THROWN INTO TIMELESS SPACE. CULTURAL DISLOCATION[1]

Abstract: *Through the figure of Emily Grierson in A Rose for Emily, William Faulkner represents the concepts of personal time and space, rendering the idea of the self in conflict with the other or the tradition versus the change theme. The inside and the outside, the inner place and the outer place, the private world and the public world, the individual and the community- all these issues reflect a clash between two ways of being. Wrapped in an endless past, disconnected and displaced, Emily lives in a vacuum, blind to the cultural values around.*

Primarily, the paper attempts to enlarge upon the notions of time and space in the aforementioned short story. The debate is yet meant to go in depth, providing views for spatial and temporal implications, both in the fiction and beyond.

Keywords: *time, space, culture.*

A Rose for Emily is considered one of William Faulkner's best short stories, in which the author greatly represents the mysterious woman, exploring her eccentricities in depth, as she is forever doomed to a frozen time within a secluded world of herself. Consequently, her denial to exist as a member of community, following an ordered kind of life projects her into cultural isolation and, moreover, into a misfortunate, dark path towards decay-both physical and metaphorical-and death. She rejects the present realities and resists change, opposing any new transformations that her community faces over the years. Therefore, in this confrontation with the world outside, Emily actually inhabits no real universe because she only knows life as she constructs it first mentally and then palpably.

The above brief hint at the main character of the story is meant to introduce into debate the purpose of this paper, which includes picturing the female protagonist in her unconscious agony that comes as a result of losing contact with the others, in her incapacity to enjoy a place that implies spatial, temporal and cultural coordinates. All the themes and motifs related to time and space spring from the woman's gloomy existence, the refusal to break her self-made walls and communicate. Therefore, the present paper intends to provide an analysis for the fictional human being in the struggle with the inconsistencies of natural motion of things, offering primarily a public space, which is Emily's town. The *corresponding* private space is the house in which she lives, a universe in miniature, both sacred and profane, capturing zone for the temporal line of the self as opposed to time sequences of the other. It is thus an evident fact that, gradually, the woman finds it uncomfortable to leave her own designed location and locks herself in, behaving against the modern laws that involve staying permanently alive to the new ways and getting rid of the old ways. This mixture of concepts gives rise to multiple literary angles of conveying the road of a character suspended in the same time and space, culturally remote from the new established forms of life. Subsequently, the principal interest of this paper is to grasp the important aspects aforementioned so that it can grow relevant for the related time-space-culture issues.

The material that Faulkner made use of in order to create the story is largely taken from his piece of land, the South, although it is true that many of the problems posed in the writing are also common to various other places on Earth as they deal with the universal man confronted with similar realities. This is a fact that William Faulkner

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himself confessed in his *Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech*, when speaking about "the human heart in conflict with itself". What is to be first mentioned to the reader of *A Rose for Emily* is that its author resorts to an interesting narrative voice and point of view in revealing the story, as well as what lies beneath its unfolding events. Hans H. Skei explains that: "[…] it is the first story in which a community point-of-view-through a first-person plural narrator, a *we*- is used with easy mastery and without any of the limitations that a first-person, outside narration may entail." (Skei, 1999: 152) This being well-established, it is certainly a story about the writer's townspeople, at least as concerns the setting. A fictionalized world then takes shape out of a cultural background that was, of course, distorted to respond the demand of the literary plot but, nevertheless, remained at the core of creative impetus. Emily is, in any possible way, fundamentally different from the people of Jefferson, through her Faulkner rendering the idea of the individual versus the social or the self versus the other. In this production of a literary figure subject to anachronism, the writer ultimately confronts the ordinary reality with a symbolic creature who clearly does not belong to the world of her own lifetime. Yet, she is emblematically placed *within* as the embodiment of a lost cause. In a simplified version, it is sustained that: "*A Rose for Emily* is a gothic tale in the sense that it creates a doom-laden atmosphere in which an old spinster who is totally shut out from the teeming outside world lives in a decaying mansion with one of the floors closed." (*ibidem*: 153) At a close reading it is still important to acknowledge Emily's position as a source for deep understanding of *the unfit*, while never forgetting that her image remains a social construct as we see her through the others. Another crucial point to consider is the importance of time in the story, which, along with that of space and value system, gives strength to a great insight, obviously surpassing a simple pattern of short fiction that follows the lifeline of an old spinster and finally depicts her inevitable death.

The community represents the group while Miss Emily implies the idea of a person, an individual; the space for the group is the town, the outside while the space for Emily is the house, the inside; the time for the others is the present, while the time for her is the past. Suffering from dislocation, the woman proceeds to create her own "temporal and spatial enclosure" (*ibidem*: 159), in an attempt to arrest time. Her not-adjusting to change suggests her adherence to an old, traditional value system, which comes in direct clash to the new, modern era. All these differences slowly cluster together and make the theme of the story incredibly complex at a psycho-analytical level. Therefore, it can be referred to as a powerful piece of literature, dealing not simply with Emily as an isolated individual but inferring, from her position, the real implications that flow beneath and beyond her resistance to change. And it is these implications that are worth debating upon and hopefully solving, so that it can be possible to awaken the spirit of those fighting the others and themselves, beyond fiction.

The fact that Faulkner resorted to Jefferson and its community to place the story and tell the story signifies his artistic capacity to insert his mind in the Southern psyche and extract from there the sense of the past that floats over the region. In her remaining bound to the past, Emily was more than a pretext to put the story on paper. Her death was considered to be the primary reason for telling the story.[1] We actually learn about the sad event at the very beginning of Faulkner's work; the following extract is worth considering, as a keystone in *A Rose for Emily*:

[1] Hans Skei specifies that Emily's death constitutes the starting point for developing all the following episodes into a story.

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> When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant-a combined gardener and cook-had seen in at least ten years. It was a big, squarish frame house that had once white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps-an eyesore among eyesores. And now Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson. Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of heredity obligation upon the town, […] (Kirszner , 1994: 70)

Nevertheless, the writing is not about a lady who passed away, but it is about the connections that finally get a conclusion in Emily's passing away. The notions of time and space are dealt with in a complex, profound way. Conflicting feelings are displayed and further exemplified in the intrusion of past into present, in Emily's pathological attachment to past, permanence and her helplessness to escape and exist for the present moment. The title of the short story also explains the author's choice to reveal the life of his fictional character in a manner that leads to our perceiving the woman as not simply outcast but thrown into a space that is incompatible to her life as it is set in time. Consequently, we follow the compassionate disclosure of her living death in Jefferson. Answering the question about the significance of the title, Faulkner halts upon the idea of the poor woman, imprisoned by her own father, who enjoys no life actually and to whom he offers a rose: "Oh, it's simply the poor woman had had no life at all. Her father had kept her more or less locked up and then she had a lover who was about to quit her, she had to murder him. It was just *A Rose for Emily*- that's all." (Gwynn, 1995: 87-88) The writer's compassion to his main character is again emphasized, this time by Edmond Loris Volpe, who understands that the unnatural way Emily behaves is somehow excused in the context of her receiving sympathy precisely from he who created her: "The morbid atmosphere of decay that prepares for the story's macabre ending- revelation of Emily Grierson's necrophilia-is offset by the affectionate tribute of the story's title." (Volpe, 2004: 99)

James G. Watson enlarges upon the concept of *the house,* implying the idea of home and further suggesting the universality of location in terms of its being a way of "self-definition and expression" (Fowler, Abadie, 1980: 139). This is a starting point for viewing Emily as living on her own, in privacy, defining herself within the limits of her possession. Her place, openly marked in space, represents her corner of the world, a cosmos or a universe that nobody can invade. In Emily's case, the house is her domain and the core symbol of her separation from community. Her refusal to accept a street number to her house is, moreover, a symbol for the total rejection she shows to any potential change that she perceives as dangerous for herself. She thus remains limited to a *home* that appears at least strange to the others, if not appalling, since the owner has not left it for years. The only link between her and the outside world or the present- as a time in space- is the black servant Tobe. It is then obvious that, culturally as well, she stays outside, defying all the changes that naturally occur and need conformity. The house keeps her without direction, but safe in so far as she defines safety. Yet, contrary to expectation, the house does not provide her independence or self-sufficiency. It is

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Homer Barron who gives us the confirmation that Emily is desperate to cling to anyone because of her insecurity and solitude. She had first been sickly attached to her father and, unfortunately, she develops the same sick pattern of remaining attached to her lover, whom she ultimately kills in an attempt to make him stand still in that place that she conceives to be the household of her imaginary weeding to him. At this point it is clear that she is, in all respects, eternally wrapped in nothingness, as the house itself does not house her but throws her out of time, giving the illusion of her being located instead of her real dislocated character. Although the house really exists as a place, she makes it hers and thus inexistent in the sense that people do not step inside, modernity is locked out and time itself stops moving forward. She is, indeed, locked in. According to James G. Watson:

> To be *unhoused* […] is to be isolated potentially not only from a particular place in space and time but from fundamental referents of human identity. For Faulkner, houses and architectural images were a habitual mode of expression and a characteristic vehicle of extended metaphors for fictional form. Another place. The French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard calls such figures 'images of felicitous space', and Faulkner's descriptions of Yoknapatawpha County were larded with them. (Fowler, Abadie, *op.cit.*: 139)

Identity is therefore constructed on the basis of man's interaction with the space and the people around, a specific place giving rise to specific features in character, behaviour and values. Emily Grierson does not interact; as a consequence, her identity is restricted to the enclosed space she inhabits and the few people she comes in relation with. As it was stated: "[…] in the fuller context of the fictional world, architectural metaphors of house and home firmly root characters in a specific place and time." (*Ibidem*: 155) Definitely, Emily is inescapably caught in her dark house, but she could escape if only she wanted. But, in her choosing to remain caught, she may have indirectly proven that, as a product of the South, at a larger scale, she prefers to stay *indoors*. It may be that the surroundings would have dehumanized her irretrievably since the others are themselves caught, even though in a different sense: in obeying the written and the unwritten laws without any personal reflection. It appears thus that existence itself is flawed and while some choose to surrender, others grow insane precisely because they cannot and will not give in to general attitudes of actual resignation. This may be an interpretation for Emily's retreat into the house. In his paper, *Faulkner: The House of Fiction*, James G. Watson acknowledges the importance of place as witness of various elements that form the writing and its immediate key topics:

> […] the houses of Faulkner's fictions project a sense of place by their regional characteristics and by the full range of human attachments to them- the tendernesses with the savageries, the psychological realities with the physical ones. Dream house or real one, historic relic or antiquarian refuge, the houses of Faulkner's fictions are complex and expressive symbolic figures: fictional places that are fictional forms. (*Ibidem*: 158)

A Rose for Emily does have numerous psychological elements. The end of the story is kept secret and the reader only knows it when he reaches it. Emily had not been able to give the dead body of her father to the authorities much in the way she could not let go of Homer after she had killed him. Homer Barron functions as a father-surrogate; therefore, Emily's necrophilia is not simply necrophilia, but more than that. She stays outside the community. As she is not proposed to by a man, we can infer that the social

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system also denies her a social space as she is all alone. Because the system repressed her, she responded. As marital love culturally has a great significance and the patriarchal order seems to rule over, Emily murders Homer and lives the kind of marriage that she desires inside her father's house. Her insanity at this stage is clear. It is through death, metaphorically speaking, that she wants to set herself aside as a non-representative for the community that she is yet a member of. Obviously, she does not manage to find a real place and time for living peacefully and healthily. Thus, it could be said that her reactions are justifiable-how can one live in no proper space and out of time and still be happy?

The whole town went to Miss Emily's funeral. Her space is finally invaded by everyone and it is observed in minute detail: "The interior of the house may well be modelled on gothic tales, but it seems most of all to be dark, worn, unchanged, decaying, and shut off from the sun and from life outside." (Skei, *op. cit.*: 156) It is only at the end that everything is revealed. Naturally, Emily had to keep her enigmatic character hidden so that the text could achieve its purpose in depicting a woman of incredibly different perspectives as compared to those of her fellows: "It is vitally important for a character like Emily to retain her enigmatic status as long as possible in a text purporting to tell the innermost secrets of a wasted life […]" (*ibidem*: 153) The delay of telling the facts leaves room for other important aspects in the development of the story: "The withholding of crucial information in *A Rose for Emily* is done almost inadvertently, and the text seems to be filled with detailed description of the new times and the destruction of the old ways, as if to put off the gruesome facts for as long as possible." (*ibidem*)

Viewed as a whole, the short story "[…] has two major characters: Emily Grierson and the community. They are complementary rather than antagonistic characters. Emily's personal history mirrors the community's collective history." (Volpe, *op. cit.*: 99) The latter is a living entity, a character in its own right. The macabre ending of the story implies the idea of a final intrusive community, disclosing the sense of the past that Emily permanently possessed. Finally, her road has come to an end, her mysteries discovered, her story contoured. She carried the burden of *being* relentlessly, confronting space and time, until she found herself dispossessed of reason and soul; unavoidably, cast away.

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