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Miss Emily After Dark

WE ENTER INTO WILLIAM FAULKNER'S "A ROSE FOR EMILY" VIA THE indeterminacy surrounding a persistent rumor. Agitated about a possible scandal, the suspicious Jefferson townfolk fixate on Emily's romance with Homer Barron: "Do you suppose it's really so?" they said to one another" (125). Their compulsive, perhaps prurient interest ironically reflects both presumption and doubt: "Of course it is. What else could . . ." (125). What else could indeed; an untold surplus of "what else" saturates this sordid tale. The town's uncertain "whispering" (125) may be read as a multivalent signal toward the story's manifold unresolved issues, including its overall rhetorical import. Indeterminacy operates throughout by way of a metanarrative that foregrounds this complication. My reading seeks to show in part why Faulkner trades in undecidability, dubious meaning and failed closures.

Faulkner plays with the incalculable and the unimaginable as a rhetorical challenge to readers in this work and others. His odd characters confirm a "human condition in which the uncanny other, as a densely signifying representational figure, always bears the signatures of the narrative's affective ambivalence and epistemological uncertainty" (Zeitlin 624). Emily may be Faulkner's most uncanny and enigmatic figure, her mystery magnified by the story's lack of details about her private world. We trace her struggles with personal grief, a restricted social life, socio-economic decline, and romantic misfortune, a long history of trauma and repression. Faulkner selectively conceals and reveals Emily with narrative mystifications that range from presumption to denial, thereby deconstructing received modes of interpretation through the sheer effect of negative capability. The tale's impenetrable plot, unique figurations and double-voiced metanarrative "we" (122) subvert any definitive closure on Emily's improbable life.

Emily's eccentric behavior is one of Faulkner's gestures toward the unfathomable. Her intransigence runs from chasing off city officials—"I have no taxes in Jefferson" (121)—to refusing "to let them fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a mailbox to it" (128). The "we" that ironically purports to "know" her only succeeds in making her more remote. She appears visible enough to the townspeople bent on

scrutinizing her every move, yet she remains well beyond their comprehension.

This irony is made more evident by Emily's ill-fated dalliance with Homer Barron, harbinger of the tale's deepest conundrum. Homer sweeps into town on a public works project, charming people with his outgoing personality. He hangs out with the locals and romances lonely Emily "on Sunday afternoons driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy" (124). Their dates cause gossip to erupt everywhere: "At first we were glad that Miss Emily would have an interest" (124). Conversely, the indignant community is scandalized that she would ever "think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer" (124). Here "we" both illustrates and sends up the town's mystified hyper-vigilance, class consciousness, and nosiness. Yet Homer's role in Emily's life warrants questions about who and what he really is and whether his intentions are genuine, since by his own admission, "he was not a marrying man" (126). Hal Blythe advances that Homer may be a homosexual, and has drawn critical rebuttals for his theory.¹ His view fuels further queries about what this untypical love affair may actually involve.

These unresolved matters all turn on Homer's problematical death. If he was murdered, the motive remains and may forever remain unknown. We know very little about Homer beyond some basic physical description and that he is "a foreman" and "a Yankee" (124). The narrator also tells us that he "liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks' Club" (126). Blythe takes this testament as evidence of Homer's homosexuality (49). Homer's sexual preference is not proven, but his stated attitude toward marriage and his courting of Emily appear contradictory. There is an equal chance that Homer is straight and that he and Emily carried on a conventional love affair. The nature of their relationship is further complicated by a Baptist minister sent to interrogate Emily about her relationship with Homer: "He would never divulge what happened during that interview, but he refused to go back again" (126). This is another mystery; the minister may have viewed her as irredeemable, or at least highly disagreeable. We may assume that either he was not well received, or else discovered something very distasteful.

¹Blythe received several critical replies to this argument, notably from James Wallace (1992), and Judith Caesar (2010), yet his claim is not convincingly disproved by either response.

We really don't know much about Emily beyond the narrator's self-assured labels: "dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse" (128). These are superficial impressions drawn from a distance and are not necessarily resonant of Emily's inner life or her real emotional qualities. We must then, like the curious townsfolk, assess her actions and misadventures from an incomplete perspective. No one knows the intimacies of Emily and Homer with any certainty, but select details may expose various reasons for Homer's corpse's winding up on gruesome display in Emily's upstairs bedroom.

The received explanation for this mess is that Emily buys arsenic and poisons Homer on his return, just after the visit from her Alabama cousins. Nothing confirms this, however, since only circumstantial evidence exists: her purchase, Homer's disappearance, and later the macabre discovery of his decayed body in Emily's boudoir. Taken together, these facts may become slippery, perhaps causing readers to draw hasty and unsupported conclusions. There is no real proof that Emily murders Homer, and he could have died of natural causes, perhaps while having sex with her. Even if Homer dies a natural sudden death, Emily keeps the body for whatever twisted reasons; she thus becomes an uncanny felon. Her morbid behavior suggests a profound pathology that naturally raises serious doubts about her sanity; derangement implies another realm of indeterminacy, since mentally ill people are radically unpredictable and are often capable of anything.

Certain critics posit an incest scenario between Emily and her father (Arensburg and Schyfter 127; Scherting 399). Mary Arensburg and Sara E. Schyfter claim that real incest occurs; Jack Scherting consigns Emily's problems to a libidinal fixation on her father, more properly an Electra Complex (399-401; 403). In either case, the specter of incest opens the story up to consideration of the psychic damage that Emily may have suffered. Psychotherapist Naomi Schlesinger notes that "The work of understanding the particular meaning and impact of incest is unique for each individual" (65). This factor points up further uncertainty since incest victims exhibit a range of psychopathologies, including "psychotic behavior" and "multiple personality [disorder]" (deChesnay 396). Some may go into psycho/sexual shutdown, while others evidence "promiscuity" (Maltz ii). Their "defiance and pride" (Herman and Hirschman 7) sometimes manifest as sexual profligacy: "They seemed to believe that they had seduced their fathers, and therefore could seduce

any man” (7). Given the potential for incest, this trend may suggest that Emily develops into an erratic sexual rebel.

The Homer Barron affair, when measured in view of Emily’s damaged psyche, calls into question how her trauma may manifest. Emily’s liaison with Homer is in many respects remarkable: she makes a leap out of her seclusion and into a new intimate social reality. Readers are left to ponder how this ever came about, given their particular social and cultural differences. Homer appears an experienced man of the world, making his sudden involvement with Emily seem all the more suspicious. He should have spotted Emily as a socially naïve woman, especially for her age. Yet this was perhaps a motive for the odd attraction, since she may not have inquired into his obscure background. That these two are together for “the better part of two years” (Scherting 401) raises issues about what kind of an experience this was for them as a couple. We don’t know whether or not they were genuinely in love or sexually intimate because we see them only through the narrator’s mostly unqualified assertions.

However, they are enough of an item to provoke the fear of scandal. Jefferson’s concerned citizens enlist Emily’s Alabama cousins to insure that they finish off their dubious “courtship” with a marriage. Scherting suggests that this seals the deal, and that Emily then murders Homer because he remains uninterested in marriage and both the town and her relatives will no longer tolerate their presumed fornicating (402). Since she can’t bear losing him, Emily makes him into a morbid icon of their former romance. She likewise transforms him into a model of her repressive dead father (402).

This reading is plausible since some incest victims do evidence psychotic behavior.² However, it may miss something crucial about Emily: she is agentive enough to acquire a lover in Barron, who is far from an ideal suitor by either her family’s standards or the community’s. Emily willfully chooses an inappropriate partner, displaying “that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness” (125). It therefore seems unlikely, after having experienced real *jouissance*—if she did—that Emily would willingly settle for merely a lifeless abject simulacrum to replace her lost sexual satisfaction. Emily’s libido, after two years of

²Schlesinger explains that “a murderous rage may invade all of the child’s meaningful relationships” (56), and Scherting thinks that Emily may have “regressed into her childhood” (400), a permanent arrested development in which she acted on her rage.

being with Homer, was no doubt fully inflamed. Yet Scherting believes that their lovemaking simply fulfills Emily's repressed fantasy of incest with her father (404).³ He asserts that Faulkner's use of "cuckolded" (130) means that Emily was always already psychically cuckolding Homer by projecting their lovemaking as a replay of her incestuous desire (403). Scherting considers Emily an emotional zombie, merely acting out her desires in her head, implying that no real romantic communication occurs between the couple.

While this perspective points up the difficulty with assessing Emily's complex and extreme psychic issues, on another interpretative level it places her into the category of untypical characters subjected to "political necrophilia" (Castronovo 4). This phrase implies that an unofficial mandate in American society determines that various deviants can only enter into the "social contract" (7), i.e., be accepted or loved, by submitting to a "social death" (1). Throughout American literature "necro ideology" (12) cancels out certain figures whose cultural, racial, and sexual difference and otherness provokes ideological discomfort in the dominant culture. They must die, either literally or symbolically, so that they might be recuperated as worthy citizens, since they are perceived subversive threats to the body politic:

The laboring body, licentious body, mesmerized body, emancipated slave body, and corpse all possess (and are possessed by) senses of historicity that under the right conditions, can add particularistic and hence disruptive doses of memory and difference to both the nation-state and public sphere. (17)

All of Castronovo's examples appear in this tale: Homer is the laboring body and the corpse, Emily the licentious body, Tobe the emancipated slave. Arguably, the town is metaphorically "mesmerized" by their mere appearances. Taken together this strange group indeed troubles the "public sphere." Jefferson is able to lavish on Emily the social esteem that mimics love only after they project her licentious body "as if she were dead" (Heller 45). The Homer saga confirms this contradiction: after he supposedly jilts her, "we all said, 'She will kill herself'; and we said it would be the best thing" (126). This notion cannot imply any advantage for the designated victim, since unnatural death is never welcome.

³Scherting (399) cites Faulkner's comments on the emergence of Emily's repressed desires as evidence (Gwynn and Blotner 138). However, Faulkner's statements are not specific, and thus open the story up to further consideration along these lines.

Rather, this perverse idea envisions a collective benefit for its necro-logical prescribers: Emily's anticipated suicide crystallizes their ultimate fantasy of a Southern woman who prefers death to dishonor.

The town's ability to respect her, albeit from a detached, duplicitous, and reductive smugness, depends on her conjuring for Jefferson the "conviction that death redeems a sexually dishonored woman" (Castronovo 30). This morbid, sanctimonious regard for Emily as the perfect suicide exposes the collective fear of her defiling Jefferson as a "fallen woman," wronged by a Yankee. Her discomfiting presence signals that the world she represents for them is now morally compromised. She typifies Faulkner's treatment of female pariahs: "his fictional women, because they never quite fit the stereotype, interrogate, disrupt and even begin to dismantle the male revisionist myth of Southern womanhood" (Robertson 161). Emily's "myth" does not enliven Jefferson; instead, it discloses an impoverished fantasy of a lost "*noblesse oblige*" (124).

While Faulkner's damning of the town's hypocrisy is not in question, Emily's quirks, predicaments, and the story's utter lack of detail about Homer's death invoke detective fictions that feature maddening gaps between evidence and proof. We have a body, and a possible perpetrator, but it remains to be seen where the means, motive, and opportunity likely fall. Emily is a prime suspect, not only for murder, but possibly for necrophilia, which the story's final scene descriptively implies: the indented pillow, the body's "attitude of an embrace" and the single "strand of iron-gray hair" (130) seem to provide evidence of Emily's intimate proximity to the body.

This Southern Gothic story leads us into a disturbing and confusing realm of psychic distortion that issues a tantalizing challenge: we must accept that some secrets may never be fully disclosed. Yet "A Rose for Emily" calls us repeatedly to its mysteries, ironically convincing us that some textual evidence may emerge that will offer a clearer perspective on these aberrant and insoluble events. One might wonder whether this lure is not the result of a well-laid rhetorical trap: we go searching for what Faulkner already shows us we will never find. Nevertheless we go, since negative capability begs for its complement: signification. Indeterminacy conjures scenario, constructed as speculative explication.

Several details about Homer may reveal hidden aspects of his identity. Homer is "a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than

his face" (124). During the story's era a white man with a dark complexion was an unsettling subject in the South, and that Homer's eyes are lighter than his face indicates his countenance is noticeably darker than typical. The narrator might be suggesting that Homer is a mixed-blood individual. Other significant information about him may point to similar concerns.

When he takes Emily driving, Homer holds his "reins and whip in a yellow glove" (126). A glove is literally a second skin, and yellow can suggest racial difference. "Yellow" or "high yellow" are slang terms in the racial discourse of the South that designate a mulatto, possibly an "octoroon" with a greater percentage of white blood.⁴ Both "dark" and "yellow" may imply that Homer is crossing the color line with Emily in order to bury his unknown past and racial secret. Homer clenches "a cigar in his teeth" (126), a brown phallic object, perhaps a dark symbol covertly signaling his mixed-race status. Does Homer "pass" as white in Jefferson? Ironically, one way for him to accomplish this deception is to become a fixture at the racially exclusive Elks' Club. Hiding in plain sight is a motif further complicating these undecipherable complexities. Another odd factor about Homer is that following his "disappearance" no outsiders ever come to seek for him. He could therefore be a social outcast, since people can rarely disappear without being sought for by concerned others.

If he is a mulatto, this might be one reason that Homer is "not a marrying man" since "one drop" laws were in place primarily in the South but in other states, too, during this period that would have prevented his openly marrying anyone except a black woman. A similar conflict appears in "Elly": Paul deMontigny's questionable racial status may inform his refusal to marry Elly. Whether Homer considers himself white or black would naturally complicate the possibilities of any union; as a light-skinned black man he would not necessarily have found welcome among either group. A comparable social dilemma haunts Joe Christmas, another subject of uncertain racial origin.

If we read "Emily" assuming that Homer is "yellow," an octoroon, and that he deceives Emily by "passing" and seducing her, or perhaps being seduced by her, then miscegenation is fatefully brought to the fore of their relationship. Since Emily may already be a victim of incest and Homer conceivably brings miscegenation into her life, even if

⁴One obvious example occurs in Langston Hughes's poem "Mulatto."

unknown to her, their situation is already freighted with taboos on all fronts. If Emily discovers the truth, perhaps through the more racially savvy Tobe, or some other way, she might well be incensed enough at Homer's betrayal to want to kill him.⁵ Also, if he really intends to marry her, she probably suffers a serious existential and emotional crisis, since she likely does love him, yet realizes that she cannot go through with a marriage across the color line. Therefore, it is plausible that she murders him out of deep anger, alienation, and necessity, since she could not endure a scandal that would locate her in what would then be considered an illicit interracial affair and/or marriage. We thus discover a prelude to the tragic events in *Absalom, Absalom!* wherein Henry Sutpen presumably shoots Charles Bon over a fear of miscegenation complicated by the potential for incest.

It may seem unlikely that Tobe discloses Homer's racial secret, but he might have done it out of his survival instinct. He knows that if Homer marries Emily another "black" man will be his overseer in her house. He may have witnessed Homer "cuss the niggers" (124) and this might not have set well with him; Homer's romance with Emily may have aroused fear, jealousy, and resentment. Tobe might know that Homer's secret is out elsewhere, and that if Emily marries Homer, rumors could arise that would destroy her and hence his role in her life. One clue about Tobe's possible tipoff appears when Homer returns to Emily's house, and "a neighbor" sees Tobe "admit him" (127). This phrase may be read as a double entendre, not just admit as ushers in, but admits *of him*; that is, discloses his true racial identity "at the kitchen door" (127), the gateway to Emily's domestic space. If Tobe tells Emily, he might also aid and abet Emily's murder of Homer. Tobe certainly becomes a conspirator after the fact, if for no other reason than his silent complicity.

Tobe naturally complicates the story's enigmas because he frequents Emily's personal realm before, during, and after the Homer Barron drama. His silent yet persistent presence raises natural questions about his knowledge of the murder and about his awareness of Homer's corpse. The awful secret of Emily's upstairs bedroom clearly depends on Tobe's silence, since he is exposed to Homer's reeking decay yet does not report the hidden body. Their interpersonal possibilities are intriguing, since if Tobe tells Emily about Homer's racial secret, then she owes him a deep

⁵See Schlesinger, who notes the incest victim's sensitivity to betrayal and its fallout (56).

debt of gratitude, something that can never be repaid in material terms. We recall the human debt that Chick Mallison owes to Lucas Beauchamp for saving him from freezing, discharged through his future efforts on Lucas's behalf. Tobe, in this scenario, in many respects saves Emily's life, or at least her social reputation. Tobe may thus play the ancient literary role of the "gift giver," one who supplies crucial information that enables the protagonist to triumph where the individual might otherwise fail.

A dialogue between Emily and Tobe excluded from the final version may shed light on how Faulkner initially envisioned their private lives. This deleted section, preserved in the holograph manuscript and the carbon typescript of the text, unpublished until 2000, discloses that Tobe knows all along about Homer's corpse ("Matter" 24). His open knowledge of the body brings up further issues—why he keeps this terrible secret and yet remains living an apparently unperturbed life working for Emily until she dies. This strange pair confronts us with profound irregularities that even the excluded text fails to resolve. The deleted material is not a part of the published work, but nevertheless bears a significant relationship to its narrative, the narrative voice, the characters and plot. Emily and Tobe are not ontologically different in these separate texts, since Faulkner originally saw the fragment dialog as part of the story. Sensing her end is near, Emily discusses with Tobe Homer's body and her knowledge that the town will soon investigate the room where his corpse lies. She realizes that they will entertain conclusions, perhaps not entirely accurate.

Emily directs Tobe with a specific caveat: "Don't you let a soul in until I am gone, do you hear?" ("Matter" 23). She obviously has her reasons: "Then they can. Let 'em go up there and see what's in that room. Fools. Let 'em. Satisfy their minds that I am crazy. Do you think I am?" (23). Her tirade confirms that Emily has been thinking for most of her adult life about what will happen when the townspeople eventually discover the death scene. Faulkner thus initially felt that their story needed more details about matters the final version simply leaves to speculation.

Emily's salty comments, delivered with profound contempt, project a sublime moment of revenge. Her derisive reference to the townsfolk as "fools" speaks volumes to the possibility that the death scene is a planned tableau, one intended to shock and confuse its observers and

perhaps finalize a ruse that she set up long before. If as she thinks the people are fools, obviously she has been the one fooling them, and it is hard to miss her pleasure in doing so. Her belief that they will “satisfy their minds” that she is crazy indicates her prescience about the community, her sense of self, and her social situation.

She believes, conceivably out of paranoia, that the community thinks of her as insane. How she arrives at this notion remains unclear, but whatever the case, it will inevitably be proved, and Emily sardonically anticipates how the confirmation will happen. She leaves the corpse as an abject reminder rudely signifying that she believes the intrusive community has been victimizing her, driving her to behave in such a deranged fashion. Thomas Dilworth offers a corresponding view (259-60) and Terry Heller observes “how the town has apparently victimized Emily and how grandly she seems to have resisted that victimization” (45). Considering the obsession that Emily provokes and endures, Dilworth’s and Heller’s readings make complete sense. She exhibits Homer’s corpse as transgressing proof that she both is and is not Jefferson. Emily wickedly parodies the town’s political necrophilia; she refuses to “die” quietly for her social managers.

In the deleted passage, Emily thinks that Tobe will also be interested in Homer’s corpse: “Let ’em go up there and open that door. And you wont be the last one, either. Will you?” (“Matter” 23). Their conversation takes a strange turn here, as Tobe supplies an unexpected insouciance: “I wont have to,’ the negro said. ‘I know what’s in that room. I don’t have to see.’ ‘Hah,’ Miss Emily said. ‘You do, do you. How long have you known?’ Again he made that brief sign with his hand” (24). This information seems to absolve Tobe of any guilt in the murder itself, except knowledge of it after the fact. Yet their talk may also imply an ironic private joke, suggesting that Tobe has of course known from the beginning. Indeed, he would have had to, as Dilworth observes (260), and so Emily might be sarcastically jesting that he simply wants to see what a vile spectacle remains there. The further point could be that he will perpetuate their secret by pretending to cooperate with the town’s ensuing investigation. The wave of his hand suggests that either he is aware of the joke or that the matter does not matter to him.

Tobe thus functions to normalize Emily’s strangeness by interacting with her as if nothing is out of the ordinary. Dilworth reflects that, “As her servant, Tobe had allowed her ‘to be’ as she was—the infinitive is

spelled out by the letters of his name” (260). He likewise makes clear that “the townspeople do not accept her as—or allow her ‘to be’—herself in this sense” (260). This is exactly why Emily sees them as fools. Dilworth’s semiotic analysis of “Tobe” and “to be” suggests that their attempts at making her into what they would have her “to be” seem a likely reason for her to enter into a subversive alliance with Tobe. What may have transpired between Emily and Tobe throughout their long and mostly isolated involvement engenders inevitable conjectures. Tobe was obviously Emily’s only real companion and confidant for most of her life, as the substance of their fragment dialogue reveals. For example, she mentions that he has wanted to go to Chicago “for thirty years” (“Matter” 24). Their private conversation sparks compelling concerns about what we don’t hear.

Along with his ironic metanarrative, Faulkner complicates this tragic take on social mystification by confronting readers with a highly unusual constellation of signs, some obvious, some buried in the text. For example, Dilworth’s reading of Tobe as “to be,” when pursued through a deeper and more intricate analysis reveals a complex *moiré* of signifying gestures that mark Faulkner’s treatment of race, his culture, and his era. His figurations may be read as one way that Faulkner dramatizes how “white females who are sexually active before or outside marriage fall afoul of the gendered conceptions of honor that work in the timocratic social order of the South to confer white identity on elite and middle-class subjects” (Watson 10). Emily occurs within the range of “characters who do whiteness wrong, sometimes flamboyantly, spectacularly wrong” (10). Watson’s speculations are confirmed in the racially coded signs that Faulkner leaves scattered within his narrative comments, character descriptions, and dialogue. Tobe is at the heart of this semiotic pattern; he supplies numerous clues demanding analysis.

Emily and Tobe’s long association and Tobe’s likely involvement in Homer’s murder lead Dilworth to consider the greater significance of their emotional tie: “Tobe accepts and serves her as she is: a once—at least—deranged killer, perhaps with an ongoing normal erotic life” (260). He may be implying that Emily once enjoyed a sexual relationship with Homer, but he also investigates “A Rose for Emily” for unexamined evidence of miscegenation, speculating that Emily “may have had an extended sexual relationship with her Negro manservant, Tobe” (256). Dilworth’s reading explores the possibility for an unknown and yet

entirely plausible interracial romance transpiring right under the noses of the benighted Jefferson folk who seem to watch Emily incessantly.

Dilworth realizes that his theory is controversial; ergo, he allows that “a sexually loving relationship between a white lady and a black man was as unthinkable then as, decades earlier, marriage had been between a queen and a commoner” (256). Yet he entertains the irony that “Apparently violation of racial-sexual taboo by Miss Emily (guilty of violating the—most would think—far greater taboos against murder and lying with a corpse) has been as unthinkable to literary critics as it was to her white Southern neighbors and the narrator” (256). Dilworth makes clear that neither the narrator nor the townsfolk suspected, or if they did, none admitted to this arrangement: “Has Emily been living ‘in sin’ with Tobe? We do not know—the narrator does not tell us. The idea has probably never entered his head” (257). He nevertheless hazards the opinion that Emily has learned how to keep secrets, Homer Barron’s corpse and perhaps an affair with Tobe. He also considers that Emily and Tobe had to have colluded in Homer’s murder (260). Jennings Mace likewise discusses the probability that Tobe had a hand in the murder and perhaps in the positioning of Homer’s body in the bed (127). The deleted fragment establishes that Tobe guards the mystery, but not why. The ease of his dialog with Emily might suggest a more intimate relationship, although this remains unconfirmed.

These questionable matters open the story up to further analysis along these lines, as do several other important elements of the story, including Tobe’s status as a domestic servant. Although Tobe is not a slave, his “employment” status recalls at least the potential for conditions that historian Fay A. Yarbrough examines under slavery: “By choosing a slave lover, an elite white woman could coerce the silence of her sexual partner, for she could threaten him with an accusation of rape should he refuse her advances or reveal their relationship” (572). Given that Emily and Tobe certainly have every opportunity for such a relationship and that Tobe never comes forward to testify about what he knows of the missing Homer, we may assume that his silence is part of some private accord with Emily. We will never know precisely what such a pact would have involved, but it certainly runs deep between them and informs their relationship, whatever its nature, on every level.

Dilworth’s hypothesis may seem doubtful regarding an interracial romance in “A Rose for Emily,” but complicated interracial affairs do

appear throughout Faulkner's works. Reflecting on Faulkner's sparse treatment of white women who have sexual relations openly with black men, Joel Williamson testifies that "Excepting the special case of Joanna Burden, Faulkner's major women, unlike his major men, never had either love or sex across the race line" (385). His point remains safely certain in terms of Faulkner's significant female figures in the novels, but may not apply to Faulkner's major short fictions, given the ambiguity that Faulkner evinces over miscegenation in many of these stories. "Miss Zilphia Gant" mentions Zilphia's "dreaming of negro men" (380), while "Elly" features a desperate and tragic interracial romance. "Mountain Victory" and "Dry September" likewise revolve around the potential for this forbidden erotic attraction.

However such matters may have troubled Faulkner and most white Southerners during the times he depicts, Williamson nevertheless confirms the persistent transgressing of this cultural taboo in the segregated South: "In every community there was the notorious case, the maverick who made bold sexually across the race line" (386). The covert presence of this practice fueled social paranoia, since "Southern White Manhood depends upon keeping black men away from white women" (Andrews 498). Faulkner treats this harsh imperative as a primal psychic force in both "Dry September" and "Elly," stories that feature women who are "driven to perverse or violent rebellion against the prevailing community standard" (Carothers 49). These stories confirm that Faulkner explores the repressed interracial desires of white women and white men's fears about them in critical ways that dramatize Southern racist practices and chauvinistic behaviors. Faulkner's rhetorical trend may validate interpreting "A Rose for Emily" along similar lines, since the story features a largely sequestered interracial mistress/servant arrangement, the details of which remain both suspect and inscrutable.

Throughout the story, Tobe appears in sundry roles, going to the market, maintaining the house, ushering in visitors, performing domestic duties. Faulkner's narrator supplies a relevant set of details:

After her father's death she went out very little; after her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all. A few of the ladies had the temerity to call, but were not received, and the only sign of life about the place was the Negro man—a young man then—going in and out with a market basket. (122)

Has this “young” “Negro man” injected the very “sign of life” that becomes the precise antidote to the cultural morbidity and sexual denial that once attended this tragically repressed and retrograde domestic scene? One need not speculate too far in imagining the erotic implications of a young Negro man “going in and out,” the “basket” long being a known slang term for the genital bulge in a man’s clothing, or even the genitals proper; the “*marked* basket.”⁶ This pun/rhyme, even if accidental, is entirely appropriate to Tobe’s youthful sexuality.

Richard Godden decodes a number of vulgarisms present or sub-rosa throughout Faulkner’s fictions. He shows how Faulkner decries untenable socio-economic conditions in his conflicted South by using obscene humor related to various injustices and debased social relations. Not the least insightful of these is the dirty joke, treating subjects such as buggery as a metaphor for Flem Snopes’s usury and abusive behaviors (28-30; 35). Godden explains how Faulkner traces Flem’s dubious movements between class lines and social roles by deploying “double-voiced terms, each of which points simultaneously in discrete social directions” (14). I submit that Faulkner’s repetitive use of Tobe’s “going in and out” (few phrases are more sexually overdetermined) with the “market basket” represents a similarly double-voiced trope, perhaps decoding a hidden yet present sexual relationship between Emily and Tobe.

Tobe’s role recalls how, historically, the social presence of blacks was exploited for their erotic potential in other cultural paradigms. Sander Gilman notes that “black servants” in European literature and opera are repeatedly used to “mark the presence of illicit sexual activity” (228). He likewise explains that “one of the black servant’s central functions in the visual arts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to sexualize the society in which he or she is found” (228). Visibility and sexuality are the crux of the story’s themes and issues. The story’s axial crisis is a young white woman’s sexual repression and, read as a hidden miscegenation narrative, the story suggests a symbolic investment in black sexuality similar to Gilman’s examples. Tobe is both young and possesses a “basket” that he takes to the “market,” i.e., puts it into

⁶See “Basket,” *Sex-Lexis.com*. Faulkner uses basket in a sexual context in “A Courtship”: Herman Basket may be read as “her man basket” or “her man’s basket,” precisely what is at stake in this romantic ordeal. Captain Studenmare confirms the libidinal economy of vulgar humor in the story.

circulation in a double sense. The trope functions both sexually and within the political economy operating between the outside world of exchange value—the literal marketplace where Tobe goes in order to “do” Emily’s “business”—and the domestic space of Emily’s house, in which the serviceability of his “market basket” takes on a different yet related context, more closely aligned with use value. Tobe becomes a surrogate husband who causes local speculation about his ability to “keep” Emily’s “kitchen properly” (122), something Dilworth also mentions (256).

It is perhaps significant that Tobe’s name only appears once, at a crisis moment late in Emily’s life, a suggestion of his significance as her protector. She calls him to eject the men come to inquire into her tax dispute; Tobe thereby facilitates her open defiance of their paternal law. The content and syntax of her utterance in this scene are important to the possibility of their having an intimate relationship: “‘Tobe!’ The Negro appeared. ‘Show these gentlemen out’” (121). On the surface, this directive seems merely to punctuate an aggravating moment, Emily’s ordering Tobe to escort the unwanted visitors from her premises. However, interpreted as an instance of verbal and narrative encoding, it reads, “To be! The Negro appeared.” In other words, in order for Emily to become dynamically alive, the Negro appears. Emily’s sexual enlivening may be proclaimed by the phallic exclamation point, since Faulkner joins this “sign of life” directly to Tobe’s name.⁷ Dilworth notes that “‘Tobe’ shares its consonants with the word ‘taboo’” (256). Emily’s directive to Tobe also subverts the community’s dominant white paradigm by placing him in the position of an overseer in her own house. Not to put too fine a point on it, Tobe is always seen coming and going through the back or kitchen entrance, and indeed, a “back door man” is a term often applied to a woman’s secret lover.

Finally, furthering this pun is irresistible, if not essential: Tobe or not Tobe, to be or not to be, this doubling of phrases and their combined meaning instantiated at the axis of sexuality and being, this is exactly the question. Catherine Gunther Kodat relates that “there is ample evidence—in Faulkner’s poetry as well as in the fiction, essays, and interviews—

⁷Noel Polk includes “punctuation” among the “mechanics of the English language” that Faulkner uses “to reveal things that the narrators are incapable of saying or are specifically trying to keep from saying, things that have caused them pain and shame” (103-04). This certainly seems likely in this instance, given the story’s undisclosed issues.

that writing for Faulkner was deeply sexual: passionate, orgasmic, and fundamentally unsettling" (601). Faulkner displays a highly retraceable libidinal investment in his writing, perhaps informing his treatment of Emily and Tobe.

Other racially coded imagery can be mined throughout the story, beginning when the visiting Aldermen notice that Emily's eyes, "lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough" (121). The eyes, a traditional signifier of the inner person, are juxtaposed in a black and white contrast that might be racially interpreted. She is likewise dressed "in black," perhaps as a "black widow" (Heller 34) who kills her mate. Emily in her youth dressed in white; this sartorial shift may imply a movement from white innocence to black experience. She is also "leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head" (121). The cane is an obvious phallic symbol, a corollary of her father's whip, yet specifically, ebony, and that which lends her support.⁸ The "tarnished gold," joined to this ebony, may indicate her fallen character and/or social station and also further disclose encoded racial symbolism. The "thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt" (121) harkens to a former symbol of slavery aesthetically reversed and worn as an idiosyncratic badge of identity. Presumably it is a watch chain, although this is not certain, but if so may relate that Emily is both chained to the past, as well as within her own time, and yet perhaps able to transcend this restriction via a different lifestyle. Taken together, this color-specific ensemble may indicate larger concerns about Emily's private life with Tobe.

The deplorable scene disclosed at the ending also supplies a fund of peculiar signs that may speak to the possibility that Emily and Tobe are secret lovers. One passage reveals a startling multivalent message, utterly strange, even given the repulsive discovery staring these shocked men in the face: "but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him"(130). The polysemia Faulkner employs here requires unpacking: it might be assumed that "the long sleep that outlasts love" is simply death itself, Thanatos

⁸Polk considers that Emily reproduces her father, and that her cane indicates "she has become her father" (81). The cane can certainly be interpreted as bestowing paternal authority through its status as an artifact of the Symbolic. This factor militates in favor of Emily's sexual agency, since phallic females are famously devoted to their sexual fulfillment. Any of them, from Clytemnestra to Joanna Burden, prove this point.

defeating Eros, their polarity invoking the seemingly obvious meaning, given the context of the figuration.

However, and especially regarding the “grimace of love”—a metonymy for orgasm—precisely Lacan’s “grimace of the Real” (Žižek 80-81), the “long sleep” may also refer to rejection, the denial of sex, or the intentionally cruel withholding of it, and the felt deadening that such a crisis would inflict on any lover.⁹ Emily might have lain beside Homer as he was dying, knowing full well that he would be hungering for but unable to fulfill the conjugal act. Polk considers that “In her bed, she is both seductive and judgmental, simultaneously offering and denying” (82). Perhaps she entices Homer sometime between the poisoning and the onset of its effects, a terrible psychic castration enhancing her ultimate act of revenge.

The highly overdetermined phrase “had cuckolded him” may provide the rhetorical and semantic skeleton key to the final scene and the entire story. As a metaphor, perhaps indicating Eros “cuckolded” by death, it holds no vital meaning whatsoever; in no sense are the dead cuckolded. The word retains meaning only for the living, and this truth may become the loose thread that permits the unraveling of the deception perhaps wrought by Emily to disguise her preference for her black manservant. “Cuckolded” can only realistically apply to a betrayal that takes place in relation to the living Homer Barron.

Another curious pun/rhyme emerges, important to interpreting Emily’s necrophilic layout. Throughout the story the preponderance of references to Tobe are invariably repeated as “the Negro.” The word “Negro” and the prefix “necro” are separated only slightly by the difference between two consonants, a hard g and a hard c, and the vowel sound distinctions long e and short e, respectively. These morphological

⁹Glyn Daly considers that

the Real is experienced in terms of the Symbolic (dis)functioning itself. We touch the Real through those points where symbolization fails; through trauma, aversion, dislocation and all those markers of uncertainty where the Symbolic fails to deliver a consistent and coherent reality. While the Real cannot be directly represented—hence Lacan’s dictum that nothing is lacking in the Real (lack can only be formulated through some form of symbolic endeavor but has no meaning in relation to radical negativity)—it can nonetheless be *shown* in terms of symbolic failure and can be alluded to through figurative embodiments of horror-excess that threaten disintegration (monsters, forces of nature, disease/viruses and so on).

differences in the regional dialects of the Deep South are hardly noticeable. Likewise, in this same cultural venue, the hard g and c partly rhyme and more generally sound nearly identical. The final o of both likewise receives similar accented treatment along regional lines. Especially during Faulkner's time, Negro was often colloquially pronounced in a Southern US dialect as "Negra," with the short e and a more characteristic of a schwa (ə), and the same would be true of necro, regarding the e and o. This dialectical trend renders the sounds of the word and the prefix quite similar.

Spoken quickly, and when inflected with a strong Southern accent, the word "Negro" and the prefix "necro" herald an acoustic oscillation that creates a semantic deferral suspended between necrophilia and negrophilia. Emily is likely not guilty of necrophilia, except in the sense of having staged an abject if entirely deceptive tableau. The narrator directly characterizes the family's public image as a "tableau" (123) that frames the reductive social stereotype Emily has endured under her father's rule. In an ironic reversal of roles, she becomes the one who stages an untenable display, subverting any conjecture that she has engaged in negrophilia, as the accretion of semiotic and tropical details related to this revolting exhibit strongly suggests. After all, if she had been sleeping perpetually with the corpse, it is highly probable that more than a single strand of her hair would have been found on the pillow. Only one hair, however, suggests planted evidence. That "she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house" (128) proves that she could not have been sleeping with the corpse continuously. She conceivably misleads her watchers, thus making herself and Tobe safe from suspicions about having an affair.

Yet decoding the tropical play of necrophilia/negrophilia and situating the death scene ideologically operate on different hermeneutic levels. One provides a method for analysis and interpretation, while the other calls for an assessment of why Faulkner indulges in this deplorable figuration. This is an unsettling discovery, since one must take into account that Faulkner figuratively engages with the practice of necrophilia as an abject and depraved perversion erupting from extreme and unusual family behaviors. His figuration calls into question what an interracial affair would have meant to him and to his audience at that time. Linking the semantic implications of Negro and necro in a subtly buried trope suggests that Faulkner's verbal gaming is racist, since it

conflates miscegenation with a gross sexual taboo that no sane person would have wanted to think about, much less perform, and even for Faulkner, this seems unduly paranoid and hyperbolic. The question then becomes, is he casting the possibility of an interracial romance in intrinsically abject terms, or rather suggesting that the culture's own obsessions have ironically forced something unnatural, this strange misalliance between Emily and Tobe? The real question is whether Emily's potentially different personal life is presented as a social critique or simply as an exploration of an aberrant affair, culturally and psychologically. Faulkner's position on this matter remains rhetorically undecided and controversial.

Faulkner signifies through his metanarrative aporia and tropical sub-textual play that any of these untoward things, including betrayal, deception, fornication, incest, miscegenation, murder, necrophilia, and passing, *might* be going on. This catalogue of otherness, however unproved, inevitably implies that such practices *could well* be happening in the society, and Faulkner's final gambit reads as suggesting that Jefferson's townsfolk can't even figure this out in their own community. At this level we move away from accepting any of the narrator's smug assumptions, and reflect on how Faulkner cleverly uses uncertainty to paint social misperception and denial. The story is an allegory of misreading signifying backwardness, mystification and psychopathology, themes that echo the trenchant resonance of Faulkner's social criticism.

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