

William Faulkner's use of theme in A Rose for Emily

[Linguistics](#), [English](#)



William Faulkner's Use of Theme in A Rose for Emily William Faulkner is generally recognized for his articulation of southern daily life, as well as his experimental approach to literature. Still, in some of Faulkner's work it's clear that he is influenced by the southern gothic genre (Blotner 89). Perhaps this is most prominently witnessed in his short story 'A Rose for Emily'. This story explores the macabre and desolate life of a woman named Emily as she experiences a number of life setbacks before finally settling into a reclusive existence. While containing southern gothic tendencies, the story is characteristic of Faulkner's style in terms of theme. This essay argues that Faulkner implements a number of thematic elements in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily'. Perhaps the most pervasive theme in 'A Rose for Emily' is the power and exploration of death. This is perhaps one of the most important elements in articulating the story as an element of southern gothic literature, and it gives the tale a sort of surreal touch. Faulkner begins the narrative in reverse, already stating that Emily Grierson, the main focus of the story is deceased. Faulkner writes, "When Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to the funeral" (Faulkner, web). While this is only a narrative element, its position as the first sentence of the story is notable as it sets the general thematic tone for the tale. In addition to Emily's death the story also indicates that Emily's father died. Faulkner advances the thematic power of death in this instance by demonstrating that it extremely impacted Emily's existence. Faulkner writes, "When her father died, it got about that the house was all that was left to her; and in a way, people were glad. At last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized" (Faulkner, web). Here, Faulkner is demonstrating that with

Emily's father's death she began to live a solitary and confined existence. Emily's reaction to her father's death, namely the denial she faces, also demonstrates the thematic concern with the power of death. Another major thematic concern of the story is the nature of tradition vs. change. As Faulkner relays the story in a narrative that jumps a number of years, the structure presents particular insight into the nature of change and tradition. While tradition vs. change is articulated through a number of elements in the story, it is perhaps seen most clearly in terms of Emily herself (Sensibar). Faulkner even writes, "Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" (Faulkner, web). While the story explores Emily's life from a number of periods, she is always articulated as a sort of traditional aspect of the town, a sort of portal into the past. Even as Emily's funeral occurs at the end of the story Faulkner links her to the older members of the community. He writes that they linked their lives in with Emily's, "'... confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road, but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years" (Faulkner, web). While this is a masterful piece of writing, it also demonstrates Faulkner's thematic linking with the traditional order (Morton). Faulkner explores the clash of the traditional and modern world perhaps most acutely when the city attempts to gain taxes from Emily. Emily had been once remitted taxes as the town felt sorry for her, but as time passes the new city government attempts to charge her once again. The conflict is a literary means for Faulkner to demonstrate the thematic occurrence of the change of time, as

well as characterize Emily as firmly rooted in old and bygone ways of existence. In conclusion, it's clear that William Faulkner implements a number of thematic and stylistic devices in his short story 'A Rose for Emily'. In terms of theme, the essay has argued that Faulkner implements the theme of death and tradition vs. change as main elements within the story. In terms of death, Faulkner advances this theme through the death of Emily, as well as the death of her father, demonstrating the power of both of these occurrences. The theme of tradition vs. change is considered through the changing nature of the community and Emily's resistance to it; this is witnessed most powerfully in the story's final morose scene. Ultimately, the story is a powerful exploration of one's women's struggle to exist and cope with the changing seasons of her life. References Blotner, Joseph. Faulkner: A literary voices. New York: Random House, 1984 Faulker, William. 'A Rose for Emily' WM Norton. 2005. <http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/litweb05/workshops/fiction/faulkner1.asp> Morton, Clay. "'A Rose for Emily': Oral Plot, Typographic Story", *Storytelling: A Critical Journal of Popular Narrative* 5. 1. 2005. Sensibar, Judith L. *The Origins of Faulkner's Art*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984