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ANOTHER VIEW OF FAULKNER'S NARRATOR IN "A ROSE FOR EMILY"

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In a recent article, Hal Blythe discusses the central role played by the narrator in William Faulkner's gothic masterpiece "A Rose for Emily."¹ Focusing on Miss Emily's bizarre affair and how it affronts the chivalric notions of the Old South, the narrator, according to Blythe, attempts to assuage the grief produced by Miss Emily's rejection of him by relating her story; telling her tale allows him to exact a measure of revenge. Faulkner's speaker, without doubt, serves as a pivotal player in this tale of grotesque love. Although Blythe grasps the significance of the narrator's place in the story, he bases his argument on a point that the story itself never makes completely clear. Blythe assumes that Faulkner's narrator is *male*. The possibility exists, however, that Faulkner intended his readers to view the tale-teller as being *female*.

Hints in the text suggest that Faulkner's speaker might be a woman. The narrative voice (the "we" in the story), a spokesperson for the town, appears very concerned with every detail of Emily's life. Faulkner provides us with an important clue concerning the gender of this narrator when he describes the townspeople's reaction to Emily's attachment to Homer Barron: "The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister...to call upon her."² Jefferson's male population seems apathetic regarding Emily's tryst; the men are not the least bit scandalized. The females in town (the "we" in the tale) are so concerned with Emily's eccentricities that they force their men to act; one very interested female in particular, the narrator, sees to it that Emily's story is not forgotten.

This coterie of Jefferson's "finer" ladies (represented by the narrator) seems highly offended by Emily's actions. This resentment might stem from two primary causes. First, the ladies (the phrase "the ladies" appears throughout the tale and might refer to the "proper" Southern belles living in town) find Miss Emily's pre-marital relationship immoral. Second, they resent Emily's seeing a Yankee man. In the eyes of these flowers of Southern femininity, Emily Grierson becomes a stain on the white gown of Southern womanhood.

Despite their bitterness toward Emily, the ladies of Jefferson feel some degree of sympathy for her. After her father's death, the ladies reminisce: "We remembered all the young men her father had driven away...." Later, Homer Barron disappears, prompting this response:

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"Then we knew that this was to be expected too, as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and furious to die." These intensely felt statements suggest how a woman might react to another woman's loneliness; the narrator seems to empathize with Miss Emily on a woman-to-woman basis. Faulkner himself sheds interesting light on this matter when he describes Miss Emily as a woman "that just wanted to be loved and to love and to have a husband and a family."³ The women of Jefferson know that Emily, a fellow woman, possessed these feelings, and as women they feel as if some sort of biological bond links them to "the last Grierson." Unlike the majority of the ladies in town, Miss Emily experienced neither the joys of marriage nor the fulfillment of child-bearing. If the ladies did not view Emily in a sympathetic way, would they have sent their daughters to her house for china-painting lessons?

Another possible reason exists for the speaker's sympathetic view of Emily. Our narrator knows (perhaps from the druggist) that Emily purchased poison, ostensibly to kill "rats." One slang use of the term "rat" applies to a man who has cheated on his lover. Perhaps Faulkner's tale-teller suspects that Emily feared that Homer would not remain faithful to her. In order to "keep" Homer by her side, Emily poisoned him. The speaker might sympathize with Emily somewhat because she believes that Emily did what she could to retain Homer's companionship and insure that he would not give her up for another woman. Faulkner's female narrator does not approve of Miss Emily's methods, but she understands what prompted them: Emily's weariness of being alone.

An additional clue regarding the narrator appears toward the end of "A Rose for Emily" when Faulkner's speaker emphasizes the first-person pronoun "they." Previously, our narrator has used "we" to indicate the town's collective female element. After Miss Emily is buried, the tale-teller relates how the residents of Jefferson learned of the gruesome secret lying upstairs in the long-closed bedroom. She makes one point very clear: "*They* waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before *they* opened it [my italics]." The "they" in this sentence are people strong enough to break down the door of this death chamber. Since most ladies in Jefferson would not be strong enough to force in a door, might not the reader assume that these initial intruders are men? The ladies follow the men into the room and make their ghastly discovery: "For a long while *we* [my italics] just stood there looking down at the profound and fleshless grin."

The reader is left with a very important question: why would a lady desire to repeat Miss Emily's story? The narrator's "dual vision"

(as Blythe calls it) provides a clue. As a woman offended by Emily's actions, the speaker relates this tale of necrophilia in an attempt to vindicate Southern womanhood. She wants her listeners to understand that Emily was not representative of the typical "Southern Lady." Perhaps familiar with Caroline Bascomb Compson, Joanna Burden, and Rosa Coldfield, other infamous females living in the Jefferson vicinity, the narrator wants to convey to her audience that virtuous women (such as herself?) *do* still live in Jefferson. On the other hand, the speaker's sympathy for Miss Emily, a woman lost in her own particularly lonely world, also prompts her to recall the tragic events of Emily's sterile life. As a woman, the tale-teller allows her heart to go out to "poor Emily."

Viewing the narrator of "A Rose for Emily" as a woman allows the reader to enjoy Faulkner's tale from a unique perspective. Indeed, such an interpretation offers an interesting alternative reading that emphasizes the important role women play in the fiction of Oxford, Mississippi's Nobel laureate.

NOTES

¹Hal Blythe, "The Chivalric Narrator of 'A Rose for Emily,'" *UMSE*, 6 (1988), 280-284.

²My text is *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York, 1950), pp. 119-130.

³See Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University* (Charlottesville, 1959), p. 185.