

Nikki Ellis

Dr. John Hellmann

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“A Rose for Emily” and a Ghost for Slavery

“A Rose for Emily” by William Faulkner is considered one of literature’s leading examples of the Southern gothic genre. Traditionally, the Gothic “...evokes anxieties, fears, and terrors, often in tandem with violence, brutality, rampant sexual impulses and death” (Inge 145). Emily Grierson’s crumbling house, her psychological torment, and the ominous feeling of death and decay, paint the perfect picture of gothic. By looking at the story in the context of the *southern* gothic genre, the focus mainly falls upon Emily’s madness and the deterioration of the Old South. However, the story’s African Americans, particularly Emily’s black man servant Tobe, are strangely elusive and gothic characters as well. While “A Rose for Emily” can be read as a commentary on the death of the Old South, it can also be an interpretation of the haunting and oppressive effect that slavery had upon the spirits and souls of African Americans.

The gothic portrayal of slavery is evident in Tobe’s soulless and zombie-like physicality. Faulkner rarely penetrates the consciousness of his black characters, and instead stays outside of them so that we know what a black person says and does, but never what a black person thinks (Marius 49). This leaves us with a very gothic-like premise: the living corpse. Tobe’s physical descriptions echo that of the walking dead, illustrating the disregard of blacks as normal, living members of a white-dominated society: “Daily, monthly, yearly, we watched the Negro grow grayer and more stooped, going in and out with the market basket” (Faulkner 332). He is

portrayed as dead and vacant; he is a demoralized cadaver that has been trained not to think or interact with white society on the same level. This is quite apparent as he gloomily leads the aldermen into a dimly lit and dusty parlor to routinely open the blinds and awaken the dead dust of the leather furniture (Faulkner 329). This is his tomb of eternal service to the Grierson family, and it has left him an oppressed body that walks silently among the living white society.

The occurrence of African Americans in “A Rose for Emily” also comes across as very eerie and muted, like a hazy apparition in the background of the plot. It is important that gothic literature’s blacks be historicized, not only in terms of slavery, but also in terms of the racial fantasies (illusions) that haunt it (Wonham 231). The blacks in “A Rose for Emily” are described as making random “appearances” like ghosts, but only when they are in their expected place as servants or slaves. Tobe is summoned like a loyal and incarcerated spirit: “Tobe!” The Negro appeared. ‘Show these gentlemen out” (Faulkner 330). Furthermore, Colonel Sartoris’ law suggests that black women are only noticed by their aprons as the narrator states “...no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron-... (329). Also, Emily’s arsenic is silently brought by a Negro delivery boy instead of the druggist who never returns. These appearances ultimately establish the recognition of blacks as only laborers or assistants, as well as the invisibility of their human spirit in a white hierarchal society. They are souls who are eternally bound by the contract of service. Their humanity has been oppressed and it is only the shallow and ghostly shell of their imprisonment that appears on the surface.

Finally, the descriptions of Tobe’s domestic work produce a repetitive image of a residual spirit, reflecting the enduring and trapped souls of servants and slaves. William Faulkner grew up in a society where blacks and whites were bound in an inescapable web of dependency (Marius 45), and this idea manifests itself as one of Faulkner’s recurring Gothic elements: imprisoned

(jailed) black bodies that are suspended between life and death (Anderson 100). This gothic element can also be applied to Tobe. He is not literally jailed, but he is imprisoned in a limbo of dependency on Emily as his white master. Throughout the story, there is a recurring image of Tobe opening and closing Miss Emily's front door, as well as his repetitive task of going in and out with a market basket. This repeats until the death Emily where his confined soul seems to stop its residual anguish at the door: "The Negro met the first of the ladies at the front door and let them in, with their hushed, sibilant voices and their quick, curious glances, and then he disappeared. He walked right through the house and out the back and was not seen again" (Faulkner 332). Tobe's domestic work follows a fixed path; he either answers the door or leaves through it with his market basket. When Emily dies, he passes through and out the back of the house, free territory that Tobe has not yet walked upon. The image is eerily angelic, as if Emily's death has released his lingering and confined spirit as a domestic laborer. Tobe may not be literally caught between life and death, but he is certainly caught between a life of freedom and Emily's oppressive dependence on him as a domestic servant of the Old South.

"A Rose for Emily" adds much more depth to the Southern gothic genre when read through the perspective of its African Americans. The idea that Faulkner provides very little detail about the consciousness and the thoughts of his African American characters sheds light on Tobe as a symbol for slaves and servants who are only walking bodies of labor, unable to think or interact on the same level. The random and eerie appearances of African Americans in the story are also important, as they demonstrate the oppressive anguish of only being identified by their status as slaves and domestic laborers; Faulkner has envisioned them as residual souls who are stuck between loyalty to their white masters and the freedom of their spirit.

## Works Cited

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