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‘ Instructor’s Name’

‘ Subject’

A Rose for Emily

‘ A rose or Emily’ by William Faulkner, is one of the most critically acclaimed and widely debated short stories in modern literature. It is a story, of an aristocratic lady of the rural south, which happens during the early years of the twentieth century. In a sequence of flash backs the narrator conveys how the very uptight and mighty Emily Grierson lived a secluded life after her father’s death and how in the end when she dies, the townspeople find out that she in fact had killed her boyfriend, and was living with his corpse for forty odd years.

This short story is one of the widely anthologized works and easily the most popular work of Faulkner. The reason this work has fascinated so many scholars across the past century is, not only because of its intriguing story line, but also due to its various other components such as, the anonymity of the narrator and deliberate distortion of chronology. One such critique of this story includes the article named ‘ A romance to Kill for’ written by Thomas Dilworth. In this article, Dilworth argues that the townspeople (of whom the narrator is a part of) knew about the murder when it happened, but they chose to remain silent and thus they become co-conspirators in this murder. This essay aims at proving his point to be wrong, and establishing that the narrator or the townspeople did not know about the crime before Emily’s death.

Dilworth is right when he says the narrator speaks for the town of Jefferson, as his views reflect the common mindset of a Southern town in the 1930s.

His argument that the townspeople were aware that Emily murdered Homer Barron is based on, three important observations made by him. First Dilworth is of the opinion that the townspeople see the old southern values reflected in the Griersons, and they wanted the entire family to adhere to those values. He observes that, Homer's relationship with Emily was seen as a deviation from those traditional class values and that the townspeople resented this romance. He says,

“ the townspeople had wanted, in their dealings with Emily, to preserve the values of the old South embodied in Emily as a representative of idealized southern womanhood” (Dilworth, 1999)

But if we go through the story, nowhere in the narration we get a feeling that the townspeople admired the Griersons for their social stature. They were in awe of them and had a hint of respect about their past history, but never in the story do we get an idea that the narrator wanted the Griersons to act in the way they did – high and mighty. In some part of the story we also get a feeling that the town resented this behavior from the Griersons. As the narrator says the family was a tradition, a duty and an obligation to the town. We see that the house of Emily was considered an eyesore, attempts were made to make her pay taxes and the narrator also tells at one point that “ Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really are.” (Faulkner, 1930) Thus, the town did not herald Rosy as a champion of the old values like Dilworth says, but considered her to be an obligation and put up with her behavior just out of respect to her family name.

The second assumption by Dilworth is that, the townspeople did not want Emily to marry Homer, and this pressurized her to end her relationship with

him. But we see that the town was in fact divided in its opinion about her relationship. While some older women did not see it as a good match and asked the Minister and her cousins to persuade her, the younger folks of the town were happy for her. The narrator empathizes with Emily when her father does not allow her to court young men of the town. He says that the men of the town did not interfere in the affair she had with Homer, and many of them seem to anticipate the marriage, saying that Emily will somehow persuade Homer to marry her. The narrator says many of us have become Emily's allies in fighting the cousins. Also, Homer on his part is portrayed as a person who is interested in men and not interested in marriage. So the reason behind them not marrying may well be Homer's attitude, as Emily does not come upon as a woman who would sacrifice her love, just to please a section of the society to which she belongs.

The third reason put forth by Dilworth is that the narrator and townspeople knew that Emily bought arsenic, and that she did not disclose the reason behind the purchase. He says this knowledge should have been enough for them to put two and two together, and come to a conclusion that Homer has been murdered, particularly in the wake of the fact that he was not seen in the town after that. Of all the reasons presented by Dilworth, this seems the most credible and warrants a close study. But there is a perfect explanation for this behavior of the townspeople too in the story. For one thing we do not have an exact chronology as to when the arsenic was bought and when Homer was last seen. Homer, on his part was not a part of the town, and before this incident he already has once left the town for few days and returned back. So his absence should not surprise anybody as he clearly was

the wandering type. Lastly, every person in the town seems to have assumed that Emily bought the poison for herself and that she was contemplating suicide. All the data in their hand logically pointed to the conclusion of the suicide than a murder. Nobody would have guessed a traditional South lady would murder her lover in a house, which also has a resident servant, and live with the corpse for forty years. The theory of the suicide had more weight-age, given the seclusion and solitude suffered by Emily.

Dilworth's comparison of Emily to Queen Victoria and his assumption that she had a sexual relationship with his servant, are just his guesses and has no proof elsewhere in the story. Thus, it would be safe to assume that the townspeople had no prior knowledge of the murder till the day they opened the upstairs room, and I put my case to a rest.

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