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Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 64, Numbers 3-4, Summer-Fall 2011, pp. 491-499
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2011.0015>

Mississippi
Quarterly

The Journal
Of Southern Culture

Volume 64, Numbers 3-4
Summer-Fall 2011

Vol. 64, Nos. 3-4 Summer-Fall
2011

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The Functions of Ambiguity: A Response to "Miss Emily After Dark"

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FROM THE START OF HIS ARTICLE, THOMAS ARGIRO ACKNOWLEDGES THE presence of spaces in the narrative with applications of terms like "undecidability," "dubious meaning," and "failed closure"; in addition he cites Michael Zeitlin's description of the story: "affective ambivalence and epistemological uncertainty." Accordingly, Argiro emphasizes Emily Grierson's mystery: "The tale's impenetrable plot, unique figurations and double-voiced metanarrative 'we' subvert any definitive closure on Emily's improbable life." My own reading of "A Rose for Emily" comes close to this approach, for in the literary short story especially, ambiguity has a role that closely parallels its use in poetry and makes the story as written more of a prompt for the readers' imaginations and experiences in their contacts with characters and conflicts, and yet, almost like rules in a game, the language and vocabulary of the narrative sets some boundaries for its reading. Ernest Hemingway's illustration, in the 1958 *Paris Review* interview, of the text of a short story as being the small part of the iceberg above the water with its substance largely below seems relevant to this reading. After establishing his basic perspective regarding the openness allowed by the story, Argiro proceeds through a series of readings of its problematic or ambivalent elements, many of which, he acknowledges, have been previously addressed.

Several critics have referred to "A Rose for Emily" as a metanarrative, as does Argiro, and the story does have elements that conform to the uses of this postmodern critical term. It is a story about a story, but it does not have the self-conscious emphasis on narratology that one finds in either *Absalom, Absalom!* or in *As I Lay Dying* with their overtly

differing narrative points of view. Perhaps metanarrative suggests the duality of narratives: is the story about Emily or is it about the townspeople? Although Argiro describes the beginning of the story with this term, it seems more like the epic feature *in medias res*, but one term does not necessarily negate the other, as beginning in this manner signals the story's broken chronology. There seems something conventional in the handling of the narrative, and yet as Faulkner does in *Light in August*, he tests the limits of the convention.

Argiro also creates a question by describing Emily's life as "improbable," the general definitions of which range from "unlikely to take place or be true" to "having a probability too low to inspire belief." There seems to be no narrow definition that would suggest another dimension for the reader. And so is Emily's life improbable? Her being "isolated" from her community and, in fact, her family places her within a large group of literary characters created by many writers, including Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, Harper Lee, and Carson McCullers. Of particular note is Robert Browning's poem "Porphyria's Lover," in which the lover strangles Porphyria with her own hair as they embrace and kiss (interesting how in Faulkner's story and in Browning's poem, hair, color, and behavior are elements—porphyria, the purple hue associated with a physical and mental disorder). In life older communities with layered generations tend to produce residents with intense eccentricities, often leading to some form of isolation. The South has been known as a place where migrations have been minimal by comparison with the New York to Chicago regions, and it is here and in a small town where Faulkner places Emily. Faulkner's other spinsters and spinster-like characters indicate that he had an acquaintance with single women of some age. Emily's birth in 1852, as Brooks and others have noted (382-84), places her in the generations of Mississippians with the loss of men and the higher presence of women in the post Civil War period. My own experience in old neighborhoods in New Orleans includes the presence of people like Emily, who feel that time has passed them by and yet choose to live in the manner of previous generations. Taking someone's life in order to preserve the memory of a romantic relationship, however, is improbable for many people, and although the manner of Homer's death, at minimum, is exotic for most who commit such acts, public records reveal that many murders with more familiar instruments occur because of the feared loss of love.

The phrase "not a marrying man," as Homer is described by Faulkner, is one of those spaces for interpretation acknowledged by Argiro. Ample evidence suggests its ambiguity—homosexual or confirmed bachelor, perhaps a conscious choice of words as the term has frequency in nineteenth and twentieth century American writing. Dickens in *Little Dorrit* and George Eliot in *Middlemarch* seem to suggest the latter use, as does "The Song of the Selfish Man": "I'm not a marrying man—in vain young ladies try to net me . . ." (*New York Mirror*, 1838). And in the same period, T. Haynes Bayley in "You can't Marry Your Grandmother" has a character say, "Not a marrying man! . . . No man's a marrying man till he meets with the woman that he really wishes to marry!" (66). In Faulkner's own time, Clark Gable in the film *Gone with the Wind* states, "I'm not a marrying man" (Fleming), this from a man who enjoyed regularly the pleasure of a house of prostitution. The overwhelming uses of the phrase suggest a man who does not wish to take on the familial and communal responsibilities generally attributed to a married man, one who wishes to devote himself to his own pleasures.

In *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture*, Howard Chudacoff acknowledges in sociological terms Argiro's indeterminate position in the matter of Homer's sexual ambiguity: "A set of fundamental values of American culture has entangled bachelors in a web of contradiction" with individualism and self reliance opposed to "norms of mutuality and conformity" (11). Faulkner's narrative describes Homer's liking the company of men, including younger men, and their socializing at a male-only civic club. Indeed, this could indicate Homer's homosexuality as read by Hal Blythe and reported by Argiro. Social history, however, records that men and women socialized more within their gender than with the other, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One could make the same assertion today, although the distinctions of place and activity are less dramatic.

Societal attitudes toward bachelors and that displayed by the narrator of "A Rose for Emily," who speaks for the community, affirm Homer's exclusion from an appropriate socially comfortable group, which in his situation would be married men. Chudacoff writes accordingly, "bachelors themselves constitute a nonconforming minority group because, by crossing the lines of acceptable individuality, they too do not accede to what is believed to be the natural order of things" (12). According to Chudacoff, there were large numbers of unmarried men in

urban America during the early twentieth century (15), and although Homer is working in a small town, his behavior was shaped in the North, where same sex socializing—bars for men and church and volunteer groups for women—was common. In the South of Faulkner's time and that of his characters, similar social arrangements existed: for example, even in great houses women and men convened after dinner in different rooms for different activities. In the first paragraph of the story, Faulkner presents men and women as having different purposes for attending Emily's funeral. Furthermore, on Emily's death the ladies come as a group to her house; earlier representatives of the "Board of Aldermen"—they were men—had called on her about her taxes. The men's behavior and actions in the story, including Homer's, affirm what Chudacoff asserts, that maleness required a rejection of female domesticity (15). In this light, while there may be some possibility of seeing Homer as homosexual, more evidence exists to indicate otherwise.

Similarly, Homer's race has become an issue for Argiro, and there is enough evidence in the text—his being dark—to support its consideration. Faulkner establishes his dark complexion, but he does not create a sufficient color pattern to make this more than the basis of a question. Homer is a construction foreman, nearly always in the outdoors and dark probably from exposure to the sun. The darkness has more of a value related to class than it does to race in this instance, and this is the basis of the distant and critical response of the community, as we learn from the narrator, for Homer is observed courting a lady from one of the old, highborn families of the town. Furthermore, he is from the North, a fact that sets him apart from society as well. Homer arrives in Jefferson about 1883, a year after Emily's father's death, only six years after the end of Reconstruction; the multiple Confederate references suggest that the atmosphere is still somewhat resistant to the North. Homer's cigar is a traditional image of masculine power, wielded not only over his Negro laborers but also over the residents of the town, ironically, perhaps, over Emily herself. His yellow gloves also are traditional symbols of power—they were worn by George Washington in the eighteenth century (Thayer 178) and Martin Van Buren in the nineteenth (Johnson 336) at formal events when their authority and power were on display. The fact that these items are aligned with other images of power (teeth, reins, and whip) reinforce their role in the text. Furthermore, Faulkner's own public uses of his uniform following his

training in the Royal Air Force in Canada and his traditional British hunt attire on social occasions suggest his awareness of clothing as an instrument of influence (Watson). Consequently, this argument based on images of power diminishes Argiro's point that Homer is black and, thus, a specifically racial influence on Tobe's conduct.

Tobe's role, however, has a power all to itself. In some ways the manner in which Faulkner creates Tobe is an ironic extension of a Southern cliché that the black servants actually are in charge of their employers. In this matter it is significant that Argiro recognizes that the knowledge Tobe has about the Grierson family and Homer's death is instrumental in the events that occur in the Grierson house. Anyone who has been in a house with servants, even when they might be part-time, knows that they learn the secrets of the family in the process of developing working relationships. In the South, terms of address like mammy, aunt, granny, and uncle for black servants (and earlier for house slaves) indicate a recognition by the family of a complex relationship that includes the power accumulated by their subordinates, the human affection developed over time, and the inherent, historical guilt of those who employ (or own) them.

As both a character and a device, Tobe operates similarly to ones found in stage roles, such as Laurent, the servant in Molière's drama *Tartuffe*, who does not speak whether he is on or off stage. Tobe's name, with its pun-like spelling, as Argiro and others have observed, suggests that he has more than one role, or at least has the capacity for multiple roles. The story has many elements of a play, especially the uses of doors for entrances and exits. There is little doubt that the Grierson house functions as a stage with the arrivals and departures, all accompanied by "stage notes" with their descriptions of the setting. Tobe is in a tradition of mute characters or at minimum the utility man in productions, i.e. someone useful on and off stage. Argiro's speculations about Tobe's knowledge confirm this kind of role. His silence (conscious or unconscious) and his black pigment (no color or many colors) emphasize his being a device of ambiguity, a technique for moving readers toward questions. When Argiro observes that Tobe "functions to normalize" Emily's behavior by providing an ordinary and conventional frame for her and her conduct, he recognizes one of the multiple duties of this character, especially as a point of contrast with the townspeople.

Emily, however, does not exist without Tobe. Just as her father has a gilt easel on which his portrait rests, Emily depends upon the ebony Tobe, a silent but pronounced support. Like the delicate portrait, its medium described as crayon (composed of oil and chalk, or if with color and a dried binder, pastel), she requires similar care and protection. Part of the protection is her separation from the town. Tobe, except for Emily's journey to acquire poison, ventures forth into the town for her needs. When she goes into the public sphere, she is accompanied by Homer and seated in "the yellow-wheeled buggy" drawn by "a matched team of bays," separated by the conveyance from the townspeople as they watched her Sunday afternoon social ritual. Other than the several visits to her home and the public spectacle she provided them for a brief period, the townspeople could see Emily only at a distance. On three occasions her image appears in a window much like a silhouette, a popular art form in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the viewers she is frozen in time and space and defined by the house, its window, and the light behind her.

Emily's separation from the townspeople might also lie in the actual or perceived state of her mind. Although not the first to raise the issue of her sanity, Argiro writes, "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." Even though this observation is made in the context of Argiro's and others' suggestions of an incestuous relationship with her father, an assertion that relies on no hard evidence, addressing Emily's mental state has merit given the often cited textual references to her great aunt's having gone "crazy." Inherited mental illness was a popular subject during this dawn of psychology as a medical discipline, and the separation of patients from the public had existed for centuries. While Argiro's claim about Emily's being "radically unpredictable" and "often capable of anything" could be somewhat extreme, it is the kind of response that people have had over many years. Rather than keeping his daughter for himself as a sexual partner (Argiro cites several critics who take this position), Emily's father may have separated her from society because of fear of an inherited mental disease in her mother's family, the Wyatts. While it is not unusual for fathers to be overly critical of the young men courting their daughters, excesses and abuses happen often

enough for a daughter to depart her marriageable years still single, and that might be Emily's situation. What suggests otherwise, however, are the references to mental illness in the family and her being separated from her peers. Her father could fear the presence of mental illness in her children had she married. His motivation could, indeed, have been an attempt to keep Emily from having a more difficult life as well as an attempt to preserve the integrity and reputation of the family name as he saw it. She is an image of inherited power and prestige, the richly decorated walking cane being almost a scepter, despite the tarnish. When the Baptist minister calls on Emily, he has an experience that deters him from returning, and the lack of detail about the experience has led to much speculation about what he might have discovered and the behavior he might have witnessed.

The minister's visit came as a result of request by the ladies in the town. In truth, the townspeople, through their representative narrator, compose a separate character. Emily Grierson's life could be read as a mirror in the reflection of which the readers learn the character of the townspeople, a character whose "prurient interest," as Argiro states, "reflects both presumption and doubt." Their lives segregated by race, class, and gender revolve about the rise and fall of the old families, especially the mystery surrounding Emily's life. Argiro notes that both reader and townspeople must "assess her actions and misadventures from an incomplete perspective." His refrain in the essay, "We will never know . . ." continually reinforces the mystery of the text. The fear of scandal, however, is large in their lives and the cause of their sending for Emily's Alabama cousins. Because of the repeated sightings of activities at the Grierson house, it is evident that the townspeople spend much time as observers, rising to action only when their patience is severely tested.

This mirror has a double function, as Argiro notes: Emily "believes that the community has been victimizing her, driving her to behave in such a deranged fashion." When Argiro cites her calling Tobe to show the townsmen out, she may, as he notes, be flouting "paternal law," but she is also striking back at the townspeople for the damage she experiences from their gossip and interventions. After all, she does consider them "fools," and Argiro correctly observes, "she is self-aware." Faulkner has a persistent interest throughout his fiction in creating images of the townspeople as having negative consequences from their

attitudes and actions, for example their responses to Sutpen's arrival and marriage in *Absalom, Absalom!* Brooks sees her as "more sinned against [by the community] than sinning." He continues, "She had not willed the great warping of her life; it had been imposed upon her" (163). Max Putzel is right in that "A Rose for Emily" "tells more about the town than about the victims of its malice—including Miss Emily" (222). In the end more can be said with certitude about the nature of the townspeople than can be said about Emily.

Argiro's speculative analysis examines a number of theories including Emily's having sexual relationships with her father and with Tobe and that of Homer's being black. While it is true that secrets and mysteries dominate this story and that good readers can obtain strikingly different understandings of the same narrative, Brooks observed in 1978 that "commentary on this story shows violations of history, aesthetics, and plain common sense" (384). His observation seems to be applicable many years later. What can we say about "A Rose for Emily," a story that has drawn such dramatically different responses from serious readers and scholars for over eighty-two years since its initial publication? So far, no one seems to have stopped at the author's own explanation of the story: "Oh, it's simply the poor woman had had no life at all. Her father had kept her more or less locked up and then she had a lover who was about to quit her, she had to murder him. It was just 'A Rose for Emily'—that's all" (Gwynn 87-88). Argiro, in the conclusion to his essay, confirms the dilemma of the question when he writes, "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, passing *might* be going on." When Argiro points to Faulkner's use of "uncertainty" in the story, he is pointing to the story's very strength, for its repeated ambivalences make it a narrative that slowly reveals a little of itself on each subsequent reading, each rereading providing new pleasures, insights, and, of course, questions.

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