

# "a rose for emily" by william faulkner critical essay

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William Faulkner's 1930 short story *A Rose for Emily* concerns the tragic life of the last remaining survivor of a powerful southern family, the Griersons, and the unhealthy relationship she has with memory and the past.

Miss Emily Grierson, the daughter of the overbearing and self-important southern gentleman Mr. Grierson, preserves a proud haughtiness in the face of her neighbors and refuses to pay municipal taxes, thanks to an arrangement made 30 years earlier with the former mayor of Jefferson, Colonel Sartoris.

Miss Emily Grierson's unwillingness or inability to let go of the past and the prison of her father's beliefs about her social station cause her to become a recluse. A man much beneath her social station takes an interest in her, but eventually leaves her, and the townspeople of Jefferson grow to feel sympathy for her and attempt to protect her from the reality of her situation – poverty, isolation, and spinsterhood.

The following essay analyzes the setting, characters, plot development, and symbolism of *A Rose for Emily* to demonstrate how William Faulkner uses these devices to develop the theme of memory and the past in the short story.

The fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi provides the setting for *A Rose for Emily*. In Jefferson, William Faulkner creates a town steeped in a storied pre-Civil War past that it struggles to relinquish. Though the Civil War and all of its supporters and participants are long dead, their memories crowd the pages of the story.

William Faulkner tells the reader at the story's outset that Miss Emily Grierson has now "gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson" (Faulkner 49).

Miss Emily Grierson occupies a house of former grandeur on a street of former renown; both are dilapidated at the time that the story takes place. William Faulkner describes Miss Emily Grierson's house as "a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street.

But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps" (Faulkner 49).

The frozen in time quality of the setting, combined with the images of "coquettish decay," underscore Miss Emily Grierson's inability to free herself from the memory of her father and of the past.

The characters in *A Rose for Emily* occupy two generations: the elders, including "the mayor, Judge Stevens, eighty years old," who understand Emily's faded grandeur and think of her as "a tradition, a duty, and a care," and the more youthful characters (Faulkner 51; Faulkner 49).

The members of the younger generation of characters do not understand the elder obsession with decorum and propriety, let alone why the town allows this woman to default on her municipal taxes. When a noxious odor envelops Miss Emily Grierson's homestead, William Faulkner demonstrates the difference between these two generations.

"The next day [Judge Stevens] received two more complaints, one from a man who came in diffident deprecation. We really must do something about it, Judge. I'd be the last one in the world to bother Miss Emily, but we've got to do something. That night the board of aldermen met - three greybeards and one younger man, a member of the rising generation.

It's simple enough, he said. Send her word to have her place cleaned up. Give her a certain time to do it in, and if she don't...Damn it, sir, Judge Stevens said, will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?" (Faulkner 51). In this example, we see that through the use of character, William Faulkner shows how the obsession with propriety that transfixes Miss Emily Grierson's generation is completely lost on the other generation.

William Faulkner describes the Griersons as a family that "held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough to Miss Emily and such. We had long thought of them as a tableau; Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the backflung front door.

So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated" (Faulkner 52). Thus, both generations eventually develop pity for Emily as she sinks into decrepitude after the death of Mr. Grierson.

William Faulkner's plot development uses the associative quality of memory to align the plot points in a non-linear fashion and tell the story as though it were being recounted from memory. After Miss Emily Grierson sends the aldermen away, William Faulkner tells the reader " so she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell.

That was two years after her father's death and a short time after her sweetheart - the one we believed would marry her - had deserted her" (Faulkner 50). William Faulkner uses seamless transitions between past and present, similar to the non-linear movement of memory across time, to move the action of the story.

The most potent use of symbolism in A Rose for Emily occurs in the description of the toiletries that Emily buys for Homer Barron. William Faulkner uses the strange admission from the townspeople that " we learned that Miss Emily had been to the jeweler's and ordered a man's toilet set in silver, with the letters H. B. on each piece.

Two days later we learned that she had bought a complete outfit of men's clothing, including a nightshirt" (Faulkner 55). These symbols set up the idea

in the reader's mind that the marriage between Emily and Homer will take place.

When the story later describes Miss Emily Grierson's death, whereupon the townspeople learn the appalling secret that the town's last southern belle has been harboring for over forty years, the reader revisits the chilling symbolism of the "man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured...The man himself lay in the bed.

For a long while we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin...What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt" (Faulkner 57). The tarnished silver and rotting nightshirt symbolizes the death and decay that Emily's obsessive refusal to release the past created.

Faulkner, William. "A Rose for Emily." Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner. New York: Modern Library, 1951. Print.