Sexism Supported and Expectations Exploited in “A Rose for Emily”

In his chilling tale “A Rose for Emily,” William Faulkner uses juxtaposed descriptions to portray the sexist attitudes of both the men and the women of the community. They habituate themselves to not only alienate each other but also any “abnormal” member of their town. While Miss Emily falls prey to this prejudice, her reaction towards it is a sardonic and extreme testament to the fact that human nature takes great pleasure in the vengeful fulfillment of societal expectations. Ironically, it is by conforming to these limiting stereotypes that Miss Emily gains the advantage over the people in her town.

Throughout the story, Faulkner makes subtle (and not so subtle) comparisons between the men and women of the community, some of which paint the men as respectable, non-interfering citizens who patronize the controlling, intrusive women. The story opens with Miss Emily’s funeral and within the first sentence, the men and women are delineated by their motives for attending the service. The men are described as paying a sort of homage to a fallen hero, while the women are only accredited with nosiness to see the inside of Miss Emily’s home. These statements make the men appear respectful of the dead, the women irreverent. When Emily begins cavorting around with Homer Barron, the females in the community are again portrayed as prying and also controlling: “The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister…to call upon her” (Faulkner 377). After what would seem to be an unsuccessful interview, the minister refuses to return, leaving his wife to inform Miss Emily’s cousins in Alabama of her actions which are considered “a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people” (Faulkner 377). This experience re-emphasizes the label of the busy-bodied females and the peace-seeking men. Once the two female cousins have arrived, the reaction towards them further supports the disgust for women’s interfering ways. Although it is under the
cousin’s supervision that Miss Emily purchases bridal items, these two other lady Grierson’s are associated with the phrases “to get rid of” and “circumvent” (Faulkner 377).

Other situations in the story which compare the men against the women indicate that the reason for this admirable propriety and non-interference of the men is a happy consequence of their superior mental faculties. When money becomes scarce for Miss Emily, Colonel Sartoris devises a plan in which Miss Emily is inconspicuously relieved of her taxes to avoid embarrassing her. The narrator remarks, “Only a man of Colonel Sartoris’ generation and thought could have invented [the plan], and only a woman could have believed it” (Faulkner 374). This is the most explicit of all gender statements within the story, stating that any grand scheme must of necessity be engineered by a man; the woman’s job remains to ignorantly accept whatever the men dictate. This mind-set is reinforced later in the story when Miss Emily’s home acquires an acrid stench. One of the women demands that the judge “send her word to stop [the smell]” (375). The judge vacillates, saying he’ll talk to Miss Emily’s workman about it. Soon other town members begin complaining, including a man; however, his suggestion to the judge is markedly different: “I’d be the last one in the world to bother Miss Emily, but we’ve got to do something” (375). Neither of the men are eager or willing to confront the problem. During the meeting of the Board of Aldermen, a younger male offers the same suggestion as made by the woman earlier: simply confront Miss Emily, “…give her a certain time to do it, and if she don’t…”(375). What might have been a moment of the reconciling of the sexes becomes just the opposite as the older men shoot down this idea as something impossible, even stupid. The judge scoffs, “Will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?” (Faulkner 375). Again, the ideals supported by the women are dismissed, their attempts at solving problems deemed ineffective, and the men satisfy themselves with sprinkling lime on Miss Emily’s lawn by night, remedying the issue with their self-defined intelligence and nobility.

A comparison of the ways in which Miss Emily is described when alive and then when dead offers proof towards the prevalent opinion that not only are women unintelligent, they are to be regarded as objects rather than human beings. As it reads in the text, “Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care” (Faulkner 373). Traditions, duties, and cares are all things, inanimate objects created and acted upon by mankind. At Miss Emily’s funeral, the “very old men…[talk] of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary
of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps” (Faulkner 378). Now that she is no longer a burden to deal with, she is still only considered as an object that satisfies the men’s fantasies and appetites. Clearly, women as a group are not respected or valued as contributing members of the community. Instead, they are condescended to as frivolous objects useful in fulfilling the men’s desires.

It is well worth noting that the women are not the only victims here. The females of the community also pass judgments upon the men. With each of the juxtaposed comparisons, the women’s own point of view, while not as evident, still carries weight. In their eyes, the men are useless because of their placidness, incapable of action or practical function. Such underlying attitudes gain voice with the ladies criticism of Miss Emily’s male housekeeper: “Just as if a man—any man—could keep a kitchen properly” (Faulkner 375).

Such comparisons separate not only the males and females from each other, but also encourage the community to separate themselves from any one unlike themselves. The expressions of “the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons” and “hereditary obligation” demonstrate the wall that the community feels and encourages between themselves and Miss Emily. Opinions of the people at large are expressed with the inclusive “we all said,” “we had…thought,” and “we were glad” followed by a presumptuous perception of Miss Emily. They do not include her as one of them but as something to be observed and gossiped about.

Miss Emily proves both the sexist and clannish attitudes of the community false by showing exaggerated compliance towards them. Analyst Judith Fetterly observes that “Emily…uses [these] stereotype[s] to gain power over those who place her in this role” (195). Such is the case when the men come calling for Miss Emily’s taxes. She tells them to see Colonel Sartoris, who has been dead for ten years. Fetterly argues that the men do not correct Miss Emily because they believe that, as a woman, she is “…not capable of either reason or logic” (195). This situation illustrates the irony that it is the men’s own underestimation of women that allows Miss Emily to take advantage of them. She mocks them through her response, which is subversively communicating, “You thought me stupid enough to believe Colonel Sartoris’ story, so now you’ll think me stupid enough to think he is still alive.” Miss Emily emerges from the situation, pardon the pun, smelling like a rose, and then men are sent away empty handed. Viewed in this light, Miss Emily’s response to go and see the colonel doesn’t label her as stupid, but as clever and capable.
Emily further exploits the belief in women’s stupidity when she purchases the arsenic. The druggist ignores her initial request with a condescending “Yes ma’am. But what you want…” and then even upon Miss Emily’s insistence he “[looks] down at her” both literally and figuratively (Faulkner 377). He doesn’t press the matter of the arsenic’s purpose, presumably because he is of the popular opinion that “[Miss Emily] will kill herself” (Faulkner 377). The druggist does not consider Miss Emily smart enough to be of any damage to another human other than herself, and so disregards the observance of the law. Such neglect and underestimation allows Emily to commit a murder that remains undiscovered until after her death. The avoidance of punishment for such a crime portrays Miss Emily as a criminal mastermind rather than an incompetent gossip.

By retaining her father’s body even after his death, Miss Emily appears to condone the idea the women are obsessively controlling and intrusive. She is excused in her actions, as the people reason that “with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her” (Faulkner 376). Having realized that the community will explain and even tolerate such behavior, Miss Emily pushes the controlling stereotype to the limit. She commits the ultimate intrusion on a human life by taking it. The poisoning of her estranged lover Homer shows that rather than allowing herself to be spurned and ignored, she will ensure that he will never leave her side. Emily has offered conclusive and vengeful evidence of the judgmental town’s banal attitudes, as Homer Barron lies dead and rotting in her home.

The people of the town discover this murder only after Miss Emily’s death because she took their isolation of her and capitalized on it. Because of their self-created stupefaction of Miss Emily, the community doesn’t even think to investigate when Homer enters Miss Emily’s home and doesn’t emerge—they simply satisfy themselves with “And that was the last we saw of Homer Barren” (Faulkner 377). Miss Emily feels confident in housing a corpse in her chambers because she knows the community’s perception of herself as an oddity and knows they will not confront her.

Through the contrasting descriptions of the men and women of the community, Faulkner shows how they perceive themselves and how their attitudes influence their perceptions of others. By amplifying these stereotypes, Miss Emily exploits the town, achieving a greater measure of control than the community ever
realizes. The atmosphere of this closely knit community is created by destructive enablers—the men, the 
women, and Miss Emily. Frederick Douglass once said, “If little is expected of a people, that people will find it 
difficult to contradict that expectation” (Foner np). In the case of Miss Emily, she gave the community not 
what they consciously expected, but rather what they subconsciously imposed on her and on themselves.
