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**Article**

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**The Stunted Identity of Emily Grierson  
in *A Rose for Emily* by William Faulkner**

Ratna Asmarani

*English Department, Diponegoro University, Semarang 50275 - Indonesia*

**Abstract**

The purpose of writing this paper is to analyze the problem concerning the oppression of the female character's identity in Faulkner's short story entitled *A Rose for Emily*. The focuses are on the triggering factors of the stunted identity, the efforts to develop personal identity, and the impacts of the undeveloped personal identity. The concept of identity, James Marcia's concept of identity statuses, and the stereotypes of the women in the nineteenth century are used as analysis tools. The result shows that if identity which should be fluid and able to develop freely is oppressed and stunted many times, the female character will be stuck in the status of "identity foreclosure". The outcome will be unpredictable and even horrifying. The conclusion that can be drawn is that women are vulnerable to identity crisis because they are often not given chances to develop their identity freely. As a result there is a tendency for those women to do things considered perverse by the society.

**Keywords:** identity, identity statuses, identity foreclosure

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**1. Introduction**

Identity is a crucial element in a person's life that differentiates him/her from another person. A short story written by William Faulkner in 1930 entitled *A Rose for Emily* [2] is about the problem of identity faced by Emily Grierson. She was the only daughter of the aristocratic Grierson who used to be quite prominent in the South around the end of the nineteenth century. Her father who highly upheld the Grierson family name was very protective of her daughter and very selective towards her future son-in-law. As a result, at age thirty when her father died she remained single without friends. She was left in poverty and occupied a family home that gradually became unkempt. After her father's death, Emily tended to withdraw herself from the society but this situation began to change with the appearance of Homer Barron, a road repair foreman from the North. Their closeness arouse comments from the Southern community, but Homer Barron suddenly disappeared and Emily went into seclusion again. Her death in

her seventies opened up a horrible event that had not been known to the surrounding community. Based on the story, Emily's character, especially about her oppressed identity that makes her an unexpected person needs to be analyzed. The focuses of the analysis are on the triggering factors and the impact on Emily's identity, Emily's efforts to be different after the death of the father, and the appalling effect of the twisted identity of Emily Grierson.

## **2. Methods**

Identity is a very broad term referring to “the way individuals understand themselves and are recognized by others”, while the term personal identity usually means “people’s beliefs about the qualities and attributes that distinguish them from others” (Matsumoto, 2009: 244) [2]. Thus, identity is a compilation of personal characteristics that represents someone’s self to the public. As a representation of self, identity is of great importance in someone’s life. Marcia, a Canadian psychologist, identifies four identity statuses in relation to someone’s effort to overcome the identity crises. Marcia’s four identity statuses are Identity Foreclosure, Identity Diffusion, Identity Moratorium, and Identity Achievement (Marcia, 1993: 8) [3].

According to Marcia, Identity Foreclosure is “... individuals with conferred identities ... have adopted a lifelong "game plan," set out for them by their parents or similar authority figures” (Marcia, 1993: 8). This kind of individual has no personal identity. His/her identity is constructed by other, usually an authoritative person in his/her life. Meanwhile, Identity Diffusion is defined as: “... lacking a coherent identity ... have little future sense ... primarily present oriented, with some regrets about a disappointing relationship with their parents” (Marcia, 1993: 8). A person with identity diffusion status still has no firm identity. He/she is still looking for personal identity, however his/her effort is generally not too successful.

Marcia defines Identity Moratorium as follows: “Individuals in the process of constructing their identity ... holding on to the bar of the past while swinging toward that of the future, often with much of the vacillation, fear, intensity, and excitement ....” (Marcia, 1993: 8). An individual who is in identity moratorium status is still experimenting with his/her new identity. He/she is not so sure about the new identity. As for Identity Achievement, Marcia’s opinion is as follows: “Individuals with constructed identities ... also have game plans, but these tend to be their own, not their parents', and are subject to revision” (Marcia, 1993: 8). For an individual with identity achievement status, he/she has been able to construct his/her own personal identity and is ready to face the future along with the obstacles.

In the effort to construct one’s own identity, someone may encounter identity crisis, which is: “The acute feeling that one's identity and sense of self have lost their normal stability and continuity over time, leaving one disoriented and having difficulty in recognising oneself” (Statt, 1998: 68) [4]. Especially for women, besides the great possibility of experiencing identity crisis, they may also have to endure certain

construction related to their gender. Women in the nineteenth century are described and expected to behave according to the powerless construction as follows: “weak; passive; timid; domestic; illogical; emotional, susceptible to madness, hysteria; social/familial; dependent; unable to resist temptation; pure; content; not sexual/sensual; sphere: private.” [5] In other words, due to their gender they are given limited chance to express their ability, intellectuality, and/or sexuality.

### **3. Results**

The main factor triggering the hampered development of Emily’s identity comes from her father. Emily’s father is a typical Southern patriarchal aristocrat who is so proud of his position. This can be seen from the family’s portrait: “Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip” (Faulkner, 2002: 77). The father’s pose indicates his authority by being the dominant figure holding a controlling tool menacingly. The daughter is in a retreating position serving as a blur background emphasizing the father’s power. The picture implied that Emily’s identity is controlled by the authoritative father.

Emily’s father is very protective to his only daughter. Too proud to the Grierson name, he is very selective to the young men who come to visit her. This can be seen from the following community’s comment: “... the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily ...” (Faulkner, 2002: 77). His high standard for the future son-in-law drive the young men away, leaving Emily ‘still single’ at the age of thirty (Faulkner, 2002: 77). Thus, Emily has no husband, no new status, no new role, and no new responsibility. The father clips Emily’s existence so that she does not have a chance to develop her personal identity.

The father’s stubbornness and aggressiveness also isolate Emily from the big family of Grierson. He cuts off any communication with the rest of the Grierson’s big family after some hot dispute: “She had some kin in Alabama, but years ago her father had fallen out with them ... and there was no communication between the two families” (Faulkner, 2002: 78). As a result, Emily has no other familial identity: she is not a cousin or a niece of another Grierson. Emily’s sole identity is as an only daughter of the old Grierson.

When the father dies, Emily is thirty years old, still single, without friends or relatives. In addition, her father does not leave her money. Emily only inherits the house they live (Faulkner, 2002: 77). The house itself, used to be majestic in an elite surrounding, is now deteriorating and unkempt with the surrounding that has changed into a common business area (Faulkner, 2002: 75). The Grierson house indicates the stagnancy of the people living in there. The old Grierson and Emily have no capacity to follow the social and economic changes since the dominating father is a person who is closed to the progress of the times living only in the past glory. As a consequence, Emily has no chance to develop herself, to socialize, and to construct her own identity free from

the shadow of her authoritative father. Emily is much like the house: old, unkempt, isolated.

Another triggering factor preserving the stagnant identity of Emily is the society where the Griersons live. The nineteenth century society tends to consider the Grierson family as an artifact, quite valuable in the past but now is just one piece of history: “respectful affection for a fallen monument” (Faulkner, 2002: 75). Concerning Emily, the society does not regard her as a developing person, but a static inheritance: “Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town” (Faulkner, 2002: 77). The society feels that it is their responsibility to preserve Emily as what she has been for years. The society does not expect Emily to change. For the society, Emily has a fixed identity: “Thus she passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse” (Faulkner, 2001: 80). Thus, the society where Emily lives does not give a chance for her to develop. Emily is like a historical object with fixed inscription on it. The society’s treatment on Emily is much the same as her father. They all clip her existence and stunt her identity from developing.

As for Emily herself, she keeps tightly her unchanging identity. She lives under the strong shadow of the past. She rejects any changes in her life: “When the town got free postal delivery, Miss Emily alone refused to let them fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a mail-box to it” (Faulkner, 2002: 80). This indicates that Emily denies the present. She will not follow any sign of modernity. Her attitude also clearly reflects her insistence on holding the Grierson’s image in the past: “She carried her head high ... It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson...” (Faulkner, 2002: 78). Poor Emily does not have any intention to change, even after a long time has passed since the death of her father. Emily herself, with all her might, preserves the old-fashioned aristocratic style of the Grierson. Thus, from the four identity statuses proposed by Marcia, Emily’s identity is still in the status of Identity Foreclose. She for decades has steadfastly held on the fixed identity constructed by a dominant person in her life; namely her father.

#### **4. Discussion**

##### *4.1 Emily’s Efforts to be Different after the Death of the Dominating Father*

Even though it can be said that mostly Emily Grierson’s view and attitude do not change much, there are moments when she wants to leave the psychological shell that has locked her for decades. These happen after the death of her father. The first change boldly enough for Emily to do is to cut her hair short: “She was sick for a long time. When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows—sort of tragic and serene” (Faulkner, 2002: 77). Her sickness indicates her vulnerability to face the world alone without her sole protector. However, her cutting her hair indicates her intention to cut loose her attachment to the old life under the dominating father. She wants to start a new

life which is symbolized by her new hair style. Apart from the new hair style, everything around her is still much the same: the neglected old house, the poverty, the isolated life.

Another big change on Emily's life is when she is close to Homer Barron, a road-repair supervisor from the North. This is a big change because Emily who used to view herself having a high status in the Southern community is now willing to associate herself with just a road-repair supervisor: "Presently we began to see him and Miss Emily on Sunday afternoons driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy and the matched team of bays from the livery stable" (Faulkner, 2002: 78). This change can be considered as Emily's effort to create a new life and a new status. However, the public declaration of their relationship startles the surrounding community leading to many pro and con remarks from the nosy community who views Emily only as an object of gossips.

Emily's life undergoes another big change when suddenly Homer Barron disappears after the road-repair work is finished: "When we next saw Miss Emily, she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray, when it ceased turning" (Faulkner, 2002: 79). Emily's appearance indicates her losing hope in life. She looks old, she does not take care of her body and hair. For Emily, life stops offering happiness that she has just tasted. She does not care anymore and she retreats to her old house, the only safe shelter that she knows.

Years after the disappearance of Homer Barron, Emily makes a new change in her life. She becomes a painting tutor for children and opens her house as a mini studio: "she gave lessons in china-painting. She fitted up a studio in one of the downstairs rooms, where the daughters and granddaughters of Colonel Sartoris' contemporaries were sent to her ..." (Faulkner, 2002: 79-80). The pupils are the daughters and granddaughters of her father's friends. At this moment Emily has a really new identity as a painting tutor for young girls. For around seven years Emily socializes and gets money from her new profession.

However, suddenly Emily stops her socialization and again closes herself in the old house: "as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die" (Faulkner, 2002: 79). It seems that the pull to be the old self is too powerful for Emily to resist. Emily returns to the comfort zone she knows so well: her old house and her old identity. Thus, it can be said the based on Marcia's four identity statuses, Emily tries to enter the Identity Diffusion in which she tries to leave the psychological cage to develop new identities, for example as a lover and as a painting tutor. However, her efforts are not successful enough. Actually, this is a critical moment for Emily whether she keeps on trying to develop new identities or to retreat once more to the previous familiar and safety zone.

#### *4.2 The Horrible Effects of Emily's Stunted Identity*

Emily's father is the only person who is close to Emily. For Emily, her father is her world since she has no other social life outside the house. Her father is her patron, the

one that shapes her personality. Thus, when her father dies, she denies the fact. Her strong denial is pathetically but horribly described as follows:

The day after his death all the ladies prepared to call at the house and offer condolences and aid, as is our custom. Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days, with the ministers calling on her, and the doctors, trying to persuade her to let them dispose of the body. Just as they were about to resort to law and force, she broke down, and they buried her father quickly (Faulkner, 2002, 77).

Emily is not ready to live alone without her father. The death of her father means a big change in her monotonous life. It means she is alone and must take care of her own life. It is too scary for her. All her life is arranged by her father. In her denial, she keeps the dead body of her father as long as she can just to make her calm as if her father was still alive and with her.

Emily's trauma of being abandoned by someone who is close to her is repeated when Homer Barron suddenly disappears. Her action of buying poison makes the nosy neighbors quickly speculate that: "So the next day we all said, "She will kill herself"; and we said it would be the best thing" (Faulkner, 2002: 79). At this point, as before, Emily is alone and lonely in facing her loss of the loved one. The neighbors, after busily gossiping the sudden disappearance of Homer Barron and Emily's action of buying poison, are now fussing on the pungent stinky smell that suddenly spread from Emily's house: "the smell ... a short time after her sweetheart—the one we believed would marry her—deserted her" (Faulkner, 2002: 76). Reluctant to ask Emily about the unbearable bad odor, the men at night secretly pour out limestone around Emily's old house. When the reek vanishes after two week time, the neighbors have no object of gossip anymore and thus they forget about Emily's monotonous existence. From this event, it can be said that Emily isolates and is isolated by the surrounding community. Having no real social life, Emily's identity has no chance to develop.

The death of Emily in her seventies, open a horrible secret as a result of Emily actions in relation to her stunted identity. After the burial, the neighbors forcibly open a room that has been locked for forty years. It turns out to be intended as the bridal room decades ago "decked and furnished as for a bridal" (Faulkner, 2002: 81). This room pathetically indicates Emily's inability to move on from the breakdown of the much-hoped wedding with Homer Barron. However, there is another startling finding. They finally meet the missing person, even though it is just a face to face with his skeleton:

The man himself lay in the bed.

For a long while we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin. The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquered even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him ... (Faulkner, 2002: 81).

Homer Barron never left Emily's house after he entered it one evening decades ago (Faulkner, 2002: 79). The poison bought by Emily is not for committing suicide but is used by Emily to prevent Homer Barron from leaving her. This way, Homer Barron although not alive anymore, he keeps accompanying Emily forever.

The horrible finding does not stop there. The neighbors face another appalling fact: "Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair" (Faulkner, 2002: 81). They find out unimaginable reality. All this time Emily has slept next to the corpse of Homer Barron that she considers as her husband. Emily cannot face the fact that Homer Barron will not become her husband. She cannot lose another loved one after she loses her father. Emily, with her stunted ability, solves the problem in her own horrible way.

## **5. Conclusions**

Identity is principally has no fixed feature. Identity is fluid and it develops and changes many times during someone's life. Identity which is forced to stop developing will bring certain consequences. In the case of Emily Grierson in the short story entitled *A Rose for Emily* written by William Faulkner, her identity is stunted by her authoritative father. Even though she tries to free herself from the gripping shadow of her father, she is not able to develop her personal identity. Losing an important person in her life for the second time after her losing her father is something that cannot be overcome by Emily. Her stunted identity which implies a twisted personality leads her to take a horrible step to keep what is considered belong to her. Alive or not alive, she determines to keep what is hers. If once she fails to keep the dead body of her father, she will not fail again to keep the corpse of Homer Barron once she is able to prevent him from leaving her. Her keeping the corpse of Homer Barron in the bridal room is also her final realization of many postponed dreams to be a bride. The stunted identity will lead to twisted personality and finally will result in horrible actions.

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