

FEMALE CARNALITY FROM “A MALE EYE”:  
GOTHICIZING THE FEMALE DESIRE IN FAULKNER’S “AS I LAY  
DYING” AND “A ROSE FOR EMILY”

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**Abstract.** The issues of gender and sexuality in William Faulkner's fiction have provided a fertile ground for debate. Faulkner's women have perplexed and intrigued scholars and critics, who invested their energy in deciphering his attitudes towards gender and women. While some scholars accuse Faulkner of misogyny and sexism, others perceive his inscription of the female desire in his texts as a challenge to the “Law of the Father” and to the discourse of patriarchy, which silences the female desire and relegates the female carnality to taboo. Focusing on “As I Lay Dying” (1930) and “A Rose for Emily” (1930), two-Faulknerian women-centred narratives that tell their protagonists' bodies' stories from the male author's “eye”, and adopting a gothic perspective, this paper attempts to show that Faulkner's Gothicized inscription of the female body is neither empowering nor liberating. Rather, it betrays his masculine concerns about female sexuality, as well as his patriarchal Southern society's fear of the liberation of her body.

**Keywords:** gender, sexuality, carnality, gothic

## INTRODUCTION

The inscription of the female body into the text owes credit to eighteenth-century Gothic fiction<sup>1</sup>. Marked by transgression, excess and relying on the supernatural, Gothic fiction brought the issues of female sexuality and carnality from the repressed to the expressed, from the taboo to the debatable. Nevertheless, such inscription is often “affirmative”, as the rebellious fleeing heroine reconciles herself to her society by marrying her “male saviour who rescues

her” from other male dangers. The real shift has come almost two centuries later with the *avant-garde* modernist and postmodernist fiction: a fiction of “bliss” - in Roland Barthes’ terms - which cancels happy endings and resists closure. This fiction often imposes on its reader “a state of loss” (98) since it “discomforts [...] [and] unsettles the readers’ historical, cultural psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories brings to crisis his relation to language” (98). Typically, modernist texts, “As I Lay Dying” and “A Rose for Emily” tackle the theme of female carnality, which is Gothicised since both female protagonists are represented as monstrous creatures, “demons in the house”, who are dangerously sexual and who instigate destruction to avenge their abused and oppressed sexuality. Though Faulkner deviates from the normative conception of femininity as passive, conquered and helpless and inscribes a new version of femininity, which is disruptive, destructive and vengeful, his narratives fail to repress his masculine fear of female sexuality.

#### GOTHICISING THE FEMALE BODY IN “AS I LAY DYING”

“As I Lay Dying” (1930) is a story of fifty-nine chapters narrated by multiple narrators namely, the Bundrens and their acquaintances. It tells the story of the Southern unfortunate Bundrens who set for a journey from the Mississippi to their dead mother’s hometown, Jefferson, so they can bury her there as she has already wished before she passed away. The events of the novel revolve around Addie Bundren, who dies at the very outset. Yet, Addie is present while absent. In this narrative, Faulkner does not only grant Addie presence in the absence but also makes Addie’s body the main point around which the events of the story evolve. Faulkner even allows Addie’s body to speak and to tell its story of oppression and revolt while alive and revenge while dead. This abused body, however, turns out to be the direct cause for all the misfortunes that befall on the Bundrens.

The novel opens with a very gloomy scene. On a hot day of July, Cash Addie Bundren's eldest son is building a coffin for his agonizing mother who lies dying indoors while others are "sitting there". Like Buzzards waiting, fanning themselves" (14). Addie could see her coffin as she raises her head and looks through the window of her dark room. Readers feel sympathy for the dying mother who is surrounded by a callous household. The loud noise produced by Cash's carpentering "Chuck Chuck Chuck" (8; emphasis in original) creates a gothic effect in the novel. "[E]very breath [Addie] takes is full of knocking and sawing" (14). Yet, Faulkner intervenes via his female narrator, Cora, (Addie's neighbour) and tells us that Addie Bundren is not going to die "a Christian death" (19) since "the eternal and the everlasting salvation and grace is not upon her (11).

As the narrative progresses, this sympathy is further undermined. Readers are led to believe that Addie deserves this tragic end. Addie is presented as a stone-hearted woman "with any natural affection" (18) and "loving nobody" (18), even her own children. Blamed for his misconduct by his brother Jewel, Darl, Addie's second eldest son shocks us when he affirms "I cannot love my mother because I have no mother" (60). The monstrosity of Addie is further consolidated by the animal imagery which is used by her own kids to depict her. Unable to handle his mother's death Vardaman the protagonist's younger child asserts "my mother is a fish" (64) and Darl mocks his illegitimate brother's love for his mother "Jewel's mother is a horse" (60). Simply, "[Addie] was not a true mother" (107). Her kids, she informs us are nothing but her duty to her husband. Addie is an orphaned school teacher from town who tells us little about her family and childhood. Addie dies in chapter twelve but she talks to us in chapter forty from her coffin to reveal her secret.

Addie informs us that she hates her father alluding to her problematic relationship with her patriarchal society. Addie marries the farmer, Anse Bundren, to find out later that she has tricked herself with words namely, love; "the same word that had tricked Anse too" (108). Marriage has made Addie realize that the word

“Love [...] was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack” (106). Addie feels resentful because Anse has dispossessed her of her body. Indeed, Addie’s frustration and bitterness are not caused by Anse’s infiltration into her body and its shift from a virgin from the shape of a [...] [into] an inversion” (107), but rather from its failure to satisfy her sexual drives. Addie tells us that living with Anse is like living with the dead because for her “Anse is dead” (107). When she lays by him in the dark, she would hear the land she would not feel her body, her “blood and flesh” (107). To appease her pains Addie seeks fusion with nature. After class, instead of going home “she would go down the hill” (105). What is striking is that what attracts Addie to nature is not its bright side but rather its dark one. Projecting her decaying sexual life on nature, Addie prefers visiting the mountains in “the early spring for of it [is] worst” (105). In that part of the season she could enjoy scenting “the quiet smell of damp and rotten leaves” (105).

The “postponement of sexual satisfaction” (Freud 6) has nurtured Addie’s death instinct. Addie becomes death-obsessed and grows sadistic. Turning out pain from “the ego to the object” (Freud 44), Addie seeks excitation and pleasure through inflicting pain on others. This “sadistic instinct whose aim is to injure the object is driven from Eros” (48). However, “the act of obtaining erotic mastery over an object coincides with the object’s destruction” (48). Addie enjoys beating not only her kids but also her students because it is through beating that she can realize herself as a human being and as a female. Addie confesses:

When the switch fell, I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran; and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own forever and ever (Faulkner 105).

According to Julia Kristeva, motherhood can be “a cure” for oppressed femininity. Motherhood can transform the relationship into another (the embryo) into love and hence it can reduce the female estrangement in the oppressive phallic culture. (84-86 *Hatred*)

*and Forgiveness*). But to our surprise, motherhood for Addie Bundren is more horrible than her marriage to Anse. For her, pregnancy and motherhood have violated her 'aloneness' more than Anse himself. Addie could handle the violation at first when she gave birth to Cash but when she had her second child Darl she felt so bitter to the point that she thought "[she] would kill Anse. But she did not because it was pointless; for her "he died" a long time before (108). To avenge herself, Addie asks Anse to bury her in Jefferson roughly forty miles away when she dies. She also resorts to sin.

Refusing to be the mute "eternal feminine" of the oppressive patriarchy, not only does Addie Bundren refute to be the good mother who incarnates sacrifice and self-effacement but also opts for being a sinner. Defying her rough Southern society and thwarting the matriarchal roles expected from her as a good Christian female, Addie starts a love affair with the local minister Whitefield and conceives a child, Jewel, the only character to whom she holds some affection. Though Addie gains some sympathy when she draws our attention to religious bigotry referring to reverend Whitefield as "the instrument ordained by who created the sin, to sanctify that sin He has created" (108), she does arouse the reader's repulsion when she admits that she would lay with Anse afterwards.

#### GOTHICISING THE FEMALE BODY IN "A ROSE FOR EMILY"

Faulkner's first published story, "A Rose for Emily", (1930) is a gothic story with a very romantic title that tells the tragic tale of Emily Grierson's enforced loneliness and gloomy life with the corpse of the man who broke her heart and expectations. Emily's story, though so tragic, parallels Emily's passage from a victimized into a victimizer; from an oppressed female into an oppressor.

From the outset, a sense of mystery hovers over the whole narrative. The novel opens with the news of Miss Grierson's death. Mrs Grierson is introduced as a very revered woman whom the

town's people consider "a tradition, a duty and a care" (1). She is also a private and mysterious woman whose death arouses in men's hearts "a sort of affection for a fallen monument" (1) and evokes women's curiosity about "the inside of her house" (1). The third-person narrator indulges in a detailed description of Emily's mansion. Reminiscent of Edgar Allan's Poe's Usher's house, Emily's house is a putrefying dust-smelling mansion that may reflect the decay of its household, particularly, Emily's psychological decay. The narrative moves back in time and returns to Emily's life and family's history. Emily, we are told, is a victim of her oppressive and possessive aristocratic father. As the narrative progresses, readers' curiosity for details about Emily's house and life goes intense.

Though the narrative does not hint at incest, readers remain uncomfortable with the father-daughter relationship in this story. Emily's father is a stubborn aristocrat who has refused all the suitors who proposed to his daughter. He used to scare them away with a horsewhip because "none of the young men was good enough for Miss Emily" (4). Like her aunt who remained unwed and who lost her wits, Emily is condemned to lead a life of seclusion and loneliness after her father's death. She is depicted as an impervious woman who has no human relationships. Even when curious relatives tried to invade her privacy, they were not received. A few weeks after, Homer Barron, a northern day worker would appear in Emily's life. People expected the couple to get married since Emily seemed glad to give up her nobility for love. Yet, Homer vanquished a short while after Emily visited the drug store to get some poison. Emily locked herself inside. The only one who used to be seen "going in and out" (3) with "a market basket" (3) was her young Negro servant. A nasty smell coming out from her house has made the neighbour ask the mayor's help. People went to her house by night stealthily and scouted the garden sniffing across the lawn without finding anything. "Within a week or two, the smell went away." (4).

It is only after her death that the horrible secret of Mrs Grierson's nasty smelling house has been revealed. Emily, we find out, is living

with Homer Barron's corpse. People get in her house and break into her secret upstairs chamber. Reminiscent of Dickens' Miss Havisham's, it is a decaying macabre bridal room. The whole scene is uncannily Gothic. The colour of the rose curtain is faded, the man's silver toilet staff is tarnished, the groom's collar and tie are laid as if "they [have] been just removed" (9). "The man himself lay in bed" (9). His decaying body was inextricable from the rotten bed. What is dismaying is that the body "was laid in an attitude of an embrace" (9), while the adjacent pillow had "the indentation of a head" (9) upon which there was "a long stand of iron-grey head" (9). It turns out that Emily has poisoned Homer to lay with his rotten body. Readers cannot but feel repulsive to Miss Emily's death-obsessed carnality. Though Emily's is a tragic figure of patriarchal oppression whose killing of Homer is nothing but an assertive revolt against male abuse, her animalistic seeking of "jouissance" in death strips her of her humanity.

#### CONCLUSION

Though Faulkner empowers Addie Bundren and Emily Grierson by allowing them to cast their rage on their abusers, his representation of female sexuality, in "As I Lay Dying" and "A Rose for Emily", as animalistic, promiscuous and abject reflects his fear from female carnality rather than his sympathy for women. Female sexuality in both narratives is not creative but rather destructive. It is death-obsessed sexuality whose Eros is undermined by its Thanatos. Indeed, both narratives betray their writer's "fear and loathing" of female carnality. Unlike "As I Lay Dying", which presents its female heroine as a monstrous woman, "A Rose for Emily" does not demonize its protagonist and attempts to arouse the reader's empathy and respect, implying that Emily is a revered lady who is a victim of the declining aristocracy. However, the abjection and shock brought by its story's end surpass those evoked by Addie's story of sin and promiscuity. Both women are silenced until their

death. It is death that demystifies Addie Bundren and Emily Grierson abject sexuality. Allowing Addie Bundren to speak from her coffin and revealing Emily's true sexual nature, by the end of her story Faulkner is alluding to the threatening reality that lies behind the patriarchal silencing of female desire. His vilification of Addie and Emily reflects what Simone de Beauvoir calls "the male dread of women, especially the infantile dread of maternal autonomy" (Gilbert and Gubar, 34). This autonomy unsettles male masculinity and challenges the hegemony of "the Law of the Father".

#### NOTES

1. In *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), the American feminist and cultural theorist Elaine Showalter argues that though it is not quite possible to find out when women started writing since they tended to publish their works pseudonymously, the 1750s has witnessed the females' joining of the literary market place (16-17). Showalter asserts that the eighteenth-century women fiction of Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve and Charlotte Brontë and their contemporaries can be seen as the earliest subtle form of female self-expression that inscribes women's experience of their bodies in the text.

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