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The Essence of Marriage in *A Rose for Emily* and *A New England Nun*

Thesis Statement: Authors Mary Freeman and William Faulkner both highlight the essence of marriage to women; however, while Freeman views marriage as an optional venture, Faulkner seems to hold that marriage is a necessity for any woman who wishes to feel whole.

Many authors have highlighted the idea of marriage in their works. However, very few matched the emphasis placed on marriage as was the case in *A New England Nun* by Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman and *A Rose for Emily* by William Faulkner. Reading these two works makes it apparent that marriage does not necessarily make a woman complete.



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The story of Emily has been classified as gothic fiction, and this is mainly owing to the various seemingly dark aspects of the plot and the happenings in the protagonist's tale. Particular attention is drawn to the events in the protagonist's life and the themes involved therein; the primary idea being that of death. Indeed, the story itself is unequivocally centered

on death and related happenings. There is the death of the protagonist, Emily, the demise of her father, one Mr. Grierson, and her perceived suitor, identified as Homer Barron (Faulkner). It is, however, noteworthy that the author explored other themes in the narrative. These included; control and its repercussions, the effect of the death of a loved one and the idea of marriage. The latter theme, while being addressed by a relatively significant portion of the story, is highlighted much like Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman does in her short story entitled *a New England Nun*.

This narrative was the tale of one Louisa Ellis as the main protagonist and her would-be husband, Joe Dagget. The narrative follows the life of Louisa as she attempts to find a place for love and a meaningful relationship in a life which is otherwise perfect according to her. The author describes Louisa as a lonesome yet uniquely neat and tidy woman whose only companion is her dog (Freeman). The author also highlights that her dog has been chained and closely monitored for a staggering fourteen years owing to a biting incident for which the dog was responsible, back when he was a puppy. The author uses such non-essential aspects of the plot to inform the audience and readers of the extent of control which the protagonist exercised over her life. These twists in the plot also go a long way in emphasizing why her suitor would not easily find a place in her heart. Louisa was of the opinion that tying the marital knot would be akin to losing all which she has worked for.

From a preliminary reading, it is apparent that both authors address the theme of marriage, albeit from a different perspective. On the one hand, Louisa Ellis strongly holds the opinion that there is no place for a lover or suitor in her life. For her, what remains of her life is for her to establish herself better as a strong and independent woman who in some way feeds off her loneliness. On the other hand, Emily Grierson opines that she can never be complete without a husband of her own. She has drifted to what appears to be a case of borderline mental decay or obsession with the idea of marriage. However, as luck would have

it, she has neither a proper suitor nor the charm to attract one due to her undesirable past. It is for this reason that she murders Homer Barron. She imagines that with him dead and his corpse safely locked away in her house, Barron can be hers for as long as she lives.

It is imperative to note that in tackling the theme of marriage, both authors have employed the use of various stylistic devices which aid them in driving their respective ideas home. Some of these devices are unique to either literary works or are merely outstanding owing to the way in which the different authors have used them. In *A Rose for Emily*, the author exhibits the use of symbolism in the most effective way all through the narrative. This is apparent in the use of various seemingly equivocal aspects of the story but which could be interpreted and understood in many ways. Some scholars and commentators on the subject have argued that indeed that title of the story may have been an example of the author's use of symbolism and this is contextualized to imply that, the Rose referred to in the title could, in fact, mean Homer Barron (Li 78). It is noteworthy that this approach and way of thinking are not without basis.

From the narrative, it is apparent that the protagonist has seen her fair share of troubles in her lifetime. For instance, her deceased father was adamant to marry her off in his lifetime. This resulted in Emily embracing a solitary life from which she needed salvation. Her loneliness is further emphasized by the author's deliberate choice to overlook a mother-figure in the life and times of Emily. Instead, she is left to her own devices, and loneliness swiftly comes over her. At this point, it becomes apparent to the reader that Emily is in dire need of at least one happy happening in her life, or a rose for her sorrows. The rose for Emily's misfortunes appears to have manifested itself in the shape and form of a suitor, Homer Barron (Perry 194). The Rose in the title may, therefore, have been symbolic of a remedy for her woes. In this way, the author highlights the essence of companionship as a cure for sadness.

Another instance of symbolism is evident in the description of Emily's abode. At the beginning of time in the narrative, Emily and her father are known to maintain a modest and relatively presentable residence. However, as the tale progresses, this home gradually turns into an undesirable hovel, only a house in the eyes of its inhabitants. The description of the house is symbolic of Emily's heart, and this is so because when she was younger, and before her father's death, she was protected and well taken care of, and as a result of this, her emotional distress was not visible. However, after her father's demise, she is a visible wreck, undesirable both inside and outside.

In furthering the theme of marriage, the author also employs the use of flashbacks as part of his storytelling techniques (Ahmadian et al. 219). One quickly notes that the narrative is not told in a chronologically flowing fashion but with a myriad of instances of flashbacks. The reader is taken to a time before now when Emily was young and when the seeds of loneliness were planted in her by her deceased father. The essence of marriage becomes obvious when as an adult; loneliness causes her mental anguish and leads to inexplicable escapades on her part. The author also uses irony in bringing out the essence of marriage to the protagonist. This is especially the case where; while in the rest of the world the foul smell emanating from Emily's house is anything but attractive, she seems to find solace in this quite ironically.

On the other hand, Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman does a commendable job of bringing out the idea of marriage in her narrative *A New England Nun*. From its onset, the author highlights a promise of marriage made between two protagonists, Louisa and Joe. This author also employs some stylistic devices in developing and addressing the themes of family and marital union in the novel. Chief amongst these devices is the use of dramatic irony (Mann 41). This is a stylistic device whereby the author makes some aspects of a narrative known to the audience but significantly unknown to some characters. The said characters,

therefore, play their roles in the story and make decisions based on their limited knowledge of the situation. A quintessential example of this in the story is clear where the protagonist, happens to eavesdrop on a conversation between her would-be husband and his lover without the latter's knowledge. Armed with this privileged information, the protagonist calls off her wedding and allows Joe to marry his lover. The dramatic irony is used by the author to highlight Louisa's desire not to enter into a loveless marriage.

This author similarly employs the use of symbolism to develop the theme of marriage in the narrative. This is done mainly through Louisa's dog, Cesar. The author narrates that the dog has been confined and chained for fourteen years. The dog has been unable to make any contact with the outside world and has failed to pursue any of its wishes owing to the shackles weighing him down. This dog and its life are symbolic of Louisa and her way of life (Hirsch 124). Similar to the dog, she has been chained to the promise of marriage to Joe for fourteen years. She has also been unable to pursue any of her other desires owing to shackles of the promise she made. Similarly, Joe has been unable to pursue his love for Lily Dyer since the same commitment bound him.

The author of *A New England Nun* also uses allegories to develop the idea of marriage in the narrative further. Simply defined, an allegory is a merely descript scenario which is often relatable to the main protagonist and which tells the protagonist's story from a different perspective. In this narrative, the stories of Louisa's pets, her dog, and canary, are very telling of the life Louisa herself lived; devoid of any company and held down by shackles. Further, some scholars and commentators on the subject have argued that the story of Louisa is in itself an allegory for many women, trapped and left at the mercy of potential suitors, in a society which holds marital unions in very high regard (Pryse 249).

In conclusion, while both authors approach the subject of marriage with starkly contrasted views, it is evident that they both recognize its essence in any society. This is especially apparent from the ease with which marriage not only takes center stage as a theme in the narrative but also its ability to sustain an entire story.

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