Faulkner’s Elderly Ladies

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Each of William Faulkner’s characters, as any Faulkner scholar can attest, is comprised of numerous complexities, including their personalities and internal conflicts, their significance in relation to the plot, and the literary value of their actions. These characters, of course, fall on a spectrum between “good” and “evil,” with many actively participating in conflict formation. However, one seemingly innocent demographic in particular—that of elderly ladies—often passively or cunningly participates in conflict formation, serving as the main source of conflict in a story. In “A Rose for Emily,” “The Brooch,” and “Elly,” Faulkner’s elderly ladies help lead other characters to their demise or at least a profound transformation, acting as catalysts that push their respective stories to grim ends—not necessarily because they are inherently evil, but because of their inability to accept the changes taking place around them. These women, imposing and defiant, perfectly demonstrate the concept of “disruptive femininity,” which Deborah Clarke mentions in Robbing the Mother: “Not even age and menopause necessarily render a woman less threatening,” she says. “The only safe woman is a dead woman” (6).

One of Faulkner’s most famous short stories, “A Rose for Emily,” features Miss Emily Grierson, whom the community of Jefferson considers “a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town” (119). They believe her bizarre, and rightly so; she looms over the town, a symbol of stagnancy, refusing to conform to or participate in the changing society. This refusal (or inability) to accept change is one of the main conflicts of the work; every other conflict stems from it. However, this deficiency comes about not as a result of something inherent in Emily’s nature but instead as a result of Emily's father’s excessively strict presence in her life. Never having had the opportunity to develop any meaningful relationships due to this oppressive paternal figure—and thus never really knowing how—Emily reacts to loss by clinging to the remnants of what she once had—or what she fears losing. Reflecting on the past, the narrative voice of the townsfolk mentions feeling sorrow for Emily as well as the community’s belief that she would kill herself after Homer Barron supposedly leaves her, which builds suspense for the impending revelation. Despite the bothersome stench surrounding her old house, the other residents of Jefferson do not suspect murder. They agree upon the idea of Emily’s otherness, but they do not immediately deem her capable of such a sinister act. And perhaps this act was in fact one of desperation rather than evil. Emily’s inability to accept that the past is gone drives her to perform these grim tasks; her father’s strict and unfair parenting methods stunted her, injuring her mental health and development and leading her unintentionally to these evil actions. When Emily asks for the rat poison at the drug store, a considerable wickedness radiates from her:

The druggist looked down at her. She looked back at him, erect, her face like a strained flag. “Why, of course,” the druggist said. “If that’s what you want. But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for.”

Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up. The Negro delivery boy brought her the package; the druggist didn’t come back. When she opened the package at home there was written on the box, under the skull and bones: “For rats.” (126)

This pivotal point in the story sets the stage for the impending act of evil. The community
presumes that Emily will kill herself with the poison, saying that “it would be the best thing” (126). However, considering the stench mentioned earlier on in the story, the reader delays making any concrete conclusions. Emily—the last of her breed—simply cannot accept time’s passing and the change that accompanies it. This fault brings about the act that forever scars the city of Jefferson. After Miss Emily’s death, the community men break into one of her rooms, making the baffling discovery that the decomposed body of Homer Barron, who had not been seen in decades, lay upon the bed—from which he had become “inextricable” (130). Perhaps even more shocking than the corpse itself, however, is the single strand of gray hair that lay upon the second pillow; here, the true extent of Emily’s mental illness is revealed. By killing Homer and continuing to live with and even sleep next to his dead body, she believes that she can preserve a portion of her past. Here, Thomas Dilworth makes an important observation about Emily’s relationship with Homer in regards to the town:

By entering a love affair with Homer Barron, Emily briefly rebelled against Southern values and then, by ending her affair with him, at least as far as the townspeople were concerned, she conformed again to those values. She killed Homer largely to placate society, although that, in her deranged mind, also secured him as her lover forever. (251)

In engaging in a romantic relationship with Homer—a northerner—Emily seems to reject an aspect of the old status quo that she had so vehemently clung to. Perhaps in killing this lover—and thus in a way preserving their relationship for eternity—she is able to reconcile her desire for love with the townsfolk’s expectations. In the end, though, not only does Emily Grierson prevent the complete transformation of Jefferson from old to new, but she also commits a murder—all because she could not accept the change that comes with the passage of time. This attempt to appease the townspeople, of course, does nothing but further outcast her, marking her as a malignancy to the city of Jefferson, her sinister deed forever lingering in the city’s history and collective memory.

Howard Boyd’s mother in “The Brooch” is an example of an almost vampiric old lady whose inability to accept her son’s independence imposes on several aspects of his life, rendering his days devoid of any happiness. She has metaphorically attached herself to him like a parasite in an attempt to preserve her status as the primary female in his life. Faulkner even writes that “When [Howard] went away to college she went with him [. . .] she kept a house in Charlottesville, Virginia, for four years while he graduated” (“Brooch” 647). Unlike Emily, in order to inflict damage, she need not even lift a finger. She does not inflict any physical harm or directly cause any deaths; she simply controls Howard’s life from her bedroom, as if her very existence oppresses his. Howard and his wife, Amy, cannot live freely in his mother’s domain; they must work their secret schedules around the light of her transom. However, as the narrator states, “she heard everything that happened at any hour in the house” (647). Howard’s mother cannot be fooled; she is all-knowing and all-powerful despite her invalidity. She controls Howard in the same way a vampire controls its victim; she will not let him detach himself from her. His blood comes from her blood—she need not taste it, for the connection is already present. He refuses to stray from her side, creating tension in his marriage; it is as if his mother has cursed them. Amy attempts to persuade Howard to leave his mother behind so they can start a life of their own, but Howard declines, saying that his mother will not live forever. To this Amy replies, “Yes, she will. She’ll live forever, just to hate me” (652). Soon afterwards, their child dies. Could this death result from Howard’s mother’s rejection of her son’s marriage? Did she really
curse them? Howard’s mother destroys his relationship with Amy in an intriguing way: she seemingly uses the brooch she gave Amy as a sort of tracking device, sensing when Amy is near or far and even sensing when Amy has lost the brooch. Howard tries desperately to keep this secret from his mother and convince her that Amy is not out doing anything disagreeable:

“So you swear she is in this house this minute.”
“Yes. Of course she is. She’s asleep, I tell you.”
“Then send her down here to say good night to me.”
“Nonsense. Of course I won’t.”
They looked at one another across the bed’s footboard. “You refuse?”
“Yes.”
They looked at one another a moment longer.
Then he began to turn away; he could feel her watching him. “Then tell me something else. It was the brooch she lost.” (656)

In the above passage, Howard’s mother takes on a particularly dark tone; she displays elevated intuition in a manner that seems supernatural. Throughout the story, Amy, the “intruder,” threatens this parasitic bond between mother and son, and Howard’s mother uses the brooch to catch Amy in the middle of a lie, giving her a reason to kick Amy out of her house without making the fact that she has control—or at least partial control—of Howard’s actions expressly obvious. Soon after Amy leaves, though, Howard prepares to kill himself, taking care not to make too much noise or mess—but did Howard commit suicide by his own free will to escape his mother’s control, or did his mother drive him to it as punishment for lying? In this story, as in “A Rose for Emily,” the dangerous elderly lady causes a conflict that cannot be resolved—an untimely and unfortunate death.

In Faulkner’s “Elly,” Elly’s grandmother, much like Miss Emily Grierson, creates conflict by trying to preserve old and outdated values. Elly’s grandmother, Ailanthia, coldly and quietly judges her granddaughter for her promiscuous lifestyle—perhaps out of love, perhaps simple contempt. The narrator mentions that after her almost nightly meetings with different men, Elly would often encounter Ailanthia as she passed by her room:

Wearily now, with the tread almost of an old woman, [Elly] would mount the stairs and pass the open door of the lighted room where her grandmother sat, erect [. . .] Usually she did not look into the room when she passed. But now and then she did. Then for an instant they would look full at one another: the old woman cold, piercing; the girl weary, spent, her face, her dark dilated eyes, filled with impotent hatred. (Faulkner, “Elly” 208-09)

Here, the comparison of Elly’s gait to that of an old woman suggests an interesting connection; in “Double Murder: The Women of Faulkner’s ‘Elly,’” Alice Hall Perry proposes that Elly and her grandmother Ailanthia are Doppelgängers. “As with most literary doubles,” she says, “they share much: the same name, the same home, even the same capacity to fix each other visually” (222). Perhaps in attempting to preserve her own personal morals in her granddaughter, Ailanthia hopes to simultaneously retain her own honor through her double, Elly. Her quiet threats to tell Elly’s father about her adventures with Paul, fueled by her racist views, comprise the main conflict between her and her granddaughter. According to Wen-ching Ho, “to the cold, implacable grandmother, Elly’s illicit liaison with Paul is indeed a cause for fear, for it violates the Southern code” (8). This code constitutes the driving force behind Ailanthia’s desires to prevent Elly from being promiscuous, especially with someone of mixed race like Paul; her shock and contempt upon even hearing Paul’s name causes her to “start violently backward as a snake does to strike” (Faulkner, “Elly” 211).
Elly believes that marrying Paul would at the very least improve this conflict; however, Paul refuses her marriage proposal. Unable to handle her grandmother’s looming threat, Elly ends up killing Ailanthia and Paul in the car on the way home from Mills City. Even though she ends up without her lover, she succeeds in destroying her double, freeing herself from the old lady’s constraints and making an identity for herself. In this story, contrary to the others, the dangerous old lady faces defeat; however, her death brings nearly as much destruction as it does freedom.

These three ladies, despite their age, are formidable antagonists who hold the power to shape the plots of their stories in unforgettable ways—in these cases, through murder, vampirism, and blackmail. Faulkner’s elderly women are no ordinary characters; they are cunning, dangerous, and effective, creating unique forms of conflict and dismissing the myth of the helpless, harmless old lady. Though they may not always walk away successful or victorious, they must not be underestimated, as they often are; underestimation only renders them more powerful and dangerous. In their vehement rejection of the changes taking place around them, Miss Emily, Howard’s mother, and Ailanthia end up shaking Yoknapatawpha County’s very roots and challenging the society that they live in as well as everyone around them, forcing them to think of change, of life, of impermanence. After all, change is imminent and nothing lasts forever—especially not youth.

References


