

Faulkner's A ROSE FOR EMILY

Laura J Getty. The Explicator. Washington: Summer 2005. Vol. 63, Iss. 4; pg. 230, 5 pgs

People: Faulkner, William (1897-1962)

Author(s): Laura J Getty

Document types: Commentary

Publication title: *The Explicator.* Washington: Summer 2005. Vol. 63, Iss. 4; pg. 230, 5 pgs

Source type: Periodical

ISSN/ISBN: 00144940

Text Word Count 1875

Abstract (Document Summary)

Getty examines William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*. The possible meanings of both the title and the chronology of Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* have been debated for years. What is not under debate, however, is that the chronology deliberately manipulates and delays the reader's final judgment of Emily Grierson by altering the evidence. In other words, what the chronology does is as important as when the events actually take place.

Full Text (1875 words)

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The possible meanings of both the title and the chronology of William Faulkner's "*A Rose for Emily*" have been debated for years.¹ What is not under debate, however, is that the chronology deliberately manipulates and delays the reader's final judgment of Emily Grierson by altering the evidence. In other words, what the chronology does is as important as when the events actually take place. In the same way, what the title does reveals as much as the debate over what the rose means. The only rose that Emily actually receives (putting aside symbolic roses for the moment) is the rose in the title, which Faulkner as the author gives to her.² Just as the story's chronology is a masterpiece of subtle insinuations, so also is the title in its implications for the structure of the story.

Previous attempts to offer a single explanation for the rose in "*A Rose for Emily*" highlight how many possibilities exist. In one sense, Homer could be the rose (Fenson and Kritzer). A combination of the rose-colored bedroom and Homer as a dried rose could serve as "a relic of the past" (Weaks 12). Homer's body could be like a rose pressed between the pages of a book, kept "tucked away in a seldom used, rose colored room which at times can be opened" (Kurtz 40). In another sense, it might be the narrator offering a rose to Emily: either "as a final tribute" by preserving the secret of Homer's murder (Nebeker, "Emily's Rose" 9); or, conversely, the narrator, "unwittingly, offers little more than 'bought flowers' in tribute to Miss Emily" by not recognizing the truth until the hair on the pillow is found (Garrison 341). If these various symbols in the story are petals in the rose, it is important to note that the "Rose" of the title gathers all of these references together in a way that moves beyond any one source. Rather than focusing the interpretation of the rose on any number of internal elements (Homer's body,

Emily's state of mind, the narrator's tribute, etc.), however valid as a piece of the puzzle, the focus should be on the impact of the titular rose itself.

The narrator's ultimately limited understanding of what has been happening weakens the case for the "Rose" being a tribute by the narrator.³ No critic claims that the narrator knew about the hair on the pillow, even if the narrator (and a significant percentage of the population) knew or guessed about the murder. The reassessment of the title by the reader (but not by the narrator, who technically does not know the title and remains oblivious to any outside commentary or literary allusions) must include more than a passing thought for the author, whose sleight of hand has brought about the surprise ending. The story is, after all, a literary construct, and it is constructed under the title, or in this case *sub rosa*: According to legend, the Greek god of silence, Harpocrates, stumbled

upon Venus while she was making love with a handsome youth, and Cupid [. . .] bribed the god of silence to keep quiet about the affair by giving him the first rose ever created. This story made the rose the emblem of silence, and since the fifth century B.C., a rose carved on the ceilings of dining and drawing rooms where European diplomats gathered enjoined all present to observe secrecy about any matter discussed *sub rosa*, or "under the rose" [. . .] The rose was also carved over the Roman Catholic confessional as a symbol of silence, and *sub rosa* became well known [. . .] as a term for "strict confidence," "complete secrecy," or "absolute privacy." (Hendrickson 167-68)

Jack Scherting's Freudian reading of "A Rose for Emily" uses the *sub-rosa* concept only to suggest that Emily's attachment to her father had lasting repercussions: "The Oedipal desires expressed in Emily's affair with Homer were never recognized by the people of Jefferson, and Emily herself was aware of them only as subconscious longings" (404). On the contrary, the townspeople are extremely sensitive to Emily's psychological state. When Emily tries to keep her father's corpse, they "believed that she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will" (124).⁴ The fact that certain people in town knew that Homer was in the upstairs room argues a similar recognition of Emily's need to cling to Homer as she had tried to cling to her father: only, this time, they let her keep the body.

Whereas Scherting limits the title to expressing Emily's state of mind with her lover, I would argue that the entire story operates *sub rosa* to conceal that iron-gray hair on the pillow until after Emily is dead. Furthermore, Faulkner preserves Emily's privacy by never allowing the reader, or the narrator, to become a voyeur. When Emily drives the Baptist minister away, we are told that "He would never divulge what happened during that interview" (126): meaning, of course, that the town must have pressed him for details enough times to realize that he would not talk. No one is allowed inside the bedroom until both former occupants are dead, and the full understanding of Emily's state of mind (despite the inevitability of speculation on the subject) remains known only to Emily and her author.

The religious implications of the *sub-rosa* concept apply to the story as well. Beyond the numerous secrets kept by various members of the community (from the Baptist minister to Tobe), the concept of the confessional, with the carved rose above it, applies more to the

Episcopalian Emily than it does to her Baptist neighbors. Although not all present-day Episcopalians practice extreme unction, the Articles of Religion established by the American branch of the Episcopal (Anglican) church in 1801 include a description of how extreme unction fits into church practice. Obviously, in Emily's case, the possibility for a full confession before death exists only with her author, and his knowledge of her actions remains confidential until after her death.

Structurally, the Grierson house itself adds both a physical and a figurative frame to the sub-rosa aspect of the story: "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" (119). The house, described as "lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps" (119), is almost certainly decorated in places with carved flowers, the rose being a favorite choice among the Victorians. The main secrets in Jefferson take place inside that building, and the most important secret is revealed only after the flowers have been placed on Emily's grave.

The "Rose" of the title extends far beyond any one flower or literary allusion in its implications for the story's structure. The "Rose" represents secrecy: the confidential relationship between the author and his character, with all of the privileged information withheld.

[Footnote]

NOTES

1. A sampling of critical suggestions for the chronology can be found in the articles by Going, McGlynn, Nebeker "Chronology Revisited," Sullivan, Wilson, and Woodward. Literary allusions for the story are discussed by Barber, Barnes, Birk, Edwards, Going, Hays, Levitt, Mellard, Stevens, Stewart, Stronks, and Winchell.
2. Faulkner's well-known answer about the title's meaning has been recognized as vague and, more important, evasive:
Q. What is the meaning of the title "A Rose for Emily"?
A. Oh, it's simply that the poor woman 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. (Faulkner in the University 87-88)
3. A sampling of critical views of the narrator include the articles by Burduck, Nebeker ("Emily's Rose"), Rodgers, Rodman, and Sullivan.
4. I am using the *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Vintage, 1977) 119-30.

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Citation Information:

ABELL

Author: Getty, Laura J.

Title: Faulkner's A Rose for Emily.

Publication Details: Explicator (63:4) 2005, 230-4.

Publication Year: 2005

Subject: English Literature: Twentieth Century: Authors: Faulkner, William

Reference Number: 2005:16410

Source: Literature Online Reference Edition

URL: http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lore-us&rft_id=xri:lore:rec:abell:R03583210