

Reading Faulkner: A Collection of Literary Criticism on “A Rose for Emily”

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**INTRODUCTION**

William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," first published in 1930 in an issue of *Forum* and later appearing in a slightly revised version in two collections of short stories *These Thirteen* (1931) and *Collected Stories* (1950) was his first short story to appear in a major magazine (Akers). The story, told in five sections, is about the unmarried, Emily, who lives alone in her deceased father's house, and the story is told through the perspective of an outside voice, encompassing the community's opinions and observations of her. The narrator remarks on her isolation, peculiar behaviors, and the comings and goings of different guests in her house. The town both takes pity on her and gossips about her ruthlessly, and several neighbors eventually notice a smell coming from her house, which they refuse to confront her about, instead dealing with it directly by entering her home. None of the community is prepared to discover the corpse laid out in the locked room of her house, however, which is only revealed after she has died along with evidence that she had lied with the corpse.

By the time Faulkner wrote "A Rose for Emily," he had attended and dropped out of the University of Mississippi, worked idle jobs where he had become distracted by reading and writing, and briefly served in the Royal Canadian Air Force but never saw combat ("William Faulkner"). He had published a few works that were mostly unsuccessful, and it wasn't until he published *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929 that he started to gain popularity and critical success ("William Faulkner"). In his Nobel Prize address in 1949, Faulkner said that literature must "help man endure by lifting his heart," but in this piece, the title character is a "pathological necrophiliac murderess," which may at first glance seem to oppose this belief, but ultimately Emily's character expresses dignity by exercising free choice (Strandberg). No matter how gruesome her choice may appear, she has the power to evade society's expectations by keeping

her lover, Homer, with her permanently. This is a crucial point to examine when considering the debate in English studies regarding the use of theory or cultural critique and new directions.

While much can be discovered through theoretical approaches as exemplified in several of the articles included in this case study, it is only through cultural approaches that scholars begin to reach more exhaustive interpretations of Emily that align with her dignity and free choice, which Faulkner may have intended for her to possess. Cultural studies also moves away from the author's intents to show how he may not have been in control of creating the character of Emily. It is only when theoretical and cultural critiques are combined that the reader may begin to see the fuller scope of the many layers of "A Rose for Emily," making it a good candidate for a case study in criticism.

Faulkner's views of the publishing process fluctuated during his early writing years—his frustration with the process and apathy towards how the public viewed his work gave him the freedom to write *The Sound and the Fury*, but in 1931, he wrote *Sanctuary* to make money to support his family ("William Faulkner"). This motivation may have contributed to the shock value featured in "A Rose for Emily," but that is not to detract from the seriousness of the message behind the piece. "A Rose for Emily" depicts the "Southern legend" found in many of Faulkner's works as well as one of his prominent recurring themes: time and the harms of clinging to the past, which Emily attempts to do in keeping her dead lover's body ("William Faulkner"). Faulkner's narrative structure is similar to his other works in that it begins in the present, takes the reader to the past to examine the characters and events, and then resurfaces in the present at the end (Strandberg).

Much of Faulkner's work takes place in his fictional location of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, including this piece, which takes place in Jefferson, an important setting in many of

his fictions and features Colonel Sartoris who has appeared in other works as well (Akers). The town of Jefferson is reminiscent of Oxford, Mississippi, and the fictional mythical setting of Yoknapatawpha manages to encapsulate legends of the deep south (“William Faulkner”). The story is embedded in this traditionally southern setting, which influences the community’s reception of the morbid discovery in “A Rose for Emily”:

“There is no denying that the image of Homer Barron's mummified body, with Emily's tell-tale hair next to its head on the pillow, violates conventional standards of morality, just as her courtship with a Yankee of low class ("a Northerner, a day laborer") violates the conventional code of a Southern lady. But suspension of conventional mores is an indispensable feature of Faulkner's heroic vision. It is only by occupying the inner consciousness of his madmen, scapegoats, and outlaws that we can have any hope of understanding the Faulkner protagonist, whose circumscribing contingencies will typically make conventional standards inapplicable.” (Strandberg)

In this way, Faulkner takes the society he is writing from and challenges southern tradition by applying it to Emily’s situation. This short story is an example of southern Gothic literature because it creates “an atmosphere of horror and suspense” using the setting of “the crumbling landscape of the antebellum era as the backdrop” (Witalec). Elements of the Gothic novel include psychological approaches, themes of terror, human existence, and social interactions (Witalec), which can all be found in Emily’s character and actions as well as the community’s reactions to her lifestyle and macabre secret. Faulkner often uses Biblical elements in his fiction as well, including themes of guilt passed on to children by their fathers for past sins against Native Americans and Black Americans (“William Faulkner”). This is less direct in “A Rose for

Emily,” but the treatment of her relationship with her father and the inherited biases and judgments the town feel towards Emily echo this notion.

The Gothic style is appropriate for the setting Faulkner writes from because “the plantation world of the antebellum period provided writers with an analogy to the medieval settings available to English gothic writers,” and Emily’s crumbling house is representative of the decay of a past era (Witalec). Her house can be interpreted as a monument to southern traditions of the past. Race and gender as well as attention to the past and a move away from tradition are also features of southern Gothic literature that “A Rose for Emily” exemplifies (Witalec). The story’s popularity in part may come from these themes, but primarily it originates from the horrific yet satisfying ending that uncovers Jefferson’s gruesome secret (Akers). The scandalous nature of Emily’s life paralleling the decay of southern tradition and prompting the negative response of the community contribute to the story’s success as well as Faulkner’s critique of the traditional south.

The following scholarly articles delve into several of these themes and encompass a time span of 1994 to 2013. The oldest of these articles, written by Renee R. Curry in 1994, remains crucial to the study of “A Rose for Emily” today because of the feminist and ideological issues attached to the traditional southern “lady,” which the story cannot be critically analyzed without considering. It provides the groundwork for further ideological approaches that other articles in this case study analyze. I included articles that ranged from very close readings to broader cultural studies approaches and some that combine both of these elements. Both cultural critiques and theoretical approaches are represented, although most employ both of these methods to an extent. In searching for articles, I used keywords that reflected three main approaches, which I thought were crucial to interpreting the story: psychoanalysis, feminist studies, and post-

structuralism. However, I found articles that went beyond these three approaches as well. I primarily used JSTOR, Academic OneFile, and the Literature Resource Center and found that some of these articles can be obtained from two or more of these resources. The following five articles are discussed in the order presented below:

“The Coveted Monument” (2013)

“Gender and Authorial Limitation in Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily’” (1994)

“Miss Emily After Dark” (2011)

“Pulp Fictions: Reading Faulkner in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (1997)

“Eating Faulkner Eating Baudelaire: Multiple Rewritings and Cultural Cannibalism”  
(2009)

#### DESCRIPTIONS OF SCHOLARLY ARTICLES

##### “The Coveted Monument” by Hans van Stralen and A. M. Iken (2013)

**Journal:** The online journal this article is from, *PsyArt*, is, as the name implies, a peer-reviewed journal dealing with psychological approaches to the arts with a specific interest in psychoanalytic approaches applied to literary works. Their publishing criterion include “conceptual and methodological rigor,” and they also rate submissions based on significance of research. The journal was founded in 1997 and reaches an international readership.

**Abstract:** “The Coveted Monument” uses a psychoanalytic approach to analyze how male villagers perceive Emily as a sexual desire and also how Emily’s behaviors defy societal constructions of how a “lady” should act in “A Rose for Emily.” The methodology opens with Stralen’s initial reservations about the psychoanalytic approach, and he does not argue that the story is entirely constructed of erotic symbolism. Instead, he analyzes the town and supporting

characters in terms of the id, ego, and superego, and he breaks down the symbolism of the house as a body resistant to the town's penetration. Rather than employing resistant reading as many other critical articles on the story do, Stralen does not try to answer questions about Emily's relationship with Homer but instead aligns with the narrator's biased attitudes to analyze the work. In the results section, the author applies psychoanalytic methods to the town's construction of "lady" and how the symbolism of Emily's house as a body ties into this based on the narrator's descriptions of and the town's invasion of the house.

**Rationale:** I chose this article because it fit well in conversation with some of the other articles I selected, offering some opposing interpretations of the short story and also some that were in line with feminist readings and other interpretations. It is important to incorporate a psychoanalytic approach in reading "A Rose for Emily" because of the themes dealing with the unconscious and issues like Emily's necrophilia and possible oedipal complex. Similar to Renee R. Curry's article described later, this article also addresses the "lady" ideology imposed on Emily by the town.

### **Theory Application**

Although Stralen primarily cites other Freud works not included in the Norton Anthology, "The Interpretation of Dreams" can also be applied to the sexual symbolism in "A Rose for Emily" that Stralen ties to the house, which he cites as a symbol for the vagina. The town's obsession with the house acts almost as a method of displacement to try to ignore the immorality taking place right under their noses:

"Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of these wishes, repugnant to morality, which have been forced upon us like Nature, and after their revelation we may all of us well seek to close our eyes to the scenes of our childhood." (Freud 816)

These wishes, which refer to incestuous impulses, can be applied to the tableau of “Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip” (Faulkner). Her father was the only man she ever lived with in the house, and when he died, she tried to keep his body instead of burying it. Her lifestyle consistently opposes morality as laid out by the community. The narrator and the rest of her spectators may repress such incidents in their own lives in order to thrive in the community, but Emily carries out her solitary life with the immoral desire of necrophilia in the open. Stralen shows that the town frequently tries to penetrate the house, engaging in a symbolic sexual act, but Emily herself is never approached sexually. This may be because of the town’s ignorance to their own immoral wishes.

Freud’s essay on the uncanny also ties into “The Coveted Monument” and Faulkner’s work:

“The German word ‘unheimlich’ is obviously the opposite of ‘heimlich’ [homely], ‘heimisch’ [‘native’]—the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar. Naturally not everything that is new and unfamiliar is frightening, however; the relation is not capable of inversion. We can only say that what is novel can easily become frightening and uncanny; some new things are frightening but not by any means all. Something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny.

On the whole, Jentsch did not get beyond this relation of the uncanny to the novel and unfamiliar. He ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one’s way about in. The better oriented in his environment



a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it.” (Freud 826)

Because the villagers are frightened by and unfamiliar with the necrophilia taking place behind closed doors, they have trouble navigating that which is uncanny to them. While they may believe they are in touch with the society they live in, this concept betrays them as fallible and subject to the dark secrets that Emily’s life reveals. They are intruders in her environment but not oriented within it, making her environment a mystery to them.

Stralen’s article also has undertones of race and ethnicity studies in its analysis of Tobe’s outsider role in the story as Emily’s black servant. Along with Emily, he presents an opposition to the town’s ideology, but unlike Emily, who is at least able to ensure that her secret will be revealed after her death, Tobe does not have a voice at all. Tobe is only given life through the narrator’s commentary, and although Stralen does not go into these issues extensively, it is still apparent through considering Tobe as a voiceless outsider that he has been painted in a similar way that W. E. B. Du Bois’ critique in “Criteria of Negro Art” accuses white Americans of composing:

“But let me sum up with this: Suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans? Now turn it around. Suppose you were to write a story and put in it the kind of people you know and like and imagine. You might get it published and you might not. And the ‘might not’ is still far bigger than the ‘might.’ The white publishers catering to white folk would say, ‘It is not interesting’—to white folk, naturally not. They want Uncle Toms, Topsies, good ‘darkies’ and clowns.” (Du Bois 874)

End of Sample

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