

2016

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Recommended Citation

Muneton-Carrera, Alejandra (2016) "A True Exhibition of the Southern Gothic Genre," *Toyon Literary Magazine*: Vol. 62 : Iss. 1 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon/vol62/iss1/20>

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A True Exhibition of the Southern Gothic Genre

by Alejandra Muneton-Carrera

Ms. Emily is dead. William Faulkner wastes no time in allowing this one key fact to be revealed to the reader in his short story “A Rose for Emily.” From this exposition, the reader is trapped in place by a gnawing curiosity so often ignited by a well-written piece. “A Rose for Emily” intertwines the juxtaposing worlds of the Old South and the modern age—a major element of the Southern Gothic genre when placed alongside grotesque events—allowing Faulkner to scrutinize Old Southern traditions from a modern vantage point. Moreover, he grants the story its ability to relish in mystery set in the antebellum South through a less-than-linear path. William Faulkner, a distinguished modernist, masterfully explores the Southern Gothic genre in “A Rose for Emily” through the use of a nonlinear plot, collective narration and symbolism.

Faulkner’s technique of navigating a nonlinear plot in “A Rose for Emily” serves to engulf the story with macabre foreshadowing, establishing itself in the Gothic realm. This foreshadowing seems subtle during a first reading, which works not to explicitly give away the ending but rather to successfully amplify the feeling of uneasiness with small hints of an eerie hidden truth. In fact, due to the story’s nonlinear structure, the heaviest foreshadowing of Homer’s death does not appear until midway through the story when the reader learns of the

occurrences immediately following Miss Emily's father's death: "She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days" (34). Prior to this, the reader already knows of Miss Emily's "desertion" by a one time sweetheart, and the foul odor that "developed" in her house (33). Though the reader is eventually informed of the purchase of arsenic not long ahead of Homer's last known visit to her, all of these events continue to seem disconnected (35; 36). With Ms. Emily giving off a regal Southern air throughout the story, one does not suspect her of a murder but can simply feel the palpating ominous aura that seems to have nestled around her. Not until further examination are these hints no longer mere subtle hints, but large flashing arrows pointing towards Mr. Homer's decrepit corpse that is now indecipherable from Ms. Emily's bed sheets.

The reason for the nonlinear structure of "A Rose for Emily" is the short story's startling lack of a single, unquestionable narrator. Faulkner employs a collective narrative told in a first person point of view for his Southern Gothic short story. The narrator often lumps themselves with the entire town, which brings up the notion that perhaps this is not a single narrator filling the audience in: "We were a little disappointed that there was not a public blowing-off, but we believed that he had gone on to prepare for Miss Emily's coming" (36). Furthermore, the descriptions of Ms. Emily vary—from seemingly fearful admiration to harsh critical judgment for her traditional mannerisms—pointing to the narrator's identity as the town's evolving multi-

generational consciousness or an interweaving of different townsfolk. These conflicting depictions on the part of the narrators propel the story far beyond what could have been possible through Ms. Emily's perspective. The whole town itself is moving forward, evolving into a more modern state. A perspective outside that of Ms. Emily's shows just how out of place she truly is. Faulkner's short story clearly falls under the Southern Gothic genre, which affords the audience the chance to not only pass judgment on Ms. Emily, but on the idea of modernity itself. These narrators are questionable at best, leaving the reader to not only feel uneasy about Ms. Emily, but to also feel uneasy taking their accounts at face value. Ms. Emily is an alienated character, but the town relishes in the gossip she provides them with, drawing into question whether an 'evolution' away from the Old South is really all that evolutionary.

Despite the modern narrators, or possibly thanks to them, Ms. Emily's symbolic status emphasizes the discrepancies between the Old South and the Northern Mr. Homer, which draws the reader back to a possible foreshadowment of their ill-fated relationship. Ms. Emily is after all, the embodied personification of the Old South with her "invisible watch" keeping her rooted in a time long gone (33). Ms. Emily is immediately pronounced to be a deceased character, but this circumstance is the least macabre of all. Faulkner paints Ms. Emily as an old confederate ghost with the story's initial introduction of her as a perished figure, and the continued use of language that describes her as a "fallen monument"

whose hair eventually turned “iron-gray” only further emphasizes this personification (32; 36). Ms. Emily and her mannerisms are those of the regal, prideful Old South, but Ms. Emily is a broken character, who points directly towards the broken state of the Old South. Ultimately, with Ms. Emily’s death, the symbol that she stands for is deceased as well, finally taken out of the modern world and laid to rest with the other “representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among...Union and Confederate soldiers,” with only the morbid corpse of Homer Barron left behind (32). Faulkner’s Southern Gothic genre truly shines as he creates a Southern symbol in Ms. Emily.

Throughout his Southern Gothic short story, Faulkner makes it undeniably clear that Ms. Emily dances between the land of the living and the land of the dead, separated only by the layer of “dust” that fills her home (32). Ms. Emily herself is unable to decipher between the two—from her dead father to Homer Barron’s corpse—eaving the reader to do the same tip-toeing dance throughout the short story and thus adding to the heightened cautiousness with which it is explored. The subtle way in which Faulkner chooses to paint a macabre antebellum South through varying literary techniques transports the reader into a palpable Southern Gothic world, but one in which the reader likely does not wish to physically find themselves.

Works Cited

Faulkner, William. "A Rose for Emily." *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing*. 12th eds. Ed. X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. Boston: Pearson, 2013. 32-37. Print.