

Unveiling Patriarchal Authority: Exploring the Elements of Fiction in Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore the complex interplay between the various components of fiction and the overarching theme of patriarchal authority and control in William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*. By delving into these intricate connections, this study seeks to illuminate the profound impact that these literary devices have on shaping both the narrative and the overall interpretation of the story. Furthermore, the paper will be divided into five distinct sections, each addressing different aspects of the theme. The introduction will provide an overview of the major themes present in *A Rose for Emily* and will elaborate on the rationale behind choosing patriarchal authority and control as the focal point of this analysis.

Keywords: *A Rose for Emily*, Patriarchy, Point of view, Setting, Symbols.

1. Introduction

In William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*, a multitude of themes intertwine to reflect the historical and societal context of the post-Civil War South. Among these themes, several stand out prominently: Patriarchal authority and control, isolation and Loneliness, decay and death, tradition versus progress. For example, Miss Emily formed a relationship with Homer, a man from a lower social class and the North, driven by both financial necessity and a genuine need for companionship. Even though the setting era of the fiction was shifting towards a more modern and progressive society, characterized by social equality, openness to change, and the breaking of traditional boundaries, the townspeople initially pitied her fall and later became scandalized by the non-conventional relationship. Their resistance to progress pushed Miss Emily to create a private world steeped in the past, using poison and secrecy to preserve a sense of stability in an ever-changing world. The theme of isolation and loneliness in *A Rose for Emily* permeates the narrative, depicting Miss Emily as a solitary figure who becomes progressively detached from the community and trapped in her own secluded world. Her isolation is a result of various factors, including societal expectations, her own choices, and the town's perception of her. While this essay will focus on exploring the significant theme of patriarchal authority and control in the short story *A Rose for Emily* by examining how various elements of fiction contribute to its portrayal. Whilst acknowledging the presence of other themes within the story, the primary purpose of selecting this theme is to explore societal structures that shape the lives of the characters offering fresh interpretations and nuanced understanding of Faulkner's masterpiece. With a focus on the oppressive nature of patriarchal authority within a conservative Southern society, this theme provides a valuable lens to critically examine the impact of such power imbalances on individuals, particularly women. By analyzing the setting, symbol, point of view, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of how the theme of Patriarchal authority and control operates within the narrative. Through this analysis, we aim to deepen our understanding of the characters' lives and shed light on broader social issues, encouraging dialogue and the pursuit of social change.

2. Components of Fiction

2.1. Setting

Each person is a byproduct of the society and cultural traditions in which they were both born and raised. Regardless of their willingness, a myriad of social factors and traditions permeate the profound fabric of their thoughts, akin to genetic genes, shaping their thinking patterns, cognitive processes, and fundamental stance towards life and the world. In the case of writers, the region that fosters their growth becomes an abundant wellspring of inspiration for their creative endeavors. Hence, as acclaimed Southern American female writer Eudora Welty [1] astutely observed, "The vitality of a novel emanates from its geographical context." This aspect is particularly pronounced in the case of William Faulkner, given that a significant portion of his life was dedicated to residing in a secluded town within the depths of the American South. Utilizing this town as a blueprint, he constructed a fictional universe that drew inspiration from the rich tapestry of history, lives, aspirations, joys, and sorrows woven by the people he intimately knew. Consequently, his thoughts became intricately intertwined with the fabric of Southern society, historical occurrences, and cultural traditions. From the late 1920s to the early 1940s, his literary works predominantly delved into the decline and decadence of esteemed Southern lineages, notably the Compson and Sartoris families. Moreover, these families were imbued with a sense of mythos, embodying a bygone era. Thus, their eventual downfall signified the unraveling of the old South and the culmination of an epoch [2].

Within this book, the narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the post-Civil War era, marking America's transition into the Industrial Age. Despite the trying circumstances, the enduring presence of traditional aristocratic power in Southern society prevails. Emily, a scion of the fading Southern aristocracy, serves as a poignant embodiment of the era's representative figure in the traditional Southern social milieu. Victorian values, revered by those educated in the South and yearning for an upper-class way of life, embody an ethos of elegance and a set of standards to which individuals aspire. The novel's townspeople, immersed in wistful recollections of a grandiose past, yearn for a venerable "idol"

figure to bestow upon them spiritual fortitude and solace. Emily, on the surface, appears to be a Southern woman, representing the traditional virtues of the South and holding a high social status associated with refinement. However, in reality, these attributes are merely subservient to a male-dominated society, and the so-called Southern traditional virtues, such as "ladylike demeanor," are precisely the shackles imposed on women by the patriarchy. The term Southern belle (derived from the French word *belle*, "beautiful") is an archetype for a young woman of the American Old South's upper class [3]. The ideal of the Southern belle evolved in the 1930s and it combined positive characteristics and described a perfect daughter, sister, mother, wife and life companion. Typical Southern beauty was not her only distinction, she was accompanied by other virtues as well, the most prominent being devotion to her family and husband, modesty, respect of ancestors, fragility and tenderness. It is via Emily that Faulkner wanted to show criticism of the antebellum Southern society that interfered with women's lives and destinies. The social stereotype of a perfect woman of the South. Despite many positive and worthy qualities that praise the ideal image of a woman, these same qualities can have a dual effect and at the same time destroy them and push them in despair, disappointment and weakness that eventually ends in a tragic and sad conclusion. Social norms, unreal and unattainable wishes, demands and expectations that women cannot meet nor fulfill, bring unwanted consequences not only for the woman herself but also for her closer and wider society. The pressure to conform to societal expectations and avoid being mocked or judged by others likely contributed to Emily's extreme actions. She is desperate to maintain her relationship with Homer and prevent it from being exposed to public scrutiny. Her fear of being seen as a social outcast and the potential shame associated with it may have driven her to take drastic measures. Emily's extreme behavior, such as poisoning Homer and keeping his body in her house, can be seen as a desperate attempt to retain control over the situation and preserve her perceived reputation. She is unwilling to accept the possibility of Homer leaving her or the public humiliation that might come with their relationship becoming known. It is obvious that Miss Emily is typical representative of the patriarchal women. The setting plays a significant role in showing the oppressive nature of patriarchal authority within a conservative Southern society.

2.2. Symbol

Semiotics, the study of signs as part of social life, explores the rules and social codes that govern a society. Arthur Simmon, an American poet and literary critic, defines a symbol as various forms of thoughts that encompass both conventional and tangible to intangible representations [4].

Many readers may initially find themselves puzzled by the significance of the rose that Faulkner presents in the title of his story. Traditionally, roses are commonly associated with passionate love between individuals of the opposite sex. Therefore, it seems perplexing for the writer to offer a rose to a lady who has committed murder and engaged in macabre acts such as sleeping with a corpse. However, upon careful reading and contemplation of the story, we eventually come to grasp Faulkner's intended meaning behind the rose. Initially, the "rose" symbolizes the love that Miss Emily yearns for but ultimately fails to attain [5]. As the story progresses, the rose takes on additional meanings, representing purity, secrecy, silence, and even sin. Miss Emily remained unmarried

throughout her entire life, perpetually living in solitude without any companionship. In the end, she died in isolation, highlighting her profound loneliness. Consequently, Faulkner's gesture of offering a rose to Miss Emily can be interpreted as a form of compensation for the love she yearned for but could never attain. It serves as a means to compensate for the profound solitude she experienced during her youth. The portrayal of women belonging to their fathers and subsequently being transferred to their husbands, as seen in the case of Emily in Faulkner's story, can be interpreted as reflecting the historical practice of patrilineal descent and the perception of women as objects or possessions. This perspective views women's worth as being tied to their relationship with men, specifically their fathers and husbands. Emily's father exercises strict control over her life, isolating her from potential suitors and denying her the opportunity to marry. Emily's desire to marry Homer can be seen as a rebellion against this oppressive patriarchal system. It is worth noting, however, that feminist perspectives challenge and reject the notion of women being treated as property or possessions, advocating for gender equality and the dismantling of such oppressive systems [6].

The house was the only heritage the father left to Emily, which symbolizes imprisonment, isolation, and alienation. Especially, Emily's position behind her father signifies her perpetual existence within his shadow, forever confined to the land he controlled. This placement effectively silences her voice and denies her the agency to assert herself as an independent individual. Consequently, Emily becomes unable to assert control over her own pursuit of marital happiness. During her father's lifetime, the house represents Emily's confinement and imprisonment within the autocratic patriarchy. It becomes a symbol of her entrapment and her inability to pursue personal relationships and freedom. However, when Emily meets Homer, she breaks free from the confines of the house and experiences a sense of happiness and liberation. Unfortunately, the house that should have been a warm and welcoming home for Emily and Homer ultimately becomes their grave. Following Homer's disappearance, Emily withdraws from the world and lives in the house for the next forty years, disconnected from society and resembling a living dead woman. In this way, the house in the story serves as a powerful symbol of Emily's constrained existence, her subsequent liberation, and the tragic consequences that befall her in the context of her home. It represents the entrapment of tradition, the weight of the past, and the isolation that Emily experiences throughout her life.

2.3. Point of view

Faulkner employs a relatively objective point of view through an "unknown" narrator, utilizing setting, events, and characters to engage the reader in an interpretive role similar to that of a jury. The narrative unfolds in a manner that allows readers to piece together the story's puzzle, drawing their own conclusions with the information provided. Unlike an omniscient narrator, "unknown" narrator is limited, preventing them from fully understanding events as Emily experiences them. However, "unknown" narrator serve as conduits, presenting clues that enable readers to form their own interpretations before the shocking ending is revealed. By withholding certain details and relying on the reader's imagination, Faulkner intensifies the horror of the narrative. Our minds often conjure up more vivid images than explicit descriptions, enhancing the impact of the story when the truth

is eventually uncovered. This technique immerses readers in the story, encouraging them to actively participate in uncovering the layers of mystery surrounding Emily's life. And I believe the "unknown" narrator is fellowmen in town.

To be more specific, the narrative perspective, focusing on the town's collective voice and observations, which can be inferred from the text, for example, "We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.". The narrator use "we" rather than "I" contributes to the portrayal of Emily as an object and reinforces the idea that she is controlled and defined by the patriarchal norms of her community. Emily's silence throughout the story, except for the mention of her name in the context of "Miss Emily" or sentence repeated in the short conversation between Emily and city authorities "See Colonel Sartoris" reinforces her lack of agency and independence. The absence of her voice and inner thoughts emphasizes her position as a passive figure, subject to the will and expectations of her father and, later, the town. Besides, Faulkner's deliberate choice to depict Emily's closest relationships exclusively with male characters, including her father, lover, and black housekeeper, serves as a narrative device that implicitly reflects the marginalized status of women within a male-dominated society. It sheds light on the prevailing social order characterized by male dominance and highlights the limited agency and societal constraints imposed on women during the time period in which the story takes place. Furthermore, the fact that the story doesn't delve into Emily's psychological feelings and experiences can be seen as reflective of the societal disregard for women's emotional lives during that time. Women were often marginalized and their feelings dismissed or overlooked, and this aspect is echoed in the narrative's focus on external events and observations rather than internal reflections. Besides, Faulkner's deliberate choice to depict Emily's closest relationships exclusively with male characters, including her father, lover, and black housekeeper, serves as a narrative device that implicitly reflects the marginalized status of women within a male-dominated society. It sheds light on the prevailing social order characterized by male dominance and highlights the limited agency and societal constraints imposed on women during the time period in which the story takes place.

3. Conclusion

William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* skillfully explores the theme of patriarchal authority and control through the adept use of various elements of fiction, including setting, symbols, and point of view. The post-Civil War Southern society serves as the backdrop, where traditional aristocratic power and Victorian values dominate. Miss Emily, the central character, becomes a poignant representation of the constraints imposed by patriarchal norms as she navigates societal expectations and seeks love and companionship outside the prescribed boundaries. The setting itself plays a significant role in

emphasizing the oppressive nature of patriarchal authority within a conservative Southern society. The fading Southern aristocracy, with its longing for a bygone era, serves as a constant reminder of the power dynamics at play. Miss Emily's isolation within her inherited home becomes a powerful symbol of her entrapment and lack of agency within the patriarchal system. Symbols further enhance the exploration of the theme. Initially representing the love that Miss Emily yearned for but ultimately failed to attain, the rose evolves to encompass deeper meanings such as purity, secrecy, silence, and even sin. Faulkner employs the rose as a form of compensation for Miss Emily's profound solitude, thereby highlighting the tragic consequences of societal expectations and the limited options available to women.

The point of view, characterized by an "unknown" narrator which refers to the limited perspective of the townspeople, reinforces the marginalized status of women within the narrative. The townspeople act as conduits, allowing readers to piece together the fragments of Miss Emily's life while simultaneously highlighting the male-dominated society that controls and defines her. The absence of Miss Emily's voice and inner thoughts underscores her lack of agency, reflecting the disregard for women's emotional lives during that time.

In essence, *A Rose for Emily* serves as a powerful commentary on the impact of patriarchal authority within a conservative Southern society. Faulkner's skillful use of setting, symbols, and point of view amplifies the portrayal of Miss Emily's struggle against societal expectations and prompts readers to reflect on the wider implications of such power imbalances. Through engagement with these elements of fiction, we gain a nuanced understanding of Faulkner's masterpiece and are encouraged to challenge oppressive systems in our own lives and societies. At the end, I would like to describe Emily's awakening female consciousness as a rose blossoming. However, this rose struggles among the ruins and debris, caught between scorched earth and rubble. It leaves a faint fragrance among the lingering smoke of conflict, swaying in the wind, but eventually wilts in the barren wilderness.

References

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