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Faulkner's "Black" Emily

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Abstract: This article explores the overlooked racial complexities in William Faulkner's prominent short story "A Rose for Emily" (1930) through a close examination of the protagonist Emily's characterization. While Emily's racial identity has been widely assumed by scholars to be White, evidence from Faulkner's writing suggests he subtly depicted Emily as a figure navigating fluid racial boundaries. Faulkner's precise description of Emily's "pepper-and-salt iron-gray" hair suggests concealed racial mixing, as hair color symbolizes inherited identity across his works. The strategic juxtaposition of Emily's confined existence parallels with Black townspeople and implies shared restrictions under racial hierarchy. Interweaving motifs of unpaid debts metaphorically links Emily to Faulkner's broader exploration of obligations between races. Her profound bond with the Black servant Tobe, including angelic imagery and alternating visibility, intimates deeper connections beyond Black and White. These textual clues subtly encode Emily's uncertain mixed-race background and fluid identity between clearly defined boundaries. Situating "A Rose for Emily" within Faulkner's complex representation of race illustrates an enduring thematic preoccupation emerging in this early 1930 canonical work. Uncovering overlooked racial dimensions provides new insights that enrich interpretation and highlight Faulkner's nuanced, visionary approach to portraying racial ambiguity. The analysis sheds new light on both this seminal text and Faulkner's pioneering portrayal of identity in the charged context of Southern race relations.

William Faulkner's most widely read short story, "A Rose for Emily" (1930), and its protagonist Emily have long fascinated literary scholars. For decades, scholars have delved into what vision occupied Faulkner's mind concerning this mysterious character when creating this story. Surprisingly, despite extensive analysis, Emily's racial identity has rarely been considered. As early as 1968, James Strunk notes intriguing parallels between Emily and the title character of Edgar Allan Poe's 1831 poem, "To Helen." Both figures are portrayed as statue-like images viewed as if through windows, representing the glory and grandeur of either Greece and Rome or the Old South (11). Paul Levitt points out similarities between Emily and "Miss Emily Hardcastle" in John Crowe Ransom's poem, including their shared name, each having a suitor named Baron, and the use of an anonymous townspeople's point of view (92). Blotner's biography refers to Faulkner's cousin Mary Louise Neilson, who had married a "Captain Jack Barron, a Yankee who had come into Oxford...when the streets had been paved" (631-632), as a possible inspiration. Peter Hays introduces the possibility of an Emily Dickinson connection, drawing multiple parallels between the two Emilys, including their white attire, their withdrawal from public appearances,

overprotective fathers, and “their shared fascination with death” (107-108). Gary Kriewald suggests Queen Victoria as another potential source of inspiration for Emily. He highlights the striking similarities in their physical attributes in later years (6), their similar reaction to the death of loved ones (8), and their unique positions in society, which seem to place them “above the laws” (5). Scott Williams further suggests another European origin in stating “Emily is Baudelaire’s Idol” (73), noting that both have powerful eyes (73) and exist within a context of stagnation (74). Irrespective of whether they are fictitious characters or real people, all the sources referred to are distinctly “White.” This point is underscored by Romine Scott, who asserts that “Emily is represented in the text as white” and it is “impossible to read her as anything else” (483). Scholars overwhelmingly accept Emily as White, missing opportunities to reexamine her identity.

Mario Materassi’s study is the first to suggest that it is highly possible that Faulkner had a mixed-race image in mind while crafting the story. Materassi points out striking resemblances between Emily and Madame Aubert-Rocque, a “free mulatto” in “Cane River Portrait” (1928), an article by Faulkner’s roommate, William Spratling, with whom he stayed in New Orleans. Specifically, both women live in poor surroundings, have crayon portrait(s) on their room walls, and represent a former generation in conflict with the subsequent generation. In addition, both works end with a similarly distinctive residual clue, namely, “a heavy streak of gray dust” (Spratling 418) and “a long strand of iron-gray hair” (130).¹ Although Materassi does not explicitly state that Madame Aubert-Rocque is the direct source of Emily, the presence of these compelling similarities provides a strong indication that Faulkner likely had a mixed-blood image in mind when creating the character of Emily. These connections warrant further exploration into the racial dimensions subtly encoded in Faulkner’s works.

This article reveals the overlooked racial complexities in Faulkner’s prominent short story “A Rose for Emily” through a close textual analysis that uncovers clues subtly encoded in his writing. Specifically, the analysis points to Emily’s profound liminal identity as a figure navigating fluid racial boundaries. This interpretation emerges from examining key pieces of evidence, including Faulkner’s precise description of Emily’s “pepper-and-salt iron-gray” hair, his strategic juxtaposition of Emily’s confined existence in parallel to Black townspeople, and the depth of her bond with the Black servant Tobe. By revealing Faulkner’s early nuanced portrayal of racial ambiguity and identity in this canonical 1930 work, the analysis provides new dimensions to our understanding. Situating “A Rose for Emily” within the context of Faulkner’s broader complex representation of race illustrates an enduring thematic preoccupation that shaped his literary approach from the outset.

The Telltale Hair

The meticulous attention Faulkner lavishes on Emily provides evocative clues unlocking the uncertainties of identity and racial coding in her characterization. The hidden truths of lineage are only perceptible through close examination. It is important to be aware that hair was integral to the overall story from the beginning, as Faulkner confirmed that “a strand of hair” had inspired the entire work.² In an interview, Faulkner stated:

[“A Rose for Emily”] came from a picture of the strand of hair on the pillow. It was a ghost story.

Simply a picture of a strand of hair on the pillow in the abandoned house. (Gwynn 26)

This makes the hair’s climactic revelation even more resonant, as a secret encoded in Emily finally comes

to light after her death. The hermetic, decaying bedroom becomes a crime scene laid bare, with the accusing hair at last exposing Emily's long-hidden connections to death and murder. Faulkner's brilliant inspiration from a lone visual detail proves profoundly consequential. Quietly weaving through the story, the hair symbolizes the lingering intersections of intimacy, lineage, and criminality that haunt Emily even after her death. From its first imagery to its climactic return, hair forms a narrative thread-binding identity and doomed secrecy that runs throughout Emily's characterization.

The careful description of hair, and especially hair color, in Faulkner's works is always intentional. Specifically, Faulkner deliberately links a person's origin to the color of their hair. A prime example arises in "Hair" (1931), the story immediately following "A Rose for Emily" within the "The Village" section of Faulkner's short story collection. Immediately at the beginning of this story, the protagonist is described as an orphan with hair color that is "not blonde and not brunette" (131). As with her hair color, her origin is ambiguous and remains a mystery until the end of the story. Similarly in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Faulkner portrays Henry as having hair "halfway between his father's red and Ellen's black" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 61), symbolizing the blending of blood inherited from his parents. This choice of hair color serves as a visual representation of the integration of parental heritage.

Across texts, Faulkner utilizes precise coloration of hair to represent inherited identity. Faulkner's precise detailing of Emily's "pepper-and-salt iron-gray" hair (127) follows this motif, and intimates concealed racial mixing. The mixed gray coloration suggests an intertwining and blending of Black and White. Just as hair bore the weight of inherited traits for other Faulkner characters, Emily's gray strands harbor secrets about her shadowy mixed-race background. Through repeated descriptions of Emily's distinctive hair, Faulkner subtly implies that she has Black ancestry, encoding racial fluidity in her characterization. While her racial identity remains intentionally obscured, the hair functions as a symbolic key, unlocking an interpretation of Emily as a figure navigating the liminal spaces between clearly defined racial boundaries in the post-Civil War South. Faulkner's brilliant original inspiration from a single hair is profoundly symbolic, as this resonant visual detail quietly amplifies Emily's hidden complexities. The power of her hair harbors coded mysteries about identity and the story's secrets.

Debt and Obligation

Faulkner further subtly weaves elements of Blackness into the narrative surrounding Emily, drawing telling parallels between her situation and that of the Black townspeople, suggesting her uncertain racial status. Faulkner emphasizes these parallels first through syntactic juxtaposition when introducing the colonel "Colonel Sartoris, the mayor—he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron—remitted her taxes" (119-120). Notably, Faulkner inserts two dashes before noting that Sartoris also remitted Emily's taxes. As Terry Heller observes, this purposeful syntax encourages readers to see Sartoris's actions as related (305). By presenting these two edicts in the same sentence, Faulkner deftly implies a similarity between Emily's situation and that of Black women. The well-crafted textual juxtaposition hints at Emily's own obscured, but intertwined, racial identity beneath the social hierarchy. Through nuanced literary techniques, Faulkner layers in textual clues that signal Emily's uncertain status and liminal position between clearly defined racial boundaries.

Faulkner then strengthens the racial parallel between Emily and Black women later in the text. He notes, Emily "did not appear on the street for almost six months" (127) after her father's death. This line

intentionally mirrors the edict limiting Black women's movement by utilizing the same phrasing about enforced absence from the public sphere. Through these tactical textual juxtapositions, Faulkner intimates a sense of shared confinement between Emily and the Black townspeople. Just as the edict restricts Black women's movement, Emily's confinement to her house and prolonged absence from public view evokes the limited freedoms imposed on Black people under Sartoris's edicts. Faulkner emphasizes Emily's disappearance from public view by depicting how she "no longer went out at all" (120) and "people hardly saw her at all" (122). The strategic textual parallels and repetition suggest Emily's own uncertain racial status and liminal position between the White and Black worlds within the social hierarchy. Though never made explicit, these suggest Emily exists in an interstitial space, trapped between Black and White. Through masterful juxtaposition, Faulkner implies profound yet obscured ties that bind Emily to Blackness, further revealing her identity to be fluid and undefined by traditional boundaries.

Faulkner further deepens the connection between Emily and the Black townspeople by threading motifs of unpaid debts and obligations throughout the narrative, notably centering on taxes. When first introduced, Emily is described as "a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" (119). The repeated words "duty" and "obligation" portray Emily as someone the town is indebted to and must repay, like an outstanding debt. This unpaid debt becomes clear when Faulkner notes that "Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town, as a matter of business, preferred this way of repaying" by forgiving her taxes (120). By interweaving language around obligations and debts, Faulkner subtly links Emily's narrative to his broader exploration of relationships between White and Black people in this setting.

In his later work *Intruder in the Dust*, another murder mystery involving racial issues and mysterious deaths within Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Faulkner revisits the motif of debt and obligation relating to racial dynamics, especially the relationship between Black and White people.³ In *Intruder in the Dust*, the young White boy Chick Mallison owes his life to the Black man Lucas Beauchamp. This unpaid debt is fulfilled as Chick later aids Lucas against wrongful charges and potential lynching. In a 1948 letter about his conceptualization of *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner articulates that the "theme is more relationship between Negro and white," specifically explaining that Whites "owe and must pay responsibility to the Negro" (Blotner 262). This emphasizes a one-directional relationship from White to Black, exactly like what the townspeople do to Emily. By revisiting the motif of obligation, Faulkner implies profound, if fraught, bonds between White and Black people. When woven through Emily's narrative, this reoccurring motif signals her uncertain identity and status within the charged racial hierarchies of the South, reinforcing Faulkner's vision of her character existing between clearly defined boundaries.

Emily and Tobe

While Tobe is the only character in the story whose race is explicitly mentioned as Black, his complex connection to Emily reveals deeper racial dynamics. As Emily's "combined gardener and cook" (119) and her sole companion for decades, previous studies have largely overlooked the significant role and depth of Tobe, with few articles dedicated to exploring him. Stafford stands out as the first scholar to underscore Tobe's importance. However, he suggests Tobe is merely a contrast to Emily in that Emily's movement is toward decay whereas Tobe "offers a counter movement of purposeful activity" (452).

Dilworth places greater emphasis on Emily's potential "violation of racial-sexual taboo" and her possible sexual relationship with Tobe (256). Similarly, Argiro suggests that "Faulkner's repetitive use of Tobe's 'going in and out'...with the 'market basket' represents a similarly double-voiced trope, perhaps decoding a hidden yet present sexual relationship between Emily and Tobe" (458). Kartiganer aligns with this perspective, noting that Tobe's presence in the story has sexual resonance by concluding that "[i]t is the absence of any consideration of the possible impropriety of Emily's decades-long relation with her sole companion that becomes the elephant in the room" (482). Overall, while these studies recognize Tobe as important, they do not offer a clear or sufficiently nuanced interpretation of his role or significance. The relationships between Emily and Tobe merit exploration but reducing it to transgressive desires overlooks more complex textual implications.

Faulkner establishes a deliberate parallel between Tobe and Emily, implying an interdependent relationship that blurs color lines. Deleted passages from early drafts provide insights into their profound bond. Striking physical similarities emerge through recurring angelic imagery linking the pair aesthetically. Faulkner repeatedly describes Tobe as "haloed like an angel" when at Emily's bedside (Railton Manuscripts).⁴ This directly mirrors the earlier description of Emily's cropped hair giving her a "a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows" (124). The textual mirroring implies a deeper symbolic connection as if both stand with one foot in the physical realm and one in the spiritual. Most intriguingly, the deleted passage presents Tobe as "a secret and unfathomable soul behind the death-mask of an ape and haloed like an angel" (Railton Manuscripts). While apes are physical beings, angels are spiritual. Tobe is a new "mixed-blood" being, combining the animal and the spiritual to the extent of transcending fixed identities. Through resonant angelic motifs, Faulkner transcends dividing lines, depicting a sacred union between Emily and Tobe that powerfully defies expectations.

Faulkner also draws parallels between Emily and Tobe's comparable life circumstances, further binding them through shared fate. After her father's death, Emily is left with only her family home; she becomes "a pauper" (123), is troubled by taxes, and is called "poor Emily" (125-126). Additionally, according to the will Emily signed before Colonel Sartoris, the house is to be left to Tobe after her death. However, Tobe gives up his inheritance and chooses to live in the poor house. In this decision, Tobe mirrors Emily's circumstances, voluntarily embracing the role of poor Tobe. Faulkner's deliberate repetition of "poor" serves as another means to emphasize the profound connection between Emily and Tobe. Through these narrative strategies, Faulkner underscores the profound, unbounded connection between Tobe and Emily. Their parallel marginalization and mystical characterization dissolve boundaries, highlighting deeper connections beyond White and Black.

Moreover, Faulkner implies Emily and Tobe's profound interconnectedness through their alternating visibility, like two halves of one being. Typically, the reclusive Emily remains inside while Tobe moves through town. However, when Homer arrives, their roles reverse - Emily emerges into public while Tobe fades into the background. Faulkner implies their complementarity through this strategic paralleling of their movements. When one retreats from view, the other surfaces in relief. Although Emily's racial identity is obscured, her inextricable link to Tobe intimates ties to blackness beneath her white exterior. Just as Tobe's identity as a black man shapes his reality, it also reflects Emily's liminal status between the White and Black worlds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a close analysis of textual evidence in “A Rose for Emily” reveals Faulkner’s nuanced portrayal of racial ambiguity encoded in Emily’s characterization. Faulkner’s precise attention to Emily’s gray hair color, strategic textual juxtapositions with Black townspeople, and rich characterization of her bond with Tobe all intimate Emily’s own obscured mixed-race identity and uncertain social positioning between White and Black worlds. By teasing out these subtle textual clues, Faulkner’s vision of Emily’s liminal racial status becomes apparent, adding new depth to this canonical work. The obscured racial dimensions open new interpretations, as Emily contains complexities and contradictions that defy surface assumptions about identity in the post-Civil War South.

Situating this canonical short story within the broader context of Faulkner’s complex literary exploration of racial dynamics illustrates how “A Rose for Emily” harbored an enduring thematic preoccupation with race that shaped his approach from the outset. Uncovering the overlooked racial dimensions provides new insights that enrich interpretation and highlight Faulkner’s visionary, nuanced approach to portraying racial ambiguity in his seminal texts. The analysis reveals early evidence of Faulkner’s lifelong project of illuminating the complexities of identity, lineage, and social statuses concerning racial hierarchies and boundaries.

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Notes

- 1 The quotations relating to Faulkner’s short stories without specific citations are all taken from *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (the full references are noted in Works Cited under Faulkner, William).
- 2 Howell, Clements, and John all pay attention to the role of Emily’s hair. While Howell suggests the hair was left there the night Emily murdered Homer Barron by eliminating the necrophilia from the story, Clements denies this assumption, see Howell 63 and Clements 147. John suggests the left of the hair is similar to a ritual gesture of grief and farewell at the corpse of a beloved person among the ancient Greeks, see 68.
- 3 Dussere argues that *Intruder in the Dust* presents the ideas of debt and repayment in the context of America’s troubled relationship with its past and national origins. It portrays slavery as a debt owed by whites to blacks that remains unpaid and emphasizes the difference in perspectives between the South and the North, see pp. 37-57.
- 4 This quotation and others concerning this source are cited from *Digital Yoknapatawpha*, a website for Faulkner’s works, so there is no specific page (the full references are noted in Works Cited under Railton, Stephen).

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