

BAILEY BASINGER

Tension, Contradiction, and Ambiguity: Gender Roles in "A Rose for Emily"

Bailey Basinger (b. 1996) wrote this literary analysis of William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" when she was a student at Arizona State University, Tempe. She now attends Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law. As you read, notice how Basinger draws on literary critics to enrich her analysis.

IN "A ROSE FOR EMILY," William Faulkner creates Emily Grierson and Homer Barron as characters whose gender identity and sexuality are ambiguous. Faulkner leaves subtle and often contradictory clues throughout that hint at possible definitions of their sexuality, setting up an unsettling tension. Moreover, through the narration of a collective "we" representing the community of the fictional Jefferson, Mississippi, Faulkner illustrates the community's—and, by extension, society's—persistent attempts to fit the two characters into an unequivocal sexual binary. Yet critics have been less certain about Emily's and Homer's sexuality. Hal Blythe, for example, argues that Homer may be best understood as a homosexual (49–50), but Blythe's perspective has been criticized by other literary scholars such as James Wallace (105–07) and Judith Caesar (195–98). This essay argues that Faulkner presents an ambiguous perspective on both Homer's and Emily's sexuality, despite the town's relentless attempts to attribute a clear gender identity and sexuality to both, in order to make a point about society's insistence on defining gender and sexuality even when they are undefinable. The town's desire to assign Homer and Emily clear gender identities and sexualities, even in the face of ambiguous evidence, reveals more about the prejudices in the town than it does about Emily and Homer, but the ambiguities help create tension in the story that contributes to its surprise ending.

In the first physical description given of Emily, Faulkner sets her up as a character whose gender identity and sexuality are clearly ambigu-

ous. The narrator describes her as "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" (Faulkner 788). In his essay "Horror and Perverse Delight," Dennis Allen discusses Emily's adoption of masculine accessories, noting that "mediating the distinction between male and female, Emily has equipped herself with a good deal of phallic paraphernalia. In fact, the only details of her costume mentioned in the passage are the cane she holds before her and the watch suspended from the gold chain that vanishes beneath her belt" (686). These phallic symbols clash with Emily's supposed femininity.

Emily's hair is also an important symbol of the tensions around her gender identity. The importance of her hair as a symbol is underscored through the narrator's use of nearly identical introductory phrases—"when we next saw Emily" and "when we saw her again"—to open the descriptions of her hair. For example, after her seclusion following her father's death, the narrator explains, "When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl" (Faulkner 791). The use of the word *girl* signifies Emily's haircut gave her a more youthful appearance. But the haircut was uncommon for women at the end of the nineteenth century. Women, young and old, had long hair until the early years of the twentieth century. Hair was only cut due to illness. While the short hair signifies perhaps illness (possibly even mental illness, "with insanity in the family" [790]), it is also likely to suggest a masculine appearance. Faulkner makes this contradiction more explicit later in the story when the narrator again mentions Emily's hair, noting, "When we next saw Emily, she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. . . . Up to the day of her death at seventy-four it was still that vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man" (794). The narrator describes the natural graying of Emily's hair as suggesting masculinity. Through illustrating Emily's appearance as both feminine and masculine, Faulkner again emphasizes Emily's ambiguous gender. Her identity overall is impossible to define in binary "either-or" terms; her hair is pointed to as a sign that she is potentially both young and old, male and female.



The tension created by these contradictions is reinforced by the community's continued attempts to define Emily as a heterosexual woman. In attempting to explain why Emily had not yet married, the town first agrees that "[n]one of the young men were ever quite good enough for Miss Emily" (Faulkner 790). The town chooses to blame her failure to get married on her family's perceived high social status and her father's rejection of suitors. However, when Emily remains single into her thirties, the town changes its theory, claiming that "even with insanity in the family she wouldn't have turned down all of her chances if they had really materialized" (790). The town contradicts its earlier statement that Emily's family's perceived high social status had ruined her chances at marriage, instead claiming she never had any serious suitors at all. Again, the town chooses to believe Emily is a heterosexual woman and creates evidence to support their beliefs regardless of Emily's seeming androgyny and apparent refusal to marry. Even after her death, certain members of the community are willing to invent memories of Emily. At her funeral the narrator describes "the very old men—some in their brushed Confederate uniforms—on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps" (795). The men in their Confederate uniforms create memories to prove Emily's heterosexuality even when the rest of the community recognizes these memories are false. The town is so determined to define Emily's sexuality and gender that they are willing to use contradictory and clearly fabricated evidence to support their definition.

Just as Faulkner emphasizes Emily's androgyny through phallic accessories, he also equips Homer with violent phallic images. As the town of Jefferson watches Emily and Homer drive around in his buggy, they observe "Homer Barron with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove" (Faulkner 791). The use of this hyper-masculine imagery—the word *cocked* paired with the phallic objects of a cigar and whip—is paired with Homer's own remarks that "he liked men, and . . . drank with the younger men in the Elks' Club—that he was not a marrying man" (793). Thomas Bonner, Jr., explains the "not a marrying man" phrase in his article on "The Functions of Ambiguity":

The phrase "not a marrying man," as Homer is described by Faulkner, is one of those spaces for interpretation. . . . Ample evidence suggests its ambiguity—homosexual or confirmed bachelor, perhaps a conscious choice of words as the term has frequency in nineteenth and twentieth century American writing. (493)

In other words, explaining his preference for men and his distaste for marriage, it is possible that Homer is attempting to tell the town he is not a heterosexual, but the town is refusing to listen. Choosing to overlook his visits with the younger men at the Elks' Club, the town claims, "[W]e were sure that they [Homer and Emily] were to be married" (Faulkner 794). Just as the town refuses to acknowledge Emily's ambiguous sexual traits, they ignore Homer's.

Although Faulkner seems to hint at Homer's attraction to men, Homer's sexuality is never explicitly stated and is therefore still ambiguous. Indeed, Bonner suggests, "While there may be some possibility of seeing Homer as homosexual, more evidence exists to indicate otherwise" (494). However, Faulkner purposefully makes Homer's sexuality unclear. It is unclear, for example, whether Emily and Homer were ever intimate, though there is clearly some sort of relationship between them. After Emily's death, the town notices that the room in which Homer's body laid was "decked and furnished as for a bridal" (Faulkner 796) and filled with items Emily had bought him such as the monogrammed toilet set and the suit of clothes. The care with which the room was decorated for a wedding and the personal touches on the objects she bought him implies a closeness between them. Furthermore, on the pillow next to Homer's body, the townspeople saw "the indentation of a head" and "a long strand of iron gray hair" (796), the hair that reminded the town of "an active man" (794). Homer's body "had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace" (796). The indentation, the gray hair, and the body's pose suggest that Emily had lain in bed with Homer, again suggesting some affection between them, but whether that affection was sexual cannot be determined. The close relationship between Emily and Homer could have been sexual, but, if so, the dramatic reveal of the final scene would suggest that the intimacy was after death.

Faulkner never gives definitive proof of Emily's or Homer's sexual preferences and purposefully makes both ambiguous. Rather, Faulkner cleverly and subtly leaves clues that could be used to support a variety of ways of defining their sexuality. Like the townspeople of Jefferson, many readers and scholars have attempted to pin down both characters' sexuality. Many scholars have argued for motives surrounding Emily's possible murder of Homer that support one stagnant understanding of Emily's sexuality. For example, in "Emily Grierson's Oedipus Complex," Jack Scherting employs Freud to explain Emily's relationship with men:

Deliberately and with consummate skill Faulkner employed the Freudian principle of Oedipal fixation as a means of depicting Emily's character and informing the story with its powerful theme, a theme intimately connected with the incestuous nature of Emily's love for Homer. Emily Grierson was possessed by an unresolved Oedipal complex. Her libidinal desires for her father were transferred, after his death, to a male surrogate—Homer Barron. (399)

Scherting supports this claim for Emily's Oedipal complex by citing her father's rejection of her suitors as one of the causes for her development of a fixation on her father. However, even the fact that Emily had suitors cannot be stated with any certainty. Additionally, Scherting cites Emily's affair with Homer as a reenactment of her Oedipal complex, but neither the town nor the reader can ever confirm if Homer and Emily were intimate or desired to be so.

Another scholar, Hal Blythe, argues, "A closer examination of Miss Emily's 'lover,' Homer Barron, reveals . . . Miss Emily's 'beau' ideal is homosexual" (49), citing as evidence Homer's claimed preference for men and the use of the name Homer as a reference to ancient Greek homosexuality. Blythe also might have pointed out the name Barron as signifying "noble fighter," a masculine trait. Therefore, Homer's preference for surrounding himself with men could be used as evidence of his homosexuality; however, because Faulkner never explicitly states Homer's sexual preferences, one cannot say with any certainty what they were. Although Blythe seems to at least recognize Homer's ambiguous sexuality, he, like Scherting, assumes that Emily is heterosexual and argues that Emily killed Homer out of rage for her unrequited love.

While that is a possibility, Faulkner keeps the death itself ambiguous as well.

Throughout "A Rose for Emily," there is an incongruity between the town's relentless attempts to define Homer and Emily as a traditional couple and their physical descriptions, which raise questions about their gender and sexuality. In this way, Faulkner is providing commentary on society's inclination to define sexuality and gender identity in binary terms even when they are fluid and undefinable. As Faulkner scholar Max Putzel notes, "'A Rose for Emily' tells more about the town than about the victims of its malice—including Miss Emily" (222). Bonner agrees: "Max Putzel is right. . . . In the end more can be said with certitude about the nature of the townspeople than can be said about Emily" (498). The same could be said for the townspeople and Homer. By giving the reader more insight into the town than into Homer or Emily, Faulkner demonstrates—and criticizes—society's real and continued tendency to look for a rigid definition of individuals' gender and sexuality even when none may exist.

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Engaging with the Text

1. What is Bailey Basinger's **THESIS**? Restate it in your own words. Read "A Rose for Emily" (on pp. 851–60) yourself. Are you convinced by Basinger's argument? Why or why not? Point to three pieces of evidence she uses and explain why you do or do not find them convincing.
2. How does Basinger use **QUOTATIONS** from Faulkner's short story? Is her use of quotations effective? Why or why not? What other quotations might she have used?
3. How does Basinger **SYNTHESIZE OTHER SCHOLARSHIP** on Faulkner's story in her analysis? How does this synthesis support her analysis of the story?
4. Basinger focuses on gender and sexuality in "A Rose for Emily." Should she have broadened her focus? narrowed it? Why?
5. **For Writing.** **ANALYZE** some facet of a literary work that intrigues you: its theme, its characters, its setting, its narrator, or its structure. You should **RESEARCH** scholarship on the literary piece, and write an essay that both presents your own analysis and responds to what others have said about the same work. You can agree with what they say, disagree, or both; the important thing is to think about what others say, and to **QUOTE**, **PARAPHRASE**, or **SUMMARIZE** their views in your text.