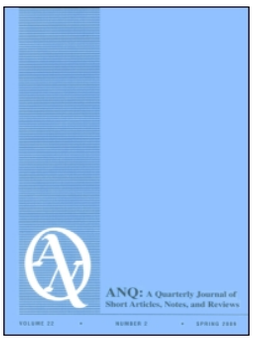

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"A Rose for Emily": Will the Real Mother Please Stand Up?

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Very few of William Faulkner's characters have childhoods that are happy or indicate some semblance of contentment. David Vanderwerken in *Faulkner's Literary Children: Patterns of Development* explores several terrible childhoods and states that good ones, "in stable, loving, and nurturing extended families, [are] a scarce commodity in Faulkner's world" (106). To make matters worse, Faulkner's wounded children often become maladjusted adults. We can only imagine the degree of happiness and maturity Vardaman will reach as an adult, having said as boy in *As I Lay Dying*—in and as an entire chapter—"My mother is a fish." Similarly, joy does not permeate the existence of Emily Grierson in Faulkner's famous short story "A Rose for Emily." She does not even have a mother that we know of and no reference is made to one. Instead, Emily is presented as a figure dominated by her father, who clutches a whip and drives away her suitors. However, as I will discuss, Emily does find a mother and closeness—in Homer Barron.

Much of "A Rose for Emily" is devoted to letting us know that the father has been the driving force in shaping and keeping Emily close to the home, both physically and metaphorically. Miss Emily has, as a result of his training, also rejected any outside authority as well as what used to be called "courtship."

When she begins her relationship with Homer Barron, in what would be a breaking of the "no men policy," she is, in fact, establishing a relationship with what has been the missing mother. Whether Homer is gay or not, as numerous notes and articles and generations of students have seized upon,[1] Homer is not like the other men. And Emily is not like the other women. In her masculinity, outwardly apparent and psycho-sexual, she welcomes the feminine psycho-sexual component of the outwardly "macho" Homer Barron. It is from this man-to-man attraction that Emily derives a loving closeness to another person, experiencing the warm love of a mother—that of Homer as mother. And to leap ahead in preparation for the discussion that will ensue, Emily has to murder Homer Barron because she does not want to be abandoned by the mother she has finally found.

Emily's masculinity, taking on various forms, by now has been chronicled, as we take our cues both from the narrator and critics. We learn from the former that "Upon the day of her death at seventy-four it [Emily's hair] was still that vigorous iron-gray, like *the hair of a man* [emphasis mine]" (*CS* 127–28). Emily has been transformed in her appearance from what the narrator says the town had thought of as a tableau of her and her father, in which "Missy Emily [was] a slender figure in white in the background …" (*CS* 123). Emily becomes not only "fat," (*CS* 127) with "the hair of a man" (*CS* 128), but appears very man-like. Emily's discourse is also male, very straightforward and not ornate as would be a Southern lady befitting, in her direct utterances, such as "I have no taxes in Jefferson" (*CS* 121), "See Colonel Sartoris" (*CS* 121), and "Show these gentlemen out" (*CS* 121). Emily is all business, sure of herself in her limited verbal exchanges, as would have been expected of a man during the era in which she lived. There is nothing ornate or ladylike about Emily either when she tells the pharmacist, "I want arsenic" (*CS* 125) and engages in a practical, brief dialogue with him if it is a good poison she is picking, in a manner similar to how a man might choose motor oil. Emily is male also in her ability to stare down the druggist and not answer him, in a way that would make any aficionado of Clint Eastwood movies proud.

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Emily's femininity gone, it becomes clear that she would likely not be swayed by a traditionally courting Southern gentleman. No flowers for her, no roses for her. Externally, she would be attracted to a masculine, "macho figure," with tough posturing rather than some Southern male suitor with genteel manners of feminization. Emily's macho figure of attraction is Homer Barron, who, like an early-version construction worker of the Village People making much noise in town, comes to rescue her. Homer Barron possesses the additional advantage that he likes men and will not necessarily want to consummate sexually a relationship with a woman. Emily, in her masculinity, is attracted to Homer Barron and wants to get close to him, as close as no other person has been in her life before, other than her omnipresent father. But the father and Homer differ in their domineering presence, and so Homer and Emily make a nice match.

Emily, confused sexually and psycho-sexually, finds in Homer Barron the warmth of a mother, as she mistakes and substitutes the love of a mother for a lesbian-masculine attraction to Homer Barron. That the outwardly macho Homer Barron possesses an element of femininity is understandable if we explore the macho posturing of gay men. In his book *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, Martin P. Levine in a chapter with the interesting title of "(I Wanna Be a) Macho Man" discusses how gay men construct their masculinity finding models in the working class. A very macho man still maintains femininity as is illustrated by the following exchange of gay men discussing bodybuilding. Pronouns such as he/she and him/her for macho men are still easily exchanged, in the process revealing the female element maintained by the macho gay man: "Clones abandoned some of these butch sign-vehicles … in non-cruising situations. The men manifested some camp speech patterns … then typically used cross-gendered nouns and pronouns, often referring to each other as 'girl' or 'she'" (63). Levine quotes the following dialogue: "Tony: Did you see Alan at 12 West last night? Brad: God she was a mess. That girl was ripped to the tits. I think she did too much MDA" (Levine 63). It is this kind of macho-feminine person, the strong Homer Barron, Emily attempts to dominate as her mother, whether wittingly or unwittingly so, arranging a kind of pseudo-marriage to ensure that mom will stay with her.

As we know, "mom" stays with Emily. Homer Barron as mom even has his/her feminine room upstairs in the house, with what we find to be "curtains of faded rose color" (*CS* 129) "rose-shaded lights" (*CS* 129), and a dressing table with "the delicate array of crystal" (*CS* 130). Much like Norman Bates's mother in *Psycho*,[2] Homer Barron fulfills a need that also becomes a burden in its strong field of gravity or pull. Like Norman Bates, Emily is not able to let go of her mother, and we can conjecture that an earlier vision of Miss Emily upstairs at night when men sprinkle lime could be, in reality, the kept, dead Homer Barron; we are never told with any certainty by the narrator which suitor is upstairs or if a suitor who was driven away was a person other than Homer. The vision the men have of "a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso *motionless* [emphasis mine] as that of an idol" shows Faulkner filtering through his narrator considerable skill as horror and mystery director *auteur*. While not suggested by any article on Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and the subsequent connection to *Psycho*, who is to say that propping up a dead lover like "mom" could not have entered the imagination of Faulkner, the narrator, and the onlookers, including us.[3]

Emily, not as skilled as Norman Bates, is preserving her/his mother as best as she can, including making visits to the upstairs to be with mother, evident by "a long strand of iron-gray hair" (*CS* 130) we see on the indented pillow as described by the narrator when we leave Emily, Homer-mom, and the whole ordeal Faulkner has bestowed on the town of Jefferson in this psycho-sexual drama of a short story that continues to satisfy and yield investigations beyond the grave, for, after all, those who love one another are said to maintain that bond eternally, even if not so in the form of a physical embrace.

Notes

1. Notably as notoriously, see, for example, Hal Blythe's note establishing Homer Barron as a homosexual.
2. Thomas Fick and Eva Gold, in "'He Liked Men': Homer, Homosexuality, and the Culture of Manhood in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" believe from the narrator's commentary that "Homer is combatively heterosexual" (99). However, in making the argument that as readers we must recognize "our own position as interpreter," the authors conclude that "the story raises questions about reading gendered behavior that are important to a wide range of classic and popular literature" (106).
3. For an interesting discussion establishing, in fact, the connection between Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and Robert Bloch's *Psycho* as well as Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*, see John A. McDermott's "'Do You Love Mother, Norman?': Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' and Metalious's *Peyton Place* as Sources for Robert Bloch's *Psycho*."

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