

# THE CONFLICT BETWEEN WOMAN AND COMMUNITY IN TWO SHORT STORIES BY WILLIAM FAULKNER<sup>1</sup>

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(Resumen)

En este trabajo nos disponemos a estudiar dos ejemplos paradigmáticos del choque entre sujeto femenino e imposición social característico de la narrativa de William Faulkner. Pese a que en numerosas ocasiones este autor fue tachado de misógino, intentaremos demostrar que sus escritos evidencian un profundo conocimiento y comprensión de la problemática posición de la mujer en la sociedad patriarcal del Sur de los Estados Unidos de la primera mitad de este siglo.

Los relatos elegidos para probar tal tesis, "A Rose for Emily" y "Dry September", tienen como protagonistas a dos figuras femeninas que, consciente o inconscientemente, retan a la comunidad a la que pertenecen no sometiéndose a los roles de esposas fieles y madres abnegadas que les están reservados y provocan el desconcierto de un colectivo que se erigirá en guardián, juez y carcelero de las existencias de ambos personajes.

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"A Rose for Emily" and "Dry September" are two paradigmatic examples of the clash between women and the impositions of society in William Faulkner's narrative. In spite of the fact that Faulkner was often accused of being a misogynist,<sup>2</sup> I shall attempt to show that his work evinces of a deep understanding and comprehension of the problematic role of women in the patriarchal society of the early twentieth century South, as the following quotation suggests:

The women that have been unpleasant characters in my books were not created to be unpleasant characters, let alone to be unpleasant women. They were used as implements, instruments, to tell a story, which I was trying to tell, which I hoped showed that injustice must exist and you can't just accept it, you got to do something about it.<sup>3</sup>

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2.. See Albert J. Guerard, "Faulkner's Misogyny," in *William Faulkner: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1977): 143-70.

3.. "Interviews in Japan," in *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962*, eds. James B. Meriwether & Michael Millgate (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1980, 1st edition 1968), 125. Elizabeth M. Kerr emphasizes this with respect to women in the South and points out that Faulkner's attitude to them, as seen in his various female characters, has not been interpreted correctly on many occasions: "The Southern ideal sets the pattern from

The protagonists of the stories "A Rose for Emily" and "Dry September", are two women who, consciously or unconsciously, challenge the community to which they belong by not adopting the roles of static icons, faithful wives and self-sacrificing mothers. Thus they disconcert the most outstanding males in their town, who have set themselves up as the guardians, judges and jailers of these two women's existences. As Elizabeth M. Kerr points out, in this aspect of his work, Faulkner is being very faithful to the historical realities of his time in which

For white gentlewomen, free, spontaneous emotion was damned up, often without any outlet, legitimate or otherwise: the result was, at best, hypocrisy, at worst perversion of some kind.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. "A ROSE FOR EMILY"

This story has as its subject the vicissitudes of a spinster belonging to an aristocratic family whose fortunes are now declining. This lonely woman described by Faulkner as "the indomitable and undefeated maiden",<sup>5</sup> is motherless and grows up under the stifling influence of her father, who does not allow her to mix with other men. Once her father dies, Miss Emily tries to keep his corpse with her which leads the chief members of the town to break into her home to prevent this breach of decorum, convention and good sense. Some time later, to the horror of her neighbours, she begins to go out with a worker from the North, who then suddenly disappears. Once again she finds herself isolated in the middle of a hostile community who once more break into her mansion to discover why it is emanating such a bad smell. After the death of the protagonist the town discovers, to its terror, that Miss Emily has been living with the corpse of her former suitor, Homer Barron, who, according to local legend, had left her in the lurch.

"A Rose for Emily" is very clearly located in Jefferson, a fictional version of Faulkner's birthplace, Oxford, Mississippi. If we take into account the criterium of Gene M. Moore, we could say that the story begins in 1888 with the death of the heroine's father and brings us up to 1930, the death of Miss Grierson and its publication.<sup>6</sup> The wide span of time covered by the tale justifies as much the longevity of the protagonist as the fact that she has been able to witness the transition from a traditional to a more modern society in the South.

During all this time Miss Emily lives shut up in her mansion and surrounded by a

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which Faulkner's characters tend to deviate. Consideration of the causes and consequences of Southern gynolatry suggests why Faulkner rejects the ideal and why, in so doing, he may be revealing sympathy rather than scorn for some of his women characters whose deeds cannot be praised." ("William Faulkner and the Southern Concept of Woman," *Mississippi Quarterly* 15 [1961-62]: 2).

4. "Faulkner and the Concept of Woman," 5.

5. See: Stephen M. Ross, *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner* (Athens: Georgia UP, 1989), 264 (n. 27).

6. See: Moore, Gene M. "Of Time and Its Mathematical Progression: Problems of Chronology in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 29 (1992): 202-203.

own that consider her, just like her house, to be "an eyesore among eyesores" (p.119).<sup>7</sup> The narrator who describes her so is a first person representative of this community, someone who, from beginning to end, spies on the last member of the Grierson family in an attempt to discover and reveal "that touch of earthiness" (p.125) of this member of the aristocracy. This narrator, when he gives his opinions and judgements (which are almost always incorrect), joins the reactionary group in the town by using the pronoun "we", a "we" in direct opposition to Miss Emily.

The story opens with this opposition: "When Miss Emily Grierson died, *our whole town* went to her funeral" (p.119, my italics). If the narrator of the story believes that *his town* is not incomplete because of Miss Emily's death, this is due to the fact that he never considered her an integral part of a community whose only unifying factor is the envy that its members feel towards the position of superiority that the protagonist occupies. A complex mixture of admiration and hate joins them against Miss Emily, who insists on protecting her privacy in spite of the curiosity that surrounds her. It is precisely this lack of information about a person who does not accept the submissive posture that is expected of her that so intrigues and provokes the town. To summarize what Nietzsche has said in *The Twilight of Idols*, reducing something unknown to something (supposedly) known relieves, soothes, satisfies, and, moreover, gives a feeling of power. with the unknown come danger, uneasiness, worries, the primary instinct is to try to *eliminate* these painful states.

So, the neighbours of the last of the Griersons feel a satisfying sense of power over the isolated Miss Emily when they invent a soothing set of suppositions about her, which are no more than what Judith Fetterley defines as "the grotesqueness that results when stereotypes are imposed upon reality".<sup>8</sup> Indeed, I agree with this critic when she says that one of the reasons for the isolation of this character is the fact that the men who make up her community insist on shutting Miss Grierson up in what they believe to be the definition of a lady. Such restrictions, mentioned explicitly by the author ("But there were still others, older people, who said that even grief could not cause a real lady to forget *noblesse oblige*..." [p. 124]), deny the protagonist her right to individuality. As the author says in another work, *Absalom, Absalom!*: "... years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the war came and we made the ladies into ghosts" (p. 9).<sup>9</sup>

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7. *The Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989, 1st edition 1950). From this point onwards all references made to the stories will be taken from this edition.

8. See Judith Fetterley, "A Rose for 'A Rose for Emily'," in her *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978), 43. Tony J. Owens adopts almost the same point of view when studying the male attitudes towards the protagonist in another of Faulkner's short stories, "Artist at Home": "The attempt to explain from an egotistical, imperceptive masculine viewpoint the feelings and actions of a woman is an important device in Faulkner's work, and it occurs in many of the early stories. The attempt is futile when it depends upon an abstract categorization of women, and its failure accompanies a narrow, distorted, or perverse viewpoint." ("Faulkner, Anderson, and 'Artist at Home,'" *Mississippi Quarterly* 32 [1979]: 397).

9. For a study of the figure of ghost as a type of female character in Faulkner (including both Miss Rosa Coldfield and Miss Emily Grierson) see: David M. Miller, "Faulkner's Women," *Modern Fiction Studies* 13 (1967): 5-6.

The real feelings of a community, that turn this woman into a shadow, the satisfaction they feel at the sufferings of their independent neighbour, are expressed with great frankness in one of the most revealing scenes, when Miss Emily has her first crisis after the death of her father:

When her father died, it got about that the house was all that was left to her; and in a way, people were glad. At last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone and a pauper she had become more humanized. Now she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less... (p. 123).

In such a crucial moment as this, it is obvious that we have a deeper insight into the members of the community, their reactions to the changes in the life of the protagonist, than into the real feelings of the latter. The almost childish simplicity and sincerity of the narrator, here and on other occasions, his emotions and judgements make us doubt his more elaborate and abstract statements such as that at the beginning of the tale: "Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" (p. 119). Equally surprising are his expressions of sympathy ("Poor Emily!") on several occasions (pp. 125 and 126) or the incredible statement "That was when people had begun to feel really sorry for her" (p. 123), which the narrator withdraws only a few lines later: "So when she got to be thirty and was still single *we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated*" (p. 123, italics mine). Actually the narrator is just putting into words the ambivalence and feelings of the community towards a woman who insists on preserving her individuality in spite of the devastating attitudes of the majority.<sup>10</sup> Freud speaks of these types of attitudes when describing obsessive feelings of affection and concern which normally repress unconscious feelings of hostility:

... [In] the case of privileged persons, we shall realize that alongside the veneration, and indeed idolization, felt towards them, there is in the unconscious an opposing current of intense hostility; that, in fact, as we expected, we are faced by a situation of emotional ambivalence.<sup>11</sup>

The stance taken by this group towards Miss Emily is revealed as much by the narrated facts as by the nameless narrator who gives them.<sup>12</sup> The distance between narrator and character is the main subject of a work by Joseph M. Garrison, in which he describes very well the hostility of the former to the latter:

10. With regard to this, Victoria Franklin Jr., the daughter of Faulkner's stepdaughter makes some very helpful comments: "Just read Pappy's 'A Rose for Emily' if you really want to know how the town reacted to anything and everything even slightly out of the ordinary" (Louis Daniel Brodsky, *William Faulkner: Life Glimpses* [Austin: Texas UP, 1990], 47).

11. *The Pelican Freud Library: The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism and Other Works*, Vol. 13, tr. James Strachey. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, 1st edition 1953), 104.

12. Andrew Nelson Lytle says that: "The dual nature of the central intelligence [the nameless narrator], while making the action show itself, also served for a choral effect, revealing, commenting upon, extending the violence into a larger context of meaning." ("The Son of Man: He Will Prevail," *Sewanee Review* 63 [1955]: 129).

Unapologetically, he [the narrator] is voicing the established opinions of the *newer generation*. He attests to sympathy and understanding but his language does not confirm it.

As the narrator continues to tell his story, he builds an increasingly wider emotional barrier between himself and whatever smouldering anxieties Miss Emily may have experienced in her isolation... Moreover, when we reach the end of the story... he does not seem fully conscious of the reality that confronts him and reports the details as if they were strange, unfamiliar, even alien...<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, we see that the narrator learns nothing from the final scene, especially if we notice that this "we" already knows the secret of the protagonist when the narration begins.<sup>14</sup> Even though he knows that this woman has made herself spend, approximately, forty years of her life in the company of a corpse so as to keep off her loneliness, this fact has caused absolutely no change in the general ignorance of the town with respect to the real emotions of their neighbour. The voice that tells us the story remains unshaken by the final vision, reinforced by the fact that he still believes that the disappearance of Homer was because he had abandoned Emily ("after her sweetheart... had deserted her", "after her sweetheart went away" [p. 122]). Actually, the attitude of the "narrator-group" is that of a *voyeur*, because their obsessive vigilance of the private life of this haughty lady shows the twisted ways their unsatisfied sexuality is forced to take. All of them take pleasure in this sadistic espionage, a type of aggression which, moreover, tries to tame the high and mighty Miss Emily. Sigmund Freud's definition of *voyeurism* or "alloglania" fits perfectly with the attitude of the masculine members of this group towards Miss Emily:

The sexuality of most male human beings contains an element of *aggressiveness* -a desire to subjugate; the biological significance of it seems to lie in the need for overcoming the resistance of the sexual object...<sup>15</sup>

In keeping with these words, some authors have claimed that Miss Emily is, to all intents and purposes, a sexual object for those who surround her. The information that the narrator gives us is too sketchy and ambiguous to support this claim very strongly. Nevertheless, there is no doubt at all that the assembly of male characters feel a fascination for Miss Emily which is beyond the bounds of what we call normality. The morbid curiosity which prevents the narrator from being moved by what he sees ("we sat back to watch developments" [p. 127]), isolates the woman. As Judith Fetterley says, "her furious isolation is in direct

13. "Bought Flowers in 'A Rose for Emily'," *Studies in Short Fiction* 16 (1979): 343-44. For further reading with respect to the narrator's obsessive attitude to Miss Emily, also see Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963), 158-62.

14. *The Resisting Reader*, 35.

15. *The Pelican Freud Library: On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, Vol. 7, tr. James Strachey [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, 1st edition 1953], 71.

proportion to the town's obsession with her".<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Jefferson's bewildering interest in the private life of its enigmatic inhabitant knows no bounds. As we shall see in the following, the most outstanding male characters in the community behave almost indecently towards the spinster on several occasions.<sup>17</sup> The propriety and legality of their behaviour is, at the very least, to be seen in a suspicious light even for the narrator who, unconsciously, shows his doubts by using the expression "like burglars" (p. 122) to describe the behaviour of these men.

Firstly, a commission from the Town Hall make an attempt to breach the privacy of the protagonist so as to make her pay her taxes (pp.120-121), and she responds with anger and a petulance not unnoticed by the intruders ("She did not ask them to seat... Her voice was dry and cold" [p. 121]). After Mr. Grierson's death, the most outstanding members of the community would have used force and the law (which they themselves do not respect) once more if Miss Emily had not given in to their demands ("Just as they were about to resort to law and force, she broke down," [p. 124]). The following piece of meddling caused by the stench coming from her house, is suggested by the only town councillor from the new generation: "Send her word to have her place cleaned up" (p. 122). Once more, we find the idea given prominence that this spinster is a lady ("Will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?" [p. 122]) and the representatives of the town decide to put into effect a measure which they consider, ironically, less embarrassing than sending a message: they decide to break into her house at night. The different ways the various protagonists react to this scene are very revealing: whilst those who must find out where the bad smell is coming from the house originates spend their time sniffing around "along the base of brickwork and at the cellar openings", Emily watches them impassively from above, erect and immobile (p. 123). Another piece of meddling takes place when the neighbours say they are shocked by the sight of Miss Emily in Homer Barron's company. This is when the women of the town unsuccessfully send the Baptist Minister to her abode ("he refused to go back again" [p. 126]). And after failing thus they decide that perhaps by getting in touch with the protagonist's relations ("the two female cousins were even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been" [p. 127]) this intrusion in an affair which has absolutely nothing to do with them, will be more effective.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of the obvious animosity in all these ruses (this indeed is the clearest characteristic of the narrator) the creator of both the story and the narrator claims to have felt some very different emotions for the unfortunate Miss Emily. In the explanation which Faulkner gave when asked about the meaning of the flower in the title, we can observe a feeling of sympathy for her:

Oh, that was an allegorical title; the meaning was, here was a woman who had had a tragedy, an irrevocable tragedy and nothing could be done about it, and I pitied her

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16. *The Resisting Reader*, 35.

17. For a study of the structure of the short story based on these intrusions, see Floyd C. Watkins, "The Structure of 'A Rose for Emily'," *Modern Language Notes* 6 (1954): 508-10.

18. According to Philip Momberger, the fact that it is the preacher who takes on himself the attempt to separate Miss Emily from Homer, shows that "institutional Christianity has ceased to be a unifying force for compassion and love and degenerated into divisive intolerance, self-righteousness, and puritanical repression" ("Faulkner's 'The Village' and 'That Evening Sun': The Tale in Context," *The Southern Literary Journal* 11 (1978): 29).

and this was a salute, just as if you were to make a gesture, a salute to anyone; to a woman you would hand a rose...<sup>19</sup>

In her tragic defense of her privacy, Miss Emily tries to create a microcosm, solely her own, where there are neither laws nor time, where death does not even seem to have its usual meaning. Just like some of her neighbours, the protagonist confuses time with the "mathematical progression" (p.129) inherent in it and tries to keep the past from being different from the present or the future, burying herself gradually in a neurotic universe and holding onto the dead as if they were still alive.<sup>20</sup> The irony of this is the fact that the mysterious Miss Grierson takes revenge on all the men who have appropriated her privacy and her life (her neighbours, Colonel Sartoris and her father) by becoming the possessor, as well, of another male character body and soul, of Homer Barron, a man she has probably poisoned. The protagonist has learnt the lesson of violence which her environment has taught her and has fully overcome the brutality of those who insistently try to deny her her true right to live her own life. So, the murder can also be interpreted as a type of rebellion against the patriarchal system and father figures. As Minrose C.Gwin points out:

Emily Grierson "plays" creatively by breaking down paternal and societal restraint. She subverts the Law of the Father. Within her own physical space, the bedroom, she subverts the culturally defined signifiers of marital love -the rose-shaded lights, the tarnished hairbrush, the discarded clothing. She thereby creates a play of signifiers which undermine their own referentiality, even within the repressive margins of patriarchal order -inside the Father's House.<sup>21</sup>

Besides not respecting the laws of the society in which she lives, the protagonist is also killing Mr Grierson by poisoning Homer who has become a father substitute. In this way the love-hate binomial will always be firmly anchored in a tale in which a lonely female succeeds in revenging herself on the masculine authority figure to whom her emotional reactions have been limited in a forceful and tragic way.

This story, that opens with the disappearance of the protagonist, closes with the idea of death, which consequently imprisons Miss Emily in a tragic circle from which she is not able to escape. The last of the Griersons has lived such an isolated lonely life, with such a lack

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19. "Colloquies at Nagano Seminar," in Robert A. Jelliffe, *Faulkner at Nagano* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1966, 1st edition 1956), 71.

20. Paradoxically, and as Karl E. Zink points out, it is precisely the attempt to hold back chronological time and the changes this brings that leads to the appearance of death in the work of an author who saw man as "the creature of change" ("Flux and the Frozen Moment: The Imagery of Stasis in Faulkner's Prose," *PMLA* 71 [1956]: 301). In this way, Miss Emily is shown as an obstinate fighter who, from the very first moment, has lost the battle against time. This resistance on the part of the character is particularly heroic in the Faulknerian universe, where time is conceived as duration, flow or constant movement that eludes any kind domination or categorization (see *Lion in the Garden*, eds. James B. Meriwether & Michael Millgate, 255).

21. *The Feminine and Faulkner: Reading (Beyond) Sexual Difference* (Knoxville: Tennessee UP, 199), 26.

of communication that only her father, and after death his corpse, have been with her. At all times her surroundings have been hostile: her family, her neighbours, her strong class consciousness and the passing of time have all contributed to her isolation. Just like so many of the women (Miss Rosa Coldfield, Miss Jenny, Addie Bundren) who populate the Faulknerian universe, Miss Emily Grierson represents an aspect of one of the most fundamental conflicts in the writings of this author: "the whole burden of man's history of man's impossible heart's desire", the impossibility of true self-realization for humankind when they feel themselves imprisoned by an oppressive society.

## 2. "DRY SEPTEMBER"

"Dry September" is the story of a desperate woman whose only escape from the indifference of those around her is to start the rumour that she has been raped by an innocent negro who ends up being lynched. Obviously, the strength of the lie which the character invents, the results of its being spread around, are not caused by its feasibility but by the kind of lie it is. The mere idea that a white woman has been "stained" by a black man, clouds the reasoning of other white men who, as William J. Cash and Louise Westling point out, fully identify their idea of a southern lady "with the very notion of the South itself".<sup>22</sup> The perpetrators of the lynching are not defending either the sexual liberty or the honour of the spinster; what they are defending is the idea of white supremacy in a country where they fear for its continuance due to the sterility and lack of stability there.

Just like "A Rose for Emily" this story deals with the problematic relationship between the people of Jefferson and a mature, single woman. As we shall see, the loneliness of Miss Emily Grierson has a lot in common with that of Miss Minnie Cooper, something attributable, to a certain extent, to the fact that Faulkner wrote them quite close together in time. Moreover, the two texts are both divided into five parts, in which the consequences of the isolation of the female character, subjected to the aggressive *voyeurism* of those around her, are described. If in Miss Emily's case the external hostility led the protagonist to a homicidal neurosis, for Miss Minnie the surrounding animosity leads the character to hysteria, which in an indirect way is murderous. But in spite of all these coincidences, these two characters also differ in certain ways. Miss Grierson, the aristocrat, showed an energetic pride which was a challenge to the curiosity of her fellow town dwellers. Miss Cooper, a member of the comfortable middle class, is going to be ruined in public, much to the delight of her neighbours.<sup>23</sup>

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22. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage, 1969, 1st edition 1941), 118. Westling mentions this topic at the beginning of her chapter "The Blight of Southern Womanhood". In it this critic analyses both the identification between woman and land, typical of the Southern society, and the utilization of these ladies, whose virtues ought to be praised in public, to divert the attention of the inhabitants of this area from pressing problems such as slavery and racism (*Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O' Connor* [Athens: Georgia UP, 1985], 8-9). In accordance with these ideas, Miss Minnie would be a representative of the most problematical questions of the Southern reality at that time.

23. "A Rose for Emily" was published in 1930. "Dry September" appeared in *Scribner's*



This story also takes place in Jefferson, Mississippi. After several months of drought, the town is ablaze with a nervous tension which brings the townspeople to a high degree of frustration. It is September, a suffocatingly hot, dry September which affects the judgement of the members of this community. The year, "roughly" 1929 according to John K. Crane, makes it clear that the characters who live in this suffocating and cloudy universe are no longer young.<sup>24</sup> The third person narrator observes the group from outside and shows no signs of belonging to the community of which he "speaks". Once more, Jefferson spies on a solitary neighbour, Miss Minnie Cooper, who is desperately looking for a little affection without ever finding it.

An unsatisfied sexuality is the cause of the inhuman and violent behaviour of some of the members of this community. Indeed, this is true not only of those characters who discuss the supposed rape with an almost pornographic interest but also of those who accompany this woman with the sole objective of spying on her. They isolate her and make her the victim of a false veneration and of an aggression which is the result of their dissatisfaction and their frustration. Mimi Reisel Gladstein analyses what happens to Miss Minnie from this same point of view:

In the short story "Dry September" woman is used as just... an icon... [McLendon] does not refer specifically to Miss Minnie Cooper, the woman whose virtue was supposedly assaulted. Her virtue, as we learn later in the story, has been questionable since her affair...

Virtue, character, and individual circumstance are irrelevant when woman loses her human identity and becomes an object of reverence. In this situation the distance between the sexes is widened. As the venerated object, woman is put on a pedestal, and pedestals are a special kind of prison. Those on them may be held in awe, but they are also kept apart from the human community.<sup>25</sup>

Just so, the town dwellers say they want to defend the honour of this character while they are really showing their animosity towards her, experiencing a sadistic joy when they remind the spinster of the present prosperity of a former suitor:

... they would tell her about him, about how well he looked, and how they heard that he was prospering in the city, *watching with bright, secret eyes* her haggard, bright face (p. 175, italics mine).

Moreover, the community shows its voyeurism on several occasions. On the one hand, the women who accompany her insist on knowing all the details of the supposed crime with a type of anticipatory glee:

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([LXXXIX]: 49-56) in January, 1931.

24. "But the Days Grow Short: A Reinterpretation of Faulkner's 'Dry September'," *Twentieth Century Literature* 31 (1985): 412.

25. *The Indestructible Woman in Faulkner, Hemingway and Steinbeck* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986, 1st edition 1974): 17-8.

“Do you feel strong enough to go out? “ they said, *their eyes bright too, with a dark glitter*. “When you have time to get over the shock, you must tell us what happened. What he said and did; everything.” (p. 180, italics mine).

On the other, the men, who had lost interest in the once popular lady, (“the sitting and lounging men did not even follow her with their eyes any more” [p. 175]), once more consider her worthy of their attention, incited by the morbid curiosity which the mere idea of the rape causes in them:

“That’s the one: see?”... even the young men tipped their hats and followed with their eyes the motion of her hips and legs when she passed. (pp. 180-81).

But the moment in which the lack of compassion of those surrounding the character becomes most evident is precisely when they discover her in the middle of an attack of hysteria. On this most embarrassing occasion, Miss Minnie’s friends, instead of showing affection and loyalty, spend their time looking for evidence of the fact that the spinster is aging (“smoothing her hair, examining it for gray” [p. 182]), whilst, once more, they enjoy watching the spectacle of her hysterical behaviour, (“their eyes darkly aglitter, secret and passionate”).<sup>26</sup> As Janice Townley Moore so rightly points out “the so-called friends of Minnie Cooper... become serpents”.<sup>27</sup> Sure enough, the protagonist is alone in the middle of this group, whose lack of solidarity and support is made evident through the sibilant sounds with which they whisper and invade the privacy of Miss Minnie. In this way the narrator makes a comparison between the prying friends of the spinster and the biblical representation of evil, the serpent: “their voices sounded like long hovering sighs of hissing exultation” (p. 181); “Shhhhhhhhh! Shhhhhhhhh!” (p. 182). But the sibilant and muttering aggression of which Miss Cooper falls victim is not the only aggression which exists. Ironically, she is much more merciless than all the others in the violence which her accusation of rape causes to Will Mayes, and which results in his death. As Günter Von Bernd points out:

Die Wahl eines Negers als tätiges Werkzeug ihrer imaginativen sexuellen Befriedigung ist dabei dreifach motiviert: Einmal ist damit gewährleistet, daß ihre Aussage nicht bezweifelt wird...; darüber hinaus wird der Eindruck der ihr so attestierten sexuellen Attraktivität noch verstärkt durch die Tatsache, daß ein Neger mit dem Vergewaltigung einer weißen Frau unweigerlich sein Leben riskiert, d. h., in Minnies spekulativen Denken: der Preis muß sich für ihn gelohnt haben.<sup>28</sup>

26. This scene could be an excellent example of the feminine prototype described by Philip M. Weinstein when he analyses the lonely situation typical of Faulknerian characters: “Conceived as gregarious beings, the women are not often portrayed as lonely. Yet they are solitary inasmuch as the narrative neither proposes a discourse that might articulate their subjective self-understanding nor dramatizes their sharing their inner lives in each other’s company” (*Faulkner’s Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992], 17).

27. “Faulkner’s ‘Dry September,’” *Explicator* 41 (1983): 47.

28. “The choice of a negro as a way achieving her imaginary sexual satisfaction has three dimensions: on the one hand it is a guarantee that her accusation will not be called into

Just so, if the spinster has chosen Mayes for her sexual fantasy it is because he, on the one hand, shows that Miss Minnie can still powerfully attract the opposite sex, as this attraction causes a dangerously aggressive act. On the other hand, it was easy to foist this act on him, as everybody shows great willingness to believe in the guilt of the negro who, once lynched, nobody will try to defend. As far the reasons which cause the character to make this accusation, these are made evident in the tale itself. The barber listens to the violent and obscene remarks of his clients about the rape calmly, and suggests an explanation for the behaviour of this person who lives exclusively with women ("her invalid mother and a thin, sallow, unflagging aunt" [p. 173]) with the following words: "I leave it to you fellows if them ladies that get old without getting married don't have notions that a man can't-" (p. 170).

In spite of the fact that scandalous rumours (rumours which are usually incorrect) have it that Miss Minnie is an adultress, she has probably never had relations with a man ("a woman that never-" [p. 170]), which emphasises her loneliness even more. The aggression and isolation which she is subjected to together with the sterility of her mature years, causes the spinster to deny reality and insist on returning to the past, which alienates her even more. This is shown immediately before in this story, in the section dealing with the notoriety she had enjoyed (II), "the crest of the town's social life" (p. 174), but now she has become invisible for the town. Even her name, Minnie, seems to imply the narrowness and smallness to which she has been reduced as a person, surrounded by a paralytic mother and a dominant aunt, enclosed by an oppressive atmosphere which mutilates her. Her existence boils down to an empty waiting for the day to pass, without any other diversion except one or the other fruitless excursion:

... each morning, between ten and eleven she would appear at the porch in a lace-trimmed boudoir cap, to sit swinging in the porch swing until noon. After dinner she lay down for a while, until the afternoon began to cool. Then, in one of the three or four new voile dresses which she had each summer, she would go downtown to spend the afternoon in the stores with other ladies, where they would handle the goods and haggle over the prices in cold, immediate voices, without any intention of buying. (p. 173).

Imprisoned in such a monotonous existence, it is not surprising that the character looks for a way out of her terrible existence: a hysterical fantasy and exhibitionism. Instead of showing her genitals, the repressed spinster invents a provocative sexual story, rape by a negro, so as to get back the attention she has lost. This desire to attract attention from others shows itself in the showy dresses which she always wears (and whose "furious unreality" [p. 175] shows that they are a way of escaping from sterile reality), and in the scene where the character puts on "her sheerest underthings" in front of her female friends (p. 180). In her frenzy, Miss Minnie loses all moral scruples and enjoys herself "as children eat ice-cream" (p. 180), after

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question...; moreover her sexual attractiveness is emphasized by the fact that a negro undoubtedly risks his life by raping a white woman, that is to say, in Minnie's fantasizing, for the negro this high price to pay would have been worthwhile". My translation ("William Faulkner's 'Dry September'," *Die Neueren Sprachen* 22 [1973]: 612).

being responsible for the annihilation of a person who, ironically, works in an ice factory.<sup>29</sup> Paul Rogalus points out that in this final scene, “Minnie is trembling but more from excitement at being the center of attention than from guilt or shame”.<sup>30</sup> Sure enough, after getting back her lost centrality the protagonist shows her exultant excitement in the way she trembles feverishly:

As she dressed for supper on that Saturday evening, her own flesh felt like fever. *Her hands trembled* among the hooks and eyes, and her eyes had a feverish look, and her hair swirled crisp and crackling under the comb...

As they neared the square *she began to tremble again*, walking with her head up...

They entered the square, she in the center of the group, fragile in her fresh dress. *She was trembling worse.* (p. 180, italics mine).

Such reactions lead to the conclusion that Miss Minnie is suffering from a neurotic/hysterical anxiety which, according to psychoanalytical theories shows itself in “a single, intensely developed symptom, ... a tremor, a vertigo, a palpitation of the heart”.<sup>31</sup> People with this type of illness are usually those who systematically repress their sexuality, that is to say, “people in whom violent sexual excitations meet with no sufficient discharge”.<sup>32</sup> Such is the case of the protagonist who, in her apparent celibacy, finds no outlet for the powerful sexual stimulus of imagining herself and of being considered by others a rape victim. In the end, this “libidinal” impulse, so often repressed, will have as its only escape valve the trembling and guffaws which so intrigue those around Miss Minnie.

Split in two (the Miss Minnie who invents and annihilates and she who observes these fantasies amazedly) and totally separated from those around her, the “utterly self-centered” Miss Minnie becomes more and more a part of an imaginary universe in which only she can be at the centre.<sup>33</sup> The passing of time has made this person lose ground (p. 174) in a society where the only activity of young, single women is to catch a man that they must attract with their physical beauty or social position. Miss Minnie, who has never stood out in these two aspects of her possible “career” as a wife (“on the slender side of ordinary looking” [p. 174] and “of comfortable people -not the best in Jefferson,” [p. 173]), is the last to find out that she has missed the boat. When she contrasts her single status and idleness with her old friends' marriages and maternity, the protagonist is alienated from the ominous world that surrounds her with a “furious repudiation of truth” (p. 174). This self-exclusion from reality is crystallized in her escapist recreation: the cinema and whiskey.<sup>34</sup> It is precisely in the cinema

29. The irony is also underlined by the fact that Miss Minnie's friend apply ice to her temples to calm down her hysterical breakdown (pp. 181-82).

30. “Faulkner's ‘Dry September,’” *Explicator* 48 (1990): 211.

31. *Sigmund Freud: Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Vol. I, 449.

32. *Introductory Lectures*, 450.

33. Max Putzel, *Genius of Place: William Faulkner's Triumphant Beginnings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985), 226.

34. Thus, the cinema plays a double role in the short story, especially if we take into account William B. Bache's opinion, according to which “Dry September” is a parody of “the Hollywood movie in which the honor of the young beautiful girl is avenged by the handsome, virile hero.” (“Moral Awareness in ‘Dry September,’” *Faulkner Studies* 3 (1954), 54).

or “miniature fairyland” (p. 181), where the frustrations of the spinster are most obviously joined, and sex and the corresponding fantasies are used to alleviate her dissatisfaction:

The lights flicked away; the screen glowed silver, and soon life began to unfold, beautiful and passionate and sad, while still the young men and girls entered, scented and sibilant in the half dark, their paired backs in silhouette delicate and sleek, their slim, quick bodies awkward, divinely young, while beyond them the silver dream accumulated, inevitably on and on. (p. 181).

By a reference to one of Shakespeare's plays, *Othello*, that Faulkner had already used in *The Sound and the Fury*, a probable sexual game is suggested for the young couples who come into the cinema when the lights have gone out. The words “paired backs” (p. 181), which describe these silhouettes remind us of the “the beast with two backs” with which Iago refers to the sexual relationship between Desdemona and her husband. The images on the screen and these young boys and girls who come here looking for a dark place away from startled looks increases Miss Minnie's excitement even more. In this short scene, she seems to suffer from the same voyeurism as the community in which she lives.<sup>35</sup> So, she breaks out into loud guffaws:

She began to laugh. In trying to suppress it, it made more noise than ever; heads began to turn. Still laughing, her friends raised her and led her out, and she stood at the curb, laughing on a high, sustained note, until the taxi came and they helped her in. (p. 181)

This shows her unhinged frustration and split personality. No illusion, neither the filmed type nor that which she invents, can alleviate her loneliness and frustration. The nudity with which her attack of hysteria ends shows that behind the rosy appearances (“pink voile” [p. 181]), a complex tangle of lonely, unsatisfied desires is hidden, condemned by a society that does not allow women any other source of affection except that sanctified by its institutions.

The protagonists of the two tales, “A Rose for Emily” and “Dry September” are, therefore, victims of an established patriarchal order that also turns these very same men into executioners condemning these women to failure. Both Miss Emily and Miss Cooper, marked by the stigma of femaleness and singleness, decide to play a different role to that which has been assigned to them and so become marginalised criminals within a society which allows them no other way out except isolation and violence. The male characters that surround them,

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35. The sublimation of sexual activity implied in such a conduct is, as we saw in “A Rose for Emily”, typical of Faulkner's heroes and heroines. Thus, in *Sanctuary*, we find a character, Popeye, whose very name makes reference to the obsessive voyeurism to which he is reduced by his impotence. The words employed by André Bleikasten to describe the behaviour of the protagonist of the novel can be applied to Miss Minnie's attitude: “Voyeurism and violence are his surrogates for the sexual act he is unable to perform. Barred from reciprocity his maimed and morbid sexuality can be gratified only at a distance... and the closest he comes to orgasm is either passively, by way of painful exacerbation of its impossibility, or actively, through sadistic infliction of pain on others.” (*The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from 'The Sound and the Fury' to 'Light in August'* [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990], 259).

who are incapable of reducing them to a precise categorization, isolate these females who, as Simone de Beauvoir said, are for them, *l'autre*,<sup>36</sup> an unknown and impenetrable world, which they, as men, do not dare to explore.

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36. *Le deuxième sexe* 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 438.

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