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Faulkner's Vision of the South in "A Rose for Emily"

In one of William Faulkner's most criticized works, "A Rose for Emily", the reader learns much of Faulkner's view of the South. Faulkner attempts to paint a picture of the changing south. Perhaps Faulkner wishes to honor and maintain the old southern traditions, rather than allowing them to decompose over time.

One way that Faulkner visions the South is by using symbolism in the death of Homer Barron to show that the ideals from the North should not replace those of the South. Thomas Dilworth makes a good argument that, "Emily briefly rebelled against southern values and then, by ending her affair with him [Homer Barron] [...] she conformed again to those [Southern] values" (251). By all appearances, Miss Emily was, in no way, ready to give up her lover, Homer Barron, until a two-week visit from her female cousins who "probably opposed her consorting with a socially inferior Northerner" (Dilworth 255). In essence, Miss Emily is "denying progress" (Scherting 405) in order to stop the changing traditions of the South.

The symbolic rose in the title of the short story, may also be a part of Faulkner's vision of a changing South that should not change. Laura Getty makes a good argument for this:

A combination of the rose-colored bedroom and Homer as a dried rose could serve as "a relic of the past" (Weeks 12). Homer's body could be like a rose pressed between the pages of a book, kept "tucked away in a seldom used, rose colored room which at times can be opened".
(230)

As roses die, only a memory of them is preserved. Perhaps in this same way, Faulkner was using the rose as a symbol of how Southern ideals were eroding away, leaving only a memory of old traditions and ideas as rare afterthoughts. Moreover, during the 1800s, the South used roses as "tokens of love, or at least deep friendship" (Kurtz 40). It is possible then that the symbolic meaning of the rose could have two different, dual meanings. Faulkner may use the rose as a symbol of how the love and deep respect of the Old South was replacing that of a new, more permissive south.

For the most part, during the Civil War period, there was a deep respect that men had for women and their dignity. The women of the town "began to say that [Miss Emily's relations with Homer Barron] was a disgrace to the town" (Faulkner 134), while the men strayed away from confronting Miss Emily. The women of the town "forced the Baptist minister [...] to call upon her" about her relations with Homer Barron (Faulkner 135). Even

then, a forced confrontation never occurs between the minister and Miss Emily again. Even when they smell Homer's decaying body in Miss Emily's home, the men do not wish to confront Miss Emily on the matter of smell even "when neighbors complained of the stench issuing from her house" (Dilworth 254) because someone should not "accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad" (Faulkner 132). Instead of confronting Miss Emily on the matter, they snuck around the house to sprinkle lime, which limits the smell of dead things in the yard. As in keeping with the traditions that many in the South held, that man should respect women, Faulkner's representation of the South are made clear.

While most men in the South were to treat women with respect, "women of class were not to be troubled by certain worldly obligations" either (Dilworth 254). Perhaps Faulkner believes that men of the South should take care of women. Faulkner states, "Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care" of the town (Faulkner 131). This suggests that Faulkner believed men *should* take care of women. When new town officials are in office, they demand Miss Emily pay taxes, which she had never had to do before. However, "only a woman could have believed" the story concocted by the old town leaders (Faulkner 131). As Dilworth believes, this is reason enough to support the stance that women are not to be "troubled by certain worldly obligations" (254).

As if a flashback from the past, it appears Faulkner writes the story *intentionally* out of the natural sequence of events. Alice Hall Petry realizes “‘A Rose for Emily’ is essentially a series of flashbacks” (52). This was foreshadowing the events that took place in the story. Petry discovers that of the five adjectives used to describe Miss Emily, “dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse” (Faulkner 136), that when part four ends, only four of the five adjectives actually describe Miss Emily. The last adjective, “perverse” does not describe Miss Emily until the very end of the story, Part 5. Maybe this foreshadowing is Faulkner’s way of alluding to the fact that Southern ideals are becoming perverse and perverted. These, the ideals held highly by Southerners were beginning to crumble and “directed away from what is right or good” (“perverse”). Moreover, what had once been “dear, inescapable, impervious, [and] tranquil” (Faulkner 136) in the South, was now, in Faulkner’s mind, being directed to a new way – no longer right *or* good – that is perverse.

Faulkner, born and raised in Mississippi, had been accustomed to the changing South. Being born at the turn of the twentieth century, he was able to see how the south was changing. Most of his stories dwelled on “characterization of usual Southern characters” (“William Faulkner”), so there is no doubt that his heritage played a part in his stories. Conceivably the best exemplification of how Faulkner’s view of the South influences his writing is when the narrator speaks of Miss Emily at the beginning of Part 5.

The old Confederate laced men come to honor Miss Emily, possibly an example of the fact that Faulkner views the South as no longer a place that has little variable change – but rather one that has nearly faded out. Even those who still believed in a “Southern lifestyle” were “confusing time with its mathematical progression” (Faulkner 136). West states, “Emily is a ‘monument’ of Southern gentility [-] an ideal of past values” (149).

Faulkner knew the change sweeping across the South, and like the long life of Miss Emily, it would soon die away just as she had.

The restructure of the South during the twentieth century changed the South in many ways. Some would say for the better, some for the worse, but either way it is looked at – the south was changed. The way Faulkner writes “A Rose for Emily” – with the coupled knowledge of his involvement with the South throughout his life – shows the deep symbolic elements of Southern culture in the story reveals that Faulkner, possibly believes that as they die others will look back on the day, just as the Confederate soldiers did when Miss Emily died. Jack Scherting puts it so well:

Unable to confront the realities of life in post-bellum America, that element of Southern society continued to cherish the corpse of a beloved but decayed ideal”. (405)

The picture is painted – Miss Emily’s death is like marking the death of ideals of generations that embraced those ideals before her.

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