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### The Fall of Masculinity in “A Rose for Emily”

As in many pieces of literature, gender is a vital issue in William Faulkner’s 1931 short story, “A Rose for Emily.” Literary critic Kelly Cannon says that William Faulkner’s short stories and novels are “intensely aware of gender,” perhaps because they are set in the South (291). Faulkner deals with gender in all of his works, but what the plural narrator of this story has to say about gender is unique. The story is set in a time when women’s suffrage would have been on the mind of American citizens, perhaps especially of those who resided in the South, but instead of rooting for the movement, the narrator of the story seems to be *lamenting* it, or at least lamenting the rise of womanhood. The narrator compares men and women from the very first sentence—comparisons which are blatant and biased. The women are represented as somewhat catty and intrusive, only kind because custom tells them to be so. Men, on the other hand, are represented as caring and considerate, kind because that is who they are by nature. Emily Grierson, the principle character of the story, is represented as an intermediary figure, possessing attributes of both groups. The narrator’s commentary on women shows the rising of womanhood, while the commentary regarding Emily shows the masculinization of women. The narrator uses this rise of womanhood and masculinization of women in a traditionally patriarchal society to display the fall of traditional masculinity, something which it clearly resents.

Many critics and readers believe the narrator to be the townspeople, made up of generations of men and women. Literary critic Ruth Sullivan claims that the sexes of the plural narrator are not hinted at (Sullivan), but I would argue that the voice of this narrator is biased enough to insinuate that it belongs to that of male figures. For my argument, this assertion is important because, as previously stated, the narrator seems to be lamenting the rise of

womanhood and the masculinization of women. The narrator uses biased language throughout the whole story, shedding an almost completely negative light on the women, while emphasizing the redeeming qualities of the men. Starting in the very first sentence, the narrator states that the whole town went to Emily's funeral, "the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house,"(9). But the women are not simply curious, they are also temerarious and "sibilant." Almost every description of women, where as a group or an individual, is negative. The narrator represents the women as ignorant when saying that "only a woman could have believed" Colonel Sartoris when he claimed that he owed Emily money. The women are represented as snobby when the narrator states that the ladies believed that "even grief could not cause a real lady to forget *noblesse oblige*," referring to Emily's lover, Homer, and his status as a Northerner. It is interesting to note how the narrator uses such negative language when referring to the women of the story, while on the contrary, it speaks of the men *only* in a positive way.

The majority of the men of "A Rose for Emily" are represented as wise, innocent, and submissive. The women of the town make the only negative comment about the men, saying, "Just as if a man—any man—could keep a kitchen properly," (10). The reader will not believe the women; on the contrary, this attack against men's culinary abilities attaches more negative qualities to the women than the men. Through the narrator's descriptions, the men become sympathetic characters. Even Homer, an outsider in this Southern community, is likeable both to readers and to the town. He becomes likeable enough that the little boys follow him around, while nobody in the town interacts with Miss Emily for pleasure.

The narrator almost makes victims of the men when describing how Emily's father had driven all of her young suitors away, as well as in the case of the Board of Alderman coming to

Emily. She drove them out mercilessly when they approached her with the gentlest respect.

Emily's father comes across as dominating, yet he is not a villain. The narrator represents the male society of Jefferson as tender, incapable of doing harm. In the realm of this story, there are no male villains. This strong bias insinuates that the narrator actually is a group of men, or a group of people that believe in the cause of men and their manhood, at the same time resenting the rise of womanhood.

The narrator's negative view of women is directly related to the fall of masculinity among the men in Jefferson. The women rise above the men, taking the place as the "head of the household," or in this case, becoming so influential on the men that it essentially falls in their feminine hands to make the important decisions. Cannon explains that "Southern womanhood can be another means of masculinity's undoing in Faulkner's South. Because the Southern lady is an essential part of the Southern gentleman's self-concept, to this extent she holds power over him," (292). An example of this power or influence occurs when a neighbor of Miss Emily, "a woman," goes to Judge Stevens complaining about the smell permeating around the Grierson house. The Judge asks what she would have him do about it (with very respectful language), to which the woman replies, "Why, send her word to stop it....Isn't there a law?"(10). This woman is not only ignorant (a negative quality), she also demands the man, a man who should have been her superior. The men do something about the smell in their own way—they do not march up to Miss Emily as the ladies may have hoped, but still, they are obedient to the women.

Another example of this influence can be found when the ladies "forced the Baptist minister—Miss Emily's people were Episcopal—to call upon [Emily]," (13). The Baptist minister had no connection to Emily except for that of a common citizen of the town—he was not her preacher, yet he went because *the ladies forced him*. Also, when Emily goes to buy

arsenic, she completely disregards the druggist's authority. When the druggist says to Emily, "The law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for," Emily gains power over him as well as the law by simply looking at him. The crowning moment of her defeat takes place when the druggist remains in the back of the story and the "Negro delivery boy" brings the package back for her. These instances show the demasculinization of the men in the story as they become more and more submissive to women with the passing of time.

Emily's role in this process of demasculinization is different from that of the other women in Jefferson. The narrator describes Emily as an intermediary figure between the two sexes by attributing masculine qualities to her, thus separating her from her female contemporaries and providing more evidence for the fall of manhood. Emily, like the women in her town, disregards the counsel of the men of Jefferson and by acts of defiance and inactivity forces them to submit to her. However, instead of simply rising in femininity, Emily becomes more masculine as time goes on, overstepping the men who respected her despite her reputation. The narrator partially blames this on Emily's father, who "thwarted her woman's life" (13), but in the end, Emily takes matters into her own hands and expands them. In life, Emily was always separated from both the men and women of her town, but after her death, she is buried among "graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson," (9). Not only is Emily buried among soldiers, a group typically associated with men, but she is buried among two contending armies, suggesting her role as a mediator among the two groups.

Emily's appearance also becomes more masculine as time goes on, reflecting the events of the story (Priddy 92). When Emily was younger, "her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl" (11), but as time goes on and Emily grows, her hair becomes "like the hair of an active man," (13). As Emily grows in masculinity, the men around her seem to lose more power, falling

from manhood. The ultimate symbol of Emily's masculinity overtaking the men's is when the town discovers Emily's lover, Homer Barron, dead after several years, with ample evidence that Emily not only killed him, but had watched him and kept him for all that time. Emily's hair is found on the pillow next to him, "iron-gray" like it had been for years. This seems to represent her total domination of Homer, as she had become more masculine as time went on. She was still a woman because she possessed womanly attributes such as domesticity, but she had become masculine in the sense that she had dominated his life.

Scholars and readers suggest that Emily refuses to change and that this could perhaps be a reason for her keeping Homer in her possession. Literary scholar Lisa Paddock suggests that Emily is *obsessed* with changlessness (34). Emily refuses change in several ways, such as refusing to believe her father is dead, refusing to pay taxes, and refusing to let go of Homer, but she also *represents* change. Priddy also says that "Emily seems to be representative of the old South," and also that "gender is clearly related to the passing of the 'old South,'" (2, 92). Emily's change from the submissive woman to the masculinized woman represents the passing of the epitomized man: the Southern gentleman. The narrator states that "Miss Emily had been a tradition" (9) to which I add that she represents changing tradition. In the beginning of the story, Emily was submissive to her father. He kept her suitors away and as far as we know she did not fight him, but with her father's death comes a new birth in Emily. Emily's father's death may be symbolic of the death of masculinization of men and the birth of masculinization in women, for this is the moment that Emily changes from submissive to absolutely obstinate.

Homer seems to be an attempt to change this obstinacy, or an attempt to revive masculinity. He comes from the North, so he does not represent the "masculine ideal" of the Southern gentleman (Cannon 291), but he is still a man. He comes to Jefferson and attaches

himself to Emily in a way that no other man could, making the whole town like him at the same time. Not only did little boys follow him, but “whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group,” (12). Homer seems to be a hope for the men, for he is lively and admired, and that hope is represented in the townspeople’s belief that Homer would break Emily’s heart because “he was not a marrying man” (13). This situation could have ruined Emily’s new obstinate qualities, but instead of allowing herself to slip back into old ways, she bought the arsenic and became completely in control of Homer by taking his life.

It is symbolic that all those who represented true masculinity, or a hope of its return, end up dying before they can make a lasting effect. Colonel Sartoris had begun to submit when he allowed Miss Emily to forgo paying her taxes, but he was also the man “who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron.” The narrator suggests that the Colonel’s passing was the passing of a generation when he says about the remittance of the taxes, “Only a man of Colonel Sartoris’ generation and thought could have invented it,” (9). Perhaps the Colonel would have been disappointed by the Board’s submission to Emily. Emily’s father, the one man who seemed to have control over Emily, died, leaving her free to rise in her masculinity. And of course, Homer Barron, who, instead of thwarting the rise of womanhood, became a victim, a body that had been “cuckolded,” laden with a “coating of the patient and abiding dust,” (15). Cannon writes, “The South of Faulkner’s imagination is filled with ghosts, and one such ghost is that of masculinity,” (291). The death of these men represents the death of masculinity.

The ending of the story and the title both suggest that the same death of masculinity that came to these men also came to Emily and the other women. First, the narrator describes the

women of the town as “macabre,” which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “grim, horrific, repulsive.” Other synonyms for macabre are *deathly* and *ghastly*. This suggests that the women are beginning to fall from the place to which they had once risen. Also, the narrator points out that above Emily’s body, which is buried under a “mass of bought flowers,” hangs a picture of her father. Priddy suggests that Emily’s father presides “over the house like a god, even after his death,” (100). There is not much mention of Emily’s father after his death, but perhaps he had been presiding over the house the entire time, assuring that he remained in control. This could be a symbol of the narrator’s belief that despite previously losing the battle between man and woman, the manhood would ultimately prevail.

The symbol of the rose also suggests that Emily fell from her own heightened state as a masculinized woman. In his book *Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Michael Ferber points out that the “rose blooms in the spring, and does not bloom long; the contrast is striking between its youth in the bud and its full-blown maturity, and again between both these phases and its final scattering of petals on the ground, all in the course of a week or two,” (172-173). Emily had bloomed; she had dominated, but her time of domination ended with her death.

The narrator describes a “thin, acrid pall as of the tomb [lying] everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights,” (14). With this ending, Emily’s rose becomes acrid, diminished and withered. The rose is often a symbol of beauty, but in this context, it represents something that dies quickly despite its bloom. Priddy states that the title “A Rose for Emily clearly “says something about the narrator’s attitude toward the title character, Emily Grierson, and all she represents,” (2). The narrator’s attitude seems to be respectful, but ultimately it recognizes that

she became defeated—though the men may have still failed to revive true manhood, Emily and the women also failed to change tradition.

The rise of the women in “A Rose for Emily” causes great controversy for the narrator, but in the end, masculinity ultimately falls for both groups. The narrator mourns the rising of the women throughout the story, but the word choice in the end suggests that the narrator would be more pleased to have no masculinity than to find it in the women. As Cannon says, in this realm, masculinity is a thing of the past and the past cannot compete with the present (292). The narrator, though grieved for this loss of manhood, can at least look on the past with “rose-tinted glasses,” embellishing the glory of times when manhood thrived among its people.



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