

# The past-present contrast in william faulkner's "a rose for emily" essay sample



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## **The Past-Present Contrast in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" Essay Sample**

William Faulkner is well known for his use of imagery and symbolism in portraying the depth of his tales. Another literary device that he used in many of his works is contrast. Examining contrasts provides the readers clues to the meaning or messages the author wants to convey. Contrasts of character are perhaps the most common. In such contrasts, however, there is a resulting contrast in terms of action. Because action mirrors an ethical or a moral state, the contrasting actions suggest a contrast in ideological perspectives and thus toward the theme.

In the short story "A Rose for Emily", Faulkner contrasts present time and past time. In the story, Faulkner depicts the present through the narrator and represents it in Homer Barron, in the new Board of Aldermen, and in "the next generation with its more modern ideas." On the other hand, Faulkner represents the past in Emily herself, in the old Negro servant, in the Board of Aldermen, and in Colonel Sartoris.

Faulkner's concept of the present is not a sharply defined point between past and future. His idea of the present is irrational; it is an incomprehensible and monstrous event, which comes upon us and disappears. For Faulkner, there is nothing beyond this present, since the future does not exist. Faulkner's concept of the present is also characterized by suspension, which indicates a kind of arrested motion in time. One can observe from the works of the author that there is never any progression, nothing which can come from the future. For Faulkner, the present does not contain in itself the future events

one expects. In contrast, the author suggests that, to be present is to appear without reason and to be suspended.

Moreover, Faulkner's characters' past is not ordered according to chronology but follows certain impulses and emotions. Many fragments of thought and act revolve around some central themes; thus the absurdity of chronology and the assertion of the clock. The order of the past In Faulkner's works is the order of the heart. One must not believe that the present event, after it has gone, becomes the most immediate of memories. The shift of time can submerge it at the bottom of memory or leave it on the surface. Only its own intrinsic value and its relevance to our lives can determine its level. For Faulkner, the past is never lost; it is always there, nearly as an obsession.

In "A Rose for Emily", Faulkner depicts the world as a confusion between the past and the present. Here, the author creates an atmosphere of distortion, one that is unreal. Emily's world is the result of the suspension of a natural time order. Emily is portrayed as "a fallen monument". This is because she has shown herself susceptible to death (and decay) after all. In the mention of death, one is conditioned for the more specific concern with it later on. The second paragraph of the story depicts the essential ugliness of the contrast. Emily's house is described 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-an eyesore among eyesores.

Here, one sees a juxtaposition of past and present. This scene can be recognized as an symbolic presentation of Emily herself. This is suggested through the words “ stubborn and coquettish”. The contrast is preserved in the description of the note which Emily sent to the mayor, “ a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in faded ink” and in the description, in the fifth paragraph, of the interior of the house when the Board of Aldermen’s representatives visit her: “ They were admitted by the old Negro into a dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow. It smelled of dust and disuse—a close, dank smell.” Furthermore, Faulkner discloses in the sixth paragraph Emily’s similarity to her house: “ She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue.”

When she was young and part of the world with which she was contemporary, the narrator tells the readers that Emily was “ a slender figure in white”, unlike her father, who is described as “ a spraddled silhouette.” In the picture of Emily and her father together, Faulkner describes her as looking frail and seems hungering to participate in the life of her time. Here one observes a reversal of the contrast which has already been presented and which is to be developed later. Even after the death of Emily’s father, she is not described as monstrous; rather, she looks like a girl “ with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows—sort of tragic and serene.” Faulkner suggests in “ A Rose for Emily” that the main character

had already begun her entrance into that nether-world, but that she might even yet have been saved, had Homer Barron been another kind of man.

By the time the representatives from the new, progressive Board of Aldermen wait upon Emily regarding her delinquent taxes, she has completely retreated into her world of the past. Readers sense that there is no communication possible between Emily and the representatives:

Her voice was dry and cold. " I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me. Perhaps one of you can gain access to the city records and satisfy yourselves."

" But we have. We are the city authorities, Miss Emily. Didn't you get a notice from the sheriff, signed by him?"

" I received a paper, yes," Miss Emily said. " Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff . . . I have no taxes in Jefferson."

" But there is nothing on the books to show that, you see We must go by the —"

" See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson."

" But, Miss Emily—"

" See Colonel Sartoris." (Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years.) " I have no taxes in Jefferson. Tobe!" The Negro appeared. " Show these gentlemen out."

Just as Emily refused to acknowledge the death of her father, she now refuses to recognize the death of Colonel Sartoris. He had given his word, and according to the traditional view, "his word" knew no death. It is the Past pitted against the Present - the Past with its social decorum, the Present with everything set down in "the books." Emily dwells in the Past, always a world of unreality to us of the Present. Here are the facts which set the tone of the story and which create the atmosphere of unreality which surrounds it.

Faulkner contrasts the past and present over and over. For example, the author differentiates the attitude of Judge Stevens (who is over eighty years old) and the attitude of the young man (a member of the "rising generation") who comes to him about the smell at Emily's place. For the young man, Emily's world has ceased to exist. The city's health regulations are on the books. "Dammit, sir," the judge replies, "will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?" Emily had given in to social pressure when she allowed them to bury her father, but she triumphed over society in the matter of the smell. She had won already when she bought the poison, refusing to comply with the requirements of the law, because for her they did not exist.

However, such incidents appear as mere preparation for the more important contrast between Emily and Homer. Emily is the town's aristocrat; Homer is a day laborer. Homer is an active man dealing with machinery and workmen. He is a Northerner, while Emily is a "monument" of Southern refinement. Emily is common property of the town, but in a special way - as an ideal of past values. It seems that Faulkner is commenting upon the complex relationship between the Southerners and their past and between the

Southerners of the present and the Yankees from the North. Emily is viewed  
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unreal by her compatriots, however she impresses them with her station, even at a time when they considered her fallen: “ as if [her dignity] had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness.” Emily’s world continues to be the past, and when she is threatened with desertion and disgrace, she not only takes refuge in that world, but she also takes Homer with her, in the only manner possible.

Emily’s position concerning the specific problem of time is suggested in the scene where the old soldiers appear at her funeral. In this scene, the readers are provided two views of time: the world of the present and the world of tradition. The world of the present is the view of the modern generation in Jefferson and Homer. On the other hand, the world of tradition is the view of the confederate soldiers and of the older members of the Board of Aldermen. Emily holds the second view, except that for her, there is no blockage dividing her from the meadow of the past. Here small room has become that timeless meadow. In it, the living Emily and the dead Homer have remained together as though not even death could separate them. The symbols of Homer’s life of action have become silent. On the contrary, Emily’s world, though it had been inviolate while she was alive, has been invaded after her death.

Overall, Faulkner’s “ A Rose for Emily” suggests that man must learn to deal both with the past and the present. Ignoring the past is to be guilty of a foolish innocence, and ignoring the present is to become monstrous and inhuman, above all to betray an excessive pride before the humbling fact of death. “ A Rose for Emily” repeats what has been said in so many stories -

that the plight of man is tragic, but that there is heroism in an attempt to rise above it.