

"a rose for emily" symbolism and themes – analysis essay

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



This essay analyzes "A Rose for Emily", its symbolism, main themes, messages, and tone. As the plot of the southern gothic story unfolds, the author uses certain symbols to show us the tragedy of human perishability.

The end of the Civil War in 1865 brought many changes to the states of the South. The Old South, with its agrarian-based economy, and its residents were facing a dilemma. Should they adapt to these changes or try to continue with their social order and economy model? This time of changes is when the story takes place. Jefferson, Mississippi, is the setting of "A Rose for Emily". Almost all of the townspeople there have decided to adapt to the changes except for one resident Emily Grierson, who dislikes the New South and refuses to get used to the new way of life.

Emily's refusal to accept this new reality means that she clings to the social conventions which no longer exist, isolating herself from both the townspeople of Jefferson and their new lifestyle. This isolation reflects the main theme of "A Rose for Emily" - that is the necessity to adapt to changes brought upon us. From my point of view, Emily represents the reluctance to changes typical for some parts of the American society of that time. W. Faulkner effectively uses the events surrounding the main character to emphasize his message of adaptation that is necessary for us all and additionally introduces some vivid symbols in "A Rose for Emily" to describe her motivations and emotions behind her actions.

Stability and resistance to change are the main features of Ms Grierson's character that develop during her younger years and that define her

attitudes during her whole life. The only leaders Emily recognizes are the once-and-forever established authorities of her father and Colonel Sartoris.

Even after their death, Emily continues to insist on their existence. She does not recognize the fact that her father is not alive any longer, and she refers to the tax committee to the long-deceased Colonel Sartoris, who once relieved her of city taxes (Faulkner). Living in the past, Emily denies the present and the innovations it brings. Her mansion is the only building in the city that does not have " the metal numbers above her door and ... a mailbox" (Faulkner).

Moreover, it is the only old house in the neighborhood that has become obliterated and turned into " an eyesore among eyesores," a ridiculous monument to the past colonial grandeur. It is noteworthy, however, that Miss Grierson's commitment to the old ideals is not accidental and is dictated by the conditions of her life and upbringing.

Raised in arrogance to the rest of the society, Emily Grierson transfers it to every aspect of her life. She ignores the demands to pay taxes, the glances at her butler, as well as the gossip of her entering a relationship with a stranger. Miss Grierson preserves her initial traditions and way of life by distancing herself from the rest of the townspeople.

As a result of her secluded life, there emerges a paradox: on the one hand, Emily Grierson refuses to accept the new lifestyle. On the other hand, she adapts to the new life conditions while dissociating herself from the Jefferson society. After some attempts to appear in public with her suitor or to give

china-painting lessons, Emily chooses a secluded lifestyle and locks herself up in her house.

She becomes a living symbol of Jefferson, " motionless as ... an idol" and barely ever speaking to anybody (Faulkner). Despite all the effort to save her lifestyle intact, Emily fails in her undertaking since she is mortal as any living being, and all the symbols of her past that surround her in daily life are equally perishable.

The opposition between Miss Grierson's desire for stability and the inexorable course of history frames up the fundamental conflict of " A Rose for Emily". Symbolism is used by the author to immerse the reader in this conflict. . To emphasize Emily's belonging to the Pre-Civil War South, William Faulkner surrounds her by objects that represent that past.

The first and foremost symbol of Miss Grierson's époque is the place she lives in: " 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" situated in the once " most select street" (Faulkner). The splendor of the mansion was almost unsurpassed in its better days, with endless fashionable objects filling its rooms. However, the once-grand place is subject to the inexorable course of time and shows visible signs of decay.

One of the most powerful symbols in " A Rose for Emily" is the image of dust that fills the house: not only does dust rise from the old leather furniture when visitors sit on it, but it also defines the smell of the house and its very atmosphere (Faulkner).

Symbolic of the memories and regrets, the dust appears throughout the whole story, acquiring a special significance in the scenes of Miss Emily's death and the discovery of her suitor's corpse in the house . In the short story, dust throws a dense veil concealing the mysteries of the Griersons family.

Faulkner employs bitter irony to describe the pitiful state of the Griersons' mansion. Its only neighbors are now not the estates of the same grandeur but simple " cotton wagons and gasoline pumps" — symbolic of new life and new values — indifferent to the majestic culture of the old society. This miserable decay prompts an idea that the whole past splendor was not due to the owners themselves but due to the everyday slave labor, which, once eliminated, left the house to sink into the past.

What does Homer symbolize in A Rose for Emily? The character of the Negro butler reminds of the Pre-Civil War époque and its slaveholding system that supported the existence of the wealthy white upper class. Faulkner introduces this image to enhance the museum-like state of the Griersons' mansion. The old Negro butler works hard for the Griersons throughout his life and performs a range of entirely unnecessary tasks. He shows the visitors in and out of the house and then opens the blinds to let some light into the house.

Although Emily could have easily coped with those tasks herself, she prefers to keep the Negro butler as a way of emphasizing her high social status the way it was appropriate in her Pre-Civil War youth. Along with performing

purely formal duties, the Negro butler constantly reappears with a market basket, which suggests that he is also in charge of the practical aspects of Miss Grierson's household.

A notable occurrence in this respect is the complaint of the city dwellers concerning the peculiar smell from the Griersons' mansion: "Just as if a man — any man — could keep a kitchen properly," the ladies said; so they were not surprised when the smell developed" (Faulkner).

But even though a woman would be more suitable for running the house, Miss Grierson would not replace the Negro butler who is as much of a tradition in her life as she is in the life of the whole city.

On no occasion can he leave his owner, and therefore he grows gray and "doddering" and disappears from the house only with Miss Grierson's death (Faulkner). Symbolic of Miss Grierson's commitment to past ideals, the Negro butler is the part of her mystery, which he never reveals.

To further emphasize Miss Grierson's striking adherence to the values of the Pre-Civil War époque, William Faulkner introduces the reader to the enormous influence of her father. He oppressed and dominated her when he was alive. He still spreads his authority on her life even after he passes away.

After his death (which Emily stubbornly refuses to admit), his crayon portrait is one of the main focal points in the parlor: "On a tarnished gilt easel before

the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father" as if overseeing and controlling all the events (Faulkner).

The dominance of Miss Emily's father over her is clearly shown in the way they are described. " 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" (Faulkner).

Therefore, it is not accidental that she chooses her only suitor according to his looks that coincide with the way the Griersons are depicted, " his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove "(Faulkner).

This action serves as an evidence of how arrogant the Griersons' attitude to the surrounding society is and how eager Miss Grierson is to show the distance between herself and the community if she makes such a risky choice of a partner. Thus, additional emphasis is placed on the abyss dividing Miss Grierson and the Jefferson townsmen, the past and the present.

The dramatic changes take place without Miss Grierson: she remains the same self-willed woman throughout the whole story. However, despite the apparent stability in Miss Grierson's character, an individual evolution can be traced in her through the symbolic image of her hair.

The first change in her hairstyle comes after her father's death: " her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl" (Faulkner). By cutting her hair and thus recovering her youthful looks, Miss Grierson probably attempts to emphasize her girlish nature and her devotedness to her father. Over time,

she grows older, and her hair becomes gray. This decay reflects the overall decay of the mansion and thus of the ideals that its inhabitants cherish. It becomes one of the most vivid symbol in " A Rose for Emily".

Besides, the " long strand of iron-gray hair" found at the dead body of Miss Grierson's suitor emphasizes the fact that although her body is decayed, her spirit remains strong enough to insist on her way of behavior (Faulkner).

Thus a discrepancy comes to the fore between the aspirations of happiness and the inevitability of withering away with the time.

In " A Rose for Emily," the theme of adapting to the changing environment is developed through the character of Miss Grierson and her reluctance to the changes.

In summary, the evolution can still be traced through the symbolic images of her mansion, her Negro butler, and her hair. Those images demonstrate that although Miss Grierson wishes to stick to the past, it is impossible due to the natural processes of decay and lavishing. As shown in this essay, symbolism in " A Rose for Emily" reveals the tragedy of human perishability.