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Hal Blythe
Eastern Kentucky University

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THE CHIVALRIC NARRATOR OF
"A ROSE FOR EMILY"

Hal Blythe

Eastern Kentucky University

Although the entire story of "A Rose for Emily" is funneled through an un-named first-person narrator, relatively little criticism has centered on the narrator's role in the story. In passing, both Austin McGiffert Wright and Brooks and Warren note that the narrator is not an objective viewer, but a subjective embodiment of communal feelings toward Miss Emily.¹ In the first extensive treatment of the narrator as an individual, Ruth Sullivan so concentrates on a psychoanalytic dissection of the teller's infantile voyeurism that she neglects a larger behavioral pattern.² Joseph Garrison, while stressing that the narrator is the story's focal point, finds that "we do not get the impression that the narrator has any abiding interest in Miss Emily" and concludes that the story is an artistic allegory on the impossibility of presenting objective truth.³ A close reading suggests, to the contrary, that William Faulkner has made the narrator integral to the tale, a character so interested in Miss Emily that the key to the story is how the harsh facts of her life are rendered. More precisely, the narrator possesses a dual vision of his subject that produces an ironic portrait of her as well as a surprising self-portrait.

That Faulkner wished to emphasize his narrator as character more than mere observer is shown by the author's choice of first-person narration, and by the story's forty-eight first-person references. Here is a person who has scrutinized Miss Emily for some seventy years, a person who has been so close to her that he can reproduce the sights and sounds as well as the dialogue about her for this lengthy period.⁴ Furthermore, he has sought out things about her life of which even she was not aware—e.g. that the Baptist minister's wife sent for her cousins, Judge Stevens's comments about her "smell," and the break-in to her home after her death. For some reason he has taken it upon himself to be her personal biographer.

Since the reader can know nothing about Miss Emily except as it is filtered through the narrator's perception of her, the reader is forced to scrutinize the narration for clues to the teller's coloring of the tale even before evaluating Miss Emily. Such an investigation reveals that the narrator, ever conscious of how the chivalric ideals of Southerners clash with the gruesome realities of Miss Emily's affair (poisoning/necrophilia), tells a mock *romance de la rose*.

It is important to note that the narrator's initial comments concerning the aftermath of Miss Emily's death—the funeral and burial—are derogatory. Miss Emily is depersonalized as a “fallen monument”⁵ and a mere object of curiosity. The Grierson house, emblematic of Miss Emily, is “an eyesore among eyesores” with “its stubborn and coquettish decay” jutting “above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps.” And she like other “august names of that neighborhood” now lies “among the ranked and anonymous graves” of Civil War soldiers. Obviously the narrator feels a sense of social inferiority to her, yet a triumph in her ultimate and permanent decline: in death “the high and mighty Griersons” are no better than “the gross teeming world” of which he himself is a member. Remember, he never speaks of himself in the singular, preferring to take refuge in the common plural.

Conversely, when the narrator describes Miss Emily's early life, he is certainly not what Scherting calls “a naive raconteur.”⁶ Instead, he adopts the traditional chivalric perspective on her. He becomes the medieval troubadour whose ballad is “A Rose for Emily.” Like the balladeers, he focuses his story on a noble woman—“a real lady”—who is both desirous and distant from him. As the poets of yore idolized the lady, so too the narrator looks up at his lady in her castle—“a big squarish frame house that had once been white with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies”—and describes her in quasi-religious, courtly love similes. As if surrounded by a spiritual aura, Miss Emily appears in the traditional window, “the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol.” Later, he limns her purity: “We had long thought of them [Miss Emily and her father] as a tableau. Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background....” After the lord of the manor, her father, dies, the lady suffers an illness, but then appears “with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows.” His last vision of her alive underscores the image: “Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows...like the carven torso of an idol in a niche.” His use of the window image is so frequent as to suggest a conscious use of the courtly convention.

Another major chivalric convention is that the lady must have a sensuous, illicit, difficult, and secret relationship. Appropriately, the portion of her life Faulkner's poet-lover chooses as his matter is her affair. Homer Barron's very name suggests a feudal rank, that he is an errant knight whose quest for adventure and conquest has brought him south. The narrator describes Barron's appearance as that of a romantic hero: he was “a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face.” Furthermore, Barron is consistently pictured traveling like a knight with a “matched team of bays” and his lance-like whip. That the affair is both sensuous and illicit is implied not only by the

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town's whispers, but also by the narrator's remark "she was fallen." Despite the gossip of the townspeople, Miss Emily carries on the majority of her tryst behind the closed doors of her mansion. The secrecy of their clandestine rendezvous is underscored by the narrator's admission that, the first time Barron leaves, "We were a little disappointed that there was not a public blowing-off" and that, the last time he is seen alive, he disappears into the Grierson's "at the kitchen door at dusk one evening." The affair certainly encounters difficulty. A Baptist minister, his wife, and two cousins from Alabama try to intercede, and the lovers must endure a two-week separation.

Like the courtly love poets, Faulkner's narrator is obsessed with his subject's eyes. When she encounters difficulty with the reluctant druggist, the teller notes her "cold, haughty black eyes" and says, "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." Sitting in her window, she is "looking or not looking at us." And when the aldermen come to see her about the taxes, the narrator describes the gateway to the soul: "Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand." Interestingly, this conceit is undermined not only by the description of her face as dough, but also by the portrait of the rest of her physique: "Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of pallid hue." The grotesque simile suggests an other-than-courtly attitude.

How can this dual vision be reconciled? The key lies in the nature of the narrator's elusive relationship to Miss Emily, the reason he has chosen to chronicle her life. Of primary importance is the narrator's adaptation of the chivalric mode, especially his choice of his own role. While he is apparently describing only the love affair between Miss Emily and her "knight," he has also cast himself in the role of the other lover in the courtly tradition—the poet. And like the old troubadours, Faulkner's tale-teller is in love with his subject and has been for all these years. This love is also suggested by his criticism of some of the mourners, "the very old men—some in their brushed Confederate uniforms," for thinking they courted her when they came from an even older generation. In fact, as he is close to her age, it is quite possible that the narrator himself was suitor of Miss Emily, one of "the young men her father had driven away" because they were not "quite good enough for Miss Emily."

This sense of social inferiority, which is emphasized by his commenting that everyone "believed that the Griersons held themselves

a little too high for what they really were" and Miss Emily "demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson," is compounded by jealousy toward his rival, Homer Barron, and his frustration that Miss Emily, too good for the local beaux, chose a Northern "day laborer" whose cigar-chewing, loud talking, and cussing of "niggers" points out he is no gentleman. The narrator's irony, then, is obvious: he inflates a homicidal old maid to the role of the lady and a crude carpetbagger to that of knight-errant.

Why the narrator tells his tale, a critical question virtually ignored, becomes apparent. The teller, being in love with Miss Emily, feels betrayed when she chooses a commoner no better than himself. To rationalize that the lady was mad—he makes reference to the possibility of her insanity four times—is not enough. He must tell the tale to justify his failure to obtain the object of his love and thus to exact a measure of revenge on her. Henceforth people who hear his story will remember Miss Emily not as a beautiful Southern belle, but as worse. Fittingly, the reader's final impression of Miss Emily comes from the narrator's ironic use of a chivalric convention. The "long strand of iron-gray hair" resting on the pillow is not the traditional token of a lover's endless fidelity, but a symbol of Miss Emily's human depravity.

Thus, Faulkner's tale-teller presents us with his own tableaux. In the foreground looms Miss Emily mocked by the chivalric frame into which she is placed, but lurking ever so subtly in the background is the frustrated, jealous, and vengeful artist himself. Indeed, the narrator's story is his rose for Emily, but it is an ironic gift filled with poisoned thorns.

NOTES

¹Austin McGiffert Wright, *The American Short Story in the Twenties* (Chicago, 1961), p. 334; and Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction* (New York, 1947), pp. 409-414.

²"The Narrator in 'A Rose for Emily,'" *JNT*, 1 (1971), 159-178.

³"'Bought Flowers' in 'A Rose for Emily,'" *SSF*, 16 (1979), 341-344.

⁴See Jack Scherting, "Emily Grierson's Oedipus Complex: Motif, Motive, and Meaning in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" *SSF*, 17 (1980), 397n.

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⁵My text is *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York, 1950), pp. 119-130.

⁶Scherting, p. 397.