



# Analysis of Emily's Subject Construction in *A Rose for Emily* from Jacques Lacan's Psychoanalytic Theory

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## Abstract

William Faulkner, a Nobel Prize-winning author, is a highly influential figure in Southern American literature. *A Rose for Emily* is his Gothic short story published in 1930. This novel tells the story of Emily, a descendant of the aristocracy of the Old South, who grows up with a monstrous upbringing and is eventually driven by desire to poison her lover, Homer. The novel demonstrates the process of Emily's complete entrapment in the real world, as well as the process of Emily's subject construction. In the traditional society of the Old South, it is a common phenomenon that women suppressed by patriarchy live with a lack of subjectivity, but in the end, in the funeral of the main character Emily, she is regarded as a monument by southerners rather than a decentralized individual. This study aims to unravel the process of Emily's subject construction through Lacan's three orders theory. By exposing the oppression of patriarchy and traditional values of the Old South, it interprets Emily's ultimate alienated self.

## Subject Areas

Linguistics, Literature

## Keywords

*A Rose for Emily*, Subject Construction, Jacques Lacan, Three Orders

## 1. Introduction

Faulkner is a renowned writer during the Civil War, who is adept at portraying the psychological transformation of characters and illustrating the evolution of southern American society to readers. During the 1920s, the United States under-

went a period of significant change, marked by the aftermath of the Civil War. There is a clash between the traditional southern economy and the advanced northern industrial revolution. This leads to a surge in southern literary writers expressing their admiration and longing for the traditional southern civilization.

In his famous short story *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner portrays the traditional culture of the south, such as exempting Emily from the tax she must pay, reflecting the disappearance of ancient traditions that southerners strive to preserve. Emily is born into a noble family in Jefferson, Mississippi. Her father's strict family values and outdated Puritan cultural education have cultivated Emily's aloof personality. Despite the decline of Emily's entire aristocratic family, traditional southern values remain deeply rooted in the hearts of everyone in the town, who naturally regard Emily as a symbol of old customs. In this novel, the conversation between Emily and her father has never been depicted. To a certain extent, the absence of language reflects the absence of female discourse resulting from the excessive control of patriarchy. In turn, this contributes to Emily's psychological trauma, caused by her inability to conform to the traditional moral order of the time.

Emily's lifestyle is greatly changed by her father's death, which presents her with numerous new challenges. After losing her noble status, she becomes just like any other resident of the town. However, the mansion she lives in still retains its former aristocratic style, serving as a reminder of her past. She leaves the mansion without hesitation and is seen leaving in a carriage with her beloved. Unfortunately, when Emily discovers that Homer has no intention of marrying her, she resorts to poisoning him. This is a thorough tragic end to her struggle against her fate. At the end, nearly all the citizens attend Emily's funeral. They regard her as a monument, and believe that as long as it remains standing, their attachment to southern tradition can be maintained. In short, the novel employs a highly distinctive narrative technique, and its characters are rendered with remarkable individuality. Consequently, it has attracted considerable attention from critics since its publication. This Lacanian analysis advances the study of the novel from a socio-historical critical perspective to the philosophical level of subject construction. It connects the grand narrative of the South's decline with the individual's subject construction, ultimately revealing that Emily's tragedy is a metaphor for the collapse of the entire Southern symbolic system.

## 2. Lacan's Three Orders Theory

Jacques Lacan is the most outstanding psychoanalyst after Freud, and an important French thinker in the 20th century. To better understand the subject construction of characters in the work, it can be interpreted in terms of Lacan's three orders theory. From there, one can further understand how the subject's behavior is carried out under the interaction of the three orders. It is a theoretical framework for the psychological structure of the subject and an important part of Lacan's ideological system. And it can be divided into the imaginary order, the symbolic order and the real order. In short, the imaginary order is the realm of imag-

inary images. The symbolic order is the world of symbols, consisting of laws and rules that govern individual behavior. The real order is everything that escapes the reality constructed by the imaginary order and the symbolic order.

The imaginary order is the realm of the self, the prelinguistic realm that unites perception and illusion. It is based on the mirror stage, in which infants begin to recognize images in mirrors between the ages of 6 and 18 months. The image in the mirror creates a sense of wholeness and fulfillment. The infant then becomes obsessed with the image in the mirror and recognizes it as his or her own, which is the process of identification. Moreover, the image in the mirror does not refer to a real mirror but to any reflective surface. The imaginary order is divided into two parts, the other and the "Ideal I". The infant recognizes the self through the image in the mirror. And it is a process of alienation while the individual constructs the self through the other. In short, the imaginary order is a realm of imagination in which the individual constructs the self through identification.

The symbolic order is the most detailed and important part of Lacanian topography. It is the realm that dominates the regularity of the subject's life, in which the subject establishes connections with cultural systems and relations with others through language. Lacan explains the concept of the symbolic order by stating that he develops it by incorporating theories from anthropology and language. The symbolic order involves the dimension of language that includes the signifier and the signified. Lacan considers the structure of the unconscious to be like a language. Identifying with the other is about gaining status and identity in the symbolic order. The other mostly refers to father, so symbolic identity is the identification with the function of father. It can be said that father's intervention marks the children's entry into the symbolic stage. Here, father does not refer to a real person, but a symbol. It is seen as embodying the symbolic laws of society, the metaphor of father serves to replace the desire for motherhood with the laws of fatherhood. And it is also referred to as the Name-of-the-Father. The Name-of-the-Father represents authority and law. Therefore, the individual must identify with the symbolic order and law in order to gain identification with the symbol. In short, the symbolic order is the field of law that dominates the formation of the subject. The individual must accept the castration of father in order to construct the self.

The real order is Lacan's slipperiest and most paradoxical concept. It is regarded as the antithesis of the imaginary order and is later incorporated into the three orders to illustrate the relationship with the symbolic order. The real order is also considered one of the central concepts of Lacanian theory. It is a place where personal needs are generated and fulfilled. According to Lacan, there is no absence in reality because it is everywhere but elusive and unconscious. Therefore, the realm of the real absolutely resists symbolizations. In other words, there is no language or sign in the world of the real order because it transcends the sign. Later, Lacan restates the real order, which is basically nothing, a substantial non-existence whose core is nothing. For Lacan, the real order is traumatic, and the subject em-

employs both fantasy and language to avoid contact with it [1]. No matter how much people try to eliminate pain by expressing it through language, something is always left behind.

### 3. Alienated Self in Imaginary Order

Lacan proposes that human cognition originates from fascination with images, specifically beginning with infant's identification with its own mirror image [2]. This recognition is essentially both an aesthetic perception and an illusion, representing the subject's striving toward wholeness. Through the mirror as an external medium, the infant's immature body becomes complete. The relationship between the self and its mirror image thus constitutes the realm of the imaginary. In Lacan's theoretical framework, the imaginary order emerges during the mirror stage, though it is not identical to the stage itself. Chronologically, the imaginary order spans a longer period than the mirror stage, persisting until the intervention of the symbolic order, at which point it withdraws from the realm of consciousness. Lacan posits that the imaginary order constitutes the domain of the subject's subjectivity, its formation dependent on the individual's mirror experience and the psychic illusions of the mirror stage. The ultimate destination of imaginary order is inevitably the unconscious realm. This ensures that even after adulthood, children remain susceptible to being awakened by certain images from the imaginary order, thereby seeking objects with which to identify their conscious self.

Lacan provides a perspective that consciousness is established during a mysterious moment in the infant's preverbal period, which he terms the mirror stage. This stage represents a crucial phase in human psychological development, occurring between 6 and 18 months of infancy. During this period, the infant first recognizes its own image in a mirror and identifies this external image as the self. Further observation reveals that the emergence of self-awareness and alienation occur simultaneously. It seems that the establishment of the subject depends on the alienation of the self. But in fact, the construction of the self cannot be separated from its counterpart, the "other". The other is achieved through the self's identification with its mirror image, meaning that the infant's self-awareness always forms in reference to the other. However, this identification is an illusory unity, for the infant's self-perception at this stage is actually incomplete, and it mistakes the unified mirror image for the true self. And the imaginary order is not governed by the reality principle, rendering the self-design at this stage illusory and imaginary, that is to say, the construction of the self begins within the imaginary order.

Emily's imaginary identification with Southern culture profoundly influences her psyche and behavior, causing her to live perpetually within her own imaginary world. The crux of the mirror stage lies in the subject establishing self-identity through external images, an identity inherently found on alienation from the outset. Emily's entire life is trapped within this alienated self in the realm of imagination. As the last representative of the southern aristocratic Grierson family, she is

imbued from childhood with a specific aristocratic image by her family and society, forced to identify with this externally imposed identity. This identification is not a choice born of her own heart, but rather the result of societal imposition. For Emily, her father is her earliest and most significant mirror image. It helps Emily construct relationships between herself and the other, thereby establishing her self-identity. Her father drives away every young man who comes courting her, using his actions to forge an unquestionable self-image for her, that is, a lofty, unattainable noblewoman. In the novel, Mr. Grierson is portrayed as a powerful Southern patriarch who serves not only as her biological father but also as the figure with whom she identifies psychologically. It is within this image of the other that she seeks to define herself. Consequently, Emily's sense of self cannot exist apart from this mirror image of her father.

This differs from Lacan's discourse on the function of the Name-of-the-Father, which incorporates individuals into the social symbolic system by introducing laws and order. It manifests as the honor, traditions, and social status of the Southern aristocracy represented by the Grierson family. And Emily must conform to the values and norms of the entire Southern aristocratic society. While her father was alive, Emily existed entirely in his shadow, deprived of any opportunity to develop an independent subjectivity. His prohibition against any male companionship strips her of the normal right to express her desires as a woman, condemning her to perpetual alienation within the imaginary order. After her father's death, Emily chooses to marry Homer, a man who in no way meet the standards set by the traditions of Southern aristocracy. Boothby observes that the subject enters the symbolic order through identification with the paternal name, but when this identification becomes excessive, it leads to the dissolution of subjectivity [3]. This precisely encapsulates her tragedy, the excessive identification with the Southern aristocratic values embodied by her father ultimately deprives her of the possibility to develop her authentic self. When she realizes Homer has no intention of marrying her, Emily is once again faced with the imaginary trauma. After being abandoned by her father's death, Emily poisons Homer to shield her fragile self from this new other, ultimately sealing the failure of their romance. From then on, she locks herself in a square shaped wooden house and spends the rest of her life with the corpse of her loved one, always maintaining her dignity and pride. Emily's inner imagination is that she is the embodiment of tradition, and a monument.

Emily's subjectivity is not only constructed within personal relationships but also deeply entangled in specific social symbolic systems. The aristocratic identity bestowed upon her by the southern town constitutes another crucial mirror image of the other. Lacan posits that social identity is also a form of symbolic identification, one whose fictional nature is understood by most people. But Emily appears to have fully internalized these social expectations, treating the identity of a noble lady as an immutable essential trait. In the tax incident, the author vividly reveals Emily's stubborn attitude of sticking to the old order through a dialogue with of-

ficials. She has twice refused to pay taxes, which inexplicably defeats the delegation. As Lacan's theory suggests, she enters a stage of ego-alienation. Emily represents the culture of the Old South, which being dead with war, but at the same time more stubbornly alive than ever before. Imagination always returns illusions and temptations, and is far from being an insignificant existence. Emily represents the old order and moral standards of the South, but she is also a victim and sacrifice.

Under the collective gaze of the residents in small town, Emily's sense of self becomes further alienated. The collective gaze can be further explained through Lacanian "big Other". The big Other represents the collective of language, law and social norms. Therefore, the townspeople's role in the novel can be identified as the big Other for Emily. Their surveillance of Emily constitutes symbolic violence perpetrated by patriarchal society through collective gaze. As a result, the townspeople's gaze not only demands Emily fulfill her obligations as noble descendant, continuously internalizing social norms into her self-perception, but also reinforces her alienated self. Moreover, the subject affirms itself through the gaze of the other. Emily becomes a symbol within the town's cultural imagination, distancing herself from authentic self-experience. Ultimately, Emily's subjectivity is laid bare in her death. As her hair gradually turns gray, she ceases to be the Southern belle living in fantasy and instead becoming a real subject eroded by time. Death finally liberates her from a lifetime of alienated selfhood, though at the cost of her life. The entire novel can be viewed as a tragic narration of an alienated self.

#### 4. Subject Influenced by Symbolic Order

Lacan's symbolic order refers to a system of signs composed of language, law, and social norms. Individuals acquire subjectivity by entering this system, but are simultaneously disciplined by it. The symbolic order connects to the entire existing cultural system through language. Individuals rely on the symbolic order to engage with their cultural environment, establish relationships with others, and on this basis become objectified, beginning to exist as subjects. Emily's life trajectory precisely illustrates the core contradiction of this theory: the subject both depends on the symbolic order's recognition and is destroyed by its violence. The father stands as the primary representative of the symbolic order. Since the symbolic order precedes the subject, the subject falls under the dominion of symbols even before birth, becoming the bearer of their own name and their family's surname. Therefore, the symbolic order is inevitably linked to the father. But this father is not a specific biological progenitor but a symbolic father. Lacan states that we must recognize the cornerstone of the symbolic function for the Name-of-the-Father, which throughout history has identified his image as the legal image [4].

The construction of Emily's subjectivity is first decisively shaped by the Name-of-the-Father within the symbolic order. The Name-of-the-Father represents the intervention of law, authority, and the symbolic order, compelling the individual into the system of social norms. The symbolic culture of the old South determines

Emily's imaginary order, especially the old rules, old moral standards, patriarchal culture, and Puritan ideology of the South. The serious moral and psychological consequences brought about by the Civil War cannot be ignored. Emily is born into a declining aristocratic family, and her father believes in Puritanism, so she is deeply influenced by the Puritan concept of women's morality because her father is her only spiritual pillar and hope in life. The role of mother is absent at a young age. In her father's Puritan belief, Emily should not desire anything unlike a noble lady and bring glory to her family, so she has to obey rather than resist. Therefore, Emily always stands behind her father's towering figure, witnessing his resolute rejection of every young suitor who comes to court her. This violent interference caused Emily's psychological development to stagnate at the mirror stage, where the individual has not fully entered the symbolic order and remains immersed in chaotic imagination between the self and world.

For Emily, her father's symbolic death signifies the collapse of her entire world of meaning. The loss of the Name-of-the-Father in her individual psychological development hinders her entry into the symbolic order, even affecting her identity formation and psychological stability. This absence may increase the risk of psychosis, as the individual cannot rationally interpret the world through language and symbols. After her father's death, Emily should have experienced liberation of her subjectivity, but prolonged psychological control prevented her from establishing an independent sense of self. Homer's corpse becomes the materialized symbol of Emily's psychosis, embodying her creation of a pathological personal symbol system. By appropriating the dead, she resists the collapse of the symbolic order. Emily's tragedy lies in her own repression under the Name-of-the-Father, but she reproduces this violent logic through murder. This paradox constitutes the irreconcilable fundamental contradiction at the core of Emily's existence as a psychotic subject.

At the same time, Emily's tragedy manifests more profoundly as the alienation of the other's desire. Lacan points out that human desire is fundamentally a desire for the desire of others, that is, individuals affirm their existence through recognition by others [5]. In the story, her father deeply influences Emily's life like a ghost. The townspeople have seen her father's portrait on two separate occasions. The first one is on the easel in front of the fireplace when they come for taxes. Another time people see it above Emily's morgue. Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier [6]. The portrait indicates that the shadow of the father is nowhere to be found. This also reflects in the fact that when she bravely faces love, her relatives and neighbors are like her father's substitute, trying their best to prevent her from doing that would ruin reputation of the South. Notably, her relationship with Homer, a Northern worker, appears superficially as rebellion against patriarchy but is fundamentally another form of dependency on the other. The northern industrial civilization Homer represents exerts a fatal attraction on the southern aristocratic lady. This desire is fundamentally an illusion manufactured by the

symbolic order. When Homer attempts to leave, Emily chooses to poison him and live with his corpse. This horrifying scene symbolizes her transformation of a living other into a permanently controllable symbolic object, the extreme embodiment of desire that can never be satisfied.

The townspeople, as collective representatives of the symbolic order, serve both as witnesses and accomplices to Emily's subject construction. Lacan emphasizes that subjectivity is perpetually situated within the gaze of the other, and the townspeople's prying, gossiping, and pitying of Emily constitute an omnipresent symbolic violence. They tacitly accept her aristocratic privilege of tax exemption, but condemn her relationship with Homer as improper. Through seclusion, the suspension of time, and the murder of her lover, Emily tries to create a self-contained world beyond the symbolic order's control. But this act of resistance proves she has been utterly consumed by it. From textual details, Emily's struggle with the symbolic order permeates the entire narration. Her mansion serves both as a material symbol of Southern aristocratic glory and a monument to decay. Emily herself is referred to as a monument, intended for public veneration. Undoubtedly, she embodies not only nobility but also the idealized values of the past. After the American Civil War, society undergoes tremendous changes. Having lost their wealth and status, the Southern aristocracy stubbornly resists in the face of pain and harsh reality. Precisely because of this, Emily loses her autonomy for bearing too much responsibility and obligation. Just as the novel twice describes her as resembling a statue: when upstairs, her upper body remains utterly still like a divine image; while downstairs, she resembled a statue in a niche, leaving us uncertain whether she was watching us. These two descriptions render her profoundly enigmatic, as if she is living incarnation of the divine. Emily cannot escape the dominant culture of the old Southern society, which profoundly shapes her entire spiritual development.

We can see how Emily is oppressed by patriarchy and the symbolic order, struggling and becoming alienated within this framework. Her life trajectory precisely illustrates this contradiction, the subject both depends on recognition from the symbolic order and is destroyed by its violence under specific, extreme circumstances. When the narrator recounts this story in a collective voice, the rose in the title becomes a dominant signifier. This rose marks the irreparable trauma in Emily's real order, while simultaneously revealing the horrifying truth of the symbolic order's subjugation of her life. Ultimately, after her death, a poetic "rose" completely obscures the traumatic and rebellious core of her real order, completing the symbolic destruction of her subject construction. What merits deep reflection is that Emily's predicament of subjectivity remains relevant today. Any symbolic order that disregards the authentic needs of the subject risks precipitating a spiritual catastrophe.

## 5. Desire Manifested in Real Order

The real order is the most perplexing aspect of Lacan's theory in three orders the-

ory, with Lacan himself offering divergent interpretations. First, the real order is that which always returns to its origin [7]. Second, the real order is the primordial chaos upon which language operates—the world of words that creates the world of things. Both points clearly emphasize the limits of language’s power. The real order is not the result of the combined forces of the imaginary order and the symbolic order, nor is it their superposition. The subject can only sense its omnipresence and perennity, describing it only through the discourse of the other. In the sense of repression, everything rejected by the symbolic order reappears in the real order. In the novel, Emily lives against the backdrop of the decline of Southern aristocracy. Her father’s control, societal expectations, and the constraints of traditional values form a powerful Name-of-the-Father, which in Lacanian theory represents the symbolic order that regulates the subject’s desires and actions. Emily’s tragedy lies in her inability to fully submit to the discipline of this symbolic order, but she cannot entirely escape its shadow either. For Emily, her father not only rejects all suitors, depriving her of opportunities for normal emotional development, but more crucially, he robs her of the possibility to establish an independent subject. Her father’s death should have liberated her, but it instead inflicts deeper trauma. She suddenly loses the symbolic support she depends on for survival, plunging her into the uncertain experience of the real. The real order manifests here as unbearable emptiness and anxiety, for without the father as signifier to provide her with a stable sense of identity.

The unconscious desires of the subject arise from the real world, which is a product of the symbolic order. And the real world is actually a gap in the symbolic order, where the desires of human are the desires of others. And Lacan’s desire is the desire for the unattainable lack, while Emily’s strong desire for the former glory of the old Southern aristocracy brought by the symbolic culture of the Old South. When Emily and her lover Homer make a high-profile appearance in the small town, it immediately sparks widespread gossip and drew fierce opposition from traditional forces. They feel this compromises Emily’s dignity as a descendant of nobility. Therefore, they desperately try to rescue her by forcing her to accept the pastor’s baptism and writing letters to her relatives. How would Emily confront this turbulent world? What choice would she make? The end of desire is the ultimate manifestation of desire. When Homer expresses his reluctance to marry, Emily once again confronts the terror of the real order, the primal anxiety that desire cannot be satisfied. Emily’s desire for love is strangled by traditional morality. Ultimately, she poisons her beloved Homer with arsenic. From Lacanian perspective, this behavior represents the subject’s attempt to resist the collapse of the symbolic order by retreating into the real order. The real order constitutes the most primal psychological domain in Lacan’s theory, containing a traumatic core that cannot be symbolized. Her extreme act of poisoning Homer and preserving his corpse in her bedroom can be interpreted as a pathological attempt to objectify and eternalize the real order. This behavior highlights the subject’s extreme defense mechanism when confronted with the real world that cannot be symbolized.

Emily's reclusive behavior in her later years can be understood as a complete withdrawal into the real order. She rejects all symbolic communication, such as paying tax, living entirely within a time and space she controlled. She transforms the entire estate into a fortress where the immutable nature of the real order overpowers the historicity of the symbolic order. When Emily cannot emerge from the glory in the past, she becomes a fractured subject of the old Southern society. Meanwhile, Emily's persona begins to fracture between the order of imaginary and real. Her sense of self cannot be constructed, succumbing to the tragedy of real world.

Emily's fate reveals the tragic consequences that may arise when the subject cannot reconcile the traumatic realities of the real order with the normative demands of the symbolic order. This conflict preserves her as a peculiar subject—neither fully psychotic nor fully socialized. Emily, as a character seemingly bizarre and morbid, actually reveals the profound predicament of subjectivity. Unable and unwilling to fully submit to the call of the symbolic order, she suffers a catastrophic direct encounter with the real order. Her tragedy is not merely personal, but also reflects a universal human dilemma. That is, how to strike a balance between desire and law, truth and social norms. The extreme act exacts a price of loneliness and alienation, but it also spares her from more insidious violence of the symbolic order against the subject—the alienation of the self. The enduring power of this novel lies precisely in its ability to reveal those universal but often concealed truth about human subjectivity.

## 6. Conclusions

During her father's lifetime, Emily lived without subjectivity. She turns to living in the imaginary order she has built herself after her father's death. In this world, she tries to become the center of power like her father, so she does not allow anyone to resist her. In addition, Emily is oppressed and discriminated against by the male dominated society led by her father, and is bound by the Puritan and Southern aristocratic views on women, making it even more difficult for her to release her ego. The more Emily wants to find her ego and realize her subjectivity, the more she falls into the abyss and is unable to see the truth and find herself. Emily becomes a victim of the feudal patriarchy in the South because of the failure of self-construction and external oppression.

Meanwhile, Lacan's three orders theory also reflects Emily's inability to form her own subject construction. Emily is influenced by the symbolic culture of the Old South and is intervened by the Name-of-the-Father, thus unable to avoid her tragedy. Through the function of the Name-of-the-Father, Emily becomes a tradition, a duty, and a care, a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town. Lacan's amplification interprets how the heroine socially constructs herself through filling up the deficiency of her subjectivity. Accordingly, Emily's death unexpectedly makes the whole town go to her funeral and men embrace a sort of respectful affection for such "fallen monument" in such a patriarchal conservative society.

Emily ultimately enters the cruel real world through the mutual influence of imaginary order and symbolic order, becoming an alienated self.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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