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EWRT 1B 1:30-3:30

5/10/12

Tick Tock: An Analysis of Time in “A Rose for Emily”

Have you ever wanted to go back in time, perhaps to a moment in your life when you were really happy or when things were easier? Many people throughout history have not only wanted to go back in time, but have actually tried to control it, whether it was through inventing a time machine, searching for the fountain of youth, or merely purchasing the latest anti-aging creams. William Faulkner explores this same theme of thwarting time through his enigmatic character Emily, in “A Rose for Emily.” While many literary critics of the short story examine the symbol of the Rose or the relationship to Homer Baron, Milinda Schwab, Gene Moore, and John F. Birk all explore “A Rose for Emily’s” emphasis on the elusive nature of time.

First in the article “A Watch for Emily,” Milinda Schwab stresses Emily’s pocket watch as the short stories essence. Emily does not allow time to progress in her life, yet she carries hidden within her clothing a loudly ticking watch. Emily’s awareness of the concealed watch is the guide to understanding her perspective and motivation. Schwab continues to state:

The idiom of having something or someone in ‘one’s pocket,’ that is, under one’s personal control, is important here, for by wearing the watch in her pocket rather than, say pinned to her bodice, Emily demonstrates her effort to subjugate the clock to her own will.

The fact that the watch is contained somewhere in her pockets, gives her more authority. When Emily has control over time, she has the power to manipulate which events she will and will not allow to occur. Time entails change causing Emily’s desire to stifle it. When time intervenes in her life, Emily loses something; she loses her beaus, her father, her way of life, so she does not want time’s progression to continually take away the things that are important to her. Emily refuses to give up Homer Baron, a beau, although he is a lowly day labor and Northerner (Schwab). Schwab further observes that “[t]he townspeople have joined forces with the representatives of her own family and are on the verge of separating her from him,” which forces Emily to kill him to keep him by her side. Emily tries to thwart time by murdering Baron to hold him to her. If not, time would have eventually taken him away. Emily represses time by keeping the watch hidden, symbolizing her endeavor to manipulate time and its consequences (Schwab).

Another article to explore time in the short story is Gene Moore’s “Of Time and Its Mathematical Progression: Problems of Chronology in Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily.’” The confusion of actual chronological events in the story is the key to understanding Emily’s understanding of time. Moore argues, “…it is vitally important to establish [Emily’s] own chronological place in the historical context of the passing generations.” Following the dates in the text leads to an impossible chronology of Emily’s life because she would have been fifty years old instead of ‘about forty’ (Moore). Also following the events backwards leads to Emily’s father’s death when she was under thirty instead of over thirty (Moore). Perhaps Emily’s life and motives would have been different depending upon what age her father died when she met Homer. Using Faulkner’s original manuscript for “A Rose for Emily,” the Moore concludes that Faulkner changed a date and forgot to change the other dates in the story. Originally Faulkner wrote, “that day in 1904… Colonel Sartoris…remitted her taxes dating from the death of her father 16 years back…,” but he changed the tax’s remittance to 1894 and dropped the sixteen years about her father’s death altogether (Moore). However, the ill-fitting pieces require adjustment again. Ambiguity exists around Judge Stevens and Colonel Sartoris, two characters from Faulkner’s other works concerning Yoknapatawpha County. Judge Lemuel Stevens is too old to be the same Judge Stevens in “ A Rose for Emily” while Colonel John Sartoris is also too old and Colonel Bayard Sartoris is too young to be Colonel Sartoris from the story (Moore). These are just some examples of the confusion concerning Emily’s chronology, which ultimately reflect Emily’s own confusion around time.

The last critic to examine time in “A Rose for Emily” is John F. Birk in “Tryst Beyond Time: Faulkner’s ‘Emily’ and Keats.” Birk compares the “structure, theme, and imagery” of “A Rose for Emily” and the poem “Ode to a Grecian Urn” by John Keats. The two works contain five stanzas, where the first and last stanzas come back to each other as an electric circuit. According to Birk, both tales’ first stanzas “evoke the image of an unfilled woman numbed by stasis….” The ode depicts a bride destined forever to be a virgin, and the other characters and elements that trap her constitute the first stanza. Similarly, Emily Grierson, a woman stuck in time, cannot accept time’s passing and the people who push her into this role (Birk). The last stanza plays upon the imagination where the first image and past events mingle together (Birk). The story begins and ends with the funeral scene coming full circle similar to how the Urn tells a story that circles back around again. Both of the narratives also use art as a tool. For instance, Keat’s ode pertains to another artist’s painted urn. Emily’s home resembles “a frame that encloses a work of art” and scattering of art throughout the story with “a note,” “china-painting lessons,” and her “crayon portait” (Birk). Most of all though, the two stories are about people caught in time because like the still pictures on the urn, Emily tries to resist time to for the people in it to be stagnant (Birk).

Although critics speak differently of time, Emily and her opposition to time make it the key to understanding her and her motives. One looks at the watch, one looks at the chronology, and one looks at the circularity, but all of them are fascinated by Faulkner’s exploration of the inevitable movement of the clock. We are all under the effects of time as it controls our days, our years, and ultimately our lives, and Faulkner helps us understand that we are not alone in our occasional desire to control the tick tock that governs our world.

Works Cited

Birk, John F. "Tryst Beyond Time: Faulkner's `Emily' And Keats." *Studies In Short Fiction* 28.2 (1991): 203. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 1 May 2012.

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