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## How Many Black Lovers Had Emily Grierson?

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IT REQUIRES NO GREAT EFFORT TO CONCLUDE, AS I DO, THE ANSWER TO THE above question is none, and not, as this essay argues, maybe two. Probably tens of thousands of readers have concluded as I do, and probably only a few (notably Thomas Dilworth) have put the number as high as maybe one. Sustaining my claim argumentatively is, however, a trickier matter, requiring at some level a theory of critical error. As it happens, I have some experience with critical error in this story, having received a term paper some years ago based on the assumption that Emily Grierson is represented in the story as an African American. Last year, I received a troubled email from a lecturer in my department who had received a student complaint regarding the consistently negative portrayals of African Americans in his course materials; singled out as the primary offender was, again, Emily Grierson. There is no question, I think, that Emily is represented in the text as white; any competent reader can point to several markers in the story that make it impossible to read her as anything else. I would have ventured to say any *casual* reader, but in both cases I've mentioned, the person reading her as black had devoted significant time to the text, at least enough to write a term paper or a lengthy email message. In both cases, I attributed the error to a cultural association of blackness and abjection; simply put, I read it as racist projection.

This essay, however, has caused me to reconsider my judgment. Eventually, Thomas Robert Argiro locates in "A Rose for Emily" traces of the full-blown slate of what we might think of Faulkner's pollution complex: "betrayal, deception, fornication, incest, miscegenation, murder, necrophilia, [and] passing." It is true that these violations of communal norms (to which we might add homosexuality, which also makes its appearance in the essay) often come in bunches, either as a matter of narrative fact (Carothers McCaslin adds incest to miscegenation) or, more often, as narrative speculation. In *Light in August*, for example, the mob gathered to contemplate Joanna Burden's dead body want necrophilia and Negro rape, not just plain old murder; lacking any evidence, they pin the crime on "Negro" and "knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before

her throat was cut and at least once afterward" (288). Later, Percy Grimm ritually sacrifices Joe Christmas as a Negro, a rapist, and homosexual, when there is textual evidence (and that ambiguous) only for the first. Given the ubiquity of the pollution complex in Faulkner's work, not to mention its notorious indeterminacies, it may seem perverse on my part to read this story as straightforwardly as I do, and to view most of the scenarios posited in this essay as conjured out of thin air. Normally, however, it is the community in Faulkner's fiction that, when confronted with one form of anomaly—with phenomena that "just d[o] not explain," as Mr. Compson famously puts it in *Absalom, Absalom!*—or deviance from its norms, overproduces deviance in reaction. Here, I suggest, it is the critic. Like the hound of the Baskervilles, the community doesn't bark, even in the presence of the corpse—the "utmost of abjection," as Julia Kristeva observes, and thus likely (as do the dead bodies of Joanna Burden and Charles Bon) to invoke the community's standard repertoire of boundary violations (4).

I fully agree with Stanley Fish that the only limit on interpretation is whether it is persuasive to other readers. Not knowing whether that is the case—for all I know, I am the only respondent in this forum who finds the argument unpersuasive—let me provide a brief account of why I am predisposed to disagree with this argument before trying to show in more detail why I do. First, I do not share Argiro's premise that "A Rose for Emily" is an especially indeterminate text, nor that Emily "may be Faulkner's most uncanny and enigmatic figure." To the contrary, I find her actions—*what* she does—rather straightforward, if somewhat eccentric. I do not doubt that she is courted by a Yankee, buys arsenic, poisons him, preserves the body, sleeps beside it, and fails to have a sexual relationship with her servant. Second, my frame of reference has much less to do with Emily's actions than with the community's reading of them. More specifically, I am interested in how the story offers a variation on the romance of reunion as it existed contemporaneously with the time frame represented in the story and in how the community's investment in Emily as a "tradition, a duty, and a care" is temporally mapped against the cultural shift from the Sartoris generation to "the next generation, with its more modern ideas." Without elaborating further, suffice it to say that it is important to my reading of the story that Homer is a (white) Yankee and that Emily's position within a genteel tradition is similarly crucial. The latter point dominates

my reading of her relationship with Tobe and of its contrast with Homer's very different command of black labor.

Regarding its interrogation of whether Homer "pass[es] for white in Jefferson," the essay moves mainly in mode of what its author calls "speculative explication," a mode, it is claimed, to which Faulkner's narrative style drives us despite its constitutive indeterminacies: even as "we go searching for what Faulkner already shows us we will never find," "Nevertheless, we go" in search of signification and scenario. This logic is questionable in two ways: first, as regards the specific scenarios the author locates as having explanatory or signifying power, and second, as regards the extent to which that search is necessary in the first place. On the latter point, as I have noted, I do not regard the narrative stylistics as indeterminate to the degree that Argiro does; at the same time, I do not feel compelled, as Argiro suggests "we" are, to fill in every textual gap. Between the effect of Homer Barron's dead body and the cause of Emily's murder by poisoning, we have a fairly strong, if circumstantial, textual case to make. Immediately prior to Homer's disappearance, she buys arsenic and, shortly afterward, the clothing and men's toilet set that will frame her display of the corpse. Whether this constitutes "real proof" of her guilt (Argiro says it does not) is an open question—indeed, I am not sure what "real proof" would mean short of an actual representation of the killing. But even if it does not constitute real proof, *every* piece of evidence we have points to Emily as the premeditated murderer of Homer Barron. By contrast, there is no evidence at all to support the author's suggestion that Homer "could have died of natural causes, perhaps while having sex with her." That is indeed *possible*, if we imagine the textual world to exist independently of ours and to follow the same rules of probability. But the probability is very low, and there are a potentially infinite number of alternative low-probability, textually ungrounded explanations for Homer's death: he "could have" died as well from suicide, justifiable homicide as a consequence of attempting to rape Emily, or from falling and hitting his head. None of these scenarios, however, accounts for the likely connections between Homer's death and Emily's two purchases. Although she may have bought the arsenic for (textually invisible) rats and the clothing as a gift for a live Homer (only to repurpose it for a dead one), the more likely explanation is that she buys both in anticipation of killing him. What we have here, I suggest, is not speculative explication,

but speculation in the absence of explication; nothing is explicated. The essay conjures an unlikely scenario for the purposes of destabilizing a likely, coherent, and textually grounded one. I find most of the scenarios offered in this essay to follow a similar pattern. As it turns out, Argiro has no commitment to Homer's natural death, which serves merely as a preliminary exercise in destabilizing "received explanations." A few pages later, he *requires* Emily's "murder" of Homer (momentarily, at any rate) as support for his more central speculation that Homer is passing as white. "If Emily discovers the truth" about Homer's racial identity, he writes, "she might well be incensed enough at Homer's betrayal to want to kill him." Given the conditional nature of the claims involved, this does not constitute a contradiction. Neither does it constitute anything like a clear argument. But even as the ubiquity of "might," "if," "perhaps," and so forth suggest that Argiro dwells exclusively in possibility—and even if the promise of "textual evidence" that will "offer a clearer perspective on these aberrant and insoluble [sic] events" *may* be "the result of a well-laid rhetorical trap" (at least "one might wonder" if this is the case)—it seems that Argiro is actually committed to some of his possibilities. He seems persuaded *that* Homer has black blood, or at least that Faulkner "signifies" (a positive claim) that he *might*, and seems even surer that Emily and Tobe have a sexual relationship. These possibilities (or probabilities), it is implied, actually *do* offer a "clearer perspective" on events stipulated to be otherwise insoluble.

I do not find much clarity to ensue. Homer's black blood, as argumentatively positioned here, doesn't explain much at all. If Homer is a mulatto, Argiro observes that, like Joe Christmas, "he would not necessarily have found welcome reception among either [racial] group." In the preceding paragraph, however, Homer is described as having "become a fixture at the racially exclusive Elks' Club." In other words, he has found welcome reception among a racially exclusive group. Argiro suggests that Homer is "not a marrying man" because his racial identity would put him in conflict with laws preventing "his openly marrying anyone except a black woman." But Homer, if he's black, isn't doing anything "openly." Since he's passing successfully (if he's passing at all), the prohibition wouldn't apply in the first place, since the law does not regard him as non-white. Even if we imagine that Homer's reluctance is caused by a fear of punitive consequences, it's difficult to see how the prohibition would apply only to marriage, and not to the

affair as well. If Homer doesn't want to marry because he's black and fears being found out, he would likely avoid the affair for the same reason. In short, Homer's status as a provisional "mulatto" (or an "octoroon") explains nothing about his being "not a marrying man."

Things are no clearer when Homer becomes (for argumentative purposes) a marrying man. A few lines later, we learn that "if he really intends to marry her, [Emily] 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." Several textual non-events are implicit or embedded in this hypothetical scenario as it moves toward "probability" and "likelihood": Emily has learned that Homer is black; Homer (for unexplained reasons) wishes to marry her; Emily loves Homer (a "likelihood" snuck in the back door), but cannot marry him due to the imperatives of the color line. Therefore, it is asserted to be "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." The plausibility is arguable. A page or so back, it wasn't clear that she even killed him; now, it's "plausible" that she did because of a *predictable* response to learning certain information. But how could we predict *that*, if "Mentally ill people" such as Emily "are radically unpredictable and are often capable of anything"? As a claim about real persons who are mentally ill, this is dubious, since many forms of mental illness—and what kind are we talking about, anyway?—manifest as predictable schemes of behavior. Certainly this is true of Emily, who wants to keep every dead body in the story.

As for the information she learns (assuming for a moment that it is accurate), how does she learn it? The only scenario posited is through the revelation of the more "racially savvy Tobe," whose "perhaps disclosing Homer's racial secret" may "seem unlikely," but actually isn't because "He knows that if Homer marries Emily another 'black' man will be his overseer in the house." But how do we know he prefers a white overseer to a black one? Why, in fact, would he? After all, Homer "cuss[es] the niggers" irrespective of his own racial identity. And what indicates that Tobe reveals the information to Emily? That, prior to Homer's disappearance, Tobe "admits" him to the house "at the kitchen door," which *might* mean that he "admits" (it's not an admission) to Emily (who isn't there) that Homer is black. Probably, though, it means

that he let Homer in through the kitchen door, just as the delegation sent to receive taxes (and whose whiteness is not in question) “were admitted by the old Negro” earlier in the story.

I could, I think, continue in this vein, the gist of which is that Homer’s black blood does not clarify anything, but rather necessitates ever more elaborate and textually ungrounded scenarios. My preference, then, is for Occam’s Razor over what I regard as the critical equivalent of a Rube Goldberg cartoon. But if, as I suggest, we don’t need black blood to explain anything in the story, that is not to say that it’s not present. Faulkner could well have signified its possible presence *without* linking it causally and authoritatively to subsequent events. That scenario forms the backbone of the narrative structures of *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* (We don’t need, for example, Charles Bon’s black blood to account for his dead body; bigamy and incest can, and do, for certain of the novel’s narrators, suffice as cause. That Bon *might* have black blood, however, isn’t a textually covert matter.) The obvious difference between those texts and this one is that *possible* presence of black blood is signified explicitly and in no uncertain terms: characters believe it’s there (or might be), say so, and embed it in causal structures. In “A Rose for Emily,” however, no one suggests out loud that Homer is black, and if the narrator “might be suggesting that Homer is a mixed-blood individual” by referencing his dark complexion, he is the only narrator in the Faulkner canon who suspects the presence of black blood and doesn’t seize on it as the causal key to all subsequent effects. Instead, the narrator calls Homer a Yankee, and everyone seems to treat him that way.

Throughout the essay, textual evidence is deployed in a cavalier manner. Later, we learn that presence of a *single* hair on the pillow “suggests planted evidence,” since more than that would probably have been on the pillow “if she had been sleeping perpetually with the corpse.” That Emily has “evidently shut up the top floor of the house” is said to “prove” that she “could not have been sleeping with the corpse continuously.” Leaving aside that sleeping “continuously” or “perpetually” is itself impossible (irrespective of doing so with a corpse), neither piece of evidence does the work it is supposed to do. Upon inspection, the four slept-on pillows at my house were found to have zero, zero, one, and three hairs, respectively, and it is certainly possible that Emily occasionally has the pillowcases laundered. That the top floor is

"evidently" shut off doesn't prove *that* it is, nor that, *if* it is, Emily cannot enter it to sleep the corpse repeatedly. (If she plants the hair, she must, in fact, have access to the top floor.) Again, the evidence links tenuously to what it is said to explain—here, that Emily stages the tableau to "subvert[t] any conjecture that she has engaged in negrophilia" in her supposed affair with Tobe. By this point in the essay, Emily's "preference for her black manservant" is claimed to indicate a betrayal of the "living Homer Barron"—the man who, earlier, she "likely" loved.

But wasn't her affair with Homer also an instance of negrophilia, a point the narrator "might be suggesting" in noting Homer's dark complexion? If the narrator suspects Emily of negrophilia in her affair with Homer, wouldn't she be staging the tableau in vain to distract attention from her negrophilia for Tobe that no one in the text shows the slightest evidence of recognizing? Nor am I persuaded that there is much evidence for the narrator's suspicion of Homer. A dark complexion is not uncommon in white persons who labor outdoors; even Freud conceded that a sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, not a "brown phallic object." If yellow gloves do "imply that Homer is crossing the color line" (and are not, as I think, the gloves of a rake), it isn't clear why Homer, who apparently fears discovery of that fact, would be wearing them. (Here, I think Argiro has missed the best evidence for his scenario: the neat inversion of Homer's "eyes lighter than his face" in the description of Emily's eyes as "two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough" and, more significantly, the possible allusion to the most celebrated case of passing in American jurisprudence. Homer Plessy was chosen to challenge Jim Crow laws precisely because he appeared white, and thus was forced to announce his racial identity to the conductor of the Louisiana train, a point, it was thought, that would expose the absurdity of the law.) But leaving aside the validity of the evidence, here the narrator is credited with providing it. Later, however, the narrator is faulted for his "smug assumptions" and strategies of "denial": he is one of the townfolk—indeed, the town's representative figure—who "can't even figure out" that "untoward" things "*might* be going on" behind appearances. The narrator's appearance in the latter guise depends on a structure of *authorial* signification: what "Faulkner" is showing us that the narrator misses. That is indeed a possibility, but it would seem to contradict the earlier, cagier narrator who "might be suggesting" the presence of some untoward things.



With respect to Emily's relationship with Tobe, I find the essay more provocative, although again dependant on "speculative explications" that strike me as less than explicative. I doubt, for instance, that "Tobe! The negro appeared" has anything to do with Emily's "sexual enlivening," and I suspect that the exclamation point in question is a regular one, not a phallic variation. There are, however, enough questions raised here to suggest, at the least, a dissonant quality to that relationship. One is reminded of the curious social position of Gail Hightower's two black cooks, both of whom are explicitly associated by the community, and in the absence of all evidence, with deviant forms of sexuality—homosexuality in the one case, acts "against God and nature" in the other (*LIA* 71). In contrast, the community of "A Rose for Emily" again fails to bark. In closing, Argiro seems to fault the community for that response—that is, for smugly "misreading" the possibility that "untoward things" might be going on. But his list doesn't hold up under scrutiny: it's unclear how the community *doesn't* recognize that murder and fornication *could well* have happened, nor, more importantly, why passing or miscegenation (the "unnatural" and "strange misalliance between Emily and Tobe") are untoward. In order to view them this way, one must adopt the community's norms. Argiro clearly doesn't, and yet at the same time seems to blame the community for not invoking those norms and realizing its pollution complex. The community, in short, is faulted for denying or repressing (and thus not punishing) violations of its own (pathological) boundaries.

As the title of my response suggests, I believe that this essays asks the wrong questions. In not responding to its titular question, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" critiqued what L. C. Knight believed to be an excessively literal critical practice concerned with such questions. Argiro errs, I think, in this direction by fleshing out in extravagant and literal detail the abject scenarios that might have occurred offstage in "A Rose for Emily." Although this essay successfully indicates the *potential* for those scenarios, the potential, I think, lies in the community's narrative production of them rather than in their literal existence. The more salient question is why, given that potential, the community abjures the abject, recuperating Emily as a monument (if a fallen one) and laying her to rest respectfully among the Confederate dead. Why doesn't the community bark?

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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