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The Tabloidization of Emily

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> Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.
> —Henry David Thoreau

How can we account for the fact that, for over seven decades, readers of "A Rose for Emily" have almost unanimously agreed that Emily Grierson killed Homer Barron and slept next to his corpse for years? Is the textual evidence so overwhelming, a "trout in the milk" (Frank 255), that there is no other sensible way to read the story? That would be surprising, since there is little consensus on most other aspects of the story, especially her reasons for killing him.

In fact, the physical (or "circumstantial") evidence in the story is considerably weaker than most readers assume. Faulkner does not use the standard fictional device of accumulating a critical mass of detail to elicit our belief in Emily's guilt. Instead, I contend, he employs the smallest possible number of incriminating facts and then relies on the time-honored methods of tabloid newspapers to lead his "jury," the readers, to the desired inferences. First he uses the rhetorical strategies of the tabloids — hinting at dark secrets, omitting key information, teasing with half-truths. Second, he builds a coherent narrative with a strongly implied conclusion. And third, he invokes puritanical standards to create an atmosphere of guilt. In using these pseudo-journalistic techniques, he accomplishes various related goals. He convinces us beyond a reasonable doubt that Emily is a murderer (and worse). He also involves us in her "conviction" and entices us to provide the motive for her crime(s). Furthermore, he parodies and satirizes the strategies

associated with sensationalized reporting, and most importantly, chastises and ridicules humankind for its susceptibility to those strategies, for its voyeuristic tendencies, and for its destructive hypocrisy.

The central theme of the story, therefore, cannot emerge merely from a discussion of why Emily killed Homer or what she did to/with the corpse; we must also consider the techniques by which we are led to ask these questions. "A Rose for Emily" is as much about a way of communicating as it is about what is being communicated, as much about our desire to snoop into others' lives as it is about those lives that we are being invited to observe and interpret.

To see the significance of Faulkner's manner of narrating this story, we first need to determine how convincing the "case" against Emily Grierson is. Put another way, given the circumstantial evidence arrayed in the story, how probable is it that she killed Homer Barron?

It might seem odd to put questions about a fictional character in legal terms, but, as recent scholarship has demonstrated, narrative and forensic evidence have been tightly linked in our minds since the middle of the eighteenth century. Alexander Welsh asserts that Henry Fielding, novelist and lawyer, "showed off in *The History of Tom Jones* a kind of epitome of narrative for the next 150 years — a narrative much more closely patterned on forensic debate, in which the representation of the facts was carefully managed by a narrator who was not a party to the action" (6). Fielding's innovation followed on the heels of a similar change in the legal system in Britain. According to Matthew Wickman,

> In the later seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, standards of proof in the English and Scottish court systems began to privilege estimations of probability over the alleged certainties associated with positive testimony. As a result, jurors became more rigorously separated from witnesses in the forging of evidentiary truth. Circumstantial evidence became a viable — indeed, the preferred — mode of evidence . . . .
>
> (182)

In a very real sense, readers are judging evidence in the same way jurors do, trying to ascertain what can't be seen (feelings, memories, intention, motivation, or state of mind) on the basis of what is seen, which means that writers or attorneys who are trying to sway readers or juries must manipulate the evidence so the audience is led to the appropriate conclusions. As Susan Griffin points out, "a fact or circumstance means nothing in isolation. The renegade, reporter, autobiographer, detective, prosecutor, and novelist alike make meaning by ordering facts into a coherent, inclusive, believable account" (99). Welsh calls this "making a representation." "A representation," he explains, "is literally *made*; arguments need to be set forth, evidence marshaled, and words carefully put together" (8-9). "Circumstances do not lie," says Griffin, "only when they have been carefully and conclusively managed" (99).

In that context, then, how strong a representation of guilt does Faulkner give us in "A Rose for Emily"? First, let us ask if Emily Grierson were on trial for murdering Homer Barron, her "sweetheart," what circumstantial evidence

could the prosecuting attorney point to in his closing argument — assuming he could use only what was stated explicitly in the story itself?

1. The Closing Arguments

To start with, he could mention that when Ms. Grierson died several townspeople found a skeleton lying on a bed in an upstairs room of her dwelling. He could then remind the jury that she purchased arsenic from a drugstore not long before Homer Barron disappeared. He could point out that, soon after that disappearance, an offensive smell emanated from her house for a fortnight or more. And finally, he could refer to an iron-gray hair that was found on the pillow next to the corpse's skull — and then call the jurors' attention to the fact that Ms. Grierson herself has hair that could be described as that exact color. That's it. Faulkner offers no other physical evidence that even the most single-minded lawyer could possibly use against the defendant. Not exactly an open-and-shut case.

On the other hand, the defense attorney for Ms. Grierson might present a very powerful argument against the prosecution's case. She could start by responding to the "evidence" presented by her opponent.

The Skeleton: We do not even know for sure who is lying on Emily's bed. The narrator does not tell us explicitly that the skeleton belongs to Homer Barron but merely says, "The man himself lay in the bed" (Faulkner 130). In other words, the corpse is never identified. More significantly, the narrator implies that the bones are not Homer's. Earlier in the story, the narrator, says:

> A neighbor saw the Negro man admit him [Homer] at the kitchen door at dusk one evening.
> And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron.
>
> (127)

Remember, this comment comes from someone who viewed the skeleton on the bed ("For a long while we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin") and can describe the "body" in great detail: "What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay" (130). The narrator does not say, as he might have, "that was the last we saw of Homer Barron alive." Therefore, the narrator's remark suggests that he thinks this rotting body belongs to someone else. Of course, even if it could somehow be established that these were Homer's remains, that in itself says nothing about how he died or, if he were murdered, who killed him.

The Poison: Although we are privy to a scene in which Emily buys arsenic from the druggist, we have no information whatsoever about how she actually uses it. In addition, the narrator implies at least three other reasons besides murdering Homer for her to have purchased the poison. One is suggested by the druggist: "For rats and such?" (125) Another is to commit suicide, as the

townspeople assume (126). The third is to kill her cousins. After all, the narrator says: "Like when she bought the rat poison, the arsenic. That was . . . while the two female cousins were visiting her" (125). Isn't it plausible that she bought rat poison to do away with these two meddlesome relations? Of course, we know she did not carry out such a deed — "after another week they [the cousins] departed" (127) — but in any case we can no longer say with certainty that she was intending to kill Homer with the arsenic, let alone that she actually used it for that purpose.

The Smell: As with the first two pieces of "evidence," this one suggests much but proves little. Again, the story itself provides alternative explanations: "'It's probably just a snake or a rat,'" says Judge Stevens (122). The "ladies" attribute the smell to poor housekeeping by Tobe, Emily's servant: "'Just as if a man — any man — could keep a kitchen properly'" (122). Of course, the odor takes "a week or two" to dissipate (123), implying that something more than a small animal or a dirty kitchen was causing it, but it should be obvious that associating the smell with a decaying human body does not tell us whose body, does not demonstrate that a murder has taken place, and does not suggest who might have committed a murder if there had been one.

The Strand of Iron-gray Hair: The presence of this hair on the indented pillow next to the skull doesn't demonstrate that Emily's head has been resting on that pillow. It is not necessarily Emily's hair. Assuming it is, it could have gotten on the pillow in many ways other than the one suggested by the D.A., but even if we grant that she was sleeping next to the corpse, it's hard to imagine how that fact implicates her in a murder. In a very real sense, the D.A.'s whole case against Emily is as thin as this single hair.

But it gets even thinner. The narrator of the story never tells us in so many words that Emily killed Homer. In fact, instead of saying that Emily poisoned Homer, the narrator says, unequivocally, that Homer abandoned Emily:

> That was two years after her father's death and a short time after her sweetheart — the one we believed would marry her — had deserted her. After her father's death she went out very little; after her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all.
>
> (122)

Obviously, this passage can refer only to Homer, even though his name is not mentioned. We are told what the town expected from this relationship: "When she had first begun to be seen with Homer Barron, we had said, 'She will marry him'" (126), so he must be "the one we believed would marry her." Notice that the passage says that Homer deserted Emily, that he went away, not that he was murdered. Some might argue that this passage merely refers to the time when Homer left town for about ten days: "So we were not surprised when Homer Barron . . . was gone" (127). But the narrator makes clear that no one in Jefferson considered that event a desertion: "And, *as we had expected all along*," the narrator tells us, "within three days [after Emily's cousins departed] Homer Barron was back in town" (127, emphasis added).

The D.A. might try to explain away, as Jack Scherting does, the apparent discrepancy in the passage that says that Homer "had deserted her":

> If Faulkner had intended readers to infer that Homer Barron had jilted Emily or that he intended to jilt her, we would expect the author to provide some substantive evidence as a basis for such an inference. There is only one allusion to jilting in the history of this protracted affair. Noting Homer's disappearance, the people of Jefferson assumed that he "had deserted her . . . after her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all." The assumption is not reinforced anywhere else in the story.
>
> (398)

But nothing in the narrator's language suggests that the town is merely making an "assumption" that later proves false. In other contexts, when the narrator mentions such a mistaken notion, it is always accompanied by a clear disclaimer: "We did not say she was crazy then" (124); "At first we were glad that Miss Emily would have an interest" (124); "even when we believed that she was fallen" (125). In this case, the narrator says nothing to suggest that "her sweetheart had deserted her" and "her sweetheart went away" are based on erroneous assumptions.

Could the D.A. argue that the narrator was just being coy, that the phrase "went away" is a joking reference to death, that Homer "deserted" Emily by dying? At best, this is stretching the language. If X killed Y, would anyone be inclined to say, even with tongue in cheek, that Y abandoned X? Only a strong desire to convict Emily of murder would explain any reading other than the literal one — Homer left town before she had a chance to kill him.

2. The Universal Presumption

Clearly, the defense attorney has the stronger closing argument. Since Faulkner, according to Michael Millgate, "was no stranger to courtrooms" and "seems to have possessed a considerably better knowledge of it [the law] than the average layman" (*Place* 96), he would have known that "A Rose for Emily" does not provide nearly enough evidence even to bring Ms. Grierson to trial, let alone convict her of murdering her lover. And yet, despite the flimsiness of the forensic case against her, each succeeding generation of readers has taken for granted that Emily indeed murdered Mr. Barron with rat poison. Ray B. West, Jr. (1949), for example, claims that Emily acted "as though she could retain her unfaithful lover by poisoning him" (197). James T. Stewart (1958) says that "Miss Emily . . . poisons Homer with arsenic" (56). Norman N. Holland (1975) argues that Emily "can commit and get away with murder" (21). James B. Carothers (1985) explains: "'A Rose for Emily' is . . . an indictment of those conventions and customs which drive Miss Emily to murder Homer Barron" (22). And Diane Roberts (1995) reiterates that "Miss Emily poisons her lover . . ." (159).

To my knowledge, only one writer has even considered the possibility that Emily did not poison Homer. Terry Heller says, "Mysteries about Emily's

actions remain unsolved: if she had an affair with Homer, if she killed him, and if she used the poison." (316). But no one seems to bother with Heller's "mysteries." Virtually everyone else who has commented on "A Rose for Emily," including Faulkner himself, takes the murder as a given and tries to explain its thematic significance or the title character's reasons for committing this crime.

In fact, trying to understand why Emily Grierson killed her lover is one of the primary pastimes of Faulknerphiles. The never-stated assumption is that, as the story makes perfectly plain, she did him in, so now our task is to figure out exactly what led her to take such drastic measures. Following the story in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction,* for example, the editor includes this question: "What motives can you attribute to Emily for her killing of Homer Barron?" (486). Bernard Hochman, who acknowledges that "'A Rose for Emily' leaves us with a 'global gap,' an insoluble mystery,'" (149) still asks, "Did she kill Homer Barron because he did sleep with her or because he didn't?" (150).

As Heller observes, most of the criticism of this story "has centered on the nature and cause of the aberration which leads Emily to kill Homer and keep his body in her bedroom" (301-302). Scherting asks, "Why did Emily Grierson murder her lover?" and claims that this "thematically significant question has not been satisfactorily answered" (398). Hal Blythe suggests, "Perhaps the most provocative aspect of Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' is ... her motive in killing Homer Barron" (49).

Ironically, the explanations offered for Emily's actions ultimately cancel each other out. Every conceivable reason has been given without a consensus being reached. To West, "Emily's world ... continues to be in the Past (in its extreme form it is death), and when she is threatened with desertion and disgrace, she not only takes refuge in that world, but she also takes Homer with her, in the only manner possible" (195). According to Dennis W. Allen, "Emily's murder of Homer is ... an attempt to forestall his loss through death" (688). Scherting argues that Emily kills Homer because she "was never allowed to outgrow her Oedipal attachment to her father and ... Homer was, libidinally, a surrogate for her father" (400). Holland says that Emily's "vengeful murder of Homer seems just the kind of thing her father would do; I feel she has incorporated much of her father's brutality in herself" (28). Blythe claims that "Faulkner hints that Miss Emily's 'beau' ideal is homosexual and that she poisons him to save face" (49). Heller summarizes another half dozen explanations, none more enlightening or convincing than the others (302-303).

One might think that critics' inability to agree on Emily's reasons for committing murder would lead, as it would in the real world (or on *Law and Order*), to the conclusion that she had no ascertainable motive for the crime and therefore shouldn't be considered a viable suspect. Clearly, she gains nothing obvious, like money or power or security, by killing Homer, and we are given no reason to think she hates or fears or envies him, so the familiar whodunit motives are missing. As a result, critics must dredge the story for deep (and arcane) psychological explanations, explanations which would never stand up under scrutiny in a court of law.

So why does everybody still think she did it? If there is no agreed-upon motive, no compelling justification for even thinking that a crime was commit-

ted, and good reason to believe that Homer Barron had left town before he could be killed, why do readers universally regard Emily Grierson as a murderer? Considering that various aspects of "A Rose for Emily" besides her character and motivation — including the identity and role of the narrator, and the sequence of events described in the narrative — have been the subject of endless dispute, the consensus on this one point is quite remarkable. In light of the incredible lack of trial-worthy evidence available in the story to convict Emily, how can we explain this near-unanimity on her guilt?

3. Possible Influences

We might be tempted to point to a very early and very influential review by Lionel Trilling ("Mr. Faulkner's World") published in *The Nation* in November, 1931, only six weeks after the story appeared in *These Thirteen*, Faulkner's first collection of short stories. Trilling proclaims that "A Rose for Emily" is "the story of a woman who has killed her lover and lain for years beside his decaying corpse" (492). (Of course, we would still have to explain how Trilling arrived at this startling conclusion on first reading the story.) Despite — or more likely because of — the fact that Trilling offers no further explanation and not a shred of support for this bold interpretation, his view has had a powerful effect on later readers of the story. As John V. Hagopian, W. Gordon Cunliffe, and Martin Dolch point out, "Such was Faulkner's reputation as a writer of horrifying, sadistic, and morbid shockers that this interpretation went unchallenged for many years" (77). According to Diane Brown Jones, "Most efforts at interpretation [of "Emily"] attempt to find meaning beyond Lionel Trilling's early, dismissive evaluation of the story as 'essentially trivial in its horror because it has no implications, because it is pure event without implication'" (106).

Trilling's glib characterization of the story has apparently led subsequent readers to see Emily in the same terms. Not only is it generally assumed that she killed Homer but that she slept next to the deteriorating body every night for decades. (To my knowledge, no one has bothered to explain how the body got up into the bedroom and on her bed.) Ten years after Trilling's article, Allen Tate says that "Miss Emily . . . conceals the dead body of her lover in an upstairs bedroom" (101). Other readers pick up on the same theme, sometimes almost paraphrasing Trilling. Irving Malin, for example, tells us that "the townspeople enter the house and find to their horror that she has slept next to Homer's corpse all these years" (48). Similarly, Danforth Ross claims that "the dead Homer continues to share her bed" (62) and Allen, referring to Emily's "shocking and incomprehensible" actions, says: "Having poisoned her lover and concealed his body in an upstairs room, she sleeps with his corpse for roughly forty years" (686). Most recently, Hans Skei proclaims, "Emily has slept beside her dead lover for some forty years" (58).

Since 1959, critics have undoubtedly also been influenced by the author's own comments about "A Rose for Emily," which substantiate Trilling's view that Emily murdered Homer. When questioned about his story at the University of Virginia, Faulkner said, "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" (88). In another context, he refers to Emily as "the woman who murdered him," her "lover," Homer Barron (58).

Echoing both Faulkner and Trilling, Cleanth Brooks says that "when her paramour prepares to desert her, . . . she poisons him and conceals his corpse in an upper bedroom. . . ." (153-54). Two decades later, Hans H. Skei summarizes the story in virtually the same terms as Brooks: "When she later fears that Homer Barron, her Northern 'beau,' is about to leave her, she poisons him, [and] hides the corpse in a sealed room in her house. . . ." (163).

Ironically, Brooks, in discussing "what constitutes a proper interpretation of Faulkner's story" (387), says that "the actual text of the story" is "far more important" than "what Faulkner said he had in mind" (388). Despite that bit of advice, which Brooks himself doesn't follow, later writers who might have been tempted to question the validity of the assumption that Emily is a murderer would undoubtedly have found Faulkner's pronouncements about his story a powerful deterrent, even in light of his notorious (both intentional and unwitting) misreadings of his own work and despite the fact that these particular remarks were made nearly three decades after the story was published. If the author himself says that Emily murdered her lover, who are we to argue?

But the almost universal agreement on Emily's guilt cannot be attributed to readers blindly following the lead of Trilling or even of Faulkner. After all, the author's interviews make no mention whatsoever of Emily's sleeping next to the rotting corpse, so we cannot argue that the consensus on that aspect of the story has the author's imprimatur. More importantly, critics' interpretations of the story have deviated in important ways from the author's and Trilling's "influences."

For one thing, the previously cited explanations of Emily's reasons for killing Homer do not match up with Faulkner's, who says (apparently ignoring his own narrator's claim that Homer had in fact deserted Emily) that she murdered Homer to keep him from leaving her. Few critics besides Brooks and Skei seem to accept that as the real reason. Notice also that Scherting, in the passage quoted above, dismisses the possibility that Faulkner "intended readers to infer that Homer Barron had jilted Emily or that he intended to jilt her" (398) even though Faulkner, twenty-two years earlier, had spelled out that that is precisely what he intended readers to infer — "she had a lover who was about to quit her."

Moreover, some readers have gone beyond Trilling's tepid suggestion that Emily has "lain for years beside his decaying corpse." In his biography of Faulkner, Joseph Blotner, for instance, says, "A strand of gray hair on the pillow next to the corpse showed that this was a drama not only of fornication and murder, but of a kind of necrophilia as well" (632). Other readers have concurred with or extended this view, which Faulkner himself never endorsed nor denied. Thus, Max Putzel rather melodramatically claims that Emily "held unspeakable congress with the corpse of her victim" (222). At least one interpretation goes even farther. James Mellard tells us:

> What makes the thought of Emily's sexual acts with Homer's corpse so repulsive is the evidence Faulkner gives us that it is oral, not genital: not

> merely necrophiliac, but also . . . saprophitic or, perhaps more accurately, saprophagous. The two signs that Faulkner gives us that link Emily, bodily, to Homer's cadaver are the gray strand of hair and the odious obesity that overtakes her after she has murdered the man. (44)

So what are we left with? If the influence of Trilling's and Faulkner's interpretations of the story cannot explain the tacit and universal agreement that Emily committed murder (and worse), and if the physical evidence in the story itself is sparse and hardly conclusive, what accounts for so many readers (including Trilling in the first place) finding Miss Emily guilty of unspeakable offenses, accusing and convicting her of transgressions against the laws of man and God?

4. Tabloid Rhetoric

I contend that Faulkner leads us to our judgments of Emily Grierson, first, by appropriating the sleazy and seductive rhetoric of tabloid newspapers — intimating, hinting, affirming though denying, revealing by concealing. Faulkner subtly lampoons the voice of the scandal sheets to direct our thoughts to the gutter without including a single lewd or graphic detail.

Ironically, we suspect Emily of nefarious practices because of the scarcity of evidence; we tend to believe that she actually committed these heinous acts in large part because we have to work so hard to determine what they could have been. We unconsciously decide, in other words, that the narrator's details must be dripping with hidden meaning because there are so few of them. Thus, a single strand of hair mentioned at the very end of the story takes on enormous significance because of its position in the narrative and because we have so little else to go on. We are reluctant to believe that a commentator, even a gossipy one, would deliberately mislead us with blind alleys and false premises.

These strategies are typical of a medium that focuses on the rich and powerful and on those who have fallen from a lofty height. In his treatment of Emily Grierson, Faulkner seems to be deliberately reminding us of (and almost certainly parodying) the tabloid newspaper's titillating treatment of celebrity. By leading us to rash conclusions with only a few well-placed "clues" (the skeleton, the poison, the smell, the iron-gray hair), he ridicules the tabloid's technique of promising more than it delivers, of encouraging readers to indulge their wildest fantasies, of hinting at the most scandalous events without ever naming them, of avoiding libel by a hair's breadth, all for the purpose of selling newspapers. Simultaneously, he makes fun of us for trusting gossips, professional or otherwise, and, on the basis of the thinnest possible evidence, leaping to condemn those in the public eye.

Undoubtedly, Faulkner was familiar with the tabloids' tactics. He could not have missed the sensationalized coverage of various stories by these purveyors of celebrity gossip, such as the Fatty Arbuckle manslaughter scandal (1921), the Leopold-Loeb case (1924), and the mysterious death of Rudolph Valentino (1926), especially during his weeks-long stay in New York, the mecca of the tabs, in 1921 and his one-day visits to London (home of the notorious *Daily*

Mirror) and New York in 1925. He also would have been aware of other highly publicized and sensationalized cases, including the so-called "monkey trial" of John Scopes, who was "convicted" of teaching evolution in Tennessee in 1925. The near-universal familiarity of the tabs is suggested by the following dialogue from Dashiell Hammett's script for *The Thin Man* in 1934:

> "I read where you were shot five times in the tabloids."
> "It's not true. He didn't come anywhere near my tabloids"
>
> (Frank 106)

The period out of which "A Rose for Emily" sprung was the golden age of sensationalistic journalism. In *The Form of News*, Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone refer to an "emphatic newspaper form," which "congealed in the interwar years, exemplified in its extreme version by the tabloid" (252). According to David Krajicek, "The brash little papers developed a style that came to be known as *jazz journalism* as they helped America forget the world war" (89). "During the summer of 1926," he explains, "the circulation of the *Daily News* passed one million as it featured an extraordinary stream of sleazy stories about triple murders, secret love nests, and child brides" (89). Frank Mott describes in detail this era in "gutter" journalism:

> A number of other trials and scandals, some of them involving elements of great indecency if not downright obscenity, received "heavy play" in the press of 1925-29, under the impulsion of the war of the tabloids. Perhaps the worst was the mess concerning "Daddy" Browning and his youthful inamorata "Peaches," in 1927. *The Daily Graphic* went so far with this that McFadden and Gauvreau were brought into court by the Society for the Suppression of Vice, and even the *Daily News* muttered that if this sort of thing went much further readers would be "drenched in obscenity."
>
> (671)

That Faulkner held this type of reporting in contempt is obvious from his reference to it in "Golden Land," a short story published four years after "A Rose for Emily." The narrator mentions "the two tabloid papers which the Filipino removed from his master's topcoat" (704) — and goes on to show his (and obviously the author's) disdain for this kind of newspaper. The story, more explicitly than "Emily,"demonstrates the tabloid's willingness to intrude on and disrupt people's lives, especially the lives of celebrities and their families:

> [A]t his [Ira's] feet the black headline flared above the row of five or six tabloid photographs from which his daughter alternately stared back or flaunted long pale shins: APRIL LALEAR BARES ORGY SECRETS.
>
> (705)

We are told, "The trial was but entering its third tabloidal day now, and so for two days his daughter's face had sprung out at him, hard, blonde and inscrutable, from every paper he opened" (705). Later in the story,

> [Ira] lifted the paper from the terrace where Voyd had flung it, and read the half headline: LALEAR WOMAN DAUGHTER OF PROMINENT LOCAL FAMILY. Admits Real Name Is Samantha Ewing, Daughter of Ira Ewing, Local Realtor.
>
> (711)

As in "A Rose for Emily," the personal affairs of a celebrity have become an open secret because of the public's voracious appetite for scandal.

We also know that Faulkner occasionally told stories whose events, if they had been real, could easily have been exploited by the tabloids of his time. *Light in August* (1932) features miscegenation (assuming Joe Christmas is black), murder, and lynching. Similarly, "Dry September" (1931) involves an alleged miscegenous rape, followed by a lynching. In *Wild Palms* (1939), a doctor shares a "love nest" with a married woman who has left her family; she gets pregnant, he botches the abortion, she dies, and he's imprisoned. *Sanctuary* (1931) tells of a trial involving the abduction and rape (with a corncob!) of a beautiful, emotionally unstable eighteen-year-old college girl by a psychopathic killer-for-hire.

In many cases, the crime or sin at the heart of a Faulkner story is never seen and sometimes merely hinted at without being named, as in "Emily" or in a particularly titillating tabloid story. In *Light in August*, we do not know if Joe Christmas is black, and we do not see him (or anyone else) slit Joanna Burden's throat and set fire to the house. In "Dry September," we have no scene of the alleged rape of Minnie Cooper for which Will Mayes is lynched, and no scene of the lynching. In fact, the word "lynched" does not appear in the story. In *Sanctuary*, there is no rape scene either (although the corncob is shown). In *Go Down Moses*, we have to infer (as Ike McCaslin does) that a slaveholder got his own (slave) daughter pregnant. In "Barn Burning," we are never allowed to see Abner Snopes actually burning a barn. Similarly, in *As I Lay Dying*, we do not witness Darl (or anyone else) torch the barn. Faulkner habitually avoids depicting a horrific action and instead forces us to infer what happened, as a clever tabloid writer might, simultaneously solidifying our belief in the event and allowing us to imagine the worst.

But did Faulkner imitate the tabloid style in any work besides "A Rose for Emily"? Yes, he did, in parts of various works. In late January of 1930, a few months after finishing "Emily," he submitted a never-to-be-published story called "Smoke," which according to Blotner is told in a similar manner. The narrator is also "we" and seems to speak for the town, "its knowledge of the circumstances, its guesses about facts and causes, its reactions to mystery unraveled" (644). But, unlike "Emily," the mystery in "Smoke" is unraveled at a trial and the murderer revealed.

In the opinion of Joseph W. Reed, Jr., Faulkner uses tabloid rhetoric in parts of *Sanctuary*, published on February 9, 1931, less than a year after "Emily" appeared in *Forum* and before it reappeared in *These 13*:

> Experiments in imitation and emulation go beyond structural and narrative similarity into a combination of character-cliché, situation, and narrative technique. Here and there is an unmistakable odor of old newsprint, a suggestion of tabloid journalism which finally comes to full force in chapter 31, the story of Popeye. Its form is as old as journalism itself — the formative years or the confessions of the condemned criminal, a form which has changed little between the *Newgate Calendar* and the current copy of *Midnight*.
>
> (61)

Perhaps Reed is thinking of a passage like the following from Popeye's "formative years":

> When the afternoon of the party came and the guests began to arrive, Popeye could not be found. Finally a servant found a room door locked. They called the child, but got no answer. They sent for a locksmith, but in the meantime the woman, frightened, had the door broken in with an axe. The bathroom was empty. The window was open. It gave onto a lower roof, from which a drain-pipe descended to the ground. But Popeye was gone. On the floor lay a wicker cage in which two lovebirds lived; beside lay the birds themselves, and the bloody scissors with which he had cut them up alive.
>
> Three months later, at the instigation of a neighbor of his mother, Popeye was arrested and sent to a home for incorrigible children. He had cut up a half-grown kitten the same way.
>
> (216-217)

This passage displays some of the characteristics of tabloid writing we can find in "A Rose for Emily": shocking details, short and pithy sentences, melodramatic stereotyping, and pathos (the lovebirds, the half-grown kitten).

Similarly, the section of "Dry September" describing Minnie Cooper sounds remarkably like Section III of "A Rose for Emily" (although the narration is in third rather than first person):

> Then the town began to see her driving on Sunday afternoons with the cashier in the bank. He was a widower of about forty — a high-colored man, smelling always faintly of the barber shop or of whiskey . . . . Then the town began to say: "Poor Minnie." "But she is old enough to take care of herself," others said. That was when she began to ask her old schoolmates that their children call her "cousin" instead of "aunty."
>
> It was twelve years now since she had been relegated into adultery by public opinion, and eight years since the cashier had gone to a Memphis bank, returning for one day each Christmas, which he spent at an annual bachelors' party at a hunting club on the river.
>
> (174-75)

As in "A Rose for Emily," Minnie's neighbors gossip about her, reduce her to a stereotype (in this case, The Frustrated Old Maid), "convict" her of adultery through rumor, and pity her (first for being sexually exploitable, then for being seduced and abandoned, and finally for being sexually assaulted by a "Negro")—all-too-familiar tabloid clichés.

Reed suggests that tabloids do not evolve. The techniques that Faulkner would have been familiar with are still with us today. According to S. Elizabeth Bird, "The tabloid style was in full flower at this time [1919-1929]; it has not changed that much since" (20). She describes tabloids (past and present) as "sensational, excessive, gossipy, stereotyped" (201). "Stock cliches," Bird tells us, "give tabloid writing a consistently familiar look" (89). "The formula for writing style," explains Bird, "is easily recognizable, characterized by Burt as 'short and pithy' and by Linedecker as [having] 'plenty of drama and pathos'" (89). We can find all these elements in "A Rose for Emily."

Sensational: *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines "sensational" as "Arousing or intended to arouse curiosity, interest, or reaction, esp. by exaggerated or lurid details" (1116). Of course, the story is filled with "lurid" and suggestive details — a once-thin woman who now looks "bloated" (121), a mysterious smell, an "idol" sitting motionless in a window (123), a three-day old corpse, the purchase of rat poison, the sudden disappearance of a man, a bedroom locked up for many years, a skeleton on a bed "in the attitude of an embrace" (130), a hair on a pillow.

The story as a whole invites but then impedes our curiosity because we are allowed to see Emily only in brief snippets, as if we were paparazzi trying to snap an unauthorized photograph. When the aldermen are sprinkling lime around her house, we catch a glimpse of her: "As they recrossed the lawn, a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol" (123). In the next paragraph, we see her in a "tableau," "Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background" (123). Later, we see her riding with Homer Barron, "on Sunday afternoons driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy and the matched team of bays from the livery stable" (124). Finally, when she no longer goes out at all, we, like the townspeople, see her only from the outside looking in and from a distance: "Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows . . . like the carven torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which" (128). Like any good tabloid story, "A Rose for Emily" makes us beg for more.

Excessive: The narrative can also be described as excessive —"exceeding what is normal, proper, or reasonable" *(American Heritage Dictionary* 472). In a couple of passages, the excess is in the style: "She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough" (121); "What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay" (130). In other parts of the story, the topics discussed and the scenes depicted stretch the bounds of good taste. Telling us that a lady's house has an odor so disturbing that the neighbors complain to the mayor is certainly a breach of propriety. So

is making public Emily's refusal to acknowledge that her father has died and her subsequent nervous collapse. And breaking into her bedroom to reveal the most intimate details of her sex life hardly qualifies as an appropriate way to treat a lady (or anyone else).

At another level, of course, the entire story violates what is "normal, proper, and reasonable" in exactly the same way that an article in a tabloid can be said to be offensive. Obviously, Emily Grierson's whole life, like that of any celebrity given the "treatment," is turned into a spectacle for people to gawk at and comment on. She is not even allowed to rest in peace. Her privacy and her dignity are stripped from her. Her frailties and pecadillos are flaunted before the world for the entertainment of the masses, including a house that's an "eyesore among eyesores," her poverty, bad smells in the house, her tax evasion; her obesity, rudeness, agoraphobia, arrogance, inability to attract a man, insanity; the fact that she dated a Yankee "day laborer," and perpetuated a family rift. But worst of all, her vilest sins are never named outright, so no one can begin to defend her against the unspoken charges of incest, fornication, murder, necrophilia, and cannibalism.

Gossipy: The narrator maintains our interest by gossiping — passing on rumors, offering theories, wondering aloud, contradicting himself, exactly as a scandal sheet would. As James M. Wallace recognizes, the "details of Emily Grierson's life have been passed to him [the narrator] along a sloppy bucket-brigade of gossip" (106). The narrator, explains Wallace, "wants the reader to join 'us' — 'our whole town' . . .with . . . its nose in everyone else's business" (106). "A Rose for Emily," he says,

> is about, among other things, gossip, and Faulkner, through his narrator, tricks us into implicating ourselves as we gossip about his characters in a way that we usually reserve for neighbors — failing to understand them, revealing only our own phobias and fascinations.
> (107)

We can't get inside the house or inside Emily's head, so we are thrown scraps of information to keep our appetite whetted. We learn about a smell so bad that it lasts for "a week or two" even after the aldermen have sprinkled lime around the house (123), but are never given a cause for it. We are told Emily "had grown fat" (127) but offered no explanation. We find out that Emily was left "a pauper," who "would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less" (123), but who still "ordered a man's toilet set in silver, with the letters H.B. on each piece" and "bought a complete outfit of men's clothing, including a nightshirt" (127). We are given to understand that she no longer has any visible means of support: "the painting pupils grew up and fell away and did not send their children to her" (128). Yet she still sends Tobe to buy groceries for (presumably) the two of them: "we watched the Negro grow grayer and more stooped, going in and out with the market basket" (128). At one point, we are told that "We remembered all the young men that her father had driven away" (124). Yet the narrator refers to Homer as "her sweetheart — the one we believed would marry her" (122) as if Emily had several sweethearts besides Homer.

The narrator can omit explanations as he pleases, send mixed messages, even controvert his own statements, because virtually nothing in the story before the final section is firsthand information. In the spirit of the gossipmonger, he continually uses phrases that exclude him from the action, and therefore free him from worrying about the accuracy of what he is merely "reporting." He says, "They called a special meeting" (120), "They rose when she entered" (121), "They broke open the cellar door" (123). Except for the bedroom scene, the narrator did not witness the events described, so he can pretend that he is only passing on — without taking responsibility for its effect on others — what he has heard over the years.

And yet, as is often the case in tabloid journalism, the specifics he provides suggest that he was a fly on the wall. He knows, for example, exactly what the aldermen saw and heard and smelled when they visited Emily in her home: "when they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray" (120); "they could hear the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain" (121); "It smelled of dust and disuse — a close, dank smell" (120). Similarly, he reports the conversation between Emily and the druggist, quoting each verbatim. He knows what was written on the box of arsenic when "she opened the package at home" (126). He even knows where and how she died: "in one of the downstairs rooms . . . her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight" (129). As with a tabloid, we are encouraged to assume that he had brilliant (or clairvoyant) informants, capable of remembering the minutest details.

In addition, the narrator occasionally uses another familiar tactic of the gossipy tabloids, disingenuously reporting what others have said, as if disclaiming responsibility for their opinions. He says, for example, "People in our town, remembering how old lady Wyatt, her great-aunt, had gone completely crazy at last, believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were" (123). Later, he tells us, "But there were still others, older people who said that even grief could not cause a real lady to forget *noblesse oblige* — without calling it *noblesse oblige*" (124-25). Still later, he says, "Then some of the ladies began to say that it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people" (126). He passes along the most pernicious rumors by attributing them to others: "And as soon as the old people said, 'Poor Emily,' the whispering began. 'Do you suppose it's really so?' they said to one another. 'Of course it is. What else could . . .' This behind their hands" (125).

Stereotyped: The characters fit the stereotypes associated with sensationalized newspaper stories. Emily herself is never allowed to be seen as an individual, by the townspeople or by the narrator, their representative. According to Heller, the town "tends to see her in terms of stock melodramatic stereotypes" (311). One of these is the "Lady Aristocrat" (310). She is depicted as a typical Southern highborn woman, gullible, haughty, and eccentric. She is so credulous that when Colonel Sartoris invents "an involved tale" to salve her feelings for taking what amounts to charity, she accepts his explanation without question. The narrator condescendingly says, "only a woman could have believed it" (120). Her arrogance shows up after the town begins to pity her:

> She carried her head high enough—even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition

> of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness.
>
> (125)

When she asks for the poison, the narrator tells us, she has "cold, haughty black eyes" (125) and she "just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye" (126).

Similarly, her eccentricity is emphasized again and again. For example, "When the town got free postal delivery, Miss Emily alone refused to let them fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a mailbox to it. She would not listen to them" (128). She is little more than a caricature, a two-dimensional figure who is seen only from the outside, which is why so many writers have used up so much ink trying to explain her "real" feelings about her father and her lover. As Heller says, "Because the town unfailingly bases its approach to Emily on stereotypical expectations, it never sees her as the very human person we believe her to be" (311).

Minor characters have no more depth or complexity. Predictably, her father is portrayed as a tyrannical Southern patriarch. He is pictured "clutching a horsewhip" (123) and the town "remembered all the young men her father had driven away" (124). Similarly, Homer fits everyone's image of a rough Yankee foreman: "a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face" (124), "with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove" (126). "Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group" (124). Tobe is described as "an old manservant — a combined gardener and cook" (119), but is not characterized and is generally referred to merely as "the Negro" (128). Emily's two cousins are barely described. They are said to be "even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been" (127) as if no other explanation is necessary.

Stock Clichés: Unlike Faulkner's typical style, which is filled with original word combinations, the narrator in "Emily" makes extensive use of melodramatic clichés redolent of the tabloid: "a fallen monument" (119); "who fell at the battle of Jefferson" (119); "So she vanquished them, horse and foot" (121); "the high and mighty Griersons" (122); "had gone completely crazy at last" (123); "his back to her and clutching a horsewhip" (123); "the old thrill and the old despair" (123); "she was fallen" (125); "He would never divulge what happened . . . but he refused to go back again" (126); "too virulent and too furious to die" (127).

The story also contains familiar narrative clichés, including, as Heller points out, "a house we often see in Gothic Romances" (304). "The atmosphere of the house," he tells us, "reminds us again of Gothic Romance. It is tomblike, dusty, dark, and damp, with a stairway that mounts into shadow" (305). Other features borrowed from the Gothic novel include "insanity in the family" (123), a tyrannical father, the emotional breakdown of a hysterical woman, the seduction (and abandonment?) of a vulnerable female, the purchase of arsenic, a mysterious locked bedroom, gossips whispering about dark secrets, and, almost literally, a skeleton in a closet.

Short and Pithy: Faulkner's narrator (unlike most of his other story-tellers) is fond of very succinct sentences, smoldering with meaning, which often appear at the beginning or the end of a paragraph: "The tax notice was also enclosed, without comment" (120); "She did not ask them to sit" (121); "Her voice was dry and cold" (121); "After a week or two the smell went away" (123); "She told them her father was not dead" (123); "We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that" (124); "She was sick for a long time" (124); "At first nothing happened. Then we were sure that they were to be married" (127); "And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron. And of Miss Emily for some time" (127); "She would not listen to them" (128) "And so she died" (128). These sentences, even out of context, convey the tone and hint at the substance of the whole story. In light of Faulkner's well-known penchant for extremely long and complex sentences, the "short and pithy" style of this narrator is particularly significant.

Plenty of Drama: Like his journalistic counterparts, the narrator often dramatizes (or melodramatizes) the events described. The most important line in the story, another concise and pregnant sentence, is set off as a single, (melo)dramatic paragraph: "The man himself lay in the bed" (130). In an earlier version of the story, quoted by Michael Millgate, this sentence is not separated from the next paragraph (*Achievement* 264), so Faulkner's revision tends to emphasize the shocking nature of this pronouncement. Similarly, the narrator ends two sections with a familiar (melo)dramatic device, the blackout line: "'Show these gentlemen out'" (121) and "'For rats'" (126).

In addition, the narrator presents a suspenseful confrontation in each of the first three sections of the story. In the first, Emily faces down the Aldermen who expect her to pay taxes. In the second section, Judge Stevens must confront the youngest Alderman, "a member of the rising generation," who wants to tell Ms. Grierson about the odor emanating from her house. "'Dammit, sir,' Judge Stevens said, 'will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?'"(122). In the third section, Emily convinces the druggist to sell her arsenic:

> "Why, of course," the druggist said. "If that's what you want. But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for."
>
> Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up.
>
> (126)

Plenty of Pathos: Of course, the text, like a scandal sheet, is also filled with pathos. From the second paragraph of the story, Emily is portrayed as a figure to be pitied. She had lived on "our most select street," in a house "that had once been white"; now her house lifts "its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps — an eyesore among eyesores" (119). She is so poor, the narrator implies, that she cannot pay her taxes, her house smells of "dust and disuse," and her leather furniture is cracked (120). In Section II, we are told, "That was when people had begun to feel really sorry for her," "when she got to be thirty and was still single" (123). When her father dies and leaves her nothing but the house, the people of the town can finally

feel compassion for her. "Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized" (123). In Section III, they begin to refer to her as "Poor Emily" because she has been reduced to going out with a Yankee laborer.

5. A Coherent Narrative

In addition to following the stylistic strategies of the tabloids and accusing Emily through innuendo and rumor, Faulkner constructs a coherent narrative that subtly and effectively suggests Emily's deep-seated depravity, her willingness to participate in a wide range of unthinkable activities. The pattern of this narrative is quite difficult to see because, instead of arranging the scenes chronologically, as we might expect, Faulkner has the narrator jump around randomly, for no obvious reason. Many have tried to put the story's events in their historical order (since there are several tantalizing time references) and to explain why a convoluted arrangement of events is appropriate to Faulkner's themes, but no one I know of has explained why the incidents occur in this particular sequence.

Once we notice that Emily's behavior is arranged from least to most egregious, regardless of when it occurred in historical time, we can see how the narrative by itself could lead us subconsciously to conclude that Emily was not only a murderer but a sinner rivaling the Whore of Babylon. The very ordering of the scenes pushes us to see that, since she is capable of breaching the social contract in ever more appalling ways, nothing would prevent her from sliding down that slippery slope from offensive social lapses to disgraceful transgressions of human law to horrific violations against God himself. The fact that Faulkner broke the story into numbered sections in the final draft (Skei 153) suggests that he wanted to underscore the progressively degenerative movement of the narrative, but readers' continued inability to recognize the "order" of "A Rose for Emily" tells us how deeply Faulkner buried his structural principle — and how powerfully this aspect of the story can work on our subconscious.

Thus, in the section labeled I (119), Emily is shown only to be incredibly obtuse (or arrogant) and impolite, rather than immoral or sinful. She claims to owe no taxes, refusing to acknowledge the power of the state over her and angering the "next generation, with its more modern ideas" (120), which insists on her conformity to the community code. When the deputation sent by the Board of Alderman enters her unkempt parlor, "She did not ask them to sit. She just stood in the door and listened quietly until the spokesman came to a stumbling halt" (121). Instead of following the conventions of etiquette, she treats these city fathers like dirt beneath her feet. In the section labeled "II" (121), she is portrayed not only as less-than-polite — she does not receive the bold ladies who call on her (122) — but as emotionally unstable, the next step down the road toward complete abandonment of social restraint. In this section, she is not merely violating the rules of etiquette with visitors; now she is willing to make her neighbors' lives extremely unpleasant by inflicting her "bad smells" on them.

In the second half of Section II, two years *earlier* than the time when the smell developed, Emily's father dies, and she once again exceeds mere impo-

liteness, but even more shockingly. "The day after his death all the ladies prepared to call at the house and offer condolence and aid, as is our custom. Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them her father was not dead" (123). After three days of this denial (and, presumably, when the stench from the dead body would have begun to permeate the neighborhood), "she broke down, and they buried her father quickly" (124). The narrator comments, "We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that" (124), implying that later she gave them more reason to think of her as less-than-sane. The reverse chronological order of this section provides particularly strong evidence that Faulkner is deliberately arranging the scenes in relation to the odiousness of Emily's behavior.

In Section III, predictably, the level of her offenses against community standards reaches a new low. In the first half of this section, she is violating more than the rules of etiquette and decorum. She violates the caste system itself, what the narrator calls her "noblesse oblige" (124), her obligation to act in ways appropriate to her high rank in society. Inexplicably, she starts keeping company with Homer Barron, "a Northerner, a day laborer" (124) (whose name, ironically, sounds like baron), even though she is a Grierson, a Southern aristocrat. As if this behavior is not bad enough, in the middle part of Section III, her image becomes even more besmirched. We are told about her becoming the subject of a gossip campaign, which hints that she is doing more than riding in a carriage with her working-class beau. "And as soon as the old people said, 'Poor Emily,' the whispering began. 'Do you suppose it's really so?' they said to one another. 'Of course it is. What else could . . .' This behind their hands" (125). Then in the final part of Section III we are told of behavior that points to an even worse act than "dating" a Yankee: "'I want some poison,' she said to the druggist" (125). At the beginning of Section IV, the town suspects her of planning to commit suicide, which is of course an unforgivable sin in Christian terms, but, still, in the minds of the hypocritical townspeople, "it would be the best thing" (126).

In the perverse value system of the citizens of Jefferson, the next step in Emily's degradation is spelled out at the beginning of Section IV, her inability to get Homer to the altar. It's bad enough that she's seeing a Northern day laborer, it's worse that she's succumbed to him sexually, but it's inexcusable that she can't (or won't) wring a proposal from him. "When she had first begun to be seen with Homer Barron, we had said, 'She will marry him.' Then we said, 'She will persuade him yet'" (126). When she fails to "persuade" him, "some of the ladies began to say that it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people" (126). Her failure to marry him is intolerable, the ultimate insult to community pride, worse than any of the previous offenses described by the narrator.

At this point in the narrative, in the middle of Section IV, Homer Barron disappears, and the progression (or retrogression) of the story, especially when combined with the tabloid-style innuendo and the (otherwise flimsy) physical evidence, makes the inference inescapable: she has poisoned him. She has slid all the way down the moral slope and committed murder. In narrative (rather than strictly chronological) terms, she descends step by step from one trans-

gression to a more reprehensible one, successively (i.e., page by page) breaching or threatening to breach the rules of etiquette, the principle of decorum, the caste system, sexual mores, the sanctions against suicide, and, finally, the marriage code.

A perfect "chain of circumstances" can be established, much like the one in *Robinson Crusoe,* as argued by Hosea Knowlton in the Lizzie Borden trial in the 1890's (Welsh 2-6). All that is needed is a mind to make the connections. For the townspeople, and presumably the jurors/readers, the links are unbreakable. As this pattern registers on our subconscious, we come to realize, without knowing why, that she is capable of anything.

It is evident that Faulkner himself was conscious of this chain, at least in 1959, when he explained in an interview: "The conflict was in Miss Emily, that she knew that you do not murder people. She had been trained that you do not take a lover. You marry, you don't take a lover. She had broken all the laws of her tradition, her background, and she had finally broken the law of God too, which says you do not take human life" (Gwynn and Blotner 58).

6. A Puritanical Attitude

According to Barnhurst and Nerone, "Within its small size, the tabloid offered a moral rather than an intellectual picture of the world. Instead of pretending to map the world for readers, tell them what mattered most and predict the future, the tabloid attempted to move readers by activating fundamental values and replaying timeless narratives" (270). This moralism, Bird contends, leans to the right. American tabloids, "in spite of their reputation for espousing unusual and nonmainstream viewpoints, . . . are consistently conservative in a very real sense" (67). "The tabloid papers," she points out, "are . . . reactionary, constantly rising to the defense of 'traditional American values' (in the sense that term is used by the Moral Majority and like-minded groups)" (67). Tabloids, she explains, are both sensational and "puritanical" (78). "While critics often call them sleazy, sexy, or immoral, the papers in fact cast themselves as guardians of a particular kind of moral code that sits well with their regular readers" (201).

We see reflections of these descriptions in "A Rose for Emily." The narrator exploits the sensational possibilities of his material, licking his lips at the prospect of wickedness and scandal, presenting a bedroom scene whose "sleazy, sexy, and immoral" implications are too delicious to ignore, but he simultaneously reminds us that no one can disregard "traditional American values" with impunity. He continually shows us how Emily's real and imagined violations of propriety cause the straitlaced townspeople to cluck their tongues, raise their eyebrows, whisper "behind their hands" (125), and even ostracize her. The Baptist minister, after all, could not even talk about what happened when he went to visit Miss Emily (126).

Any reader of tabloids would instantly recognize the puritanical strain that runs through the story. Emily's initial "sin," of course, the one that leads to all the others, is pride, considering herself superior to the common folk. Her family is described sarcastically as "the high and mighty Griersons" (122). Later,

we're told that "People in our town . . . believed the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such" (123). To describe her suspected affair with Homer, the narrator says "we believed that she was fallen" (125), using the stock Victorian phrase to refer to a woman losing her virginity and her "reputation," but also reminding us what pride goeth before.

The townspeople evidently get some perverse pleasure out of seeing the once-proud Emily fall, morally, financially, and socially, and consider it their duty to set Emily back on the path of righteousness. When the ladies of the town suspect Emily of having been seduced by Homer, they whisper; they consider her behavior a "disgrace" and "a bad example to the young people" (126), so they force the minister to call on her. When that doesn't help, they decide she needs family around her and get the minister's wife to contact cousins to come chaperone her. The townsfolk attempt to fulfill their "duty" of getting Emily back on the righteous path.

Like any celebrity ground through the mill of the "puritanical" tabloid, Emily is judged by the most rigid standards. Since she has no family to enforce the strict code of behavior, the town must act as a surrogate until her relatives arrive. As with any eccentric celebrity, Emily is fascinating to the townspeople, to the tabloid reader, and to us precisely because she — reputedly — violates the rules we all cherish. Perhaps this is why they, and we, have mixed feelings toward her and other celebrities who live outside the bounds of convention. They get to do what we secretly want to do. They get to transcend their time, place, and station and indulge their fantasies with abandon. So we root for them — up to a point. That's why "our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument" (119), why she was "a tradition, a duty, and a care" (119), why the narrator says "she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell" (121), why "we were all Miss Emily's allies to help circumvent the cousins" (127).

Appropriately, this town, bent on believing the worst about, and yet feeling grudging admiration toward, one of its leading citizens, is called Jefferson, presumably after the third president of the United States, who was himself the target of ugly scuttlebutt in the scandal sheets of his day. In 1802, as Faulkner would have known, Thomas Jefferson was said to have carried on two illicit affairs, one with the wife of a friend and the other with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. Significantly, these rumors were planted by a newspaperman, James T. Callender, in the *Recorder*, a Federalist propaganda sheet. According to Virginius Dabney, Callender's unsubstantiated claims about Jefferson were turned into "ribald verses" that appeared in the *Boston Gazette* and the *Philadelphia Port Folio* (11-13). Moreover, this gossip, as Norman Risjord points out, "was kept alive by English travelers in the nineteenth century, who used it to titillate their readers" (114). Michael Durey, in his discussion of the scandal associated with Jefferson, refers to "a readership now expecting new sexual revelations with each newspaper edition" (163). He calls such readers "gossips and sensation seekers" (163). As with Emily, Thomas Jefferson's suspected sexual escapades became a target of tabloid journalism, so it hardly seems coincidental that the town in "A

Rose for Emily" bears his name.

The attitude of the town of Jefferson toward Emily's (mis)behavior, however, parallels the tabloid's handling of women in the spotlight. According to Bird,

> Tabloid heroines are not successful career women but women who make unusual marriages and succeed as mothers. Villains, on the other hand, are women (and men) who disrupt the family ideal. Celebrities are often seen as hopelessly pursuing the quest for a perfect marriage and family.
>
> (77)

Thus, as Emily is seen more and more with Homer Barron, hardly the mate her neighbors would choose for her, tongues begin wagging. Emily is a "villain" because she dares to "disrupt the family ideal." She hopelessly pursues "a perfect marriage and family," so she deserves the contempt of the town and of the reader. She succumbs to Homer's advances but doesn't get him to the altar, so the townspeople (as embodied by the narrator) are justified in exploiting her life for cheap thrills and stern moral lessons, the perfect formula for celebrity-watchers everywhere.

7. A Cautionary Tale

As should be clear, then, "A Rose for Emily" mimics the style and attitude of American tabloid newspapers and subliminally establishes a pervasive atmosphere of guilt and sin around the title character. The strong representation of Emily's depravity created by the titillating insinuations, the suggestive structure and the moral overlay is overwhelmingly persuasive and encourages us to join the townspeople in rooting around in Emily's psyche and weaving intricate tapestries of evil from a single strand of hair. If the truckload of criticism about this story is any indication, Faulkner's strategy has worked better than even he could have hoped, for no other story of his enjoys so much attention.

However, the bulk of that criticism echoes Lionel Trilling's facile summary of the story and, therefore, has focused on her behavior, poisoning Homer Barron and desecrating his corpse, rather than paying attention to key features of the narration. As long as Emily is perceived through this narrow lens, much energy will be wasted on an attempt to explain her reasons for acting as she does, and the deeper implications of the story won't be explored. Once we recognize that "A Rose for Emily" is not about its title character but about itself, its use of language and its distortion of reality, we can begin to see the larger issues that the story raises.

Of course, I am not claiming that Emily is innocent of any wrongdoing. That's not my point at all. I am arguing that questions about her behavior should not be our primary concern and can easily lead to counterproductive speculation. What is far more important is that the fictional (as opposed to the "legal") case against her is apparently very compelling. After all, a vast majority of readers have been led to believe, by the tiniest collection of evidence

imaginable, that she committed several heinous acts. We need to understand how Faulkner's narrator convinces us of Emily's guilt, and then we need to ask what that process says about words, fiction, crime, law, thinking, emotions, attitudes, newspapers, and society.

My claim is that the story shows us the power — and peril — of "tabloidization," the tendency to see people, especially celebrities, as fodder for our fantasies. The narration both describes and serves as an analogy for the town's treatment of Emily Grierson — the last "monument" (119) in Jefferson. She is being devoured by the hypocritical voyeurism, mean-spirited speculation, and vicious rumor-spreading of small-minded, jealous wanna-bes. Emily's neighbors, then, are the real cannibals in the story. Their hunger for scandal leads her to close herself off almost completely from the world outside her house, which only whets their appetite and increases their willingness to interfere in her life. More than her father or her "sweetheart," the good people of Jefferson, unaware that they are in any way responsible for her suffering, make her life a living hell. Their behavior is despicable, utterly lacking in compassion or common decency. Like the writers and readers of tabloids, they exploit Emily's (perceived) misfortune, treating her like a creature invented for their profit and pleasure, not like a human being deserving of privacy and dignity.

As we read the story, we are continually invited to join the town in piercing Emily's veil of secrecy. We are led to believe that entering her house, her bedroom, her inner sanctum, will allow us to see her soul, but the ending of the story suggests that this goal will always be frustrated, not just with Emily but with any of our acquaintances. Once we see the body on the bed, the man's toiletries, the collar and tie, the suit, "the two mute shoes and the discarded socks" (130), the indentation and the iron-gray hair on the pillow, we realize that we can find only "mute" physical objects, not human needs and feelings. The objects left in this room, including the skeleton with its "profound and fleshless grin" (130), cannot speak to us about the people who lived there.

The innuendo, the hearsay, the clichés, the stereotypes, and the melodrama have led us to a "dead" end, a body without flesh, a story without meaning. If we have played the narrator's game, as so many of us have, searched for clues, offered opinions, passed judgment, ventured guesses, rendered verdicts, we have fallen into the trap the story has set for us, and we are in a better position to understand the idol/idle worship of the people of Jefferson, for we are no better than they.

Faulkner's most frequently analyzed short story, then, illustrates how people, regardless of their behavior, can be ostracized and destroyed by whispers and self-righteous bigotry. If we pay attention to the story's style, structure, context, and tone, "A Rose for Emily" reminds us that our efforts to dissect our neighbors' lives are not merely unfair and futile, but can ultimately dehumanize the subject and the observers. All of us, including those in the limelight, certainly deserve better treatment than Emily gets from the townspeople of Jefferson and from the readers of her story. Clearly, "A Rose for Emily" transcends the form it imitates and becomes a cautionary tale about the folly and danger of tabloidizing our world and the individuals who share it with us.

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