Université de Sfax
Faculté des Lettres et sciences
Humaines de Sfax

Recherches Universitaires
Academic Research

Revue indexée
Indexed Journal

Numéro 8 - 2010

Revue Recherches Universitaires

Administration et Rédaction
Adresse : Route de l'Aéroport km 4.5 – 3029 Sfax
Adresse Postale : B.P. 1168 Sfax
Tél : 216 74670557- 216 74670558
Fax : 216 74670540
Site web : www.flshs.rnu.tn

Directeur Responsable : **MOHAMED BEN MOHAMED KHABOU**
Directeur de la Rédaction : **MOUNIR TRIKI**

LE COMITE DE REDACTION

Mounir TRIKI
Mohamed BEN AYED
Abdelaziz AYADI
Abdelhamid FEHRI
Mohsen DHIEB
Mohamed BOUATOUR
Mohamed Aziz NAJAHI
Mohamed Ben Mohamed KHABOU
Akila SALLAMI BAKLOUTI
Ahmed JAOUA
Nagi OUNALLI
Ali ZIDI
Ali BEN NASR
Habib MAJDOUB
Bachir ARBI
Abdlefatah KASAH

Tarif de l'abonnement annuel

Tunisie et pays de Maghreb ....
Autres pays : ....
Les prix de l'abonnement seront envoyés par montant postale ou par chéque bancaire au nom de Mr l'Econome de la faculté des lettres et sciences Humaine de Sfax – c.c.p .294823 avec la mention de « Abonnement à la Revue Recherches Universitaires «

Table of Contents/Table de matières

		Page number
Salwa Qaroui Onelli	The Aesthetics of Resistance in	5
Toufik Megdiche	Les rapports de Sfax avec le Sud tunisien : quelques éléments de réflexion	41
Mounir Guirat	Beharati Mukhariji's Jasmine	63
Henda Ammar Guirat	Containing the Threat of Monstriosity in William Faulkner	75
Fatma Belhaj	The Syntax of Adjuncts	87
Nadia Abid	Who is the True American ?	105

Containing the Threat of Monstrosity in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

Henda Ammar Guirat[1]

Abstract

This papers tries to investigate the readers' sympathetic, even reverential, response to Emily in *William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" by reading it as a dialogic work. In spite of the fact that she occupies an object position as the narratee, the narrative could not be considered as a monologic work in which the dominant discourse of her community prevails. Instead, all the characters create a polyphony of voices that emerge in a dialogue with Emily's. In her proud seclusion, she does not merely answer, correct, silence, or extend their voices, but informs and is continually informed by them. It is this capacity to engage in a constant dialogue with the dominant viewpoint of her community that prevents Emily from being dismissed as a monstrous character sleeping in the same bed with a corpse*

Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" closes up with a shocking revelation about its heroine. It ends with the horrible discovery of "the indentation of [Emily's] head" on the pillow next to the decaying corpse of the man who courted then deserted her. Returning from her funeral, the people of Jefferson open the upstairs room "which no one had seen in forty years" to discover a decomposing body. They also find, much to their surprise, a "long strand of iron-gray hair" on the second pillow which points out that Emily has been sleeping on the same bed with the dead Homer Barron, the road paver, whom she poisoned about forty years ago (183). Indeed, this is a shocking revelation about Emily Grierson who has been considered as a

---

1) FLSH, Sfax, University of Sfax.

"monument" and who has "been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" (177).

Most critics have agreed on the fact that the most provocative aspect of "A Rose for Emily" is not this shocking revelation about her; rather it is her motive behind killing Homer Barron. Conjectures have run from Ray West's theory of her attempt to stop time to Jack Scherting's assertion of unresolved Oedipal complex to Hal Blythe's suggestion that the "chivalric courtship ritual, so subscribed to by the Old South, was in reality a sterile vision" as "Emily's 'beau' ideal is homosexual" (192). Being interested in the motivation rather than the deed itself is due to the fact that we tend to consider the murder she commits as heroic. Cleanth Brooks, argues that

> What she does in order to get her own way is, of course, terrible. But there is an element of the heroic about it too, and the town evidently recognises it as such. Can an act be both monstrous and heroic? For a person who can hold two contradictory notions in his head at the same time, the answer will be yes. We can give Miss Emily her due without condoning her crime and, in an age in which social conformity and respectability are the order of the day, her willingness to flout public opinion may even be exhilarating. (191)

So, Brooks finds it uplifting that Emily stubbornly defies social conformity and respectability as inscribed in the code of behaviour imposed on her.

It seems that the critics and readers of "A Rose for Emily" cannot but respect the heroine and see her as a glorious lady even though she is a murderess. All of us tend to explain the crime she commits. No body thinks about the man she kills. Judith Fetterley sees Emily as a victim taking on power; she argues that "Not only does "A Rose for Emily" expose the violence done to a woman by making her a lady; it also explores the particular form of power the victim gains from this position and can use on those who enact this violence" (195). So, it is clear that our eyes are averted from the terrible and monstrous in this story although it could be read as a tale of horror. The heroine who represents a glorious south of prosperity and noblesse oblige remains admirable and dear even after we discover her crime.

What this paper attempts to show is that the narrative succeeds in containing and absorbing the threat of illegality and otherness which surround the perception of Emily as a self-isolated, mysterious, and perverse murderess, a threat which is inherent in tales of horror. I suggest that Faulkner contains the threat of monstrosity and otherness as he succeeds in creating Emily as an autonomous voice, rather than an objectified image, in dialogue with the other voices even though she cannot tell her own story, even though her story is told by the people of her town. Faulkner succeeds in creating a polyphonic fictional world where all characters, and even the narrator, are possessed of their own discursive consciousness; he creates a world in which no individual discourse can stand objectively above any other as these discourses lie on the borderline between oneself and the other. Therefore, Emily's voice is heard on the borderline between her own self-narrative and the version people make of her. It is also heard on the borderline between the people's own narrative as they tell of their admiration for, obsession with, and jealousy of Emily and her version of the same narrative as "she demands that the situation be settled on her own terms" (Brooks 191). "A Rose for Emily" is structured by a "dialogical" intercourse. Emily remains great and glorious because her discourse is not only dialogised by that of her people as they invest her with communal significance but is also capable in its turn of dialogising their discourse about themselves and about herself.

My reading of the story is inspired by M. M. Bakhtin's notion of "dialogism." The attraction of Bakhtin's work is that it acts as a pointer to the fact that we represent ourselves and others not in a single shared language but in a multiplicity of overlapping and often conflicting versions of that language. This multiplicity of interacting languages is always implicitly present when any one of them is used, and any utterance takes its meaning from its relation to the various other languages with which it is inevitably in dialogue. Dialogics, then, is the study of the way meaning is constructed out of the contending languages within any culture - contending because there is a constant cultural tendency to try to unify languages within an official or unitary language, or in the words of Bakhtin, the tendency "to [. . .] extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgements which occurs [in the sign], to make the sign uniaccentual" (*Speech Genres* 23). There is as Bakhtin argues, an ongoing struggle between centripetal and centrifugal forces of language which is similar to the opposition between monologic and dialogic utterances. It is a struggle that challenges any notion of single meaning and unquestionable authority. An official or a unitary language is undermined by the endlessly changing conditions of the society, which generates new languages and new relations between them. Ancient carnivalesque traditions, as Bakhtin points out in *Rabelais and His World*, acted as centrifugal forces celebrating the unofficial discourse and subverting the dominant religious, political, and social order.

The idea of unequal distribution of power in language which results in oppositional tactics is of central importance to my reading of "A Rose for Emily." The conflicting impulses, the centripetal and the centrifugal, create a space of dialogic forces rather than monologic truth. The centripetal works towards a unified and static language, while the centrifugal develops new forms which parody, criticise, and generally undermine the pretensions of the ambitions towards a unitary discourse. It is in terms of this dialogic space that I define the fictional world of "A Rose for Emily." It is a space of dialogical intercourse between Emily, the heroine, and her townspeople. Emily is as active in this dialogical exchange as the narrating "we" or the authorial "I" that chooses the title of the story. Therefore, we should not see Emily as inhabiting a unitary official discourse and dismiss her as the gentlewoman of noble birth and status who lives in her past of glory and isolates herself. Emily's discourse is not isolated. Nor is it completely dictated by a centripetal impulse. Her people's discourse is not completely dictated by a centrifugal force, either. The narrating "we" acts as a centrifugal force undermining the official discourse of power embodied by Emily, the aristocrat. It undermines the centre by interfering in her life, objecting to her behaviour, and narrating her story. However, it also acts as a centripetal force when it criticises her failure to live up to the public image her townspeople make of her.

The narrating "we," therefore, alternates between centripetal and centrifugal forces because Emily herself alternates between them. She is the true aristocrat who has pride, independence, and an iron will; she refuses to be pitied and humanised. She also defies them when, in spite of the criticism of the whole town, she takes a commoner, a nobody as a lover and "carried her head high enough - even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness" (180). Clearly, Emily's alternation between the centripetal and the centrifugal rests on her proud and defying spirit and reaffirms her greatness and glory. Emily's pride and defiance are the life force of her voice and of the narrative told by her people about her. So, the heroine's discourse is dialogised by her ability to dialogise the discourse of her people. Emily and her community live a tense life on the borders of each other. It is this dialogical exchange which results not in a simulacrum of actual experience but in a representation of it. This is an important distinction which rests on the creation of a polyphony of voices in dialogue, on the creation of a heroine as a voice expressing a world-view which is closely linked to her social superiority and pride. Emily is dead and her story is told by the people of her town, but she has her specific voice that interprets the world for her and interacts with and conditions that of her people.

"A Rose for Emily" is a polyphonic world where no individual discourse can stand objectively above any other discourse; the narration of the community is an interpretation of, a response to, and a call for Emily's own self-definition. So, all the choices she takes - the murder included - are responses, as well, to her community, partly rejected, partly desired by them. Thus, the murder she commits, rather than seen as monstrous, takes the meaning of an ultimate expression of her aristocratic pride and independence. These are the values of a much admired glorious era. The murder, like the murderess, takes a communal and historical significance. A Grierson cannot be deserted and rejected by a nobody from the North. The murder which could be seen as a stubborn defiance of social conventions is also an affirmation of her identity as a true Grierson, an affirmation of her birthright to respectability and superiority. In fact by killing the Yankee Homer Barron, the heroine is finally and gloriously at home as she joins "the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-mused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson" (177). She is the last Confederate ranked soldier of this old battle finally at home as the last of the Griersons.

The most obvious way, then, to apply Bakhtin's ideas is to look at the way this short story fights against any view of the world which would valorise one official point of view, one ideological position, and thus one discourse above all others. In this sense, "a Rose for Emily" presents to us a world which is literally dialogic. Dialogism does not concern simply the clash between different character-centred discourses; it is also a central feature of each character's own individual discourse. As Bakhtin states: "dialogic relationships can permeate inside the utterance, even inside the individual word, as long as two voices collide within it dialogically" (*Dostoevsky's Poetics* 184). This is what Bakhtin means by a double-voiced discourse. The characters in this short story show marks of the addressivity of their speech anticipating the comments of the other speakers, arguing, and refuting. This demonstrates the dependence of one's discourse on others' utterances.

"A Rose for Emily" is a polyphonic fictional world in which there is no trace of an objective, authorial voice presenting the relations and dialogues between characters, but a world where the author himself is possessed of his own discursive consciousness. The "I" which chooses the title is the authorial "I" that chooses to address Emily the woman. He rids her of her title, "Miss," and chooses to see her only as a female. He also gives a rose to Emily as a gesture of true chivalric courtesy. However, his chivalric gesture cannot be completely his; it is done in response to Emily's discursive consciousness, of her self-conception as the last of the Grierson, as a lady who needs and expects that courteous attention. Homer fails to give that attention, but Faulkner does not.

Likewise, the narrating "I" or "we" is hardly here a claim for authority or a presence which might be expected to go with the idea of author or objective narrator since the "I" which is telling the story is undifferentiated from the "we" of Emily's town. These people who follow Miss Emily's movements with much interest are not identified individually; they are identified jointly by what they say and think about her. So, she defines them when they try to define her. The heroine is their Miss Emily Grierson; they invest her with communal significance which makes her the object of their scrutiny. She inhabits the centre as the first lady, but they impose on her a particular code of behaviour. They try to interfere in her life whenever they think that she fails to live up to that code. So when she starts going out with Homer Barron who is a Yankee nobody, her people "said that even grief could not cause a real lady to forget *noblesse oblige* - without calling it *noblesse oblige*. They just said, 'poor Emily. Her kinsfolk should come to her'" (180). The heroine, however, is aware of their objections and her behaviour enters into a dialogue with them for she carries on going out with Homer and "She carried her head high enough" (180). Emily's capability of violating her public image paradoxically reaffirms it. It re-affirms her independence and superiority, as she undermines and rejects her community's desire to pity and humanise her.

The characteristic feature of this short story is the fact that Emily is not seen and represented from the outside, as an object. The story and the comments are on her, not by her. This is the true dialogisation of her story and self-narrative. But although dead, she remains engaged in an implicit dialogue with her community, with their need for her and with their portrayal of her as uncommonly superior. What is characteristic is the way in which the characters, Emily and the narrating "we" and their languages, merge into each other and define themselves. Emily is regularly characterised by her tyrannical power and authority. But we experience its force directly not only because we see her and listen to her directly as she intimidates the druggist: "She looked back at him, erect, her face like a strained flag [. . .]. Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look at him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up" (181), but also because her speech is heavily dialogised by what surrounds it, by the comments of the town and the silence of those who are unable even to face her.

It is this addressivity that allows Faulkner to construct his heroine, in the words of Bakhtin, "not out of words foreign to the hero, not out of neutral definitions; he constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, in fact he constructs no objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero's *discourse* about himself and his world" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 53). Faulkner's Emily is not an objectified image but an autonomous discourse, a "pure voice"; we see her and we listen to her everywhere; what the other characters say or fail to say about her becomes the raw material of her discourse, swallowed by it "or else remains outside it as something that stimulates and provokes" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 53).

Emily's utterances and silence as well as her self-isolation are addressed to the people of her city. Her discourse is not simply her own; it emerges from her dialogic place within the culture of the South as she is powerful and powerless at the same time. Her story shapes and is shaped by the comments of her people, as Faulkner places her at the centre of a transitional social and historical situation. She is impoverished but also empowered as the last link with the past. We need to stress at this point the curious nature of her community. What unites it are the archaic values of a glorious South as much as their identification with the commercial and industrial interests of a new and evolving South. Note the description of Emily's house and of the changing nature of its neighbourhood: It

> was a big squarish frame house that had once been 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 the obliterated even the august names of that neighbourhood ; 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. (177)

Such is the historical, social, and economic context that shapes Emily's self-narrative. When her father dies, she becomes alone and pauper; she becomes humanised as people could pity her. But her name entitles her to the past glory of the dying south. Emily rejects their pity and isolates herself. Her self-isolation is the only means of protecting her past and her power. Note when the narrator describes her face as that of "a lighthouse-keeper" (180). Emily whose lineage links her to the old south is necessary to her community providing them with guidance. She provides them with light but remains isolated in darkness as Brooks points out (191). She provides them with light and guidance as they experience a changing present.

Emily cannot tell her story and her story is told after her funeral by a voice that sounds that of a patriarch who resents and scorns the pettiness, jealousy, and curiosity of women entering her house and who, as Fetterley argues, does not see Emily but sees his concept of her (195). He portrays her as eccentric, stubborn, "dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse" (182). The townspeople may portray her as eccentric and incapable of coping with their ordinary everyday life, but it is this incapability which makes her all the more superior to them. It is her eccentricity which gives her actions a special meaning to her community. The narrator's list of adjectives reveals that Emily's isolation is the reason why she belongs to the community. The narrator tries to render the awe they feel before her calm superhuman dignity. Emily has a presence felt in his nostalgic and venerating tone. Her voice, though she is isolated and unseen, is not isolated; it is not a monologue.

The narrating “we” dialogises Emily’s discourse as much as she dialogises their versions of themselves. Therefore, they could recognise the tyranny and intimidating authority of her language as the official discourse of the old south. But they cannot produce a language that completely and adequately opposes her language. The other end of the dialogue, the voices that would lead to an overturning, a carnivalization of the official language cannot be adequately represented by a “we” that does not overcome its admiration for Emily whose voice makes itself heard in their own. It is a “we” that does not overcome its romantic vision of the last Grierson, the fallen monument of the South.

In reading “A Rose for Emily” as a dialogical exchange in a polyphonic world of voices, I have tried to show that Emily, far from being an objectified figure, is an independent voice which lies on the borderline between herself and her community. This awareness of the dialogic exchange between Emily and her townspeople leads us to the fundamental contradictions engendered by the historical situation of a changing region that still holds a romantic vision of the dying South of august names and grand ladies. It also accounts for the narrative’s success in containing the threat of illegality, otherness, and monstrosity that could otherwise surround the representation of the heroine. Faulkner in ‘A Rose for Emily” offers voices in dialogue; his central concern is the tension, exchange, and addressivity between these voices and the desire to hold them all and hold this fictional world with a myth which contains their history, the myth of the old South.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, M. M. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Trans. C. Emerson. Minnepolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

---. *Rabelais and His World.* Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

---. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays.* Trans. V.W. MmcGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

Blythe, Hall. "Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily'." *Literature for Composition : Essays, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama.* Ed. Sylvian Barnet et al. New York : Harper Collins College Publishers, 1996. 191-193.

Brooks, Cleanth. "On 'A Rose for Emily'." *Literature for Composition: Essays, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama.* Ed. Sylvian Barnet et al. New York : Harper Collins College Publishers, 1996. 190 - 191.

Faulkner, William. "A Rose for Emily." *Literature for Composition : Essays, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama.* Ed. Sylvian Barnet et al. New York : Harper Collins College Publishers, 1996. 177-183.

Fetterley, Judith. "A Rose for 'A Rose for Emily'." *Literature for Composition : Essays, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama.* Ed. Sylvian Barnet et al. New York : Harper Collins College Publishers, 1996. 193-196.

Scherting, Jack. "Emily Grierson's Oedipus Complex: Motif, Motive, and Meaning in Faulkner's 'A Rose For Emily'." *Studies in Short Fiction.* 17. 1980. 397-405.

West, Ray. "atmosphere and Theme in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily'." East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1968. 205-11.