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Introduction to Literature

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Historical Analysis of "A Rose for Emily," by William Faulkner

In 1930, William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily," was published in *The Forum*. To help characterize the success and mass appeal of this eerie tale, "A Rose for Emily," has had a television adaptation, a spinoff into a novel, has been the inspiration for a song and continues to be the subject of research analysis. To be considered as acceptable, the sources within an analysis should all be germane to the major premise of the topic researched.

Consolidated criticism of academic journals, subsumed by the same major subject, will bring about or contribute to the collective value of literature. This essay combines various essays and journals over time, using Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," is its focal point.

To gain a complete comparative analysis, this author will conclude with a fresh criticism, using excerpts from an original response essay written in 2006. I have not read my essay since it was submitted for review in 2006, the sections found from it are unearthed only after reading all the research mentioned herein, as well as a complete rereading of the text by Faulkner. In order to compare journals analyzing, "A Rose for Emily," a brief summary of the story must first be provided.

"A Rose for Emily," is a short story about the life of Miss Emily Grierson. The dialog and events are presented in a non-linear fashion which adds to the big reveal, a creepy detail once the reader has a moment to process the implications. Throughout the small town that Emily resides in attempts to civilly engage with her. Emily gained control of the home estate after it was bequipped to her after her father died. The deputation, the mayor, on several occasions fails

to enforce the law in collecting taxes. Even more peculiar about Miss Emily than her anti-social behavior, is the strange odor from her home that lasts for decades. When a neighbor complains about the smell, Judge Stevens justifies it as a dead snake. The rank odor persists when the exhausted Judge Stevens replies, “will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?” (Faulkner 582).

Emily had been getting away with defying town ordinances her entire life. When she was younger “she told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days...We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that,” (Faulkner 582).

Emily failed to acknowledge her father’s death, so the town took swift action to bury the body. Emily’s defiance continued after she inherited the home. The townspeople, while unapproving, did not provoke Emily. They brushed off many offenses saying, “Poor Emily,” up and until Emily’s funeral (Faulkner 583). She is 74 when she dies, her hair a “vigorous iron-gray,” (Faulkner 585).

Emily had a secluded childhood and likely suffered from some type of traumatic abuse. The perception of the towns people was of “Emily in the background...her father a silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip,” (Faulkner 582). When Emily is older, she meets a man named Homer Barron. Even though he was not a man of nobility, the townspeople were happy Emily met someone.

“I want arsenic,” Emily demanded the druggist (Faulkner 584). Many townspeople speculated Emily would commit suicide. When pressed by the druggist to discover the purpose of buying the poison, Emily defiantly rejects the inquiry, “Miss Emily just stared at him,” (Faulkner 584). Overtime the townspeople begin seeing less and less of Emily and Homer.

Emily did earn some money, she “fitted up a studio in one of the downstairs rooms,” and would open her home to children (Faulkner 585). “[W]hen she [Emily] was about forty...she

gave lessons in china-paintings,” and children would visit with 25 cent pieces. Taxes are never remitted, and “she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house,” (Faulkner 585).

At the end of the story, after Emily’s burial the townsfolk storm the house to the top floor and force open the door. “The violence breaking down the door seemed to fill this room,” (Faulkner 586). Shocked, the townspeople realize what the awful odor is. The corpse of Homer Barron, “once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love,” (Faulkner 586). What’s more stomach-turning than a decayed human corpse of some thirty years laid on a bed is the “long strand of iron-gray hair,” that sat atop pillow fresh with an indentation next to the body (Faulkner 586).

According to Mary Arensberg and Sara Schyfter, the text can be translated into Freudian or other psychoanalytical constructs with the following delineation: “a. Repetition of fantasy, b. the Violation of the Origin, c. Androcracy of the Text, d. Writing as Necrophilia, [and] e. Coitus Interruptus,” (129). This approach pays credence to past traumas contributing to psychotic behavior. The implication being that, Emily was a victim of incest, subsequently fantasizing repeatably about sex, she remained secretive and secluded in her adult life. Perhaps compounded by a male dominated society, an androcracy; her emotional state eroded over time.

Arensberg and Schyfter offer three explanations for the apparent murder of Homer. One is that Emily, “poisons Homer after the sexual embrace in order to,” keepsake the sexual experience (129). Another thought is that Emily, “killed [Homer] before an [intimate] encounter was possible,” thereby maintaining control (129). A final interpretation is in, “reference to Homer's homosexuality,” with the argument that “Emily’s rage...[after] sexual rejection,” caused her to kill Homer (129). In the post psychotic state of time, in Emily’s aporia, she fails to bury Homer’s body which in its essence removes any feminist criticism, as the character is not further empowered by her actions.

The Freudian psychoanalysis the two authors present was predicated on the idea that, “[a]s readers...we are...both the narrator and the analysand who are caused anxiety by the glimpse,” in our mental construction of Faulkner’s story (Arensberg and Schyiter 126). Arensberg and Schyiter claim that readers “are faced with an anxiety of interpretation,” because the text simply, “refuses closure,” (126-127). There is greater depth in the Freudian view within the research as well. The idea that the tax collectors in Faulkner’s story denotes to some “tableau and....fictions of male penetration,” is a metaphor to men entering Emily’s life (128). The researchers build a case for possible incest as a premise for Emily’s actions in their journal published 1987 by Duke University Press.

In 1997 Jean O’Bryan-Knight compiled a complete entry for Pennsylvania State University’s *Comparative Literature Studies* by colligating two literary works: Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Los cachorros [The Cubs]*, and William Faulkner’s, “A Rose for Emily.” Both works of fiction place the reader, “inside and outside the stories they tell and thereby maintain a special relationship with the reader who also stand outside the story,” (O’Bryan-Knight 337). In keeping with O’Bryan-Knight’s research, author Vargas Llosa was influenced by Faulkner’s work although “critics have, for the most part, glossed over this connection,” (329). For O’Bryan-Knight this is an important comparison because it gives the reader, “a more precise understanding for the Faulknerian nature of Vargas Llosa’s narrative,” and affords an exclusive exploration into the, seldom used, literary application known as, choric narration (328).

Mario Vargas Llosa was a student at the University of San Marcos when he discovered a Spanish translation of “A Rose for Emily.” Born in Arequipa, Peru in March of 1936, he would eventually be responsible for many works for literature such as, “*The Green House* (1966), *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* (1973), *The Storyteller* (1987) and *The Dream of the Celt* (2010),” (Vargas Llosa). In addition to his major contribution to literature, he is also known

for his role in politics when he decided to run “in the Peruvian presidential election in 1990,” (Vargas Llosa). In 2010 Vargas Llosa received the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 1981 he is quoted as being impressed by the disturbing and daring world that Faulkner created in “A Rose for Emily,”, saying, “Serfa una gran mentira decir que mi deslumbramiento por Faulkner fue •tecnico• [It would be a lie to say that I was impressed only by Faulkner's technique],” (qtd. In O’Bryan-Knight 329).

Some significant similarities between the short story, “A Rose for Emily,” and the novel *Los Cachorros*, is that the both protagonists, Emily and Cuéllar respectively, suffer from “crippling childhoods followed by failure to find a mate,” (O’Bryan-Knight 333). In the denouement of both stories a death is occurs or is revealed. In *Los cachorros*, Cuéllar commits suicide which is not too dissimilar to the motive behind the homicide that Emily commits in Faulkner’s short. Both characters hang on to the past and are maladjusted as a result. Ironically, both stories include a sexual trauma, for Cuéllar, it is an accident that resulted in castration, for Emily it is the tableau of sexual repression, possibly incest.

O’Bryan-Knight also pays homage to the author’s choice in voice throughout the individual works. He credits Faulkner for successfully using the rare point of view known as, “choric narration, that is, narration in the first person plural,” (335). For all intents and purposes, it is safe to say that Falkner uses choric narration in the entire story, except for the very beginning and the very end of the story. Faulkner does this by keeping the narrator anonymous, which is a slight distinction for the choice in voice in *Los cachorros*. In *Los cachorros* the narration comes from four speakers and according to O’Bryan-Knight, “the various voices merge into one uniform chorus,” forming a first person plural (339).

During the month of December, in the year 2000, nearly one year after the Y2K scare, that threatened to shut down major power plants and city traffic grids, a pair of students from

Wake Forest University and the University of Central Florida, through their English and Computer Science departments respectively, assembled William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," into a chronological timeline using a computer algorithm. The program the three analysts developed together uses "constraint logic programming" or CLP; which, has the "ability to sort numeric variables that do not yet have definite values," (Burg et. al. 377). William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," contains a non-linear timeline. Because of this, Faulkner's short makes for an interesting piece of literature to read, as well as a puzzle for analysts to understand the series of events in a normal, chronological timeline, almost how one assumes a detective, or a doctor would prefer.

The experiment explained briefly assigns certain words, events or groups of words to a single letter variable. For example, the variable "A" has been assigned with the meaning, "Emily's Death," (Burg et. al. 381). Another example would be how the meaning, "There was a bad odor around Emily's house," was assigned to the variable "G," (Burg et. al. 381). Next the research scientists found sentences in Faulkner's work that contained key information denoting to position in time and applied the variable meanings to mathematical logical expressions. This is demonstrated best by showing the example "C = 1894," which is derived from the meaning "Colonel Sartoris remitted Emily's taxes in 1894," taken directly from the text (Burg et. al. 382).

Remarkably, one can extrapolate additional information from this type of analysis and with a greater level of accuracy than simply having a strong literary sense. In addition to drawing a timeline of events from within the story, such as finding the year in which Emily dies, this program could also check for continuity. Ultimately researchers might be more interested in Faulkner's frame of reference in writing the story, "considering the different possible historical settings in which Emily lived makes an excellent starting point," for debate (Burg et. al. 386).

Chronos and Kairos are ancient Greek words that support theories of time. Chronos defines the most familiar concept of time, as a measured, chronological or sequential experience. By contrast, Kairos expresses a passage of time or an experience that has no determined measurement. Time as an element has already been studied with respect to Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." In 2007 Paul Harris conjectured that many of Faulkner's work, "induces readers to undertake," analysis using an approach discovered by the French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze while studying French writer, Marcel Proust (Harris 169).

Whereas nonfiction stories apply the principals of Chronos to construct the events, "fiction induces an uncommon sense of time that no longer takes for granted the coherence or totality of time," (Harris 170). The first-person plural concept introduced by O'Bryan-Knight earlier is an important concept just as Harris expresses how "A Rose for Emily," has a dubiety from time as well. It's not confusing if the reader can conceptualize Emily as ghost, "not part of living history," but rather a member of, "dead time," (Harris 174). The sinister spinster haunts the haunts the curious townsfolk who attend Emily's funeral.

"The story begins and ends at one moment in time, Emily's funeral...her death is the necessary condition," to tell the story of Emily's life. Symbolically, Emily's house relates to Emily in a metonymic fashion. One reason "A Rose for Emily," calls for strong analysis is the frequently cryptic choric style by Faulkner. And one way of making rational sense of why Emily would haunt the town is because, "the town attempts to impose taxes on her," only "humanizing" her after her family fortunes dries up (Harris 176). When she refuses to pay taxes, she causes agitation for the deputy sent to collect. This analysis helps to explain the absence of time within the story. Harris takes it one step further with the claim that, "Emily is not a necrophiliac," but rather, "one who literally embraces death!" (181).

“Time plays a central role in all of Faulkner’s writing...critics tend to treat time in his work in relation to psychological, existential, formal and thematic problems,” (Harris 170). One thing all the journals have in common is pointing Faulkner’s use of time. In Arensberg and Schyiter’s journal time was used to demonstrate the lack of closure, adding to a level of anxiety the reader has. The research by Berg et. al. had everything to do with putting the story on a chronolectal map. Harris looks at ‘dead time,’ as terminology to argue that perhaps Emily was in a metaphysical space where time does not exist. And while OBryan-Knight doesn’t specially discuss time, he does write about first-person plurals as a literary device which principally escapes time. I ended my high school paper by arguing that Emily’s, “mistreated emotional problems caused her to digress into a state of emotional confusion.”

Each academic journal had a specific research topic. Whether it be a psychological, computational, metaphysical, or comparative view; they all contribute to the idea that literary consumption is important. My high school analysis was written in 2006. I wrote in my high school essay that “the mere absence of Emily’s mom displays how Emily has been completely desolate most her life, causing her unhealthy mental state,” aside from poor choice of words, I believe I was making a finding not discovered in other research throughout the years. Literature can be dissected in many ways, a great starting point for us to talk about literature.

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