

ANOTHER ROSE FOR EMILY: A Critical Comment on Warren's Interpretation

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Most of the criticism on "A Rose for Emily"¹⁾ remains centered around the crucial but still puzzling question: why did Miss Emily murder Homer Barron? In his interpretation of this short story, Robert Penn Warren tries to unravel the pivotal theme by discovering "what may be called a moral significance, a meaning in moral terms—not merely psychological terms," in order to "justify the horror story" which he supposes Faulkner might not have intended.²⁾ In his endeavour to account for Emily's motivation, he at first notices such idiosyncratic traits as her "lapse of the distinction between illusion and reality" and her "firmness of will and iron pride." Thus he somewhat succeeds in explaining not only the ambiguous distance set between Emily and her community, but the abnormality of her behaviour and the ultimate killing of her first lover/bridegroom. In this context, he proposes the first generally accepted explanation: "Confronted with his jilting her, she tries to override not only his will and the opinion of other people, but the laws of death and decay themselves....She would not be jilted."

To some degree, his conclusion is somewhat appealing in explaining the emotionally complex and chronologically confusing narrative of Emily's case, but his approach is, I think, unmistakably superficial, for he merely lists the outward symptoms of her anomaly instead of probing the hidden recesses of her repressed psyche, which might provide a crucial key to her necrophilia. He might better have turned his critical eye from such a long analysis of the tension-bound relations between solipsistic Emily and the watchful community, to the dynamic reality of the father-daughter relationship as well as to the politics of sexuality inherent in her choice of Homer Barron and the final murder. Such an inward and psychological approach will, I argue, reveal more effectively the quizzical entanglement of Emily's biographical narrative.

But in tracing Warren's essay, we cannot but recognize his continual anxiety lest his interpretation should fall to pathological report. Unmistakably he betrays his self-consciousness by saying at the beginning of the second half of the essay that "we are still merely dealing with a case history in abnormal psychology." Then he puts forward

1) William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily," *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1950), pp.119-130.

2) Cleanth Brooks & Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), pp.350-354.

his discussion "in order to make a case for the story as meaningful." Why does Warren try, in so short a space, to reach irritatingly something more meaningful which I think he has already achieved on his own terms in his essay? Moreover why is he afraid of resorting to psychological terms and methodology which, I'm sure he would also admit, he already introduced in his argument in his own way. It is only too ironical that his attitude is similar to that of a psychologist when he finally passes his tentative verdict on her that "she's mad," adding hesitatingly that "her madness is meaningful after all." It is also noticeable that whenever he comes across something complicated which requires further investigation, he rather easily comes to terms with it by resorting to "irony." But ironically enough, the irony to which he so frequently refers does not ensure him the insightful comprehension of the main motivation of her monstrosity and terrible murder. Instead of escaping into irony, he should have pushed his discussion deeper and deeper into Emily's psychology.

Now we'll turn our eye to the father-daughter relationship which is far too complicated to be analyzed on a normal basis, for it not only moulded Emily's personality in the wrong direction in her formative years but influenced her bizzare relationship with Homer afterwards. Mr. Grierson, the last aristocrat but one in his fallen family in the antebellum South, is unable to compromise with the changing social realities after the Civil War and out of family pride as well, and therefore drives away any man who approaches to propose to Emily in her youth. As the townpeople correctly surmised, for the Griersons who "held themselves a little too high for what they really were, none of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such." In so doing, Mr. Grierson must have cruelly prevented her from maturing sexually in the "normal" heterosexual way. With no blood-kin but her father in the house in which his ever-vigilant portraits, as her paternal superego, are ubiquitous, he may have dominated Emily's distorted universe. Thus she must have felt a strong attraction to her father as a patronizing ally against the contemptible public who she supposes dare to pull down the ever-present barrier between classes. At the same time she resisted his intervention and inhibition which are no more than the projection of his inverted desire to maintain the aristocratic majesty the villagers no longer pay homage to. These facts are strengthened by the narrator's utterance that "that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious too die." In addition to that, such a queer relationship between the obstinate father and motherless Emily is symbolically shown to the narrator as a formed tableau: "Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father sprawled silhouette in the foreground his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door." Therefore at the death of her father who actually has been the conflicting agent for Emily in both of her sexual repression and Oedipal element in her sexual frustration³⁾, she at first denies to the townspeople for

3) Jack Scherting tries in his essay to explain Emily's motive by focusing on the Oedipal and

three days that he is dead, for she could not bear her father's corpse to be taken away by the villagers whom she arrogantly looked down on so far. As the townspeople rightly pointed out, "with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will." Such a demented response suggests not only Emily's shock but also her necrophilia, which is once again revealed in the execution of the singular murder at the end of the story. After the burial of her father, the only case in the story Emily surrendered to the norms of society she herself so stubbornly denied so far, she becomes very ill for a long time, which tellingly shows her turbulent and ambivalent feeling toward her father.

Anyway, after "they buried her father quickly," which might have been the psychological removal of a potential obstacle for Emily, she, for the first time in her gloomy life, falls in love with Homer Barron, a virile Yankee labourer. In those days when they appeared on Sunday afternoons driving about the streets in the yellow-wheeled glittering buggy, Emily, with her short-cut hair, turned into "a girl with a vague resemblance to angels in colored church windows—sort of serene and tragic," her face looking like "a lighthouse keeper's face ought to look" or "like a strained flag." Moreover her sexual potentiality, despite long repression, proved to be strong when she felt an obsessive attraction to H.B. at the sight of the masculinity itself—"a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice"—and the two years of going steady to the grimaces of the older generation in the village and her honeymoon with him at her own mansion secluded from the inquisitive eyes of the outside world without appearing on the streets "for almost six months."

But tragically enough, her long-suppressed sexuality turns out to have deprived her of the ability to discern that he was a homosexual, which fact is ascertained not only by his confessional remark that "he liked men," drinking with younger men in the Elks' Club, adding that "he was not a marrying man"⁴⁾ but also by his name-symbolism and his yellow glove which is somewhat grotesque for a normal man to wear. In addition to that, Emily was at once too naïve for a woman aged over thirty and too blind in her passionate love for Homer to see through the concealed motive of his approach. From the time they first dated, the ladies in the village who showed keen interest in the scandalous love-affair said, "Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer." But to the contrary to the public's observations, it proved to be Homer who did not seem to have seriously considered marrying Emily. We can assume that he might have been more interested in Emily's wealth, which he wrongly assessed to be great. Thus on finding to his disappointment that Emily was left with nothing more than

incestuous nature of her relationship with her father, but his argument I think is not convincing in that he regards Homer as the surrogate of Mr. Grierson, through the murder of whom, he insists, Emily seeks her Oedipal satisfaction.

4) Homer's confessed saying that he is not a marrying man does not necessarily make him a homosexual indeed, but the details I cited in my argument implicates strongly that he potentially might be one.

her decaying house, which was the "eyesore among eyesores" in the vicinity, Homer's seeming involvement with Emily cooled off and he went away suddenly without "a public blowing-off," leaving her in total despair. But the collective "we" wrongly "believed that he had gone on to prepare for Emily's coming, or to give her a chance to get rid of the cousins" who paid a brief visit to Emily in order to dissuade her from marrying the foreman from the North.

Warren finds his original explanation of Emily's morbid impetus of murder in Homer's jilting her, which argument the evidence contradicts rather than supports. For one thing, Homer abruptly came back within three days after he left Emily all of a sudden, and was seen to be admitted by the Negro man at the kitchen door at dusk one evening, which was the last the villagers saw of Homer Barron. Since then, the front door of Emily's residence which witnessed all the while the unspeakable monstrosity that happened inside it remained closed firmly to her funeral day. For another, the narrator at the end of this short story implies that it is not Emily but Homer who was jilted, by saying: "but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him." Of course it is impossible to point out Emily's motivation in a word or two, but we can at least deduce it by tracing the inner logic of Emily's tormented life which both hereditary and environmental elements thwarted so irrevocably that she could not help but resort to abnormal solution in the end. So we can at least say that Emily's long-repressed libido, on the powerful spurt as soon as she encounters him, when confronted with the tormenting dissuasion from the outside and Homer's brief disappearance as well, seeks its perverted outlet in her final killing of her man, with her naïve but radical intention to ensure the one-sided sexual penetration permanently. (That Homer is an intrinsic gay and that his interest in Emily sought its satisfaction not in love but in other material considerations might be a presumptive argument, but it cannot be denied that they provide helpful clues to our analysis, although we cannot be sure whether or not Emily's fatal murder sought its justification in her recognition of Homer's hidden intentions.) Then she, with her fragile emotional equilibrium totally broken down, slept safely with the carcass of her former lover for about forty years in the attic, the objective-correlative of her inverted interior where the boundary between reality and illusion is blurred out irretrievably. Such an abnormality of behaviour seems to be rather consistent with her inverted view of reality when we take into consideration her self-contained world in which the mathematical progression of time is suspended while past and present penetrate and merge into each other confusingly. For Emily, who willfully exiled herself within her own time-scheme without the frame of reference to the outside world, the dead and the living seemed to exist simultaneously: Colonel Sartoris who has been dead for about ten years is still alive to her and she denies to the townspeople for three days that her father is dead. Hence the logical coherence of the derangement of a person who sought her marriage/murder simultaneously! Now it is necessary for us to recall that

in the beginning section of this story, she, who completely concealed her post-murder life from the public, was seen to the committee as "bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue." In fact she was in the state of living death, embracing her man the corpse, which was not only her fulfilment in her psychotic way but her resistant way of meeting the world on her own terms. "Thus she passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse."

This kind of horrible but tragic story needs reading with more sympathetic imagination on the part of the reader, for the author seems to dedicate this narrative as a requiem to Emily's frustrated love/life. Couldn't we get involved emotionally in the overflowing ecstatic joy she might have tasted in the sexual consummation with H.B., and her preparatory purchases of a man's toilet set (with initials H.B. on each piece!) and a complete outfit of clothing, decorating her bridal room in roseate color just like a virgin expectant of her wedding ceremony, which matters tellingly show us that she could have been a decent and lovely woman, if her innocence and virginity had not been relentlessly trampled down twice by males, her father and her would-be husband. Together with the townspeople who went to her funeral with "bought flowers," couldn't we also scatter another rose on her who somewhat heroically insisted to the last on enclosing her autonomous world, denying not only the communal codes but time itself, the lapse of which was another unnoticed guest that began flowing again through the memory of the collective consciousness of the villagers, as quoted below:

They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier and the ladies sibilant and macabre; and the very old man—some in their brushed Confederate uniforms—on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road, but instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years.

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