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Bodies & Portraits: The Human Condition

It is in the nature of humans to seek contact. However the contact if not always has to meet the standards of the initiator, the one who seeks perfectibility in the counterpart. Nonetheless this contact sometimes, if not always comes at a price of either to the one who initiates contact or the other/s who contributes to the interaction, more than often it is in the form of death. More so the desire for the perfect companion further contributes to human contact becoming artificial, in the sense the initiator creates a mere likeness of their counterpart. In the search for the closeness of human connection the initiator falls into an obsessive madness killing their counterpart and/or themselves. Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* and Poe's *The Oval Portrait* portray a grim pattern of how the human need for a burst of live through self-fulfillment comes at a deadly cost.

Emily Grierson, a thirty year old spinster spent most of her life under the control of her dominating father who scared off all potential suitors. She would have been free of him upon his death, but since she aged out for young suitors this left her void of any direction on how to revive herself leaving her to resort to murdering a suspect gay man (Homer Barron) in an attempt to fill the lost contact of a patriarchal figure:

What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt...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 (Chapter V).

From past into the present, in fiction and in real life there has always been the never ending trope that a woman has to be in part to a man and when there's no man the woman has to re/marry or die. In the case of Emily Grierson because the only man she could attract who "himself had remarked - liked men" (Chapter IV) she finally took control of her life by killing the man whose physical carcass was equal to the man she had ever known, her father.

The married painter of *The Oval Portrait* was so greatly obsessed with capturing the essence of his beautiful, young wife in a portrait he failed to realize how sick she had become prior to him finishing the portrait. However even though it's not stated in the story perhaps he had known his wife was gravely ill for which is why he greatly wanted to capture her before she departed him as he might never be in the presence of the "rarest beauty" again. He was so self-absorbed with fulfilling his needs by capturing perfection, he let it die before him:

And when many weeks had passed, and but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth and one tint upon the eye, the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp. And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, "This is indeed Life itself!" turned suddenly to regard his beloved: - She was dead!

The binary concepts of life and death and what it means to be male and female pervade these stories. The females of both stories were submissive to their male figures, a great trait of the cult of true femininity. Both males, Emily's father and the wife's husband both had privilege of holding the lives of their partners in their hands. The females lost their sense of voice and self-worth ultimately withering away. From a structuralist point of view, observed from these

stories it is noted that the positive human experience can only be identified through the male being.