The Scapegoat in William Faulkner's Fiction: A Girardian Analysis

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Abstract

According to René Girard, the concept of the scapegoat originated as a religious practice, a communal ritual whereby the sins of the community are projected onto a goat. The chosen goat would then be sent into the wilderness, as a sacrifice, to carry the burden of their offences. The goat was, later on, replaced by individuals who were burdened with the sins of the community. This study highlights the scapegoating of characters in two of William Faulkner's iconic short stories, *A Rose for Emily* and *Barn Burning,* through the lens of Girard's theory of scapegoating. In these stories, scapegoating conceals itself under the guise of social hierarchies and gender discrimination, whereby the weaker individuals undergo communal oppression. The repetitive pattern of projecting blame on the central character of each story demonstrates the underlying violence maintained by social norms. In *A Rose For Emily,* Emily is demonised and alienated by the community. Emily feels the imperative to withdraw herself from the hostile world that inadvertently participates in scapegoating her. The first-person plural narration reveals the community's hostile attitude towards her in many instances. In *Barn Burning*, the ten-year-old Colonel Sartoris, aka Sarty, acts as an emotional scapegoat of his father's rage against the system. Sarty's ideals unfit him for his family and make him an outcast. This study also explores how Faulkner endows his characters with the power to resist oppression. Their acts of resistance show the rejection of their role as a scapegoat.

Keywords: Scapegoat, Alienation, William Faulkner, René Girard, Eric Neumann

Introduction and Theoretical Perspectives

This study contemplates the parallel scenes of scapegoating in Faulkner's iconic short stories *A Rose for Emily* and *Barn Burning*. It takes René Girard's framework of the scapegoat as a point of departure for a comparative study of these short stories to investigate them in terms of the eternal need for a society, especially one based on a patriarchal structure, to scapegoat certain characters. In Faulkner's short stories, scapegoating conceals itself under the guise of social hierarchies and gender discrimination, whereby the weaker individuals undergo communal oppression.

A Rose for Emily is ostensibly about the story of the Griersons- a highly esteemed patriarchal family at Jefferson, who "held themselves a little too high for what they were" (Faulkner 2), and the fate of their eponymous descendant Emily Grierson. It is interesting to note that the town's people consider the family as a "tableau", meaning a portrayal or representation. Earlier, the omniscient narrator describes the culmination of this tableau in the personification of Emily Grierson as a "monument", keeping alive the memory of the past, and embodying "a tradition, a duty, a care, a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" in the wake of Colonel Sartoris' edict "that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron", which sets in the initial theme of black women's scapegoating while exempting Emily from paying taxes- "the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity" (Faulkner 1) in a very patronising gesture.

René Girard treats the scapegoat as a conscious or unconscious cultural practice of victimisation, which this study intends to look at in the context of the stories as part of the transgenerational inheritance variously described in both stories in terms of an ineluctable claim of paternal blood. The concept of the scapegoat originated as a religious practice, a communal ritual whereby the sins of the community are projected onto a goat. The chosen goat would then be sent into the wilderness, as a sacrifice, to carry the burden of their offences and purge the people of their guilt. The goat was, later, replaced by individuals who were burdened with the sins of the community, to rid the community of their guilt and misfortune. Instances of scapegoating are frequently witnessed in literature. The perpetrator absolves himself/herself of his/her dark desires by projecting them onto another individual (René Girard 79). The concept does not merely refer to the physical victimisation of the characters, as it also implies the emotional, historical, social, and psychological victimisation. This study focuses on the characters' victimisation at the hands of their families and communities to highlight the pernicious impacts of scapegoating on the psyche of the victim.

Critical Perspectives on Faulkner's Fiction

Born in September 1897, William Cuthbert Faulkner was a poet, a short story writer, and a novelist. Because of his outstanding contributions to American literature, he was honoured with the Nobel Prize in 1949. He started his career in literature as a poet but gained popularity because of his novels and short stories. However, some critics believe that most of his initial work was written by him to make money. He was an excellent

craftsman and had an unprecedented speed in creating his marvellous pieces. Critics usually attribute the quick production of his writing and the high number of his literary works to his need for money. However, this claim is not altogether accurate because most of his works are so carefully written and compiled, carrying strong insights that only a writer who has a passion for literature can create. Works like *These 13* do not seem to be an inception of forced creativity. The crafting of complex sentence structure and employing the stream of consciousness are proofs of dedication and hard work. His novel *A Fable,* composed in 1954, won two awards: The National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. His works reflect on racism, capitalism, class difference, gender discrimination, and other social issues. *A Fable* deals with the repercussions of World War 1. This iconic story is set in France and skilfully portrays the horrors of war. *The Reivers: A Reminiscence,* published a little while before his death, also won the Pulitzer Prize. It deals with the theme of initiation. The novels chronicle the adventures of three adolescents. It portrays the psychological complexity of these characters and deals with the theme of initiation or coming of age.

The New Orleans Sketches include stories like *Home*, *Jealousy*, *The Rosary*, *The Cobbler*, *Liar,* and many more. His collection *These 13, The Portable Faulkner, The Collected Stories of William Faulkner* has stories like *A Rose for Emily*, *Honor, Red Leaves,* and many others stories. *Dr. Martino and Other Stories, The Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, includes stories such as "Death Drag," "Turn About," and "Mountain Victory," among others. He debuted his career as a novelist in 1926 with *Soldier's Pay.* Many of his works offer a detailed portrayal of the post-war landscape. It explores the impacts of war on individuals and the unending consequences that war entails. Like his stories, many of his novels portray Southern life: *Absalom, Absalom!* and *As I Lay Dying* are typical examples of his interest in the South. Most of his novels depict the post-war South. His works demonstrate the shift from the plantation era to the industrial era. The transition from glorifying the landowners to a period of self-exploration. He draws characters in all their complexities, navigating through the ever-changing time, to explore their identities. Some characters succumb to the system, but some stand up against the brutality to construct their identities. His works depict the hopes and the doubts and the miseries and the joys of the era that was lost and the era that was to come.

The setting is usually the fictional Yoknapatawpha County. He carves characters struggling against class, race, gender, family, society, and the self. He integrates personal struggles into social issues and creates his marvellous literature. His novels, like *Sanctuary, The Sound and the Fury,* and *Pylon,* are typical examples of his genius. He usually deals with war, slavery, disease, poverty, political unrest, etc.

Critical Perspectives on *A Rose for Emily*

Justine Schweizer, in her work "*A Rose for Emily*: The Dichotomy of a Rose," explores Emily's character possessing the duality of a rose (2). Schweizer demonstrates the idea by focusing on the dual nature of Emily, just like a rose: the softness of the petals and the harshness of the thorns (2). Emily presents the dichotomy of being feminine and masculine,

holding the values of the ideal past and the uncertain future. She is strong and fragile; she endures and rebels. Schweizer's work on the story is an important contribution and demonstrates the social and psychological aspects of the story.

Chung and Gil-Wha, in their work "*A Rose for Emily*: An Ambivalent Narrator in the Patriarchal Southern Community," explore the story concerning its unique narrative technique. Faulkner uses the plural first-person narration to tell the story of Emily. The use of this type of narration has thematic significance. The narrative technique presents the collective opinion of the people about Emily. People of the town treat Emily as a tradition and a relic of history. The non-linear flashback technique also demonstrates the intermingling of the past and the present. The transition from the old values to the new ones is never absolute. The past keeps coming to the present through the traditions and values the people uphold. The employment of devices like flashbacks and cyclic time achieves the goal skilfully. Chung and Gil-Wha highlight the ambivalence of the narrators. They represent the ambivalent attitude of the Southern community, who respect their history but is also open to the dawn of the modern era. That is why they respect and adore Emily for what she stands for, but also condemn her for her resistance and rebellion.

Ying Liu's study "Respect or Superiority: The Townspeople's Feeling for Emily" analyses the significance of the relationship between Emily and the town's people. For the people of Jefferson, Emily embodies the old South. Emily is the only remnant of the decaying South. They hold her high for her superior status but judge her for her outdated values and fading grandeur. Ying Liu demonstrates his point of view through the four confrontations between Emily and the townspeople. These events depict the ambivalent attitude of the people towards Emily. They love and hate, respect and judge Emily. Emily represents the decaying Southern culture and tradition. The people, though, adore their past and embrace the modern South. The tension between the people and Emily highlights the difficulty Jefferson's people face in reconciling old values with modern ones.

Literary Applications of René Girard's Scapegoat Theory

Scholars have widely borrowed René Girard's perspective of the scapegoat to analyse literary works. Luaces in her work "Sula, Literary Scapegoats, and Contemporary Black Women" demonstrates the mechanism of scapegoating through the character of the black protagonist Sula. The society projects its miseries onto her to restore peace. This study demonstrates her character from different angles. Sula is not entirely innocent in bringing about her destiny as she indulges in activities that incite the people around her. Her scapegoat destiny is not entirely justified, as she is not entirely responsible for all the blame they project on her. Though she is redeemed in the end, the study gives insight into the scapegoat mechanism of black women in the contemporary scenario.

Girard's scapegoat theory gives a new dimension to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter.* Tadd Ruetenik depicts the mechanism of scapegoating in his study "Another View of Arthur Dimmesdale: Scapegoating and Revelation in *The Scarlet Letter*". He demonstrates his idea through the fate of Arthur Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale acts as a scapegoat figure for

the whole community. Ruetenik focuses on the need for a scapegoat figure for the community. Dimmesdale carries the burden of the whole community and purges the people of their sins.

Luke Sayers, in the work "The Politics of the Poison Pen: Communism, Caricature, and Scapegoats in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," explores the mechanism of scapegoating. The study reveals the negative impacts of scapegoating on the psyche of the victim. Sayers analyses selfish motives.

Emily's Role as a Scapegoat

Emily's relation with the town is that of a scapegoat because she represents the social order of the old South that victimised the townspeople, thus becoming the victim of the townspeople's hatred, resentment, and vindication (Chung and Gil-Wha 88). Faulkner develops Emily's character as a double scapegoat one at the hands of the community, who shut her off, look down upon her, and believe that she deserves to die – "She will kill herself: and that would be the best thing" (Faulkner 4). and perhaps a remnant or revenant of an aristocratic Southern family system dominated by a patriarchal father who denied her freedom and exposure. Emily's tragedy follows the same trajectory as that of Temple Drake in *Sanctuary*. The society upholds its self-image by redirecting its guilt and moral collapse on the victim (Carson 167). This describes René Girard's theory of scapegoating, where an individual is blamed to maintain social harmony.

Paternal Scapegoating: The Father's Role in Projecting Blame

Emily's father holds her back from marrying anyone: "None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such" (Faulkner 25). It is ironic that in the process of scapegoating his only daughter, he sabotages his only hope of continuing his legacy through her. He deliberately exploits his only child to keep her dependent on him and deprives her of successfully integrating into society through interaction with other people. Critics, like Douglas, read Emily's scapegoating as "probably more individualistic than the ancient ritual…equally dedicated to the purposes of evasion of responsibility or blame and to self-preservation" (Douglas 32). However, the transgenerational impact of her father's legacy or life beyond the grave does not entirely exonerate Emily from her filial obligations because the stifling presence of her father's ghost remains a source of sustenance, preventing her from establishing any meaningful contact with the outside world, perpetuating her state of despair within the four walls of her inherited house secretly "cling[ing] to that which had robbed her…" (Faulkner 25).

Societal Scapegoating: Emily and the Weight of the Communal Guilt

After her father's death, Emily's example becomes a source of tragic catharsis and gratification for the people (Faulkner 3) as they take sadistic delight in seeing the colossal Emily Grierson being humanised by her abject state of poverty and tragedy. Devoid of any empathy, they make fun of her poverty "At last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left

alone, and a pauper, she had become humanised" (Faulkner 25). Out of retribution, they even take measures to make sure that she pays her taxes. They condemn her for her digression from the Griersons' ways of life when she falls in love, and that too with a day labourer, Homer Barron. They call her cousins to let them know about her affair, which they thought was a "disgrace to the town" (Faulkner *4*). The elderly people believed that "Even grief could not cause a real lady to forget *noblesse oblige…"* (Faulkner *30*). Thus, she becomes a victim of her "hereditary obligation"- her necrophiliac attachment to her father who had robbed her of any chance for life in terms of asserting her own choice and freedom to live an independent life foreclosing any possibility of escape in the form of a marriage with a northerner below the rank bourgeois suitor the like of Baron her father detested and rejected many times diminishing any chance at happiness, owing to "All the young men her father had driven away…" (Faulkner 2). Although Barron's refusal to marry Emily and the latter's act of poisoning and preserving the dead body of their suitor as a taxidermist replicates the way she preserves the dead body of her father, it becomes difficult for the reader to rule out that it is the abiding legacy of her father who undermines the final opportunity her daughter has and live freely detaching herself from her hereditary or parental bonds because even in his posthumous life the ghost of Mr. Grierson continues to preside over her daughter's fate as in the scene of Emily's bier where the crayon face of her is shown musing profoundly over the body of his daughter. It seems as if the dead father has come to claim his daughter even in her death.

The psychological impact of the tyranny of a possessive father and the ruthless social system upon Emily is devastating. Unable to resist the system, she becomes dehumanised and gains demonic power from her position. She trespasses on cultural norms by keeping her father's death a secret. She poisons her lover and becomes a necrophiliac. "Emily's extreme action cannot be simply attributed to her grotesque and cruel nature; rather, it is the ruthless Southern social system--- patriarchal chauvinism, puritan womanhood, and the conflict between community and individual that drives Emily to her tragedy" (Du 20). She breaks all the taboos and attempts to balance the ritual and, to an extent, compensate for her tragedy.

Emily: Challenging the Scapegoat Script

From the perspective of scapegoating, Tobe's position can be seen as part of the broader impact of scapegoating, highlighting the cyclic nature of scapegoating. Emily's household is a microcosm of the real world with racial trends. Tobe, her black servant, is the only entity against whom Emily defines herself. He is the racial other who gives Emily the recognition of her Griersons' dignity, and that is why his presence in the story is indispensable to her place in society. His significance in Emily's life is crucial yet understated. He is called by his first name only once in the story. He is also referred to as the racial other who has an invisible existence. He is placed in a dependent position by the Grierson's and continues to perform his role willingly. Emily would never have survived without his presence. However, Emily burdens him with the load of her tragic life to preserve her false sense of being a superior master. She portrays an outward appearance of

independence to the world while she relies on Tobe to manage all her affairs, which underscores her dependence on him. She denies her vulnerability and projects her misery onto him to absolve herself of the burden.

Bearing the Blame, Rejecting the Role

Under the lens of Girard's theory, Miss Emily is both the victim and the agent of scapegoating. She redirects her unresolved misery onto her husband-to-be, who ditches her at the brink of marriage. She reclaims agency through the demonic act of lying with the dead body of her beloved. Her relationship with Barron's dead body becomes a final assertion of her identity. She defines herself on her terms, devoid of any external intervention. She takes her revenge against the tyranny of her father and the society on Homer Barron. Emily reclaims her authority and control by subjugating Barron to her will. He carries the accumulated burden of her selfish father and people who enjoy her misery. Barron. Her response to the trauma instilled by the father is shown by the way she holds on to the corpse of her lover to have a false sense of relationship and control. This perverse idea of clinging to a dead body to regain her autonomy shows her fractured self. The consequences of her oppressive past show through her morbid act of necrophilia.

Sarty's Role as a Scapegoat

In *Barn Burning,* Abner denies his son any authority. He deprives Sarty of any power to make his choices. Since he could not take his revenge on the upper class, he turns on Sarty for supporting him in his violence. He deliberately keeps him dependent on him to maintain his power and continue to exercise his control over him. He reinforces his subjectivity by hampering Sarty's development of independence and identity. He constantly reminds him about his incapacity to think independently, while Sarty, being the scapegoat, cannot stand up to his father against the oppression. He defines his masculinity against Sarty's weak position, which puts him in the position of the master of his household. His mother, Lennie Snopes, realises Sarty's helpless position, but she is as powerless as her son. Though she attempts to protect her son from Abner's violence, her weak position shows their family dynamic clearly. She is unable to provide the kids with a safe anchor. Abner constantly projects his anger onto others, and Lennie is a victim of his misplaced anger. The cyclic nature of scapegoating can be seen in the dysfunctional family dynamics. The mother is in a constant state of anxiety, and she recognises the unjust behaviour of her husband. She is aware of the pressure Abner exerts on Sarty to accomplice him in his destructive ventures, but she is unable to shield her son against Abner's manipulation. His family members feel threatened by his vicious nature. Even in his household, Abner is an outcast. He asserts his authority to reclaim his control. Abner is socially ostracised and even looked down upon by the African American slave who derogatorily asks them to wipe their feet before entering the Major's house.

The Scapegoat Cycle: Anger and Projection

Major de Spain acts as a scapegoat for all the others whom Abner holds responsible for his tragic state. The rug symbolises power and control. It shows the luxury and comfort that Abner's class has been denied. His soiling of the rug shows his deep-rooted resentment against everyone who lives in better circumstances than he does. He, in a way, attempts to make the statement that if he cannot have these luxuries, he will take them away from them, too. Abner believes that the rich are responsible for his pain and suffering. He blames society for his condition. Out of resentment, he destroys Major de Spain's carpet. Abner projecting his rage on him is crucial to the theme of scapegoating. De Spain carries the cumulative burden of his class. For Abner, the carpet symbolises the luxury and privilege of the upper class that he has been denied. Ruining the carpet shows his aggressive attempt to challenge the power of the privileged landowners. He derives gratification from his violence. His refusal to pay for the damage to the carpet shows his rebellion against his wealthy superiors. He takes Sarty along to the de Spain's residence to forcefully make him an accomplice in his violent act. Abner commands his loyalty, pressuring Sarty to accompany him and sacrificing him emotionally. Sarty recognises his father's vicious acts but cannot step out of the vicious cycle of victimisation. The older son passively resigns to his father's scapegoating, which makes the father invincible.

Sarty's Moral Dilemma

The father demands abnegation and self-denial from him and wants him to adopt the role he assigns to him. The father abuses Sarty and tries to control him, even though he is an innocent kid. Like Temple Drake, in *Sanctuary*, Sarty is a victim of his family's silence and his father's violence. The father redirects his anger and frustration onto Sarty and bears the weight of his father's rebellion (Carson 167). The story opens with the scene of a trial: Abner is on trial for burning Mr. Harris's barn. The judge calls Sarty as a witness on Mr. Harris's demand. Trapped between two opposing forces, Sarty himself is on trial to choose between "the old fierce pull of blood" (Faulkner 1) and the truth. The father wants him to obey his directive unquestionably, the way the elder son does. He is forced to carry his father's rage and pain. He threatens him to - "stick to your blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you" (Faulkner 9). Sarty knows that his father's behaviour is wrong, and that is why he is in constant battle with his blood, but "The fear and despair and the old grief of blood" (Faulkner 2). Represses his fragile identity and submits to his father's will, against his own, "he aims for me to lie…and I will have to do hit" (Faulkner 5). His silence at the trial scene is suggestive of his loyalty to his clan against the truth. Sarty's suffering is an example of the classic scapegoat mechanism that restores Abner's peace.

Sarty: Challenging the Scapegoat Script

Faulkner endows his central characters with agency and resistance. Sartoris's deviancy from his family's loyalty norm plays an instrumental role in his selection as a scapegoat. Since Sarty is ethically superior, his ideals make him a misfit for his family, who treat him like a pariah figure (Eric Neumann). He has always felt the urge to defy his father because

of "the terrible handicap of being young…" (Faulkner 10); he is powerless. He is a sensitive soul who registers the absurdity of his father's act. The final scene, when Abner sets out to burn the barn of the De Spains, is the dramatisation of Sarty's psychological battle against his blood. He finally gathers the courage to renounce his heritage by disassociating himself from the family's loyalty norm "By warning de Spain. Sarty identifies himself with an entity other than his father, and only by violating his blood does he gain his freedom" (Faulkner 238). By breaking himself free of his sordid family system, he discovers his authentic self, a self not channelled by a tyrannical father who is brutally indifferent to his emotional trauma. Sarty carries the cumulative burden of the family by ostracising himself from his loved ones. His self-imposed exile redeems the rest of the family from their misfortune. However, he carries the guilt of being responsible for his father's and brother's deaths. Sarty's exile to the wilderness is an instance of the scapegoat mechanism, which restores the harmony of his family.

The Role of Projection in Fuelling Scapegoating

Abner's misplaced rage against the upper class is seen in his horrendous act of burning the barns of the financially superior ones. He vents his rage against the whole class by burning De Spains' barn. The arson is associated with the cathartic outburst of his anger. It is an expression of his resentment and rebellion against the system. His fractured self finds recognition by placing himself in the position of a messiah for the socially disenfranchised. He retaliates against the communal oppression by ruining their property. He stands for the collective good; however, instead of restoring his position as an individual, the violence ostracises him. He expects unwavering loyalty from his family. The recurrent episodes of arson imply the ritual of scapegoating for the purification of injustices against his community. He forces Sarty to succumb to his power and join him in the ritual of defiance. The act of barn burning carries a plethora of symbolic loads. Every instance of arson leaves a testimony of his identity. It brings significance to his invisible existence. He reconstructs his identity around these events. The fire purges him of the perceived injustices and exploitation. Sarty's inner conflict resolves in the final scene of the story when he breaks free of his father's authority. Sarty subverts his scapegoat destiny by telling the de Spains about his father's vicious plan. The struggle to choose between the father and justice, allegiance and defiance, and the self and the scapegoat culminates in his act of rebellion. He reverses his destiny regardless of the dire consequences of his action and reconstructs an identity untarnished by his father's influence. He ends the recurrent cycle of victimisation and retaliation and chooses moral integrity against family loyalty.

Conclusion

Faulkner's treatment of these characters at the hands of their families (and society at large) adds a new dimension to how the mechanism of scapegoat operates because he shifts his focus more on the symbolic/psychic/internal lynching of the scapegoat figure rather than the physical. The scapegoating of these characters brings to the fore Faulkner's concern about man's inhumanity to man, making a plea for the eternal need for tolerance in a society that habitually scapegoat's characters who challenge or subvert the established

norms of society. Sarty manages to detach himself from "the old fierce pull of blood" (*Faulkner* 1). The boy gets freedom from the claim of patrimony and achieves his manhood: "He has destroyed the crushing force that has threatened his awakening identity…" (Faulkner 238). The ending of the story demonstrates Sarty's reversal of his scapegoat destiny. The following statement supports the argument that up till now, whenever Sarty thinks about his father, he experiences fear and terror. However, it is as soon as he hears the gunshots that the terror is suddenly replaced by grief "The grief and despair was no longer terror and fear but just grief and despair (Faulkner 18). The father figure ceases to be a scapegoat anymore. Faulkner's lingering on the details of Sarty's flight rather than the father's death demonstrates the thematic significance of the work. Faulkner is more inclined to sympathise with the scapegoat figure. Faulkner is supportive of his justified rebellion, "his breathing was easier now…" (Faulkner 18), and concludes the story on a note of hope for a better future. The story ends with a promise of a better tomorrow for Sarty. "He knew it was almost dawn, the night almost over" (Faulkner 18).

The humming of the birds signifies a kind of rebirth. Emily is unable to do so because her father had instilled in her the virtues of aristocracy. She has internalised her father's snobbery. Her false belief in her father's creed does not let her see that she is running out of time by not resisting her father, for not allowing her to marry anyone outside her family. She is doubly victimised, first by her father and then by the community. Paul Harris observes that "the town is never finished burying Emily" (Faulkner 174). Harris's observation concerning Emily's predicament is in sync with what Girard postulates as the resolution of a scapegoat, that she meets the psychological necessity of the town to absorb their animosities and differences. Every society needs a scapegoat who provides the people with an outlet for their guilt and hostilities. She is the descendant of aristocracy, her father enacted a patriarchal structure, and that is why the people believe that she should be penalised.

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