

Gothic north-south relations in a rose for emily

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" consists of two stories working simultaneously. The first story is a gothic story about a woman who kills her husband and spends decades sleeping with the corpse. The second story is about the collapse of the Old South and the inability of the South to cope with the changes which are coming upon it. Both stories center on Emily Grierson. In the first story, Emily is a monstrous person who plays out the crazy woman in the attic scenario. In the second story, Emily is a symbol of Southern history which cannot adapt to the time and only grows steadily more insane.

In the gothic story, Emily is the classic woman with the secret. The story begins with her death after ten years of hiding away in her house with only her man-servant as company. In the first chapter, Emily is described as an "obligation on the town" (1273) and the narrator gives over an anecdote about her refusing to pay her taxes and not even comprehending that she needs to pay taxes. Her man-servant (who is never named anything but "the Negro") shows them out.

This leads the narrator to the second vignette where the woman and her man-servant lead an isolated life that is disturbed by a rank odor coming from the house. "They broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there, and in all the outbuildings. As they recrossed the lawn, a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol. They crept quietly across the lawn and into the shadow of the locusts that lined the street. After a week or two the smell went away." (1274) Emily is too scary for anyone to actually confront her about the strange smell coming from her cellar. In many ways,

<https://assignbuster.com/gothic-north-south-relations-in-a-rose-for-emily/>

she is cut out of the classic gothic villains who live in isolation and exude malignancy. One is reminded of Heathcliff screaming on the moors or Miss Havisham in her moldering wedding dress. This trope is so popular that it's very hard to read the story without thinking about the movie Psycho which came after the story but still retains power.

The rest of chapter two gives context for the bad smell in the cellar by noting that everyone realized that Emily was mentally ill (or crazy) when her father died and the town could barely get the body out over her insistence that he is still alive. This also provides a foreshadowing to the end where Homer is found dead in the cellar and Emily's hair is on the pillow next to him.

The story continues from this point to have one vignette after the other with Emily acting more strange. When she buys arsenic, the druggist asks her what she is going to use it for. " Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up." (1277) The Baptist minister has a similar experience when he tries to talk to her about Homer, the unsuitable suitor. " He would never divulge what happened during that interview, but he refused to go back again." (1277)

To make matters that much creepier - " The Negro man went in and out with the market basket, but the front door remained closed." (1277) Emily stays in the house and only grows more insane and isolated. The story mentions a time where she was giving lessons in china-painting, but that ends and she becomes the mad woman in the spooky house with the silent servant. " She died in one of the downstairs rooms, in a heavy walnut bed with a curtain,

her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight.” (1278) She is practically a vampire at this point in the story.

This all leads up to the ending where the corpse of Homer (or the man) is found on the bed in the cellar. The dead body on the bed is bolstered by the other pillow that is indented and has an “ iron-gray hair” (1279) indicating that Emily has been sleeping with dead Homer up until she died at the beginning of the story. This is all very penny dreadful and similar to the EC horror comic books where dead bodies were used for revenge and sad affection.

The second symbolic story places Emily as the quintessential representative of the Old South. At the beginning of the story, she is described as a “ fallen monument” (1272) who lives in a “ big, squarish frame house that had once been white” (1272) which is also “ stubborn and coquettish” (1272) as it lies on a street that was once select but is now rundown with gas stations and eyesores.

Before Emily is buried in the cemetery with the soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson, she is given to a privileged position in the town by Colonel Sartoris “ the mayor – he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron” (1272) and she dismisses the aldermen who come for taxes by invoking Colonel Sartoris even as her house is described as an abandoned museum and her body is “ bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another” (1272).

Everything about her and her house is a remnant of a society in decay with everything that was once vibrant. As the story progresses, Emily is portrayed as a woman trapped in the past with a man-servant that is only known as “the Negro” throughout the story and whom is the perfect house slave. He never asks questions and he always turns a blind eye to the sins of his mistress. The death of her father creates the following reaction: “Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead” (1274).

When Homer Barron enters the story, he becomes a lost chance for Emily and even though he’s not truly interested in her. As Emily is a symbol of the Old South, Homer is a symbol of Reconstruction which came to the Old South with high idealism and ended as a failure, with many textbooks and popular films attempting to characterize it as a monstrous event. “The construction company came with riggers and mules and machinery, and a foreman named Homer Barron, a Yankee—a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face.” (1275) Note that he works in construction. Just like the South during Reconstruction, the townsfolk assume that she is being destroyed by Homer. When she buys the arsenic everyone assumes that she will kill herself but instead she kills Homer. This is similar to the KKK using terrorism to end Reconstruction which is destructive to the North (Homer) but just as destructive to the South (Emily) in that it destroys the infrastructure even as it imposes Jim Crow laws in order to keep everyone in a certain place.

Jim Crow is even more apparent in the death passage that speaks about “the Negro” in more racially charged tones. “And so she died. Fell ill in the house filled with dust and shadows, with only a doddering Negro man to wait on her. We did not even know she was sick; we had long since given up trying to get any information from the Negro. He talked to no one, probably not even to her, for his voice had grown harsh and rusty, as if from disuse” (1278). This was the purpose of segregation in the South where African Americans might have been seen, but they were not allowed to speak with their own voices and they were not heard. Of course, this goes beyond 20th century South since there have been various times where the majority of movies and television shows were minority free, with few exceptions like the Harlem Renaissance and isolated jazz musicians.

Finally, the last scene in the story is the image of the room where the dead body of Homer is found as well as the second pillow with the iron gray hair. This ending is a symbolic death of the South that has been soldiering on for decades without anything to show for it but hair on a pillow.