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Miss Emily, Imaged as Goddess, in

“A Rose for Emily”

by William Faulkner

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## Introduction

In my essay I will discuss the role of the main character, Miss Emily, in the short story “A Rose for Emily” by William Faulkner. The short story was written in 1930 and takes place in the small town of Jefferson, in the south of the USA. Miss Emily is the only person remaining of the Grierson family, a family seen as mighty, as it used to be wealthy and had a prominent position in the town, and therefore she considers herself as finer than the other townspeople. As a result, she never marries and keeps to herself most of the time. The story stretches over most of Miss Emily’s life and the narrator focuses on her. When she in the end dies, it is revealed that she had poisoned her lover and slept next to the dead body for forty years.

In this essay I suggest that Miss Emily is imaged as a goddess and I will try to show evidence for that by pointing out religious references in the text as well as by discussing the important role of the narrator. I will argue that due to the Grierson family’s history being of importance to the town, the prominence of Miss Emily’s looks, and the way she acts imply that she is seen by the townspeople as a goddess. Moreover, Miss Emily’s relationship with Homer Barron and the description of her house will be analyzed to strengthen the idea that Miss Emily could be linked to divinity. In my view, if Miss Emily is perceived as a goddess, she is bound to emerge as more than a mentally disturbed woman who killed her lover.

## Theoretical Perspective

For my analysis here I plan to employ a feminist theoretical perspective as defined in the works of two leading feminist thinkers. To start with, of relevance are Simone de Beauvoir’s theories that women are the “second sex.” According to de Beauvoir women are not allowed the construction of a positive self-identity as females. Men are seen as the norm, with positive qualities, whereas women are seen as others, as not-men, and thus they are

frequently associated with the opposite qualities of men. De Beauvoir claims that women in male literature are usually portrayed negatively and that men project their fears and anxieties on them. Quite often females also represent different forms of evil and destruction. The descriptions of women are moreover mostly physical and women are viewed as the passive object, whereas men take more active roles (Morris 14-23).

Secondly, Judith Fetterley's views that the attitudes and values in male-authored texts are predominantly male orientated will be taken into consideration. Fetterley states that the active, judging consciousness in most texts is male. She furthermore points out that the woman often is the passive object of the narrative gaze and that there is a patriarchal will to control women (Morris 27-30).

As I will claim that Miss Emily could be viewed as a goddess, it is, lastly, important to define the word "goddess." Hye Sook Hwang points out that the interpretation of the word "goddess" in an American context is difficult:

It is very personal, steeped in the takes or rejects of very common motifs like nature, nationalist symbol of the freedom statue, Native Indian and Afro-American perspectives, all too rich and complex to make a judgment which one is more important to us. My thinking cannot catch up with all those intricate workings of images, events, and thoughts. (Sook)

The fact that "A Rose for Emily" is set in the American south in the 1930's should therefore be taken into account when considering the idea that Miss Emily might be presented as a goddess. Sook furthermore argues: "'Goddess' is a word that is problematic and yet necessary for lack of a better word. It is problematic because it is linguistically derivative of 'god.' The term 'goddess' therefore fails to convey the original and encompassing nature of the Female, she-reality." She therefore suggests

the transformation of “the language by stipulating a new meaning for the word ‘goddess’: a norm from which ‘god’ is not only derived but in which it is included.” She adds: “She is the Origin, the Creatrix, from whom both he and she are derived and in which they are included. [ . . . ] ‘She’ antecedes and embodies ‘he.’ ‘He’ is an extending and often distorted reflection of ‘She.’ Wo/man is a human norm from which man originates. Only with such a semantic device is it possible for us to discuss Goddess.” (Sook)

Goddess feminist contexts have generally involved varied and changing meanings of “goddess.” Giselle Vincett claims that the use of “goddess” has become more and more personal and nowadays it is broader than a metaphor for “true self.” Instead, the word could refer to a deity or divine energy with whom one can interact. Vincett furthermore states:

Goddess also is usually treated as multiple. In my experience, Goddess Feminists tend to be what I call ‘functional polytheists’. Rarely have I heard ‘the Goddess’ invoked in ritual as if she were a single entity. Instead, the many aspects of Goddess are most often invoked in both ritual and conversation. (Vincett)

In line with the above in my essay I will also include the idea of “goddess” in a very general sense as “a female spirit or being that is believed to have power over a particular part of the world or nature” (“goddess.” *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*).

### Religious and Biblical References

Christian and biblical references are common in the story but while some are pretty obvious, others are harder to find. Peter Swiggart points out that Faulkner, in many of his

works, used Christ-like characters and Christian symbolism and that his interest in Greek and Christian mythology influenced his writing (24). Numerous heavenly allusions in “A Rose for Emily” contribute to highlighting divinity as important.

Of the Christian symbols that may arguably elevate Miss Emily to a state of divinity, a central role plays the staircase in her house. The inclusion of a stairway like this constitutes an architectural aspect typical of southern gothic literature, but the allusion here is so strong, it could be taken into consideration to strengthen the suggested divine status of the resident of the house. When the Board of Aldermen visits Miss Emily, the staircase evokes associations with the commonly used symbol in Christianity, of a stairway showing the way to heaven: “They were admitted by the old Negro into a dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow” (Faulkner 5).

Another biblical allusion might be traced in the part when the men from the Board of Aldermen slink about Miss Emily’s house to locate the horrible smell that comes from it and they hide among the locust trees. While locust trees are common in the south, the word locust may be linked to the invasion of the locust in the bible, linking in turn Miss Emily’s surroundings to a biblical context.

Furthermore, some more words in the story could arguably evoke notions of Christianity, as they are likely to be used in connection with churches, heaven, and thereby denote superiority. Faulkner uses for example the words tranquil and perpetuity, which mean serenity and eternity, and thus can be associated with churches. Then Miss Emily is twice pictured as an idol, a word directly linked to the worshipping of icons or statues of gods.

Lastly, the word rose in the title “A Rose for Emily” is another interesting religious aspect of the story. Miss Emily is never given a rose so it is questionable why there is a rose in the title. In the end, when Miss Emily’s bridal chamber is revealed, Faulkner uses the

colour rose to describe the curtains and the light in the room. The interpretation of the word rose has been debated for years according to Laura J Getty, and she refers to a legend about the Greek god of silence, Harpocrates, in which he is given the first rose ever created. She argues that the rose should indicate the silence and keeping of secrets among the towns people (Getty 230-231). When referring to the legend of the Greek god of silence, Getty also suggests a connection between Miss Emily and the god.

### The Narrator

The narrator has an important role in how the reader might come to view Miss Emily as a goddess. The story is told by an unnamed narrator and there are indications that there is more than one person telling it (Klein 229). The narrator could therefore be a group of people living in the town who have watched Miss Emily for over fifty years which, in turn, implies that it is not the same group of people. And since Faulkner tells the reader nothing about the narrator's sex, age or occupation (Klein 229), the narrator could be the town itself in a general sense. The fact that the story is told in the first-person collective explicates then that the townspeople are interested in Miss Emily. That they have observed and adored her for a long period of time shows moreover that she is considered special.

At the same time, in the eyes of the narrator Miss Emily is not physically attractive and therefore, according to de Beauvoir, she is also the focus of anxiety and hostility. Her uncharming presence makes the narrator look at her with fear, especially as she refuses to take the subordinate role as a woman (Morris 21-23). Yet, despite the fear of her, the townspeople admire and feel awe for her (Sullivan 161) and their fascination is so great that it could be argued that she is indeed idolized as a goddess.

That Miss Emily is perceived as superior, and perhaps godlike, may also be evident in that the narrator does not dare to come too close; the townspeople seem to find it inappropriate, and instead they appear to be watching her from underneath, like worshipping her. A worshipping mode may also be implied when the narrator twice describes Miss Emily as an idol, first when they approach the house to investigate the smell: “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” (Faulkner 9) and then as they observe her from afar: “Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows – she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house – like the carven torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which” (Faulkner 17). The narrator, in the form of the townspeople, exhibits an eagerness, to catch a glimpse of Miss Emily, when she shows herself in the window. She, on the other hand, does not take much of a notice of them. She just sits there saint like and alighted, as if she understands it to be her obligation, to show herself to the people.

Miss Emily commits an awful crime when murdering Homer Barron, and it is quite probable that most people in town are aware of it, or at least suspect, that she has killed him (Schwab 216). They do not seem to detest her, however, which in my view could reveal that they see her not only as inaccessible a goddess might be but also as untouchable. The townspeople know that she has purchased poison, they have noticed the disappearance of Homer Barron and they can smell the terrible odour around Miss Emily’s house. They also know that there is one room in the house that no one has seen in forty years, which strengthens the idea that they suspect that something is wrong (Getty 231-232). Still, they wait until she is decently in the ground, before they open the door to her bedroom and thus show that they respect her; and even then, no utterance is made about the morbid crime and

no one claims that Miss Emily has committed the murder. The people might be shocked or unwilling to say anything, but their silence could also suggest that they do not look down on her because of the murder. They might think that her prominent position in town gave her the right to act the way she did. Besides she had proven before that she stood above the law, when she refused to pay her taxes, or ignored the rules for purchasing poison, and the townspeople had allowed her to do that, considering her somehow beyond punishment.

According to de Beauvoir, women who refuse submissiveness are the most fearful (Morris 14-34). Miss Emily's unwillingness to be submissive makes the townspeople view her with fear and anxiety as they realize she cannot be controlled. No one really knows her and instead she is mystified and, Ruth Sullivan notes, she is seen as godlike as she commits murder almost under the eyes of the town. She takes Homer Barron's life, but no human law stops or punishes her for it (168).

### The Family's History

Miss Emily's and her family's history helps her attain a certain position in the town. The Grierson family had been significant for generations and they had always held themselves higher than the rest of the community and thought of themselves as superior. The people in town likewise considered them as being more than just an ordinary family, something which becomes evident when the ladies first notice the smell that develops around Miss Emily's house. Instead of confronting Miss Emily with the smell, they discuss and consider what to do, as she was seen as a special member of the town. "[The smell] was another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons" (Faulkner 7). The Grierson's were obviously not seen as being part of the wide world in the same way as other people. In fact, Faulkner's use of the word "gross" in this context implies that the family was seen as

purser, while it could also mean “repulsive” and “high and mighty” and in that sense that they stood above other families. Moreover, the word “almighty” is a word strongly connected with God and Faulkner’s use of “mighty” evokes a possible allusion to divinity.

Being the last Grierson in town after her father’s death, Miss Emily’s position was even mightier; she was in turn determined to keep her prominence “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” (Faulkner 12). Miss Emily was indifferent to the town and did not view herself as part of the community. The town on the other hand was more or less obsessed with her: “Thus she passed from generation to generation – dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse” (Faulkner 17). The fact that perceptions about her were passed on in the community accentuates her importance and her legendary position in town.

Furthermore, as Thomas Klein argues, the people in town picture Miss Emily and her father as a tableau, which indicates that the two are seen in a different way than ordinary people (230): “We had long thought of them as a tableau: Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door” (Faulkner 9). The father is pictured with legs stretched far apart and a horsewhip in his hand whereas Miss Emily is dressed in white, reminding of an angel due to the colour of the clothes while being described as a figure, not a woman, in the tableau. She is then viewed as an image and not a real person of flesh and bone and is depicted accordingly in a godlike manner.

Throughout the story the townspeople are repeatedly willing to hold the Grierson family higher than themselves. Miss Emily does not have to pay any taxes due to an old agreement with the town’s mayor, where he stated that Miss Emily’s father had loaned the

town money and that the town was only repaying it when not asking her for any taxes. The older people in town understand that the story about the loan is just an invention, but nevertheless accept it, as they want Miss Emily to keep her preeminent position. The next generation of mayors and aldermen, however, question the fact that Miss Emily stands above the rest of the community, when being allowed not to pay her taxes. Yet, when trying to make her pay them, they fail and eventually they too come to accept her exemption from taxes, realizing that it might be best for things to be left as they always were: “Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town, dating from that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor [...] remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity” (Faulkner 4). Sullivan claims, that the way the townspeople worshipfully take care of Miss Emily reveals that she is seen “Like a goddess in her temple, cool and unapproachable and vaguely frightening” (169). If they had thought otherwise they would after all probably have forced her to pay, one way or another, or taken some kind of appropriate measures. Instead they act as if they idolize her, as they accept her privilege with remarkable docility.

### Miss Emily's Way of Acting

Miss Emily's way of acting reveals that she is not an ordinary woman. Throughout the story she acts and interferes with people as being superior to them. For example she is the only one who refuses to put up metal numbers and a mailbox when the town gets free postal delivery. An even more blatant example to her preeminence is the way she behaves to show her unwillingness to obey the law, when she refuses to pay her taxes (Petty 53). When the representatives of the town visit Miss Emily to compel her to fulfill her obligation she does not meet them at the door and instead they are shown in by her servant. This, of course, has to

do with tradition and the fact that she belongs to a fine family, but it also is a way for her to demonstrate her power. Then, the men automatically rise when she enters, perhaps again out of politeness, but also out of respect for someone prominent. Judith Fetterley argues that women often are “[t]he passive object of the narrative gaze” (Quoted in Morris 27-30). In this context it is, however, obvious that the men are nervous and that Miss Emily is the one with the real authority. The men are in her house, the dwelling of the woman they find mystical and they feel inferior. This inferiority is also exposed in the way they are interrupted by Miss Emily when they try to explain their errand (Faulkner 6-7). Notably, to strengthen her position further, Miss Emily does not ask them to sit down and she hardly listens to the men. Instead, she clarifies her stand, over and over again and in the end she asks them to leave in a manner in which she enacts her role as an upper class southern lady, staying beyond the reach of those she considers below her. She firmly holds her position as strong and independent with a will of her own and is unwilling to obey the male representatives of the town. At the same time she rejects the role of a suppressed woman, as she is the one controlling the situation, whereas the men are powerless and become uncertain about how to respond. She is rational instead of emotional and in being implacable in her stands she threatens the male dominated community (Morris 14-33).

Miss Emily furthermore shows arrogant superiority when she wants to buy some poison and according to the law she is obliged to tell what she is going to use the poison for, but once again she raises herself above the law and imposes her prominence. When the druggist asks her what she is going to use it for, she just looks at him masterfully until he is subdued: “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” (Faulkner 13).

Moreover, the townspeople think of Miss Emily as superior, due to the way she exhibits lack of emotion, even though they perceive her as strange as well, since she shows no grief the day after her father's death. It is most likely that she does not believe that he is really dead at first and then the people of Jefferson show her their respect by not forcing her to bury the father immediately. Once again under those circumstances though, just as she refuses to pay her taxes, put up a mailbox, and follow the law in general, she puts herself above humanity and acts like a god in the eyes of the narrator (Sullivan 168).

### Miss Emily's Looks

Miss Emily's unfavourable looks emphasizes her uniqueness. Here is how she is described by Faulkner:

A small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. 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 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 as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand.

(Faulkner 6)

Miss Emily is certainly not portrayed as a usual woman. Sullivan claims that she is even masculinized as the narrator twice describes her as "impervious." "Twice he calls her impervious (impenetrable) as if to stress that she is not anatomically equipped so that a man could have sexual relations with her" (170). Furthermore she states that Miss Emily cuts her

hair boyishly short and when she is older it is described like the hair of an active man (Sullivan 170). As mentioned above, De Beauvoir argues that “women who are not physically attractive to men are also focus of anxiety and hostility” (Quoted in Morris 21), which might indicate how her unusual looks also make Miss Emily intimidating.

Despite the unfavorable description of Miss Emily, she is nevertheless several times referred to as an angel and an idol. Sullivan notes: “Her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows-sort of tragic and serene” (168). According to her, she is also described as having heavenly connection, as she is shown as godlike: “Godlike, she lives in a *timeless meadow* for she also defies superhuman forces of time and death” (Sullivan 168).

There are moreover several other details linked to her appearance signaling that Miss Emily is special. She has a watch on a gold chain that is ticking when The Board of Aldermen visit her: “They could hear the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain” (Faulkner 6). Melinda Schwab claims that the ticking watch symbolizes Miss Emily’s will to control time (215). But her desire for controlling the years passing by could mean that she thinks of herself as standing above humanity as it is impossible for humans to control time. Then, as Miss Emily grows older her hair turns gray but not the tone of gray old women get, the hair colour thus implying that she does not grow old in the same way ordinary women: “During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray, when it ceased turning. Up to the day of her death at seventy-four it was still that vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man” (Faulkner 16). Miss Emily’s will to control time and her hair’s specific tone of gray could give people around her reasons to think of her as more than human.

### Miss Emily's House

The description of Miss Emily's house makes the reader think of it as a place for worshipping. The house is presented in the beginning of the short story, and its presentation gives an impression of a vast, important building: "It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what once had been our most select street" (Faulkner 3). With its cupolas and spires it is easy to picture the house as a church, especially considering Faulkner's meticulousness with words (Petry 54). In my opinion the word "heavily" could then easily be read as "heavenly" and thus the word could be an indirect reference to Miss Emily's divinity. Miss Emily is after all very closely linked to the house: "Miss Emily's house is Miss Emily herself if we read symbolically. Faulkner seems to spend some effort on having us draw such an equation for the first thing he describes in Emily's story is not the lady but her house" (Sullivan 163). Then Sullivan notes that the townchildren, who took china-painting lessons, by Miss Emily attended the lessons in her house with the same regularity and in the same spirit as they would have gone to church on Sundays. According to Sullivan this strengthens the idea that the house was seen as a church and that Miss Emily was viewed as godlike (169). Moreover, the general appearance of the house makes it churchlike. Besides its cupolas and spires (Faulkner 3) mentioned above, its colour had once been white while it has come to be dilapidated, when the rest of the graceful houses in the street are gone, it stands there as visible as ever, arguably resembling old churches that survive century after century. And as Getty notes, the house could be linked to the Greek god of silence as it probably is ornamented in places with roses: "The house [...] is almost certainly decorated in places with carved flowers, the rose being a favorite choice

among the Victorians” (232). It is as if throughout the story the house is left there alone for a reason, as if a remaining church, or temple.

Moreover, the mysticism of the place is strengthened with the revelation that there is one room in the house that no one has seen in forty years. The very knowledge that the room is decorated as bridal and that it is sealed is remarkable (Faulkner 19), as not that many people seem to have visited Miss Emily during the years. The townspeople must have made their assumptions about the room, and speculated that Miss Emily could be hiding a terrible secret. Even upon its being finally opened, the smell of a tomb lingers in the air and the attributes of Miss Emily’s lover Homer Barron mystify the room. The mysticism is heightened when the decomposed body of Homer Barron is discovered together with Miss Emily’s long strand of iron-gray hair on the pillow next to it, occurrences which confirm the status of Miss Emily as an extraordinary woman who puts herself above humanity.

### The Relationship with Homer Barron

Miss Emily’s relationship with Homer Barron is depicted as an affair between two prominent people. The town views them, as celebrities, when they drive around in a yellow buggy, “Miss Emily with her head high and Homer Barron with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove” (Faulkner 14). Homer Barron is man with an impressing voice and eyes lighter than his face and Hal Blythe pictures him, when he arrives in Jefferson, “like a knight-errant from afar” (49). According to Blythe, Homer Barron’s surname indicates aristocracy and together with his chivalric appearance contributes to the impression that he is of a higher rank than other people (49). His mighty status also justifies Miss Emily’s relationship with him. Moreover Homer Barron is portrayed as a man with aura. The little boys follow him in groups and people listen to what he has to say (Faulkner 11).

Obviously, however, Miss Emily's failure in relating to men along with her dependency on them leads towards the decision to kill Homer Barron. During the years Miss Emily had some other suitors, but they were all turned down by her dominating, perhaps tyrannous, father. After the death of the father, it appears that she again becomes dependent on a man, as she remains emotionally attached to Homer Barron. This dependence is emphasized by the fact that she has no women acquaintances to rely on. Feminists have pointed out how some women appear to make the wrong choices when it comes to men. "The woman herself is sometimes unsure of which suitor to pick, and often makes a fatal choice which leaves her captured in a deadening relationship" (Morris 32). In the story, Miss Emily chooses Homer Barron but the outcome is not happiness. Notably, Blythe argues, there are indications that Homer Barron is perhaps more interested in men (49). Moreover he is not worthy enough in the eyes of the family representatives and some of the townspeople as, no matter what his name may yield about his background, he is no more than a day-laborer and, even worse, a yankee. When these want to separate the couple, just like they once separated Miss Emily from the late father, she poisons the man so that she can keep him (Schwab 217).

While the fatal choice of a lover she is not allowed to have leaves Miss Emily withdrawn in solitude, having committed the murder, she also refuses the role of a suppressed woman. Sullivan states that the town never loses the fear of Miss Emily and she is furthermore never fully humanized (169). "She is rather like a goddess in her temple, cool and unapproachable and vaguely frightening, and like so many terrible mythical goddesses, she chooses a man of lower station, has an affair with him, and then kills him to gratify her own needs" (169).

## Conclusion

Religious and Christian references in the story indicate that Miss Emily is more than an ordinary woman and could be seen as a goddess. Most notably, the way the narrator views her implies that she is perceived as godlike. Then she is not described as physically attractive and yet she is pictured as an angel. The townspeople appear to admire her but they also look at her with fear, as she challenges the male dominated society. The detailed descriptions of her house, along with Miss Emily and her ways, also have an important role in the story and suggest that she is high and mighty. She is depicted as superior in the manner she refuses to obey the law and in the way she behaves towards other people. She puts herself above others, rejecting the role of a subordinate woman and is allowed to do that by the townspeople, which indicates that she might be viewed as a superior. Miss Emily's relation with other people in general and in particular with her father and Homer Barron also evoke a godlike status.

Viewing Miss Emily as a goddess hence contributes to a new understanding of the short story, because if she is placed above humanity her role in the short story must be reevaluated. Instead of being considered a victim, or a piteous old woman who commits a terrible murder, she might then emerge as the one controlling the courses of events, as well as, the people living in Jefferson. And instead of reading "A Rose for Emily" as a morbid crime story, or a sad story about a bitter spinster, it could be read as a story about a woman who has the power over the people in her community and feeling entitled to her supremacy, she does not hesitate to impose her eccentric ways.

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