Three Man-Murdering Women in American Literature

Three American short stories written between 1916 and 1931 – “Trifles” by Susan Glaspell, “Sweat” by Zora Neale Hurston, and “A Rose for Emily” by William Faulkner – feature female characters in rural settings who kill their men, even though these women are all in different states and have vastly different stories. Moreover, all of them endure oppression at the hands of men until they see that the only way out is to kill their oppressors. These authors depict women in rural, unchanging parts of America (during otherwise socially tumultuous times) who decide to take charge of their lives – and even kill their men – to express how oppression, devaluation, and isolation can make women act unpredictably but also in a way that they feel is justified, all while living in a patriarchal system that is in place to protect the powerful from the weak.

The word *feminism* was not widely used before 1910. In lieu of “the Feminist Movement,” it was called “the Woman Movement,” and its purpose was “to initiate measures of charitable benevolence, temperance, and social welfare and to initiate struggles for civic rights, social freedoms, higher education, remunerative occupations, and the ballot” (Cruea 187). The decades-long women’s suffrage movement comes to an end in 1920 when women win the right to vote. There was and is still a double standard when it comes to sexual freedom, but between 1914 and 1945, women were beginning “to demand similar freedom for themselves”; aside from sexual demands, their needs also encompassed “education, professional work, mobility, and whatever else seemed like social goods hitherto reserved for men” (Levine, et al. 671). All of
this brought a shift in the cultural perceptions of womanhood and women’s roles. Women were showing the world that they were a force that would not be trampled, and their voices would not be silenced anymore. This shift is evident in modernist literature as female characters often take charge of their lives and demand more than society tells them they need. Women began to see their dependence on men as a farce and strove towards achieving autonomy in a patriarchal society that viewed this as threatening. Despite all of this, in literature from this period, rural America seems unfazed and unaffected by many of these changes. Even today, small towns can be collectivist societies where people are of one mind and where differences of opinion or behavior are frowned upon. In small towns, there is typically not very much cultural diversity; therefore, towns are often less susceptible to social change and less likely to be open to new ideas – this is in sharp contrast to the swift changes that often occur in cities. Societal changes are commonly like crashing waves around the country, but people on the margins may not feel the effects as strongly or at all. Works of literature can prompt great social change because it encourages readers to understand other worldviews. Though people could see through new eyes through literature, it can be hard to be exposed to any of it or be an active part of it for those who are geographically isolated. The authors of these stories may be shedding light on the issue of gender inequity in their works as they explore the dynamics of domestic life and married life in rural America.

First, “Trifles” is a 1916 play by Susan Glaspell about a murder case and is set in a farmhouse in rural Iowa. Minnie Wright’s husband, John, was mysteriously killed overnight. The investigators do not see any evidence that could point to the person who caused his death; everything looks to be where it should be, and no evidence would suggest that Minnie was the killer she is in their view. Every time anyone begins to talk about the relationship between
Minnie and her husband, the County Attorney is dismissive, seeing all of that as unimportant even though it is the most critical element of the case. For example, Mr. Hale tries to explain that the things that Minnie wants do not make a difference to John, but the County Attorney cuts him off and says, “Let’s talk about that later, Mr. Hale” (752). This instance is significant because it shows how dismissive men can be towards women’s feelings, and though they may believe that those feelings are inconsequential, they can make all the difference. Mr. Hale’s wife, Mrs. Hale, and the sheriff’s wife, Mrs. Peters, are left alone and conduct an investigation of their own during which they find that Minnie actually strangled her husband because he killed her beloved bird. Minnie loved that little bird more than anything; it might have been her only joy in her isolated world, and her husband took that from her. Like Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, most readers would sympathize with Minnie even though she killed a human for killing a bird because they realize that the bird was more than just a bird, and they understand that killing the bird was not the only act of cruelty that John committed towards his wife. A husband denying his wife love is a tremendous act of cruelty, and from what Minnie’s neighbors say, he was not a kind or loving man. While the County Attorney does not find this to be of consequence, the truth is that women have their own secret motives and their own knowledge of the domestic sphere that men cannot begin to comprehend. This knowledge and ability to empathize makes women more protective of one another in a system that is interested in maintaining a power structure against the weak. Although her actions may not be entirely justified, Minnie was a victim, and when victims stand for themselves, people tend to cheer them on. Men like the investigator and Minnie’s husband often minimize, devalue, redirect, and dismiss women’s reality so that they will not be accountable for those feelings, but Minnie and the other women likely realize that just because she is a woman does not mean that her feelings are any less valid.
Next, “A Rose for Emily” by William Faulkner is a story about a woman from Jefferson, Mississippi, named Emily Grierson, as told by a representative from the town after Emily’s death. Emily had an interesting life; she was a hermit who had been oppressed by her father in her youth. Her father denied her relationships with men and would not let anyone court her. She was sexually repressed, and it was that way until he passed away in her thirties; then, she was then able to have relationships with men. She and a man named Homer Barron were going around for the better part of two years, and she hoped that he would marry her. While it is uncertain whether or not he was willing to get married, she poisoned him with arsenic. This violence was a desperate attempt to preserve the little that she had left, a kind of reactive violence. A renowned psychoanalyst and philosopher, Erich Fromm, describes reactive violence as “violence which is employed in defense of life, freedom, dignity, property…It is rooted in fear, and for this very reason it is probably the most frequent form of violence; the fear can be real or imagined. This type of violence is in the service of life, not of death; its aim is preservation, not destruction” (Buechler 193). This is undoubtedly Emily’s motivation for killing Homer Barron; she wanted to preserve and hold on to Homer knowing that he was not a marrying man. She enjoyed herself so much that she could not physically part with him, so she decided not to. In this, Faulkner may be suggesting that it can be harmful for people to stay firmly rooted to past ideals just as it is unhealthy for Emily to try to preserve everything in her life. Change can be scary, and fear can be debilitating. It can even become a mental illness, and Emily was undoubtedly mentally ill. Jack Scherting, a literary researcher and journalist, in his article titled “Emily Grierson's Oedipus Complex: Motif, Motive, And Meaning in Faulkner's 'A Rose For Emily,’” he explains that Emily’s sexuality was repressed well into her adulthood, and she suffered from an Oedipal complex. Barron was merely a replacement for her father (403).
This is an illness that was in direct correlation to her father’s dominance over her sexuality. Again, he would not let any man court her; he kept her to himself. As such, she did not have an outlet for sexual feelings other than for her father, whether this was what he wanted or not. This repression and her father’s subsequent death likely influenced her decision to kill Homer rather than have him leave as her father did. Her decision to kill Homer went undetected for at least forty years and could not have been predicted by the townspeople. While no one could fully comprehend why Emily killed Homer and kept his body in her house, it was common knowledge that Emily was mentally ill. In her own way, for her own reasons, it is likely that she thought her actions were justified. Perhaps she just had a strong fear that Homer would leave her for good and was willing to keep that from happening at all costs, lest she be alone again.

Lastly, “Sweat” by Zora Neale Hurston is about a couple from rural Florida, Delia and Sykes Jones, who hate each other; this story is set in the 1920s. He hates her for being skinny, and she hates him because he squanders her money, abuses her, and cheats on her. Delia washes clothes for a living. She already bought the house that she lives in and loves it to pieces. Sykes, on the other hand, does nothing but use the money that Delia earns. With it, he drinks, pays for his mistress’s room in town, and spoils her with treats, all the while promising her that he will get rid of Delia and that they’ll live in the house. Delia, however, plans on living in that house forever. It is the one thing she has, and she will not part with it, but Sykes is also stubborn, so he brings a rattlesnake to the house in a cage. Snakes scare Delia to death, so she pleads with Sykes to kill it. Sykes is determined to get rid of her, however, and does no such thing. He plans to torment Delia until she leaves or dies. Simply having it in a cage by the door does not work, so he puts it inside the laundry basket, perhaps in the hope that it would bite Delia when she opens it, but she goes to the hay barn where she waits for Sykes to get back. When he does, it is not yet
dawn, and he cannot see well in the house with a snake loose. As the snake sounds like it is everywhere, he goes right where it is on the bed and gets bitten. Beating her, putting her down, and making her look like a fool by parading other women around was not enough; he intended to kill her, so she feels justified in killing him. She does not prevent his death because she sees no other way of ending his torment. In her article, “Domestic Violence and State Intervention in the American West and Australia, 1860-1930,” Carolyn Ramsey, a Professor of Law at University of Colorado Law School, writes that between 1860 and 1930, “[M]en’s frustration with their failure to live up to prescriptive ideals of respectability, sobriety, and socioeconomic success contributed to marital and other intimate-partner homicides. As women increasingly vied for economic and political independence, the incidence of domestic violence actually may have increased” (198). This increase in domestic violence could have been because men felt that they were losing control just as Sykes ups the ante when Delia begins to stand up for herself. She begins to show him that his antics do not affect her anymore, and she refuses to waste energy by being goaded into an argument with Sykes. Standing up for herself is the only choice she has. During this period, acts of domestic abuse were often ruled with a light hand, if at all. For example, in a 1920 case where Evelyn Niles accused her husband, Edward Niles, of assaulting her and her eight-year-old daughter after he was served divorce papers, the court dismissed the case and released Edward (30). This case sheds some light on the fact that women were not highly protected, even in cases where their lives were at risk. Even though Edward also attacked a child, and his wife was bloodied, the court still sided with an unmistakably dangerous and deranged man. It is likely that as a black woman, Delia’s case would not be taken seriously, even if she did take it to white people as she threatens Sykes she would. Delia’s life and her future are at stake, and she is the only one who could do anything to secure both. The sad truth
is that women were not the ones that judicial systems felt needed to be protected. No one else was going to do anything about it. Even though the men from town do say that they would kill Sykes, it is far from likely that they would ever do such a thing because what he does does not directly affect them, and they likely do not care enough about Delia to do anything about her abuse, especially since they have known about it for so long and have not done anything about it yet (953). She takes charge and ends her torment as the only one who truly could. The man who was supposed to support and protect Delia was instead cheating on her, beating her, and even attempted to kill her. The audience might be sympathetic towards her and may even deem her decision to kill her husband as validated because she is isolated both geographically and socially; she was either going to kill or be killed.

“Sweat” may cause readers to question whether or not they would prevent their real or imagined abuser’s death; “Trifles” may cause readers to question whether or not men and women have inherently different ideas about justice and whether or not they can really value a bird’s life more than a man’s; and “A Rose for Emily” may cause readers to question whether or not they have Oedipal complexes and how they feel about punishment for mentally-ill killers. But something the authors of these works may have wished all their readers would feel is empathy or, at the very least, sympathy for these women because though the act of killing is harsh, so is the oppression, devaluation, and isolation that these characters endured. Though these characters are fictional, there were real women who went through these same things and could never escape. There are women even now who are abused like Delia and see no way to end their torment without risking their own death or that of their abuser’s. While feminism is not about killing men, it is certainly about fighting for equality, and though these characters are killers,
these homicides can be seen as acts of self-defense and self-preservation, performed by isolated women who could no longer endure living in a perpetual state of victimhood.
Works Cited


true&db=f6h&AN=18461632&site=ehost-live&scope=site.


Hurston, Zora N. “Sweat.” Levine et al., pp. 950-58.


true&db=a9h&AN=58651811&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Scheidler, Natalie F. “‘Failure to Protect.’” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, vol. 65, no. 4, Winter 2015, pp. 29–40. EBSCOhost,

true&db=31h&AN=112299690&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Scherting, Jack. “Emily Grierson’s Oedipus Complex: Motif, Motive, and Meaning in Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily.’” *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 17, no. 4, Fall 1980, p. 397. EBSCOhost,