

Mental Health and Minority Status: A Reading of William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*

Japheth Langat¹ and Maina T. Sammy²

¹Catholic University of Eastern Africa

²Moi University

Abstract

This paper undertakes a postmodernist reading of William Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily'. It imbibes the binary notion of order versus chaos to interrogate the seeming madness of the main character in the story. The aim is to demonstrate how Emily, being a minority in her community, battles with mental or psychological challenges, which are products of her environment. The study relies on a close reading of the short story, and deploys postmodernism as a theoretical basis. In this paper, we argue that, the main character, Emily represents the minority in society. She is mentally unhinged (mad) because of the tragedies she has gone through. She is also a social recluse. Besides, she is a woman. To top it all, she is a criminal, a murderer. Faulkner thus uses Emily to give voice to the socially awkward or eccentric individuals. As we read the story, we begin to see that her madness is not random. It is a product of a larger society that has gone rogue. Emily is a product of the maltreatment and segregation she has suffered from a society that refuses to accept her. She embodies well Francis Imbuga's (1987) statement: "When the madness of an entire nation disturbs a solitary mind, it is not enough to say that the man [or woman] is mad."

Key Words: *Postmodernism, William Faulkner, A Rose for Emily*

Introduction

Literary works have timeless and universal relevance. Every text, no matter when and where it was written, inspires some level of knowledge and delight in anyone who can access its language. It is for this reason, I believe, that every literary text can be examined through the lens of any theory. In this paper, I attempt to subject William Faulkner's short story, *A Rose for Emily* to a postmodernist reading.

Post-modernism theory imbibes many of the ideas of contemporary theories of literature, including feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and deconstruction and even postcolonial theory. Within post-modernism also, one finds some features of linguistic or text-based and reader oriented theories. For instance, the notion of self-reflexivity in post-modernism is in tandem with the idea of in the reader response-theory. The text constantly invites the reader to reflect on it as he or she reads. Similarly, one can say that the post-modernist concept of intertextuality alludes to features of stylistics or narratology and formalism. Through experimentation, postmodernist writers create rich texts that combine several forms and generate layers of meaning.

Therefore, in undertaking a post-modernist analysis of *A Rose for Emily*, this paper sought to identify and fill the gaps missed by previous critics who have examined this short story from the various theoretical and critical angles mentioned in the reviewed literature. Moreover, post-modernism being the sort-of current theory, this paper attempts to demonstrate the timeless relevance of literary texts by examining *A Rose for Emily*, which was published in 1930. The paper also underscores the importance of theory in bringing out meanings that are relevant to given times and spaces from texts.

Key Features of Post-modernism

As already indicated above, postmodernism is an all-inclusive theory. It arose in response to modernism, which advocated for the centrality of the individual. In my view, postmodernism is the very embodiment of the values of liberal humanism. In postmodernism, anything goes. Writers are free to experiment with style. Texts can ascribe to multiple genres. The plot and the narrator of the story can be unreliable. The language can be conventional or innovative.

Postmodernists believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth. To them, truth is relative. Truth does not exist objectively out there waiting to be perceived through the human senses. It is constructed in the human mind. The mind constructs truth through a reflexive process of trying to comprehend its own realities and experiences. Following their conviction that there is no absolute truth, modernists reject the notions of established cultures, beliefs, ideas or norms. They believe that every existing way of life or worldview can be contested, accepted or rejected, depending on the current realities with which people are contending.

A postmodernist critic reading a work of literature looks for truths that are based on personal experiences of characters. Postmodernists also prefer the face-value meaning of realities. They do not bother to bring out the underlying profound truths behind the superficial appearances. As such, they read texts to determine the obvious meanings and see no reason to speculate that there is a deeper symbolic meaning that is implied by the author. Moreover, modernists believe that human experiences are fragmented and highly subjective. As such, they reject the notion that texts can have central themes or united vision. They instead highlight the several meanings that emerge from the text and believe that each of these meanings can stand alone. They also look for features of internal fragmentations, contradictions and ambiguity in texts.

To depict the fragmented nature of life and reality, postmodernist writers use irony, humour and playfulness. They strive to dramatize the ironic twists of life and to ridicule those who seek a unified or fixed order of reality. Postmodernist writers also engage in different forms of experimentation. These include a combination of different styles or aspects of various genres in one text, a technique also known as pastiche. There is also intertextuality, which entails the borrowing or transfer of meanings across texts. This entails reference to other texts or imbibing of another text.

Literature Review

William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* has been studied from different theoretical perspectives. The oldest study we found was by Skinner (1985) titled "*A Rose for Emily*": *Against Interpretation*. In this work, Skinner asserts that *A Rose for Emily* has generated several scholarly works so that there is hardly much that can be said anymore about it. Through a chronological review of literature on the short story, Skinner concludes that Emily's character is both recognizable and mysterious. She is recognizable because she is the typical heartbroken and isolated individual who exists in every society. Conversely, she remains a mystery since the circumstances that cause her isolation and experiences have no simple explanation.

Anwar (2014) undertook a psychoanalytic reading of *A Rose for Emily*. Anwar's main aim was to show elements of Freudian psychoanalysis in the text. The narrator of the story uniquely speaks from the point of view of the collective town's people most often using the word "we" and represents the superego, which is the part of psyche driven by morals. The town's people are the ones who approve and disapprove of Emily's behaviour as socially acceptable or tabooed, through them we learn what Emily is like. They see bits and pieces which they add together to form assumptions and judgments; because Emily hardly socializes. Emily's father was an extremely controlling patriarch. His overly oppressive behaviour was a result of the superego that dominated his psyche and made him prefer isolating his daughter from members of the opposite sex. These experiences brought about sexual repression in her, because she was never let to date any man, she kept repressing her sexual desires in her unconscious and it affected her personality severely. Towns people come to see her when her father dies and are shocked as she does not want to let go of the dead body and is in a state of denial

by telling people that he was not dead. By psychoanalytic theory, all her repressed sexual frustration becomes part of the id that is unconsciously driving her behaviour and makes her obsessed with the thought of possessing a man, and because she was denied that all her life, the only man she can possess is her father. The repression of the hidden sexual desires she felt guilty of expressing turn into displacement then, as she takes out all the pent up emotions by holding on to a dead body of her father. Because of a history of sexual repression, Emily as a defence displays a behaviour of avoidance, because social interaction can result in stirring up unpleasant feelings of her unconscious. She does not go out much, spends time in isolation, and is practically mad.

In her study, Li (2015) did a stylistic analysis of *A Rose for Emily*. The focus of the analysis was to deploy the foregrounding theory in reading the short story. Through a close reading of the story, Li observed that quantitative deviations in Faulkner's story are achieved through repetitive use of some words and use of idiolects. Meanwhile, qualitative deviations are realized in the story through symbolism and the narrative point of view. Li concludes that Faulkner exhibits great creativity by relying on destructive of the rules, conventions and expectations about reading and writing. In this way, the author produces a captivating and timeless story.

In another study, Khrais (2017) undertook a reader-response reading of *A Rose for Emily*. Khrais uses Wolfgang Iser's view that reading is not a passive activity to explore aspects of blanks and gaps in the short story. He notes that Faulkner uses language carefully in the short story to create gaps and blanks for the reader to fill. For instance, the opening line of the short story, "When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral...had seen in at least ten years" (p. 119). According to Khrais, the opening sentence first provides readers with clues to the attitude of the townspeople toward Emily. However, it introduces many gaps about Miss Emily's identity and isolation. First, Miss Emily had not been visited for ten years. People also came to her funeral not so much out of respect for her but out of curiosity. The reader can only fill these gaps by reading the entire story and connecting pieces together.

Xia (2019) also examined the subject of class discrimination in *A Rose for Emily* deploying the Western Marxist critical approach. The study used close reading. Xia identifies features of Marxist theory. For instance, the society of Emily is divided along economic classes and there is tension and clashes between the different classes. At the top of the hierarchy are the nobles, followed by officers and priests, then farmers, poor white people and then the slave. Tobe, Emily's servant, is at the lowest rung in this socio-economic ladder. Taxation and tax evasion is a feature typical of a capitalist society which Marxism criticizes for its dehumanising nature.

***A Rose for Emily*: Synopsis**

Emily Grierson has just died. She was an old woman who lived in the Southern town of Mississippi. She was a member of a rich family prior to the Civil War. The Civil War ravages much of her family. She and her father survive for a while. Her father declines Emily's intentions to get married. Emily relied heavily on her father. He was the constant sign of presence in her life. However, Emily's father dies while she is aged around 30. The death takes Emily by surprise. As such, she withholds the dead father's body from the townspeople who want to inter the old man. The townspeople empathize with her actions. They interpret her keeping of dead father's remains as part of her grieving process.

Emily becomes the sole survivor and heir of the big family house. There is a servant in the house, a black man by the name of Tobe. She becomes Emily's butler and errand man. Emily is hardly seen outside the house; Tobe is the one who keeps going in and out. At age 40, Emily begins to coach young children in the community about art. This is the first sign of Emily's engagement in community concerns. However, she gives art lessons mainly to get money, since the family wealth has been depleted over time. The townspeople find Emily strange. She is both mysterious and interesting. Most people dislike her and make crude remarks about her appearances and silence. However, after the grieving period, Emily accepts that her father is gone. She focuses on herself. She changes her hairstyle, for instance. She even befriends Homer Barron, a Northern labourer who appeared in town after Mr Grierson's demise. The townspeople have mixed feelings about Emily and Home's

relationship. Some even claim that Homer is gay. Others allege that he is not the marrying type, meaning that Emily should not expect much from him.

The townspeople believe that Emily's sad tale of a life would end in miserable death by suicide. Therefore, when Emily goes into a local drugstore and buys arsenic claiming that she was going to use the drugs to kill rats, the people do not believe her. They are convinced she will use the drugs to end her miserable life. As such, the townspeople take the initiative to protect Emily from self-harm. The local pastor's wife invites Emily's distant cousins to watch over Emily and her friend Homer. Some days later, Emily is spotted in town shopping for wedding presents. She claims that the presents, which included a monogrammed toilet set, belong to Homer. Soon after, Homer leaves town. He is uncomfortable being around the house in the presence of Emily's cousins. In Homer's presence, Emily sends her cousins back to their homes. Homer returns to Emily's house one evening. However, after his return, Homer is never spotted again. The townspeople speculate that Homer ran away from Emily.

Meanwhile, Emily reverts to her eccentric ways. The city council officers visit Emily and discover a strong smell emanating from her house. However, due to her mysterious reputation, the officers are afraid to confront her about the smell. They instead opted to believe that Tobe had not cleaned the house thoroughly, hence the smell. Later, the council send officers to spray around the house at night with lime to mask the smell. Emily is also facing other problems following her father's death. The town's council claims that the town had not received any tax payments from Emily's house since Mr Grierson's passing. Prior to his death, Grierson and the then Mayor, Colonel Sartoris, had made an agreement to exempt the family from taxation in light of their financial situation. However, the council believes the agreement ended with Mr Grierson's death, a fact with which Emily disagrees. According to Emily, she has no taxes in Jefferson. Realizing the futility of trying to deal with Emily's obstinacy, the council forfeits the tax issue altogether.

After the tax saga, Emily stays indoors more than she did before. She also seldom allows people into her home. The townspeople have stopped bothering with her case. She has become just another inexplicable mystery in the town. After her demise, the townspeople feel the obligation to bury Emily. Her death raised more curious questions. The funeral brings together many of the townspeople. Most of the attendants are curious about the contents of the big house in which Emily lived. They are also interested in finding out the kind of life that Emily led in that house. As such, after her burial, some of the people go into the house to cure their curiosities. Meanwhile, Tobe, the butler, walked out of the house and is never seen in the town after that. The entrance to the upstairs bedroom is locked. The curious townspeople break it down, only to discover the rotten body of Homer lying on the bed. Next to the body are all the wedding gifts that Emily had bought for Homer. There is a thread of Emily's hair next to the pillow where Homer's body lies. It becomes apparent to the townspeople that Emily had always shared the bed with Homer's corpse. The entire house stands out as a monument of unadulterated past. Emily tried to keep her life intact, to never let go of her loved ones, but time overtook her.

Discussion

In 1931, Lionel Trilling observed that *A Rose for Emily*, "the story of a woman who has killed her lover and has lain for years beside his decaying corpse, is essentially trivial in its horror because it has no implications..." (p. 492). This idea of meaninglessness resonates well with the condition of postmodernism. The story opens with the death of Emily. The community members are trying to make sense of her life and death. There is nothing much to judge from her life since people did not know her well. There is a general sense of mental agony in the mind of every member of Emily's community.

The trivialising of murder in the story resonates well with the idea of the breakdown of meta-narratives in postmodernism. In Lyotard's words, post-modernism is a condition of knowledge characterised by incredulity of meta-narratives. Murder, in this sense, can be equated with all the so-called serious aspects of social reality, like religion, education, politics, family, whose authority is not supposed to be questioned. It represents disorder or social madness that shocks society.

Postmodernists do not ascribe to the notion of absolute truth. In Faulkner's story, this plays out in Emily's life and character. She is a mystery to the community, which makes her difficult to judge. Was Emily a good person? Was she a bad person? These questions do not make sense because she is already dead. People despise Emily when she appears because she dresses haggardly. When she cleans up well after her father's burial, the community still mock her looks. In this community, the standards of judging a person's beauty or 'normalcy' keep shifting. Nothing is stable and everyone is petty. The characters' idea of truth when it comes to the person and character of Emily is relative. This also points to the fact that postmodernists prefer the face-value meaning of realities. All that the people know about Emily is what they have seen, but no one understands her motivations and the depth of her experiences. These chaotic experiences drive Emily to the brink of madness.

A postmodernist critic reading a work of literature looks for truths that are based on personal experiences of characters. Faulkner's story revolves more around the personal experiences of Emily. Emily's relationship with her lover, Homer, amounted to nothing and she felt meaningless. The emotional pain drives her to murder Homer. She then proceeds to live for years with his corpse. The allusion to psychological trauma from both the heartbreak and the murder is typical of postmodernist writing. Postmodernism is a conflation of theories one of them being psychoanalysis. Even the murder did nothing to alleviate the pain she felt. The point for her is that Homer was hers; she was unwilling to let go of him, whether dead or alive. His presence was more important than his usefulness; in other words, presence precedes utility; or to quote Jean-Paul Sartre (1965), "existence precedes essence" (p. 31).

Faulkner's story is a mixture of subgenres. It reads more like a psychological narrative and a journal; the events in the story are surreal. It could be that the author or narrator was engaging in wishful thinking after a break-up and hoping that he could murder the source of his pain. This is the universal pain that accompanies the meaningless pain brought about by sudden change. When Emily is heartbroken, being an introvert, she wallows in her pain for long. It can therefore be concluded that her decision to murder her lover was a result of obsessive compulsive thinking and feeling of pain. For this reason, the tone of the story reads like a diary or journal entry. The story is personal and the narrator is unreliable.

The sudden death of Emily's father breaks her down. We can interpret this as the collapse of an established structure, synonymous with the breakdown of meta-narratives in postmodernism. Many have argued that post-modernism represents "chaos, entropy, and cultural apocalypse" (Collins, 2013). However, Snell (2009) argues that, on close scrutiny, the chaos and disorder in post-modernism in fact have some pattern. Accordingly, what best characterizes postmodernism is ambivalence. In other words, things are not what they seem or there do seem contradictions. What is good seems to be abhorred yet it is truly desired. On the other hand, the bad are seemingly celebrated. This seeming despise of the ideal life is a result of the frustration of the individual in trying to attain it. Conversely, bad represents freedom from worrying too much about trying to be good in the eyes of those who judge. Emily is postmodernist in this sense. She never cares much about what the world around her thinks of her. In fact, she never cared to belong to her community. Emily's ambivalence is also seen when she withholds the remains of her dead father. The father was not very kind to her, yet she cannot let him go. We expected her to celebrate the fact of his death.

The title of the short story is deeply symbolic. A rose is usually given to a woman as a complement for her beauty or goodness. However, in the story, Emily is a woman who has been turned into a mysterious social misfit by the experiences she has suffered. A rose for Emily, therefore, signifies a gesture of goodness or kindness shown to a woman who has only known pain and suffering for so

long. It is not recognition of her beauty but her resilience. The rose being handed to her is a sign of empathy or even pity for her condition.

The character of Emily best embodies the fragmented nature of life as one of the tenets of postmodernism. However, her life is broken away in piecemeal, beginning with the death of her father, then the heartbreak and subsequent death of her lover, then the loss of her family property and ultimately her death. This process of decay is best dramatized by the rotting corpse of Homer Baron in her bed. It is slow but sure.

Implications for Reading Some Kenyan Texts

In Kenya, postmodernism is embodied by the rise of publishing companies like *Kwani*, which was the first company to ever publish creative works in Sheng. Nevertheless, features of post-modernism (the incredulity with metanarratives) may also be seen in Meja Mwangi's book *Carcase for Hounds* or even in the anti-hero glorification in John Kiriamiti's *My Life in Crime*. Meja Mwangi, in his text, seems to question the very idea of Mau Mau struggle, which is in itself a questioning of the veracity of Kenyan history. While the so-called serious writers (high and low literature being an aspect of post-modernist debates) like Ngugi seem to glorify Dedan Kimathi as the hero of the Mau Mau revolt, Mwangi depicts Mau Mau fighters as mere cowards who ran to the forest to escape colonial oppression. In the forest, they were not fighting for their people but simply hiding from the colonial military forces. At times, these fighters would sneak into the villages to steal food from the people who had been forced by the colonial establishment to live in reserves. This audacity to diminish the historically acclaimed and feared Mau Mau movement is in keeping with the spirit of postmodernism.

Similarly, John Kiriamiti, in *My Life in Crime*, seems to glorify crime. The novel begins on a sombre tone, suggesting that it is a confessionary narrative about how crime does not pay. However, as one reads the story, it appears that Kiriamiti did enjoy his criminal misdemeanours. In fact, he did reap a huge harvest of wealth from his criminal enterprise. Even the story itself as a product of the lived life of John Kiriamiti provides a reflexive avenue to reap from crime by narrating the dramatic events of his past life. Kiriamiti, the author, is rewarded with huge royalties (may be a movie deal) for telling a story, which, to him, is his lived experience. Moreover, unlike Ngugi who treats crime as a product of unjust socio-economic and political structures, Kiriamiti regards crime as a product of personal choice. In this sense, Kiriamiti is a post-modernist because he emphasizes on the power of the individual to make choices and face the consequences of those choices. Conversely, Ngugi is a Marxist who interprets individual choices as informed by the prevailing social, economic and political structures.

Conclusion

Emily's death represents the death of a tradition of order. It also marks the advent of madness as the norm in her society. She tried so hard to hold on to her father, her lover and family property. Ultimately, she could not even hold on to her own life. We have argued in this paper that Faulkner's story can be read from the postmodernist perspective. The breakdown of Emily's life piece by piece represents the collapse of established notions of fixed order in her society. In the end, her life story was ambivalent, and the narrator likens her sick image to those angels in coloured church windows – sort of tragic and serene. We have shown that postmodernism as a theory can be deployed to reading any text irrespective of time or place of writing.

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