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ABSOLUTE DEVOTION AND THE LIFE-AFFIRMING SACRIFICE IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S A ROSE FOR EMILY AND D. H. LAWRENCE'S THE HORSE DEALER'S DAUGHTER

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Abstract: This essay examines the nature of absolute love and sacrifice in William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* and D. H. Lawrence's *The Horse Dealer's Daughter*. Through close textual analysis, it argues that both Emily Grierson and Mabel Pervin embody a form of devotion so total that it dismantles self-preservation and social conventions, rendering them paradoxically most alive. While Emily turns inward, preserving the beloved in an eternal present through ritualized care, Mabel moves forward through self-dissolution toward an unknown future shaped by reciprocal sacrifice. Despite their different temporal orientations, both protagonists reject the limits imposed by time and mortality. The essay concludes that love's deepest significance lies not in its moral justification or outcome, but in the total surrender it demands—an act that becomes the most life-affirming expression available to individuals.
Keywords: Absolute devotion; Sacrifice; Female subjectivity; Temporal transcendence; Life-affirmation

1 INTRODUCTION

This essay argues that both Faulkner and Lawrence construct protagonists whose absolute devotion demands the relinquishment of self-boundaries, yet their orientation toward time fundamentally diverges.Love, at its most absolute, often resists balance and asserts itself as a force that overrides reason, unsettles social conventions, and demands the relinquishment of the very boundaries individuals construct to preserve its stability [1]. In this sense, the depth of devotion becomes inseparable from the extent of sacrifice it commands, prompting authors—particularly in their short stories, where compression intensifies moments of emotional extremity and strips experience to its most essential impulses—to interrogate the limits of human commitment: whether love's value lies in what it produces or in the sheer intensity with which it is sustained. Both William Faulkner in *A Rose for Emily* and D. H. Lawrence in *The Horse Dealer's Daughter* construct protagonists whose devotion is carried to such an uncompromising extreme [2]. While Emily Grierson and Mabel Pervin each embody a form of love defined by profound sacrifice, their relationship with time diverges; Emily turns inward from her social world to sustain an intimate bond with the past, whereas Mabel moves toward death as a form of reunion before encountering, in Ferguson's response, the overwhelming force and reciprocity of love's sacrifice. Through this contrast, both authors ultimately assert that love's deepest significance lies not in its moral justification or tangible outcome, but in the total surrender it can demand—an experience so inexplicable that it nonetheless becomes the most profoundly life-affirming expression available for individuals to explore.

2 ABSOLUTE DEVOTION AS SELF-ERASURE AND LIFE-AFFIRMATION

First and foremost, both Emily Grierson and Mabel Pervin exemplify a form of love so absolute that it demands a relinquishment of self-preservation that paradoxically renders each woman most intensely alive. Indeed, in *A Rose for Emily*, a revelatory image of Emily's inner state first crystallizes in the aftermath of her father's death, where she is described with her hair "cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows — sort of tragic and serene." Here, Faulkner juxtaposes the external perception "tragic" with Emily's internal composure "serene" without subordinating one to the other — a balance that renders Emily's grief not as psychological collapse but as a state of controlled, almost sacred endurance, suggesting an inner life so self-contained that external devastation has failed to penetrate it. The simile of "angels in colored church windows" further elevates her into a spiritual existence: like stained glass, she is both fractured and illuminated, her suffering transfigured into radiance [3]. For readers, this image destabilizes any impulse to pathologize her; instead, it suggests that Emily's experience of love, even in loss, has already begun to reorder her inner world into something more enduring than ordinary emotional response. While some may view Emily's self-determination negatively, reading the story's culminating act as evidence of a twisted possessiveness that renders her love pathological, the quality of care that pervades Ms. Emily's every gesture well before the bridal chamber is disclosed, suggests otherwise. Long before the chamber is revealed, Emily's life demonstrates an impulse that is generative rather than destructive: for six or seven years, she teaches china painting to "the daughters and granddaughters of Colonel Sartoris' contemporaries," offering skill in the most permanent of artistic media — fired enamel on ceramic, resistant to the decay that governs every other material in her world. She chooses this medium precisely because her deepest drive is toward the preservation of beauty — and it is her pupils, not Emily herself, who "grew up and fell away." What the bridal chamber finally reveals, then, is

not a crime scene but a devotional space sustained by precisely this same instinct: the "rose-shaded lights," the collar and tie arranged "as if they had just been removed," the suit "carefully folded" — details saturated with the color of the title itself, rose, the elegiac color of beauty approaching and outlasting its own decay [4]. The verb "carefully" is Faulkner's most decisive evidence: it is not a justification for obsession but of sustained, patient, ongoing regard — the act of someone for whom the love is still fully, actively alive, because for Emily it is. This love culminates in the strand of "iron-gray hair" on the second pillow: Emily has lain beside Homer not as an act of morbid fixation but as the most intimate form of companionship still available, her willingness to sustain love that does not require the beloved to be living constituting the most life-affirming act available to a self that has given everything. In fact, this interior life is further externalized through the image of Emily standing with "the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol" — the light not illuminating her for public scrutiny but emanating from within, signifying a consciousness that exists in a different moral order from those observing it. Against the townspeople who move "like burglars" in the dark, Faulkner's inversion renders the balance of power and ethics with precise irony: the collective who trespass in darkness commit the violation, while Emily, singular and self-sustaining in stillness and light, is rendered most fully alive. Likewise, in *The Horse Dealer's Daughter*, Lawrence constructs Mabel's inner life through an image of equal precision: in the graveyard, Mabel "took minute pains, went through the park in a state bordering on pure happiness, as if in performing this task she came into a subtle, intimate connection with her mother [5]." The pairing of "minute" with "pains" encapsulates a sustained form of love: "pains" asserts the genuine cost of the act, while "minute" insists on the smallness of the gesture — too intimate to be legible from the outside, too particular to register as devotion to anyone who has not themselves performed it. Furthermore, Lawrence positions Mabel at the threshold of pure happiness with "bordering," love charged with desire that has not yet exhausted itself through completion; he also conveys that Mabel "thought of nobody, not even of herself" in this moment, the beloved so fully occupying the field of attention that no self seems to remain — illustrating that love, at its most absolute, is not a state of fullness but of self-erasure, the same erasure Emily performs in forty years of unseen devotion beside Homer. While one may posit Mabel's pursuit of love as manipulative in her interactions with Dr. Ferguson, the text's own diction forecloses this reading at every turn. Lawrence selects the word "supplicating" to describe Mabel's gaze after the rescue — a word that denotes petitioning from a position of total powerlessness, placing oneself entirely at another's mercy without any claim upon it. Supplication is, indeed, the moral opposite of a manipulator opting to maintain leverage; when Mabel walks into the pond, she does so with no reasonable expectation that Ferguson will arrive and has anticipated nothing, which renders her the exact opposite of a strategist. In fact, when she cries "I'm so awful, I'm so awful! Oh no, I'm too awful," her repetition does not accelerate or vary but returns compulsively to the same unfinished phrase, unable to move past itself. A manipulator, conversely, will be able to control her syntax and resist being overtaken by love's arrival [6]. This quality of absolute, self-erasing devotion performed without audience, without design, and without expectation of return — love so total it cannot even complete a thought — is the same quality Mabel shares with Emily, whose china-painting lessons, whose scrupulous arrangement of the bridal chamber, and whose years of unseen companionship beside Homer are all equally enacted without witness or calculation. In both women, Faulkner and Lawrence locate the same radical and life-affirming claim: that love's most absolute form is not the love that announces or performs itself, but the love that has nothing left to perform — a devotion that has consumed every self-protective boundary the self once held, that is characterized by sacrifice, and in doing so, paradoxically rendered each woman most intensely and irreducibly alive.

3 TEMPORAL DIVERGENCE: ETERNAL PRESENT VS. FORWARD DISSOLUTION

Next, while both Emily and Mabel love with a totality that almost dissolves the self, the direction of their devotion in relation to time is opposite; Emily's love reaches backward, constructing an eternal present that refuses to surrender the beloved to time, while Mabel's reaches forward, willingly dissolving the self entirely to be remade by what love inaugurates. First, Faulkner's portrayal of Emily's resistance begins right after her father’s death, where the narrator observes that Emily "clung to that which had robbed her". Here, the word "robbed" carries weight, for it implies that Emily holds the devastating self-knowledge that she has been robbed, knows she has been robbed, and clings nonetheless, establishing that Emily's love is not the love of blindness but of full knowledge — a love that has assessed the cost and continues regardless [7]. This recognition reframes the bridal chamber into a chamber of devotion, where Homer's collar and tie, arranged "as if they had just been removed," constructs a perpetual recency from the adverb "just". This adverb also creates an eternal present in which the act of removal is always happening now, with the body always on the verge of return. Moreover, the culminating detail, the strand of "iron-gray hair," asserts permanence and resistance to decay from “iron”, time inscribed on the body from the modifier “gray”, and a sustained love that has left its physical impression on the material world from the “indented pillow”. In stark contrast, Lawrence's protagonist Mabel operates in a wholly forward-facing position with her love. To illustrate, pproaching the pond, "she seemed in a sort of ecstasy to be coming nearer to her fulfilment, her own glorification, approaching her dead mother, who was glorified." The three words "coming nearer," "approaching," "glorified" here seem to trace an arc from the present longing through prospective completion to a state already achieved by the mother Mabel follows [8]. This, far from being a regression toward what was, is a journey toward what has not yet, for her, been. Indeed, the diction “glorification” which Lawrence deploys carries positive connotations that can be associated with a spiritual transformation that renders Mabel's act an ascent rather than despair. While Ferguson crosses to Mabel, "all that he had left behind had shrivelled and become void", with "shrivelled" suggesting that the part left behind has been actively

destroyed by love's arrival, Faulkner's bridal chamber is held in perfect suspension with objects preserved, colors maintained, and the act of removal perpetually recent. In other words, Lawrence's shrivelled past is the direct formal opposite, since nothing survives the crossing, evident in the closing lines "I want you, I want you," that reveal an uncertainty of whether it becomes satisfied, and "tomorrow," that paints a forward picture of what has not yet arrived. Despite these differences in terms of love's relationship with time, both protagonists constitute the same refusal to accept the limits that time and mortality impose on love — Emily refusing through permanence, Mabel through becoming — and it is precisely in the difference between these two refusals that Faulkner and Lawrence together explore the capacity of devotion at its most absolute, which is the defiant eternal present and the courageous unknown tomorrow [9].

4 CONCLUSION

In essence, both Emily Grierson in *A Rose for Emily* and Mabel Pervin in *The Horse Dealer's Daughter* embody a love of such totality that it dismantles the conventional parameters around it, revealing a love characterized by sacrifice that becomes, paradoxically, the most life-affirming act available. Both Emily Grierson and Mabel Pervin arrive at love's most absolute, which does not exist to be explained or returned, but exists to be sustained at whatever cost; yet, they arrive by different routes, with Emily refusing to yield the beloved to time, constructing in the rose-shaded chamber a devotion so total it has fossilized into an eternal present, and Mabel dissolving the existing self almost entirely, moving forward through toward a state of being astounded by the doctor's sacrifice in his love. Both characters' love teaches readers that devotion, at its furthest limit, will not accept the terms of a reality that spells out loss, and so creates its own reality outside those terms. Ultimately, love's depth is not measured by whether it can be explained or returned, but by the absolute willingness to give everything in its service; it is this which constitutes the most life-affirming assertion that humans are capable of creating.Read together, Faulkner and Lawrence suggest that love at its most absolute is not a transaction or a social contract, but an ontological act—one that redefines the self's relation to time, death, and meaning. In an age increasingly skeptical of sacrifice, both stories recover a vision of devotion that is neither pathological nor naive, but radically life-affirming precisely because it asks for everything.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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