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THE SOUTHERN TOTE BAG: THE IMAGE BANK IN  
WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *A ROSE FOR EMILY*

The complexity of Faulkner's art is vindicated by the difficulty of classifying his works, which is a great advantage rather being a drawback. Faulkner's art managed to avoid boxing itself into convenient categories signaled by superficial labels. It is Faulkner's diversity which fascinates readers. Both umbrella terms and specific notions have been attached to his writing, thus he can be identified as a realist, a symbolic naturalist, a regionalist, a Southerner, a gothic writer or a modernist. He is a highly individual writer, nevertheless, the Faulknerian world is a homogeneous entity the creation of which has been a great achievement and a great burden simultaneously, because no writer in the South after him has managed to avoid the comparison to Faulkner's art, so they have had to act in the shadow of the genius.

So it is this complexity which is the test of the genius, but it is also this complexity which is the greatest test for the teacher in the classroom. Unless teachers can devote a whole semester to Faulkner's writing, they usually face the problem that they need to introduce their students into Faulkner's world within the frame of a couple of lectures and seminars, and they struggle with time. One short piece however which might prove to be a suitable example to illustrate the diversity of Faulkner's work is "A Rose for Emily".

Faulkner's greatest achievement is that the microcosmic proportions of the story can appeal to the percolating macrocosmic qualities of the writer's oeuvre. The story shows how unity is born out of diversity, as it nicely illustrates almost all the dimensions that Faulkner's art can open. So it can offer a solution to those teachers

who wish to tackle with the problem of how to make an author's oeuvre palpable to the students. How to raise students' interest?

In this essay I would like to show various ways through which the work can be approached, I would also like to show the diversity of interpretations and the process through which unity is born out of this versatility. The following is a summary of the connotations of the work, aspects of analyzing the work, key terms that can be exploited during class discussions. The labels refer to overlapping features, so in the next part I would like to sum up the following ramifications of the story and its author: naturalistic regionalism, symbolic naturalism, expressionism in Faulkner's style, gothicism, psychoanalytical approach and the Southern qualities in his story. The essay does not aim to fully explore the implications of the notions above. Within the confines of a paper like this my only endeavour is to give hints and ideas for further study and teaching. While exploring the various dimensions of the story, I insist on relying on the images that can radiate and can be related to the ontology of Faulkner's South. The theoretical background to the analysis is provided by that aspect of iconology which applies the "visual-verbal interaction throughout the American literary and artistic tradition" (Miller 2).

### **Faulkner as a naturalistic regionalist**

The first step in approaching Faulkner's world is to try and map his terrain. Faulkner created his own fictional realm, Yoknapatawpha County, which is not a fantasy land, but a region in the state of Mississippi called La Fayette County. We know about this from the map that he attached to his writing. If we compare the map of Yoknapatawpha County and that of Lafayette County, we will see that the coincidence is obvious. So Faulkner was a regionalist in the way that he, like Thomas Hardy, created his own land, and he was a naturalistic regionalist because it is the region that determines his characters and the characters also define themselves by the moral code of their region, the American South. His characters are rooted in their Southern soil, and they are indoctrinated by it. The region with its history dooms the characters, and Jefferson, the place where Emily lives is a microcosm of the American South. A sign of naturalistic determinism is Emily's death at the very beginning of the story. After

learning about this death we, the readers, realize that Emily has been committed to failure.

The fictional town of Jefferson coincides with Oxford, Mississippi. The structure of the story also reflects this determination because it is confined by a frame which yokes the story. What are the parts of the frame? The rose itself, which appears as a flower in the title and is the colour of the bridal at the very end. The rose colour is in sharp contrast with the gloomy and tragic event that happened in the room which is supposed to be a locale for happiness. Fading glory is also a part of the frame. References to past glory appear through the images of the decaying house which used to be white. At the end of the story the motive of fading glory recurs with even greater intensity through the “faded rose color” and the “tarnished silver” and “invisible dust” (Faulkner 233). The description of the old generation’s longing for the past also recurs powerfully,

...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 bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years. (232)

So the old generation still lives in the past for them the past is their inspiration, their “meadow”, they want to live in the past, their past is their present. The past is not something gone, it is still an integral part of their lives. Their past is never touched by “winter”, the past is their eternal spring, the beginning and the starting point of everything. The image expresses the conviction that for most Southerners the most precious things in life are those that once were or the ones that are ought to be, but not the ones that are.

Another indifferent force shaping the characters is history. Faulkner’s sense of history is expressed through Emily refusing to pay taxes. Emily is confined by her status, moral obligations and privileges as well. She adamantly rebels against change.

### **Faulkner as a symbolic naturalist**

The Faulknerian symbols imply that radical social change which created a South which is referred to as the Modern South. Emily Grierson herself is a symbol of the Old South. Her aristocratic detachment from the rest of town folks confirms the idea of the Old

South as a historical era which seems to be remote but still inherently lives in the characters. Emily symbolizes this attitude. Everybody wants to know more about her, they are preoccupied with guesses concerning her life, but they can never reveal the core of the problem around her. Their speculations revolve around a malleable entity which is more like a living dead. The Old South has the same function. All the Southern characters cling to it, but they may not know exactly what it was like. Both Emily and the Old South are buried and recreated by mythology. Through Emily's life we can see how the unknown can create myths, and how uncertainty can settle onto the character (Virágos 395). Respect was won by Emily because all the people from the town went to her funeral. They wanted to express their affection for a "fallen monument" (226), through this they wanted to express their respect towards the past.

Homer Barron can be referred to as the embodiment of the North. He is a vigorous Yankee, and his job also confirms this idea that he is the exploitative Northerner. He works for a construction company. The construction itself can stand for the transformation of the South into a new region, into a modern country and a new region which is industrialized and urbanized and where all the old southern social values are gone.

Emily's and Colonel Sartoris' characters stand for all the values that the Old South represented, 'a tradition, a duty, and a care, a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town' (226). Their obligation was self-imposed, and this obligation is symbolically juxtaposed to the new social structure which is democratically elected but which is resented by Emily representing the feudalism of the Old South. From the point of view of the old generation the key terms of honor, chivalry, decorum and dignity have become replaced by disintegration, fall, decay and doom.

Faulkner inhabited his imaginary Yoknapatawpha County with fictional characters who he met and meticulously observed. These characters represent two generations. In this constellation Emily represents the old generation, which is gradually superseded by the new generation. Faulkner divided his characters into two major groups. These two groups are more like two different sets of characteristics and behavioral patterns. The first group is the one sharing characteristic features and qualities of the old generation, they

are called the Sartoris-type characters. The other type is the representatives of the new generation, the Snopes-type characters. As Faulkner's writing is inhabited by dynasties of characters, these Sartoris-type characters are the old Southern families: the Compsons, the McCaslins and the Griersons. They are past the peak of their prosperity and are riddled by moral decay. On the other hand, the Snopes clan are efficient, materialistic, they are merchants and entrepreneurs who are overtaking the Sartorises.

Emily's house is also an integral part of the landscape of the Old South. The porticoed house is a typical "big, squarish frame house ... decorated with cupolas and spires" (226). The story of the house is a mirror of the decline of the Old South. The use of the past perfect also illustrates vanishing glory. The colour has also vanished, the house used to be white symbolizing elegance and aristocracy, but by now the whiteness, that is the aristocratic flair has vanished.

The enormous social change that affected small communities, small towns is represented in the shift in focus in Jefferson. The restructuring of priorities expresses this change. Emily's house used to be on the most select street of the town. Not only has the house lost its bright whiteness, but the once select street has also lost its significance. It is not the most important street any more, which shows the aristocracy in a state of losing positions in the town since they used to have their houses on that street. The new centres are the commercial, business centres, the haven of material wealth for the new generation.

To sum up, the story can be comprehended as an allegory of decadence built around the life of a simple Jefferson spinster. The story depicts the seduction of the aristocratic South (Miss Emily) by a vigorous and enterprising North (Homer). The South (Miss Emily) having destroyed its seducer, lives to the end proudly cherishing the shreds of its traditional aristocratic dignity.

### **Faulkner as an expressionist**

Several elements of expressionism can be traced in the story. Exaggerations, distortions, caricature-like descriptions and enlargements are all signs of expressionism. These signs are transmitted towards the readers through visual, olfactory and auditory images. Among the

visual images the emphasis on a part of Emily's body – her hair –, and the way this tiny piece of hair gains significance and leads to the solution of the puzzling problem at the end are expressionistic devices. The changes in Emily's physique and hair colour turn her into a sexless persona in the story. The father's portrait on the wall is also an oppressing force that overshadows Emily's life.

The poignant smell that is so palpably described is an olfactory image that penetrates into every niche of the story.

Among the auditory images the significance of the expressionistic dialog in part 3 should be stressed. Considering the proportions of the parts, it should be noted that the third part is the shortest and the most dramatic part. In comparison to the other parts in the story the pace of the narration in part 3 is intensified. After the steady flow of the first two parts, in part 3 we, the readers, are suddenly introduced to three topics: Homer Barron, noblesse oblige and buying poison. The dialog in the drugstore (230) increases tension by the use of unfinished sentences, artificial pauses, repetitions, and word choice (arsenic, haughty eyes, skull and bones). The reference to Emily's face as a strained flag also reinforces the idea of artificiality and it builds up tension rooted in doom.

### **Faulkner as a gothic writer**

From the beginning of the story we know that Emily's life ended in failure. The funeral is not only the burial ceremony of an average person in the town, because Emily was a monument. However, the word "fallen" implies that her life may not be commemorated as a glorious period in the history of the town. So from the very beginning of the story Emily and the South that she represents is doomed to failure.

The story can be analyzed as a mockery on the traditional gothic story pattern, thus being a grotesque gothic story. Thomas Inge writes the following about the significance of humour in the short story,

...this story, Faulkner's best known, partakes of this tradition in its exaggerated treatment of a Southern lady who resorts to necrophilia as a means of protecting her genteel reputation. While critics have labored at the serious and symbolic meanings of the story, perhaps Faulkner finally meant for it to be another of his outrageous tricks on his gullible readers. (Inge 16)

All the images strengthen the idea of a transformed gothic story. The lady to be saved is a sexless and cruel person, the savior is a meek man, and their dark and dusty gothic chamber of horrors is the place which is supposed to be the place for pleasure that is their pink bridal.

### **Faulkner as a psychological writer**

The forces that shaped Emily's life can be explored from the psychological aspect. Firstly, Emily's attachment to her father, and the impact of the father figure on Emily's life affected her psychosexual development. Secondly, Emily's role in her relationship with Homer Barron could be exploited, and her incipient domineering role in this affair expresses the gender-switch that she undergoes. The mental turmoil and Emily's delusions, and her losing touch with the reality of her time result in her desire and action of necrophilia, which is again a psychic disorder. Through the psychological aspect of the analysis the general decline and disorder of the social consciousness of the South could be explored.

The psychological analysis of Homer Barron's character may address the issue of gender and masculinity, self-identification and self-esteem. Homer Barron's reticent meekness is in sharp contrast with Emily's marauding sense of possession.

The presuppositions and the rumour around Emily reveal an element of the social consciousness of the South. In the story we are introduced to the social awareness of the South, and learn about the common consciousness of a Southern small town. The unmasking of this awareness may result in analysing the significance of belonging, the relationship between personal and common or shared guilt and sin. Besides Emily, the other major characters in the story are the town folks. We learn about Emily through public rumour. This narrative device increases tension, because the readers never know how much is supposed to be taken for granted. Exaggeration and inventing story fragments to fill in the unknown white spots are inherent features of public rumour, thus this form of narration often leaves the reader in doubt and builds up exacerbation and suspense.

## **Faulkner as a Southern writer**

All the preceding parts of the essay refer to Faulkner, the Southern writer. As soon as we start reading the story, we know that we are in the South. What are those special characteristic features that bind us to the region?

- man-made parts of the setting: the porticoed house, cotton wagon, cotton gin,
- the social structure: hierarchy, aristocracy, black folks,
- social consciousness: tradition, respect, honour, duty, care, sin, guilt and belonging,
- writing style: long baroque sentences in the descriptive parts, colloquialism and vernacular idioms in the dialogs,
- sense of history: confederacy, dynastic sense of history.

The analysis of the criteria mentioned above will contribute to a better understanding of Faulkner's world. From the springboard of "A Rose for Emily" the imagery of Faulkner's works will be comprehended with greater ease. In relation to imagery Cleanth Brooks concludes his essay on Faulkner as follows,

He had fully absorbed the oral tradition from tales told around a hunter's campfire or yarns heard on the front porch of a country store. Yet he also dared to venture high-flown rhetoric – flamboyant language, rich cadences, and elaborate imagery. He is an original. There is no one else quite like him in American literature. His place in the canon is secure. (Brooks 342)

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