

Thematic Ambiguity in William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*

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Abstract: Literary texts often contain various types of ambiguities such as ambiguous word, ambiguous images, ambiguous theme and so on. Literary writings often contain maximum number of unambiguous words, images and symbols but at the same they may contain few ambiguous elements. Authors may do it deliberately in order to heighten readers' reading experience or, at times, such ambiguities emerge due to the vagueness that language contains. Whether ambiguity in literature is good or bad is a part of an unending discussion but thematic ambiguity in literary texts can certainly force us to develop an art of living amid uncertainties. We all know life situations can't be all the time explained in black and white terms. Life is complicated and society is full of such complications. William Faulkner, a Nobel laureate, beautifully illustrates how thematic ambiguity heightens readers' engagement with the text and forces them to read it many times for a better grasp. Not only that he teaches readers an art of living among uncertainties.

Keywords: Ambiguity, ambivalence, literary text

Usually in literary texts, authors try to draft their thesis statement and elaborate it with definitions and examples. Since literature is also a form of communication, what authors say should be clear and understandable. If writers create literary quicksand using words, such writings will certainly dander the readers. However many literary texts defy the above

generalizations. Betraying an ordinary reader's expectations, literary texts often contain various types of ambiguities such as ambiguous word, ambiguous image, ambiguous theme and so on. Literary writings often contain maximum number of unambiguous words, images and symbols but at the same they may contain few ambiguous elements. Authors may do it deliberately in order to heighten readers' reading experience or, at times, such ambiguities emerge due to the vagueness that language contains.

Writers weave complex layers of meaning in their texts using various literary devices and ambiguity is one among them. Sometimes ambiguity emerges in the text unbeknownst to its authors. At times it is deliberately created as a part of writer's craft. Whether ambiguity in literature is good or bad is a part of an unending discussion but thematic ambiguity in literary texts can certainly force us to develop an art of living amid uncertainties. We all know life situations can't be all the time explained in black and white terms. Life is complicated and society is full of such complications. Christoph Bode in "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity" categorically explains why thematic ambiguity in literary texts is important. He writes- the question is not how can we reduce, belittle or truncate a phenomenon so that it fits our theories and preconceptions, but how can we widen our concepts and ideas so that they embrace what we cannot yet understand (83). Thus authors at times may speak up about the unsolved mysteries or perennial debatable issues. They may not give us answers all the time and such writings devoid of answers or such ambivalent writings also do have their own significance. William Faulkner, a Nobel laureate, beautifully illustrates how thematic ambiguity heightens readers' engagement with the text and forces them to read it many times for a better grasp. Not only that he teaches readers an art of living among uncertainties.

A Rose for Emily, by William Faulkner, set in the town of Jefferson during the decades preceding and following the turn of the twentieth century, illustrates how an innocent girl Emily Grierson is driven to madness. For example, the patriarchal society depicted in the story dictates that the only acceptable way a young woman like Emily can escape from a selfish, domineering father is through marriage, and there is nothing the town can do about the fact that Mr. Grierson forbids Emily that escape. Jefferson's patriarchal culture also holds that a woman of Emily's rank must not work for a living. In such a context, Emily wouldn't be able to survive financially if she left her father's house without a husband to take care of her. In addition, much of the gossip and speculation about Emily, which contribute to her isolation, reveals the town's steadfast belief that the only acceptable behavior for a woman is behavior that accords with traditional gender roles. And surely patriarchal ideology contributes to Emily's apparent desperation to have a husband, and to do anything to keep him. *A Rose for Emily* illustrates the ways in which patriarchal gender roles victimize women, even to the point of driving them crazy.

In this regard, Sheila Cronan writes:

This idea is very much part of the male culture and is always being reinforced by men's complaints about marriage and by the notion that women are the ones who want to get married. We've all heard plenty of jokes about how women "snare" husbands, and popular songs with lines like "the boy chases the girl until she catches him". Mothers give their daughters advice on how to get their boyfriends to marry them etc. The propaganda tells us that marriage laws are operating in the interest of women and in fact exist to provide protection for women. (213)

Mr. Grierson, a domineering father, thinks that he has the sole right over Emily and her future.

He made important decisions about Emily and restricted her choices. Many of his decisions about Emily cause profound consequences in her life, often negative ones. His choices regarding Emily's lifestyle, education, marriage, friendship etc. are propelled by his own patriarchal beliefs. He attempts to have complete control over his daughter. In this light, Emily's father appears to be a typical example of patriarchal male. Emily, living in a small town in the American south later realized that her choices are limited by patriarchy. She had been allowed to give classes on China painting that later on she couldn't use as a means of her survival. Some students were interested in taking the painting lesson but later on they stopped coming to her. Her leisure activities were also limited to her home. She was not allowed to go out without her father's permission. She was not even allowed to make friends freely. Many boys were seeking her hand in marriage but her father drove them away. Ursula K. Le Guin explains how patriarchy works: "Civilized man says: I am self, I am master, all the rest is other- outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women, to be used as I see fit. (69)"

The story also depicts the patriarchal attitude of the townsfolk. They gossip a lot about Emily and her unmarried status. Later on, they talk a lot about her relation with Homer Barron. They don't come forward to help Emily when she is in dire need of rescue. Rather than helping her, they are in the mood of celebration when they see Emily's tragedy. When he takes Emily out, then some of the ladies began to say, " it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people. The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister--Miss Emily's people were Episcopal-- to call upon her (1072)". It is because they consider her a

“bad girl” and in patriarchy, a bad girl deserves worst possible punishment.

Her relation with Homer Barron can also be easily related to patriarchy. Homer Barron is also a man who has deeply ingrained patriarchal ideology. The narrator writes: “they passed on Sunday afternoon in their glittering buggy, Miss Emily with her head held high and Homer with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove (1072)”. The way Homer treats his black workers also reveal that he is somehow a macho man. Homer was obviously a less-than- perfect partner for Emily who invited a tragedy in his as well as Emily’s life. Thus it becomes quite evident that *A Rose for Emily* is a story of victimization of women by patriarchy.

However, it is also equally true that the story endorses patriarchy and its ideologies by depicting female characters in a negative way. Especially after her father’s death, Emily has become rude and arrogant. She goes to the extent of killing an innocent man who loved her and accompanied her despite the harsh comments made by the townspeople. Even if Homer was not ready to marry her, she has no good reason for killing him. Readers can never forgive Emily for the crime she committed. But this sudden change in her behavior can be understood using Feminist literary Criticism which assert that patriarchy forces women to behave in a certain way and if they fail to follow the parameters of the society, they will be turned into an outcast. When Emily realized that she would not be able to marry Homer, she was so desperate that she wanted to possess him living or dead. She wanted to give the villagers an illusion that she married Homer Barron and this is why she might have bought bridal clothes and others.

The story uses two different images of Emily- before her father’s death and after her father’s death. Before her father’s death, she was happy, beautiful, and dutiful. She completely fitted the definition of good girl that patriarchy cherished so much. But after her father’s death, she

changed. She stopped being a “good girl”. She started pursuing her own happiness, transgressing social norms and values. Instantly the society where she was living tagged her bad girl. Society did not take her tragedy as victimization. Society perceived her tragedy as a punishment that Emily deserved. Thus the story seems to be saying- look this may happen to you too if you behave like Emily! Dowling writes:

Once established, the young girl's dependency is systematically supported as she proceeds through childhood. For being "nice" – non-challenging, non-confronting, non-complaining - she's rewarded with good grades, the approval of her parents and teachers, and the affection of her peers. What reason is there for her to turn deviant or nonconformist? The going is good, so she conforms. Increasingly, she patterns herself after what's expected of. (Colette Dowling, 87)

Moreover, the story has also depicted other female characters negatively. Readers get an impression that the women in the town Jefferson are selfish. They do nothing except gossiping. They witness the victimization of an innocent girl but don't rush for help. According to patriarchal line of thought, they seem to have internalized the ideology of “good and bad girl.” Whereas male characters in the town are portrayed positively to a great extent. In comparison to other women characters in the story, men are at least not backbiting Emily.

It seems that the narrator himself carries this prejudice against women. We come to know about these characters in the story through him and automatically his biases influence our understanding of the story and the characters. In this sense, we can call the story itself a sexist text, which promotes or endorses patriarchal ideology.

To sum up, it can be safely concluded that the story “A Rose for Emily” is an ambiguous text that

beautifully depicts author's conflicted attitude towards patriarchy. It may be because the author William Faulkner himself has this conflicted attitude towards women and their movement or the writer just tries to depict the overall mood of the general public over the issue of women and feminist movement.

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