

Emily's Rose: Symbol of Her Transcendence to Traditional South

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Abstract

The title of William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily", particularly the symbolic meaning of the rose has been discussed for years. Four major ideas towards the rose are summarized as love, lament, secrecy and an ambiguous ghostly feature. Based on the previous studies, this paper is aimed at discovering a most related meaning towards the protagonist Emily and the theme of the story. Emily is a Southern woman who afflicts from a patriarchal father and Puritan moral code of virginity. The rose for her, therefore, should be an opportunity to transcend the traditional South. The love story between Emily and Homer is her first try. And the rebellion converts to be a secret through Emily's maintenance of Homer's dead body. The symbolic rose, thus being a presence-absence, lives forever in the narration of "we" and memorizes by the readers. The high-profile love affair with Homer Barron is her first attempt to resist the pain she suffers from her dominant father and the Southern womanhood. Her rebellious action transforms to be in secret when she faces with the prevention from her relatives and other Southerners. Her brave kill of her lover, which is revealed at the end of the story, successfully remains her transcendence. In other words, the presence-absence "rose" safely conceals in Emily's pretense to be traditional. And Faulkner succeeds in "A Rose for Emily" as well, by representing his humane concern towards Southern ladies like Emily.

Keywords: Emily, Rose, Symbol, Presence-Absence

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Introduction

William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" depicts the life and death of a Southern lady. It is acknowledged as "Faulkner's most famous, most popular, and most anthologized short story" (Roberts, 13), and is "by no means Faulkner's best story" (Skei, 46). To understand the story, its title, especially the "rose" has to be paid much attention. The literal rose as a type of flower is non-present in the story; that is to say, the rose is allegorically functioned in the life of Miss Emily. Homer Barron, the intruder, changes Emily's life. His coming indicates Emily's rebellion towards the patriarchal South and Southern Womanhood. And similar to the absent flower, her transcendence is the presence-absence, hidden in her monumental image on behalf of the tradition.

Four Symbolic Meanings Related to Emily's Rose

The symbolic meaning of the rose has a relation to, and even beyond the flower rose. In C.S. Peirce's semiology, three signs are defined: icon, index and symbol. Their function is similar, that is, to represent the relation between a signifying item and the signified. Unlike icon and index, the relation between the two revealed by a symbol, is "not a natural one, but entirely a matter of social convention" (Abrams and Harpham, 358). And in literature, "the term 'symbol' is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or suggests a range of reference, beyond itself" (Abrams and Harpham, 393-4). In the case of the rose in "A Rose for Emily", it is in the first place a word. The word rose signifies an object, that is, a flower with a sweet smell, and the objective rose becomes a signifying item, indicating a meaning related to the literal rose, or a meaning beyond it.

Basically, critics hold four different ideas towards Emily's symbolic rose: three determined meanings are love, lament, and secrecy; the last opinion refuses an absolute meaning of the rose and welcomes the possibility of uncertainty. Love is the commonly acknowledged meaning for a literary rose. Robert Burn's poem "A Red Red Rose" and a medieval dreamer's narrative *The Romance of the Rose* are both examples. Influenced by the literary tradition, critics such as Harry Fenson, Hildreth Kritzer, Mary Lousie Weak and Kong Fanting deem that the rose represents the love story between Emily and Homer, especially "the tragic love beyond death and space-time" (Kong, 388).

Represented by James L. Roberts and Joseph M. Garrison, others point out that the rose is given to Emily after her death, in order to commemorate her. Both Faulkner the writer and his readers lament the tragic end of the poor Southern lady with the narrator as the executor, "presenting her with a 'rose' by sympathetically and compassionately telling her bizarre and macabre story" (Roberts, 21).

Laura Getty, however, proposes another stance that the rose represents secrecy. In the Greek legend, the god of Silence—Harpocrates was bribed by Cupid with a rose, for Cupid demanded Harpocrates to keep in silence about a love affair between Venus and a young man. Since then, another signified meaning of the rose generated in the Western culture. That is, "strict confidence", "complete secrecy" or "absolute privacy". Based on this mythical story, Getty takes a clear notice of the concealed information beneath the story, particularly Emily's kill of her lover. In her view, the rose for Emily represents the secrecy of her murder. Considering the narrative of this story, only Emily and the author know this message, but neither of the two confess it to others (townspeople or the readers) until the death of Emily. In

this sense, the rose anticipates “the confidential relationship between the author and his character, with all of the privileged information withheld” (Getty, 232).

The fourth opinion resists a certain connotation and emphasizes on the ghostly feature of the rose. Concerning the gloomy and horrible atmosphere, and the uncanny images of a corpse, a murder, a disappearing servant and the protagonist’s psychological tendency of necrophilia, “‘A Rose for Emily’ evokes the terms Southern gothic and grotesque” (Roberts, 12). In He Qingji and Lv Fengyi’s article, they analyze the specter element in the story. As for the rose, they find it “a real absent presence, another ghost in the novel” (He and Lv, 134). By pointing out the ghostly characteristic of the rose, they believe that “looking for the symbolic meaning of the rose is doomed to be unsolved; the only thing that is certain is that Emily received her roses after she died—after she no longer needed it” (He and Lv, 134).

To some extent, four ideas towards the symbolic meaning of the rose are reasonable. And though the last opinion finds a certain meaning unacceptable, its analysis of a ghostly flower as absent presence is also meaningful. They all provide “something” that the rose signifies and establish a clear and valid relation between the rose and its meaning. What they neglect, however, is the significance and exclusiveness of the rose for the story, especially for Emily the protagonist. For example, love is indeed a symbolic meaning of the rose. But, the importance of love for Emily hasn’t been explained in details.

To interpret the rose, the item itself is by no means inescapable, but the prepositional objective phrase “for Emily” and the whole story plot is as well important. According to M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s definition, a literary symbol also “suggests a range of reference” (394) and the meaning can surpass the word itself. Therefore, love, lament, secrecy and even a ghostly characteristic are all participants to generate a sole meaning. The meaning, as the signified’s signified, is most adjacent to Emily and Faulkner’s writing intention of the title. That is, Emily’s transcendence towards the traditional South. Her love affair with Homer Barron gives her a chance to fight against the yoke of tradition; the lament on account of her tragic ending also memorizes her courageous behavior; and the secret and ghostly rebellion is really underneath her acknowledged image of a Southern lady. Emily is never alive, but the dead body of Homer as evidence for her resistance still lives in the narration presented by “we”.

Overt Rebellion Towards the Traditional South: Emily’s Love Affair

According to Richard H. King’s analysis, the traditional South depicted in Faulkner’s works refers to the Southern family romance. It is composed of the idealization of the plantation, resolute patriarchy with heroic Southern Cavalier, the celebration of the feminine, the lip service paid to the family as well as the justification of slavery (King, 27-29). Females (young ladies and mothers) are both symbols of Southern grace and neglected figures under the pressure of patriarchal society, who are denied to preserve sexuality or erotic appeal, and “in extreme form she was stripped of any emotional, nurturing attributes at all” (King, 35). As for Emily, a White aristocratic woman, the traditional South directly points to a patriarchal father and the Virgin-like womanhood. Emily “was distinctly subordinate in the romance to the powerful and heroic father” (King, 34).

When her father is still alive, Emily’s situation is depicted as such:

We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the back-ground, her father a spraddled silhouette in the fore-ground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door. So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated; even with insanity in the family she wouldn't have turned down all of her chances if they had really materialized. (Faulkner, 53-54)

The strong comparison between Emily and her father is narrated by “we”. Considering their shape and posture, Emily is slender while her father is much stronger. And as for their standing position, Emily is the “background” of her father. Metaphorically, the scene implies an arbitrary and dominant father image. Though Emily’s attitude towards her father hasn’t been described, the narrator’s unpleasure towards her situation sheds light on the protagonist’s pain. The family’s “insanity” commented by the narrator “we” thus both refers to the father’s unaccountable patriarchy and Emily’s worrisome psychological statement caused by her father. Another traditional demand for a Southern lady can also be seen in the above depiction. That is, “to preserve the ‘honor’ of a white woman” (Hamblin and Peek, 136), especially her “quasi-Virgin Mary role” (King, 35). Even for a woman in thirties, she is still controlled by her family and not to be in love or in a marriage. Instead of having her own life, Emily should remain in purity and fulfil “a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town” (Faulkner, 50) —as a symbolic honor of the South.

Even after the death of her father, Emily is still considered as a symbolic figure of Southern family romance and Southern femininity. In the second episode, the narrator elucidates the event that four men sneak in Emily’s house to find out the reason of the bad smell. They accidentally bump into Miss Emily, and “Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol” (Faulkner, 53). From the descriptions of “light behind her” and “as that of an idol”, it implies a female image similar to the Goddess in the Greek legend with a suspended, ghostly aura hung over her. In other Southerners’ eyes, Miss Emily still can’t get rid of her Mary-like identity attributes. Even as she grows older and the glory of the Old South is long gone, Emily is still a living emblem of the Old South.

Hence, the contradiction “within a society that simultaneously viewed women as inferior human beings and the standard bearers for all that is moral and good” (Hamblin and Peek, 136) leads to woman’s rejection towards the tradition. Emily starts to realize that “the tradition was a ‘tradition’ was to be alienated from it” (King, 56). Her opportunity comes when her father is dead and Homer Barron the outsider intrudes into her life.

The advent of Homer, especially his identity as a black Northerner, offers Emily a pleasant path to rebel the traditional South. The symbolic rose, masked by the name of love, begins to blossom. “Homer Barron, a Yankee—a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face” (Faulkner, 55), who always “would be in the center of the group” (Faulkner, 55). According to John B. Cullen and Floyd C. Watkins, Faulkner is adept to capture the folk-tales in the daily life, and Homer Barron is one of the examples. They point out that the archetype of Homer is Caption Jack Hume, “a Yankee from New England, worked for the W. G. Lassiter Paving Company” (Cullen and Watkins, 17). Based on their research, “old Captain Jack proved to be as fine a citizen as any man in the county” (Cullen and Watkins, 17). Although Faulkner’s story should be regarded as a fictional composition, and the personalities of Homer Barron and Caption Jack cannot be equated, the depiction of Homer in the story as well as the analysis presented by Cullen and Watkins shows the fact that Northerners and Southerners are equal in their ability and status, and the only difference

goes to their birthplace. Hence, Emily's love affair with Homer—a northerner can't be regarded as a matter of devaluing or mismatch, but implies Emily's conviction to fight against the Old South, especially the Southern tradition.

Faced with rumors and suspicions from the town people, Emily is fearless for she "carried her head high enough" (Faulkner, 55). Townspeople recognize "her dignity as the last Grierson" (Faulkner, 55-56) when staying with Homer, but similar to the absent flower in the story, her rebellion as the symbolic rose is hidden in the misunderstanding of the narration. Her dignity is not for the perseverance of the tradition, but a victory to transcend it. When Emily dates with Homer, "rustling of craned silk and satin behind jealousies closed upon the sun of Sunday afternoon as the thin, swift clop-clop-clop of the matched team passed: 'Poor Emily'" (Faulkner, 55). The narration can be seen as a typical type of zero focalization (in Gérard Genette's term), which means what described above should be the real scene in the storyworld. But the confusing and misleading part of the depiction—"the matched team passed: 'Poor Emily'" should be a simple recording of townspeople's opinion, and "poor Emily" is commended relatively subjective. That is to say, Emily's love affair with Homer has been considered a shame and misfortune only in the eyes of the townspeople, and Emily's own view of her dating is hidden under the verbal appearances created by the "we" narrator, like the connotation of the "rose". "Poor Emily" appears five times in this episode, and seemingly solidifies the impression of Emily's degradation as an honorable Southern lady. But, exploring rigorously between the lines and the words, the narration has already "betrayed" itself. "rustling" and "the sun of Sunday" in this sentence and also a skeptical voice "behind their hands" (Faulkner, 55) shed light on the total opposite possibility, that is, Emily's self-liberation and complete joy in this relation. In this sense, the love affair with Homer Barron provides a chance for Emily to shed the shackles of Southern norms, and demonstrate her determination to be the real herself and challenge the Southern tradition.

The Secret and Ghostly Rebellion: Rose as a Presence-Absence

Emily's resistance towards traditional South, however, is forced to be in secret when the overt rebellion is impeded. Yet, it is also a blessing in disguise because her transcendence, being a presence-absence, becomes an eternal victory. According to Jacques Derrida, the meaning exists in its absence, because "the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present" (Faulkner, 71). Emily's evident surrender to the tradition is present in the story, while her insistence to rebel implied by the kill of her lover is almost absent in the narrative. But it is discovered to be always present until the end of the story informs the secret truth.

Followed by the narration, Emily, as a single woman, flirting with a man in public "was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people" (Faulkner, 57). Hence, the townspeople ask the minister and her relatives—representatives of the tradition to persuade Emily back on track. The narrator "we" deems that the two sides finally agree on a marriage between Emily and Homer. The jewelers, men's clothing, and other items Emily orders are thus explained by "we" as the preparation for a wedding. The abnormal and rebellious Emily is occupied by a repentant and obedient one. And in the battle with the traditional South, the apparent resistance no longer exists, whereas tradition prevails. However, the story is totally different when Emily's kill of Homer is regarded as a premise. The murder happens during the negotiation between Emily and her sisters. The outcome provides by "we", hence, is misleading. They don't agree with each other, and Emily, prevented by the ordinary Southerners and her relatives, engenders another solution to continue her resistance to the yoke. That is, to kill the lively "rose" and maintain it secretly forever.

The meaning of the rose that Emily is convicted to transcend the Old South is discovered only at the end of the time of narrative. At the end of the story, the narrator depicts, “What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the night-shirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay” (Faulkner, 61). It implies that Homer’s dead body has long been placed at Emily’s bed, but from the readers’ point of view, “these images from the past are being seen through a reversed telescope or bottle-neck” (Harris, 173). The narrator “we” sets up this suspense, making the past event of Emily’s killing her lover always pending—“left unmoored, afloat in time” (Harris, 173) in the narration. But in the chronological order of events, or if the reader rereads the story, the secrecy has been presented itself “as irreducible absence within the presence of the trace” (Derrida, 47) since the year 1894. To be specific, most stories are exactly narrated under the existence of the biological death of the “rose” and its symbolic eternity.

Dramatically, even in the first section of the narrative when Emily is described as an icon of tradition, her transcendence is ghostly concealed and pervaded in the house as a presence-absence. The board of Aldermen come and see “a small, fat woman in black” (Faulkner, 51), “like a body long submerged in motion-less water” (Faulkner, 51). The depiction represents an old-fashioned image of Emily, metaphorically indicating that Emily belongs to the past. And her rejection to pay the tax also implies that she still abides by the traditional Southern law. Another proof to show her out-of-date ideology is that she uses Colonel Sartoris, a dead man’s words to argue with them. The whole section portrays a huge comparison between a traditional woman and the modern society. It seems that Miss Emily is the walking past. However, the rose for Emily is still alive. When the Aldermen talk and negotiate with Emily, regarding the woman as a traditional monument, the dead body of Homer Barron is right posited in the house, symbolizing Emily’s transcendence towards the Southern past. What they encounters is never a symbol of tradition; instead, it is a woman who courageously fights against the patriarchal society for more than 40 years.

Another typical example happens in the funeral but early before the mourners find out the dead body:

the very old men—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 bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years. (Faulkner, 60)

Without knowledge of Emily’s murder, this account will be seen as a sincere commemoration to Emily by older Southerners, and as an emblem of the Southern family romance, her body transforms to be a “site of memory” (in Pierre Nora’s term) for these men to memorize the Southern past. But Homer’s dead body is securely placed in the house, and as a presence-absence, reaffirms Emily’s transcendence to the Old South. Dramatically speaking, while those old men think of them dancing with or courting Miss Emily in the past, young Emily herself hasn’t fell in love with neither of them; in contrast, she loves the Northerner Homer and even sleeps for years beside his dead body. Moreover, when the old men memorize the Old South “in their brushed Confederate uniforms” and talk “of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs”, the corpse serves as a testament to Emily’s rebellion against tradition, silently poking fun at these people’s misconceptions about this

lady. In their sense, the past is “a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches”, and they take advantage of Emily’s funeral to cherish the Southern glory as well as the Cavalier-like fathers. In contrast, Southern past in Emily’s eyes suits perfectly the narrator’s depiction—“a diminishing road”. It is a past that women live under the patriarchal system, always in the chaste, pure image from the male gaze. When the old male mourners look back to the past, Miss Emily—though dead, but left behind a “rose” for herself: a corpse that symbolizes transcendence and rebellion against the Southern tradition—expects a chance to repulse the past and welcome the future.

The rose is a presence-absence, from the mention of “the valance curtains of faded rose color” (Faulkner, 60) and “the rose-shaded lights” (Faulkner, 60) in the story and the rose in the title to the symbolic rose filled in the story as a secret ghost. In brief, the rose symbolizes Emily’s rebellion to traditional South, and the lamented “rose” given to her from the narrator and Faulkner, shows “Faulkner’s reflection on the Southern society and his care for the southern women, especially his attacks towards the prevailing patriarchal system of persecuting women in the South and the puritanism of the concept of women” (Yuan, 76).

Conclusion

The symbolic rose is the sum of love, lament, secrecy and ghostly characteristic. The four elements together convey a most specific meaning—Emily’s transcendence towards the tradition. The high-profile love affair with Homer Barron is her first attempt to resist the pain she suffers from her dominant father and the Southern womanhood. Her rebellious action transforms to be in secret when she faces with the prevention from her relatives and other Southerners. Her brave kill of her lover, which is revealed at the end of the story, successfully remains her transcendence. Ultimately, the presence-absence “rose” safely conceals in Emily’s pretense to be traditional as well as townspeople’s repeated comments and impressions of an old-fashioned and abided Emily. In this sense, Faulkner by designing a presence-absence rose in the story, sheds light on his humanistic concern towards such ladies in the Old South.

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