



SPAIN

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC
ONLINE CONFERENCE

PROSPECTS AND MAIN TRENDS IN MODERN SCIENCE



2024 YEAR

SPAIN, MADRID



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PROSPECTS AND MAIN TRANDS IN MODERN SCIENCE

International scientific-online conference

Part 16

November 29th

COLLETIONS OF SCIENTIFIC WORKS

MADRID 2024



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THE CONCEPT OF GOODNESS IN “A ROSE FOR EMILY” BY WILLIAM FAULKNER

Zarina Usmonova

Senior teacher of Bukhara State University

Jasmina Rakhmonova

1st year student Master degree

Abstract: *This thesis examines “goodness” in William Faulkner’s A Rose for Emily, highlighting how the character of Emily Grierson complicates conventional moral judgments. Faulkner contrasts her ambiguous behavior with the townspeople’s rigid societal values, ultimately offering a critique of Southern traditions that prioritize appearances over genuine compassion. This work seeks to understand Faulkner has nuanced portrayal of goodness and its implications within the Southern Gothic tradition.*

Keywords: goodness, William Faulkner, Southern values, A Rose for Emily, morality, tradition, Southern Gothic.

INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner’s A Rose for Emily is set in the post-Civil War South and tells the mysterious life of Emily Grierson, a reclusive woman who defies societal norms. Through the town’s collective perspective, we see her struggle with isolation, her strict upbringing, and her disturbing relationship with Homer Barron. The concept of “goodness” in the story is tied to upholding traditional Southern values—family reputation, social class, and conformity to expectations. However, Emily’s actions, which defy these norms, challenge the town’s rigid understanding of goodness. In A Rose for Emily, Faulkner reviews the Southern society’s narrow moral ideals, showing how Emily’s isolation and rebellion expose the town’s superficial concept of goodness.

Main body: The Southern setting of A Rose for Emily plays a crucial role in shaping the townspeople’s ideas of goodness. After the Civil War, the South was marked by a deep attachment to tradition, social hierarchy, and strict social norms, particularly for women.

In this context, “goodness” was often defined by one’s ability to maintain family honor, preserve social status, and conform to gender roles that dictated a woman’s behavior as modest, obedient, and dependent on male authority.

These expectations are particularly strong in the post-Civil War Southern society, where changes in social order made communities more protective of their traditions.

Tradition in the South upheld rigid expectations of class and gender. Women, especially from prominent families like the Griersons, were expected to uphold their family’s reputation through marriage and by adhering to societal standards of femininity. When Emily Grierson refuses to marry and isolates herself, the townspeople judge her harshly, viewing her actions as a rejection of the “good” behavior expected from women of her status.



Her relationship with Homer Barron — a Northern laborer — further alienates her, as the South's deep divisions between classes and regional identities play a role in how the community views her choices. The townspeople's judgment of Emily reflects their belief that goodness is synonymous with conformity. Their gossip and fascination with her life highlight their hypocritical attitude, where they pity her situation but also relish her downfall.

This superficial view of goodness is rooted in their desire to maintain the social order that Emily seems to defy. Emily Grierson exemplifies the complexity of goodness through her actions, which defy simple categorization.

Her isolation and family history make her resistant to societal expectations, resulting in morally ambiguous choices.

Cleanth Brooks notes that Emily's defiance of social norms symbolizes her desire for autonomy within a restrictive society²⁴. Her treatment of her father's and Homer Barron's corpses—though morally questionable—illustrates her deep struggle with abandonment and loss.

The townspeople's vision of goodness reflects a narrow, judgmental approach. They view Emily as a "fallen monument," emblematic of old Southern ideals²⁵. Carolyn Porter highlights their hypocrisy, noting that while they extend pity, they indulge in gossip, revealing a superficial morality²⁶.

This narrow view of goodness highlights the community's inclination to uphold social norms over personal understanding or empathy. Faulkner uses the story to analyze Southern moral codes, which he portrays as oppressive. Leslie Fiedler argues that Faulkner's Gothic elements expose the limitations of Southern traditions that judge based on appearances rather than individual compassion²⁷. By contrasting Emily's personal struggles with the townspeople's judgment, Faulkner suggests that Southern morality stifles real human connections, ultimately leading to isolation and tragedy.

Conclusion: In *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner presents "goodness" as a complex and often misunderstood concept, challenging conventional moral judgments.

Emily's character and the townspeople's hypocrisy offer a critique of Southern values, questioning societal definitions of morality.

Through Emily's story, Faulkner invites readers to reflect on the limitations of valuing social conformity over compassion and individuality.

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