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## EMILY AND THE SOUTH: THE POST CIVIL WAR PERIOD AND THE DISSOLUTION OF TRADITION

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**RESUMO:** Esse ensaio revisa o tema central do conto de William Faulkner, *A Rose for Emily* (1930). Este conto apresenta a decadência da família aristocrática de Emily que coincide com a falência de valores tradicionais na pequena cidade fictícia de Jefferson. O interesse em manter a tradição é personificado pelos moradores desta cidade que, como narradores deste conto, estão em frequente observação de sua mais ilustre habitante, exigindo dela um comportamento exemplar. A agonia de Emily ao tentar manter essa imagem, a leva à insanidade e criminalidade, tornando-a assim, um símbolo do fim de uma era.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** tradição, decadência, transição.

**ABSTRACT:** This paper reviews the central theme of William Faulkner's tale, *A Rose for Emily* (1930). This tale presents the decay of Emily's aristocratic family and its temporal coincidence with the collapse of traditional values in the small fictional town of Jefferson. The interest in keeping their tradition is impersonated by the city dwellers that, as narrators of this tale, are frequently observing Jefferson's most memorable resident from whom they demand an exemplary behavior. While trying to keep this image, Emily's agony leads her to insanity and criminality, facts which come to make her the symbol of an era.

**KEY WORDS:** tradition, decadence, transition.

### 1. THE SOUTH AND THE WOMAN

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Set after the secession war; *A Rose for Emily* deals with the economic decadence of the south as well as the decadence of its cultural and social values. Emily's character comes to represent this state of painful change in this society. Both the decadence of traditional values and Emily's personal and economic ruin confirm the vision of a present that disregards once valued customs and tradition.

The last representative of a traditional family of the South, Emily becomes the depository of Southern values. Her majestic figure becomes fundamental in the maintenance of their traditional values and their way of living. The main argument of this paper is that Emily is charged not only with her expectancy but also the citizens' hope for the maintenance of traditional behaviors of the southern society. The burden of these charges gives rise to the instability of Emily's position that eventually leads her to the act of killing. This point of view, indeed, has been a common assertion in the criticism regarding Faulkner's short story (Dilworth, 1999, Fang, 2007).

## **2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

William Faulkner's tale *A Rose for Emily* was first published in 1930. A brief historical review of this period provides the links between tale and history and lets us glimpse at Faulkner's brilliancy. The narrative encloses a period of around 40 years related to the historical period previous to its publication. The south had been defeated in the secession war around 30 years earlier. This civil war placed north and south in opposite sides. While the north, more industrialized, demanded free labor and a greater number of consumers, the south was still a predominantly agrarian society which depended on a large mass of slaves for its economic development. The defeat of the south, nevertheless, led, among other things, to the abolition of slavery. The economic changes were radical, but a more subtle change was taking place in the southern society—that of their values. The south was predominantly composed of puritans who belonged to the Calvinist church. These immigrants relied in “a stern moral code, a rigid doctrine of original sin and predestination”. Du Fang continues by disclosing the instability of Emily's position: “Under the Calvinist influence, sex discrimination was particular pervasive in the south, and numerous innocent women fall victim to the sex bias” (Fang, 2007, p.19).

After the Civil War, the empowered north started to spread its industry and commerce which required a great extension of railroads. This 'invasion' caused great impact in the south that resented it as well as attempted to resist showing a greater attachment to their 'old' values. This is Fang's argument regarding Faulkner's writing: "Being aware of these economic and social changes, Faulkner presented in his novels the transition of the southern society, the decline of the southern plantations and the consequence of modern industrialization" (Fang,2007, p.19).

### 3. THE OLD AND THE NEW

This changing society is the background for the tale *A Rose for Emily*. The story takes place in a fictional city called Jefferson. This city represents a typical southern town in the nineteenth century. The invasion of the northerners was changing considerably the life of the southerners, which proudly held on to the remains of their values: "... tension between the new and the old order arouses great agony in people's mind, as in the case of Miss Emily in *A Rose for Emily*" (Fang,2007, p.20). The 'old' that Emily's family represents is soon established in the description of her house:

It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighbourhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, living its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cottons wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores. (Faulkner, 1934, p. 1)

This passage demonstrates the glory of a not so far away past and the present decadence. Words such as *once*, *had been*, *obliterated* reveal a past in which the house and its inhabitants shared glory and wealth. The last sentence; with the recollection that *only Miss Emily's house was left* in a once rich neighborhood, reinforces the view of Emily's family and prestige as a symbol of the past. Its stubborn presence in a picture of the present produces this house's existence as a persistent detail in an adequate photo frame.

Similarly to the house and its surroundings, Emily's life is emblematic. Heir of a wealthy and traditional southern family, Emily's life becomes a symbol of the past people from Jefferson wish to preserve. The plot, however, demonstrates how heavy this role

becomes in Emily's life. Daughter of a strict and controlling father, Emily never marries and does not have children. This way, Emily is unable to continue the lineage of her aristocratic family. When her father dies, she cannot accept this fact. She denies that her father is dead and does not accept to dispose of his body for the funeral for three days.

Emily seeks to maintain a distance from the townspeople due to her position in that society. Her affair with a poor northern, however, demonstrates again her inability to reach the expectations of a once esteemed family of the south. This failure is complicated with this man's attempt at leaving her. Emily cannot accept failing again and decides to kill to maintain him by her side. The weight of her suffering and craziness is revealed when, after her death, we learn that she had not only killed him but she had also kept his body in a bedroom in her house to which only she had access.

Even though the ending of the tale suggests that Emily has gone crazy and that her acts come from a disturbed person, the reasons for her demise seem to be deeply rooted in the tradition she was raised in. Emily's decadence represents the decadence of the south in which the present meets the past and creates an anguished society whose schizophrenia is concentrated in the figure of Emily. As a representative of the old values, Emily's character embodies this dying culture. This point of view is, in fact, shared by critics:

Scholars and critics have long agreed that the story unfolds through episodes that reflect the thematic contrast between past and present. Ray B. West, Jr., for example, claims that Emily is the 'common property of the town, but in a special way—as an ideal of past values' (Kriewald, 2003, p. 3).

The perception that Emily is 'the common property of the town' as a memory of the past is, in fact, recalled in this passage:

Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town, dating from that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor [. . .] remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity. (Faulkner, 1934, p. 1)

The 'property' issue is clearly indicated by the narrator who recalls the special treatment Emily received by the townspeople and the mayor. Nevertheless, the association made between this special treatment and the people from the past is even more revealing than

the treatment itself. As the townspeople knew Emily would not accept charity, Colonel Sartoris invented a tale in which she did not have to pay the taxes since her father had loaned money to the town and which would be repaid in this fashion. The narrator is sarcastic regarding the implausibility of this tale: “Only a man of Colonel Sartoris’ generation and thought could have invented it, and only a woman could have believed it” (Faulkner, 1934, p. 1).

As the new generation takes over, this arrangement causes divergence: “When the next generation, with its more modern ideas, became mayors and aldermen, this arrangement created some little dissatisfaction” (Faulkner, 1934, p. 1). This divergence shows that, as time went by, the values that Emily and her aristocratic family represented for the townspeople has changed. In the view of the new generation, she is not a ‘property of the town’ anymore and does not deserve the special treatment once granted to her.

Emily’s ruin is clearly associated to the importance her family had had in the past to that particular society. The economic and cultural change the south undergoes directly affects Emily who becomes more and more isolated from the society. The southerners, represented by the narrator, refuse to accept their agonistic downfall and place the burden of the maintenance of their values in Emily. The importance the townspeople attribute to Emily raises ‘responsibilities’ upon her. Nevertheless, Emily’s gradual realization of her inability to fulfill them leads her to isolation and the development of an eccentric character whose full dimension is only revealed at the end of the tale.

#### **4. THE BURDEN AND THE NARRATION**

The narrator’s voice changes throughout the novel from first-person singular to first person plural. The ‘we’ that narrates represents the townspeople and their observation of Emily’s behavior. This narrator, however, is highly biased, in the sense that the townspeople have a strict view of what the role of a Southern aristocrat descendant should be. This narrator’s point of view, Thomas Dilworth discloses, emerges as one of the main characters in the story since its imposition directly explains Miss Emily’s weird behavior (1999). The expectations and the charges the townspeople place on Emily is reverberated by this

collective narrator and it partially explains Emily's eccentric behavior since she knows she is not able to meet them.

This collective narrator's perception of Emily's role and importance is glimpsed at the first paragraph of the story: "When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house [ . . .]" (Faulkner, 1934, p. 1). The townspeople's respect along with the curiosity regarding Miss Emily's life demonstrates the type of expectations this character faced her whole life.

Miss Emily's responsibility is to keep the family's tradition and wealth. In order to do so, she, as a woman in a patriarchal society, is supposed to marry a wealthy man that would take care of her and of her 'virtue'. This never takes place and we observe that this 'lack' is one of the main problems in Emily's life for she is never able to meet this tradition in an expected way. That is, she only comes to 'have a man' through her desperate act of killing and maintaining her lover's body by her side. The importance the townspeople gives to her along with the desire to have a husband entitle her craziness to impose this burden, if not upon a man, then upon a corpse.

The role of male figures in aristocratic families is essential to the understanding of Emily's actions. Aristocracy is, as demonstrated in the novel, highly dependent on the men that belonged to this nucleus. In the case of Emily, the dependence of men is visible through the importance her father has had in her life and, later on, the importance (the lack of) a husband seems to have too.

Some passages in the novel display the importance of a masculine figure in a woman's life at that time in the USA. The first clear information about the weight of this tradition is when we learn that a picture of Emily's father is prominent in the living room even after years of her death: "On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father" (Faulkner, 1934, p.1). This massive presence is reinforced by the information of his being a very rigid and strong figure in Emily's life. The narrator informs us that Emily's father was a man who had "thwarted her woman's life so many times" (Faulkner, 1934, p. 6).

The influence this state of affairs exerts on Emily has a long standing effect. She never married because "None of the men were quite good enough for Miss Emily" (Faulkner, 1934,

p. 3). The pride of this family has a double effect. At the same time it construes in Emily a sense of worthiness (only a specific type of man would deserve her hand); it implies that the image her family convey to society prevents anyone from coming closer. The aristocratic image is perpetuated by the men in the family, but all the members have to live up to it. This expectation is reproduced by the narrator who represents the townspeople:

We had long thought of them as a tableau, 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, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door (Faulkner, 1934, p.3).

The strength of this duty—of marrying and keeping to this image—is so strong that the expectations go much beyond the personal. It is the townspeople working as narrators in the tale that interpret Emily’s accomplishments as success or failure: “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, 1934, p. 3). In this passage, the townspeople’s observance of Emily’s life is again permeated by a feeling of envy(as in the passage that describes her father’s death and her delicate financial situation, below). The townspeople observe her, dictate norms of conduct, and see her as a representative of a past tradition, but, mostly, they do not have any type of feeling of sympathy or friendship towards her. She is the center of attention but, as people admire her, they also envy her. This feeling is fed by Emily’s avoidance of mundane relationships with the townspeople and it is one of the feelings that help to push her into a world of her own.

## **5. PRIDE AND PITY**

With her father’s death, the last of the Griersons is gone and Emily realizes she is alone. She understands that the world as she had learned to envisage will never be the same. Even worse, the burden imposed on her as the city’s “fallen monument” becomes clearer and clearer in her mind. Her economic and personal failure reflects in her isolation from the people in the town. The past, which had been so generous to the Griersons, does not mirror

her present situation and even less her prospect for the future. The townspeople are quite aware of her situation and allow themselves to feel sorry for her:

When her father died, it got about that the house was all that was left to her; and in a way, people were glad. At last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized. Now she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less. (Faulkner, 1934, p. 4).

Emily perceives her present state of bankruptcy and loneliness and tries to avoid it by denying that these changes are actually happening. She denies her father's death, the need to pay taxes (which she did not pay with the past mayor), and her lover's right to leave her. Melinda Schwab points out that the refusal to deliver her father's body for the funeral, for instance, reveals a desperate attempt to stop time and prevent 'her life' from changing: "She resists change because for her change will always involve loss. She must prevent time from passing if she is to hold on to what matters to her" (Schwab, 1991, p. 215).

Emily manages to keep to appearances until the day she meets Homer Barron. Even though the eccentricity of her character might be glimpsed throughout the tale, it is this encounter and the further developments which reveal the deepness of her fall. Barron, representative of everything the south despises, becomes her lover. The town cannot accept the fact that a Grierson would be interested in a labor man who comes from their previous enemy region, the north. The problematic is that Barron not only comes from the north as his work also represents the invasion of the industrialized north into the agonizing south.

The townspeople classify this romance as unworthy of a Grierson, but they 'concede' to her having a momentary interest in a Northerner: "At first we were glad that Miss Emily would have an interest, because the ladies all said, 'Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer.'" (Faulkner, 1934, p. 4). The burden of the townspeople's charges about what they thought an appropriate behavior for a southern aristocrat is expressed in the sequence of the previous pitiful thoughts: "But there were still others, older people, who said that even grief could not cause a real lady to forget *noblesse oblige*—without calling it *noblesse oblige*. They just said, 'Poor Emily'" (Faulkner, 1934, p. 4). The *noblesse oblige* they demand from her is something Emily cannot accomplish: marrying a southern aristocrat and keeping the tradition.



The townspeople 'accept' her relationship with Barron until the evidence for it becomes apparent and it comes to scandal the society. The townspeople start to describe her as a "fallen" woman: "Then some of the ladies began to say that it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people". These 'bastions of virtue' soon find possible solutions to the scandal: "The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister—Miss Emily's people were Episcopal—to call upon her". The result is not the expected and again, the society interferes in the affairs: "The next Sunday they again drove about the streets, and the following day the minister's wife wrote to Miss Emily's relations in Alabama" (Faulkner, 1934, p. 6).

The mixture between pity and a plea for Miss Emily to keep the southern tradition takes a mean form. Through observation and comments about Emily's behavior the townspeople 'demand' her return to tradition. Not only Emily seems to be involved in a relationship which is not followed by the expected matrimony but it also is with a northern. Barron represents the failure of the south which this society is not ready to accept. Emily's unexpected behavior reveals that the burden she has been carrying is too heavy and she concedes to date with 'change' when she welcomes Barron—a Yankee—into her life.

The interference of the townspeople in her life becomes quite apparent in this episode. If before we had perceived gossips and comments regarding her life and behavior, the moment she starts dating an 'inappropriate' admirer, they dare to interfere. They react by sending a priest and later on her cousins: "The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister—Miss Emily's people were Episcopal—to call upon her" (Faulkner, 1934, p. 6). The minister's reaction after the interview is quite revealing of Emily's state of mind: "He would never divulge what happened during that interview, but he refused to go back again". Since this interference is unproductive and, to the outrage of the townspeople Emily keeps driving about with Barron "the following day the minister's wife wrote to Miss Emily's relations in Alabama" (Faulkner, 1934, p. 6). This visit is again unproductive and Emily becomes even more secluded.

Emily makes an attempt at ignoring the gossips about her and Barron but we learn she cares about those rumors in the following passage: "She carried her head high enough—even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson" (Faulkner, 1934, p. 5). That is, she strives to

keep her pride even when she knows she won't find this type of recognition in the society she lives in. She knows she is criticized and this criticism destroys her sanity.

## **6. A DYING TRADITION**

The role of the townspeople in the maintenance of Emily's state of affairs is revealed by the interferences the narrator discloses the society had in Emily's life. The townspeople, as the 'group' that represents the southern tradition, actively interferes in her life by approving or disapproving her behavior (Dilworth,1999). Emily seems to want to live up to the expectations for, even though the killing of Barron might be considered the affair of a crazy being, in a twisted way, its consequences comply with what the society wanted from her (Fang,2007).

Emily realizes the movements taken by the 'society' to preserve the tradition and the moral and, in an attempt to keep Barron by her side without hurting her virtue, she kills him. Melinda Schwab concludes: "As a corpse, this Yankee outsider will be less offensive to the sensibilities of the closed southern community" (Schwab, 1991, p. 216). In one take Emily satisfies the townspeople's desire and hers. Her 'union' to Barron does not come to public knowledge and, this way, it cannot offend the dwellers of her city. On the other hand, the killing still brings her the satisfaction of having a man by her side, even if this man has to be dead to remain so. The killing becomes a way of preventing Barron from abandoning her. His unexpected trip along with the information given at the beginning of the story that "he was not a marrying man" (Faulkner, 1934, p. 5), reinforce this reading. The personal mingles with the public: "She killed Homer largely to placate society, although that, in her deranged mind, also secured him as her lover forever" (Dilworth,1999, p.251).

The narrator, nonetheless, observes from a distance the developments of Emily's life and does not manage to fully understand the meaning of some facts. Such is the case of the strange and persistent smell that comes from Emily's house after Barron's disappearance. The townspeople complain but do not make any reference to the deteriorating corpse we come to know to be the source of such smell at the end of the tale: "That [the manifestation of the smell] was two years after her father's death and a short time after her sweetheart—the one we believed would marry her—had deserted her" (Faulkner,1934, p. 3).

The narrator, in fact, only notices what is visible from the outside. The information we have is that Emily isolates herself for quite a while, reappearing some time later to teach china lessons. This attempt at maintaining herself connected to the life of the town is, however, defeated by the change of times:

Then the newer generation became the backbone and the spirit of the town, and the painting pupils grew up and fell away and did not send their children to her with boxes of color and tedious brushes and pictures cut from the ladies' magazines. The front door closed upon the last one and remained closed for good (Faulkner, 1934, p. 8).

As new pupils cease to come to her, Emily returns to seclusion where she remains until her death several years later.

The townspeople's enticement to do what is always right—right for the sake of traditional views and not Emily's wishes—makes us glimpse at this interference as acquiescence to Barron's murder. "Their knowledge of Emily's purchase of the arsenic, followed by Homer Barron's disappearance and the subsequent odor surrounding the Grierson house indicate at least some level of community awareness of what had happened" (Schwab, 1991, p. 216). This knowledge, along with the city's demands on Emily's behavior makes them doubly accomplice with her mad behavior (Dilworth, 1999).

The way the story is told, however, by the point of view of the city dwellers, move our attention away from their agentive role in the state of affairs. Emily becomes the only scapegoat in a crime that only perpetuated the community's desire. Emily, in her madness, ends up carrying all the blame for the murder while the townspeople; that continually instigated her (sick) behavior, are portrayed as simple observers. By expecting Emily's maintenance of past customs, the townspeople contribute to the creation of a deranged character (Dilworth, 1999).

The strength of the expression "fallen monument" comes to a full dimension with her complete downfall. The agonizing southern society falls with her. Even though Barron—the representative of the north—does not successfully overcome the south, his nasty death perpetrates the community's unaccomplished wish of the perpetual deferral of 'his' success in destroying the southern values. Emily, far from being the only culprit, accomplished this desire at the cost of her own sanity.

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