

# A Rose for Emily Study Guide



© 2018 [eNotes.com, Inc.](http://eNotes.com) or its Licensors.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

## Summary

"A Rose for Emily" opens with Miss Emily Grierson's funeral. It then goes back in time to show the reader Emily's childhood. As a girl, Emily is cut off from most social contact by her father. When he dies, she refuses to acknowledge his death for three days. After the townspeople intervene and bury her father, Emily is further isolated by a mysterious illness, possibly a mental breakdown.

Homer Barron's crew comes to town to build sidewalks, and Emily is seen with him. He tells his drinking buddies that he is not the marrying kind. The townspeople consider their relationship improper because of differences in values, social class, and regional background. Emily buys arsenic and refuses to say why. The ladies in town convince the Baptist minister to confront Emily and attempt to persuade her to break off the relationship. When he refuses to discuss their conversation or to try again to persuade Miss Emily, his wife writes to Emily's Alabama cousins. They come to Jefferson, but the townspeople find them even more haughty and disagreeable than Miss Emily. The cousins leave town.

Emily buys a men's silver toiletry set, and the townspeople assume marriage is imminent. Homer is seen entering the house at dusk one day, but is never seen again. Shortly afterward, complaints about the odor emanating from her house lead Jefferson's aldermen to surreptitiously spread lime around her yard, rather than confront Emily, but they discover her openly watching them from a window of her home.

Miss Emily's servant, Tobe, seems the only one to enter and exit the house. No one sees Emily for approximately six months. By this time she is fat and her hair is short and graying. She refuses to set up a mailbox and is denied postal delivery. Few people see inside her house, though for six or seven years she gives china-painting lessons to young women whose parents send them to her out of a sense of duty.

The town mayor, Colonel Sartoris, tells Emily an implausible story when she receives her first tax notice: The city of Jefferson is indebted to her father, so Emily's taxes are waived forever. However, a younger generation of aldermen later confronts Miss Emily about her taxes, and she tells them to see Colonel Sartoris (now long dead, though she refuses to acknowledge his death). Intimidated by Emily and her ticking watch, the aldermen leave, but they continue to send tax notices every year, all of which are returned without comment.

In her later years, it appears that Emily lives only on the bottom floor of her house. She is found dead there at the age of seventy-four. Her Alabama cousins return to Jefferson for the funeral, which is attended by the entire town out of duty and curiosity. Emily's servant, Tobe, opens the front door for them, then disappears out the back. After the funeral, the townspeople break down a door in Emily's house that, it turns out, had been locked for forty years. They find a skeleton on a bed, along with the remains of men's clothes, a tarnished silver toiletry set, and a pillow with an indentation and one long iron-gray hair.

## Summary

Although an unnamed citizen of the small town of Jefferson, in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, tells the story of the aristocratic Miss Emily Grierson in a complicated manner, shifting back and forth in time without trying to make clear transitions, the story line itself is quite simple. Miss Emily's father dies when she is a little more than thirty, in about 1882. For three days she prevents his burial, refusing to accept his death. He had driven off all of her suitors; now she is alone, a spinster, in a large house.

In the summer after the death of her father, Miss Emily meets Homer Barron, the Yankee foreman of a crew contracted to pave the sidewalks of Jefferson. They appear on the streets in a fancy buggy, provoking gossip and resentment. Two female cousins come to town from Alabama to attempt to persuade Miss Emily to behave in a more respectable manner. Emily buys an outfit of man's clothes and a silver toilet set. To avoid the cousins, Homer leaves town. Miss Emily buys rat poison from the druggist. The cousins leave. Homer returns; he is never seen again.

A foul odor emanates from Miss Emily's house. After midnight, four citizens, responding to complaints made by neighbors to Judge Stevens, the mayor, stealthily spread lime around the house and in her cellar. In a week or so, the smell goes away.

In 1894, Colonel Sartoris, the mayor, remits Miss Emily's taxes. For about six or seven years, while in her forties, she gives china-painting lessons to the young girls of the town. Then for many years she is seen only at her window. Townspeople watch her black servant Tobe going in and out on errands. A new generation comes to power; they insist that Miss Emily pay taxes on her property. When she fails to respond, a deputation calls on her, but she insists that she owes no taxes, as Colonel Sartoris will tell them (he has been dead ten years).

In about 1925, Miss Emily dies. On the day of her funeral, the townspeople, including some old Civil War veterans, invade the house. Tobe leaves by the back door and is never seen again. One group breaks into a locked room upstairs and discovers the corpse of Homer Barron, which has moldered in the bed for forty years. On a pillow beside him, they find "a long strand of iron-gray hair," evidence that Miss Emily had lain down beside him years after she poisoned him.

## Additional Summary: Summary

The story, told in five sections, opens in section one with an unnamed narrator describing the funeral of Miss Emily Grierson. (The narrator always refers to himself in collective pronouns; he is perceived as being the voice of the average citizen of the town of Jefferson.) He notes that while the men attend the funeral out of obligation, the women go primarily because no one has been inside Emily's house for years. The narrator describes what was once a grand house "set on what had once been our most select street." Emily's origins are aristocratic, but both her house and the neighborhood it is in have deteriorated. The narrator notes that prior to her death, Emily had been "a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town." This is because Colonel Sartoris, the former mayor of the town, remitted Emily's taxes dating from the death of her father "on into perpetuity." Apparently, Emily's father left her with nothing when he died. Colonel Sartoris invented a story explaining the remittance of Emily's taxes (it is the town's method of paying back a loan to her father) to save her from the embarrassment of accepting charity.

The narrator uses this opportunity to segue into the first of several flashbacks in the story. The first incident he describes takes place approximately a decade before Emily's death. A new generation of politicians takes over Jefferson's government. They are unmoved by Colonel Sartoris's grand gesture on Emily's behalf, and they attempt to collect taxes from her. She ignores their notices and letters. Finally, the Board of Aldermen sends a

deputation to discuss the situation with her. The men are led into a decrepit parlor by Emily's black man-servant, Tobe. The first physical description of Emily is unflattering: she is "a small, fat woman in black" who looks "bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue." After the spokesman awkwardly explains the reason for their visit, Emily repeatedly insists that she has no taxes in Jefferson and tells the men to see Colonel Sartoris. The narrator notes that Colonel Sartoris has been dead at that point for almost ten years. She sends the men away from her house with nothing.

Section two begins as the narrator segues into another flashback that takes place thirty years before the unsuccessful tax collection. In this episode, Emily's neighbors complain of an awful smell emanating from her home. The narrator reveals that Emily had a sweetheart who deserted her shortly before people began complaining about the smell. The ladies of the town attribute the stench to the poor housekeeping of Emily's man-servant, Tobe. However, despite several complaints, Judge Stevens, the town's mayor during this era, is reluctant to do anything about it for fear of offending Emily ("Dammit, sir ... will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?"). This forces a small contingent of men to take action. Four of them sneak around Emily's house after midnight, sprinkling lime around her house and in her cellar. When they are done, they see that "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."

The narrator notes the town's pity for Emily at this point in a discussion of her family's past. The narrator reveals that Emily once had a mad great-aunt, old lady Wyatt. He also notes that Emily is apparently a spinster because of her father's insistence that "none of the young men were good enough" for her. The narrator then describes the awful circumstances that follow Emily's father's death. Emily is at first in such deep denial she refuses to acknowledge that her father is dead. She finally breaks down after three days and allows the townspeople to remove his body.

The narrator begins to detail Emily's burgeoning relationship with Homer Barron, a Yankee construction foreman, in section three. The narrator seems sympathetic, but the ladies and many of the older people in town find Emily's behavior scandalous. They gossip about how pathetic Emily has become whenever she rides through the town in a buggy with Homer. However, the narrator notes that Emily still carries herself with pride, even when she purchases arsenic from the town's druggist. The druggist tells her that the law requires her to tell him how she plans to use the poison, but she simply stares at him until he backs away and wraps up the arsenic. He writes "for rats" on the box.

At the beginning of section four, the town believes that Emily may commit suicide with the poison she has purchased. The narrator backs up the story again by detailing the circumstances leading up to Emily's purchase of the arsenic. At first, the town believes that Emily will marry Homer Barron when she is seen with him, despite Homer's statements that he is not the marrying type. However, a marriage never takes place, and the boldness of their relationship upsets many of the town's ladies. They send a minister to talk to Emily, but the following Sunday she rides through town yet again in the buggy with Homer. The minister's wife sends away for Emily's two female cousins from Alabama in the hope that they will convince Emily to either marry Homer or end the affair. During their visit, Emily purchases a toilet set engraved with Homer's initials, as well as a complete set of men's clothing, including a nightshirt. This leads the town to believe that Emily will marry Homer and rid herself of the conceited cousins. Homer leaves Jefferson, apparently to give Emily the opportunity to chase the cousins off. The cousins leave a week later, and Homer is seen going into Emily's house three days after they leave. Homer is never seen again after that, and the townspeople believe he has jilted Emily.

Emily is not seen in town for almost six months. When she is finally seen on the streets of Jefferson again, she is fat and her hair has turned gray. Her house remains closed to visitors, except for a period of six or seven years when she gives china-painting lessons. She doesn't allow the town to put an address on her house, and she continues to ignore the tax notices they send her. Occasionally, she is seen in one of the downstairs

windows; she has apparently closed the top floor of the house. Finally, she dies, alone except for her man-servant, Tobe.

The narrator returns to his recollection of Emily's funeral at the beginning of section five. As soon as Tobe lets the ladies into the house, he leaves out the back door and is never seen again. The funeral is a morbid affair. Soon after Emily is buried, several of the men force the upstairs open. There they find what is evidently the rotten corpse of Homer Barron. Even more grotesque, they find a long strand of iron-gray hair on the pillow next to his remains.

## Chapter Summaries: Summary and Analysis Section I

### New Characters

**Narrator:** Never named, the narrator of the story is a member of the town and has known Miss Emily much of her life. Some critics have suggested that the narrator is the town itself.

**Miss Emily Grierson:** The protagonist of the story, Miss Emily, as she is known and referred to by everyone, is the town matriarch.

**Colonel Sartoris:** In 1894, Colonel Sartoris, who was then the mayor of the town, remitted Miss Emily's taxes, for unknown reasons, "in perpetuity."

**Tobe:** A Negro "manservant" of Miss Emily's, Tobe is the only person who has entered Miss Emily's house for years.

### Summary

"A Rose for Emily" begins with the death of Miss Emily Grierson, respectfully referred to by the nameless narrator of the story, as well as by the people of Jefferson—the town in which the story takes place—as Miss Emily. The narrator of the story tells how the whole town attended Miss Emily's funeral—the men, out of respect for a "fallen monument," and the women "out of curiosity to see the inside of her house." The narrator goes on to describe Miss Emily's "big, squarish frame house that had once been white" but had become, by the time of her death, "an eyesore among eyesores." In the years leading up to Miss Emily's death, only Miss Emily's Negro manservant, whom will be later identified as Tobe, had seen the inside of the house, which had once been considered one of the nicest houses situated on one of the most select streets in the town. Over the years, however, the house had grown into disrepair, and garages and cotton gins had been built up around the street, adding to its garishness.

Miss Emily had grown to become a town legend by the time of her death. In 1894, the then mayor Colonel Sartoris remitted Miss Emily's taxes "in perpetuity" for reasons never made clear. But over time, as a new generation of civic leaders arose, the town began to question Miss Emily's privileged status. After the new mayor was unsuccessful in collecting taxes from her through the mail, the Board of Alderman sent a deputation to her house to meet with her. Miss Emily, "a small, fat woman in black," met them at the door, and she told them that she had no taxes in Jefferson. "Colonel Sartoris explained it to me," she told the group in a voice that "was dry and cold." When the deputation continued to press Miss Emily, she responded by saying in a matter-of-fact tone, "See Colonel Sartoris," even though the Colonel had been dead almost ten years.

The first section of "A Rose for Emily" concludes with Miss Emily asking Tobe to "[s]how these gentlemen out."

## Analysis

“A Rose for Emily” is one of William Faulkner’s masterpieces of short fiction and is considered one of the great short stories in American literature. Told from the point of view of a nameless narrator and a longtime member of Jefferson, the town in which the story takes place, “A Rose for Emily” opens with the death of Miss Emily Grierson and proceeds to tell the story of her life in the years leading up to her death.

Considered one of the great writers of the twentieth century, Faulkner left behind a large body of work that effectively told the story of the American South, from the years following the Civil War to the Depression of 1929. More particularly, most of his stories and novels were set in the fictional county of Mississippi called Yoknapatawpha County, of which the town of Jefferson was the county seat.

Many of Faulkner’s trademarks as a writer are evident in “A Rose for Emily.” In many of his works, for instance, Faulkner pulls his reader along by withholding important pieces of information, leaving a great deal of work to the reader. In the opening section to “A Rose for Emily,” Faulkner provides only a few clues as to the time period of the story. The narrator mentions that in 1894 Colonel Sartoris, who was the mayor of Jefferson at the time, freed Miss Emily of all obligations to pay her taxes, “dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity”—an edict that the new generation of town leaders “with its more modern ideas” found unacceptable. The narrator also describes how garages with gasoline pumps and cotton gins had encroached upon Miss Emily’s property. But beyond these facts, Faulkner says nothing more as to the timing of the story.

The narrator also says nothing about the circumstances of Miss Emily’s death, saying only that in the years preceding her death, the Negro manservant Tobe was the only person known to have entered her house. Thus, the reader, like the townspeople of Jefferson, is left in the dark as to the background of Miss Emily and her death.

The themes that begin to emerge in the opening section of “A Rose for Emily” are very characteristic of Faulkner’s works. The themes of tradition and change, for instance, are very much evident in these first pages. Although very little of Miss Emily is described, it is clear that she represents an older and dying part of Jefferson and, indeed, of the South at this time. When she was alive, Miss Emily was considered “a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation on the town,” but now that she is dead, she has joined “the representatives of those august names where they lay ... among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson.” The Civil War and its generation, which had so strongly defined the South that Faulkner is describing, are dying out, along with their traditions. This theme is further underscored by the narrator describing the reason for the men attending Miss Emily’s funeral out of “a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument....”

Faulkner was also known for the ways in which he described class and racial divisions. Miss Emily is, or was once, clearly one of the more “aristocratic” members of the town; she lived on what was once the town’s most “select” streets among other “august” families. By the end of the first paragraph, the reader knows that Miss Emily had “an old manservant,” and in the third paragraph the narrator describes the former mayor Colonel Sartoris as the father of the edict that “no Negro woman should appear on the street without an apron....” Further, the mere fact that Sartoris is referred to as “Colonel” and Emily as “Miss Emily” is indication of the importance of status and respect the town affords its (white) members.

Beyond merely describing the process of change taking place in his South, Faulkner also set out to make a statement about that change. Miss Emily, as representative of the “Old South” of the Confederacy, does not merely die out in order to be replaced by members of the “New South.” In the years preceding her death, Miss Emily is described as a decaying figure that is clinging to the past in a delusional way. Her house, which “had once been white,” is the only house left on the block and had become “an eyesore among eyesores,” and at the time of the visit by the deputation, Miss Emily is under that illusion that Colonel Sartoris is still alive. Even her physical attributes echo this sense of decay and decrepitude. When the deputation enters Miss Emily’s

house, they are greeted by

a small fat women in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked 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 while the visitors stated their errand.

Miss Emily had effectively died long before her actual death. Her body, like her mind, is merely clinging to whatever it can in order to remain alive.

## Chapter Summaries: Summary and Analysis Section II

### New Characters

Judge Stevens: Eighty-year-old Judge Stevens is approached by townspeople about the smell on Miss Emily's property.

Old Lady Wyatt: Miss Emily's great-aunt, Old Lady Wyatt, had become senile and was remembered by the townspeople.

### Summary

Miss Emily sends the deputation away, just as she had sent a similar party away thirty years earlier when neighbors had begun to complain to the town about a "smell" that had risen from Miss Emily's property. The smell was noticed two years after Miss Emily's father's death, and a short time after Miss Emily's "sweetheart went away."

Eighty-year-old Judge Stevens was approached by neighbors about the smell, but he didn't want to "accuse a lady to her face" about such a problem. So instead of confronting Miss Emily directly, four men sneak onto Miss Emily's property after midnight to spread lime around her house and in her cellar. After a couple of weeks, the smell went away, and the town went along with its business as usual.

It was with the onset of the smell that the townspeople had begun to feel sorry for Miss Emily, as they recalled how Miss Emily's great-aunt, old lady Wyatt, had gone crazy. Miss Emily had always received more than her share of attention from the town, due to her unusual status. Although a good looking, slender woman, Miss Emily was never married; for a long time, the town believed that the Griersons felt themselves superior to the rest of the town, but when Miss Emily turned thirty without being married, the townspeople realized that Miss Emily wasn't simply turning suitors away, as they had thought, but that she was most likely not receiving any viable offers of marriage at all.

When Miss Emily's father died, and it came out that all he had left his daughter was the house, effectively leaving her a pauper, the town was "glad" and could at last pity Miss Emily. When townspeople came to call on Miss Emily, "she met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face." Miss Emily went on to explain to her callers that her father was not dead, and it took three full days before the minister and the doctors could persuade Miss Emily to let them dispose of her father's body properly.

### Analysis

If it was not clear in the first section, it is clear by now that "A Rose for Emily" is not structured in a linear narrative form. The story, which began with Miss Emily's death, has now flashed back three decades to a time

when “the smell” arose from Miss Emily’s property, and two years prior to that when Miss Emily’s father died and the town had to convince Miss Emily to dispose of his body properly.

The physical decay of Miss Emily and her surroundings that the narrator describes in the first section begins to make sense in Section II as he describes Miss Emily as mentally disturbed. Here the story begins to take something of a “gothic” twist: Miss Emily, in denial over her father’s death, refuses to give up her father’s corpse—a harbinger of events to come.

In describing the town leaders at the time of “the smell,” the narrator continues to emphasize the theme of “change” within the town: the Board of Alderman is described as comprising “three graybeards and one younger man, a member of the rising generation.” Faulkner once again pushes forth the idea of the new generations taking over the running of the town, even thirty years prior to Miss Emily’s death at the “beginning” of the story. And the theme of class distinctions and traditions is further emphasized when Judge Stevens refuses to “accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad...”

Perhaps the most important sentence in the entire story occurs at the start of this section: “So she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell.” The use of the definite article in this sentence is telling. It is not merely “a smell” that raised the attention of the townspeople; it is “the smell.” By using the definite article here, the narrator is granting significance to the smell that the indefinite article “a” would not give it. He is implying that “the smell” will return to play an important role with the story. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of “the smell” with Miss Emily’s refusal to give up the dead body of her father not only adds to the gothic element of the story, but also foreshadows events to come.

## **Chapter Summaries: Summary and Analysis Section III**

### **New Characters**

**Homer Barron:** Miss Emily’s boyfriend who is described as a “big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face.” A Northerner, he has come south to Jefferson as a foreman helping to pave the sidewalks.

**The Druggist:** Miss Emily orders the local druggist to sell her arsenic, even though she refused to tell him what the poison is for.

### **Summary**

After her father’s death, Miss Emily disappeared from public site for a long time, and when she reemerged, Jefferson had just started paving its sidewalks. Homer Barron, a “Yankee,” is a foreman for one of the crews working on the contract, and soon he would be seen by the town escorting Miss Emily on Sunday afternoons.

The townspeople began expressing pity for Miss Emily; Homer, being a Northerner, is not considered a proper match for a Southern woman such as Miss Emily. But about a year after the two started appearing in public, Miss Emily ordered arsenic from the local druggist. Despite being asked by the druggist what the poison is for, Miss Emily refuses to tell. The box has a skull and bones on it, with the caption, “For rats.”

### **Analysis**

The themes of class, race and status are prevalent throughout Faulkner’s writing, and Faulkner address those themes repeatedly in “A Rose for Emily.” The society of Jefferson is segregated by race, extremely class conscious, and extremely conscious of societal rank and status. When Miss Emily is seen in public with Homer Barron, the townspeople are abhorred on two accounts: first, that Barron is a “Yankee,” and second, that he is a “day laborer,” even if he is a foreman. A “real lady” such as Miss Emily, and a Grierson at that,

should never forget her social duty, her “noblesse oblige,” by cavorting with such a person. A true Southern lady would only consider a Southern white man of similar social standing.

Nevertheless, Miss Emily spends Sundays with Barron, ignoring the whisperings of her fellow Jeffersonians. And true to her character, when Miss Emily visits the druggist to purchase some poison for reasons not yet known, she refuses to tell the druggist the purpose of the poison. And true to the townspeople’s relationship with Miss Emily, the druggist does not press the issue and gives Miss Emily what she wants.

## **Chapter Summaries: Summary and Analysis Section IV**

### **New Characters**

**Miss Emily’s Cousins:** At the request of the Baptist minister’s wife, cousins from Alabama arrive and move in with Miss Emily, presumably to help her out.

### **Summary**

After Miss Emily had requested rat poison from the druggist, the town assumed that she was planning her own suicide. The facts of her relationship with Homer Barron, a Northerner, was too great a disgrace in the town’s eyes, and suicide seemed a viable option. Although Miss Emily and Homer were seen regularly on Sunday afternoons, the town was uncertain that Miss Emily would be able to convince Barron, who admitted that he was “not a marrying man,” to marry her, and Miss Emily could not continue with such a public relationship without losing face.

The town was concerned about the example Miss Emily was setting, and it went so far as to send a Baptist minister to meet with her, but to no avail. When Miss Emily ordered a silver toilet set with Barron’s initials, along with a man’s suit, the town became convinced that the two would soon be married. Barron disappeared for three days, long enough for Miss Emily’s cousins, who had been called in out of concern for Miss Emily, to leave. The town assumed that upon Barron’s return, the two would wed, but shortly after his reappearance in the town, he disappeared, never to be seen again by anyone.

Once Barron disappeared for the last time, the town saw less and less of Miss Emily, and when she did show herself again, she had grown fat and gray. Except for a period of six or seven years in her forties when she gave china-painting lessons to the children of the town, Miss Emily effectively removed herself from all public appearances and interactions. Only Tobe, Miss Emily’s manservant, was seen on his regular shopping excursions, and even he was steadily growing “grayer and more stooped....” Although there were attempts at extracting information from Tobe, Tobe refused to answer any questions about Miss Emily, and eventually the town stopped trying. Then one day without any warning, Miss Emily died.

### **Analysis**

The “noblesse oblige” that Miss Emily has seemed to have forgotten comes around to affect the town’s—especially the “ladies’”—view of Miss Emily. After Miss Emily purchased the poison from the druggist, the town became overly preoccupied, even obsessed, with her and her relationship to Barron. Each of Miss Emily’s actions is held under great scrutiny by the town, and when Barron returns after a brief departure, the town is at last convinced, and much relieved, that their marriage will finally take place. No longer will Miss Emily be a “disgrace” and a “bad example.”

However, Faulkner continues to provide readers with ominous hints at Barron’s fate. “And that was the last time we saw Homer Barron,” the narrator recounts and immediately thereafter recalls “that night when they sprinkled the lime....” Barron’s fate is effectively linked in this passage to the sprinkling of the lime and its evocation of death.

The theme of progress and change within the community is also once again addressed, this time in relation to Miss Emily's refusal to allow the post office to attach a mail box and metal numbers to her door. As the town is taken over by a "newer generation," Miss Emily continues to grow "grayer and grayer" until her hair becomes the "vigorous iron-gray" color that it would have at her death. And the description of Miss Emily's hair being "iron-gray" will come to play an important role in the story.

## Chapter Summaries: Summary and Analysis Section V

### New Characters

**The Town Ladies:** A contingent of women from the town are the first to arrive at Miss Emily's following her death, and they are the last to see Tobe.

### Summary

When news of Miss Emily's death spreads, a group of ladies from the town arrives at Miss Emily's door and is briefly greeted by Tobe, who lets them in and immediately proceeds to walk out the back door, never to be seen again. A funeral is held two days later, with several of the men wearing their newly brushed Confederate uniforms.

After Miss Emily was placed "decently in the ground," a room above the stairs at Miss Emily's, which has not been opened for years, is forced open. An "acrid pall as of the tomb" seemed to lie on everything in the room, including "upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured," as well as upon a man's suit of clothes.

And on the bed was "the man himself," with a "profound and fleshless grin." Although never mentioned by name, the fleshless skeleton, in the position of an endless embrace, is that of Homer Barron. Next to his head is a second pillow, with the "indentation of another head," and on it is a "long strand of iron-gray hair."

### Analysis

Until the very day of Miss Emily's death, despite the many generations that have come and gone in the town, the town members continue to act decorously with respect to the rites of death. At Miss Emily's death, just as they had done at her father's, the town's "ladies" call on the house. Tobe's immediate departure, never to be "seen again," offers yet another ominous hint of things yet to transpire.

The town's preoccupation/obsession with Miss Emily is further evidenced by the fact that the town had always known that "there was a room in that region above the stairs [in Miss Emily's house] which no one had seen in forty years...." What other person, or what other house, in the town had ever received this much attention?

The conclusion to "A Rose for Emily" provides the story with the gothic-like twist that has been hinted at since the early stages of the story. With the conclusion, all the questions that the town had ever had over the years have been answered. What had happened to the man's toiletry set and suit? What ever happened to Homer Barron? What was the "dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse" Miss Emily doing on her own all those years?

With the ending, Faulkner also forces the reader to reexamine the narration from the very beginning for the continual hints of Barron's fate that he offers. For example, Faulkner describes Miss Emily by her "skeleton" in Section I; he refers to "the smell" in Section II; in Section III, the arsenic appears; and in Section IV, the mention of "the last we saw of Homer Barron" is juxtaposed with the narrator's recollection of the sprinkling of the lime. Each of these moments in the story gain greater relevancy with the ending.

There is little about “A Rose for Emily” that is not calculated; Faulkner has created a story replete with all the hints a literary detective would need that ultimately points to the inevitable conclusion to which the story leads—the death of Homer Barron at the hands of Miss Emily. But the real story lies not in the facts of the death; the true literary detective work comes with respect to uncovering the motives behind Miss Emily’s actions. Was Miss Emily merely crazy? Does Faulkner offer the reader hints of abuse at the hands of her father that could explain her actions? Or are there other reasons for these obviously perverse actions? The plethora of possible answers to those questions give “A Rose for Emily” its strength and beauty.

## Themes: Themes and Meanings

Miss Emily’s story is certainly bizarre, suspenseful, and mysterious enough to engage the reader’s attention fully. She is a grotesque, southern gothic character whose neurotic or psychotic behavior in her relationships with her father, her lover, and her black servant may elicit many Freudian interpretations. For example, her affair with Homer Barron may be seen as a middle-aged woman’s belated rebellion against her repressive father and against the town’s burdensome expectations. That William Faulkner intended her story to have a much larger dimension is suggested by his choice of an unnamed citizen of Jefferson to tell it.

The narrator never speaks or writes as an individual, never uses the pronoun “I,” always speaks as “we.” As representative of the townspeople, the narrator feels a compulsion to tell the story of a woman who represents something important to the community. Black voices are excluded from this collective voice as it speaks out of old and new generations. Colonel Sartoris’s antebellum generation is succeeded by one with “modern ideas”: “Thus, she passed from generation to generation.”

Even though Miss Emily was a child during the Civil War, she represents to generations past and present the old Deep South of the Delta cotton-plantation aristocracy. She is a visible holdover into the modern South of a bygone era of romance, chivalry, and the Lost Cause. Even this new South, striving for a prosperity based on Northern technology, cannot fully accept the decay of antebellum culture and ideals. Early, the narrator invokes such concepts as tradition, duty, hereditary obligation, and custom, suggesting a perpetuation in the community consciousness of those old values. The community’s sense of time is predominantly chronological, but it is also like Emily’s, the confused, psychological time sense of memory. Like many women of the defeated upper class in the Deep South, Miss Emily withdraws from the chronological time of reality into the timelessness of illusion.

Miss Emily is then symbolic of the religion of southernness that survived military defeat and material destruction. The children of Colonel Sartoris’s generation are sent to learn china-painting from Miss Emily in “the same spirit that they were sent to church.” It is because “we” see her as resembling “those angels in colored church windows” that her affair with a Yankee makes her “a bad example to the young people.”

Given the fact that the Yankee colonel who made the deepest raid into Rebel territory was named Grierson, Faulkner may have intended Emily’s family name to be ironic. The insanity of clinging to exposed illusions is suggested by the fact that Miss Emily’s great-aunt went “crazy” and that Miss Emily later appears “crazy” to the townspeople. Ironically, even within aristocratic families there is division; her father fell out with Alabama kinsmen over the great-aunt’s estate.

Immediately after the narrator refers to Miss Emily as being like an “idol” and to her great-aunt as “crazy,” Faulkner presents this image, symbolic of the aristocracy: “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 back-flung front door.” Her father’s rejection of her suitors is like the defeated aristocracy’s rejection of new methods of creating a future. Emily’s refusal to accept the fact of her father’s death suggests the refusal of some aristocrats to accept the death of the South

even when faced with the evidence of its corpse. Perversely, “She would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.” However, the modern generations insist on burying the decaying corpse of the past.

Miss Emily preserves all the dead, in memory if not literally. “See Colonel Sartoris,” she tells the new town fathers, as if he were alive. The townspeople are like Miss Emily in that they persist in preserving her “dignity” as the last representative of the Old South (her death ends the Grierson line); after she is dead, the narrator preserves her in this story. The rose is a symbol of the age of romance in which the aristocracy were obsessed with delusions of grandeur, pure women being a symbol of the ideal in every phase of life. Perhaps the narrator offers this story as a “rose” for Emily. As a lady might press a rose between the pages of a history of the South, she keeps her own personal rose, her lover, preserved in the bridal chamber where a rose color pervades everything. Miss Emily’s rose is ironically symbolic because her lover was a modern Yankee, whose laughter drew the townspeople to him and whose corpse has grinned “profoundly” for forty years, as if he, or Miss Emily, had played a joke on all of them.

## Themes

### Death

Death is prevalent, both literally and figuratively, in “A Rose for Emily.” Five actual deaths are discussed or mentioned in passing, and there are obvious references to death throughout the story. The story begins in section one with the narrator’s recollections of Emily’s funeral. He reminisces that it is Emily’s father’s death that prompts Colonel Sartoris to remit her taxes “into perpetuity.” This leads to the story of the aldermen attempting to collect taxes from Emily. The narrator’s description of Emily is that of a drowned woman: “She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue.” One of the reasons the aldermen are bold enough to try to collect Emily’s taxes is that Colonel Sartoris has been dead for a decade. Of course, this doesn’t discourage Emily—she expects the men to discuss the matter with him anyway. When the narrator returns to the subject of the death of Emily’s father, he reveals that Emily at first denies that he is dead. She keeps his body for three days before she finally breaks down and allows her father to be buried. This scene foreshadows the grisly discovery at the end of the story. The narrator also mentions the madness and death of old lady Wyatt, Emily’s great-aunt. Finally, the discovery of a long strand of iron-gray hair lying on a pillow next to the moldy corpse entombed in Emily’s boudoir suggests that Emily is a necrophiliac (literally, “one who loves the dead”).

### The Decline of the Old South

One of the major themes in Faulkner’s fiction is the decline of the Old South after the Civil War. There are many examples of this theme in “A Rose for Emily.” Before the Civil War, Southern society was composed of landed gentry, merchants, tenant farmers, and slaves. The aristocratic men of this period had an unspoken code of chivalry, and women were the innocent, pure guardians of morality. For example, Colonel Sartoris concocts an elaborate story to spare Emily’s feelings when he remits her taxes; the narrator states, “Only a man of Colonel Sartoris’s generation and thought could have invented [the story], and only a woman could have believed it.” When the smell develops around the Grierson house, a younger man suggests that Emily should be confronted with it. Judge Stevens, who is from the same generation as the Colonel, asks him, “Dammit, sir ... will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?” It is also noted that Emily’s father is from this same generation, an arrogant Southern aristocrat who believes that no man is good enough for his daughter.

However, post-Civil War society in the South was radically different. At one time, the Grierson home was in one of the finest neighborhoods in Jefferson; by the time of Emily’s death, “garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood.” The generation that follows Colonel Sartoris is not swayed by his old Southern code of honor. This is why the twentieth-century Jefferson

Board of Aldermen attempts to collect Emily's taxes a decade after the Colonel's death. The reaction to the Yankee Homer Barron, also serves to delineate the difference between the generations. The younger generation finds it easier to accept Homer, while the older folks find his relationship with a woman born to old Southern gentility unacceptable. Emily's china-painting lessons also show the change in Southern society. Her pupils are the daughters and grand-daughters of Colonel Sartoris's contemporaries. However, the narrator notes that "the painting pupils grew up and fell away and did not send their children to her with boxes of color and tedious brushes and pictures cut from the ladies' magazines." Finally, Emily's dark secret might serve as a metaphor for the general decadence of the Old South.

### **Community vs. Isolation**

The odd relationship between the town of Jefferson and Emily is a recurrent theme in "A Rose for Emily." At her funeral, the narrator notes that Emily has been "a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town." However, Emily has very little to do with the townspeople during her life. Her father prevents her from dating anyone because he doesn't believe any of the men in Jefferson are good enough for her, and after his death, Emily continues to isolate herself from the rest of the community for the better part of her life. The only notable exceptions to her isolation are her Sunday rides with Homer Barron, her shopping trips for arsenic and men's clothing, and the china-painting lessons she gives to the young women of the town for a few years. These exceptions only serve to show how alienated Emily is from the rest of Jefferson.

Although Emily is indifferent to the town, the town seems to be almost obsessed with her. The reaction Jefferson has to her relationship with Homer Barron exemplifies this obsession. The ladies of Jefferson are mortified because they think the relationship is "a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people." The older people dislike the relationship because they think it is bad form for a Southern woman to associate with a Yankee. The narrator pities Emily and secretly hopes that she will outsmart her cousins and marry Homer. These various reactions demonstrate an interesting conflict. Even though Emily views herself as separate from the community, the community still embraces her. They view her as "an idol in a niche ... passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse."

## **Characters**

### **Homer Barron**

Homer Barron is the Yankee construction foreman who becomes Emily Grierson's first real beau. His relationship with Emily is considered scandalous because he is a Northerner and because it doesn't appear as if they will ever be married. In fact, it is known that he drinks with younger men in the Elks' Club and he has remarked that he is not a marrying man. The lovers ignore the gossip of the town until Emily's two female cousins from Alabama arrive. Homer leaves town for several days until the cousins go back to Alabama. Meanwhile, Emily purchases arsenic, a monogrammed toilet set with the initials H. B., and men's clothing. Homer returns to Jefferson three days after Emily's cousins leave, and he is seen entering her home. He is never seen (alive) again. However, what is presumably his corpse is discovered in a ghastly bridal suite on the top floor of the Grierson house after Emily's funeral.

### **Druggist**

The druggist sells Emily arsenic while her two female cousins from Alabama are visiting her. Emily just stares at him when he tells her that the law requires her to tell him why she is buying it. He backs down without an answer and writes "for rats" on the box.

### **Miss Emily**

See Emily Grierson.

### **Emily's cousins**

Emily's cousins arrive after receiving a letter from the Baptist minister's wife. Apparently, they visit to discourage Emily's relationship with Homer Barron. Homer leaves while they are in town, and then returns after they have been gone for three days. The narrator, speaking for many in the town, hopes that Emily can rid herself of the cousins because they are "even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been."

### **Emily's father**

Although there is only a brief description of Emily's father in section two of the story, he plays an important role in the development of her character. Certainly Emily learns her genteel ways from him. It is his influence that deprives her of a husband when she is young; the narrator says that the town pictured Emily and her father 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." Emily at first refuses to acknowledge his death. She doesn't allow anyone to remove her father's body; finally, after three days she breaks down and lets someone remove the cadaver. This foreshadows the town's discovery of Homer Barron's decomposed corpse on the top floor in Emily's house after her death.

### **Emily Grierson**

Emily Grierson, referred to as Miss Emily throughout the story, is the main character of "A Rose for Emily." An unnamed narrator tells her strange story through a series of flashbacks. She is essentially the town eccentric. The narrator compares her to "an idol in a niche ... dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse." Emily is born to a proud, aristocratic family sometime during the Civil War; her life in many ways reflects the disintegration of the Old South during the Reconstruction and the early twentieth century. Although her mother is never mentioned, her father plays an important part in shaping her character. He chases away Emily's potential suitors because none of them are "good enough" for his daughter. His death leaves Emily a tragic, penniless spinster. She may even be mad—she denies that her father is dead at first and she won't allow anyone to remove his corpse until she breaks down after three days. However, she later causes a scandal when she falls in love with Homer Barron, a Yankee construction foreman who is paving the streets in Jefferson. The narrator's various clues (Emily's purchase of arsenic; the awful smell coming from her home after Homer disappears) and the town's grotesque discovery at the end of the story suggest that Emily is driven to murder when she begins to fear that Homer may leave her.

### **Minister**

The Baptist minister, under pressure from the ladies of the town, goes to Emily (although she is Episcopal) to discuss her relationship with Homer Barron. He never tells anyone what happens, and he refuses to go back to her. The following Sunday, Emily and Homer are seen riding through the town in the buggy again.

### **Minister's wife**

The minister's wife sends a letter to Emily's relations in Alabama after her husband calls upon Emily. The letter prompts a visit from two of Emily's female cousins.

### **Narrator**

The unnamed narrator refers to himself in collective pronouns throughout the story. As Isaac Rodman points out in *The Faulkner Journal*, "The critical consensus remains that the narrator of 'A Rose for Emily' speaks for his community." Although there are a few sub-groups to which the narrator refers to as separate (for example, the "ladies" and the "older people" of the town), readers assume that he speaks for the majority of the average people of Jefferson. He tells Emily's story in a series of flashbacks which culminates in the dreadful discovery of a decomposed corpse on the top floor of the Grierson home after her death. The narrator never directly claims that Emily murders her lover, Homer Barron, and keeps his corpse in a bed for more than forty years. However, the events he chooses to detail, including Emily's purchase of arsenic and the stench that comes from her house after Homer Barron's disappearance, lead readers to that perception.

**The negro**

See Tobe

**Colonel Sartoris**

Colonel Sartoris is the mayor of Jefferson when Emily's father dies. He remits Emily's taxes "into perpetuity" because he knows that her father was unable to leave her with anything but the house. Sartoris, being a prototypical southern gentleman, invents a story involving a loan that Emily's father had made to the town in order to spare Emily the embarrassment of accepting charity. The narrator contrasts this chivalrous act with another edict made by Sartoris stating that "no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron." Colonel Sartoris appears in other works by Faulkner; he is a pivotal character in the history of Yoknapatawpha County.

**Judge Stevens**

Judge Stevens is the mayor of Jefferson when the townspeople begin to complain of the awful odor coming from the Grierson house. Like Colonel Sartoris, he is from a generation that believes an honorable man does not publicly confront a woman with an embarrassing situation. He refuses to allow anyone to discuss the smell with her. Instead, four men sneak onto the Grierson property after midnight and sprinkle lime around the house to rid the town of the disgusting stench.

**Tobe**

Tobe is Emily's black man-servant and, for most of the story, her only companion. He is often the only sign of life about the Grierson house. The ladies find it shocking that Emily allows him to maintain her kitchen, and they blame his poor housekeeping for the development of the smell after Emily is "deserted" by Homer Barron. He rarely speaks to anyone. He is the only person present when Emily dies. He lets the townspeople into the Grierson house after her death, after which he promptly leaves, never to be seen again.

**Old Lady Wyatt**

Old lady Wyatt is Emily Grierson's great-aunt. The narrator makes reference to her as having gone "completely crazy at last," suggesting perhaps that madness runs in the Grierson family. The narrator also mentions that Emily's father had a falling out with their kin in Alabama over old lady Wyatt's estate.

## Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

In "A Rose For Emily," William Faulkner imitates associative Southern storytelling style as an unnamed first-person narrator speaks for the entire town of Jefferson, relating what all the townspeople know or believe. Unlike typical Faulkner stories that employ multiple individual narrators, "A Rose for Emily" achieves the effect of multiple narrators by combining them into a single narrative voice, an unnamed (and not always consistent) narrator. First-person plural pronouns emphasize that this narrator represents the consciousness of the town. This style is similar to that used in Greek tragedy, wherein chorus and chorus leader provide the reader/audience with information, interpret the characters' actions, and express public opinion; thus, the narrator in "A Rose for Emily," whose age and gender are never identified, can be designated a choric character.

The narrative sequence in this story is not chronological; the reader learns Miss Emily's history in much the same way a newcomer to Jefferson might hear about her history. As the story opens, Miss Emily apparently has just died, and the townspeople are discussing her strange and sad life. Faulkner relates various incidents in her life, but these incidents are related thematically, not chronologically. Faulkner builds suspense by imitating the southern storyteller's style of describing people and events through situation-triggered memories; hence, the plot is associative rather than chronological.

The story's primary theme—the destructive effects of time, most notably change and decay—is familiar to readers of Faulkner. Change is Miss Emily's enemy, so she refuses to acknowledge it, whether that change is the death of her father, the arrival of tax bills, the decay of her house, or even the beginning of residential mail delivery. Furthermore, her attitude toward the death of her father (and later the death of Colonel Sartoris) foreshadows her attitude toward the death of Homer Barron. Because Miss Emily is associated with the passage of time (her ticking watch is concealed in her bosom—heard but never seen), one might consider her to be living outside the normal limitations of time or, perhaps, simply not existing. Thus, she appears to combine life and death in her own person.

A minor theme in the story is the social structure of the early twentieth century American South, as it is being eroded by the industrialized New South. To avoid embarrassing Miss Emily, Colonel Sartoris devises a convoluted explanation of Jefferson's pre-Civil War debt to the Griersons, but this same man, also, had authored an edict that any African American woman appearing on Jefferson's streets without an apron could be beaten. Likewise, to avoid appearing to give Miss Emily charity, the families of Jefferson send their young daughters to Miss Emily's house for china-painting lessons. Most significant, though, is the change in Jefferson's attitude toward the relationship between Miss Emily (a descendant of Southern gentility) and Homer (a working man, and a Northerner). Initially, the townspeople are horrified by their coupling, but gradually they come to accept Homer as a good choice for Miss Emily, perhaps as a matter of necessity.

Like most Faulkner stories, "A Rose for Emily" is highly symbolic. Miss Emily is described as a fallen monument to the chivalric American South. Reenforcing the themes of change and decay, her house, once an elegant mansion, has become a decaying eyesore in the middle of a neighborhood that has changed from residential to industrial. Another prominent symbol is the crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father, associated with the oppressive hold of the past on the present. Although less elegant than an oil portrait, the crayon portrait is important to Miss Emily, and it is seen by the rare visitor who enters her house.

The pseudo-chivalry of the townspeople comes out in several symbolic actions, such as when parents send their daughters to Miss Emily for china-painting lessons, when civic leaders spread lime around her yard to deal with the foul odor emanating from her house, and when Colonel Sartoris decrees that she will never have to pay local taxes. In contrast, Homer's carriage—considered gaudy by the townspeople—symbolizes the difference between the town's old-fashioned attitudes (reflective of the Old South) and Homer's more modern one (reflective of the emerging New South).

In this gothic story, though, perhaps the most vivid symbols are the locked room in Miss Emily's house and the long iron-gray hair found on a pillow inside. The room symbolizes the secrecy and mystery associated with Miss Emily's house and her relationship with Homer. The location of the hair as well as its color and length suggest a continuing interaction between Miss Emily and the corpse of Homer, again indicating her refusal to acknowledge the finality of death.

In Faulkner's youth, a popular literary genre was the reconciliation story, in which a Southern lady and a Northern man fall in love, thus helping to resolve the sectional conflict remaining after the Civil War. Faulkner's story can be read as a reaction against this sentimentality. Faulkner never describes the actual relationship between Miss Emily and Homer; thus, readers must decide whether "A Rose for Emily" is a gothic psychological tale or a tragic story of unrequited love.

In various stories and novels, Faulkner focuses on both individuals and their cultural milieu, and he repeatedly uses Jefferson as a microcosm for the early twentieth century South. In "A Rose for Emily," Jefferson also is a microcosm for the United States after World War I and its transition from an agrarian society to the beginnings of an urban-industrial society. The cotton gin near Miss Emily's house bridges this transition, as it combines the cotton culture of the antebellum South with the emerging industrialism of the increasingly urban New South. The tension arising from the collision of these cultures has given rise to a creative outburst of

which Faulkner and “A Rose for Emily” are significant parts.

## Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines

### • Topic #1

Faulkner uses “A Rose for Emily” to address themes of change and progress, especially as it relates to the American South. Although he describes particular individuals within Jefferson (Miss Emily, the older men and ladies, the town leaders), he seems to be using them as symbols for the larger issues that the South was facing at the turn of the twentieth century. Write a paper that discusses how Faulkner addresses the themes of progress and change in the South. Is he a traditionalist, hoping for the South to retain its old ways? Or is he critical of the South for holding on to its traditions?

#### Outline

I. Thesis Statement: [William Faulkner](#) uses “A Rose for Emily” to comment on how the South, at its own peril, is refusing to accept the inevitability of historical and social change. If the South does not adopt to the changing times, it will die a lonely, perverse death like Miss Emily.

II. The South as a region “bound” by history and tradition

A. The influences of class and social rank

1. The role of titles such as “Colonel” and “Miss”

2. The town’s perception of Miss Emily’s house

a. Was once located near “August” names

B. The issues of race

1. Tobe, the manservant

2. Colonel Sartoris’s edict regarding “Negro women”

C. Sexual relations

1. Judge Stevens’s refusal to address Miss Emily, a “lady,” directly regarding “the smell”

2. The expectations of marriage for young women

a. Marriage within social class

b. Marriage within “the tribe” (i.e., southern, white, gentility)

III. Miss Emily as a woman “bound” by the South’s tradition

A. The influence of the father of Miss Emily

1. “All the young men her father had driven away”

2. “She would have clung to that which had robbed her”

B. The pressures of the “town ladies”

1. “Noblesse oblige”

2. The pressures of marrying a Southern gentleman

a. Homer Barron’s unworthiness as a Northern laborer

C. The negative connotations of “spinsterhood”

D. The pressures of public conformity

1. Town reaction to Miss Emily’s public display of affection

IV. Miss Emily, as a representative of a desire for change, is thwarted

A. Her father keeps men from her, as is the custom of family structures

B. The town criticizes her for Homer Barron, as is the custom of male-female relationships

C. The town, as symbolized by the actions of Judge Stevens, treats her as a “lady” and not as an independent person

- V. Miss Emily's father's and the town's refusal to accept Miss Emily for who she is drives her mad
  - A. Miss Emily reacts against Homer Barron
  - B. Miss Emily, unable to fit in, becomes a recluse
  - C. Like the South in general, Miss Emily "clings to that which has robbed her"

VI. Symbols of historical change at Miss Emily's funeral

- A. "Very old men" wearing Confederate uniforms
- B. Father's picture "musing profoundly"
- C. Ladies "sibilant and macabre"
- D. Long passage of the old viewing history as "a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches"

VII. Conclusion: Miss Emily represents a part of the South that its tradition and history has thwarted and prevented from growing in a healthy way. The town's traditions and history ultimately drives Miss Emily mad and forces her into the inhumane act of killing Homer Barron and engaging in a form of necrophilia. Faulkner shows that the South, if it does not embrace the inevitability of historical and social change, will remain thwarted and die a perverse death like Miss Emily.

• **Topic #2**

Although William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" has achieved widespread recognition over the years largely as a result of its "shocking" and "gothic-like" ending, Faulkner in fact prepares the reader for Homer Barron's death at the hands of Miss Emily almost from the very beginning. Faulkner's use of foreshadowing throughout the story contributes to the tight construction and thematic unity of the story, and allows the reader to accept the lovers' fate as inevitable.

**Outline**

I. Thesis Statement: William Faulkner's extensive use of foreshadowing in "A Rose for Emily" prepares the reader for the ultimate and shocking fate of Miss Emily and Homer Barron.

II. Definition of foreshadowing

- A. Foreshadowing provides works with thematic and structural unity
- B. Miss Emily's death at beginning of story
  - 1. Is mention of her death a "red herring" that keeps reader from focusing on Homer Barron?
  - 2. Miss Emily's death as a form of foreshadowing

III. Examples of foreshadowing

- A. Description in Section I of Miss Emily's "skeleton"
- B. Reference to "the smell" in Section II
- C. The arsenic "for rats" in Section III
- D. The mention of "the last we saw of Homer Barron" juxtaposed with the narrator's recollection of the sprinkling of the lime in Section IV
- E. Tobe's immediate disappearance at the start of Section V

IV. Effects of the foreshadowing

- A. Prepares reader for final ending
- B. Although the ending remains "shocking," Faulkner's use of foreshadowing elevates the writing from a mere story with gothic shock value
- C. Faulkner's use of the technique lends a structural unity to the story

V. Conclusion: Faulkner's extensive use of foreshadowing not only prepares the reader for what would otherwise be a gratuitously shocking ending, but it also provides the story with a structural and thematic unity that helps to elevate it above the realm of gothic writing.

# Critical Essays: Suggested Essay Topics

## Section I

1. In the first section of “A Rose for Emily,” Faulkner sets a particular tone. How would you describe that tone, and what are some of the techniques he uses to do it? How does his word choice, for instance, affect the tone? And how does the tone impact your reading of the story?

2. The date of Miss Emily’s death and the state or region in which the story is set are never mentioned. However, Faulkner provides several hints in Section I for both the time and the setting of the story. Given what you have read so far, what is your best estimate of when this story takes place, and what region of the country is Jefferson located? Give reasons for your answers.

## Section II

1. Two separate and unrelated issues of heredity/inheritance are raised in Section II. What are they, and what role do they play in the town’s perception of Miss Emily?

2. It becomes clear in Section II that Miss Emily may be suffering from some form of mental illness or psychological disorder. Do you think Miss Emily is mentally ill or psychologically disturbed? Why or why not?

## Section III

1. Faulkner describes how boys would follow Homer Barron around town in order “to hear him cuss the niggers, and the niggers singing tin time to the rise and fall of picks.” Do you consider Faulkner’s use of the racial epithet “nigger,” as opposed to the terms “Negro” or “Black,” racist? Why does Faulkner use that term in this case? Why doesn’t he use that term when referring to Tobe, Emily’s manservant?

2. The older ladies in the town claim that “even grief could not cause a real lady to forget her *noblesse oblige*....” What do they mean by this?

## Section IV

1. Faulkner makes a point of explaining how Miss Emily refused to let the post office place numbers on the side of her house. What is the purpose of this information? What role does this information play in the story?

2. The town seems to abhor the prospect of Miss Emily’s relationship to Homer Barron. Some members think it is a disgrace and a bad example to the young, while others are happy at her prospects of marriage. Explain why there are such differing opinions in the town.

## Section V

1. The first paragraph of Section V describes how Tobe greets the ladies who are calling on the house after Miss Emily’s death, and then immediately disappears forever. Why do you think Tobe disappears? What effect do you think Faulkner is trying to create by opening the section like this?

2. Faulkner spends a fair amount of time describing the “very old men” at the funeral. Why does Faulkner do this? Do you think he’s only describing the “very old men,” or are the “very old men” representative of a larger issue or theme that the story addresses?

# A Rose for Emily, William Faulkner: Introduction

“A Rose for Emily” William Faulkner

The following entry presents criticism of Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily"(1931). See also "The Bear" Criticism.

"A Rose for Emily" is one of Faulkner's most anthologized stories. Drawing on the tradition of Gothic literature in America, particularly Southern Gothic, the story uses grotesque imagery and first-person-plural narration to explore a culture unable to cope with its own death and decay.

### **Plot and Major Characters**

"A Rose for Emily" begins with the announcement of the death of Miss Emily Grierson, an alienated spinster living in the South in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The narrator, who speaks in the "we" voice and appears to represent the people of the town, recounts the story of Emily's life as a lonely and impoverished woman left penniless by her father, who drove away suitors from his overprotected daughter. Emily was left when her father died with a large, dilapidated house, into which the townspeople have never been invited, and there is an almost lurid interest among them when they are finally able to enter the house upon Emily's death. At that point they discover the truth about the extent of Emily's problems: she has kept the body of her lover, a Northerner named Homer Barron, locked in a bedroom since she killed him years before, and she has continued to sleep with him.

### **Major Themes**

A variety of themes have been attributed to "A Rose for Emily." Many critics have focused on Emily's attempts to stop time by confusing past and present and refusing to accept change; similarly, the muddled chronology of events in the story has been a subject of great debate. Both issues have been interpreted as symbolic of the American South's inability to move forward along with the industrialized North after the Civil War. Another analysis finds Emily to be a tragic figure because of her staunch individualism and the probing and judgmental speculations of the townspeople. Still other critics trace the story's significance to Gothic and horror literature going back to Edgar Allan Poe.

### **Critical Reception**

Although "A Rose for Emily" is one of Faulkner's best-known stories, it has not generally been considered his greatest achievement in short fiction. In fact, some critics initially accused Faulkner of writing a shallow and exploitative horror story. More recently, however, some critics have questioned the traditionally accepted interpretations of the story, focusing in particular on the role of the unnamed narrator in the story and on the metaphoric rape of Emily through the posthumous invasion of her house.

## **A Rose for Emily, William Faulkner: Principal Works**

*These Thirteen* 1930

*Salmagundi* 1932

*Doctor Martino, and Other Stories* 1934

*The Unvanquished* 1938

*The Wild Palms* 1939

*Go Down, Moses, and Other Stories* 1942

*Knight's Gambit* 1949

*Collected Stories of William Faulkner* 1950

*Big Woods* 1955

*New Orleans Sketches* 1958

*Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner* 1979

*The Marble Faun* (poetry) 1924

*Soldiers' Pay* (novel) 1926

*Mosquitoes* (novel) 1927

*Sartoris* [*Flags in the Dust*] (novel) 1929

*The Sound and the Fury* (novel) 1929

*As I Lay Dying* (novel) 1930

*Sanctuary* (novel) 1931

*Light in August* (novel) 1932

*A Green Bough* (poetry) 1933

*Pylon* (novel) 1935

*Absalom, Absalom!* (novel) 1936

*The Hamlet* (novel) 1940

*Intruder in the Dust* (novel) 1948

*Requiem for a Nun* (drama) 1951

*A Fable* (novel) 1954

*The Town* (novel) 1957

*The Mansion* (novel) 1959

*The Reivers* (novel) 1962

## **Criticism: Edward Stone (essay date 1960)**

SOURCE: "Usher, Poquelin, and Miss Emily: The Progress of Southern Gothic," in *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 14, Winter, 1960, pp. 433–43.

[In the following essay, Stone considers "A Rose for Emily" in the tradition of Southern Gothic fiction.]

Some years ago Professors Brooks and Warren offered the suggestion in *Understanding Fiction* that we consider William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" as akin to Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" on the grounds that in both "we have a decaying mansion in which the protagonist, shut away from the world, grows into something monstrous. ..." But to do so, as these critics more or less admit, is to point up as many differences as similarities. Granted that each is "a story of horror": the gloomy corridors of Gothicism are too numerous for such a suggestion to prove more than initially instructive. Without losing sight of the possibilities it may offer, let us extend it and consider Faulkner's spirit-chilling little classic along the additional lines proposed more recently by Professor Randall Stewart—those of Faulkner's relationship to earlier characteristically Southern writers. In particular, let us compare "A Rose for Emily" with George Washington Cable's "Jean-ah Poquelin," to which it is more closely akin, not only in horror, but in that far more important quality defined by Professor Stewart as "a common view of the human condition." Although the situations of these two stories are curiously similar, they are productive of dissimilar results. In comparing them, along with Poe's, accordingly, we can arrive at some conclusion about the direction that Gothic fiction has taken during the past century in its concept of the human personality.

Our first finding is that, unlike "Usher," Cable's and Faulkner's are stories not only of horror, but everywhere of *time* and *place*. Cable sets this down in his first sentence and Faulkner devotes his entire long second paragraph to it. Our imaginations are thus fixed at once in both stories on an *exact* setting. Professor Stewart has pointed out that "a rampant industrialism was transforming the traditional social structure" of the South in the 1920's; similarly, in the years immediately following 1803, the somnolent French province of Louisiana was asked to adapt itself to the American ways of progress. "In the first decade of the present century," Cable begins, with seeming casualness; yet upon reflection this detail becomes a most precise one: merely a decade or two later, during the flood of American immigration into New Orleans, Poquelin's interview with the Governor would have been pathetic, rather than dramatic; and even a decade earlier, there would have been no need for it (the purchase of Louisiana in 1803 being ultimately responsible for Poquelin's desperate situation). Similarly, the coming of garages and gasoline pumps mentioned in the beginning of Faulkner's story places us squarely in the Jefferson of the first decades of the 1900's—a seemingly casual fact that becomes indispensable: it was this change wrought on American life by technology that resulted in the paving of small town sidewalks and streets, which in turn brought the Yankee suitor to Jefferson. And thereby hangs Faulkner's tale. Into both settings of change the author introduces a hero who, fortifying himself in an anachronistic, essentially horrible, and yet majestic stronghold, ignores or defies the insistent encroachments of time and progress. It is the different and yet similar ways in which Poquelin and Miss Emily oppose these encroachments that their creators show their kinship and, after all, their basic difference.

Each curtain goes up on an isolated fortress from bygone days. Jean-ah's is seen as "an old colonial plantation-house" in New Orleans "half in ruin," "aloof from civilization," standing at considerable remove from the smaller, newer houses on the bank of the Mississippi. It is "grim, solid, and spiritless," "its massive build" a reminder of an earlier, more hazardous period of American history. With its "dark" and "weather-beaten" roof and sides, it stands above a marsh in whose center grow two dead cypresses, "clotted with roosting vultures." The Grierson home of Faulkner's story is similarly detached, superseded, and forbidding. It is 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." It too stands alone on the street as a human dwelling, "lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores."

In the first of these half-ruined homes lives a half-ruined old creole grandee, "once an opulent indigo planter, ... now a hermit, alike shunned by and shunning all who had ever known him," the last of a prominent Louisiana line. His only relative, a much younger half-brother named Jacques, has not been seen for seven years, two years after Poquelin and he left for the Guinea coast on a slave-capturing expedition and Jean

Marie returned alone. ("He must have arrived at his house by night. No one saw him come. No one saw 'his little brother'; rumor whispered that he, too, had returned, but he had never been seen again.") This livelihood Poquelin had descended to after his indigo fields had had to be abandoned, and, after that, smuggling. From the first, there is suspicion of foul play, and with the passing of time "the name of Jean Marie Poquelin became a symbol of witchery, devilish crime, and hideous nursery fictions." His society is avoided, and boys playing in the neighborhood jibe at the old man, who retaliates imperiously with violent but unheeded (and outdated) "French imprecation and invective." All avoid the house after dark. So far as anyone knows, Poquelin lives only with an old African housekeeper, a mute.

Emily Grierson is a similarly sinister relic. The last of a proud line, she lives in her outmoded stronghold, alone but peremptory in her demand for "recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson." Since her father's death she has lived all alone in the big house except for a brief period in her thirties when she went off with a Yankee construction foreman named Homer Barron, presumably to be married. Her lover has since disappeared. ("[W]ithin three days Homer Barron was back in town. A neighbor saw the Negro man admit him at the kitchen door at dusk one evening. And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron.") For a period of six or seven years, at the age of forty, Miss Emily resorts to teaching china-painting as a source of income. Then, as years pass and the fashion with it, her pupils disappear and her front door "closed upon the last one and remained closed for good." She lives on into old age in the house "filled with dust and shadows," a place associated in her townsmen's eyes with an unspoken and mysterious horror. The only other inmate, we read, is an old Negro house servant, who does not utter a word during the course of the story.

Progress, in the form of municipal expansion, becomes old Poquelin's adversary. Surveyors give signs of running a new street close to his house and of draining the morass beside it. This is, we note, a Poquelin reverse that the townspeople relish; they too oppose new streets, and will welcome engineering difficulties, but their fearful scorn for Poquelin causes them to look upon his forcible return to the community with pleasure. Poquelin goes directly to the Governor, pleads with him in broken English (after the Governor understandably declines to speak in the French tongue). He pleads on the old, man-to-man basis of the past when informality and the importance of the Poquelin name would have made this kind of interview expectable; does not take kindly to the Governor's suggestion that he deal with the city authorities; and even proposes that the Governor personally intercede with the President on his behalf. To the Governor's innocent query about the stories associated with his house, Poquelin haughtily refuses to answer, and then departs. The city official to whom the Governor has referred him also knows no French and deals with Poquelin through an interpreter. Unsuccessful here too, Poquelin swears abusively and leaves. The new street is cut through, and houses go up near Poquelin's, but still the ugly old ruin remains, to the growing exasperation of the townspeople. Now the newer arrivals plot to persuade, then coerce, the old man to build a new home. Their efforts are rebuffed firmly by Poquelin, who refuses to permit conversation about it with the president of a local Board recently organized. The townspeople renew their pressure on Poquelin and even threaten mob action (a charivari, they say); but on the fateful night they are thwarted, both by the efforts of one of their group (who, on a secret visit to the house, becomes suspicious of a revolting odor about the place, among other things) and by the death of Poquelin himself. His body is brought out of the house by the old African mute, followed by the long-missing Jacques, a leper whose existence he has successfully concealed from all for seven years. Hoisting the coffin on his shoulders, the Negro starts out toward leper soil, Jacques with him. ("[T]hey stepped into the jungle, disappeared, and were never seen again.")

Equally impervious to community pressure, Miss Emily is also menaced in the shabby majesty of her seclusion by the passing of time and by progress. She refuses for days to let the neighbors in when her father dies, and two years later scandalizes them by consorting openly with the crude Yankee, Homer Barron. The neighbors try to thwart the relationship out of mixed feelings, both of resentment at Emily's haughtiness (she is insufferably Grierson, even when fallen on evil days) and of actual sympathy with her (after all, she is one of them, as Homer is not, and the relatives whom they send for turn out to be "even more Grierson" than Emily). She defies society by refusing to identify to the druggist the purposes for which she is buying the

arsenic. Shortly afterwards, when Homer apparently deserts her on the eve of their presumed wedding, and an offensive smell develops in her house, there is angry complaining to authority. But the old major intercedes in Emily's behalf, and the only community action that results is the sprinkling of lime around her house (secretly, almost fearfully, at night). She refuses to accept free postal delivery. Finally, thirty years later, when her continued refusals to pay her taxes cause the major himself to write a kind letter to her proposing payment, he "received in reply a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in fading ink" airily rebuffing his proposal. This imperiousness finally causes a deputation of townspeople (mostly younger) to call on her in her dusty, sinister-smelling domain. She turns them away haughtily, claiming an immunity to taxes based on a life-long remission by a mayor long since dead, to whom she refers the deputation. When death finally comes to the old woman herself, the ancient Negro admits the first visitors to the house, then disappears ("He walked right through the house and out the back and was not seen again.") The visitors enter it for the first time in ten years, break down a door above stairs which no one has been in in forty years, and find the long-decayed corpse of her lover lying in the bed. Only in her death is disclosed the permanence of her conquest a generation before over a man who evidently had no intention of remaining true to her.

Here, then, are two stories presenting a central conflict between a proud and doomed but indomitable last representative of an important family of a bygone era of the South and the progress of an encroaching and usurping civilization. Both Emily Grierson and Jean-Marie Poquelin perpetuate their pristine importance by immuring themselves in a massive, impregnable, outmoded house; and both successfully and secretly conceal in that house until their death a human ghoul who is all that is left to them, the success of the concealment itself recording the triumph of a figure whom time and progress have otherwise relegated to ridiculousness. With plot and characterization parallels like these one might well speculate about the extent to which Cable's story may have inspired Faulkner's. Yet there is a surprising difference in the impressions these two stories create. For, after all the parallels have been itemized, Faulkner has used old materials in an entirely new way and created an effect that is neither Poe's nor even Cable's but entirely his own. And although it is an effect that is derived from the Gothic horror effects of the preceding centuries, it is also characteristically modern and the more horrifying for that reason.

Cable's story and point of view are, after all, in the old fashion. The mysterious and forbidding ruin superseded by time, the proud and isolated owner, a hidden horror—these are the familiar devices of Poe and his Germanic predecessors. What distinguishes "Jean-ah Poquelin" from them is the successful mixture with Gothicism of truly local color and characterization. The scene in which old Poquelin confronts the Governor of Louisiana is one of the memorable ones in American literature. And the stolid, valiant front the old man presents to his suspicious and hostile neighbors over the years, as he harbors a forbidden horror in his home at the risk of his own health, is a masterfully executed effect. Yet, though the story is sophisticated melodrama, it *is* melodrama. Poquelin's gloomy relic of a defunct creole colonialism, with the submarine horrors that guarantee its medieval isolation, is presented as an ugly obstacle to progress; yet, identify though we are encouraged to do with the new villas springing up around it and with the ways of that basically well-intentioned civic group, the "Building and Improvement Company" (one of whose officers, White, even becomes a secondary hero of the piece), primarily and consistently we sympathize with Poquelin and his heroic, if baffling, resistance to them. We do not willingly watch greatness, however faded, vanish from our view, and we all side against the instrument of its obliteration: as the moralist that his century required the serious writer of fiction to be, Cable had to inculcate in his readers attitudes of censure and approbation in viewing the opposing forces of the story.

Faulkner, on the other hand, impassively maintains his (and our) distance, sympathizing with and reproving in turn Emily and her adversary, the Town. The outmoded, mausoleum-like edifice from which she defies society is, to be sure, an eyesore, but to Faulkner it is merely "an eyesore *among eyesores*,"—an unsightly dwelling in the midst of unsightly gasoline pumps. Between the boorish arrogance of Homer Barron and the cultured arrogance of Emily Grierson, can one choose? Or between the testy young alderman who does not recognize old ways and the crusty old judge who does not recognize new ones? Faulkner cares as little (or as

much) for the “gross, teeming world” of the New South as he does for the one “monument” to the Old South whose identity it is effacing. His concern is not with the opposition of the forces of Good and Evil. In centering his inquiry on the workings of the morbid mind of his character, he moves beyond the terms of Cable.

Thus it is not surprising to reflect that, unlike Poe's and Cable's, Faulkner's story is not a suspense story at all. Our chief interest in “Usher” eventually focuses on the condition of the hero's sister and our curiosity is solely on what the issue of the last horrible night will be. Almost to an equal degree Cable sets our minds to work on the mystery of Poquelin's insistence on seclusion and on the exact identity of the reported supernatural presence under his roof. Thus it is that when Poe's and Cable's living corpses at last emerge in their shrouds and the mystery of the central situational horror is solved, our minds have an answer—the lady Madeline and Jacques Poquelin had not really died—and need nothing more. Conversely, in “A Rose for Emily” not only do we early anticipate the final outcome with a fair degree of accuracy: *for this very reason* we are imbued with the horror of the heroine's personality at every step throughout the story, and thus in her case the basic mystery outlives the working out of the plot. For Faulkner, so far from withholding all clues to Homer Barron's whereabouts, scatters them with a precise prodigality; since his is a story primarily of character, it is to his purpose to saturate our awareness of Miss Emily's abnormality as he goes, so that the last six shocking words merely put the final touch on that purpose. They do not astound us or merely erase a question mark. If similarities to Faulkner are to be sought in Poe, they will be found not in “Usher,” but in “A Cask of Amontillado,” whose plot in no way parallels Faulkner's: both stories have a total horror, rather than a climax of horror, for in both we are given at the start a distinct impression of the moral depravity of the central figure, and the ensuing pages heighten that impression rather than merely solve for us a mystery that the opening pages have set forth. We leave Miss Emily as awed by the complexity of her being as when we met her, and therein lies the greatness of Faulkner's story.

But for the most striking evidence of the wide gulf that yawns between Faulkner and his Southern precursor Cable in horror fiction, of the two worlds in which they live, we must turn to the relationships of the two protagonists with their own dead (or living dead) and the effects these create in the reader. The strength of family ties of the Poquelins is emphasized early in Cable's story when we are told that even in old age Poquelin visits his father's tomb in St. Louis Cathedral daily. And the cost of the heart-rending tenderness with which Poquelin spends the years tending his leprous, decaying brother we have abundant evidence of; for as Cable describes him in the interview with the governor, over his entire face is “the imprint of some great grief ...—faint but unmistakable.” It clouds and weights his days and makes each breath a burden. And we, in turn, understand and are moved.

Compare with these conventional touches the effect of change on Miss Emily. When we first inspect her house (in her old age) we incidentally note that there is a portrait of her father “on a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace” in the parlor. But when, during her early spinsterhood, her father dies and she refuses for three days to hand his putrefying body over for burial, we are shocked by this irrational action, even though in keeping with his standpoint of noncommitment Faulkner tries to minimize it (“We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.”) Even more important, by Faulkner's time it was possible for him to defy taboo by substituting a husband for a brother (or, as in Usher's case, a sister) in the concealment theme. But the most frightening detail in Faulkner's story is this: not only does this obsessed spinster continue for some years to share a marriage bed with the body of the man she has poisoned—she evidently derives either erotic gratification or spiritual sustenance (both?) from these ghastly nuptials. She becomes, in short, a necrophile or a veritable saprophytic organism; for we learn that the “slender figure in white” that was the young Miss Emily becomes, as though with the middle-aged propriety that the married state customarily brings, *fat!* “She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and that of parallel hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough. ...” It is in ghoulish inner evolutions like these that Faulkner moves beyond Poe and Cable into the twentieth century, directly into

the clinic of Dr. R. von Krafft-Ebing, whose inquiries into the psychopathology of sex had revealed that

When no other act of cruelty ... is practised on the cadaver, it is probable that the lifeless condition itself forms the stimulus for the perverse individual. It is possible that the corpse—a human form absolutely without will—satisfies an abnormal desire, in that the object of desire is seen to be capable of absolute subjugation, without possibility of resistance.

Not that the appearance of the hero as pathological personality in American fiction had to await the present century, to be sure. He can be found far back in the 1800's, even in minor writers (Simms, for example), not to speak of Hawthorne (stripped of the allegorical veils) or Melville (whose Ahab is as disturbed mentally as Prince Hamlet), or, of course, Poe himself. But in "Usher" or other Poe tales the central character is patently offered to the reader and always received by him as a madman pure and simple; during the time we see him, he has never been sane; and his situation is never even remotely associable with ours—that is, with reality. Roderick Usher is, after all, a shadowy unknown living a bizarre existence in an unidentifiable land and time and suffering from pale preoccupation with a body not-dead from an equally phantasmal ailment—all details of horror for horror's sake. And only at first glance is Hawthorne's Gothic intended as much more than this. To be sure, as we meet Hepzibah Pyncheon, the "forlorn old maid in her rustling and rusty silks, with her deeply cherished and ridiculous consciousness of long descent," we are reminded of Professor Stewart's remarks on the parallels between Hawthorne's time and place and Faulkner's; and we may even be tempted to detect a foreshadowing of Miss Emily in Hepzibah, who, "though she had her valuable and redeeming traits, had grown to be a kind of lunatic, by imprisoning herself so long in one place, with no other company than a single series of ideas, and but one affection, and one bitter sense of wrong." But all this Gothic gloom is deepened only to be intruded upon later by Phoebe and Holgrave until, in the *Escape into Life* sequence, it is dispelled utterly, and we see that what Hawthorne has been striving towards all along is the exact reverse of Miss Emily's *Escape from Life*. As for Melville's Ahab, he is so much the stuff of heroes treading the boards of a Renaissance stage that we cannot consistently believe in him as a nineteenth-century sea-captain at all. Jean Marie Poquelin, to be sure, is, in terms of verisimilitude, considerably more than this. He is indeed a recognizable character with an immediate claim to our sympathy and affection. But even he was seen by Cable through the haze of three quarters of a century, he becomes alive late in life only, and only the broad outlines of his personality are set down—a striking animation but blurred as well as endeared by sentiment and melodrama.

Emily Grierson, on the other hand, not only has a local habitation and a name: *she is someone we grow up and old with*. In fact, Faulkner's ubiquitous and omniscient point of view seems used deliberately for this purpose at the expense of being the only intrinsic artistic flaw in the story. Her relatives from Alabama and their relationship to the Mississippi Griersons are made much of, as are the careful distinctions between the various Protestant sects in the town. With the exception of the last ten years of her seventy-four, she is represented as living in a fairly familiar, understandable isolation for an aristocratic Southern woman, and demonstrating by the very success of her isolation the majesty and frightfulness of her position. For all that, like other Gothic characters, she is "impervious" and "perverse"—even to the point of madness—she is also "tranquil," "inescapable," even "*dear*." "All this happened, then," we say to ourselves at the close of her story, "in our very midst!" It happened, not in the western Germany of several centuries ago, but in the Mississippi of yesterday. Although Faulkner's story is the "logical development" of Edgar Allan Poe, George Snell writes, it is

brought to a higher degree of force since its action takes place not in some "misty mid region" but exactly and circumstantially in a recognizable South, with all the appurtenances and criticisms of a society which Faulkner knows and simultaneously hates and loves. ... "A Rose for Emily" shows how little Faulkner has been restrained by the conventions of Southern life which have dictated to many Southern writers how little of reality they could deal with, and at the same time shows his ineluctable kinship with Poe, as technician and as master of the

morbid and bizarre.

Furthermore, it would seriously detract from Faulkner's intention and achievement to limit our identification of Emily Grierson's pathological intransigence to the South alone. Appalling though Emily's dealings with the North (Homer Barron) are, far more attention is given to her resistance to her own townspeople. Thus Ray B. West, Jr.'s reminder that "The theme is not one directed at presenting an attitude of Southerner to Yankee. ... The Southern problem is one of the objective facts with which the theme is concerned, but the theme itself transcends it"; and "Here is depicted the dilemma of our age, not of the South alone nor of the North alone. ..." How else, for that matter, are we to account for the fact that the surname of the very heroine of Faulkner's story, so far from one of Mississippi or even Southern association, is that of none other than the officer in the *Northern* army who had led so celebrated and devastating a raid throughout the state of Mississippi midway through the Civil War! (And readers of Faulkner will recall how carefully he chooses names for his characters.) In this connection, we might let Van Wyck Brooks, an eminent historian of the literary life in the United States, call our attention to the eccentricities and grotesquerie of the population, both fictional and real, of the other areas of this country during Emily Grierson's decline—of the Midwest, of New England. What! we exclaim, emerging from a prolonged immersion in Faulkner—is this not Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi?

[It] abounded in men who had once been important and who had no life any longer to shape to their code. ... They had set the tone for their neighbours and headed their clans. But they had no clans to lead now, and the making of laws was not for them: they were left with the "dusty ruins of their fathers' dreams." They had lost their confidence, as the years went by, and they crept away into their houses and grew queerer and queerer. ... There were creepers among catacombs, "whose occupation was to die," there were respected citizens who blew their brains out; and one saw them straggling through the town, stumbling over frozen ruts, in the cold white shine of a dreary day. In short, this population was a whole *Spoon River Anthology*, acting out its epitaphs in the world of the living.

Actually, the town described here is Gardiner, Maine.

We are left, then with this irony: in order to identify exactly the weird wizardry that Faulkner has achieved in "A Rose for Emily," to distinguish it chiefly from Poe's, we must borrow a distinction that Poe claimed for himself when he insisted that his particular kind of Gothicism was "not of the Rhine but of the soul."

## **Criticism: Ruth Sullivan (essay date 1971)**

SOURCE: "The Narrator in 'A Rose for Emily,'" in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 1, No. 3, September, 1971, pp. 159–78.

[In the following essay, Sullivan argues that the narrator of "A Rose for Emily" is more important to the meaning of the story than most critics believe.]

### **I**

Faulkner's well-read "A Rose for Emily" has been variously interpreted as a mere horror story about necrophilia and madness, as a story about the Old South contending with the New Order of the Post-Civil War era, as a tragic tale of a woman's noble but doomed effort to resist the forces of time, change, and death, and as a tale of the catastrophe that can result when someone allows illusion to become confused with reality.

Published criticism of this story shares two assumptions: that Miss Emily is its only important character and that she is somehow objectively presented; that is, that she can be analyzed as though she had an existence apart from the consciousness through whom Faulkner chose to reveal her. For “A Rose for Emily” is first-person narration, hence subject to the questions one usually puts in understanding such a story. For instance, who is the narrator and what is his relationship to the main action? Why did the author choose this particular narrator for this particular story?

All interpretations of “A Rose for Emily” tacitly or openly assume that its narrator has slight importance as a character, for his function is to be window pane or mirror upon the life of Miss Emily Grierson. One critic, Kenneth Payson Kempton, calls the narrator an “extreme of anonymity” who comes close to being totally objective. “A Rose for Emily” is

a story whose narrator, some unidentified neighbor of the protagonist, stands at the farthest possible position from the heart of the story and still is within it ... somebody who sees and hears what goes on without more than average powers of interpretation and analysis and who is in touch with the surface facts only, and therefore whose discovery of what lies beneath the surface can pace the reader's discovery.<sup>1</sup>

In substance this statement is accurate because the narrator could be a neighbor, though necessarily more than one since the point of view is first person plural, “we,” and is apparently an innocent eye. But it is not true that the narrator “is in touch with the surface facts only” because he<sup>2</sup> tells Miss Emily's story after the town has broken into her room and therefore after they all know her secrets. His apparent innocence is a story-teller's contrivance to heighten irony and suspense. Nor is it true that his “discovery of what lies beneath the surface can pace the reader's discovery” because the story is not told chronologically even within the flashback technique it uses. Finally, though the narrator is an “extreme of anonymity,” it remains to be proven whether he is even approximately objective, for if objectivity is what Faulkner wanted, why did he not use a fly-on-the-wall point of view instead?

Only one critic who studies Faulkner's narrative technique in this story, Austin McGiffert Wright, casts slight doubt upon the objectivity of the narrator. He notes that sometimes statements in short stories sound so authoritative that the reader may be misled into accepting them as truths. For instance this from “A Rose for Emily”: “Thus she passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse.” Such statements, he says, “tell us something important about a character, [but] they also, like the fallible first-person-narrator previously noted, tend to omit something else of greater importance—something which can only be gathered through inference, from the story as a whole. In ‘A Rose for Emily,’ for example, the adjectives ‘dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse’ apply only to the judgment of the town upon her before the secrets of Emily's private life are exposed.”<sup>3</sup> Though Professor Wright does not draw further conclusions from this statement, it helps us draw our own, namely, that we would be naive readers indeed if we assumed the impartiality of the teller of this tale.

Brooks and Warren are the only critics to grant prominence to the narrator. “In order to make a case for the story as ‘meaningful,’ we shall have to tie Miss Emily's thoughts and actions back into the normal life of the community and establish some sort of relationship between them.”<sup>4</sup> For the townspeople, Emily is not just an insane old lady but “a combination of idol and scapegoat for the community.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Brooks and Warren treat the narrator as though he were a window pane.

I propose to demonstrate that we cannot understand Emily Grierson until we have understood the narrator, for he is the medium of consciousness through whom she is filtered; and that the narrator is an emotional participant in Miss Emily's life and therefore cannot be objective.

## II

Who is the narrator? Not a single person because Faulkner uses a first-person plural point of view, “we”; that “we” is townspeople, but only such as are in position to watch Miss Emily constantly for fifty or sixty years; they are anonymous townspeople, for neither names nor sexes nor occupations are given or hinted at; and they seem to be naive watchers, for they speak as though they did not understand the meaning of events at the time they occurred. Further, they are of indeterminate age. By details given in the story they are neither older nor younger nor of the same age as Miss Emily.<sup>6</sup>

The most significant action the narrator performs is watching. In fact we can talk about “A Rose for Emily” as a story about a woman watched for a long time by a narrator-group curious to know every detail of her appearance, conduct, family life, and environment. The story opens with an announcement about this curiosity: “When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women *mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house*, which no one save an old man-servant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years” (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> And it continues with example after example of this close scrutiny, from the description of her house as “an eyesore among eyesores” through the curious gaze around her parlor by the Board of Aldermen come to collect taxes, to the intense watching of her courtship by Homer Barron (“we began to *see* him and Miss Emily,” “we sat back to *watch* developments,” “that was the last we *saw* of Homer Barron,” etc.), and finally to the curiosity at her funeral: “The Negro met the first of the ladies at the front door and let them in, with their hushed, sibilant voices and their *quick, curious glances . . .*,” and the curiosity which leads to discovery of the man's skeleton and the climactic sight: “then we *noticed* that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we *saw* a long strand of iron-gray hair.”

The town's curiosity about Miss Emily is stirred by respect, admiration, awe, and affection; but it is also and equally stirred by discomfort and revulsion. The pattern of this response to Miss Emily may be roughly charted: curiosity is fairly consistent with this exception, that it grows unusually intense over Miss Emily's courtship by Homer Barron and over the contents of her locked bedroom. Affection and respect dominate the town's feeling for her through the death of her father; then discomfort and revulsion dominate from the Homer Barron period until beyond her death when they break into her room. The first faint evidence of the town's revulsion shows in the narrator's description of Miss Emily's house as an “eyesore among eyesores” and then in his first description of the living Miss Emily as

a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked 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. . . .

The next image is the putrid smell as of “a snake or a rat that nigger of hers killed in the yard.” After the courtship and subsequent disappearance of Homer Barron, the narrator describes her as having “grown fat,” then as scarcely human, sitting “like the carved torso of an idol in a niche,” then as dead and buried, while in her bedchamber lie the decayed nightclothes and skeleton of her lover. The town is fond of Emily, but it is also repelled by her.<sup>8</sup>

The characteristics of the narrator-group as we have thus far adduced them are that it is an anonymous and once-naive group of townspeople who watch Miss Emily, aristocrat and town eccentric, with an intense and enduring (fifty- or sixty-year) curiosity. She rouses ambivalent feelings in this narrator-group, hence its story about her cannot be objective.

But these characteristics do not yet fully explain why Emily should mean so much to the narrator nor in what ways he distorts his presentations of her. Answers to these questions lie in an examination of the manner of the telling, for that manner will reveal some disturbing qualities of the teller.

### III

“A Rose for Emily” is an uncomfortable story, not only because its subject is necrophilia hinted at and shockingly revealed but because we sense some unsavory qualities in the teller. For instance, his curiosity. Clearly it is active, for it allows Miss Emily no privacy at all except such as she can win for herself by isolation. Though one might counter that such interest is natural in ordinary folk captured by a public figure who is also unusually eccentric, nevertheless the narrator's curiosity goes far beyond the normal. He often aggressively intrudes into the intimate life of a harmless woman (harmless as far as he knew) and then reveals for public inspection that juicy gossip about her sexual life. For this, after all, is the main concern of that narrator. He wants to know not just what Miss Emily is doing, but what she is doing with Homer Barron and what is in her locked bedroom. And lest my reader accuse me of pan-sexualism here, let me remind him that whatever its theme, “A Rose for Emily” is a kind of mystery story whose plot turns on the discovery of the corpse of Homer Barron, preserved and embraced by the jilted spinster.

Sexual curiosity, then, drives the narrator. He is at times aggressive and even sadistic in his penetration into Miss Emily's house and affairs. The instrument of this penetration is not the phallus but the eyes. The narrator is a voyeur. The very structure of “A Rose for Emily” demonstrates this, for according to Floyd C. Watkins, Faulkner “divided the story into five parts and based them on *incidents of isolation and intrusion*.”<sup>9</sup> I quote Professor Watkins extensively now: “The contrast between Emily and the townspeople and between her home and its surroundings is carried out by *the invasions of her home* by the adherents of the New Order in the town.” Each such contributes to the story's suspense, has its own crisis. The first invasion is that of the Aldermen come to collect her taxes, “the second part describes *two forced entrances into her isolation*, both of them caused by a death,” Homer Barron's and her father's. “*The inviolability of Miss Emily's isolation* is maintained in the central division, Part Three, in which *no outsider enters her home*.” In Part Four there are two forced entries, those of the Baptist minister and the Alabama relations; in Part Five “the horde comes to bury a corpse, a Miss Emily no longer able to defy them.”<sup>10</sup> As Professor Watkins sees it, then, Miss Emily is involved in defending herself against “invasions,” “intrusion,” and “forced entrances” by the New Order and the townspeople and this defense has something to do with her “isolation” and “inviolability”—phallic intrusion into Miss Emily's virginity (Professor Watkins, more subtle than I, does not use these terms). But since the purpose of these invasions is always in part to find out what is inside Miss Emily's house, to *see*, they are phallic in form but voyeuristic in nature.

Miss Emily's house is Miss Emily herself if we read symbolically. Faulkner seems to spend some effort on having us draw such an equation for the first thing he describes in Emily's story is not the lady but her house. Like Miss Emily it stands “lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay” alone amidst alien surroundings. When the town complains about the smell emanating from the house, the judge equates house and woman: ““Will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?”” Miss Emily becomes a fallen woman, a fact foreshadowed in that initial description of where she lived, in a house that had “once been white ... set on what had once been our most select street ... lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores.” The house, like Miss Emily, has fallen from purity and like Miss Emily it is an eyesore, for the immediately succeeding description has her looking like a bloated corpse.

If the house is symbol for Miss Emily's self, then the intrusions of the townspeople must be symbol for intrusions on Miss Emily's body and the climactic forced entry into her bedroom must be a symbolic rape—a rape performed upon a dead woman. The story opens with “when Miss Emily Grierson died” and continues with a description of an aggressive inquiry into her privacy that in effect performs upon the dead woman a kind of sexual exposure. Even while describing the living woman it makes her into a kind of corpse: “Her

skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue.” Finally they can gratify a curiosity insatiable for fifty or sixty years but only upon a dead woman and then forcibly, violently. “They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it.” They force the door. “Already we knew that there was one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced. ... The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust.” To break into a woman's room is symbolically to rape her. To rape a dead woman is to perform necrophilia.

The revelation that now follows shocks us, causes vague anxieties and even such an effort to deny the evidence that has led some critics to say that “there is no evidence in the story that she lay in the bed with Homer Barron after the night she murdered him,”<sup>11</sup> or to assume that Miss Emily *placed* the strand of hair there.<sup>12</sup> But surely these are denials of the clear signs Faulkner leaves that Miss Emily slept for years next to the decaying body of the man she murdered.<sup>13</sup>

What causes the vague anxiety and shock this scene arouses is, of course, its gruesome perversion. But whose perversion? Miss Emily's to be sure, but also the narrator's—and the reader's. Every unnatural act performed by Miss Emily is performed in some fashion by the narrator, too, if not in the flesh then in deeds symbolically similar. Miss Emily kills and cohabits with her lover; the narrator symbolically rapes the dead spinster. Miss Emily is an eccentric escapee of reality and a radical self-isolator, but the town's offenses against her are more severe than hers against them. They are peeping toms refusing her privacy. All these things the reader senses throughout the story but most intensely during its climax, for the narrator has hypnotized us into such close identification with him (his anonymity and persistent use of “we” and “you” encourage this identification) that we, too, become mental necrophiliacs and voyeurs. Now at the climax we are dragged against powerful inner resistance into witnessing something that stirs repressed memories or fantasies of the locked and forbidden bedroom in which a man and a woman are doing things we were curious but also fearful to know about. The climax of “A Rose for Emily” seems to reproduce such a buried fantasy, conceived by a sadistic narrator. For here the love-making in the forbidden chamber is deadly. The uncanniness of the scene derives from the fact that Faulkner has given us intercourse as it is understood by the child, as an assault of one partner upon the other with pain or death the necessary result. The twist here, though, is that usually if a child imagines the primal scene sadistically, he believes that it is the woman and not the man who is harmed. Not so for this watcher. He sees woman as man-destroyer.<sup>14</sup>

The uncanny effect of the final scene derives from the revival of yet another repressed fantasy, for behind the one of a sadistically conceived primal scene lies another about what one might find inside a woman's body. And the voyeur-narrator sees what childish imagination makes him see there: feces (the room is filled with dust and contains a rotted nightshirt and a decayed corpse); baby (the body); and penis (a man).<sup>15</sup>

Faulkner has carefully prepared his readers for this assault upon the dead woman, most clearly in the action of the Board of Aldermen who “broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there. ...” Then, the townspeople speak of the Griersons as “high and mighty” and are pleased when Mr. Grierson left Miss Emily a pauper. “Now she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less.” And after she has bought arsenic, they believe she will commit suicide. “So the next day we all said, ‘She will kill herself’; and *we said it would be the best thing.*” The townspeople are fond of Miss Emily, they respect her and even stand in awe of her, but they are also repelled and somewhere beneath all these other feelings they harbor powerful aggressive wishes against her.

So far I have concentrated my discussion of the narrator on trying to demonstrate that “A Rose for Emily” is about a double emotional aberration, Miss Emily's and her storyteller's. The skeptical may call this interpretation into question by arguing that after all, actions and intentions are not in fact the same. Miss Emily (we are asked to believe) actually committed necrophilia, she is actually insane given as she is to

denials of the great facts of human life like passage of time, loss of loved ones, decay, and death. But the narrator has not actually performed necrophilia; he has not raped a dead woman except by symbolic acts, and symbol is not deed or object. And while he may be a voyeur, the narrator is not insane.

All this is true, but we must keep in mind that the most significant function the narrator performs is to be medium of consciousness through whom Faulkner has us see Miss Emily. That medium is important less for what he does (though entering Miss Emily's bridal chamber is a significant act) than for what and how he sees and reports upon what he has seen. Now it makes a difference to our understanding of Emily Grierson if we perceive that the narrator who describes her is given to his own kinds of emotional aberrations, for then we must question how objective the telling medium can be.

#### IV

The narrator is not objective. He is dominated by pressing needs, desires, and fears that would render reports on the object of his emotional involvement unreliable. He is sometimes aggressive against Miss Emily because she has frustrated him in certain of the crucial but unspoken demands he makes upon her, one of which is that she gratify his sexual curiosity—she will not do it. As for what Miss Emily means to the narrator, why he should take her rather than someone else as his object of curiosity, that must be answered in two ways: on the manifest story level she is a high-born and eccentric citizen to curious neighbors. On this level the term “voyeur” to describe the narrator is inappropriate. On the latent level, she is a mother to a child.

This may sound absurd on first hearing, Miss Emily as a mother, the narrator as a child, for Miss Emily seems far from being a mother figure—she never married, had no children, lived alone, and took care of no one. And the narrator seems far from being a child—his age is indeterminate, hence there is no way of demonstrating that he is young enough to be her child, nor is there evidence that he is related to her by blood, that he depends upon her materially, or even that Miss Emily knew him so that she could be concerned about him.

But I am not saying the narrator is her child, only that he is a child—and not chronologically but psychically: his psychic development is infantile. Nor am I saying that Miss Emily is anyone's mother. She is a mother figure. For reasons not given in the story the narrator makes Miss Emily assume this role.

More precisely, the narrator is not persons at all but an archaic consciousness (*i.e.*, one dominated by infantile fixations) that Faulkner objectifies as persons in only two places in the story, once at the beginning when the narrator attends Miss Emily's funeral and at the end when he enters her bridal chamber. But otherwise the “we” disappears into the texture of the story. That “we” performs psychological and intellectual activities but no physical ones except watching and once entering Miss Emily's house. But this act is passive, for he goes in there primarily in order to see. If to these facts we add our remembrance that Faulkner gives the narrator neither face, sex, name, occupation, nor age, then this assertion that the narrator has only one dimension, a psychic one, should be convincing.

What remains to be proven now are the assertions that this perceiving medium is archaic and that it takes Miss Emily as mother figure.

#### V

Evidence that on some level the narrator is archaic consciousness may be found in the way Faulkner uses time in the story—time as theme and as structure. As theme, some critics see “A Rose for Emily” as making a statement about what happens to someone who denies the passage of time and hence denies such of its attendants as change, loss, decay, and death. For instance, Ray B. West says, “The principal contrast in William Faulkner's short story ‘A Rose for Emily’ is between past time and present time.”<sup>16</sup> Miss Emily's retreat into the past is escape from facing the fact of desertion. “Emily's small room above stairs 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.”<sup>17</sup> And she does conquer time, but only briefly, for “in its simplest sense, the story says that death conquers all.”<sup>18</sup> Result of such denial must be insanity. And other critics see time as theme in that Miss Emily (as already stated) represents the Old Order in conflict with modern times. “One pattern that is most evident throughout the story is the analogy between Emily and the Old South.”<sup>19</sup>

Time is important as structure, too, for Faulkner has the narrator perform such radical dislocations of chronology in telling Miss Emily's story that Wright calls his technique an “abandonment of chronology.”<sup>20</sup> And Faulkner even leads one to suspect something so uncanny as the possibility that Miss Emily died (by dates given in the text) any time between 1934 and 1938, three to seven years after “A Rose for Emily” was copyrighted.<sup>21</sup> A closer look throws this conjecture into question; nevertheless it might be instructive to examine Faulkner's handling of chronology and then to speculate on why he does it that way and why he should make time itself a theme.

Roughly the narrative technique of “A Rose for Emily” is flashback, for the story begins with Emily's burial and ends with the postmortem events of breaking into her bridal chamber. The story between fills in her life from the earliest incident the narrator recounts about her (the father driving suitors away) until just after her death. The flashback has this rough form, that in Parts I and II the narrator swings us back deep into Miss Emily's past, and then in Parts III and IV moves almost consistently forward to her death. However if we refine this broad pattern we notice the striking fact that the deep plunge back to Miss Emily's past performed in the first two parts is far from consistently backward-turning. The narrator veers radically backward and forward from event to event and even flashes backward and forward within individual events to record some related memories. For example, the story begins at the end of Miss Emily's life. It then goes *backward* to 1894 and sometime after her father's death when Colonel Sartoris has her taxes remitted; then *forward* from there to the next generation that demands those taxes; then *backward* to the smell incident thirty years earlier. Now the narrator's recording of that incident, of the one following it concerning the death of Emily's father, and of her courtship by Homer Barron twists chronology almost beyond recognition. First, the smell episode precedes the other two in the narrative, but in terms of Miss Emily's biography, it postdates her father's death and her courtship. Second and more remarkable is the way the narrator shifts from past to present to past during each episode. For instance in the smell episode—the narrator places the time as thirty years before the failure of the earlier, tax-collecting Board of Aldermen, two years after Emily's father's death, and “a short time” after Homer Barron deserted her.

This veering chronology in parts of the story makes the plot structure seem almost formless, for clearly events are linked by neither consecutive time periods (even if we proceed from events at the beginning of the flashback) nor by causality, for while the narrator is concerned with why Miss Emily killed and cohabited with her lover, he is equally concerned with what impact her life had upon his and upon that of the town. Nevertheless, time does structure “A Rose for Emily.” Its pattern is not by chronology but by the emotional association one event bears to another in the narrator's consciousness. “A Rose for Emily” sounds like interior monologue, like a tale the narrator tells to himself but that we overhear, for the narrative pattern imitates the flux of normal thought; it is organized by feeling rather than by logic.

Now since this temporal structuring is performed by the narrator and since it is for him that time itself is an important issue, we may conclude that Faulkner is characterizing the narrator even as he is arranging plot and creating theme. That is, we may infer from the emotional structuring of the telling that the narrator is emotionally engaged with Miss Emily; we may infer from his radical temporal swings and his tendency to treat even very early events as equally vivid with more recent ones (i.e., the tendency to flatten time, to make past seem present) that he is speaking out of some deeply-engaged psychic level, for it is there in unconscious or preconscious mental life that past and present seem to merge, that the past remains peculiarly vivid and fully alive. Finally, his preoccupation with time itself, especially the past, is an appropriate preoccupation for a medium of consciousness so essentially infantile. We might at this point remember that Faulkner makes his

narrator an innocent eye; *i.e.*, childlike in perception.

## VI

The object of the childlike perception is Miss Emily; she is the narrator's mother-figure because only the real or surrogate mother could engage infantile feelings so deeply and enduringly. The narrator has been fascinated by Miss Emily for nearly sixty years; he clearly has various, powerful, and ambivalent emotions about her; and he has both idealized and degraded her beyond human limits. He sees her as godlike, defying all merely human laws, institutions, and relationships, for she will not pay taxes or allow numbers and a mailbox to be affixed to her house, she resists allowing her father to be buried, she does not even marry as normal people do. And she commits murder almost under the eyes of a town that (we feel) should have known eventually why she bought that arsenic. She takes human life and no human law stops or punishes her for it. Godlike, she lives in a "timeless meadow" for she also defies superhuman forces of time and death. And she is several times referred to as an angel and an idol: "her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those *angels in colored church windows*—sort of tragic and serene." "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*." "Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows ... like the carved torso of *an idol in a niche*. ..." The children who take china-painting lessons "were sent to her with the same regularity and in the same spirit that they were sent *to church on Sundays* with a twenty-five-cent piece for the collection plate." The Griersons have always been "high and mighty," somehow above "the gross, teeming world" and now, disgraced because of her conduct with Homer Barron, she succumbs (they say) to a "touch of earthiness." It seems the town needs occasionally to bring her down from godhood to humanity. For instance when her father leaves her penniless, "they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized." But she never does become fully humanized and the town never loses its fear of her. She is always unapproachable. After her father's death "a few of the ladies had the *temerity* to call"; when she offends them with the smell, the town complains not to her but to the judge, and "in *diffident* deprecation." When they do act, it is secretly and guiltily: "So the next night, after midnight, four men crossed Miss Emily's lawn and *slunk about the house like burglars*. ..." The men who actually succeeded in seeing her are either ordered out imperiously (the tax-collecting Aldermen) or are treated in some unmentionable way. For instance, the Baptist minister—"The men did not want to interfere, but at the last the ladies forced the Baptist minister ... to call upon her. He would never divulge what happened during that interview, but he refused to go back again." So with the druggist who sells her arsenic though she refuses to meet the law and tell him why she wants it—"Miss Emily just stared at him ... the druggist didn't come back." Still, they take care of her almost worshipfully: "Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town. ..." She is rather like a goddess in her temple, cool and unapproachable and vaguely frightening,<sup>22</sup> and like so many terrible mythical goddesses, she chooses a man of lower station, has an affair with him, and then kills him to gratify her own needs.

To see someone as godlike is to see that person the way a child sees a parent; in the case of Miss Emily, a particularly distant, unapproachable, and frightening parent.

The infantile curiosity of the narrator spies upon the parent, needing to know from minute to minute where she is and what she is doing. He is curious about her sexuality and he will eventually decide that she is degraded, but for a while he seems to need to believe she is virginal. He says she looks "like a girl," like "those angels in colored church windows," and in tableau with her father, "a slender figure in white." The virginal mother-figure is ironically kept so by her father<sup>23</sup> for in that tableau the town sees Miss Emily "in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip. ..." They remember "all the young men her father had driven away" so that "when she got to be thirty ... [she] was still single." "None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such." A father who allows no man near his daughter is keeping her virginity intact.

Colonel Sartoris and Judge Stevens perform much the same function as Grierson does, for they both protect Miss Emily from being or seeming anything but pure, free of human grossness. Colonel Sartoris exempts her from paying taxes to the town, eighty-year-old Judge Stevens refuses to believe that the smell can be anything but a rat killed by Miss Emily's servant. In effect these men say: money is dirty—a lady should have nothing to do with it; and smell is dirty—a lady can in no way be responsible for it; men (the suitors) and sex are dirty—a lady must be protected from such.

Even after Emily begins to see Homer Barron and when it becomes clear to everyone that she had fallen, the narrator seems to wish to believe she can be restored if not to virginity, at least to chastity. He stresses that she somehow kept “her dignity,” and that everyone believed “‘She will marry him. ... She will persuade him yet.’” When the town saw her buying toilet articles and men's clothes, “we said, ‘They are married.’ We were really glad. We were glad because the two female cousins were even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been.” and “we were all Miss Emily's allies to help circumvent the cousins,” who, we assume, wished her not to marry Homer Barron.

And when this effort fails, the narrator goes a step further. He masculinizes Miss Emily. Twice he calls her “impervious” (impenetrable) as if to stress that she is not even anatomically equipped so that a man could have sexual relations with her, as if she were, in fact, woman-with-a-phallus (the mother known by the child before he finds out that human beings come in two sexes). The first step in her masculinization occurs just before she meets Homer Barron, as if in defensive anticipation of her downfall and beforehand denial that it can happen: she is described as having had “her hair ... cut short ...,” boyishly. Then she is identified with her father in her unusual strength of will, and finally her hair is again described in masculine terms: “Up to the day of her death at seventy-four it was still that vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man.” The narrator seems to have regressed to a very early stage of maternal relations in order to defend against having to see her as anything but virginal.

The virginal Miss Emily does not remain so, however, for apparently she herself does not wish it. She chooses for a mate a day-laborer and a Yankee who, unlike those aristocrats Sartoris, Stevens, and Grierson, is no respecter of Southern womanhood. Furthermore, “Homer himself had remarked—he liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks' Club—that he was not a marrying man.” Father-attached as she is, she can only choose a man who will disgrace and abandon her. So she kills him out of rage and disappointment and keeps the body out of love and need to deny her loss.

But what does Homer Barron mean to the narrator? He means, first, disillusionment with Emily, kept unapproachable hence pure by the powerful, horsewhip-wielding father, now degraded into an object of gossip behind silken fans and into a woman from whom (via the symbolism of her house as her body) a disgusting odor will emanate (the rotting corpse). Miss Emily was the mother as virgin; now she is the mother as whore. But if she is a source of disillusionment, it is because the voyeurism of the narrator has had some success in wresting from her her secrets. Now she also becomes source of the most intense curiosity the narrator displays anywhere in the story (with the possible exception of the climax). Kempton counted forty-eight “we's” in “A Rose for Emily”;<sup>24</sup> twenty-five of those appear all densely packed together in the few pages that describe the Homer Barron courtship.

We might expect Homer to become oedipal rival to the narrator, too, for the voyeurism of the child-consciousness directs itself to discovering what the mysterious relationship between adult men and women means and to trying at some time to replace one of his parents in the affections and bed of the other. Perhaps the aggression and sadism the narrator directs against Miss Emily are caused in part by the fact that she should engage so flagrantly in a love relationship with that man rather than with the narrator. To him, Homer Barron must be a potent but worthless male: “Homer Barron, a Yankee—a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice. ...” “Homer Barron with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth. ...” And the ladies are sure that “‘a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer.’”

But despite these obvious oedipal elements, we must go slowly on affirming that Homer Barron is oedipal rival to the narrator. In a fully developed and “normal” oedipal stage, we would expect at least a clear sexual differentiation among the participants; say, son (male), mother (female), father (male). Only after this is established, only after the child has reached the phallic stage, when the boy appreciates the value and pleasure of as well as the possible dangers to this phallus; when he recognizes that it has something or other to do with the sexual relationship between his parents; when he wishes to become his own mother's spouse and oust that loved-and-hated rival, his father; and when, finally, he must for the sake of keeping his phallus give up his mother—only when we have at least the rudimentary pattern of this can we say we have an oedipal conflict. But in “A Rose for Emily” the sexual demarcation of participants is not clear. Emily is a woman, Homer Barron is a man, but what is the narrator? Faulkner seems to have invested considerable creative effort in keeping that narrator not only sexless but plural. Because of the blurred sexuality of the most significant participant in the oedipal situation, we must say that while “A Rose for Emily” does begin to sketch in oedipal conflicts among narrator and Homer Barron and Emily, the most powerful unconscious currents of the story move in pre-oedipal depths. Even the phallic intrusion of the narrator into Miss Emily's privacy is expressed regressively, through the eyes. Voyeurism, aggression, and sadism directed at Miss Emily—these are the powerful pre-oedipal conflicts animating the story.

## VII

But another and even more primitive psychological conflict animates “A Rose for Emily.” It is anxiety over loss of the loved object. From Emily's point of view, the story concerns a woman's inability or unwillingness to sustain the loss of the loved man (father, protector, or lover). From the narrator's point of view, the story is also concerned with anxieties over loss, though his object, Miss Emily, lives a long time. His voyeurism, sadism, and aggression are all bound up with his loss fears (as well as with his quest for sexual information and stimulation). For instance, the voyeurism is sexualized looking, exercised by the narrator both erotically and aggressively as a phallic intrusion, but it is also a kind of eating-up-with-the-eyes used to ensure that the needed object does not abandon her dependants. The sixty-year scrutiny of the narrator seems to be saying, “I watch her so intently and so long to assure myself that she is still there. I take her into myself through my eyes so that, being inside me, I can control her<sup>25</sup> and prevent her from going away. Further, I tell this story about her and so manage to keep her with me even after she is dead. She kept the dead Homer Barron in her room because she would not accept his loss; I keep the dead Miss Emily, too, but in the form of a story.”

The narrator expresses his loss anxiety most clearly in his constant watching of Miss Emily and reporting what he sees; he also expresses that anxiety by his reporting on times he does *not* see that eccentric recluse. Miss Emily “no longer went out at all”; the Board of Aldermen “knocked at the door through which no visitor had passed since she ceased giving china-painting lessons eight or ten years earlier”; “after her father's death she went out very little; after her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all”; “and that was the last we saw of Homer Barron. And of Miss Emily for some time ... for almost six months she did not appear on the streets”; “from that time on her front door remained closed.” In fact for all the sixty years of the narrator's looking, he can have seen her very little.

He expresses loss anxiety, too, in a concern about whether Miss Emily sees him or not and in concern about how Miss Emily uses her eyes. “Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows—she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house—like the carven torso of an idol in a niche, *looking or not looking at us*, we could never tell which.” When Miss Emily ever does look at anyone, it is sightlessly, coldly: “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. ...” She had “cold, haughty black eyes. ...” Worse, Miss Emily is capable of aggressive, even destructive looking such as she does when she stares down the druggist, so compelling him to sell her poison: “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. The Negro delivery boy brought her the package; the druggist didn't come back.”

Seeing the loved person is reassurance against loss; being seen by her can be assurance of love if the regard is warm; but if it is cold and aggressive it must cause anxiety about both being harmed and being left. If the loved person also withdraws from sight, that anxiety must increase even further and must cause rage over frustrated needs. If we add to these the impotence of the watcher to force the needed object to stay near and to be giving, then we can even better understand why Miss Emily should become source of loss anxiety and aggressive attack by the narrator. We can see, too, why he should call her (house) an “eyesore among eyesores”—a description that shows both his aggression (“her house [she] is so ugly it [she] makes my eyes sore”) and his need (“I look at her [house] so hard and long that my eyes are sore”).

The voyeurism, then, is manifestation of loss anxiety, effort to control the loved object, and aggression against it because of frustration. Now in these latter two functions (to control, to retaliate) the voyeurism becomes cannibalistic. The narrator eats up Miss Emily with his eyes. The text gives abundant support for this assertion, for Faulkner consistently ties eye imagery with food or eating imagery. Miss Emily's aggressive *staring down* of the druggist is performed when she buys *arsenic*; her sitting like an idol in a niche, *looking or not looking* at the men, is performed when those men are cleansing her house and yard of the smell which they believe is caused by a *dead rat* (rotting flesh); Miss Emily's *black eyes* look like coals pressed in *dough*, and she is here described as “a small, *fat* woman ... what would have been merely *plumpness* in another was *obesity* in her. She looked *bloated*. ...” In all these instances, the eye-eating images have to do with killing. One final eating image seems to support this: “And that was the last we *saw* of Homer Barron. And of Miss Emily for some time. The Negro man went in and out with the *market basket*. ...” “When we next *saw* Miss Emily, she had *grown fat* and her hair was turning gray.”

By associating Miss Emily's aggressive looking with food, fatness, poison, and dead bodies, the narrator seems to be saying that Miss Emily is a kind of black widow spider or Evil Eye; she kills and then eats her victims. But of course the reader likely does not take the narrator's grisly hints as objective truths.<sup>26</sup> More likely they are reflections of the narrator's own mental construction: for him Miss Emily is poisoner and cannibal. One might wonder why and one might also ask how Miss Emily's hinted cannibalism proves that the narrator's voyeurism is cannibalistic, too.

Seeing Miss Emily as possessor of the Evil Eye, as poisoner, and as cannibal are all ways by which the narrator condemns her for being a bad mother. She should be looking tenderly and assuringly, but she instead hurts with her gaze; she should nourish, but instead she poisons; she should be willing to give her own body—milk and breast—for the ones she loves, but instead she eats the body of her beloved. Seeing her in these ways performs yet another function. To see mother as cannibal and capable of aggressive looking is also likely to be a projection of the dependent's own destructive wishes. He wants to poison and eat her and to kill her with his gaze because she has sorely frustrated him. And for these wishes he fears talion punishment: “she will eat me, she will kill me with her eyes.” The psychological procedure seems to follow this pattern:

I love her and do not want to lose her.

I hate her because she denied me (her presence, her secrets) and betrayed me (loved Homer Barron).

I do not want to lose her, so I will eat her up and so keep her inside me (eat with the eyes in the constant watching; retain in the body by making up a story about her).

I hate her because of her denial and betrayal, so I will eat her up to punish her.

But to eat in love is to lose by death; to want to eat in hate is to be eaten in retaliation.

No, I do not hate her; it is she who hates me and wants to eat me.

No, that is not right either; she does not want to eat me; she wants to eat him (Homer Barron).

Thus the narrator is the would-be-poisoner, cannibal, and Evil Eye, but he projects his aberrations onto Miss Emily because to acknowledge them as his own necessarily intensifies and might even actualize the thing he most fears, that Miss Emily will abandon him.

## VIII

Perhaps now we can formulate another level of meaning for “A Rose for Emily” so as to include both its major characters, the watcher and the watched. It is a story about types of perversion—Miss Emily's necrophilia and the narrator's voyeurism—that are motivated by frustrated sexual needs and by fears about loss of the loved object. Miss Emily fears and reacts insanely to the loss of loved men—father Grierson, protector Sartoris, and lover Barron; the narrator fears loss of a needed woman, Miss Emily herself, and reacts not psychotically but childishly in his mental aggression, sadism, and voyeurism.

The narrator is a kind of child, at least in his mental patterns. This in part explains the uncanny effect of the story, for by means of the archaic consciousness with which the reader merges, Faulkner stirs depths of discomfort (even horror) appropriate to the kind of story he is telling, creating rich and complex emotional responses that we might know are occurring but that we cannot fully understand. We lapse the more readily into this merger with the narrator because Faulkner has made him both invisible and apparently objective; we therefore assume that only Miss Emily, the object of the narrator's attention, is significant and that the portrait we are given of her is “true” or “accurate.” But when we step back from the story and break the fusion we have been drawn into, then certain facts must become clear: that Miss Emily is strained through the perceptions not alone of the author but of a fictional character he has created. Therefore, to determine anything at all about Miss Emily, we must first come to terms with the medium of consciousness through whom she is perceived. Miss Emily is the Miss Emily the narrator sees.

### Notes

1. Kenneth Payson Kempton, *The Short Story* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 104.
2. For convenience, the narrator-group will from now on be referred to as “he.”
3. Austin McGiffert Wright, *The American Short Story in the Twenties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 334.
4. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), p. 352.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 353.
6. For instance, they seem not to be older because they refer to the Confederate veterans who attend her funeral (she is seventy-four, they must be about ninety) as “them” and as the “very old men.” The narrator seems not to be younger for he refers to “the rising generation” as “they,” too: “they mailed her a tax notice,” “they called a special meeting of the Board of Aldermen.” But he seems not to be of her exact generation, either, for he speaks as though that generation were different from his own. When Colonel Sartoris concocts the tale to justify the town's remitting of Miss Emily's taxes, the narrator comments, “Only a man of Colonel Sartoris' generation and thought could have invented it, and only a woman could have believed it.” (All quotations from “A Rose for Emily” come from *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* [New York: Random House, 1950].)
7. Henceforth all emphases in quotations from “A Rose for Emily” and critical articles are mine.
8. The town's ambivalence toward Emily seems to be a reflection of Faulkner's own ambivalence toward the South. “Faulkner, in all his works, shows ... an ambivalence toward the South. And in none of his works, it seems to me, is the paradox so neatly compressed as in Emily. The whole texture of the story is wrought of this ambivalence of love and hate, respect and contempt.” Sister Mary Bride, “Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Explicator*, 20 (May 1962), Item 78.

9. Floyd C. Watkins, "The Structure of 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Modern Language Notes*, 69 (November 1954), 509.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Elmo Howell, "Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Explicator*, 19 (January 1961), Item 26.
12. John V. Hagopian, "Faulkner's A Rose for Emily," *Explicator*, 22 (April 1964), Item 68.
13. For further discussion see Arthur C. Clements, "Faulkner's A Rose for Emily," *Explicator*, 20 (May 1962), Item 78; and George Snell, *The Shapers of American Fiction, 1798–1947* (New York: Cooper Square, 1947), p. 98.
14. Norman N. Holland in an unpublished paper, "Phases, Fictions, and Nations: 'A Rose for Emily' and a Task for the Developmental Model," also sees the climax as primal scene fantasy, a fantasy defended against by being far removed in time. "Time is clearly one of the defensive modes the story uses, for it gives us, not the bridal night, but the bridal night forty years later, utterly still, silent, finished. In effect, any frightening noise or sight or movement is denied" (p. 24). Dr. Holland's valuable paper, which analyzes Emily Grierson herself, was the stimulus for this paper.
15. A child does not usually know that womb and bowels are different, hence it can fantasy that babies come from the bowels and are made of feces (that feces are baby). And sometimes when he speculates about where mother's penis is, he believes that the fecal column is the penis and that it lies temporarily inside the body.
16. Ray B. West, Jr., "Atmosphere and Theme in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" in *William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism*, ed. by Frederick J. Hoffman and Ogla W. Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951), p. 260.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 265.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Bride*, Item 78.
20. *Wright*, p. 322.
21. For further discussions see William T. Going, "Chronology in Teaching 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Exercise Exchange*, 5 (February 1958), 8–11; Paul D. McGlynn, "The Chronology of 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (Summer 1969), 461–62; and Robert W. Woodward, "The Chronology of 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Exercise Exchange*, 13 (March 1966), 17–19.
22. Faulkner himself said of Miss Emily, "I feel sorry for Emily's tragedy, ... I pity Emily. I don't know whether I would have liked her or not, I might have been afraid of her." *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926–1962*, ed. by James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 127.
23. Norman Holland in the paper previously referred to speaks of the relationship between Emily and her father in oedipal terms, a view supported by Faulkner himself: "There was a young girl with a young girl's normal aspirations to find love and then a husband and a family, who was brow-beaten and kept down by her father, a selfish man. ..." *Faulkner in the University*, ed. by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 185.

Irving Malin speaks of the oedipal relationship, too: "Her passionate, almost sexual relationship with her dead father forces her to distrust the living body of Homer and to kill him so that he will resemble the dead father she can never forget." *William Faulkner: An Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 37.

My analysis shifts focus on the father because whatever he might mean if we look at Emily's story from her perspective, he means something else when the story is viewed from the narrator's. Then the oedipal rival would be not Emily's father but her lover, Homer Barron.

24. *Kempton*, p. 106.
25. Norman Holland sees need for control as important in this story. "Certainly control is a basic issue of the story, not only for Miss Emily, but also in the town from whose point of view we see her. Repeatedly, we hear about the forces of law in the town ..." (pp. 14–15). He points out how often

(and how ineffectually) the town tries to control her through various legal means. Such methods for achieving control point to anal issues, issues which I, too, see as significant in the story. And beneath the anxieties about loss in the anal stage lie loss anxieties in the oral stage. In fact we can see fear of loss in all three stages, oral, anal, phallic (oedipal) in the narrator's consciousness as well as in Miss Emily's.

26. What “really” happened and what is narrator's opinion and feeling about events is, of course, a major issue in such a story as “A Rose for Emily.” I am assuming here and everywhere in this essay that events are facts but any comment and most description of those events are not facts but reflections of the narrator's psychology. Thus, the father driving away suitors, Miss Emily buying arsenic, and the finding of a skeleton on the bed are facts, but all remarks on these events (like, “that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times”) or sinister suggestions arising from juxtaposition of event with event (like how after Homer Barron disappeared Miss Emily grew fat) are part of the narrator's psychology.

## Criticism: Terry Heller (essay date 1972)

SOURCE: “The Telltale Hair: A Critical Study of William Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily,’” in *Arizona Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Winter, 1972, pp. 301–18.

[In the following essay, Heller provides a critical overview of “A Rose for Emily.”]

The Soul selects her own Society—  
Then—shuts the Door—  
To her divine Majority—  
Present no more—  
Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing  
At her low Gate—  
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling  
Upon her Mat—  
I've known her—from an ample nation—  
Choose One—  
Then—close the valves of her attention—  
Like Stone—

—Emily Dickinson

During the more than four decades since the first publication of William Faulkner's story “A Rose for Emily,” two general questions seem to have attracted significant critical attention. The more recently flourishing discussion of the narration has centered on the narrative voice, whether it is distinct from or coincident with the voice or voices of the town. Those readers who have made strong arguments for a distinct persona have differed widely in characterizing it. Nicklaus Happel, for example, believes that the narrator is somewhat aloof from the town and that, in the course of his narrative, he shows sympathy for Emily to atone for past neglect.<sup>1</sup> Ruth Sullivan, in a long article devoted exclusively to the narration, asserts that psychoanalysis of the narrator shows him to be not only the most important character, but also the villain of the story.<sup>2</sup> The larger portion of critical discussion has centered on the nature and cause of the aberration which leads Emily to kill Homer and keep his body in her bedroom. On this question, also, there is little agreement. Is Emily a black widow who devours her unsuspecting lover? A desperate and slightly crazed spinster who kills to possess him? Denied natural outlets for her emotions, perhaps she is forced into madness or a fantasy world? Is she a victim, then, of time, the town, her father, or her own repressed sexuality?<sup>3</sup> Some of these interpretations suggest that we should sympathize with Emily and some do not. Others suggest that our feelings should be mixed.

Such varied disagreement about our basic responses to the story may indicate that it, like “The Turn of the Screw,” simply does not seem to allow us to reach a single definitive understanding. On the other hand, it may be that we have been asking the wrong questions or asking our questions in the wrong way. Let us then attempt to look at “A Rose for Emily” from a slightly different point of view, keeping in mind the major questions that have puzzled other critics, but also trying to find new or, at least, untried questions that might help to increase our understanding and appreciation.

Beginning with section one, let us look closely at the text and our responses to it. The first sentence introduces the antagonists:

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old man-servant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years.<sup>4</sup>

Emily's clause is subordinate; the town is the subject of the sentence. Such a construction used by an artist who compared the short story to the lyric poem in its demands for exactness and economy, should lead us to suspect that the town may require as much of our attention as Emily.<sup>5</sup> Besides telling us that Emily is a spinster who has not been visited in ten years, this sentence also provides important clues to the town's attitudes toward Emily. The town comes to her funeral, not in grief to mourn the passing of a beloved member of the community, but out of curiosity and respect for a defunct institution. In the first sentence, we are already disposed to side with Emily as a victim for there is no evidence that she is regarded with deserved hate or disgust. On the contrary, she seems to have been a pillar of the community.

Although the second paragraph seems to move our attention from Emily and the town to her house—a house such as we often see in Gothic romances—we are shown a similar set of antagonists. The house appears to be the victim of the town too. Having been surrounded by commercial interests, it is “stubborn and coquettish” in its decay. The last sentence of the paragraph suggests that Emily's removal to the cemetery is parallel to the house's removal from selectness. The house stands in a neighborhood of obliterated august names as her grave is among “the ranked and anonymous” graves of Civil War soldiers (p. 119). The parallel works in reverse also, suggesting that the house is a kind of tomb. In each case, Emily and her house are not the agents but the victims. Of what are they the victims? The house seems clearly to be decaying, a victim of time, yet it may not necessarily be a natural process that changes the most select street to a commercial area. As Emily's house is invaded by the townspeople in the first paragraph, so her neighborhood is invaded by commercial interests rather than preserved for the value it may once have had. It is suggested, then, that the men's “respectful affection” is a hollow emotion, hollow as would be the suggestion that her house is still standing because of the town's sentimental nostalgia.

There is also in this second paragraph a curious statement, the judgment that the house is “an eyesore among eyesores.” This phrase is unique in the first two paragraphs because it is the only purely evaluative statement we find. It is significant because it alerts us that we are perceiving through a consciousness that not only sees and generalizes, but also judges. Before we have seen an actual incident, we have a sense of antagonistic forces and a judging narrative consciousness.

The remainder of the first section presents a brief history of Emily's taxes, beginning with their remission by Colonel Sartoris: “... Colonel Sartoris, the mayor—he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron—remitted her taxes ...” (pp. 119–20). The syntax encourages us to see the mayor's two acts as similar. Emily, as impoverished aristocracy, is somewhat like the former slaves; she becomes a duty, obligation, and care. The Colonel's apparently charitable action is qualified by his motives, which appear to be based more on the maintenance of a rigid class order than on respectful affection. The mayor treats her not as an individual human being in need, but as a class, as a Lady Aristocrat. The newer

generation recognizes no such category and decides she must pay her taxes. The new aldermen dehumanize Emily into a Faceless Citizen. From them she receives an impersonal tax notice, a formal letter, an offer from the mayor to meet at the place of her choosing, and finally, a deputation. In the second pair of paragraphs we see two generations in relation to Emily. The generations are similar in that they both choose to deal with an idea of Emily, rather than with Emily herself; they are different in that they have different ideas of her and, therefore, approach her and her taxes differently.

Another pair of paragraphs precedes the first dramatic incident. In them we see the interior of the house that the ladies were so curious about and we see Emily. The atmosphere of the house reminds us again of Gothic romance. It is tomblike, dusty, dark, and damp, with a stairway that mounts into shadow. The room we see is dominated by a crayon portrait of Emily's long-dead father on a tarnished gilt easel. When Emily appears, we begin to see that she resembles her house. A gold chain disappears into her belt just as the stair disappears into shadow, and her cane has a tarnished gold head. Her appearance is striking,

Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue.

(p. 121)

This passage begins with a kind of apology for her heaviness that teases the imagination. First she is small and spare, then pleasingly plump, but by the end of the first sentence she is obese. Three words later she is bloated and by the end of the passage she has been transformed from a little old lady into a bloated corpse as decayed as the house. How do we respond to such a description? If, through the hints that we may be in Gothic romance, we have come to expect a Gothic heroine, we may be surprised when we learn she is small and fat. If in spite of our developing sympathy, the description tempts us to see her as a Gothic villainess, the apologetic narrative approach to her appearance prevents us from succumbing. But how are we affected when she balloons into a drowned corpse? Looking like a corpse, she may be sinister, yet on the other hand, she may deserve sympathy—especially if her appearance is the result of the same kind of process that has made the house into an eyesore. The narrator by introducing us so gently to her ghastly appearance seems to have shown some sympathy for her, reinforcing the sympathy we already feel for what appears to be the helpless victim of powerful and careless forces.

Before we see her act, before we have any knowledge of her character, we are disposed to see Emily as victimized. The town shows little sympathy for her. Two generations have viewed her as a stereotype rather than as a living person. As Americans we usually side with the underdog, yet we are not sure how to judge Emily. She seems both pathetic and sinister. The interior of her house is both sad and frightening. One of the frightening things about her and her house is exemplified by the staircase and the gold chain both of which produce lines that frustrate the eye, causes without effects. We are led to believe there is a watch at the end of the chain because the deputation hears the ticking, but the ticking is an effect without a visible cause and adds to our sense of uneasiness by suggesting mystery and disorder. We should now be alerted to watch for a continuation of this pattern.

When we finally see her act, our responses are both clarified and clouded. As Americans, we tend to support Emily against an invasion of tax collectors, yet she seems not to need support. In the confrontation, we see her standing framed in a doorway, dominating the room as her father's portrait dominated before she entered. She is dignified and powerful as she vanquishes them. Her triumph is undercut, however, by the narrator's parenthetical remark that her authority, Colonel Sartoris, has been dead for ten years. That she acts as if the mayor is still alive is another unexplained action like an effect without a cause. Is it possible she does not know he is dead? Does she live in a fantasy world where the people she likes never die or is she perversely pretending ignorance? By defeating the deputation she upsets our expectations that she will be victimized and

earns our admiration for her strength. At the same time, she confronts us with disturbing mysteries about her character and motives.

A series of confrontations between Emily and Jefferson takes place in the following sections. When the aldermen attempt to take care of the smell without confronting her, she catches and shames them. The next confrontation concerns her refusal to admit her father's death. On the surface, the town defeats her, bending her to its will. Emily profoundly shocks the town, however, and "she broke down" after a three-day struggle followed by a long illness and a kind of resurrection (p. 124). In part three, she refuses, or perhaps fails, to play the part of Fallen Woman when the town thinks she is fallen. She also succeeds in buying arsenic without satisfying the law's requirement. Her victories continue into part four when she vanquishes the Baptist minister and when the town's female-relations strategy backfires. Then, apparently, she suffers complete defeat. Homer disappears and the town is morally triumphant. The suspected affair is at an end and Emily has not married a Yankee day laborer. Throughout the rest of part four, Emily leads the isolated spinster's life, doing the things spinsters may be expected to do: teaching china painting, refusing a mailbox and house number, and finally dying alone in her decaying house. In part five the town is completely in control. They bury her and behave as they wish at her funeral. The old men change her past to suit their befuddled fantasies. It is as if all are eager to remove the old monument and to replace her house with a cotton gin or a filling station. Then her bridal chamber reveals that once again she has vanquished the town and that even after her death, Jefferson has failed finally to understand and deal with her.

As we witness these confrontations, we seem to learn much about the town but relatively little about Emily. Through what the town feels, says, thinks, and does we gradually obtain a fairly clear idea of its character as a group. For example, there is a cluster of events which do not surprise the town. The ladies are not surprised when the smell develops because a man could not take care of a kitchen and because, "It was another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons" (p. 122). Believing Emily and Homer are married, the town is not surprised when Homer is gone or when he returns after the cousins leave. Emily's isolation after the disappearance of Homer is to be expected as her reassertion of morality (p. 127).

There are things about which the town is sad and glad. The townspeople begin to be really sorry for her after the smell goes away because they remember how her great aunt went "completely crazy" and how her father kept suitors away. On the other hand, they are "not pleased exactly, but vindicated" when she is still single at thirty (p. 123). They are glad when her father dies and leaves her a pauper because, at last, they can pity her and believe her equal to themselves for "Now she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less" (p. 123). They are glad when Emily and Homer are seen together, but begin to say "poor Emily" when the old people gossip enough to convince them she is a Fallen Woman (p. 125). They are convinced it would be the best thing if she killed herself with the poison she buys (p. 126). They are *really* glad when they think Emily and Homer are married because they want to be rid of her female cousins, but are sorry when there is no public party (p. 127). The town in being glad, sad, and not surprised reveals itself to be not only unsympathetic, but unmistakably vicious.

As distinguished from what the town feels, the things that the town says, believes, and does not only reveal viciousness and callousness, but seem to reflect limited inductive powers. For example, the town believes Homer will marry Emily, but he deserts her (p. 122). They believe she is fallen, but she does not behave as a Fallen Woman (p. 125). They believe she will kill herself with the poison and she does not (p. 126). They summon the cousins to prevent Emily from behaving immorally, then are willing to countenance the affair and the marriage in order to be rid of those cousins (pp. 126–27). They say she will marry Homer, then discover that he likes men and is not a marrying man. They say she will eventually persuade him, but we never know if she does (p. 126). In general they are wrong—as it is almost certain that they are wrong about the cause of the smell and the fact of the marriage. The town's actions reveal callousness, viciousness, hypocrisy, meddling, and a general inability to understand the meanings of events. The people of Jefferson prove themselves completely unable to sympathize with and understand Emily. Every man who attempts to

coerce Emily, except perhaps Homer and her father, leaves her house never to return in her lifetime. Even the druggist does not return from his supply room after confronting her.

Why does the town fail so completely? Its major failing seems to be either one of vision, which in turn results in one of sympathy, or vice versa. In order to account for and deal with Emily, the people constantly resort to categorization. We have seen that Colonel Sartoris remits her taxes in order to preserve a kind of status quo, that he assigns static identities to people and classes, identities which then define appropriate responses. Because she is a poor Lady she should not have to pay taxes; because she is a Lady, Judge Stevens cannot tell her to her face that she smells bad and the aldermen are forced into their ludicrous escapade; and because she is a Lady, the plebeian townspeople envy her and are glad to discover evidence that she may be ordinary. They, especially the older generation, are eager to turn her status against her when she is courted by a Yankee day laborer. The new generation has the same limitation in a different form. For them Emily is a Faceless Citizen who must be made to pay her taxes and forced to “clean up her place,” who must comply with the law in regard to dead fathers and buying poison, and who should have a mailbox on her house. Whereas the older generation felt that sending their children to Emily to learn china painting was a duty or obligation like sending them to Sunday School, the new generation does not even feel the obligation. In effect, the new generation's approach is little different from the old, yet we prefer the latter because its roots in human feeling and concern are still discernible.

The Lady Aristocrat and the Faceless Citizen are not the only categories applied to Emily, though most of the others can be seen as extensions of the former. When the town sees her as the heroine-in-white of a melodramatic tableau in which her father threatens off suitors with his horsewhip (p. 123), she is expected to do the kinds of things a melodramatic heroine usually does: to cling to her dead father despite his supposed cruelty (p. 123), to kill herself with poison when her honor is sullied (p. 126), and to isolate herself in her house when her lover deserts her or when she has ordered him to leave (p. 127). When she is a Fallen Woman, she is a bad influence on children and ought not to ride with her beau on Sunday afternoon or to hold her head high. She is then to be gossiped about behind jalousied windows, preached to by middle-class ministers, and protected by female relations. Although she apparently sees qualities in Homer that make him worthy of her attention, the town dismisses him using the categories of Northerner and Day Laborer. In parts one, two, and four, Emily is almost always described as framed in a door, window, or picture so that we come to see her as confined in the vision of the town. For us, however, the frames seem to make her into a kind of portrait of an unknown and mysterious woman, the special object of our sympathy and wonder as she is the object of the town's lack of sympathy.

Though it is not really clear whether stereotyping is a cause or an effect of lack of sympathy, it seems rather clear that the problem with the categories is that they falsify their object, making sympathy difficult. Categorizing Emily as Lady Aristocrat, the Confederate veterans at the funeral even falsify the public record, remembering things that could never have been. Because the town unfailingly bases its approach to Emily on stereotypical expectations, it never sees her as the very human person we believe her to be. The older generation fails because it is decadent and its categories have become inflexible; the new because it is impersonal; the town as a whole because Emily's class identity provokes pettiness and jealousy in them and because they tend to see her in terms of stock melodramatic stereotypes. All fail to see the human Emily. Their vision is so limited by these categories which, instead of being shortcuts, are barriers to sympathy, that they are always ludicrous in their attempts to understand and deal with her. She never does quite what they expect. Regardless of which comes first, the failure of vision and the lack of sympathy are mutually supporting. They form a closed system of which Emily appears, in spite of her resistance, to be a nearly helpless victim.

We find, then, that the town's actions, feelings, and motives are scrutinized rather closely. The quality of their actions disposes us to sympathize with Emily as a victim of careless cruelty. We noted in our discussion of the first section that we felt pressure to sympathize with Emily as a victim of the town at her funeral and

concerning her taxes, but we also felt ambiguously about her character upon first seeing her. Let us attempt to determine how we should feel about Emily through an examination of some of the means that are used for controlling our responses. We can begin by looking at the narration.

As stated previously, the narration of “A Rose for Emily” has been the subject of varied controversy. A particularly thorny problem in trying to understand the narration is the alteration of the chronology. The story seems to be told by a participant in at least some of the events described, yet all of the events are complete at the time of the telling. Emily's funeral is over before the story begins and the last scene of the story is in the past tense. Therefore, the narrator must suspect now, as he apparently did not at the time, the causal relation of the poison, the disappearance of Homer, and the smell, yet he gives us the smell in part two, the poison in part three, and the disappearance in four. One apparent effect of this alteration is to prevent us from easily perceiving the possible relation of these seemingly isolated events. Another effect might be to emphasize both the speaker's distance from the events—as he is able to re-order them—and the town's lack of sympathetic understanding which he presumably shared when the events took place. At at least one point, the narrator fails to give us pertinent information we assume that he has: he must know in what order Emily bought the toilet articles, the clothing, and the poison. In both the alteration of chronology and this withholding of available information, the narrator seems to be purposive. In the second case, he increases our difficulty in understanding Emily's intentions. Does she intend to seduce Homer into marriage or death, or the latter only if the former fails?

In the first section of the story, we noted a separation of cause and effect in the matters of the stairway, the chain, the ticking, and Emily's belief that Colonel Sartoris is alive. The silent minister, the purchase of the poison, the smell, the return of Homer, the body on the bed, and a host of other phenomena seem also to fall into one of these two classes: floating effects or dangling causes. Now we can see, however, that this separation may be a deliberate narrative strategy, that it serves several purposes and is essential to our reading experience. The separation of cause and effect obscures the obvious pattern of events for us very much as does the alteration of the chronology, thereby keeping our judgments about Emily in suspension and allowing the narrator to build sympathy for her before we can suspect what she may have done. It also reveals another facet of the town's failure to sympathize with her. The town's categories encourage the isolation of causes and effects, increasing the probability of interpretive error. Furthermore, a series of mysteries is created which we strongly suspect to have different explanations from those offered by the town. As we learn to distrust the town, we begin to wonder what is really happening between Emily and Homer. Is there really an affair? Does she marry him? These mysteries increase in number and depth as the story continues.

The patterns we have seen in the narration thus far seem to indicate that the story is told by a single voice. We have also seen evidence of narrative sympathy for Emily in the first part of the story. Is there other evidence of narrative sympathy? The first sentence of part two, “So she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell” (p. 121) clearly indicates admiration for Emily. The last two paragraphs of part four show great narrative sympathy for Emily. The sentence which precedes them, “Thus she passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse” (p. 128) applies five adjectives to Emily, only four of which we have seen portrayed. To whom is Emily dear, unless in the sense of being costly? Perhaps at this point she has become dear in another sense to the narrator and to us. The last two paragraphs of the section tell of Emily's dying alone in pitiable circumstances without anyone even knowing she is ill. The narrative tone is one of pity for the forlorn and neglected Emily. In part five the narrator seems to separate himself from the people and to judge them as he tells us that the flowers were bought by relatives rather than cut by the townspeople, that the ladies are curious and macabre, and that the old veterans distorted her past in their memories. Even though the townspeople seem, for once, to do the decent thing by not opening the room until she is buried, they have pried enough to know that the door will have to be forced. The consistent narrative sympathy for Emily is not only in contrast to the town's attitude, but presumably, also in contrast to the narrator's own attitude at the time the events took place.

How, then, does this narrative attitude affect us as readers? The teller's sympathy reinforces our similar emotions. Yet, even though we tend to take Emily's part against all tax collectors, mailmen, and busybodies, we are not required to sympathize with and admire her without qualification. The narrator appears also to be rather uncertain about Emily's true character. We have already noted our ambiguous response to her initial appearance. Emily does many other things that make us uneasy about her: thinking Colonel Sartoris is alive ten years after his death, keeping her father's body, buying poison, and having a smell about her house. Subtle and macabre suggestions of perverse madness, i.e., incest, cannibalism, and necrophilia, appear in the first four parts and receive some support in the fifth. Balancing these disturbing elements is another set of facts and appearances. She appears to really love Homer if the expensive gifts she buys him are any indication, and perhaps her father, if we can judge by the ever-present portrait which she herself may have done. She appears to treat both men as if they were not dead after they die. Such treatment may indicate either madness or love. When the lime spreaders open her cellar, they reveal that there is no secret there as is often the case in Gothic houses. When she has her hair cut, she looks like an angel. Ten years after Homer's disappearance, she offers china painting lessons to the village children, reminding us of kindhearted Hepzibah Pyncheon and her little shop. Even the final scene in the dusty bridal chamber may be as pathetic as it is gruesome.

These apparently conflicting cues are arranged so that as our suspicion of the truth about Emily grows, one set confirms and the other allays those suspicions. When Homer disappears into the house one evening, we are almost certain that we know the truth even if the town does not. Almost immediately, however, we see Emily become a fat and lonely spinster. We are asked to pity poor Emily who teaches children to paint and dies alone on a moldy bed. Our suspended judgment is never allowed to settle itself. We pity and admire Emily without being certain that she needs or deserves such sympathy. The story is so constructed that we sympathize with Emily without understanding her, whereas the town, thinking it understands her, is shown to lack sympathy. At the same time we share, to a degree, a sense of the town's error as we are tempted to see Emily in terms of certain literary conventions, i.e., Gothic romance or melodrama, from which she continually diverges.

The last scene of "A Rose for Emily" has the form of a revelation. The secret room is entered and light falls on the dark mystery of Emily's life. How does this scene affect our feelings and knowledge about Emily? Conventionally, we may expect resolution of conflicting emotions and the explanation of mysteries. First let us examine our emotional response to the scene. Just before it, our pity for Emily and contempt for the town have reached their highest points. Then we are led into the dusty room and shown everything in it, the details of a rose-colored tomblike bridal chamber. The scene is first pathetic, expressive of the fulfillment Emily never had, the mausoleum of a girl's hopes covered with dust. Then the narrator points out the body that once lay in an attitude of embrace and describes it as victim of the same forces that outlast love, time, and death. Grisly as it is, the scene is one of frustrated tenderness. If we are horrified at what Emily appears to have done, we are at the same time asked to pity the woman for whom this scene represents nearly all the love and companionship she has known for forty years and to admire the woman who has once again thwarted the town's attempts to categorize her. It seems to me that each of the emotions that Emily arouses in us—pity, admiration, and horror—is here felt to its extreme. Does the long, gray hair finally horrify or does it move the reader to tears and awe? The final scene stubbornly refuses to resolve the conflicting responses that have been cultivated in the reader throughout the story.

What mysteries does the last scene solve? It strengthens our suspicions about the causal relation of the poison, Homer's disappearance, and the smell, but does not confirm those suspicions. In fact, the narrator teasingly encourages the reader to doubt the relation. The monogram on the silver is obscured. The body is not identified, nor is it in an attitude to indicate a violent death from arsenic. It is possible that Homer and Emily lived together in the house, secretly of course, for several years. Such a suggestion seems absurd, but the very fact that it can be defended illustrates how little we really learn in the climactic scene. Mysteries about Emily's actions remain unsolved: if she had an affair with Homer, if she killed him, and if she used the poison. New mysteries are created: if she lay with the corpse and if so, for how long. These are only a few of the

mysterious events that remain mysterious and the greatest mystery, too, remains as dark as ever. If she did all the things it appears she did, why? As was stated in the introduction to this essay, this question has absorbed much critical effort since the story's publication, yet if my analysis is correct, that was probably not the most fruitful question to attempt to answer because neither the narrator, the town, nor the reader has enough information to answer it. Instead of trying to explain Emily, the narrator does his best to present all the difficulties in the way of such an explanation. The narrator shows us a group of incidents in which the town uses stereotypes that always fail to account for her. Finally, the narrator has more information than we because he knows the order in which the gifts and the poison were bought. With that knowledge, we might possibly guess with more certainty if she planned to murder Homer and decorate the room or if the gifts mean that she loved him. Knowing less than the narrator and no more than the town, how do we dare to guess at Emily's motives given the examples of his restraint and the town's failure? So Emily remains very much a mystery. We never see her thinking and must infer her motives from a small group of external actions. As so many critics have so ably shown, even after agreement is reached on the content and extent of her actions, those actions admit of numerous explanations.

We have seen that the story focuses on the relationship between Emily and Jefferson; specifically on the ways in which the town interprets and acts on the information it gathers about her. The narrator recounts a series of incidents in which the town attempts and fails to deal with Emily. In each case, the failure seems to result in some way from a previous failure to sympathize with and understand Emily. She, on the other hand, is seen only through a few brief actions and her motives are not represented except as they are guessed by the town. We have also seen that we are made to sympathize with Emily despite our ignorance of her and the conflicting cues we receive about her moral nature. We are encouraged to feel about Emily in a way that the town fails to feel so that we come to appreciate her human uniqueness as the town does not. Furthermore, we have seen that the narrator, though a participant in some of the events described, is now critical of the town and sympathetic toward Emily. "A Rose for Emily," then, shows us not only the barriers to understanding and sympathy which lead inevitably to violence and suffering, but also the means of overcoming those barriers through compassionate human sympathy, i.e., making the effort to understand another through imaginative identification rather than in terms of rigid codes of conduct and categories of perception. The story is not easily optimistic however, for it is only after her death, when the hair is found on the indented pillow and all the damage has been irrevocably done, that anyone begins to understand how the town has apparently victimized Emily and how grandly she seems to have resisted victimization. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin and Shreve, through imaginative identification with Henry and Charles, come to learn "what must be truth" about the murder of Charles, but in this story no one ever learns the whole truth about Emily. Yet we sympathize with her, for in the end her acts are no more bizarre than the town's, while in many ways she seems immeasurably more valuable and grand than all of Jefferson. The town attempts throughout her life to treat her as we see it treating her in the first two paragraphs of the story, as if she were dead. If she makes Homer into a corpse, who makes her into one? We see no anguish or pain in the town, but we see evidence enough to imagine what Emily may have suffered. At least one person, forced into the realm of light by that dusty room, seems to have realized the possibility of her suffering and to have been brought by that realization to the point of saying as Faulkner said,

... I don't think that one should withhold pity simply because the ... object of pity, is pleased and satisfied. I think the pity is in the human striving against its own nature, against its own conscience ... it's man in conflict with his heart, or with his fellows, or with his environment—that's what deserves the pity.<sup>6</sup>

#### Notes

1. N. Happel, "William Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Die Neueren Sprachen*, 9 (1962), 396–404. Reprinted in M. Thomas Inge, ed. *William Faulkner: A Rose for Emily* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Pub. Co., 1970), as translated by Alfred Kolb.

2. R. Sullivan, "The Narrator in 'A Rose for Emily,'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 1 (September 1971), 159–78. K. P. Kempton in *The Short Story* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 104–06, suggests that there is a town-narrator who appears to become more visible as the story progresses. F. C. Watkins in "The Structure of 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Modern Language Notes*, 69 (November 1954), 508–10, seems to see the townspeople as a kind of group narrator. Brooks and Warren in *Understanding Fiction* (2nd Ed. New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1959), pp. 350–54, suggest that the town-narrator may be an important character in his own right. All of the above except Ruth Sullivan's article are reprinted in M. Thomas Inge, ed. *William Faulkner: A Rose for Emily* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Pub. Co., 1970).
3. Brooks and Warren believe that Emily heroically resists restrictive local values. C. W. M. Johnson, "Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Explicator*, 6 (May 1948), item 45, argues that, far from heroic, she resists change as the South has done and that her just punishment is to live with death. R. B. West in "Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Explicator*, 7 (October 1948), item 8, and in "Atmosphere and Theme in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" from *The Writer in the Room* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1949), pp. 205–11, defending Emily, states that she resists time because she has been betrayed by it in the forms of her father who represents the Old Order and Homer who represents the New Order. In her attempts to overcome time, she is at once monstrous, heroic, and tragic. C. A. Allen, "William Faulkner: Comedy and the Purpose of Humor," *Arizona Quarterly*, 16 (Spring 1960), 60, thinks that Emily takes Homer in defiance as a father-substitute, then kills him to insure possession when he threatens to leave her. Dominating her world, she is unable to distinguish between reality and illusion. W. V. O'Connor, *The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), p. 68, agrees that Emily retreats into a fantasy world, but because she has been denied natural outlets for her emotions. Irving Howe in *William Faulkner* (2nd Ed. New York: Vintage, 1962), p. 265, sees the story as one of the decay of human sensibility from "false gentility to genteel perversion." Irving Malin in *William Faulkner: An Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), pp. 37–38, believes Emily is the victim of self-repressed sexuality and, therefore, becomes masculinized. Faulkner, who dislikes masculine women, thus has an opportunity to analyze her necrophilia. Elmo Howell in "A Note on Faulkner's Emily as a Tragic Heroine," *Serif*, 2 (1966), 13–15 argues that if Emily is to be a tragic heroine, she cannot be a necrophiliac, nor can she kill Homer from such a petty motive as revenge. We have no indication that a break with Homer is imminent when he disappears. Therefore, the murder is a victory of the spirit over the body. Convinced that the affair is immoral, she kills Homer and keeps the body in an act of expiation. Faulkner's own comments do little to clarify matters. As quoted in Gwynn and Blotner's *Faulkner in the University* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 58, he says in a March 1957 interview that Emily realized she had broken the law of her tradition and that her life was wrecked. She murdered to expiate her crime. In April, answering a question about the title, he says that she was a poor woman whose father was cruel and whose lover was about to desert her. She had to kill him to keep him (pp. 87–88). In May, asked about his inspiration, he replied that her natural emotions had been denied by her father who treated her as a servant, that all she wanted was "to be loved and to love" (p. 185). Earlier at Nagano, he was asked whether or not he liked Emily. He answered, "I feel sorry for Emily's tragedy; her tragedy was, she was an only child, an only daughter. At the time when she could have found a husband, could have had a life of her own, there was probably some one, her father, who said, 'No, you must stay here and take care of me.' And then when she found a man, she had had no experience in people. She picked out probably a bad one, who was about to desert her. And when she lost him, she could see that for her that was the end of life, there was nothing left, except to grow older, alone, solitary; she had had something and she wanted to keep it, which is bad—to go to any length to keep something; but I pity Emily. I don't know whether I would have liked her or not, I might have been afraid of her. Not of her but of anyone who had suffered, had been warped, as her life had probably been warped by a selfish father." (Robert Jelliffe, *Faulkner at Nagano* [Tokyo: Kenkyusha Ltd., 1956], pp. 70–71.) All of the above except Allen, O'Connor, Howell, and *Faulkner at Nagano* are reprinted in the Inge casebook.

4. William Faulkner, *The Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950), p. 119. Page numbers appearing in the text are from this edition.
5. In a 1956 interview with Jean Stein, *Paris Review*, 12 (Spring 1956), 30, Faulkner says that “the short story is the most demanding form after poetry.” In *Faulkner in the University*, p. 207, he says in a June 1957 interview, “In a short story that's next to the poem, almost every word has got to be almost exactly right ... because it demands a nearer absolute exactitude. You have less room to be slovenly and careless. There's less room in it for trash. In poetry, of course, there's no room at all for trash. It's got to be absolutely impeccable, absolutely perfect.”
6. *Faulkner in the University*, p. 59.

## Criticism: Dennis W. Allen (essay date 1984)

SOURCE: “Horror and Perverse Delight: Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily,’” in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Winter, 1984, pp. 685–97.

[In the following essay, Allen contends that rather than simply horrifying the reader, the grotesque elements in “A Rose for Emily” are designed to fascinate and delight.]

Enigmatic and inescapable, Emily Grierson dominates William Faulkner's “A Rose for Emily,” and her protean, mysterious nature is nowhere more apparent than in her physical appearance. If her psychology is difficult to fathom, her body is equally rich in ambiguity. Her first direct appearance in the narrative, a flashback to her meeting with the aldermen who have come to discuss her taxes, dramatically conveys her corporeal oddity:

They rose when she entered—a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked 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 while the visitors stated their errand.<sup>1</sup>

What is initially striking about the passage is its suggestion of excess. Plumpness, in Emily, is transformed into an obesity so extreme that her eyes are lost in her face, and such excess is reinscribed in the style of the paragraph, with its florid descriptions of the “fatty ridges” of Emily's face and “bloated,” drowned body.

But Emily is excessive in a more complex way, for this “small, fat woman in black” embodies the opposites of her ostensible qualities. Although she is startlingly obese, her skeleton is curiously still apparent. This is not merely a reminder that earlier in her life Emily was excessively thin; it is an ontogenic survival, the current copresence of spareness and corpulence. Yet the reference to Emily's “skeleton” does not simply point back to her past. It also hints, however obliquely, at her eventual mortality, a future that she incorporates in the present. Clearly alive, Emily appears as if she were dead. Looking like “a body long submerged in motionless water,” Emily is an uneasy conjunction of being and nonbeing. A similar drama of contradiction is played out in the relation of her body to its clothing. Mediating the distinction between male and female, Emily has equipped herself with a good deal of phallic paraphernalia. In fact, the only details of her costume mentioned in the passage are the cane she holds before her and the watch suspended from the gold chain that vanishes beneath her belt, so poorly placed from a practical standpoint and so perfectly situated from a symbolic one. But Emily's approximation of male attributes is not limited to symbolic aspects of dress. Although it is not revealed until later in the narrative, her hair has turned by this time to a “vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man.” It is an appropriate feature for a woman able to “vanquish” the aldermen

“horse and foot.”

Both grotesquely fat and excessively thin, living and dead, female and male, Miss Emily is, finally, “undecidable,” the copresence of opposites.<sup>2</sup> Evading basic distinctions, she is that most gothic of figures: the compound being. But to label Emily and to dismiss her would be to ignore the aptness of her body to the issues raised by her story, for her narrative is concerned with the mutation and corruption of bodies, with violations of the line between life and death, and with the differences and relations between the sexes. And Emily's undecidability is crucial to the work for it is, finally, a narrative about the conflict between the human need to erect taxonomies and the equally human desire to eradicate distinctions.

To understand the full significance of the story we must turn from the enigma of Emily's appearance to the even more troubling realm of action and motive. Emily Grierson's fascination for a generation of readers stems primarily from the secret gradually unfolded in the course of the narrative. Having poisoned her lover and concealed his body in an upstairs room, she sleeps with his corpse for roughly forty years. Shocking and incomprehensible, Emily's actions demand an explanation. Despite numerous hints as to her possible reasons, Emily's motivation is obscure, and much of the critical commentary on the work is an attempt to discern a coherent rationale for her actions, to find a motive for Emily.<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally, critics have seen Emily's crime as sexually motivated, the result of a life that is a virtual allegory of the consequences of sexual repression. Until his death, Emily's father prevents her from marrying; the town, in fact, remembers them as a tableau: the father standing in the doorway warning off unacceptable suitors with a horsewhip in his hand, his daughter “a slender figure in white” behind him. Denied a normal romantic and sexual life, Emily becomes unable to distinguish between reality and illusion, “a pathological case” according to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.<sup>4</sup> She murders Homer to prevent him from leaving her, for to her there is no meaningful difference between a living lover and a dead one. More recently, critics have detected a strong Oedipal element in Emily's sexual frustration. Deprived of other objects, Emily's desires focus on her father, and she clings “to that which had robbed her,” as her initial refusal to acknowledge her father's death and the ubiquity of his portrait suggest. Emily goes so far as to identify in part with her father, and her murder of Homer and the preservation of his body are thus the results of conflicting impulses. Emily's desire for the forbidden lover who will substitute for the father clashes with her introjection of her father's prohibitions.<sup>5</sup> Homer's murder gratifies both demands. It not only satisfies the paternal superego that Emily has internalized; it also makes Homer more closely resemble the dead father who is Emily's actual desire.<sup>6</sup>

Emily's motives do not seem exclusively sexual, however. Her Oedipal identification can explain, for example, her appropriation of a symbolic phallus, but it cannot explicate her choice of a watch as the privileged object. Used to replace the signifier of power, the watch that dangles below Emily's belt suggests that Emily seeks to control time, to “suspend” it. Many of her actions, criminal or otherwise, bear out this idea for Emily continually attempts to deny change and the passage of time. Once Homer is placed in the upstairs room, nothing is altered; after forty years his collar and tie lie “as if they had just been removed” except for a telltale layer of dust. Emily consistently refuses the town's attempts at innovation, whether in the form of home postal delivery or the insistence that she pay taxes. As such, a number of critics have taken Emily as a personification of the values of the Old South, the ideals of the past.<sup>7</sup> In this view, her murder of Homer is motivated by an attempt to resist the intrusion of the industrial values of the present, embodied in a Yankee who has come to Jefferson to modernize, working under a contract to pave the sidewalks.

Less allegorically, Emily's suspension of time can be seen as a denial of death. In her dispute with the aldermen, Emily's final position is to refer the issue to Colonel Sartoris, although he has been dead for ten years. The action parallels her earlier refusal to acknowledge the death of her father. Emily's use of memory here to retain the past in the present recalls the Confederate veterans at her own funeral. For them, time is not a mathematical progression but “a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches.” In contrast to the

“diminishing road” of chronological time, memory is nonlinear, a space in which the present and the various eras of the past exist simultaneously, eternally immune from death and decay. Like her manipulation of time through memory, Emily's murder of Homer is, ironically, an attempt to forestall his loss through death. Fixed beyond the ravages of time, he will be with her forever, unlike her father and Colonel Sartoris. At bottom, such an effort is an attempt to evade one's own death, for the loss of the other, the significant figure who completes the self, suggests the inevitable demise of the self. By preserving her dead lover and entombing herself in the closed universe of memory, Emily seeks to escape not merely time or change but mortality.<sup>8</sup>

In a story whose basic factual details are often unclear (for example: does Homer intend to jilt Emily?), the discovery of a welter of motives for Emily's actions is not surprising. Taken together, the various explanations—sexual repression, Oedipal fixation, the evasion of change and death—clarify not only Emily's crime but the curious doubleness of her appearance. Emily's Oedipal desires explain her physical androgyny by arguing for a psychological androgyny: the clash of the daughter's feminine desire *to have* the father with a masculine desire *to be* the father. This duality is reiterated in Emily's combination of corpulence and spareness. Her incorporation of her father is rendered almost literal in her bloated obesity, grafted onto the skeleton of the slender girl in white. Similarly, if Emily appears both alive and dead, this reflects her choice of a moribund existence in a closed world from which time has been excluded.

The oddity of Emily's appearance is thus explicable; her body is symbolically suggestive, a refraction of her psychology. There remains, however, a stubborn textual residue that resists exegesis. In a sense, the motives adduced for Emily simply defer the problem of interpretation. The reader is still left with the difficult question of origins: the cause of Emily's unusually intense fear of death; the source of the excessive sexual repression imposed by Emily's father. More subtly, such interpretations may clarify Emily's curious physical dualities, but they do so merely by translating her physical oxymorons into psychological oxymorons, whether in the form of Oedipal conflict or the living death of the obsessional. Even seen simply as a victim of sexual frustration, Emily is oddly mediate, situated on the borderline of illusion and reality. An analysis of Emily's psychology does not explain, finally, the significance of her undecidability itself.

To understand the riddles of the Griersons' psychology, we must turn to a larger, social structure. The obsessions with sexuality and death that shape the actions of Emily and her father are distorted reflections of an aristocratic ideal, a cultural ideology that shapes their perceptions of the world. At its most basic, the aristocratic perspective assumes a set of codified social distinctions that define people and rank them by degree. The principle can be seen at work in one of Colonel Sartoris' acts as mayor, the promulgation of a law that “no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron.” The edict implies a social taxonomy if only because it is made by one group (white men) to be obeyed by another (black women), but the law itself is intended to reinforce classification. Black women must display a sign indicating their social status, the cultural associations of the apron suggesting the domestic work that is their traditional province. Yet the sign is overdetermined, for the mere fact of being symbolically “marked” by the law reveals the position of black women at the bottom of the social hierarchy. More subtly, by demonstrating its power to classify, to mark certain groups, the statute implicitly asserts the importance of taxonomy itself. Thus Sartoris' edict is finally circular and self-referential, an insistence on the principle of classification and on the social hierarchy that make him a lawgiver in the first place.<sup>9</sup>

Colonel Sartoris is said to have “fathered” the law, an apt metaphor given the statute's similarity to the traditional “law of the father.” The paternal law is the prohibition of incest, which ends the child's undifferentiated oneness with the mother. The function of the father's “no,” then, is to separate and divide, to establish the principle of distinction.<sup>10</sup> If Sartoris is the “father” of Jefferson, concerned with asserting and reinforcing social differences, the story also presents another prohibiting father anxious to maintain them, for the social taxonomy can continue to exist only if the various degrees of people are kept separate. Thus Mr. Grierson stands in front of the house on Jefferson's “most select street,” warning off his daughter's potential beaux because no suitor is “quite good enough for Miss Emily.” The separation of social classes is reinforced

here by physical separation. Poised in the doorway with Emily behind him, Mr. Grierson stands between his daughter and the outside world. Thus the social boundaries between those who are “good enough” and those who are not are rendered concrete by the physical boundaries of the house itself. Yet, despite its concern with distinction and separation, Mr. Grierson's prohibition is a curious inversion of the law of the father; it forbids not incest but exogamy. Straddling the doorway, Emily's father not only blocks access to her; he prevents her from leaving. Behind the closed doors of the house, Emily's romantic involvements are limited to an incestuous fixation on her father. The aristocratic emphasis on difference, on distinguishing social classes, thus has homogeneity as its ultimate goal, and Emily's incestuous relationship with her father is an appropriate metaphor for the closed aristocratic world in which one deals only with one's own kind.

As the latter phrase suggests, the assumption that people are different in degree is often translated into the belief that people are different in kind, that some are ontologically superior to others. The comparison of Emily, at one point, to an angel in a church window suggests her high social status, but it also implies the nature of the aristocratic “kind”: physically rarified beings, more spirit than flesh, who are untroubled by biological processes. Thus, when a smell develops around Emily's house and various townspeople insist that she be told to eradicate it, Judge Stevens responds by upholding the aristocratic ideal: it is impossible to “accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad.” To do so would be to call into question the assumption that ladies are immune from the gross realities of the body. Evidence to the contrary, Judge Stevens suggests, is always ignored. In this particular instance, the smell is not that of “a snake or a rat” killed in the yard, as Judge Stevens assumes, but the odor of Homer's corpse. In either case, it is clearly the smell of death, and Judge Stevens' dismissal of its relevance to Emily hints at a fantasy at the heart of the aristocratic denial of the body: that ladies and gentlemen, like angels, are immortal, untainted by death. In refusing to acknowledge the deaths of Colonel Sartoris and her father, Emily simply insists a bit too literally that aristocrats differ from other people.

The denial of the body is not limited to the refusal of mortality. It involves an implicit rejection of sexuality as well. At its most basic, Mr. Grierson's repressive treatment of Emily seems designed not simply to maintain class distinctions but to deny sexuality itself. If Emily is limited to an incestuous relationship with her father, the relationship is Platonic, transcending sexual desire. This refusal of sexuality is based on another aristocratic fantasy, one that explains the aristocratic immunity from death: one does not feel sexual desire because one's own origin is asexual, the miraculous birth of a god, which establishes one's difference in kind from those who are biologically created and which allows the evasion of the end of biological organisms. It is significant in this context that no mention is made in the story of Emily's mother. Emily's origin is shrouded in mystery.

In the Grierson home, reproduction is limited to painting. In the crayon portrait of Mr. Grierson or in Emily's lessons in recreating illustrations from women's magazines on china, replication involves the unaltered atemporality of the copy rather than a vulgar blending of chromosomes. Like the autogenesis of a god, the copy involves the eternal return of the same; it both maintains aristocratic purity and transcends biological time. Thus Emily consummates her relationship with her father by becoming him after his death. She also is a copy, reproducing those qualities of her father “too virulent and furious to die.” This is not simply a reversal of biological chronology—the daughter engendering the father. If, on the level of fantasy, Emily is motherless, solely the creation of her father, her father is himself recreated by Emily. Closed and incestuous, this ontological circle is the asexual and atemporal immortality of a god, the eternal re-production of the self that is the ideal at the heart of the aristocratic perspective.

The construction of a social hierarchy thus leads to the fantasy of an ontological hierarchy, an attempt to translate the spiritual metaphors traditionally applied to high social status (angel, god) into facts of being. But the aristocratic rejection of the body does more than support the principle of difference in kind. Another glance at Colonel Sartoris' edict suggests a more basic function. As a sartorial law, in both senses, the statute seems to represent a projection of the aristocratic denial of the physical onto other social classes by insisting

that the body be hidden. The law, however, is more subtle than this. Using race and gender as principles of classification, the social hierarchy is itself based on the body. By legislating that black women indicate their status by wearing an apron, the edict requires the concealment of the body that is the basis for that status and reinscribes the classification in its clothing. This serves to obscure the origin of the social taxonomy. By symbolically abstracting the sign of social status, the law suggests that the hierarchy is not an arbitrary ranking of physical differences but a transcendent reality. By the same token, the aristocratic rejection of the body, the denial of any connection with sexuality or death, conceals the aristocrat's position in the social taxonomy as based on a set of physical characteristics. Used to support the fantasy of difference in kind, the denial of the body also bolsters the more basic notion of difference in degree by concealing the etiology of the social hierarchy.

Sexuality and death are privileged concerns in this denial because they threaten the aristocratic ideology on a number of levels. They challenge the notion of difference in kind not simply because they are biological rather than spiritual processes but because they are universal. If the local cemetery contains the “representatives of august names” as well as anonymous graves, if Emily experiences sexual desire, then the body is common to all, and aristocrats do not differ in kind from those who are begotten, born, and die. More subtly, sexuality and death threaten the concept of difference in degree. As physical facts common to all, they implicitly question a social hierarchy based on superficial physical differences, suggesting a fundamental human sameness that invalidates a taxonomy based on race and gender. On a more practical level, sexuality is additionally dangerous because it can lead to the violation of class distinctions, bringing together the Southern lady and the Yankee day-laborer. By joining what should be kept separate, most notably in the mixing of genes, sexuality threatens the stability of the social taxonomy. At the deepest level, however, sexuality and death must be expelled from the aristocratic world because they involve the elimination of difference itself, as John Irwin's persuasive reading of Freud reveals.<sup>11</sup> Sexuality blends opposites, joining masculine and feminine into a unity in intercourse. Death eradicates the equally basic distinction of animate and inanimate, as the sight of Homer rotted beneath his nightshirt and “inextricable” from the bed on which he lies so graphically indicates. Predicated on the validity of immutable distinctions, the aristocratic ideology must ignore the subversive implications of the body. The denial of sexuality and death is finally an insistence on the possibility of taxonomy itself.

As a cultural ideology, the aristocratic ideal provides a context for the obsessions of Emily and her father. Sexual repression, Oedipal fixation, the evasion of death and time: the driving forces of the Griersons' psychology can be seen to originate in a rejection of the body. The story's presentation of an aristocratic ideology does not serve simply to clarify the ultimate origins of Emily's motives, however. Contrasted with a contrary, democratic view, it forms part of a larger conflict at work in the story. It is, finally, the clash of aristocratic and democratic perspectives that generates Miss Emily's curious undecidability and is the underlying significance of her story.

As one would expect, the democratic ideology is primarily evident among the citizens of Jefferson. Less clearly developed than its aristocratic counterpart, perhaps because it is an inversion of it, the democratic view is based on a denial of the validity of distinctions between people. Thus the aldermen insist that Emily pay taxes like everyone else, implicitly challenging the assumption that aristocrats, as makers of the law, are above it. The townspeople are also delighted when Emily is “humanized” by poverty, reduced like them to a daily concern over expenses. Such rejections of the social taxonomy are supported by reference to the universal characteristics of the body. When the smell of death develops around Emily's house, the townspeople see it as proof of the “link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons.” Given this link, the essential biological sameness of all people, the townspeople see the aristocratic perspective not as the identification of actual differences but as an almost fraudulent insistence on false ones. They take Mr. Grierson's fastidiousness about Emily's suitors as evidence that “the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were.” As such, Emily's affair with Homer has something of the quality of an unmasking, a tacit admission of what the Griersons “really are.” It is no wonder, then, that the townspeople

finally side with Emily's recognition of her sexuality, the sign of her similarity to her neighbors. Enthusiastically forming a "cabal," the citizens of Jefferson become Emily's "allies" against the female cousins, "even more Grierson" than Emily, who have arrived on the scene to uphold aristocratic pretensions.

The democratic view not only insists on the fraudulence of social distinctions but also stresses the obliteration of difference: the violation of social barriers, mixture rather than separation. The attitude is most clearly defined in the townspeople's relation to Emily's house. The townspeople's persistent desire to enter the Grierson home seems to come less from curiosity as to how the other half lives than from an urge to overcome class barriers. When the townsmen surreptitiously come to eradicate the smell around Emily's house by sprinkling lime, they go so far as to break open the cellar door. Like the later forcing of the door to the room that no one has seen in forty years, the action seems excessively violent, a reaction to the physical symbol of social exclusion, the closed door. More significantly, given the distribution of the lime into the cellar "with a regular sowing motion," the incident also suggests sexual violation, an implication evident in two parallel scenes. The entry of the aldermen into the parlor, with its "close" smell of disuse, sends the dust "spinning with slow motes" about their thighs, and the forced entry into the upstairs bedroom has the similar effect of filling the room with rising dust. The recurrent image of the townspeople's penetration of a closed room and an attendant diffusion of particles suggests that, just as sexuality is democratic, the democratic impulse is, symbolically, sexual, a violation of social boundaries and a blending of social classes for which intercourse is an appropriate metaphor.<sup>12</sup>

At its core, the democratic goal, based on mixing as well as leveling, is the creation of a homogenous social group. It is therefore appropriate that the story is narrated by an anonymous citizen who presents the collective views of the town. Although he or she occasionally offers the opinions of various subgroups ("a few of the ladies," "the older people"), these views are themselves collective and are quickly subsumed in the larger voice of the community.<sup>13</sup> In fact, as the story progresses, the narrator increasingly resorts to the first person plural, the growing use of "we" suggesting a growing social cohesion. In contrast to the individual identities of the story's aristocrats (Emily and Mr. Grierson, Colonel Sartoris, Judge Stevens), the townspeople blend into an undifferentiated whole. If the aristocratic ideal is exclusion, the democratic aim is inclusion.

The conflict between the two ideologies is reflected in the clash of Emily and the townspeople, in the argument over her taxes, and in their attempts to enter the house from which she would exclude them. But the imbroglio is, finally, less external than internal because the townspeople themselves are ambivalent, committed at least in part to the social hierarchy. If they are delighted by evidence that Emily is equal to them, this is because they do not wholly believe it. It is from their perspective that she is identified as an "idol" or a "monument" to be viewed with respectful affection, and, when the aldermen come to confront her, they do so with great deference, standing when she enters the room and addressing her as "Miss Emily." She is able to "vanquish" them so easily because her imperious insistence on her aristocratic privileges confirms their own latent belief that she is, after all, superior to them. Furthermore, the townspeople not only recognize the social taxonomy but actively work to maintain it. Although they ultimately side with Emily against her cousins, it was the citizens of Jefferson who summoned the relatives in the first place when Emily's liaison with Homer began to threaten her status as a "real lady." The townspeople's ambivalence is nowhere more apparent than in their surreptitious spreading of lime about her house. Replete on the one hand with suggestions of the violation of class barriers, the action also covertly reinforces Emily's social position. Not only is it done secretly, to avoid confronting her with the facts of the body; it also removes the smell of death, an implicit affirmation of Emily's aristocratic transcendence of the biological.

It is not only the townspeople who are torn between the ideas of difference and equality, separation and mixture. Emily is also ambivalent. Given the absence of inner views of her, this is presented indirectly—in a series of vertical images suggesting her social ambiguity. The curious duality of Emily's social position is clearly reflected in the Grierson home:

It was 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.

It is a house exactly suited for Emily, with its architectural excesses and its oxymoronic character. Weighted down with ornamentation, it nonetheless thrusts skyward, “heavily lightsome.” The contrast has been reinforced by gravity and the passage of time for, if the house is collapsing with age, its architecture causes it to “lift its decay.” Simultaneously heavy and light, falling and rising, the house's complexity is also social. Part of the aristocratic heritage of Jefferson, Emily's house stands next to a jumble of garages and cotton gins, the signs of industrial democracy. Yet the contrast is contained within the house itself. Decayed to the extent that it blends with its surroundings, an “eyesore among eyesores,” it continues to lift itself above the rest of the neighborhood.

This odd status, both above and equal to one's neighbors, applies to Emily as well, for she is herself a blend of high and low. As angel, idol, and monument, Emily is continually associated with imagery that befits her status as one of the “high and mighty Griersons.” Thus, during her visit to the druggist, Emily seems to be looking down at him from a great height; her face is said to resemble a lighthouse-keeper's or a “strained flag.” Yet Emily is a very small woman, so short that she must tilt her head back to meet the druggist's eye, a point repeatedly stressed by Faulkner. To look down on the pharmacist, Emily must look up at him. The paradox reflects the ambiguity of Emily's social position. She continues to insist on her superiority as a Grierson, but the death of her father has left her in genteel poverty, an object of pity and condescension for the “rising generation” of townspeople. Like her house, she represents a decayed aristocracy, but the point is not simply that Emily is a victim of a specific historical change, the South's transition from an aristocratic to a democratic culture.<sup>14</sup> If Emily is repeatedly said to be “fallen,” the term is used in two specific contexts: to refer to her sexual liaison with Homer (which makes her a “fallen woman”) and to her death (which renders her a “fallen monument”). Just as her house blends with its surroundings because of the natural processes of time and decay, Emily's fall to equality with her neighbors is the result of physical forces.

At the most basic level, Emily's social ambiguity results from the untenability of the aristocratic ideal. Just as her assumption of superiority over the pharmacist is ironically undercut by her physical stature, her social position above her neighbors is rendered problematic by her susceptibility to sexuality and death, the evidence that she is fundamentally identical to the townspeople. The dual character of Emily's social status suggests that Emily is torn between aristocratic beliefs and a recognition of democratic equality, although the point is not directly presented in the narrative. The decay of her house is said to be both “stubborn and coquettish,” simultaneously a refusal of the leveling process and a coy acceptance of it. The implication of an equivocal attitude, curious when applied to the house, becomes coherent in relation to Emily. If she is reluctant to acknowledge the death of her father, her liaison with Homer suggests an eruption of sexual impulses that lead her to an apparently willing “fall,” a tacit embrace of human equality both in her choice of a partner and in her admission of her sexuality.

Emily is caught, then, between the taxonomic ideal and the return of what it has repressed: the body, with its democratic implications. This ambivalence sheds additional light on the nature of her crime. The action is deeply contradictory, a reflection of her dual impulses. By disposing of Homer, she is able to repudiate her sexuality; by preserving his corpse, she can deny the reality of death. Yet, as murder, her crime admits the existence of death just as her necrophilia acknowledges her sexual drives. On a deeper level, however, the murder of Homer is an attempt to obviate such contradictions, to dispel Emily's vacillations. If sexuality and death cannot be excluded successfully from the aristocratic world, if Emily is forced to recognize them, they can be re-repressed; Emily's recognition itself will be repudiated. Thus Homer is consigned to the closed room

upstairs that, as a combined bridal-chamber/tomb, contains and circumscribes not simply sexuality and death but the entire process of biological existence, from the nuptial relations, which are its origin, to the grave, which is its end.

This denial of Emily's ambivalence does not eradicate it. It is simply symbolically displaced: her house, the emblem of exclusivity, also becomes democratically inclusive, incorporating the physical realities that the aristocratic ideal rejects. As this duality suggests, Emily's mediate position between the aristocratic and democratic perspectives, the uncertainty she suppresses, continually resurfaces in her undecidability, her presentation on a number of levels as a copresence of opposites. Thus she is socially paradoxical, a blend of superiority and equality, just as her house is both rising and falling. And the linked oxymorons of her physical appearance and her psychology can be seen, at the most basic level, as the result of the imposition of aristocratic beliefs on her natural physical state: feminine, she incorporates the masculine; sexual, she embraces repression; living, she takes on the pseudo-death of the obsessional. Finally, Emily's undecidability is itself a compromise between the two ideologies. Simultaneously bringing together antonyms without blending them, the copresence of opposites stands between the aristocratic insistence on difference and separation and the democratic desire for the eradication of distinctions through mixture.

The significance of "A Rose for Emily" transcends, then, the interpretations generally assigned to it: as a study of incestuous love or the South's fixation with the past; as a cautionary tale of the dangers of sexual repression or the necessity of living in the present. Beyond these familiar Faulknerian themes, the story explores aristocratic and democratic perspectives, seen less as local, historical entities than as conflicting ideologies. The point is not simply that the aristocratic ideal must always falter, confronted with the insistence of the physical, the universal characteristics of the body. At a more basic level, the story suggests, the conflict is between two human tendencies: the impulse to identify differences and to erect taxonomies and the contrary desire to deny distinctions. As the ambivalence not only of Emily but also the townspeople reveals, this conflict is less an external battle between different ideological camps than an internal division, inherent in each of us.

In fact, the universality of the conflict is demonstrated by the popularity of the story itself. The sensational appeal of the work stems largely from the nature of Emily's crime. As murder, it breaks the law, the code that defines society by distinguishing the actions proper to it from those that are unacceptable. Even more striking is the final revelation of Emily's necrophilia, which eradicates the basic distinction of animate and inanimate in a literal and figurative embrace. Shocked, the reader is also secretly fascinated. Torn between horror and perverse delight at Emily's violation of basic cultural and logical distinctions, the reader experiences the conflicting impulses that lie, Faulkner suggests, at the heart of human nature.

### Notes

1. William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily," *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 119–130.
2. Elizabeth Berg defines undecidability in "The Third Woman," *Diacritics*, 12, ii (1982), 11–20. In essence, the concept is a recognition of the applicability of a rhetorical figure, oxymoron, to certain ontological states. For an overview of Faulkner's use of oxymoron as a stylistic and structural device, see Walter J. Slatoff, "The Edge of Order: The Pattern of Faulkner's Rhetoric," in *William Faulkner: Four Decades of Criticism*, ed. Linda Welshimer Wagner (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1973), pp. 155–179. In general, Slatoff argues, Faulkner's oxymorons are intended to suggest that life is ineffable.
3. Faulkner's own comments on the story are not particularly helpful. Recorded in *Faulkner in the University*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (New York: Vintage, 1965), Faulkner's explanations of the work are diverse, faintly contradictory, and often vague: Emily murders Homer because he "was about to quit her" (p. 88); the story explores "the conflict of conscience with glands,"

the “Old Adam,” and Emily's expiation for breaking “the laws of her tradition” (p. 58); Emily's actions result from her father's repression of her “normal aspirations” for love (p. 185). In most instances, Faulkner's discussions of the story revert, finally, to a formulaic response; the work examines “man in conflict with his heart, or with his fellows, or with his environment” (p. 59; see also pp. 184–185). This is certainly an open-ended description, and, as his use of “or” as a connective suggests, Faulkner does not seem particularly concerned in these interviews with assigning a specific interpretation to the work.

4. *Understanding Fiction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), pp. 350–354. See also Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 153–154, and William Van O'Connor, *The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), pp. 68–69. Brooks and Warren assume that Homer intends to jilt Emily. Despite Faulkner's statement to this effect, cited in note 3, the evidence for this in the story is inconclusive.
5. Norman Holland, *Five Readers Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 27–28. Compare Holland's “Fantasy and Defense in Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Hartford Studies in Literature*, 4 (1972), 1–35. Both of these excellent studies link Emily's Oedipal desires to the defense mechanisms of incorporation and denial. See also Jack Scherting, “Emily Grierson's Oedipus Complex: Motif, Motive, and Meaning in Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 17 (Fall 1980), 397–405.
6. Irving Malin, *William Faulkner: An Interpretation* (1957; rpt. New York: Gordian, 1972), p. 37.
7. Ray B. West, Jr., “Atmosphere and Theme in Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily,’” in *William Faulkner: Four Decades of Criticism*, pp. 192–198, and Edward Stone, *A Certain Morbidity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), pp. 85–100.
8. Emily's hermetic existence, an attempt to avoid death that ultimately enacts it, identifies her as an obsessional neurotic. See Serge Leclaire, “Jerome, or Death in the Life of the Obsessional,” in *Returning to Freud: Clinical Psychoanalysis in the School of Lacan*, ed. Stuart Schneiderman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 94–113.
9. As a patriarchal construct, the social taxonomy in question ranks female aristocrats below their male counterparts. For the purposes of the present analysis, however, I will assume that differences in social status due to gender are less significant than the similarities in outlook produced by aristocratic birth. For an interesting analysis of Emily as a victim of sexual politics, see Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 34–45.
10. Discussed by Foucault and Lacan, the idea can be traced back to Melanie Klein and, ultimately, to Freud. A clear, recent discussion of it can be found in Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 129.
11. John Irwin, *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 88.
12. Compare Ruth Sullivan, who sees the entry into the bedroom, foreshadowed by the lime incident, as an intrusion that is “phallic in form” but only “voyeuristic in nature,” in her “The Narrator in ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 1 (September 1971), 159–178.
13. Joseph W. Reed, Jr., *Faulkner's Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 14–15, and Nikolaus Happel, “William Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily,’” in *William Faulkner: “A Rose for Emily,”* ed. M. Thomas Inge (Columbus OH: Merrill, 1970), pp. 68–72.
14. The shift from the old order to the new is discussed by Stone, p. 94. Ultimately, the conflict is both diachronic, a cultural shift, and synchronic, an enduring ideological dispute. As we have seen, the aldermen, representatives of the egalitarian younger generation, vacillate between democratic and aristocratic beliefs.

## Criticism: John L. Skinner (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: “‘A Rose for Emily’: Against Interpretation,” in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Winter, 1985, pp. 42–51.

[In the following essay, Skinner contends that much critical analysis of “A Rose for Emily” is “ingenious, but misguided.”]

“A Rose for Emily,” the story of a woman who has killed her lover and has lain for years beside his decaying corpse, is essentially trivial in its horror because it has no implications, because it is pure event without implication: ...<sup>1</sup>

At a distance of more than fifty years, Lionel Trilling's comments seem almost dismissive, but literary critics have retaliated with an almost obsessive interest. “A Rose for Emily” has become one of Faulkner's most analyzed stories and with some hundred articles devoted to it, there is little encouragement for further interpretation: there may even be good reason for *not* interpreting the story any more—at least in traditional terms of character and theme—and for turning instead to more formal considerations. After explaining my misgivings about much earlier criticism, I propose to consider “A Rose for Emily” in terms of the classic formalist distinction between *fabula* and *suzhet*. I shall examine the text both in terms of the narrator's own associative logic and with reference to Genette's celebrated analysis of time in narrative discourse. My subsequent conclusions on “point of view” will have immediate relevance for this story and, perhaps, for more of Faulkner's fiction.

Older studies of “A Rose for Emily” often concentrated on one or more traditional components of narrative structure: theme, character and plot. According to S. W. M. Johnson, for example, Emily represented “a refusal to submit to, or even to concede, the inevitability of change.”<sup>2</sup> She is ultimately an implied criticism of the South: from the University of Minnesota it seems a fair assumption, although critics from more southerly latitudes tend to find a protest against the North.

For William Going, Miss Emily “has come to stand for a rose—the treasured memory of the old Confederate veterans.”<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, numerous interpretations of what she “stands for,” neatly characterised by Menakhem Perry as “Emily perceived by synecdoche.”<sup>4</sup> If the technique of synecdoche is further extended, the characters may be made to represent past versus present, North versus South, old versus new or almost any other conflict. But although such interpretation may compromise the individuality—the specificity—of Miss Emily or her fellow townspeople, it is after all merely reductionistic or arbitrary and not always inconsistent with the text. When Floyd Watkins introduces the concept of literary form, however, the result is less fortunate. Predictably, the form of the story is “a perfect vehicle for the content” (a conventional piety of New Criticism), but Faulkner has also

divided the story into five parts and based them on incidents of isolation and intrusion. These divisions have a perfect symmetry that is encountered often in the works of Hawthorne but seldom in those of Faulkner. The contrast between Emily and the townspeople and between her home and its surroundings is carried out by the adherents of the new order in the town. Each visit by her antagonists is a movement in the overall plot, a contributing element to the excellent suspense in the story, and a crisis in its own particular division of the story.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the elderly narrator, possibly contemporary with Miss Emily, dredging up memories spanning some fifty years, is, after all, a sophisticated stylist. He has perhaps attended creative writing classes, is a competent literary critic and possibly wrote a dissertation on Hawthorne. The interpretative fallacy is obvious: Faulkner could only have achieved such “perfect symmetry” at the expense of his narrator's credibility and this is

certainly never sacrificed. The illusion is so complete, in fact, that the story could almost pass as an example of oral composition with Faulkner himself assuming the more modest role of transcriber and editor.

Closely linked to the question of the anonymous narrator is that other central concern of many critics, the chronology of the story. One critic suggests that the chronology “makes the plot more easily comprehensible” and “helps clarify the function of time.”<sup>6</sup> This is a dubious claim, for chronology is arguably the least comprehensible part of the story in spite of the intense preoccupation with time. The narrator only provides one specific date and to produce any sort of chronology at all, the same critic is constrained to interpret a number of “round figures” very literally. Thus if Emily “got to be thirty” while her father was alive, she must have been born in (ca) 1864 and died in (ca) 1938. One upstairs room “which no one had seen in forty years” was therefore sealed in 1898 (approximations have already been replaced by fixed dates): inside the room there has lain a putrefying corpse, although its stench was miraculously eliminated by sprinkling the nearby cellar and outhouses with lime. A different kind of discrepancy is provided by Miss Emily's death, which apparently occurs some eight years after Faulkner has written and published the story.

Another detailed account of the chronology of “A Rose for Emily” is provided by Helen Nebeker,<sup>7</sup> who presents ingenious solutions for the discrepancies in McGlynn's analysis. She suggests that the upstairs room was actually sealed by an unknown hand as soon as Homer Barron had been poisoned, which would certainly have eliminated the smell more effectively than the sprinkling of lime in a distant part of the house. As for the date 1894, we are told that this actually refers not to the death of Emily's father but to the remission of taxes. The word remission (Latin: *remittere*) specifically suggests that the tax exemption was to apply retroactively: Emily's father in fact died much earlier (say 1884), Emily herself was born (ca) 1854 and was thus respectably dead and buried before Faulkner wrote the story. Our versatile narrator now displays a familiarity with Latin and some working knowledge, however erratic, of English etymology.

The exact chronology is actually of little interest or relevance and may indeed be irrecoverable. Any small discrepancies in the text are quite compatible with the character of the narrator. As Menakhem Perry sensibly suggests, events are defined solely in temporal relation to each other and time provides no key to the structure of the story. Perry's study is one of two recent discussions of the story which, in scope and penetration, far surpass the contributions of earlier critics.

His analysis of “A Rose for Emily” is an application of his theory of literary dynamics. The latter is based on a distinction between “Model-oriented orientations” (where the text obeys some social or literary convention with which the reader is familiar: sonnet, tragedy etc.) and “Rhetorical or reader-oriented motivations” (where the reading process is controlled by internal rhetoric).<sup>8</sup> “A Rose for Emily” clearly belongs to the second category. The analysis is supported by the results of modern experimental psychology in the study of such phenomena as the primacy effect. The resultant “psychopoetics” directed at the text itself provides what is often, in essence, a (very) “close reading” of a fairly traditional kind: the latter emphasizes metonymic and synecdochic relations and contrasts the *story* of a female psychopath with the *point of view* of the indulgent narrator and, indirectly, the awestruck townspeople.

A second modern study, Hendricks' syntagmatic analysis,<sup>9</sup> concentrates on “formal construction,” which is regarded, together with character and theme, as one of the three traditional components of narrative structure. Hendricks divides the plot into “narrative propositions,” within which his “agents” or “patients” can, at a given time, exercise one of five “particular functions.” His next stage is to group “narrative propositions” into “episodes” before attempting to adduce the interrelationship of the episodes. The internal cohesion of each episode is explained with the help of Bremond's notion of “narrative cycle” and its three stages of virtuality, actualization and completion: but the external cohesion of each episode, that is “its relation to the other episodes and to the plot as a whole,” can only be accounted for by dividing the narrative structure of the story into two subplots.

Clearly, such superficial summary can hardly do justice to the theoretical rigor of Hendricks' analysis, although two points in his argument give cause for concern. In one instance, he states categorically that he will not deal with theme (analysis of formal organization will provide “the necessary foundation for a later semantic interpretation”): and yet he adopts the common critical view that the story's theme is past versus present, actually distinguishing his Protagonist Set from his Antagonist Set by these labels. In addition to this preemptive maneuver, he complains that treatises of literary theory avoid definitions of plot (if one excepts the “bromides” offered to college freshmen) but does not offer one, himself, in more than forty pages of theorizing.

With such inconsistencies apparent in the most sophisticated studies, it may be prudent to begin with a simpler, almost reductionistic, analysis of the text.

Although the passage of time in “A Rose for Emily” is of great importance, and critical interest in precise chronology is extremely keen, the underlying structure of the story, paradoxically, depends less on temporality than on the associative logic of the narrator. A preliminary reading suggests that the narrator's reminiscences are consciously grouped around major events, which occur at the rate of two per section throughout the story. This organization may be regarded as that of the author (exercising a quasi-editorial function) although the actual transitions between scenes, which are the narrator's own, reflect varying degrees of coherence, as one might expect of this autonomous, fictional figure. The division of narrator and author/editor will be clear from the following:

## **SECTION I**

The first reminiscences are motivated by an account of Miss Emily's funeral. There follows a description of the house—like Miss Emily, associated with a vanished epoch—and Miss Emily's “hereditary obligation upon the town.” This, in turn, takes us back to 1894, to Colonel Sartoris and the remission of taxes. The subject of tax exemption triggers a fresh set of memories and the unsuccessful attempt of mayor and alderman, a generation later, to end Miss Emily's favored status.

## **SECTION II**

Emily's “rout” of mayor and alderman in the matter of taxes recalls a similar “victory” some thirty years earlier over an obnoxious smell. The transition here is less logical; if Emily kept her tax privileges by mere obtuseness, over the smell there was not even a confrontation (she had merely skulked at an upstairs window while her house was defumigated). “She vanquished them horse and foot” seems excessive to describe either occasion, although it skillfully suggests the narrator's admiration without unduly compromising his reliability. The new sympathy of the townspeople for Miss Emily, contrasted with their previous mixed emotions, provides the cue for a fresh set of reminiscences from the period terminating with her father's death.

## **SECTION III**

The narrator now jumps, arbitrarily it might seem, to the arrival of Homer Barron, but this event had coincided with the reemergence of Miss Emily after her father's death so the associative logic is clear. In her relationship with Homer Barron Miss Emily is quite indifferent to public censure and her attitude sparks off a second set of reminiscences, the purchase and delivery of the poison, where she had been equally intransigent.

## **SECTION IV**

The fourth section offers some resistance to the “rule of two” and therefore a warning against forcing the narrative into preconceived patterns, however rudimentary. The account of Miss Emily and Barron follows quite naturally from the narrator's initial assumption that the poison was purchased for the suicide of an

unrequited lover.

Miss Emily's subsequent domestic arrangements for Homer and his sudden disappearance may belong to the same set, but are only described after a short interpolation on the subject of the Alabama relatives.

The stimulus for the second group of reminiscences is, however, clear enough. It comes from the contrast in appearance when she is next seen in public and begins the account of her mental and physical decline, ending with her death.

## SECTION V

The last section, a natural enough sequel to the previous one, first describes Emily's funeral. The town comes to *look at* Miss Emily with mingled curiosity and respect, while the activity of *examining* provides the transition to a final indelible memory: the opening of the upstairs room and the discovery of its macabre contents.

The associative logic of the narrator is obviously responsible for the extended series of time-leaps in the text. These complicated departures from linear narration are nonetheless highly susceptible to the methodology for analyzing time developed by Genette.<sup>10</sup>

Genette's extended treatment also forms the basis for the discussion of time in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's useful treatise *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*.<sup>11</sup> After Genette, Rimmon-Kenan discusses *anchronies* or the discrepancy between *story-order* and *text-order*. Both writers avoid the psychological and cinematic connotations of “flashback” or “foreshadowing” in favor of the terms *analepsis* and *prolepsis*. *Analepses* may be *external* or *internal*, depending on whether or not they precede in time the starting point of the *first narrative*.

A second aspect of temporality is *duration*: the fictional norm is defined as a *temporal/spatial relationship* between duration in the story (minutes, hours, days, etc.) and the length of text devoted to it. The resulting *constancy of pace* may be modified by acceleration or deceleration, and ultimately *ellipsis* (omission) or *descriptive* pause, respectively. Between these two poles, however, text tends either to *summary* or *scene*.

A third temporal component is frequency, “The relation between the number of times an event appears in the story and the number of times it is narrated or mentioned in the text.” The narration of an event may be *singulative* (“telling what ‘happened’ once”), *repetitive* (“telling *n* times what ‘happened’ once”) or *iterative* (telling once what ‘happened’ *n* times).

Order, duration and frequency are all important in “A Rose for Emily,” as a second brief analysis will show.

In the opening paragraph of the story, the narrator mentions the death of Miss Emily and, more specifically, the reactions of curious or respectful townspeople. There is a brief anticipation of Emily's death in the middle of Section IV (“Up to the day of her death at seventy four ...”), followed by two paragraphs describing the actual event at the end of the section. The linear narrative is not resumed until the final section, with the amplified account of the funeral and the revelations of the upstairs room.

## SECTION I

After the initial paragraph of first narrative (the funeral), the text proceeds by way of descriptive pause (the house) to the two major instances of analepsis in the section—external like all subsequent ones in that they refer to events before the funeral.

The second more extended analepsis blends clearly marked *summary* (“on the first of the year ...” “February came” ... “a week later” etc.) with scene (the dramatic confrontation at the end of the section). This sequence also includes the reference to Emily's china painting “eight or ten years ago,” a further time shift embedded within the analepsis itself.

## SECTION II

The text provides two more external analepses separated by a paragraph of scene. The first of these, dealing with the episode of the smell, tends to summary rather than scene, but may also be analyzed in terms of “constancy of pace”:

After her father's death she went out very little; after her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all. A few of the ladies had the temerity to call, but were not received ...

A period of weeks, perhaps months, is condensed into a paragraph of nine lines. We then learn that the smell “developed” (a four-line paragraph) and that a neighbor complained to Judge Stevens (a two-line paragraph). These editorial features seem to imply a heightening of dramatic tension and are accompanied by a deceleration in the narrative (“The next day ...” “the next night”) before the brief final acceleration: “After a week or two the smell went away.”

The transitional paragraph to the second analepsis (“That was when people had begun to feel really sorry for her”), in spite of its reference to Emily's great aunt, functions quite literally as descriptive pause:

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 ... [my emphasis]

The final three paragraphs bring the second analepsis and the account of her father's death, where the temporal references (“The day after his death” ... “for three days”) may throw light on Genette's notion of constancy of pace, for in each episode, the “norm” is surely the particular rhythm of the “day-to-day life” in a peaceful southern town.

## SECTION III

The first analepsis is the narrator's account of Homer Barron's arrival with the construction company. Emily has been sick “for a long time” and is convalescing when the contract is let. Only some time later does work begin. The exact passage of time is unclear, but the whole episode clearly marks an acceleration of the narrative relative to the previous section.

The transition to the second analepsis, the purchase of the rat poison, proceeds by an ellipsis effectively a year in length. Emily buys the poison “over a year” after the old people began saying “poor Emily” (although there is no clear indication of when they stopped doing so). In any event, the purchase of the poison—if we except three lines to describe its delivery—is a striking example of scene.

## SECTION IV

Here there are two further examples of analepsis, the first of which presents the growing scandal caused by Emily's behavior before the arrival of her relatives; it also covers the apparent departure of Homer. These events may arguably be seen as two distinct analepses separated by a striking example of ellipsis:

... the following day the minister's wife wrote to Miss Emily's relations in Alabama.

So she had blood relations under her roof again ...

where the cousins are installed, as it were, between paragraphs (see the account of this section in terms of associative logic and the strictures on the “rule of two”).

The transition to the second major analepsis again occurs by a clear ellipsis of indefinable length (implied by Emily's physical decline) and the episode itself moves at an accelerated pace through some forty years of her life. Here the temporal referents are clear: “During the next few years ...” “From that time on ...” “save for a period of six or seven years” ... “Daily, monthly, yearly ...” although the reference to Emily's hair (“Up to the day of her death at seventy four it was still that vigorous iron-grey”) must be seen as a prolepsis embedded within the analepsis itself.<sup>12</sup>

## SECTION V

The final section brings the return to the long suspended first narrative and the dramatic events following Emily's death. The funeral is actually mentioned twice, and the text thus departs from its singulative norm to become repetitive. The iterative mode is also found, as in the description of Emily and her father framed at the front door, or Emily and Homer in the yellow-wheeled buggy on Sunday afternoons.

Such textual analysis may seem excessively formalistic, but it can only highlight the apparently instinctive skills of Faulkner's narrator and is surely more useful than the pursuit of subjective impressions. The narrative itself produces a strangely satisfying effect: its web of anachronies, each with its temporal/spatial variants, seems like a series of subtle musical variations, whilst the return to the first narrative suggests the recapitulation of a long-awaited theme.

But the double analysis carries further implications: Emily's character only emerges from the reminiscences of a highly partial obituarist, ageless, almost timeless—now chorus, now elegist (in the metaphor of time as a meadow which no winter touches)—yet always the naturalistic figure of a bemused but indulgent Jeffersonian. With the latter's fascination for Emily and the endless *implications* he finds in the story, it is no wonder that two generations of critics have found so many “themes” in the text.

The nature of the narrator is clearly of great importance, although a recent study was wrong to cast the story's point of view literally as theme. Joseph Garrison dismisses “the fairly cliché observations” about the implications of time and suggests that “A Rose for Emily” is

a critique of that kind of narrative that naively assumes the possibility of an omniscient presentation of the truth and in that naivety, fails to see the contours of its own biases.<sup>13</sup>

It is an ingenious thesis but perhaps more suitably applied to much criticism of Faulkner than to the novelist himself, who should, after all be taken literally (and with general relief) in his claims to be writing about people.

But the peculiar mind and skills of the narrator are central to the story; the narrator *himself* (for behind the patronizing comment on male respect and female curiosity must lurk a male narrator) is the chief character.<sup>14</sup> Emily is a shadowy, ambivalent figure: in terms of *suzhet*, she may be represented as a grand old Southern lady; in the context of *fabula* she is little more than an unusual clinical case, a psychopath and necrophiliac who has committed a gruesome crime, but one which after all is matched daily for brutality in our news media. In the spring of 1984, for example, the inmate of a Florida deathrow announces that, if ever released, he will continue to seduce and then murder young boys “as a social protest” (thus striking a blow for maligned pedophiles as Emily apparently struck one for the Old South); or a mass murderer in Texas claims 360 victims, some of whom he claims to have flayed alive (spectacularly surpassing Emily in Gothic flair). And

yet whether or not such parallels with the external world represent a critical solecism, they are certainly not merely facetious: Emily's case is qualitatively different, although not in the obvious way—her crime, after all, may be based on true anecdote, whilst the second murderer at least shows a propensity for fiction. More precisely, the qualitative difference is that between Faulkner's anonymous narrator and a television newscaster. In formalist terms—and here is the essence of the story—the ugly banality of Emily's existence is the *fabula* presented in all the allure of colorful *suzhet*. This may only confirm that all poets *are* liars, and yet it remains an object lesson in narrative discourse.

There is a celebrated passage in Fielding's *Tom Jones* (XVI, 5) where Partridge is taken to see Garrick in a performance of Hamlet. Partridge is unimpressed and declares with a sneer: “Why, I could act as well as he myself. I am sure, if I had seen a ghost, I should have looked in the very same manner ...” One might pay a similar compliment to Faulkner by suggesting that once he had found a gifted oral narrator it was a relatively simple editorial task to record his narrative and, for the reader's further convenience, divide it into five sections. Stranger things are said of this story in utter seriousness, but “A Rose for Emily” seems curiously resilient to critical assault: and yet, like many of Faulkner's works, it surely demands greater regard for its formal subtlety and less energy on ingenious, but misguided, interpretation.

### Notes

1. Lionel Trilling, “Mr. Faulkner's World,” review of *These Thirteen* in the *Nation*, 4 Nov. 1931, pp. 491–92.
2. C. W. M. Johnson, “Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Explicator*, VI (1948), item 45.
3. William Going, “Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Explicator*, XVI (1958), item 27.
4. Menakhem Perry, “Literary Dynamics,” *Poetics Today*, I (Autumn 1979), pp. 35–64, 311–61.
5. Floyd C. Watkins, “The Structure of ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Modern Language Notes*, LXIX (Nov. 1954), pp. 508–10.
6. Paul D. McGlynn, “The Chronology of ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (Summer 1969), pp. 461–62.
7. Helen Nebeker, “Chronology Revised,” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 8 (Summer 1971), pp. 471–73.
8. Perry, “Literary Dynamics,” p. 36 ff.
9. William O. Hendricks, “‘A Rose for Emily’: a Syntagmatic Analysis,” *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature*, 2 (1977), pp. 257–95.
10. Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980).
11. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), Ch. 4, Text: time.
12. Such “embedded” anachronies are not considered by either Genette or Rimmon-Kenan. The latter, however, discusses a passage from Joyce's “Eveline” where the analepses and prolepses in a linear narrative are “not directly attributable to the narrator ... but filtered through ... the character's memories, fears, hopes” and distinguishes between the *act* of remembering and content of memory (*Narrative Fiction*, p. 51). The same distinction seems to apply here: those anachronisms associated with content of memory are obviously subordinate to those concerned with the act of remembering.
13. The most esoteric study of all stresses Tobe's significance as a character: “The negro servant's importance actually lies beyond the story's end. Faulkner suggests this meaning through the choice of name, ‘Tobe,’ emphasized by avoiding the usual spelling of Toby and clearly implying that he is ‘to be,’ that once he is liberated from the foul atmosphere of Miss Emily's alienation and paralysis his fulfillment will be. The ending reinforces this suggestion, for while exposing Miss Emily's inability to engage in meaningful human associations, it frees *Tobe* from her decayed sphere into a world that is *to be*” [author's emphasis]. T. J. Stafford, “Tobe's Significance in ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Modern Fiction Studies*, XIV (winter 1969), p. 452. Having lived speechless for several decades with a demented woman, acted as accessory in a brutal murder and continued unperturbed by the stench of the corpse and Emily's subsequent rituals, Tobe walks out through the back door, a free man. After

such valuable formative experience, he is ready to adjust harmoniously to mainstream America. By similar onomastic speculation, Homer either finds his “long home” in the upstairs room or should have confined himself to playing baseball with the “younger men in the Elk's Club.”

14. Joseph Garrison, “Bought Flowers in ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 16 (1979), pp. 341–44.

## Criticism: John F. Birk (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: “Tryst Beyond Time: Faulkner's Emily and Keats,” in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Spring, 1991, pp. 203–13.

[In the following essay, Birk finds similarities between “A Rose for Emily” and John Keats's “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”]

Over the last two decades, critics have shown Keats's influence on the work of William Faulkner. In 1968 Cleanth Brooks pointed out that Faulkner commenced his career in letters by considering himself a poet and later even went so far as to label himself a “failed poet.” According to Brooks, Faulkner's poetry bears the influence of Keats, Verlaine, and T. S. Eliot (5–6). In 1972 J. F. Kobler showed similarities between Faulkner's Lena Grove and Keats's Grecian urn, especially in terms of the shared attribute of endurance (339). The following year William B. Stone argued a connection between “The Bear” and the famous ode, with the poem functioning as a “kind of ‘objective correlative’” to Ike's idealistic thinking and, in a later version of the story, as a token of such thinking corrupted (93). In 1974 Joan S. Korenman approached the topic of the influence of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” more broadly, maintaining that Faulkner himself claimed Keats as his favorite poet, that “Grecian Urn” held the greatest allure for him, and that at least two of Faulkner's novels cite passages from the ode directly while others bear suggestions of it (3–4). In 1980 J. Douglas Canfield again illustrated this connection, pointing to urn imagery in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Go Down, Moses* (359, 366–69).

While critics have shown that Keats's ode finds expression in Faulkner's work as citation, as a symbol of either endurance or idealism, and as a persistent leitmotif in its own right, there has yet to be an acknowledgement of his employment of the ode in a work that, as I see it, exhibits its influence more obtrusively than any of his others. “A Rose for Emily” appears to be thoroughly modeled on “Ode to a Grecian Urn.” Indeed, to compare the structure, theme, and imagery of the story to those of the ode is to unearth a series of correspondences that are little short of remarkable.

To begin with, Keats's “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (“Urn”) and Faulkner's “A Rose for Emily” (“Emily”) both exhibit five-part structures. The five stanzas of the ode feature, in turn, a general description of the vase and its attendant mystery; a homage to the ancient scenes on the urn, placed by its artist beyond the reaches of time; a celebration of an immutable if unconsummated love; a vacant polis, its inhabitants away at a wedding; and an acknowledgement of the ode's durability, to link with Stanza 1 and thereby to aid in hermetically bracketing the ode itself within a condition of stasis.

“Emily” boasts a similar architecture. The story begins with Miss Emily's wake and its immediate aftermath; recedes into the past to illustrate Emily's stubborn resolve to combat the corrosions of time; features Emily's immersion into the domain of love and mutability; focuses on the town of Jefferson curiously monitoring her love affair; and, finally, lends us an image of Miss Emily lingering imperviously amid that “long sleep that outlasts love” (Faulkner 61). As in “Urn,” the fifth and final block of the story returns full circle to its initial time frame, in order to underscore the concept of stasis. Like both the ancient vase and its commemorating ode, then, Faulkner's tale accentuates the quality of endurance that marks the genuine work of art.

But let us now look in greater detail at the striking similarities, part to part, of these two great works.

## I

The initial lines of Keats's ode evoke the image of an unfulfilled woman numbed by stasis: "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time. ..." This established, the narrator commences to sketch the other ingredients of the scene on the urn, to include mention of the long-dead artisan who has created this ancient panorama and the enigma that abides in its silent, frozen shapes.

"Emily" commences likewise: "When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral ..." (49). Further reading of the story reveals that the reference here is also to a bride-to-be reposing amid a similar condition of stasis. Hereafter in successive paragraphs Faulkner enumerates the additional components—"It was a big, squarish frame house ..."; "Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition ..."; "When the next generation, with its more modern ideas ..." (49–50).

In other words, an image of a woman unsated and frozen in time, followed by mention of other significant variables, marks the opening section of each work. The subsequent lines of "Urn"—"Sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme"—provide an image that finds a ready-made counterpart not only in the narrator of "Emily" but in Faulkner himself, who indeed acts as a "sylvan historian" chronicling a "flowery tale" of a "rose" in its own right. "What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape / Of deities or mortals, or of both, / In Tempe or in the dales of Arcady?" inquires the ode in lines 5–7, lines that address the inherent mystery of the vase. This mystery finds its match in "Emily" by the macabre truth the story ultimately reveals. The closing lines of Stanza 1—"What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"—delineate in greater detail the painted scene. Similarly, the concluding passages of the first section of "Emily" provide additional specifics regarding Miss Emily, the townsfolk, and the upcoming generation so swift to reject the past. Here we learn of another "mad pursuit," this one of the city government's endeavors to alter the comfortable and unchanging posture Emily had enjoyed from the tax remittance granted her a half century before. Even "pipes and timbrels" finds a counterpart in that stubborn refrain Emily repetitively sounds to her municipal pursuers—"I have no taxes in Jefferson" (51–52).

The first stanza of Keats's "Urn," then, finds an analogue in the first section of Faulkner's "Emily." Both ode and story progress from an opening image of an unsated woman reposing in stasis, to enumeration of ancillary elements contributing to the scene, and thence to a detailed look at supporting figures. As the ode moves deductively, so does the story, not only in content but in form as well: The opening paragraphs of "Emily" are exclusively paraphrase; toward its conclusion, this first section shifts into the dialogue mode, illustrating a less attenuated focus.

## II

The second stanza of "Urn" begins by distinguishing between the secular realm and that of the imagination, which abides outside the domain of normal time and space. "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter," remarks the narrator, who then requests that his piper play "to the spirit ditties of no tone." The outset of the second section of "Emily" draws this same mundane-ideal distinction and moves similarly into the upper reaches. A nauseating odor lingers, a stench comprising "another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons" (52). Several townsmen venture out to the Grierson house under cover of darkness and sprinkle lime, so that within "a week or so the smell [goes] away" (53). As with "Urn," the province of change is left behind for that of the immutable. Surmounting the repugnant world of decay, Emily's story is free to ascend to those loftier heights outside time, precisely as Keats would have it in the closing lines of his ode's second stanza: "Bold lover / ... yet, do not grieve; / She cannot fade ... / For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair." In but a single line "Emily" does the same; the smell eradicated, we glide into

a series of speculations that signal a presence in the more hallowed precincts of modal cognition and imagination: “That was when people had really begun to *feel* sorry for her,” we read. Emily’s great-aunt “*believed* that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were.” The townsfolk “had long *thought* of them [the Griersons] as a tableau” and “were not *pleased* exactly, but *vindicated*” by Emily’s unwed dilemma. Somehow it “*got about* that” Emily had inherited the house; people “*were glad*,” for they “*could pity*” Miss Emily. And Emily herself? Why, she “*would know* the old thrill” of poverty and day-to-day change (53–54, emphasis mine).

This focus on activities purely emotional or speculative at the exclusion of the concrete world of fact and action reaches its zenith in Emily’s own misguided notion that her father has not died, a notion that serves to keep her in a posture as rigid and unyielding as that of any figure on Keats’s urn. As the poet concludes his second stanza by reaffirming the immutable stance of a painted shape with, “For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair,” so does the close of the second section of “Emily” leave us with the image of Miss Grierson clinging tightly “to that which had robbed her, as people will” (54)—a posture every bit as inflexible in hope of love as that exhibited by each lover on the Hellenic landscape.

Like the second stanza of “Urn,” then, the second section of “Emily” flies the domain of constraints of melodies heard and bygone to seek the more rarefied heights of feeling and speculation. Here again as well, not only the form but the content of the story mirrors the architecture of the ode: The beginning of the second section of “Emily” offers dialogue dwelling on such unpleasantries as snakes, rats, and a sickening odor. As gradually we quit this region to enter the more refined plane of the abstract, the prose shifts into pure, unadulterated paraphrase.

### III

Stanza 3 of “Urn” focuses dramatically on that paramount concern of the ode, that of stasis within a world of change. The hope of immortality, of eluding such change, of not growing old and giving up the ghost, heightens almost to an obsession. “More happy love! more happy, happy love,” the poet exhorts as he beholds the vase’s idyllic scenario. This love that stands “all breathing human passion far above” is an emotion too refined for mere mortals.

Accordingly, the third section of “Emily” centers on a fervent, unworldly “happy love,” a love based not on the hard bedrock of logic and reality but on a swirl of delightful emotion. Against her own better judgment, Emily finally enters an amorous relationship. Here it is that we come to learn of that pivotal incident that has prompted her to lower her guard and permit her heart to entice her back into the province of the transitory.

A “big, dark, ready man,” foreman of a construction company, Homer Barron intrudes “with niggers and mules and machines” to transform the face of Jefferson. His contagious good nature entices children to “follow in groups to hear him cuss the niggers” (55). He soon comes to know everyone in town. A natural cynosure, he occasions laughter, activity, *change*. What better figure to tempt Miss Grierson down off her perch?

Thesis engenders counterthesis, however: This same episode that lures Emily into the world of love and change ultimately serves to steel her resolve to quit this same world for all time. In short, Emily poisons Homer with arsenic and thereby renders him (to her way of thinking) immutable. The effect of this action as it is narrated at the close of the tale’s third section provides a black-humored analogue to the lines of the ode that occupy a corresponding position. As the last portion of Stanza 3 of “Urn” tells of a love “that leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d, / A burning forehead and a parching tongue,” so no doubt the unfortunate Homer entered the domain of Emily’s eternal love enduring quite the same symptoms—a “burning forehead” and a “parching tongue.”

## IV

Stanza 4 of the ode features a sacrifice, a priest, and a group of townspeople witnessing the wedding of two lovers, a marriage doomed to remain unconsummated, inasmuch as the postures of bride and groom are frozen eternally. “Emily” follows this pattern. The opening line of Stanza 4—“Who are these coming to the sacrifice?”—finds its counterpart at the outset of the fourth section of the story: “So the next day we all said, ‘She will kill herself’; and we said it would be the best thing” (57). Hereafter each line of the ode offers an image of onlookers viewing death through sacrifice. “To what green altar, O mysterious priest, / Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies, / And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?” Matching this image is Emily's formal preparation of Homer for her own ritual, her ordering of “a man's toilet set in silver, with the letters H. B. on each piece” (57), her readying of this “big, dark, ready man” like a homicidal priestess as she carefully discards his collar, tie, and suit.

Here, too, it is that the ode not only sketches in finer relief the shapes on the vessel but also for the first time—and in marked contrast to what has come before—employs a series of active, present-tense verbs to accord these shapes some motion. In Stanza 1 the verb governing these figures is the immobile, copulative “are.” In Stanza 2 the pipes provide the only activity, activity arising not from the scene, however, but from the narrator himself who beseeches such pipes to “play on.” Stanza 2 maintains this state of abeyance; a series of negations checks all hope of action. The fair youth “canst not leave”; the bold lover “never, never canst ... kiss”; the bride “cannot fade”; her groom “hast not thy bliss.” Stanza 3 sustains the negation process—“cannot shed / Your leaves”—as all the while the narrator reveres that “happy, happy love” that lingers forever. Already we have witnessed how the strains of the pipes and timbrels are mirrored by Emily's persistent refrain about not paying her taxes. Now the “happy melodist, unwearied, / For ever piping songs for ever new” of Stanza 3 finds a counterpart in the corresponding section of the story: We witness Emily engaged in dialogue with a druggist.

As mentioned above, this pattern alters abruptly in Stanza 4, however. The narrator inquires, “Who are these *coming* to the sacrifice?” The priest eagerly “lead'st the heifer *lowing* at the skies.” The polis finds itself “*emptied* of folks this pious morn,” a phrase implying the active gesture of departure (emphasis mine). The shapes on the urn have begun to move, leaving the town to itself: “And, little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be. ...”

Similarly, the fourth section of “Emily,” for the first time in the story, highlights activity. Here Homer disappears, returns, disappears. Here time comes to be measured not so much by the clock as by its debilitating effect. “Daily, monthly, yearly we watched the negro grow grayer and more stooped, going in and out with the market basket,” the narrator reports of that other figure of Emily's household, and his mention of “going in and out” effectively links active process to time. Emily's cousins depart her home; some six months later we encounter Emily with hair “turning grayer and grayer,” hair not merely gray but “of a vigorous iron-gray like hair of an *active* man” (58–59, emphasis mine). Emily's entry into the realm of doing is taking its toll.

Notably, the newfound quality of Emily's hair hints that, first, she is playing a more aggressive if unseen role behind the scenes, and, second, she is somehow adopting a male role, which thus permits her story to imitate all the more the blueprint of “Urn,” wherein the male priest guides the female heifer to the sacrifice. In this exchange of traditional roles, the once-energetic, manly Homer remains passive in death while Emily, one customarily so secluded, quits her stance of isolation to join with him actively.

Also in the manner of the ode, the fourth section of “Emily” illustrates citizens vacating their town to attend a ritual. First, there is the image of empty streets: “So we were not surprised when Homer Barron—the streets had been finished some time since—was gone.” Emily herself “for almost six months ... did not appear on the streets” (58). Like the lovers on the urn, Homer and Emily have departed their customary haunts to

consummate a “union” of their own. In addition, the governing temporal framework of the story, that of the narrator speaking in hindsight some time after Emily's funeral, sustains this image of a vacant town with its citizens off paying respects. While the matching of Emily's funeral with an ancient wedding might seem bizarre, the analogy holds: Emily's vehicle through which she consummates her relationship with Homer is death itself. When we later come to witness this for ourselves it is in a room “decked and furnished for a bridal” (60). The parallel is a slyly legitimate one, then, for behind the scenes has been transpiring a grotesque sexual unity made possible by death alone.

Not surprisingly, Emily's venture into the realm of mortal love and thus change brings the inevitable. “And so she died,” we read toward the end of this fourth section. “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” (59–60). Living, loving, experiencing demand their dues.

Notably, Miss Emily expires in the downstairs portion of the house. Already we have seen how townsmen eradicated the horrible stench by sprinkling lime “along the base of the brickwork and at the cellar openings” and “in all the outbuildings” (53). A pattern seems evident here: Those portions of the structure nearer the earth are the more susceptible to change, while its upper, more aloof reaches remain the more secure. The gruesome revelation at the story's end bears out this equation. It is high in the attic, high in the “one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen for forty years” (60), that Emily endeavored to maintain her tryst beyond time.

## V

The concluding stanza of “Urn” reiterates the scene on the vase and then poses this same frozen picture against the susceptibility of Keats's own generation. “Cold pastoral! / When old age shall this generation waste, / Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe / Than ours, a friend to man ...,” the narrator remarks.

Likewise, the concluding section of “Emily” returns us to the story's initial time frame and contrasts events of that time with incidents as old as half a century. Once again we witness the drama of the citizens of Jefferson filing by Emily lying still and cold beneath the cold “crayon face of her father” (60) that she had drawn so many years earlier. Much as Keats and his contemporaries have their moment of passing wonder to glimpse the rigid figures on the vase and then in time grow old, so do these same townfolk moving past Emily provide sharp contrast to her immobile estate. Indeed, in death Emily *has* attained that posture she has always sought: Is she now not unlike that same “unravish'd bride of quietness”?

More broadly, Keats's ode here reveres that eternality that only the gifted artisan can bequeath. Time passes. Generations arrive, marvel, and fade on. As the urn's wedding scene remains impervious to time, so does Emily now repose securely in that “long sleep that outlasts love.” Nor is Emily alone in this particular perception of death as a means of escape. The elderly attending her wake “confus[e] time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow” (60). Then, aging allows one to transform time into space, akin to the space on the urn. Moreover, of course, it is this selfsame transforming of mutable events in time into immutable forms in space that so intrigued Keats and Faulkner. Both were deeply drawn to this particular elixir.

The famous revelation at the story's end also follows the lead of “Urn,” by means of a simple pun. “Attic shape!” begins the final stanza of the ode. And indeed, is it not an “attic shape”—Homer's decayed corpse—that so shockingly summons our interest and divulges the underlying truth? In the same way, does not the name of Homer itself suggest a figure of ancient Attica (as “Grierson” might even hint “Greek”)? Just as the potter-artisan's Attic shape is an emblem thrust up against the current of time, so the dead Homer tokens Miss Emily's grim determination to combat temporal destruction.

Of course, one paramount feature of Keats's ode concerns the poet's own keen interest in the urn he describes, as an artist lending commentary on another's work of art. "Emily" shows a like concern with artistry in its own right.

Early in the story we witness Emily viewed generally as a "fallen monument" (49) warranting the respect of the townspeople. Already we have witnessed how she dwells in "a big, squarish frame house," a description reminiscent of a frame that encloses a work of art. Also here in the first section of the story Emily's endeavors imitate those of an ancient potter-artisan on three distinct occasions. A note she writes appears like an antique work—a "note on paper of an archaic type, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in faded ink" (50). She has spent years "giving china-painting lessons" (50). And finally there is this: "On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace" sits a "crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father" (50), her private attempt to accord him immortality and an *objet d'art* that the townspeople come to witness much like Keats's narrator beholds the figures on the urn.

In the second section of the story, these allusions to art and figures come to incorporate Emily herself. We witness Emily propped in a window with "her upright torso motionless as that of an idol" (53). This picture-frame image of stasis occurs in the midst of the most poignant occasion of change, when the townsmen are trying to rid her home of the nauseating smell of decay. Here also Emily and her father appear in framed concert "as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a straddled silhouette in the foreground . . . the two of them framed by the back-flung front door" (53). Now not only her father but Emily herself has entered the artist's domain. Soon she will come to establish herself securely among those other figures outside of time.

The third section of the story elaborates on this process. Again Emily appears in an image hinting the temporal-eternal dialectic, but with an added dimension: Emily may well be winning her fight!: "When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows—sort of tragic and serene" (54). Can sheer force of will blunt Time's scythe?

The last two sections of the story echo aesthetic notes sounded earlier. We find another mention of Emily's china-painting lessons. At her wake, we again witness the familiar crayon portrait of her father "musing profoundly above the bier" (60).

There is method here, of course. These images occur not randomly but in a pattern carefully intended to illustrate an evolving ambition to escape mortal clutches. The static images of the first section—the letter, the china-painting, the portrait of the elder Grierson—are mere extensions of Emily, products of her desire to fend off the Grim Reaper with the arsenal of the artist. In the second and third sections, the window image, the tableau, and the simile of the angel in the window of a church come to include Emily herself, as if her own unflinching will has indeed succeeded in transporting her out of a world of decay and into a domain of more durable, crafted figures. Significantly, it is in this third section that Emily orders the silver jewelry. Such an act, which involves the engraving of Homer's initials on the face of a handcrafted item, represents what Emily is striving so hard to accomplish for herself and her lover alike, to enter their names on the honor roll of those who abide immutably. Finally, the reiteration in the concluding sections of those aesthetic features mentioned earlier serves to accord the story a quality of cyclical endurance in its own right. All the while, of course, this ongoing concern with the eternal aspect of art mirrors the central preoccupation of Keats's narrator.

To conclude, William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" seems closely modeled on Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." While other influences are also at work here—C. Hines Edwards, Jr., for instance, has pointed out parallels in the story to works by Dickens, Browning, and Poe (21)—a bulk of external evidence, to include Faulkner's admitted fondness for the ode and his abiding use of it in his other writings, supports this contention. Internally, the persisting similarity of story to ode extends beyond theme to details of arrangement and even to specific images of unravished brides and parched throats. Even the names of the major players

intimate the desideratum of stasis, of unimpeded being. “Emily” is partially “am”; her surname “Grierson” emphasizes the letter “r” (“are”). Similarly, her lover is named “Barron,” the standard “baron” with a capital “b” (“be”) and an additional “r” (“are”). Her manservant bears the name of “Tobe” (“to be”). As Keats celebrated an ancient artist's immortal rendering of an episode of a now long-vanished generation, so Faulkner paid a like homage to a determined lady's refusal to accede to the demands of time.

Like the lovers who modeled for the urn-maker, Emily passes on, as she must. But also like these lovers, due to the intercession of an artist, Emily has endured as a strong, persistent personality in her own right for more than half a century now. As Emily strove to immortalize her father, Faulkner did her the same favor quite possibly because he too had a forebear in whom he could take similar pride for attempting to fashion an enduring work. Is it only coincidence that the tale of Emily, published in the early 1930s, bears a title somewhat akin to *The White Rose of Memphis*, a once-popular novel penned by one William C. Falkner, the more famous author's own great-grandfather, over half a century before? The entire issue is a curious one, and borders the edge of the controversy concerning intertextuality, or what prompts one artist to adopt the work of another. Probably we shall never know why Faulkner assimilated this poem of Keats so thoroughly. What I hope to have shown, however, is the rare degree of such assimilation, which in itself attests to the great respect Faulkner held for his poet predecessor and his own acknowledgement of that same theme of endurance, which marked not only his most memorable characters but his own Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

#### *Works Cited*

Brooks, Cleanth. “Faulkner as Poet.” *The Southern Literary Journal*, 1 (1968): 5–19.

Canfield, F. Douglas. “Faulkner's Grecian Urn and Ike McCaslin's Empty Legacies.” *Arizona Quarterly*, 36 (1980): 359–84.

Edwards, C. Hines, Jr. “Three Literary Parallels to Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily.’” *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, 7 (1974): 21–25.

Faulkner, William. *Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner*. New York: Modern Library, 1961.

Keats, John. “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M.H. Abrams et al. 5th ed. 2 vols. New York: Norton, 1986. 2: 822–23.

Kobler, J. F. “Lena Grove: Faulkner's ‘Still Unravish'd Bride of Quietness.’” *Arizona Quarterly*, 28 (1972): 339–54.

Korenman, Joan S. “Faulkner's Grecian Urn.” *The Southern Literary Journal*, 7 (1974): 3–23.

Stone, William B. “Ike McCaslin and the Grecian Urn.” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 10 (1973): 93–94.

## **Criticism: Gene M. Moore (essay date 1992)**

SOURCE: “Of Time and Its Mathematical Progression: Problems of Chronology in Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily,’” in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 29, 1992, pp. 195–204.

[In the following essay, Moore proposes a chronology of events in “A Rose for Emily.”]

Over the past 30 years, no fewer than *eight* different chronologies have been proposed to account for the events occurring in William Faulkner's celebrated short story "A Rose for Emily."<sup>1</sup> These chronologies cover a span of 14 years (Miss Emily was born between 1850 and 1864, and died between 1924 and 1938), and they make use of many different kinds of evidence: not only internal temporal references and cross-references in the story, but also historical, biographical, canonical, and even forensic evidence. Given the amount of interest generated by this question and the range of evidence employed in the various arguments, it is remarkable that no one seems ever to have regarded the original manuscript as a possible source of chronological information; in fact, evidence from the manuscript makes it possible to solve some of the problems of Miss Emily's chronology by fixing the date of her father's death.

While critics have recognized the importance of time to a proper understanding of the story—in the words of Ray B. West, Jr., "The subject of the story is man's relation to Time" (Inge 36)—they have also complained, in strong and vivid language, of the difficulty of establishing a consistent chronology: "Faulkner destroys chronological time in his story" (Magalaner and Volpe, cited in Inge 63); he uses "a complicatedly disjunctive time scheme" (Wilson 56) that "twists chronology almost beyond recognition" (Sullivan 167); his technique is an "abandonment of chronology" (A. M. Wright, cited in Sullivan 167). Yet whether the story of Miss Emily Grierson is to be understood in terms of conflict between the North and the South, between the Old South and the New South, or between the "past" and the "present," for the sake of all these arguments it is vitally important to establish her own chronological place in the historical context of the passing generations. What dates are carved on Miss Emily's tombstone?

The task at hand has never been stated more simply than by William T. Going in the earliest of the chronologies: "By means of internal or external evidence, date the major events of Emily Grierson's life" (8). Yet in practice it is often difficult to distinguish "internal" from "external" evidence. Is evidence from the unrevised manuscript of "A Rose for Emily" internal or external? What about references to Judge Stevens or Colonel Sartoris in other works by Faulkner? In general, what constitutes legitimate chronological evidence? In cases of conflict, what forms of evidence should take precedence over others? The "internal" chronology of a given work may or may not prove to be consistent, and may or may not be attached (consistently or inconsistently) to a variety of "external" chronologies based on information such as references occurring in other works by the same author (*canonical* evidence), or what we know about the author's life (*biographical* evidence) or the context of history in general (*historical* evidence). In each case, specific chronological references can be either *absolute*, in the form of dates (such as the single reference to 1894 in "A Rose for Emily"); *relative* to other references (e.g., "the summer after her father's death," "thirty years before"); or *contextual*, establishing a measure of time with reference to historical or natural codes of temporality outside the text (e.g., allusions to the Civil War signify 1861–65; the graying of Miss Emily's hair is a gradual process; dead bodies decompose at a certain rate under certain conditions, etc.). The discrepancies among the eight chronologies are largely a result of underlying differences of opinion about the relative weights to be accorded these various kinds of evidence.

The specific difficulty of establishing a chronology for Miss Emily arises largely because the first half of her story is told essentially in reverse chronological order, and the events in it are described not in terms of dates or specific historical references, but most often in terms of her age at the time. Anchoring this "internal" chronology in history requires, in effect, that we find at least one point of attachment between "internal" references to Miss Emily's age or activities, and "external" references to dates or known historical events.

Most of the discussion in the eight chronologies has centered upon two problematic events in her life: the remission of her taxes by Colonel Sartoris in 1894 (119), and the period of china-painting lessons "when she was about forty" (128). 1894 is the only date mentioned in the story, but its exact position in Miss Emily's life (i.e., her age at the time) is by no means certain. In the third paragraph of the story, reference is made to "that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor . . . remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity" (119–20). This means, at the least, that her father died no later than 1894. We

are told that at the time of her father's death Miss Emily had “got to be thirty and was still single” (123); and when she buys the poison about two years later, the narrator reminds us that “She was over thirty then” (125). The year 1864 is thus a *terminus ad quem* for Miss Emily's birth, and is respected as such by all the chronologists.

Some, however, have taken 1894 as the point of attachment between Emily's life and historical chronology, assuming that her taxes were remitted immediately following her father's death, and that he accordingly died that same year (McGlynn, Wilson). Her age at the time is taken as 30 (McGlynn) or 32 (Wilson), indicating that she was born in 1862 or 1864 and died in 1936 or 1938. However, “A Rose for Emily” was first published in 1930, creating a “glaring discrepancy” that led Helen E. Nebeker to revise her original chronology (“Chronology Revised” 471), and that in Menakhem Perry's opinion leads to “absurd conclusions” (344n26). Nebeker and Perry take 1930, the date of publication, as a *terminus ad quem* for Miss Emily's death, which means that the year 1856 becomes the corresponding *terminus* for her birth.<sup>2</sup>

The remission of Miss Emily's taxes is mentioned twice in the story: first as occurring in 1894, and second in connection with the period of her china-painting lessons “when she was about forty”: the narrator ends the paragraph describing these lessons with the remark that “Meanwhile her taxes had been remitted” (128). Some chronologists have taken this “Meanwhile” to mean that Miss Emily must have been “about forty” in 1894, and that she was therefore born in 1854 and died in 1928 (Hagopian et al., Nebeker, “Emily's Rose ...: A Postscript” and “Chronology Revised”). Brooks's chronology is a numerical compromise between those of Going and Hagopian et al., according to which Miss Emily, born in 1852, would have been 42 in 1894. Perry also takes this “Meanwhile” as indicative of simultaneity: “She was exempted from taxation in the period when she gave china-painting lessons” (344–26). In other words, much of the discrepancy among the various chronologies can be understood as a result of the choice of where to attach the historical “anchor” of the remission of taxes in 1894: to the death of Miss Emily's father when she was “over thirty,” or to the china-painting period when she was “about forty”?

Surprisingly, what no one seems to have noticed or taken seriously is that in the original manuscript Faulkner assigned a different date to the remission of Miss Emily's taxes and a specific date to her father's death: the corresponding passage in the manuscript speaks of “that day in 1904 when Colonel Sartoris ... remitted her taxes dating from the death of her father 16 years back, on into perpetuity” (Inge 8).<sup>3</sup> One can only speculate about why Faulkner found it necessary to shift the date of Colonel Sartoris's gallant action back ten years from 1904 to 1894, and to delete all reference to the “16 years” since the father's death. Perhaps 16 years seemed too long for Miss Emily to remain actively on the minds of city officials? In any event, it is clear that when Faulkner originally committed the story to paper, her taxes were remitted not in 1894 but in 1904, 16 years after the death of her father in 1888. Restoring Faulkner's alterations and deletions may seem to run counter to the editorial principle of respecting the author's final intentions; but keeping the original dates in mind can help untangle the story's chronology.

The altered date and the omission of the reference to “16 years back” in the typescript version need not mean that Faulkner had necessarily changed his mind about the date of Miss Emily's father's death. Had he moved it back the same 10 years, she would have to have been born before 1848 to have been over 30 by 1878, and would thus have been of the same generation as the Civil War veterans who attend her funeral. As Brooks noted,

The “very old men—some in their brushed Confederate uniforms” who, at the funeral, talked “of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her” must have been a number of years older than she.

(*WF: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* 383)<sup>4</sup>

However, in the earliest of the chronologies, William T. Going invoked Faulkner's authority to the effect that Miss Emily was born in 1850 and died in 1924, since 1924 was the date assigned to "A Rose for Emily" in Malcolm Cowley's Viking Portable edition of Faulkner's works (1946), in which Cowley noted editorially that dates were assigned "with the author's consent and later with his advice at doubtful points" (cited in Inge 51).<sup>5</sup> Going set the date of her father's death as early as 1882.

Manuscript evidence cannot solve all the chronological problems, since the china-painting period is defined not only in connection with Miss Emily's being "about forty," but also retrospectively, working backward from later events: the death of Colonel Sartoris, the visit of the tax delegation, and her own death. We are told that no one had seen the house's interior for "at least ten years" before she died (119), and that the visit of the tax delegation (which may or may not have been the last visit before her death, but is in any case the only visit we are told about) took place "eight or ten years" after she ceased giving china-painting lessons (120) and "almost ten years" after the death of Colonel Sartoris (121).<sup>6</sup> In other words, she died at least 18 years after the last lessons were given: 18 years before her death at age 74, Miss Emily would have been 56 years old, so that if the lessons lasted for "a period of six or seven years" (128), Miss Emily could not have been "about forty" at the time, but would instead have been about 50. Paul D. McGlynn has attempted to disregard this problem by suggesting that "Of course 'about forty' might well be a genteel euphemism for 'about fifty'" (Inge 91; cf. Wilson 59); but this suggestion still does not explain why the narrator would protect Miss Emily's age only at this particular point and not elsewhere. Would anyone wish to read the narrator's two references to her being "over thirty" as genteel euphemisms for "over forty," or the announcement of her "death at seventy-four" as a coded euphemism for 84? In effect, the chronology to be established by tracing the course of Miss Emily's life forward from the time of her father's death fails to square with the chronology to be derived retrospectively from the time of her own death.

Interpreting the reference to "at least ten years" as possibly allowing for as much as 20 years is also no solution, since the visit of the tax delegation is the peg from which the date of the smell "thirty years before" is hung. Internal references indicate that Homer Barron must have died when Miss Emily was about 33 or 34 years old: at least 40 years before her own death (equal to the "at least ten years" since the last visit plus the 30 years since the smell), and two years after her father's death, which occurred when she was already at least 30.<sup>7</sup> A limit is thereby set to the range of time included in "at least": her last visit had to occur "at least ten years" and at most 12 years before her death, since if it occurred more than 12 years earlier, she would have been under 30 when her father died.

In summary, the chronologies can be divided roughly into two groups: one group—Woodward, McGlynn, Nebeker ("Emily's Rose . . . : Thematic Implications"), and Wilson—connects the tax remission of 1894 with her father's death (Emily is between 30 and 34 in 1894); while the other—Going, Hagopian et al., Nebeker ("Emily's Rose . . . : A Postscript" and "Chronology Revised"), Brooks, and Perry—links the reference to 1894 with the period of china-painting (i.e., Emily is "about forty," or between 39 and 42, in 1894). The first group tends to disregard the narrator's reference to the remission of taxes as being retroactive: "the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity" (120). Taxes are collected annually—"On the first of the year they mailed her a tax notice" (120)—so that if Miss Emily's taxes were remitted the same year her father died, the narrator's reference to the retroactive nature of the remission would appear to be unnecessary.

This much can be determined on the basis of "internal" references alone; but the references to Colonel Sartoris and to Judge Stevens lead us outside the story to look for external canonical evidence in the form of references to these gentlemen in other works by Faulkner. If Judge Stevens was already 80 years old and mayor at the time of the smell (which the chronologies date variously between 1884 and 1896), then he is probably too old to be Judge Lemuel Stevens, the father of Gavin Stevens, who is mentioned in Faulkner's late works: he would have been between 102 and 114 years old at the time of his death in 1918—perhaps not an altogether impossible age, but one remarkable enough to be worth mentioning. Nevertheless, most of the glossaries and indexes have identified the elderly Judge Stevens of "A Rose for Emily" with Judge Lemuel

(Brooks, *WF: The Yoknapatawpha Country* 483; Ford and Kincaid 96; Kirk and Klotz 349); only Runyan has created a separate entry for the Judge Stevens of “A Rose for Emily” (158).

Similar problems arise with the reference to a Colonel Sartoris who was mayor in 1894 and who died “almost ten years” before the visit of the tax delegation (and thus about 20 years before Miss Emily’s death, when she was about 54). Once again, there is some doubt about which Colonel Sartoris is meant: Faulkner has described the early history of the Sartoris family more thoroughly than that of the Stevenses, so that it appears correspondingly more difficult to imagine a strange new Colonel Sartoris, unique to “A Rose for Emily” and unmentioned elsewhere, who could have been mayor in 1894. Faulkner’s works mention two Colonel Sartorises: Colonel John Sartoris, who dies too early to have been Miss Emily’s mayor in 1894, and his son Bayard—“the banker with his courtesy title acquired partly by inheritance and partly by propinquity” (*Reivers* 74)—who dies too late. The death of the original Colonel John Sartoris at the hands of his partner Ben J. Redmond (a.k.a. Redlaw) is given three different dates in three other works, all of them well before 1894: 1874 in *The Unvanquished*; “Aug. 4, 1876” in *Flags in the Dust* (428); and 1878 in *Requiem for a Nun* (205). This Colonel’s son (the young Bayard of *The Unvanquished*) first appears in Faulkner’s works as the Old Bayard of *Flags in the Dust*, where his death is clearly described as having occurred in December 1919 (351)—too late to correspond to the story of Miss Emily.<sup>8</sup> Predictably, the indexes and glossaries are split on this issue: forced to make a choice, some identify Miss Emily’s Sartoris with Colonel John (Brooks, *WF: The Yoknapatawpha Country* 480), while others match him with Colonel Bayard (Ford and Kincaid 85, Kirk and Klotz 346, Runyan 142).

However, the original date of 1904 for the mayoral edict may help to solve this problem as well, since young Bayard Sartoris could well have been mayor at that time. We are told in *The Reivers* of his propensity for passing edicts, although he is not specifically named as mayor; when his matched carriage horses are startled by a homemade automobile, “by the next night there was formally recorded into the archives of Jefferson a city ordinance against the operation of any mechanically propelled vehicle inside the corporate limits” (27–28); additional information in *The Reivers* makes it possible to date this incident as having occurred in 1904. The Colonel’s tendency to govern by radical edict is mentioned in “A Rose for Emily” as well, since it was “he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron” (119–20).

In conclusion, the neglected manuscript evidence, by allowing us to fix the date of the death of Miss Emily’s father in 1888, makes it possible to establish a chronology that is different from the eight that have been suggested previously (although it differs from that of Perry by only one year). Perhaps when Faulkner decided to move the time of Miss Emily’s tax remission back by ten years, he simply failed to consider the consequences of this alteration for the rest of the chronology. Yet whether the year in question is 1894 or 1904, the internal inconsistency of the period of her china-painting remains, together with the canonical inconsistencies concerning the identities of Judge Stevens and Colonel Sartoris. The ancient Civil War veterans who try to remember Miss Emily are not alone in having to cope with the problem of “confusing time with its mathematical progression.”

## **APPENDIX:**

### **A CHRONOLOGY FOR MISS EMILY GRIERSON**

1856: Miss Emily is born; the narrator never mentions her birth directly, but his reference to “the day of her death at seventy-four” (127–28) defines the parameters of any chronology in terms of a span of 74 years.

1870–1879: The Grierson house is built “in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies” (119), thus presumably during the 1870s.

1888: Her father dies after “she got to be thirty” (123).

1889: She meets Homer Barron “the summer after her father's death” (124).

1890: She buys arsenic from the druggist “over a year after they had begun to say ‘Poor Emily’. . . . She was over thirty then” (125). She poisons Homer Barron, who disappears “two years after her father's death”; a smell is noticed “a short time after” (122), which is also “thirty years before” the tax visit (121).

1893–1900: Miss Emily is “about forty”; she gives lessons in china-painting “for a period of six or seven years” (128).

1894: “Meanwhile” (119,128) Colonel Sartoris, the mayor, remits her taxes.

1920: She is visited by a deputation of the Board of Aldermen “eight or ten years” after she stops giving china-painting lessons (120) and “almost ten years” (121) after the death of Colonel Sartoris.

1930: She dies “at least ten years” (119) since her last visit, presumably from the tax deputation; after her funeral, the room, “which no one had seen in forty years” (129), is opened.

### Notes

1. These chronologies were proposed by—in chronological order—Going (1958), Hagopian et al. (1964), Woodward (1966), McGlynn (1969), Nebeker (1970 and 1971), Wilson (1972), Brooks (1978), and Perry (1979). The first four were reprinted in Inge's 1970 casebook. Cleanth Brooks refers to five chronologies in this casebook (382n), but I have only been able to discover four, and my count is confirmed by the list in one of the suggestions for short papers at the end of Inge's volume (127). Helen E. Nebeker has proposed two different chronologies (the first in “Emily's Rose . . . : Thematic Implications” and the second in “Emily's Rose . . . : A Postscript” and “Chronology Revised”). Although different evidence is used, Nebeker's second chronology agrees with that proposed by Hagopian et al.
2. The provisional futurism of a situation in which Miss Emily dies fictionally some years after the announcement of her death in the “real” world, as posited in half of the published chronologies (those of Woodward, McGlynn, Nebeker [“Emily's Rose . . . : Thematic Implications”], and Wilson), is not without literary precedent: Gérard Genette has noted a similar discrepancy in the case of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, where the final scenes are required by internal chronology to take place “about 1925,” some three years after the death of Marcel Proust (Genette 91ff.). Genette remarks that this discrepancy is “an inconvenience only if one claims to identify the hero with the author” (91n11). In the case of “A Rose for Emily,” the “inconvenience” indeed exists only if one claims to identify the fictional world of Miss Emily with the historical world of William Faulkner; but this claim is at the origin of any attempt to set up a chronology.
3. This oversight is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that a quite legible reproduction of the first manuscript page was printed as an illustration in Inge's 1970 casebook, which all the later critics have cited as a reference.
4. On similar historical grounds, one could argue that the Homer Barron episode must be set much later, since the actual streets of Oxford were not paved until the 1920s (Cullen and Watkins 71, cited in Inge 17).
5. Cowley also acknowledged in his Introduction that “As one book leads into another, Faulkner sometimes falls into inconsistencies of detail.” He added that “these errors are comparatively few and inconsequential. . . . I should judge that most of them are afterthoughts rather than oversights” (Cowley 7–8).

6. In the place of the reference to the china-painting lessons as having ceased “eight or ten years earlier” (120), the unrevised manuscript reads “6 or 7 years ago” (Faulkner, *Manuscripts* 189).
7. G. R. Wilson, Jr. has confirmed this part of the chronology on the canonical grounds that 33, Miss Emily's age when she begins riding out with Homer Barron, is “Faulkner's favorite age for bringing his central figures to their point of crisis” (58). Joe Christmas indeed comes to grief at age 33, but this favoritism does not seem to apply to the Sartoris, Bundrens, Compsons, Sutpens, McCaslins, or Beauchampses who are the central figures of his other novels and stories.
8. The date of Old Bayard's death is irrevocably fixed as post-First World War, since he dies in the company of his grandson and namesake, who has returned from the war in France. Going has taken the reference to the death of Colonel John Sartoris in *Requiem for a Nun* (205) as indicating twelve years after 1876 (Inge 51); but the same passage can be read as 1876 plus only two years, depending on whether one regards the material in parenthesis as coming after the introductory reference to “another ten years,” as Going does, or during the ten years in question, as I prefer to do.

### *Works Cited*

- Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.
- . *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1978.
- Cowley, Malcolm. Introduction. *The Portable Faulkner*. New York: Viking, 1946. 1–24.
- Cullen, John B., and Floyd C. Watkins. “Miss Emily.” *Old Times in the Faulkner Country*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1961. 70–71. Rpt. in Inge 17–18.
- Faulkner, William. *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*. New York: Random, 1950.
- . *Flags in the Dust*. New York: Random, 1973.
- . *Requiem for a Nun*. New York: Random, 1950.
- . *The Reivers*. New York: Random, 1962.
- . “A Rose for Emily.” *Collected Stories* 119–30.
- . *The Unvanquished*. New York: Random, 1938.
- . *William Faulkner Manuscripts: These 13*. Ed. Noel Polk. New York: Garland, 1985. 188–214.
- Ford, Margaret Patricia, and Suzanne Kincaid. *Who's Who in Faulkner*. N.p.: Louisiana State UP, 1963.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980.
- Going, William T. “Chronology in Teaching ‘A Rose for Emily.’” *Exercise Exchange* 5 (February 1958): 8–11. Rpt. in Inge 50–53.
- Hagopian, John V., W. Gordon Cunliffe, and Martin Dolch. “A Rose for Emily,” *Insight I: Analyses of American Literature*. Frankfurt: Hirschgraben, 1964. 43–50. Rpt. in Inge 76–83.
- Inge, M. Thomas. *William Faulkner: A Rose for Emily*. The Charles E. Merrill Literary Casebook Series. Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1970.

Kirk, Robert W., and Marvin Klotz. *Faulkner's People: A Complete Guide and Index to Characters in the Fiction of William Faulkner*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1963.

McGlynn, Paul D. "The Chronology of 'A Rose for Emily.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 6 (1969): 461–62. Rpt. in Inge 90–92.

Nebeker, Helen E. "Emily's Rose of Love: Thematic Implications of Point of View in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily.'" *Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 24 (1970): 3–13.

———. "Emily's Rose of Love: A Postscript." *Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 24 (1970): 190–91.

———. "Chronology Revised." *Studies in Short Fiction* 8 (1971): 471–73.

Perry, Menakhem. "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates its Meanings [With an Analysis of Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily']." *Poetics Today* 1:1–2 (Autumn 1979): 35–64, 311–61.

Runyan, Harry. *A Faulkner Glossary*. New York: Citadel, 1964.

Sullivan, Ruth. "The Narrator in 'A Rose for Emily.'" *Journal of Narrative Technique* 1 (1971): 159–78.

Wilson, G. R., Jr. "The Chronology of Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' Again." *Notes on Mississippi Writers* 5 (Fall 1972): 56, 44, 58–62.

Woodward, Robert H. "The Chronology of 'A Rose for Emily.'" *Exercise Exchange* 8 (March 1966): 17–19. Rpt. in Inge 84–86.

## **Criticism: Isaac Rodman (essay date 1993)**

SOURCE: "Irony and Isolation: Narrative Distance in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" in *The Faulkner Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring, 1993, pp. 3–12.

[In the following essay, Rodman argues that, rather than representing the community, the narrator of "A Rose for Emily" is just as isolated and alienated as Emily.]

The critical consensus remains that the narrator of "A Rose for Emily" speaks for his community.<sup>1</sup> The narrator has been seen as "community representative" (Allen 187); "[t]he narrating character in 'A Rose for Emily' plays no active role, but his opinions of Emily Grierson directly reflect his community's attitude" (Ruppensburg 15). For another critic, "the first person narrator ... seems to represent the generalized voice of Jefferson" (Millgate, *Achievement* 272). Cleanth Brooks wrote:

In "A Rose for Emily" ... there is a narrator who ... clearly speaks for the community. For example, he never says "I thought," or "I knew," or "I believed," but speaks rather of "our whole town"; he says that "we were not pleased" at certain happenings. ... This anonymous speaker never insists on his individual judgments. (The community is a true community and he is clearly its voice.)

(158)<sup>2</sup>

But the narrator may be seen to be as isolated as Miss Emily herself, or as Faulkner himself as a young man. Emily Grierson's predicament reflects the narrator's also as he tells his story.

The narrator is more dedicated to ironic distance than to identification with the people of the town. He keeps the town's secret while giving it away—keeps it on the literal level, as the town does, and gives it away on the level of figure, allusion, and association. He implies, “*We did not see,*” but he presents what was there to be seen. And on a deeper level he implies in his diction that he stands apart from the limited perception of the town.

The narrative weave contains two voices, that of a surface narrator who accurately portrays the voice of the town, and that of a deeper narrator who conceals his judgments but allows his tone to indicate his perspective to literarily inclined readers. The deeper narrative implies Faulknerian isolation on the part of the very narrator who speaks as the voice of the town.

Early in the story the narrator establishes himself as the kind of person who catches a reader's attention with his self-conscious images.<sup>3</sup> We accept him as a story-teller: the daring yet comfortably cute paradox of the early descriptions of Emily Grierson's house as “heavily lightsome” and rising with “stubborn and coquettish decay” (CS 119) establishes the narrator as one who sees associations beyond the imaginative ken of the ordinary townspeople, and the solipsism of “cedar-bemused cemetery” (119) elevates the narrator above the town on his own petard of ironic distance.

Even in the first sentence the narrator's image-making gives the reader an experience of the way the town casts Emily in a lifeless mold. She is a “fallen monument” (119). Monuments are inanimate representations of past glory, and at least since Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms* reflected a modernist suspicion of grand adjectives and acceptance only of the names of places where people have acted with dignity,<sup>4</sup> traditional monuments are especially lifeless to the modern sensibility. (The monolith of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington embodies this rejection of the traditional aesthetic.) As early as the first sentence of “A Rose for Emily,” the narrator establishes both the traditional connotation of monument and the seeds of its rejection.

In the first sentence our readerly defenses are lulled by the “respectful affection” (119) the men feel for the fallen monument. The rhetorical focus is on the “respectful affection” and not on the connotations of “monument” (119) as applied to a human being. The word *monument* is slipped in as the object of a preposition, in a phrase, that is, that carries its own diminution of importance, its own “low profile” as an appendage to the rhetorical centers of the sentence (subject, verb, object). On a first reading, the fact that the women of the town go to Emily's funeral “mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house” (119) is elided in humor. The town's rhetorical strategy is to lull auditors into an acceptance that is, on the second level, unacceptable to the deeper narrative, and to the author standing behind the narrator's limitations. It is a natural impulse to want to see inside a house that has been closed to visitors for ten years—but for the narrator to present this as the only reason mentioned that the women of the town attend the funeral is telling about a lack of sympathy. So in the first paragraph, the narrator has shown himself by his selection of details (the women's reason to visit the house) and by the witty detachment of his images (fallen monument, stubborn and coquettish decay, cedar-bemused cemetery) to hold himself at a certain ironic distance from his fellow townspeople.

Evidence of this narrator's irony may be traced throughout the story. By the time “we” say “‘Poor Emily’ behind the jalousies as they [Emily Grierson and Homer Barron] passed on Sunday afternoon in the glittering buggy” (126), the narrator, rather than being there among those calling Emily lost, comments on the commenters. If he was there and maybe even said it, he said it with a sense of his saying it because it was the thing to say, a sense of his playing his role in the theater of the town. As far as the town is concerned, he is still one of “us.” The town is his, but, like Emily, he is isolated from true belonging in a loneliness of narrative distance that makes the subject of his story not only the subject in a narrative sense (Emily), but also the

subject in the psychological sense (the narrator himself).

Emily, her woman's life thwarted, is left to exist as the last of an aristocratic line, as an eccentric recluse, or as an idol, a fallen monument, showing its gilded crown but also its feet of clay. (The narrator cites the wisdom of the town: "People in our town, remembering how old lady Wyatt, her great-aunt, had gone completely crazy at last, believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were" [123]). The narrator too exists in a rarified linguistic stratum, talking to the town but above it, isolating himself by his superior rhetoric as Faulkner isolated himself from the other students in Oxford, Mississippi (Blotner 264).

Faulkner was called "Count No-Count" by his fellow students at Ole Miss. But the irony of this situation is that, as can be seen in the details Blotner supplies, Faulkner had no fellow students in Oxford—in the sense of students with whom he shared fellowship. Blotner quotes an observer: "It was partly Faulkner's fault ... he had rather needlessly offended many of the students by what they thought his 'arrogance'; the way he was believed to 'put on airs'" (264). "During that period of his life Faulkner was almost painfully shy; he felt that many of the other students did not like him, and he retaliated by affecting a total indifference he did not totally feel" (254). But the Francophile poetry Faulkner published while in Oxford (not to mention the skilled Beardsley-esque drawings) was competent and poignant (if perhaps derivative), while the lampoons of Faulkner published by the other students were not even grammatical (see Blotner 264). Faulkner, who had not yet adopted his protective pose of a farmer who just happened to write, was isolated in his linguistic competence. At this time he was consciously a war hero (a fabrication) and a writer (real enough even then, but not a pose designed to win acceptance among the other literary poseurs at the university). Like the Griersons, Faulkner held himself "a little too high" for the tastes of his neighbors, and there was some truth in the perceptions of both towns, Emily's and Faulkner's.

The town is unable to think of Emily as a human being with needs. This limitation of perception is implied in the narrator's presentation of the town's thinking of her as an idol. But beyond that, consider the time "we" all said "'She will kill herself'; and we said it would be the best thing" (CS 126). At this point the reader has either been drawn into the town's view and has accepted the Lucretian code of Southern chivalry that could lead to such a statement, and therefore accepts the narrator's "we" at face value, or the reader has realized that the narrator and the reader are involved in the irony of a subtle collusion against the town that mirrors the town's subtle collusion against Emily.

It is of course possible at this point that the narrator loves his town with a faint bemused detachment, much as the town "loves" Emily when it finds her "a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation" (119), but the retrospective quality of the narration, recalled some time after the finding of the hair, casts doubt on this possibility. To see the narrator as representative of the consciousness of the town would be an overgenerous perception of the town's ability to objectify itself.

A major problem in the story is the seeming inability of the townspeople to associate the smell of decaying meat with the disappearance of Homer Barron. Although the point is never made explicitly in the story, this inability seems willed, at least on an unconscious level. As surely as a gentleman does not tell a lady she smells ("'Dammit, sir,' Judge Stevens said, 'will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?'" [122]), a closed Southern town does not send its venerable idol to jail or asylum for murdering a Yankee.

Section II of the story, about the smell (and about the death of Emily's father), demonstrates the willful blindness of the townspeople. Although they recognize the smell as that of a dead and decaying animal ("It's probably just a snake or a rat ... killed in the yard" [122]), they do not reexamine their assumption that "her sweetheart ... had deserted her" (122) in the light of the evidence of animal decay. They do not allow these separate data to mix in the collective mind.

This isolation of data is especially curious because in Section IV we learn that the town knew that Homer Barron had returned before the smell (although his return is not allowed to be associated with the smell): “Within three days Homer Barron was back in town. A neighbor saw ... him at the kitchen door at dusk one evening” (127). And no one ever saw him leave again. A reasonable assumption is that, in this town, if he had left, someone would have seen him somewhere between Emily’s house and the train station, and “we” all would have heard about it. The seeming inability to reflect on causality where one of their own is concerned characterizes a perversely limited perception expressed by the contorted chronology of the narration.

Much futile ink has been spilled over chronology in “Emily.” Brooks (386) observes that “At least six chronologies of this story have been produced. Miss Emily’s death is variously set at 1924, 1928, 1934, 1937.” Despite the discrepancies among chronologies various readers had constructed, Brooks still forged ahead to try his own—somewhat of a compromise. He fell into the same trap the others had. Chronologies fail if they try to identify specific dates of events. This specificity is impossible because of the vagueness and confusion of reference in the text, and that vagueness reflects the epistemology of the townspeople. Also, considering the ages of the Civil War veterans at the funeral, any chronology must be suspected of being a little more mythic than realistic. Dates are not important. They are external to the story, which does not exist in any known system of years beyond its own. What is relevant to the story is its internal time scheme or, rather, lack of it—the way parts relate, or fail to relate, within the story. This lack of chronological relationship is relevant because it is central to the problems of the story—personal relationships, perceptions, epistemology: how the townspeople know what they know, and how they insulate themselves from other knowledge. The confused time sequence of the story may be seen to represent the way the townspeople compartmentalize their thoughts—insulating dangerous reagents from hazardous interaction. The narrator’s irony results in part from his telling of the story after the discovery of the hair in language that reflects the town’s consciousness before the discovery. Consider for instance this paragraph:

And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron. And of Miss Emily for some time. The ... front door remained closed. Now and then we would see her at a window for a moment, as the men did that night when they sprinkled the lime, but for almost six months she did not appear on the streets. Then we knew that this was to be expected too; as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman’s life had been too virulent and too furious to die.

(CS 127)

The narrator seems to claim that Emily locks herself up after her lover leaves (as the town professes to believe, although a rereading shows that they believed this about the time the smell started and that they knew the nature of the smell) because of her father’s thwarting her life and because of the patterns of behavior she learned under his control. But the paragraph works better during a rereading, when the reader is aware of the body in the bed upstairs—but works better only if we imagine the town has made the same connection—in other words, has at some level connected the smell with the disappearance of the lover, even if this connection was never admitted consciously. Here Homer Barron’s disappearance, Emily’s becoming a recluse, the smell, and her father’s furious thwarting of her normal sexual development are all juxtaposed in one paragraph. Proximity would seem to demand association, but the town’s mind is protected from such association with the dark side of its psyche as it was from association with the darker-skinned people of the region. The smell is conceived in a simile, which can be dropped from a syntactical construction without altering the meaning of the remainder. Thus language mirrors the epistemology of the town: because the categories of perception are different, phenomena in chronological proximity are not together in thought if they are classified, grouped, and processed differently, at least in conscious thought. On a deeper level, these connections are probably made, but the collective conscious mind rejects them in defense of Emily as “one of us” on that level, although resented as haughty on another level. Like Emily and the narrator as persons, data are isolated as abstractions as the town processes some information and refuses to process other.

Not only are groupings in the town's narrative associational, but the chronology that does exist is vague, couched in expressions like "a period of six or seven years, when she was about forty" (128). This vagueness seems to serve the willful blindness of the townspeople by creating a confusion that allows them to ignore, for instance, the proximity among the purchase of the arsenic, the disappearance of Homer Barron, and the smell. As a matter of fact, if the vague time references are forced into a linear chronology, it seems that the narrator claims that the arsenic was purchased after the other two events, although of course this claim is very indirect and made while juggling several other narrative events and making believe that there is no connection at all and therefore there is no claim to make. This implied claim is possible (or rather the evidence can be arranged to give this impression) because the issue is never addressed. The chronologies of the different events are given in different sequences, different episodes. The town assumes that a spinster would purchase arsenic to kill herself. The thought that she would poison a Yankee suitor does not even form to be denied. To a reader's hindsight, this compartmentalization of events takes on the quality of dramatic irony (the perception or knowledge of the audience being superior to that of the characters).

The townspeople's perceptions do not threaten their preconceptions. Emily is at once a winner and a loser to this form of perception, this selective blindness. She wins in that she gets away with murder because the town thinks of her as an idol and not as a murderess. But she is a loser because of the same idolization. The town is content to regard her as its petted eccentric rather than as a frustrated human being. The town shared "that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times" (127).

For all their spite about Homer Barron's qualifications to court Emily, the town seems genuinely happy for her when it seems that she will marry him. ("We said, 'They are married.' We were really glad. ... By that time it was a cabal, and we were all Miss Emily's allies ..." [127].) "They are married" is a curious statement for the town, another example of selective blindness. Can we doubt that if Emily had stood in front of any preacher or judge and said *I do*, within a few hours everyone in this town would have known exactly when and where the event took place and what the bride wore, and probably too what scandalously inappropriate clothes Homer Barron wore, even if there had been an elopement and secret ceremony in another town? At this point the willful blindness of the town extends even to extenuating what was previously seen as Emily's ruination.

And what has intervened? The purchase of the arsenic, to which the town's response was "She will kill herself" and "It would be the best thing." Without a qualm or a tear, the town is willing to dedicate Emily on the altar of Southern gentility, making of their idol a blood sacrifice. Emily at this point has no meaning for the town except as a Form of form. Nothing is made of this sequence:

purchase of rat poison

(125–26)

"she will kill herself," "it would be the best thing"

(126)

"We were sure they were to be married.' ... We were really glad."

(127)

This sequence is made the straight line for a joke. The punch line, immediately following, is "We were glad because the two female cousins were even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been" (so the town was glad they would take their haughty ways back to Alabama) (127). The sequence is given secondary rhetorical weight by being made a straight line; the reader's attention is thus diverted again, as the town diverted its own attention with front-porch philosophizing and wise-cracking. Entertainment values override human sympathy:

“We sat back to watch developments,” the narrator reports. In retrospect, with the last paragraph in mind, this sentence comments on the town more than on the objects of its attention.

The sequence is not only not insisted upon, it is obscured in the shifts of time, the fancy shuffles of the chronological deck in the croupier narrator's hands. It is as if the town experiences contrition for wishing Emily dead, and in repentance is willing to accept the Yankee loudmouth as her husband. At this point the town remembers seeing Homer Barron return at dusk to the kitchen door—a fact never correlated to the arsenic or the smell.

Although they do not accept Homer Barron as a suitor, the towns-people profess to be “really glad” when they believe Emily has married him. Is this merely graceful acceptance of a *fait accompli*? The townspeople know that “the quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die,” and this knowing entails compassion, a “feeling with.”

The town is more chorus than agent. This story can be seen as the town's tragedy. The town witnesses, and is powerless to prevent, the decay of one of its leading citizens, one of its idols. The narrator may be the only member of the community to examine his perceptions of Emily's isolation and to supply them in a narrative that renders the data available to reinterpretation on a re-reading, but the narrator chooses the conceptual doubling of dramatic irony rather than a break with his community. The narrator, while part of the town and speaking for the town, has distanced himself from the town and retains for himself the sanity and the loneliness of the literary perspective.

#### Notes

1. Several recent works with promising titles either do not address the issue of this [essay] or ignore discussions of “A Rose for Emily.” See, for example, Dennis Allen (whose subject is sexuality and death); Beck (who considers Faulkner's world view and concludes that Faulkner is not a nihilist and that his characters are not he); Hays (who considers historical models for the character of Emily); Jacobs; Kurtz (who considers the rose as symbol of loneliness and frustration); Littler (whose subject is chronology); Millgate ([1973] whose subject is interior monologues in the novels; his 1966 book does not consider this subject); Petry (who deals with diction); and Porter (who does not include “A Rose for Emily” in her study). Millgate sees “the central theme” to be Emily's “withdrawal into unreality and illusion” (*Achievement* 264). An implication of this paper is that the town's failure in perception may be seen as the central theme, and it forms the point of departure for the narrative consciousness. Everett argues that in the “epiphany” “[t]he reader and the narrator simultaneously recognize the deeper implications of Emily's situation” (165–67), but his discussion does not extend this insight back into a re-examination of the narration itself, which is performed after the “epiphany” and is a result of the narrator's post-lapsarian perspective.

While an interesting paper might be written contending that the narrator is female, such a claim would have to constitute a thesis of its own and could not be included as an obiter dictum here. For the sake of this paper, let us assume that the speaker of “only a woman could believe it” (*CS* 120) is a man.

2. Brooks in 1963 had hinted at the line he developed in 1978. “There are plenty of hints in Faulkner's work pointing to the pervasive sense of the community. In ‘A Rose for Emily’ ... the narrator writes: ‘We had long thought’; ‘We did not say she was crazy then’; ‘At first we were glad’; etc” (*Yoknapatawpha* 377).

Brooks' later analysis (1978) is more complex. He recognizes that the community is not monolithic; its “subgroupings ... have their differing emphases” (159), and his declaration that the narrator is clearly a community voice becomes less and less meaningful as his analysis continues. “The narrator is presumably not one of the remaining Civil War veterans,” and he is “not a member of the younger

generation either, or if he is in actual years, he is far from sympathetic with their ideas and he does not identify himself with them.” “Though he is immersed in the customs and beliefs and values of the Jefferson community, he has, nevertheless, a good observer's detachment. He is also an accomplished story-teller.” Brooks' analysis occasionally becomes impressionistic: “I think of him as man in his fifties or sixties at the time of Miss Emily's death” (*Toward*, 159), but it is the implications of the “good observer's detachment” that this [essay] considers.

The narrator's being an accomplished story-teller we may want to attribute more to Faulkner's use of the conventions of storytelling (where narrators are often more articulate than most people) than to insight into the narrator's character, but to make my argument I too depend upon the narrator's use of language. While Brooks recognizes that the community is not monolithic, he never withdraws from his position that the narrator is clearly a community voice.

3. This sentence might less tendentiously read, “Faulkner early establishes the narrator as a person. ...” To say the narrator establishes himself indicates the narrator's layering of voices.
4. Hemingway's narrator muses, “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. ... Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates” (184).

#### *Works Cited*

Allen, Dennis W. “Horror and Perverse Delight: Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily.’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 30 (1984): 685–96.

Allen, Walter. *The Short Story in English*. New York: Oxford UP, 1981.

Beck, Warren. *Faulkner: Essays*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1976.

Blotner, Joseph L. *William Faulkner: A Biography*. 2 vols. New York: Random House, 1974.

Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.

———. *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*. New York: Yale UP, 1978.

Everett, Walter K. *Faulkner's Art and Characters*. New York: Barron's, 1969.

Faulkner, William. *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*. New York: Random House, 1950.

Hays, Peter L. “Who Is Faulkner's Emily?” *Studies in American Fiction* 16 (1988): 105–10.

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. New York: Scribner's, 1929.

Jacobs, John T. “Ironic Allusions in ‘A Rose for Emily.’” *Notes on Mississippi Writers* 14 (1982): 77–9.

Kurtz, Elizabeth Carney. “Faulkner's ‘A Rose for Emily.’” *Explicator* 44 (1986): 40.

Littler, Frank A. "The Tangled Thread of Time: Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily.'" *Notes on Mississippi Writers* XIV (1982): 80–86.

Millgate, Michael. "William Faulkner: The Problem of Point of View." *William Faulkner: Four Decades of Criticism*. Ed. Linda Welshimer Wagner. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1973. 179–91.

———. *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (1966). Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1978.

Petry, Alice Hall. "Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily.'" *Explicator* 44 (1986): 52–54.

Porter, Carolyn. *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1981.

Reed, Joseph W., Jr. *Faulkner's Narrative*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1973.

Ruppensburg, Hugh M. *Voice and Eye in Faulkner's Fiction*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1983.

## Criticism: Renée R. Curry (essay date 1994)

SOURCE: "Gender and Authorial Limitation in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" in *Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 1994, pp. 391–402.

[In the following essay, Curry uses Faulkner's personal thoughts on patriarchal society and feminism to analyze "A Rose for Emily."]

Faulkner's extensive authorial power in "A Rose for Emily" looms evident in the design of a large Southern gothic house, in the outline of three complex generations of a Southern community, and in the development of a plot that dutifully weaves and unweaves a mystery through a limited omniscient point of view. However, Faulkner also reveals and revels in an authorial lack of knowledge when presented with writing a "lady" into a patriarchal Southern text. Although sole author of "A Rose for Emily," this writer knows little about what went on in his lady's, Miss Emily Grierson's, household. Knowledge of Emily proves unavailable to him (and consequently to the reader) for about thirty years before we meet her—before her father dies and lets her out of the house—and also for the last twenty-seven years of her life. He writes, "her front door remained closed,"<sup>1</sup> and with these words, he both instigates and reveals an extended period of limited knowledge.

William Faulkner opens "A Rose for Emily" with a lengthy fifty-six-word single sentence that both encapsulates a community's reaction to death and displays an immediate authorial compulsion to describe a scene through gender differences. This author situates his story in a line-up of men and women conjoined in the desire to attend Miss Emily's funeral but divided in the motivation assigned by the author:

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years.

(p. 119)

Gender motivation splits between respect and curiosity, affection for a representation and intention to view the insides of a house. The subordinate object of the sentence is "Miss Emily," the woman who provides the reason to feel "affection" and to "see," and "our whole town" hovers as subject of the sentence. The stylistics

of Faulkner's language thus serves to subordinate Emily, ostensibly the subject of the tale, and to elevate the town as the truer subject.

Reading Emily as subordinate subject matter to the town renders peripheral much criticism regarding the story, for most of the scholarship addresses the motives for Emily's actions toward Homer Barron. These motives range from sexual repression and Oedipal issues to provision of symbols designating the passing of the Old South to the new.<sup>2</sup> While scholars have treated the story as a murder mystery and have struggled with the revelation of Emily's "secret," a more pervasive secret reigns over the story: why does Faulkner create a narrator with indefinable gender to tell this particular story?

Until recently the narrator has been relegated to a marginal place of importance in the tale. Hal Blythe's 1988 essay offers provocative discussion of the narrator; however, Blythe assumes the narrator to be male.<sup>3</sup> Michael Burdick's 1990 essay critiques Blythe's article on exactly this count and argues for a female narrator.<sup>4</sup> Both of these approaches preserve the binary positions that words such as "male" and "female" signify in language. Because Faulkner has left the gender of the narrator undetermined in the text, it seems that postmodern critics assume he meant one or the other and that part of the conundrum of the tale is to solve the gender of the narrator. The often unspoken concern underlying the quest for gender resolution in this tale is Faulkner's "feminism."

The question of the canonized male writer's relationship to feminism proves vastly complicated. Laura Claridge and Elizabeth Langland, in their 1990 groundbreaking work, *Out of Bounds: Male Writers and Gender(ed) Criticism*, point out the complex layers of this difficult question:

... to write against patriarchy as a male fettered by it does not necessarily result in writing for liberation of gender bondage, a primary aim of philosophical and practical feminism. 'Feminist' tends to imply a political agenda—the granting of full economic, political, and social equality to women. It implies as well a commitment to a woman's autonomy and a recognition of her individual and independent importance. Although many male writers are interested in a space or possibility for expression coded as 'feminine,' they are not necessarily interested in particular women and their plights—or even the general plight of the generic 'woman.' A male writer may simply need the space of what he or his culture terms the feminine in which to express himself more fully because he experiences the patriarchal construction of his masculinity as a construction. He may, that is, appropriate the feminine to enlarge himself, a process not incompatible with contempt for actual women.<sup>5</sup>

From "our whole town" emerges the narrator of the story who poses an interesting limited omniscient narrating position for Faulkner to control. The author designates this narrator both as part of the "our whole town" and part of the supposed objectivity through whom the reader must envision the story.

Faulkner designs this narrative position as a reflection of his own stance toward patriarchal societal structures and toward classic realist fiction. He stands firmly within the constructs, yet by calling attention to this vantage point and its inadequacies, by deploying a bisexual narration into the text, and by presenting Emily's house both as intimate space for the character as well as impregnable barrier to its own author/creator, Faulkner dismantles the structure of classic realist fiction. Both narrator and author participate in and attempt to render beyond the powerful systems that construct them.

Faulkner's narrator suggests an authorial bisexuality through use of a disengendered pronoun; the gender of the narrator remains unclear throughout the story. We do not know immediately whether this narrator feels affection toward or turns a curious eye on Miss Emily and the funeral events, and these options provide the engendered distinctions suggested by Faulkner at the beginning of the tale. More importantly, we do not know whether he or she proves capable of both motivations while participating in the passing away of Emily

Grierson and in ascertaining fragments of her past.

Minrose C. Gwin suggests Faulkner's capabilities of exacerbating male and female elements in the self and in writing as a bisexual connection to his female subjects and to their power as disruptive agents in a text.<sup>6</sup> The bisexual possibilities housed in the narrator of "A Rose for Emily" reflect just such capabilities in Faulkner and attest to his attempts to interrogate the gender control inherent in authorship. In choosing to disgender the narrator pronoun, Faulkner offers what Catherine Belsey refers to as an "implicit critique" about the "nature of fiction" itself.<sup>7</sup> "A Rose for Emily" asserts that gender often controls the eye of a story, but it does not necessarily control the behavior of a character when he or she remains out of sight.

By not outwardly claiming an engendered visionary stance for his or her embodiment, the narrator also creates a bisexual oscillation in language. This particular narrator creates the "permanent state of tension" defined by bisexual writing: "it is generated and regenerated by an interaction between the feminine and masculine, between self and other" (Gwin, p. 10). In such writing, the woman character must "traverse the spaces between presence and absence, between her own subjectivity and her bounded status in male discourse" (p. 14), and Emily does just that. She abides Faulkner's attempts to write her life and the narrator's attempts to speak her life; she lives her life in the white space of the page. While Faulkner busily writes and the narrator dutifully tells, Emily craftily arranges—remember that she has an artistic flair exhibited in her china-painting lessons—skeletal bone and one single hair into an image to display at the end of the story.

Although the reader witnesses Faulkner's words on the page and the scenes described by the narrator, he or she witnesses nothing of the process of Emily's art. Emily thus remains present and absent simultaneously—present when Faulkner's words and the narrator's scenarios capture her, absent when the words cannot penetrate beyond the door leading to her actions. Miss Grierson ultimately proves unrepresentable: a memory, an image, a nightmare, an inhabitant of intimate space alone, a mind piece, a hyperbolic omission. And Faulkner ultimately asserts his powerlessness to represent her.

The narrator does suggest that the community women at least understand the viability of secrets as regards Miss Emily and her house. These women encourage the men to act upon their suspicions. The first concerns the smell that ensues "after her father's death and a short time after her sweetheart—the one we believed would marry her—had deserted her." One of the neighbors (and Faulkner makes a specific point of its being a female neighbor) makes an issue of the smell to the judge:

A neighbor, a woman, complained to the mayor, Judge Stevens, eighty years old.

"But what will you have me do about it madam?" he said.

"Why, send her word to stop it," the woman said. "Isn't there a law?"

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," Judge Stevens said.

"It's probably just a snake or a rat that nigger of hers killed in the yard. I'll speak to him about it."

The next day he 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. ..."

“Dammit, sir,” Judge Stevens said, “will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?”

(p. 122)

At least three interesting issues arise from this passage. The judge only feels it necessary to act after a man complains, but the fact remains that a woman initiated the idea of the smell. Both the man and the woman think that a “word” would amend the situation. Inside the text, then, rests the thought that a word exists to facilitate a change regarding Miss Emily's house; the men state it and the women state it. What this word might be goes unsaid, however. And finally, the issue of the smell itself exudes from the house, from an intimate dwelling, and threatens to permeate the text. Faulkner tries to penetrate this house with words, but he cannot find them. Instead he and Judge Stevens send men to cover over the odor from outside the house. Neither proves ready to discover this particular intimacy.

Gaston Bachelard discusses odors and intimacy and houses. He says that only the dweller inside the house, alone, houses the memories that belong to any particular house and are generated by any particular smell associated with the house.<sup>8</sup> When the intimate goings-on inside Emily's house threaten to waft out into the neighborhood, the community wants it covered with words, wants “a word” to stop what they reluctantly and repugnantly sense. Faulkner and the judge stop the smell and the scene with lime, the word and the substance. Interestingly, the word “lime” has as one of its variant meanings “to paint or cover a surface with a composition of lime and water; whitewash.” Not only do these skulking men rid the community of the smell, but they whitewash the source of the smell; they eliminate a sense. They protect their “idol” standing in the window, and thereby collude in the night to comply with and to shield a lady and a murder just as Faulkner colludes in protecting himself from knowing a woman like Emily by limiting her murderous activities to those that take place behind doors he masterfully describes but refuses to penetrate.

In a pure and public patriarchy, no language exists to address the foul smell exuding from a woman's house. By definition, a “lady” would not have such a house. To address Emily in such a way would have negated her standing as a lady, and since destroying ladies proves undesirable in a patriarchy, only the option to collude unwittingly in her behavior may be followed.

Faulkner's desire to get inside this house, yet his unwillingness or his inability simply to enter in while Emily lives, establishes Emily as psycho-barrier. This woman thwarts Faulkner's ability to negotiate the intimate space he has, as author, created to house her.

In order to demonstrate further his authorial lack, Faulkner lays bare the methods of creating classic realist fiction. As Belsey reminds us, classic realism dominates as a literary form of the nineteenth century and arguably of the twentieth (p. 45), and it mainly entails the creation of an “enigma” who persistently calls attention to the cultural and signifying systems, the inclusion of common plot focal points such as murder, the ongoing movement toward closure and understanding for the reader, and reestablishment of an appropriate order within the plot.

In “A Rose for Emily,” Faulkner abides by the form in that he provides Emily as enigma, Homer Barron's murder as focal point, and the bisexual narrator to exhibit the conscious voice of the tale, but the revelation of Homer Barron's skeleton, coupled with the gray hair at the end of the tale, affords an irregular closure and limited “knowingness” for the reader. Although the story closes in the sense that its words cease, no mention of restoration of any order reveals itself through the language of the tale. Faulkner stops writing, and the narrator stops narrating at the sight of the unlikely coupling of the skeleton and the hair. The narrator sees but ceases to narrate at the sight.

The ideology that requires closure proves incapacitated by an author who forces his narrator to facilitate such a horror. Faulkner thus dismantles the closure and the restoration of order required by classic realism. He also

displays the limits of his authority as omniscient creator. His text ends in awkward gawking; it ends in image and smell: the hair and an acrid smell.

Faulkner subtly prepares the reader for the narrator's failure to relay what he sees in the mock-closing gesture by gradually dismantling his or her perspective from a limited to a decidedly unwilling omniscience. The details required to know something begin to evade the narrator as early as section III of the story. When Emily purchases the arsenic, the druggist harbors a fear regarding the use to which Emily intends to put the poison. When the man asks her what she wants 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. The Negro delivery boy brought her the package; the druggist didn't come back.

(p. 126)

The druggist has too much “affection” for her to “see” clearly what he saw in her eyes. He reveals the purchase to the community members, and they collectively decide that she will commit suicide.

When Miss Emily clearly continues to live, the community refuses to invest in an alternative interpretation about the arsenic. They simply forget it or suppress it. This druggist and the community members thus house information that our narrator could pursue, but he or she does not. He or she remains too embedded in the construct of the community to interrogate his neighbors, a reflection again of a Faulkner who remains too much embedded in the construct of patriarchy to see a great distance beyond it.

In section IV of the story, the ladies coerce the Baptist minister into calling upon Miss Emily to discuss her gallivanting in public with Homer Barron. The minister does visit her, and the narrator relates, “He would never divulge what happened during that interview, but he refused to go back again” (p. 126). The minister knows something that the narrator does not. A piece of information about an interaction with Emily lies trapped inside a character in the text, never to be revealed. Our writer and our narrator do not retrieve it. Clearly, they privilege the harboring of information over the gathering of knowledge.

In section V, the Negro manservant who lives with Miss Emily is never questioned as a source of knowledge. When Miss Emily dies, “The Negro met the first ladies at the front door and let them in, with their hushed, sibilant voices and their quick, curious glances, and then he disappeared. He walked right through the house and out the back and was not seen again” (p. 129). He walks out of the story, most likely with crucial information, but being African-American and thereby an insignificant part of the patriarchal design, his information remains unimportant, so the narrator lets him leave. This narrator, even when confronted with the most exciting part of the mystery, refuses to participate on the front lines. When the door to the bedroom housing the skeleton of Homer and the gray hair of Miss Emily is finally to be forced open, the narrative “we” changes to the distant “they”:

Already *we* [my italics] knew that there was one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced. *They* [my italics] waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it.

(p. 129)

This narrator only wishes to be a reticent part of the discovery. He or she does not want to “know,” nor to act. In this way, Faulkner severely restricts even a limited narrative omniscience. Like the narrator, he has reservations about forcing the door of knowledge, particularly as it regards gender and the death of a too familiar social structure.

Some of this concealment proves typical of the constraints imposed by the classic realist text:

The classic realist text is constructed on the basis of enigma. Information is initially withheld on condition of a 'promise' to the reader that it will finally be revealed. The disclosure of this 'truth' brings the story to an end. The movement of narrative is both towards disclosure—the end of the story—and towards concealment—prolonging itself by delaying the end of the story through a series of 'reticences,' as Barthes calls them, snares for the reader, partial answers to the questions raised, equivocations.

(Belsey, pp. 55–56)

In "A Rose for Emily," however, the revelation of the skeleton and the hair discloses much more than any promise offered or any question posed. Evidence of the murder indicts the community as accessories to the murder of Homer Barron. This murder occurs in the white space of the text, behind the word "lady" and many other such words. No one dares to investigate because a definition would have to be dismantled as well as an entire ideology. By refusing to penetrate this word and to include in its meaning the possibility of committing murder, the entire community becomes involved in a crime. Ignorance becomes criminal; not-knowing correlates with acts of collusion. This community allows a human being to die in order to preserve themselves from the task of investigating a word, "lady," a woman, "Miss Emily," and a world within a house.

The Emily on the page of the text proves a subversive cover for the activity occurring in the white space beneath the eyes of the patriarchy. Emily does in fact exist while the patriarchal community is not looking. She exists inside her house, and this house plays an intricate role in the authorial limitation presented by Faulkner. Negotiating the meaning of images, of structures and particularly of intimate space provides the fundamental issue in this fiction. In queuing the men and the women outside Emily's house, Faulkner demonstrates a polarity of interests that he encodes with differing gender motivations. The men want to feel respect for a monument, a structure erected as representative of a human being; the women want to see the inside of the house.

Gaston Bachelard argues in *The Poetics of Space* for the ability to "read a house," or to "read a room," "since both room and house are psychological diagrams that guide writers and poets in their analysis of intimacy" (p. 38). Accommodating these terms to the Grierson house situates the grouping outside the structure as possible readers waiting for the text to open. Faulkner thus sets up dual enigmas for the readers in the text and the readers of the text, that of Emily the monument, and that of the house and its intimacies. In his gender division, he assigns men with concern for the enigma and women with concern for intimacy. In his assignment of a disgendered pronoun to the narrator, the narrator becomes a straddler perhaps interested in the monument and in the house. The men's affection renders the house something larger than life; the women's curiosity renders the house an intimate container.

In choosing the Grierson house as that enigma about to be entered and discerned, Faulkner agrees to enter into intimate, dynamic and revealing poetic space:

... the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream. Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another.

(Bachelard, p. 6)

Interestingly, in the first paragraph of the story, Faulkner aligns the community; in the second paragraph, he discusses the outside of the house; and in the third paragraph, the house does exactly as Bachelard prescribes:

it affords Faulkner entrance to discussion of Emily's past. Thereby, the narrative of Emily's past intertwines with the present people aligned to view her at her house. This supposed glance into Emily's life immediately becomes entangled with the lives of the spectators themselves. The stories of the house will engulf and include them as they attempt to read.

Faulkner attempts in this collusive suggestion to ascertain the significance of wanting to know a secret about an other, an Emily, but again as Bachelard points out, "All we communicate to others is an *orientation* towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively. What is secret never has total objectivity" (p. 13). Faulkner can only take the reader on an approach toward the Grierson house, an intimate space filled with specific secrets, which affords readers the possibility of an understanding of the patriarchal systems that awarded Emily her otherness. We think that the story, in its classic realist fiction guise, will provide a revelation, a disclosure, but merely the evidence of at least one secret will be revealed, the secret of the unknowables and the state of "being without" knowledge.

"Common sense" codes believed to be truths facilitate lack of knowledge. Codes about asking women questions, assumptions about what a woman would use arsenic for, all are revealed for the fragile inabilities of each and every person abiding patriarchal society to admit to the collusion in which they participate, to admit to the many murders of personhood that occur beneath their noses—literally, Miss Emily's neighbors could have smelled this one—due to this gap-filled framework:

Common sense consists of a number of social meanings and the particular ways of understanding the world which guarantee them. These meanings, which inevitably favor the interests of particular social groups, become fixed and widely accepted as true irrespective of sectional interests. ... All common sense relies on a naive view of language as transparent and true, undistorted by such things as 'ideology', a term which is reserved for explanations representing opposed sectional interests. Common-sense knowledge is not a monolithic, fixed body of knowledge. It is often contradictory and subject to change. It is not always necessarily conservative in its implications. Its political effects depend on the particular context in which it is articulated. However, its power comes from its claim to be natural, obvious and therefore true.<sup>9</sup>

Faulkner writes, "[W]e had long thought of [the Griersons] as a tableau" (p. 123); this collective type of thinking represents a common sense about how to think of such a family. "So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated ..." (p. 123); the collective community even feels common emotions and negates other emotions. "We did not say she was crazy then" (p. 124); a group will know by virtue of common sense when craziness occurs. "We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will" (p. 124). The collective has a common-sense memory and a common-sense rationale for Emily's behavior. This common-sense "we" even has access to the same set of eyes: "When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows—sort of tragic and serene" (p. 124). It is common sense to see her this way; everyone, "we," saw her this way.

The common-sense language in Faulkner designs the oppressive situation in which Emily had to live. Either a "we" or a "they" designs language about her that contains and explains her actions. However, ultimately she acts and slips behind this language. A common-sense language cannot write her. To write about her consistently, Faulkner would have had to drop the common-sense language and to have entered the house during the time she lived there. To do so would have been to penetrate the walls that protect a lady, and Faulkner does not grant himself such power. He opts for politeness and lack of knowledge; to have proceeded otherwise would have constituted a language rape for a man invested in the idea of a lady.

The common-sense level of the narrative language portrays a Faulkner writing Emily as a pivotal agent embodying the end of the Old South. Such a language requires many skirtings, many unperused years, an unperused house, and many unasked questions. Emily resists such purified symbol-making by leaving Homer Barron in the bed with her hair, and Faulkner resists the common-sense language by allowing the story to end in an image of words describing the body and the hair. Ultimately Emily and Faulkner collude in dismantling the structures that bind one to a form of literature, to a patriarchal structure, to a common-sense language.

In other words, Emily daily refuses to participate in the symbol-making of her as a precious lady of the Old South, an idol, and icon. Although she has almost thirty years to bury Homer Barron in the ground, she simply does not. She keeps him in the bed and either sleeps with him throughout these years, or she artfully leaves the hair and crafts a pillow indentation to signify the possibility that she could have done so behind the backs of the community and behind the discourse that symbolized her. She becomes hyperbolic omission.

By admitting to not-knowing Emily, by leaving her to act beyond the language of the story, Faulkner subverts his own discourse and displays the discourse for its constraining devices. Faulkner draws attention to the construct of gender as a posture that infiltrates literature, affects and burdens its language, and adds non-negotiable layers to the ability to tell stories. “As individuals we are not the mere objects of language but the sites of discursive struggle, a struggle which takes place in the consciousness of the individual” (Weedon, p. 106). The unrepresentable Miss Emily acts as site for the struggle to exist between the descriptive terms “idol” and “idle”—Miss Emily was neither—and William Faulkner designs himself as disempowered authorial site struggling for a language that delivers anything like a lady to literary discourse.

#### Notes

1. William Faulkner, “A Rose for Emily,” *Collected Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 128.
2. Dennis W. Allen, “Horror and Perverse Delight: Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 30 (Winter 1984), 688.
3. Hal Blythe, “The Chivalric Narrator of ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, 6 (1988), 280–284.
4. Michael Burdick, “Another View of Faulkner’s Narrator in ‘A Rose for Emily,’” *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, 8 (1990), 209–211.
5. Laura Claridge and Elizabeth Langland, *Out of Bounds: Male Writers and Gender(ed) Criticism*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), pp. 3–4
6. Minrose C. Gwin, *The Feminine and Faulkner: Reading (Beyond) Sexual Difference* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), pp. 10–12.
7. Catherine Belsey, “Constructing the Subject: deconstructing the text,” in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 63.
8. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 13.
9. Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 77.

## Criticism: Jean O'Bryan-Knight (essay date 1997)

SOURCE: “From Spinster to Eunuch: William Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’ and Mario Vargas Llosa’s Los cachorros,” in *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 1997, pp. 328–47.

[In the following essay, O'Bryan-Knight finds similarities between Emily and Cuéllar in Mario Vargas Llosa's Los cachorros.]

At first glance the protagonists of William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily" and Mario Vargas Llosa's novella *Los cachorros* appear to be exact opposites. The former is a mature woman from the semi-rural town of Jefferson, Mississippi, while the latter is a young man from a semi-urban environment, the Miraflores district of Lima. A quick comparison of these characters' life stories yields no obvious points of intersection. Emily Grierson lives her youth under the watchful eye of her over-protective father. Following his death, she withdraws from the world and spends her remaining years shut away in the big house she inherited. Cuéllar, a talented and popular boy, seems destined for a golden future until the day he is cornered by his school's guard dog. Castrated in the attack, he never regains his early promise. Other than mutual misfortune, is there some stronger evidence of overlap between the texts that would warrant a comparative study? As this essay will demonstrate, there is indeed. Under closer observation, the Southern spinster and the Latin American eunuch actually have much in common. Both live at odds with their close-knit communities, and it is from these communities that we learn about their unhappy lives. An exploration of these similarities will prove fruitful for two reasons: It will give us a more precise understanding of the Faulknerian nature of Vargas Llosa's narrative. And, it will provide us with an opportunity to explore the particular efficacy of choric narration, an unusual yet powerful perspective from which to tell a story.

The existence of parallels between Faulkner and Vargas Llosa comes, of course, as no surprise. The frequent references to the North American author in the Peruvian's fiction and literary criticism attest to his familiarity with his predecessor's work.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Vargas Llosa has long acknowledged his literary debt to the man he deems "the paradigm of novelists."<sup>2</sup> He has stated repeatedly that Faulkner was the first novelist he read with pencil and paper in hand, in an effort to master the U.S. writer's sophisticated narrative technique.<sup>3</sup> He has even cautioned his own critics to note that this influence was not only technical but thematic as well:

Sería una gran mentira decir que mi deslumbramiento por Faulkner fue "técnico". Nada de eso: su mundo perturbado y aventurero, trágico y fanático, en el que las más turbias perversiones del espíritu humano conviven con grandes arrebatos de generosidad y nobleza me sigue pareciendo uno de los más ricos y "verosímiles" creado jamás por un novelista.

[It would be a lie to say that I was impressed only by Faulkner's technique. Not at all. His disturbed and daring, tragic and fanatical world, in which the most convoluted perversions of the human spirit cohabit with great outbursts of generosity and nobility, continues to seem to me to be one of the richest and most verisimilar ever created by a novelist.]<sup>4</sup>

Oddly enough, despite this full disclosure of debt, Vargas Llosa's critics have, for the most part, glossed over this connection. Although commentators on the author's work often make passing mention of its "Faulknerian" character, very few have stopped to elaborate.<sup>5</sup> Of these, the only critic to pursue the matter has been Mary Davis, who has examined parallels between the writers' literary criticism and novels.<sup>6</sup> Because she does not consider their short fiction, however, Davis overlooks what appears to be the most concrete evidence of affinity between the two.

Vargas Llosa recalls that he first became acquainted with Faulkner's work while studying at the University of San Marcos and that he was transformed by this encounter; "Quizá lo más perdurable de mis años universitarios no fue lo que aprendí en las aulas, sino en las novelas y cuentos que relatan la saga de Yoknapatawpha County" ["Perhaps the most enduring memory of my college years was not what I learned in the classrooms, but in the novels and stories that tell the saga of Yoknapatawpha County"] ("El país de las mil caras" 241). Apparently, it was at this time that he came across a Spanish translation of "A Rose for Emily," arguably the best known of the Yoknapatawpha County stories.<sup>7</sup> Although Vargas Llosa reiterates his aforementioned debt to Faulkner in his introduction to the volume which contains the definitive edition of *Los cachorros*, he has never suggested (nor denied) that "A Rose for Emily" served as a model for his novella. He claims, instead, that he based the story on a newspaper piece he had read some years before about an infant castrated by a dog in the Andes.<sup>8</sup>

While I do not doubt that the article provided the initial anecdote, it is also true that the structure and theme of the novella bear an unmistakable resemblance to those of Faulkner's story. The implication of this resemblance, however, is not immediately apparent. Is this a case of what Gustavo Pérez Firmat categorizes as "genetic" affinity that arises due to a causal connection between the texts?<sup>9</sup> Or, is it a case of what he terms "appositional" affinity, that which arises independently of any causal connection and is due instead to similarities in the environments in which the texts were produced? The answer is both. As I have suggested, Vargas Llosa had the opportunity and the inclination to use Faulkner's short story as a model for his own. Yet, as I shall show, *Los cachorros* is by no means a slavish imitation of "A Rose for Emily." In fact, with respect to the use of choric narration, Vargas Llosa clearly develops the technique much further than Faulkner. Thus, what began as influence developed into confluence as the Latin American author found in the work of his North American predecessor material useful for fashioning a powerful and original critique of his own society.

"A Rose for Emily" (1930) and *Los cachorros* [*The Cubs*] (1967) have never before been studied in concert, although each has garnered a considerable amount of critical commentary independently of the other. With respect to Faulkner's short story, commentators have generally searched the text for the cause of Emily's dementia. Over the years they have fingered a number of likely culprits, including her father, her pride, her aristocratic lineage, her attachment to the past, and the patriarchal culture of the Old South.<sup>10</sup> Commentators on Vargas Llosa's novella have focused mainly on the symbolism of Cuéllar's castration and have suggested a number of possibilities.<sup>11</sup> His predicament has been read as symbolic of the effects of a parochial education, a bourgeois upbringing, a homosexual tendency, and an artistic inclination. What my interpretation will add to this already abundant critical corpus is a look at these fundamental works of short fiction in a new comparative context. That is, I will consider the Latin American narrative in the light of its counterpart from the United States, a work it reflects, complements, and develops.

As I begin my comparison, I wish to emphasize that in pointing out parallels between the texts, I am not arguing that they are mirror images of one another. To be sure, there are major differences between the two. With regard to technique, Faulkner's highly disjunctive time scheme has no connection with Vargas Llosa's chronologically ordered text.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, the rich linguistic dimension of the novella has no parallel in the standard dialect of Faulkner's story.<sup>13</sup> With respect to theme, the issue of incest that is pertinent to "A Rose for Emily" is not found in *Los cachorros*, and the subject of castration that is so central to the novella is peripheral at best to the story.<sup>14</sup> I will not dwell on these or other points of divergence between the two works because to do so would be beyond the scope of my study and needlessly repetitive of other critical efforts.

On the most basic structural level both works are divided into segments that relate a series of vignettes which, when pieced together, profile the lonely lives of their protagonists. More significant, however, the two feature protagonists who themselves are very much alike. Both Emily and Cuéllar suffer circumstances in their upbringings that inhibit their sexual maturation and result in disturbed behavior. Emily lives until the age of thirty in the shadow of her domineering father, who stands between her and any potential suitors that might come calling. The father-daughter bond is so tight that the townsfolk come to think 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 back-flung front door" (437).<sup>15</sup> Emily's refusal to part with her father's corpse for three days after his death makes clear the unnatural nature of her parental attachment and the damaging effect it has had on her psyche. It is not until the very end of the story, however, that we learn the full magnitude and hideous consequences of her emotional devastation. The extent to which Cuéllar has been crippled by his accident is not evident until the onset of adolescence, at which point it becomes clear that the castration has, in effect, severed his ties with his group. When his companions begin to show an interest in the opposite sex, he shows an unnatural desire to prolong boyhood. As the others are calling girls for dates, Cuéllar is calling them names and splattering them with foul-smelling liquids. Because he cannot mature sexually, he does not mature emotionally and is thus left behind by his peers.

Due to the circumstances of their youths, both of these characters have reason to mature into maladjusted, unhappy adults. Their plights are exacerbated, however, when each suffers a crisis of unrequited love. Emily is over thirty, past the age of marriage, when she takes up with the Yankee foreman Homer Barron. The townsfolk wonder how a Southern lady could think seriously about a Northern day laborer. Nevertheless, reserved and withdrawn Emily seems quite taken with the affable, gregarious Yankee. Despite his allure, Barron is indeed an inappropriate match for Emily, for he is a philanderer who courts with no intention of marriage. She, on the other hand, grows so attached to her companion that, when faced with the prospect of losing him, she resorts to murder. It is not difficult to infer a motivation for the crime or for subsequently keeping the body in a room “decked and furnished as for a bridal” (443). It is the deranged spinster's desperate attempt to preserve her romance. This severe sentimental crisis marks a turning point in Emily's life, since it definitively severs the possibility of normal interaction with the community. As the narrator observes, “From that point on her front door remained closed ...” (441).

Cuéllar's sentimental crisis is similar to Emily's in that it occurs relatively late in life. The year after his high school graduation, long after his pals have paired off, Cuéllar finally falls in love with Teresa, a new girl in the group. Like Emily's Barron, Cuéllar's sweetheart takes his affections lightly. This becomes clear when the boys earnestly attempt to interview Teresa about her feelings for Cuéllar and she coyly deflects their questions: “... Teresita, ¿lo iba a aceptar? y ella ... ¿a quién? y nosotros cómo a quién y ella ... ¿Cuéllar?” [“Teresita, was she going to say yes? and she goes ... who? and we go like what do you mean who? and she ... Cuéllar?”] (138). Despite his sweetheart's coquettish character, Cuéllar is smitten. Love transforms the social deviant into a “*muchacho modelo*” [“exemplary young man”]. In the presence of his beloved he becomes a mature, courteous young fellow who is eager to discuss politics and plans for future study. The only thing that stands between Cuéllar and his complete reintegration into the group is that, after two months of fawning over her, he has still not asked Teresa to go steady. The group finds this hesitation unacceptable and chides him for it. Cuéllar justifies his inaction, explaining that, because of his physical condition, he could never marry Teresa and, because of the sincerity of his feelings toward her, “*porque la quería*” [“because he loved her”] (140), he would never think of leading her on. Shortly thereafter Teresa leaves him for another fellow. As in “A Rose for Emily,” this sentimental crisis marks a turning point in the protagonist's life. After losing Teresa, Cuéllar returns to his self-destructive behavior: “Entonces ... volvió a las andadas” [“After that ... he returned to his escapades”] (143), and from this point on his life is a downward spiral to an early death. It is important to reiterate that neither of the protagonists' emotional crises is directly responsible for their ultimate destruction; the seeds of disaster were sown long before in childhood. Their sentimental attachments only make matters worse by offering false hope.

While both Emily and Cuéllar are driven to their sorry ends largely by circumstances beyond their control—crippling childhoods followed by failure to find a mate—we must note that both also exhibit character traits that exacerbate their predicaments. To the townsfolk Emily appears arrogant and willful. They feel she flaunts her low regard for public opinion when she ignores the minister's advice and continues the affair with Barron. Likewise, they see her refusal to obey the laws that require that she pay taxes or tell the druggist why she needs poison as further evidence that she considers herself above the town's authority. Emily is willful enough not only to select an unsuitable mate but also to kill him when he does not conform to her wishes. Critics who have observed her strong character have come to conflicting conclusions. For Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, this indomitable pride is Emily's fatal flaw that ultimately brings about her madness.<sup>16</sup> In a feminist reading of the story, Judith Fetterley lays the blame not on Emily's character but on the patriarchal system of the Old South that punishes a woman for being independent, assertive, and generally unladylike.<sup>17</sup> Both interpretations agree, however, that Emily's dominant personality would naturally clash with the collective interests of the community of Jefferson.

Although his personality is the polar opposite of Emily's, Cuéllar also has a character trait that contributes to his downfall. Whereas she ignores public opinion, he is a slave to it, requiring the approval of his peers to affirm his own masculinity. Roland Forgues points out that this particular trait is apparent even before the

accident.<sup>18</sup> Though Cuéllar is somewhat small and fragile, and his talents more for study than sport, he wants desperately to be a member of the soccer team and trains intensively for an entire summer just to make the cut. When his friends praise his improvement on the field, he delights in the attention: “[S]e reía feliz, se soplabla las uñas y se las lustraba en la camiseta . . .” [“He laughed with joy, he blew on his fingernails and buffed them on his shirt . . .”] (110). This is a boy whose sense of self-worth is dependent on his peers' approval. He learns that he can win this approval by displaying virility, in this case athletic prowess. The castration, therefore, does not change Cuéllar's character so much as aggravate it. After the accident his antics seem calculated to prove his virility to the rest of the group: “Se hacía el loco para impresionar, pero también para ¿viste, viste? sacarle cachita a Lalo, tú no te atreviste y yo sí me atreví” [“He acted like a nut to show off, but also to—see that? see that?—to show up Lalo, you didn't take the dare, but I did”] (125). Just after losing Teresa, he performs an especially dangerous stunt—surfing on a blustery day when the rest of his friends do not dare venture into the churning waters. We can see in this reckless display of bravado a development which was foreshadowed prior to his being attacked by the dog. It is because he has always been unsure of his own virility that the emasculation proves so debilitating. A young man with a stronger self-image might have been less devastated by this particular deformity, but in Cuéllar's case the physical loss serves to cement the emotional insecurity. Thus, for Cuéllar, as well as Emily, it is the combination of character and circumstance that factor into the formula for disaster.

In addition to their opposite but complementary personalities, both protagonists have a common problem: they fear the natural passing of time and attempt to resist it by socially unacceptable means. When Emily reemerges after her illness following her father's death, her hair is cut short “making her look like a girl” (438) rather than a woman of thirty-some years. As Jefferson begins to modernize, she clings to the past. She refuses to accept free postal delivery when it comes to town or to pay municipal taxes when they are reinstated. Most telling of all, she poisons her beloved and places him in a mock bridal bed, where he lies frozen in time for over forty years. This ghastly yet poignant act demonstrates the desperate extent to which she is prepared to go to stop the flow of time. Like Emily, Cuéllar too clings to the past. He amuses himself with childhood diversions such as sports and movies, while the other boys are exploring the adolescent pastimes of girls and parties. Upon graduation from high school he refuses to take on adult responsibilities. While his friends pursue professional studies or work, he continues to be supported by his parents and to spend his time playing with young boys. Cuéllar's problem with time, like Emily's, drives him to murder. He kills himself, not surprisingly, in pursuit of juvenile pleasures: he crashes his sports car. On this point in particular our comparison of the two characters allows us to discern the peculiarities of each. It is entirely fitting that Emily should actively choose another as her victim while Cuéllar should passively turn on himself. The former, because of her willful nature, tries to make the world conform to her desires, while the latter, because of his insecurity, has himself removed from a world to which he cannot conform.

We must bear in mind, of course, that any assessment we may make of the personalities of the protagonists is based on hearsay. Since we see them only through the eyes of the narrators, they never get a chance to speak for themselves. One consequence of this perspective is that key events that occur away from the narrators' watchful eyes, such as the poisoning of Homer Barron or Cuéllar's final crash, cannot be recounted directly. These lacunae are unlike those found in the authors' novels in that they do not require the reader to struggle with ambiguities.<sup>19</sup> We avoid confusion because the texts offer ample clues that allow us to fill in the gaps and thus account for the protagonists' often erratic behavior. For example, we can easily infer, as do the citizens of Jefferson, the method and motivation for Barron's murder since it was shortly after he declared that he was “not a marrying man” (440) that Emily was seen buying arsenic. Similarly, although we have only sparse, secondhand details of Cuéllar's accident, we can infer, along with his former friends, that it was a suicide that resulted from his inability to come to terms with his emasculation.

A second consequence of the perspective adopted in these two works is that it allows us to become well acquainted with the narrators themselves. Indeed, we get to know them even better than we know the outcasts of whom they speak. Like the protagonists, the narrators of “A Rose for Emily” and *Los cachorros* also have

much in common. They pack their narratives with atmospheric details that indicate a keen sense of the place and time in which they speak. Both stand at the very centers of their respective communities and thus serve as foils for the extremely marginalized protagonists. From their secure vantage points, they observe and interpret the actions of the alienated in accordance with the views and values of the communities they represent. This collective perspective is captured and communicated to the reader through choric narration, that is, narration in the first person plural.

Choric narration is extremely rare in literature. Authors tend to favor the intimacy of the *I* or the distance afforded by the third person over the unwieldy *we*. If we pause to recall instances of this narrative point of view in literature, examples do not leap readily to mind. Nevertheless, we can find a few. Consider two widely known but rather imperfect instances: the opening of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*. In the first, the collective perspective of the former schoolmates of Charles Bovary is sustained for only a few pages. In the second, the communal perspective of the ship's crew is sustained throughout the novel, but inconsistently; Conrad slips frequently into third-person narration before finally concluding in the first person singular. In *La casa verde*, a novel published two years prior to *Los cachorros*, Vargas Llosa himself experiments with collective narration, but he does so indirectly.<sup>20</sup> Hispanic literature offers two good examples of communal protagonists—Lope de Vega's comedy *Fuenteovejuna* and García Márquez's novella *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*—but neither is actually narrated in the first person plural. In the play there is no narrator, and in the novella the narrator speaks in the first person singular and is clearly identified as a specific member of the community.

Because the first-person-plural point of view is so rare, it has largely escaped critical attention. Critics have focused on choral characters, those that stand apart from the action and provide the audience with a special perspective through which to view the other characters and events, but they have not considered the specific case of choral characters who also serve as basic narrators. That is, they have examined individuals or groups of individuals in novels who represent the point of view of the community, thereby providing norms by which to judge other characters. Often cited examples of this are Hardy's peasants and Faulkner's black women. These choral characters, however, do not tell the story but simply react to what has happened; thus, they differ from choral narrators. Narratologists go to great lengths to distinguish between first and third-person narrators (e.g., Stanzel), and between kinds of first-person narrators (e.g., Kayser), but ignore the distinction between singular and plural first-person narrators.<sup>21</sup> The following, therefore, will serve to initiate a theoretical discussion of the rare, but nonetheless intriguing practice of choric narration that we find in both "A Rose for Emily" and *Los cachorros*.

In order to gain some critical perspective on the topic we must turn from narrative to drama and from the present to the ancient past. The practice of casting a collective in a narrative role in artistic representation originates, after all, in Greek drama. A review of how the classical chorus was used will provide us with a point of reference from which to evaluate the communal narrators of the contemporary works we are comparing.<sup>22</sup>

The Greek chorus enjoyed a prominent position in the play; its arrival marked the start of the action and its exit the end. During the performance the chorus remained on stage either interpreting the action (through music, words, and dance) or reacting to it. In a given performance the functions of the chorus, therefore, were basically two: to dispense information (to narrate); and to play the part of groups (subjects, worshippers, etc.) who responded to the actions of the protagonists. This dual function allowed the chorus to be situated both inside the play, as a collective character, and outside the play, as the narrator. Because it could be situated outside the action like the viewing public, the chorus enjoyed a special rapport with the audience. When narrating, the Greek chorus often chanted in unison, but this was not always the case. At times, for the sake of clarity, the chorus-leader spoke for the group, and at other times individuals or sets of individuals within the chorus spoke separately to indicate the presence of subgroups within the collective. When reacting to the action, the chorus would draw upon its store of traditional morality in an effort to cope with and interpret

events whose meaning was both difficult and unfamiliar. Dramatic tension would arise when the chorus' comprehension lagged behind the meaning implicit in the action.

My purpose here is not to argue that either Faulkner or Vargas Llosa attempts to revive the Greek choral convention in his work. I do believe, however, that their choral narrators share some of the characteristics of their classical predecessors. Like their ancient counterparts, these contemporary figures enjoy prominent places in their respective stories. They are on stage, so to speak, from beginning to end, never leaving us alone with the protagonists. Rather, they perpetually call attention to their presence as they describe and attempt to interpret the actions of the outcasts to the best of their limited abilities. Because their comprehension of the actions is often incomplete, the opportunity for dramatic tension arises, which, as we shall see, both Faulkner and Vargas Llosa exploit. Like their classical antecedents, these choral narrators have dual functions: they both tell the stories and play the roles of the collectives in those stories. Thus, they too are situated both inside and outside the stories they tell and thereby maintain a special relationship with the reader who also stands outside the story. In searching for similarities between the choral narrators and their classical antecedents, we cannot overlook the obvious differences. For example, the choral narrators of the works in question never deliver their lines in unison. Instead, individual members always speak for the group. Furthermore, their language is much reduced from the solemn, ritualized speech of the Greeks. These contemporary choruses do not chant, they chatter.

Faulkner introduces the narrator's collective perspective in the first sentence of his story, "When Miss Emily Grierson died, *our* whole town went to her funeral ..." and maintains it consistently to the last, "... *we* saw a long strand of iron-gray hair" (italics mine). While speaking for the group in the first person plural, the narrator occasionally offers views of subgroups in Jefferson, such as "a few of the ladies," "the men," "the older people," or "the younger generation." As Joseph Reed observes, these opinions do not express dissent but simply contribute to the larger voice of the community.<sup>23</sup> Such opinions also have the effect of emphasizing the anonymity of the speaker, who, because he is not aligned with either sex or generation, seems to speak for all.<sup>24</sup> It is fitting, therefore, that the only biographical information we have on this figure is that he is a citizen of Jefferson. Yet we can learn something more about this chorus-leader and the community he represents from the story he tells. Like his fellow citizens, he is an inveterate gossip whose favorite subject is Emily Grierson. Because the narrator's memoir is based on the gossip he has gathered, it has a distinctly oral tone. We get the impression that we are hearing rather than reading his accounts of what Emily purchases at the jeweler's and the druggist's. The extent to which the narrator is dependent on gossip for his tale is especially evident in his descriptions of the two calls citizens of Jefferson pay on Emily. He knows minute details of the aldermen's visit but knows nothing of the minister's, because the latter "would never divulge what happened during that interview" (440). We can learn as much about the narrator from what he reports as from what he does not report. For example, it is telling that the narrator never expresses any remorse for the way in which the town watched and whispered about Miss Emily. We can infer from the silence on this point that the narrator feels confident that he enjoys the support of the community and that, as a group, they have nothing to regret or hide.

From the narrator's comments we can also ascertain the people of Jefferson's ambivalence toward their eccentric. The very name by which they refer to her, "Miss," has a double effect of demonstrating respect while at the same time emphasizing Emily's status as an unmarried woman and therefore something of an oddity. The townsfolk are in awe of Miss Emily's aristocratic lineage. The sole survivor of an old Confederate family, she is described as "a real lady." As such, she has historical and cultural significance for the townsfolk, who regard her as a "tradition" that it is their "hereditary obligation" to preserve. At the same time, though, they resent her pedigree and describe Emily as one of the "high and mighty Griersons" (436), one of a family that "held themselves a little too high for what they really were." Because they perceive her as aloof and arrogant, the townsfolk delight in watching her downfall. When she is still unmarried at thirty, they are "not pleased exactly, but vindicated." When she is left penniless after her father's death, people are glad, because the icon has become "humanized." Only at this point, when Emily is no longer perceived as their

social superior, does their envy turn to pity. The townsfolk understand that Emily has been shortchanged by life and is thereby entitled to some of her odd behavior. They even rationalize her refusal to part with her dead father's corpse: "We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will" (437). The citizens of Jefferson are sympathetic enough toward Emily's solitude that they are actually glad to hear that she has found a suitor, even though they regard him as inappropriate. They are willing to indulge in her eccentricities because she is perceived as a relic of the town's Confederate past; their ambivalence toward this embodiment of the Old South is a reflection of their ambivalence about their own supposedly noble history. It is therefore fitting that, as time progresses and Jefferson begins to modernize, its inhabitants distance themselves more and more from Emily, the emblem of the past.

Although willing to accommodate a chaste spinster in their midst, the citizens of Jefferson will not tolerate a fallen woman. When they suspect that Emily has taken Barron as a lover, they are quick to repudiate her, agreeing callously that in this case "[suicide] would be the best thing" (440). The severity of this response is understandable if we consider that by her affair Emily has shattered not only her personal reputation but also an icon the townsfolk evidently value, that of the Southern Lady. As Diane Roberts explains, in a cherished myth of the Old South, the upper-class white woman is placed on a pedestal, where she is admired from below as a cool and silent statue of chastity and powerlessness.<sup>25</sup> This representation reflects a culture in which gender and class lines are clearly drawn and one that Faulkner exposes in "A Rose for Emily." The author deconstructs this myth of the Confederate Lady by creating a willful woman who steps down from the pedestal and, in so doing, breaks out of the role to which she was assigned and upon which the Old South sustains itself. Small wonder this provokes a hostile reaction among the townsfolk of Jefferson.

Unlike the anonymous narrator of "A Rose for Emily," the narrators of *Los cachorros* are identified. They are four boyhood friends from Miraflores who are indistinguishable except for their nicknames—Lalo, Choto, Chingolo, and Mañuco. As Roy Kerr observes, their salient feature is their unconditional acceptance of the culture of their class.<sup>26</sup> Because there are no clear speaker tags or punctuation marks to signal who is narrating, and because all four speakers express similar opinions, the various voices merge into one uniform chorus. Julio Ortega has pointed out that this blending of the voices coupled with the relaxed syntax and liberal use of onomatopoeia, conjunctions, and diminutives gives the impression that the memoir is not written but spoken in an adolescent dialect.<sup>27</sup> The oral quality of the narrative is vaguely reminiscent of Faulkner's story. There is, however, one major difference. Whereas the narrative perspective of "A Rose for Emily" is consistent in its use of the first person plural, *Los cachorros* alternates freely between first- and third-person plural. This alternation usually takes place within a single sentence and may be signaled by a switch in verb endings or pronouns from first person to third. Vargas Llosa introduces this vacillating point of view in the first sentence of the novella, "Todavía llevaban pantalón corto ese año, aún no fumábamos, entre los deportes preferían el fútbol y estábamos aprendiendo a correr olas ..." ["They were still wearing short pants that year, we weren't smoking yet, of all the sports they liked football best and we were learning to ride the waves"] (107), and maintains it through the last, "... y comenzábamos a engordar y a tener canas ... y aparecían ya en sus pieles algunas pequitas, ciertas arruguitas" ["... and we were starting to put on weight and go gray ... and on their skin little age spots and wrinkles were beginning to appear"] (151). This skillful manipulation of deictics serves artistic purposes. José Miguel Oviedo describes these shifts in perspective as a narrative imitation of the movement of a cinematic camera.<sup>28</sup> Just as the camera changes visual angles, so the speaker switches narrative angles between the subject's internal apprehension of the world and external views of how the subject appears to the world. In other words, in a single sentence of *Los cachorros* we observe the group subjectively and objectively. A powerful consequence of this complex perspective for us as readers is that we are simultaneously made to identify with the members of the group and to pass judgment on the group as outsiders.

Although the subject of the group's reminiscences is ostensibly the eccentric Cuéllar, the narrators of *Los cachorros* end up telling us a great deal about themselves, about the youths they were and the adults they have

become. At all times they have acted in accordance with the dictates of their class. The final sentence of the novella makes this point emphatically: “Eran hombres hechos y derechos ya y teníamos todos mujer, carro, hijos que estudiaban en el Champagnat, la Inmaculada o el Santa María, y se estaban construyendo una casita para el verano en Ancón, Santa Rosa o las playas del Sur” [“They were real men now, and we all had the wife, the car, and kids that studied in one prep school or another, and they were building a summer house in Ancón, Santa Rosa or the beaches in the south.”] Conformity is the defining characteristic of this affluent and uncaring community. This value placed on conformity explains the group's ambivalence toward its injured and eccentric member. Cuéllar is treated alternately with kindness and cruelty as the group's attitude toward him oscillates between sympathy and repudiation. In a show of solidarity the boys avenge their friend by torturing the dog that disfigured him. Shortly thereafter, however, they dub him with a nickname, “Pichulita” [“Dickie”]. Like the courtesy title that precedes Emily's name, this label has the dual effect of demonstrating Cuéllar's closeness with the community and at the same time calling attention to his abnormality.

The four friends understand that Cuéllar's disturbed behavior is due to extenuating circumstances, and for a time they are willing to endure his eccentricities: “[E]ra buena gente, un poco fregado a veces pero en su caso cualquiera, se le comprendía, se le perdonaba ...” [“He was a good guy, a bit of a drag a times but in his shoes anyone would be, you could understand him, you could forgive him ...”] (126). Yet, when Cuéllar begins to dress in gold chains and tight clothes and to keep the company of younger boys, they draw the line: “Ya está, decíamos, era fatal: maricón” [“That's it, we'd say, it was the kiss of death: fag.”] The words the young men use to repudiate Cuéllar reveal that their principal preoccupation is maintaining appearances:

Qué le quedaba, se comprendía, se le disculpaba pero, hermano, resulta cada día más difícil juntarse con él, en la calle lo miraban, lo silbaban y lo señalaban, y Choto a ti te importa mucho el qué dirán, y Mañuco lo rajaban y Lalo si nos ven mucho con él y Chingolo te confundirán.

(150)

What else could he do? You could understand that, you could forgive him, but man, it's getting harder and harder to hang out with him, in the street people would stare, they'd whistle and they'd point, and Choto you care about what people might think, and Mañuco they were talking about him and Lalo if they see us with him and Chingolo they'll think the same of you.

Echoing one another, in a chorus of renunciation each of the four rejects their troubled friend out of concern for how they will be seen by others. Whereas the group has been willing to accept a celibate in their midst, they will not admit someone they view as sexually perverse. Here the young men's reaction reminds us of that of the townfolk of Jefferson. As in “A Rose for Emily,” it is a perceived sexual transgression that finally triggers the marginalized individual's expulsion from the community, and this expulsion reveals a great deal about the prejudices and values of that community: *machismo* reigns in Miraflores. When the young men reject Cuéllar, they act to preserve their own cultural icon—that of the virile, heterosexual man—at the expense of a deeply distressed friend.

As we have seen, there are a number of substantial parallels between the narrators of the works in question. In both cases they speak for their communities about their unusual members. Their ambivalence about these oddities turns to outright rejection when they suspect the protagonists of sexual transgressions that threaten the identity of their respective groups. The narrator of “A Rose for Emily” repudiates Emily when she refuses to play the part of the Confederate lady in the Old South. Similarly, the narrators of *Los cachorros* turn their backs on Cuéllar when he fails to live up to the model of the *macho latino*. Here the complementary character of the texts is hard to miss. The masculinized woman is as unwelcome in Jefferson as the feminized man in Miraflores. It is interesting to note that neither the story nor the novella resolves whether or not these sexual transgressions actually took place. Emily is *seen* riding with Barron, and Cuéllar is *seen* dressed suspiciously

and in the company of young boys. The appearance of impropriety is all that is certain, and in each case this is enough to warrant expulsion from the community.

The preceding analysis of the narrators in the two works prepares us to discuss what is undoubtedly the most significant similarity between “A Rose for Emily” and *Los cachorros*: their common theme of the community's collective responsibility for individual suffering. To see how each articulates this theme, we must consider their conclusions. As we recall, the narrator of “A Rose for Emily” is so comfortable in his cocoon of consensus that he never once pauses to question his community's role in Emily's failed life. Even the horrible spectacle of Barron's desiccated corpse is not enough to trigger an examination of conscience on his part. At the very end of the story he continues to look outward instead of inward as he dwells on the macabre details of the bridal chamber. This scene is atrocious to be sure, but more intriguing than the disgusting details is the dramatic tension of the moment. What the narrator is totally oblivious to, and the sensitive reader is well aware of, is that Emily was, to a certain extent, forced to the desperate measure she took. Cut off from a community that had judged and condemned her, a community that viewed her misfortune as a source of entertainment, a community that required standards of behavior to which she neither could nor would conform, Emily was driven to madness and murder. Thus, in a sense, all of Jefferson had a hand in administering the arsenic. Similarly, in *Los cachorros* the narrators remain oblivious to their role in Cuéllar's destruction. They attend his funeral out of a sense of obligation but express no grief or remorse for having created conditions in which their former friend found it impossible to go on living. They do not realize that, by constantly encouraging Cuéllar to dissimulate rather than accept his condition, by requiring conformity to certain standards of masculinity from a person who could not conform, and by denying their approval to an individual who clearly craved it, the group created an unbearable situation for Cuéllar from which the only escape was death. Unable to recognize their instrumental role in their friend's tragedy, the four agree that Cuéllar must be to blame for what became of him: “Pobre, decíamos en el entierro, cuanto sufrió, que vida tuvo, pero este final es un hecho que se lo buscó” [“Poor guy, we were saying in the funeral, what a life, but this end, there's no denying it, he was asking for it”] (151).

In both works the central theme of society's collective responsibility for individual suffering is reinforced by the narrative point of view that requires readers to identify with the victimizers rather than the victimized. Because of the first-person-plural perspective, we never have direct access to the outcasts' mental anguish. Neither Emily nor Cuéllar speaks directly of the pain of an unfulfilled life. Neither describes how the cohesive community appears from the vantage point of the isolated member. Consequently, we never really feel sympathy for them. They appear, therefore, as psychologically abnormal characters who are of interest primarily as curiosities. Since we can never identify with such misfits, we are instead forced to regard them from the point of view of their victimizers, their communities. Furthermore, the first-person-plural point of view subtly incorporates us in these collectives. Who is that *we* that watches with perverse fascination as the misfits stray further and further from the fold? It is the citizens of Jefferson or the friends from Miraflores, to be sure, but it is we readers as well. We share the point of view of the collective that watches from a distance while gorging on gossip. Hence, we find ourselves aligned with the choral narrators, which positions us to share in the group's guilt. Perceptive critics have not overlooked this aspect of the texts. In reference to Faulkner's story, Joseph Reed observes that the community of readers cannot absolve itself of responsibility, and therefore the true horror we must feel upon seeing the corpse is not the horror of the decay but, rather, of our having helped it to come about (17). Concerning *Los cachorros* Mario Benedetti asserts that the chorus of narrators introduces the reader into the story as a participant and, therefore, as one more of those who ignore their own complicity in the tragedy:

En una suerte de nervioso y constante *switch*, el autor nos va entregando esa doble dimensión de la historia, quizá como el modo de recrear una responsabilidad colectiva, o también—y esto me parece más probable—como una manera de instalar a su lector en esa culpa tribal, de hacerle sentir de alguna manera un escozor de prójimo.

In a sort of nervous and constant *switch*, the author proceeds to show us this double dimension of the story, perhaps as a way of recreating a collective responsibility, or also—and this seems more probable to me—as a way of installing his reader in this tribal guilt, of making him share in some way the sting felt by his fellow man.<sup>29</sup>

Although the narrators remain oblivious to the end, we as sensitive readers cannot walk away from these works unaffected by their powerful portrayal of society's failure to come to the rescue of its damaged members. The common message of these works is all the more memorable because it is presented through a perspective that not only requires us to lay the blame but, in so doing, to implicate ourselves. We many conclude, therefore, that here choric narration is a particularly effective technique for exposing collective culpability while at the same time engaging the reader deeply in the meaning of the text.

Before concluding, I would like to expand upon these final observations by pointing out that Vargas Llosa's use of an oscillating point of view is perhaps more effective in exploiting the potential of the first-person-plural perspective than Faulkner's use of a consistent point of view. In "A Rose for Emily" the author can manipulate the reader's ultimate response to the text only up to a certain point. Through the first-person-plural point of view and the titillating subject matter Faulkner cleverly draws us into the tale, but it is up to us to extricate ourselves at the end in order to grasp the message. As Reed cautions us, we must detach ourselves from the final scene by looking away from the bed and into our consciences, for it is only by withdrawing from the text in which we are intensely involved that we capture its central meaning. In *Los cachorros*, on the other hand, the author exercises a much greater control over the reader's final response thanks to the oscillating point of view. As the narrators shift from first person to third (from *we/our/us* to *they/their/them*) they demonstrate that the events of the novella can be viewed both subjectively and objectively thereby setting an example for the reader. Just as the narrators alternate between identifying with the community and distancing themselves from that community, so the reader has the dual experience of identifying with the narrators and viewing them objectively. And, as Benedetti observes, the narrators' dual perspective provides us with an indication of just how we are to respond the text: we are to experience humanity's shame.

In this essay we have compared two American tragedies from either side of the Rio Grande and have found profound parallels between the two.<sup>30</sup> In *Los cachorros* Vargas Llosa recreates in a Latin American context the central thematic concern of Faulkner's tale of the Old South. The Confederate spinster becomes a Latin eunuch, but the basic message remains the same. The theme of the community's collective responsibility for the alienation of the individual is an important one that bears repeating. Faulkner was not the first American writer to take us to task on this point, and Vargas Llosa will not be the last.

#### Notes

1. In addition to these references, which appear in both his fiction and nonfiction and are too frequent to enumerate, Vargas Llosa has written three essays on the U.S. writer. "El joven Faulkner" and "Faulkner en laberinto" appear in *Contra viento y marea I-II* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1986) and "El Santuario del mal" appears in *La verdad de las mentiras* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1990). In the second of these essays, Vargas Llosa ponders the phenomenon of Faulkner's appeal in Latin America and concludes that in the stories of Yoknapatawpha County Latin American readers discover elements of their own reality ("Faulkner en laberinto" 302).
2. Mario Vargas Llosa, *A Writer's Reality*, ed. Myron Lichtblau (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1990) 75.
3. Mario Vargas Llosa, "El país de las mil caras," *Contra viento y marea III* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1990) 241.
4. Mary Davis, "La elección del fracaso: Vargas Llosa y William Faulkner," *Mario Vargas Llosa*, ed. José Miguel Oviedo (Madrid: Taurus, 1981) 46.

5. For a comprehensive review of the importance of William Faulkner for Latin American authors in general see Deborah Cohn, "‘He was one of us’: The Reception of William Faulkner and the US South by Latin American Authors," *Comparative Literature Studies* 34 (1997): 149–69.
6. In addition to the aforementioned essay see Mary Davis, "The Haunted Voice: Echoes of William Faulkner in García Márquez, Fuentes, and Vargas Llosa," *World Literature Today* 59 (1985): 531–35.
7. Written in 1929, "A Rose for Emily" first appeared in the *Forum* magazine in April 1930. A Spanish version of the story was included in a popular anthology of contemporary U.S. writers which was released in Chile in 1944. The story appeared again in a widely read translation of Faulkner's first collection of stories, *These Thirteen* (1931), which was published under the Spanish title *Estos 13* by Losada in 1956. This publication information is provided in Robert Chapman, "The Spanish American Reception of U.S. Fiction 1920–40," *University of California Publications in Modern Philology* 77 (1966): 142. Vargas Llosa has listed *Estos trece* among the Faulkner works that he discovered in college in his memoirs *El pez en el agua* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1993) 283. To the best of my knowledge, however, he has never referred directly to "A Rose for Emily" in his writing.
8. Page numbers refer to Mario Vargas Llosa, *Los jefes, Los cachorros* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1991) x. All translations of the novella are my own.
9. Gustavo Pérez Firmat, ed., introduction, *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* (Durham: Duke UP, 1990) 3–4.
10. For a good collection of some of the earlier responses to the short story see M. Thomas Inge, ed., *William Faulkner: "A Rose for Emily"* (Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1970).
11. Eugenio Suárez-Galbán Guerra identifies this tendency and evaluates the various symbolic readings of the novella in his essay "La literatura es símbolo: *Los cachorros* de Vargas Llosa" in *La ínsula sin nombre* (Madrid: Editorial Orígenes, 1990) 95–100.
12. The complex chronology of "A Rose for Emily" has been the subject of more than a half-dozen studies. For a review of the topic see Gene Moore, "Of Time and Its Mathematical Progression: Problems of Chronology in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 29 (1992): 195–204.
13. For a comprehensive study of the use of language in the novella see Roslyn Frank, "El estilo de *Los cachorros*" *Mario Vargas Llosa*, ed. Jose Miguel Oviedo (Madrid: Taurus, 1981) 156–75.
14. For a concise discussion of the incest theme in Faulkner's story see Jack Scherting, "Emily Grierson's Oedipus Complex: Motif, Motive, and Meaning in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 17 (1980): 397–405. A broader treatment of Freudian themes in the story can be found in Norman Holland, *5 Readers Reading* (New Haven: Yale UP). For a study of the castration theme in Vargas Llosa's novella see Roland Forgues, "Lectura de *Los cachorros*, de Mario Vargas Llosa," *Mario Vargas Llosa*, ed. José Miguel Oviedo (Madrid: Taurus, 1981) 176–92.
15. Page numbers refer to William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily," *The Portable Faulkner*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin, 1967) 433–44.
16. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1943) 413.
17. Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978) 34–45.
18. Roland Forgues discusses Cuéllar's insecurity about his masculinity, an aspect of his personality that can be traced through the entire text, in "Lectura de *Los cachorros*, de Mario Vargas Llosa," *Mario Vargas Llosa*, ed. José Miguel Oviedo (Madrid: Taurus, 1981) 176–92. I rely on Forgue's discussion for my own.
19. Faulkner and Vargas Llosa are both known for confounding their readers with novels in which important details are suppressed until well into the texts. A prime example of this practice is Faulkner's novel *Sanctuary*, in which the key event that initiates the action of the novel is not revealed until the final chapter. Likewise, it is not until near the end of Vargas Llosa's voluminous *Conversación en La Catedral* that we discover the solutions to a number of the mysteries in the novel.
20. According to Vargas Llosa, certain segments of *La casa verde* are narrated indirectly from the collective perspective of the residents of the Mangachería, a working-class neighborhood in Piura

- (*Writer's Reality* 76). That is, portions of Anselmo's story are focalized through the collective conscience of the *mangaches*. Because there is no narration in the first-person plural and because the collective perspective is sustained so briefly, this is not a good case for the study of choric narration.
21. Gérard Genette is the only theorist I have found who acknowledges the possibility of narration in the first-person plural. He does so in a brief footnote in which he refers to it as a variant on homodiegetic narration. See *Narrative Discourse* (New York: Cornell UP, 1980) 245n.
  22. This summary of the functions of the chorus is based on Peter Arnott, "The Audience and the Chorus" in *Public Performance in the Greek Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1991) 5–43 and Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1992).
  23. Joseph Reed Jr., *Faulkner's Narrative* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1973) 15.
  24. From this point on, for the sake of simplicity, I will use masculine pronouns to refer to the narrator. This should not be construed as the assignation of a gender to the narrator, who, as I have pointed out, is clearly an anonymous figure who speaks for the town. Critics generally agree that the narrator's gender is undetermined. Fetterley, who states that the narrator is one of the patriarchs in the story, is an exception (39). On this particular point, however, the evidence is lacking, and her case is not convincing.
  25. Diane Roberts, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994) 10.
  26. R. A. Kerr, "Choral Characters," *Mario Vargas Llosa: Critical Essays on Characterization* (Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanistica, 1990) 106.
  27. "Sobre *Los cachorros*," *Homenaje a Mario Vargas Llosa*, comp. Helmy F. Giacomani (Long Island City, NY: Las Américas, 1972) 263–74. Ortega goes on to observe that this language reveals much about the psychology of the class. We know the group is terribly immature since they continue to speak in the adolescent dialect even in adulthood.
  28. José Miguel Oviedo, "*Los cachorros*: fragmentos de una exploración total," *Homenaje a Mario Vargas Llosa*, comp. Helmy F. Giacomani (Long Island City, NY: Las Américas, 1972) 354.
  29. Mario Benedetti, *Letras del continente mestizo*, 2nd ed. (Montevideo: Arca, 1970) 274.
  30. By emphasizing here the common American identity of the authors, I am positioning this study in the expanding field of inter-American literary relations. For further reading in this field see the essays collected in the aforementioned Gustavo Pérez Firmat, ed., *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* or Earl Fitz, *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1991). In his book Fitz examines ten themes germane to New World literatures, but he does not consider short narrative or the theme that has interested me in this essay, that of collective guilt for individual failure. This theme is recurrent in American literature. Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and García Márquez's *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* are two other key examples. Perhaps this essay will inspire a broader treatment of the topic.

## A Rose for Emily, William Faulkner: Further Reading

### CRITICISM

Bourdieu, Pierre. "A Reflecting Story." In *Rediscovering History: Culture, Politics, and the Psyche*, pp. 370–77. Edited by Michael S. Roth. Stanford University Press, 1994.

*Discusses temporality in "A Rose for Emily."*

Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. "A Rose for Emily." In *Understanding Fiction*, pp. 350–54. Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1959.

*Interprets "A Rose for Emily" as a tragic struggle between an individual and the society that attempts to restrict her.*

Hagopian, John V., W. Gordon Cunliffe, and Martin Dolch. "A Rose for Emily." In *A Rose for Emily*, pp. 76–83. Edited by M. Thomas Inge. Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1970.

*Provides an overview of critical analysis about "A Rose for Emily."*

Additional coverage of Faulkner's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, Vol. 7; *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography*, 1929–1941; *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 81–84; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vol. 33; *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vols. 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 14, 18, 28, 52, 68; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vols. 9, 11, 44, 102; *Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series*, Vol. 2; *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook*, Vols. 86, 97; *DISCovering Authors*; *DISCovering Authors: British*; *DISCovering Authors: Canadian*; *DISCovering Authors Modules: Most-Studied Authors*; *Major 20th-Century Writers*, Vols. 1, 2; and *World Literature Criticism*.

## Critical Essays: Critical Overview

Faulkner is now regarded by most critics as one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century. However, "A Rose for Emily," written in 1929, was actually rejected by *Scribner's* and other magazines before *Forum* published it in 1930. Although one of his greatest novels, [The Sound and the Fury](#), was published just before "A Rose for Emily" in 1929, many American critics did not immediately recognize Faulkner as a ground-breaking writer. As is often the case with many challenging American authors, Faulkner was identified as a unique American voice in Europe long before he gained respect at home. In fact, as late as 1950, after he won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the *New York Times* (quoted in Robert Penn Warren's introduction to *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays*) published an editorial claiming that his work was "too often vicious, depraved, decadent, [and] corrupt." "Americans most fervently hope," the *Times* continued, that neither the award given by Sweden nor the "enormous vogue of Faulkner's works" among foreigners meant that they associated American life with his fiction.

Interestingly enough, it is in the *New York Times* twenty years earlier that one can read an extremely favorable review of *These 13*, the first collection of Faulkner's short stories. "A Rose for Emily" is published in this edition. The reviewer notes that Faulkner was "hailed in England, before he was known here except to a small circle, as the latest star in the American literary firmament." He writes that "A Rose for Emily" is "one of the strongest, as it is certainly the most gruesome, tales in the volume." The story was also published in *Collected Stories* in 1950. The reviews for this volume were even more laudatory. In the *New York Herald Tribune*, Horace Gregory compares Faulkner to influential and brilliant writers such as Dostoevsky, Melville, James, and Joyce.

Presently, critics continue to write about "A Rose for Emily." The subjects of the story are timeless: love, death, community vs. individuality, and the nature of time. Some of the criticism written recently concentrates on possible literary references within the story. For example, Peter L. Hays, in an article published in *Studies in American Fiction*, suggests that Faulkner may have used [Emily Dickinson](#) as a model for Emily Grierson. In *Studies in Short Fiction*, John F. Birk draws analogies between the structure, theme, and imagery in "A Rose for Emily" to the poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by Keats. The story continues to resonate even after seventy years because so many of the story's themes are a part of everyone's experience.

## Essays and Criticism: Overview of "A Rose for Emily"

William Faulkner is widely considered to be one of the great American authors of the twentieth century. Although his greatest works are identified with a particular region and time (Mississippi in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), the themes he explores are universal. He was also an extremely accomplished

writer in a technical sense. Novels such as [The Sound and the Fury](#) and [Absalom, Absalom!](#) feature bold experimentation with shifts in time and narrative. Several of his short stories are favorites of anthologists, including “A Rose for Emily.” This strange story of love, obsession, and death is a favorite among both readers and critics. The narrator, speaking for the town of Jefferson in Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, tells a series of stories about the town's reclusive spinster, Miss Emily Grierson. The stories build up to a gruesome revelation after Miss Emily's funeral. She apparently poisoned her lover Homer Barron, and kept his corpse in an attic bedroom for over forty years. It is a common critical cliché to say that a story “exists on many levels,” but in the case of “A Rose for Emily,” this is the truth. Critic Frank A. Littler, in an essay published in *Notes on Mississippi Writers* regarding the chronology of the story, writes that “A Rose for Emily” has been read variously as “... a Gothic horror tale, a study in abnormal psychology, an allegory of the relations between North and South, a meditation on the nature of time, and a tragedy with Emily as a sort of tragic heroine.” These various interpretations serve as a good starting point for discussion of the story.

The Gothic horror tale is a literary form dating back to 1764 with the first novel identified with the genre, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Ontralto*. Gothicism features an atmosphere of terror and dread: gloomy castles or mansions, sinister characters, and unexplained phenomena. Gothic novels and stories also often include unnatural combinations of sex and death. In a lecture to students documented by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner in *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958*, Faulkner himself claimed that “A Rose for Emily” is a “ghost story.” In fact, Faulkner is considered by many to be the progenitor of a sub-genre, the Southern gothic. The Southern gothic style combines the elements of classic Gothicism with particular Southern archetypes (the reclusive spinster, for example) and puts them in a Southern milieu. Faulkner's novels and stories about the South include dark, taboo subjects such as murder, suicide, and incest.

James M. Mellard, in *The Faulkner Journal*, argues that “A Rose for Emily” is a “retrospective Gothic;” that is, the reader is unaware that the story is Gothic until the end when Homer Barron's corpse is discovered. He points out that the narrator's tone is almost whimsical. He also notes that because the narrator's flashbacks are not presented in an ordinary sequential order, readers who are truly unfamiliar with the story don't put all the pieces together until the end. However, a truly careful first reading should begin to reveal the Gothic elements early in the story. Emily is quickly established as a strange character when the aldermen enter her decrepit parlor in a futile attempt to collect her taxes. She is described as looking “... bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue.” She insists that the aldermen discuss the tax situation with a man who has been dead for a decade. If she is not yet a sinister character, she is certainly weird. In section two of the story, the unexplained smell coming from her house, the odd relationship she has with her father, and the suggestion that madness may run in her family by the reference to her “crazy” great-aunt, old lady Wyatt, are elements that, at the very least, hint at the Gothic nature of the story. Emily's purchase of arsenic should leave no doubt at that point that the story is leading to a Gothic conclusion.

It is Emily's awful deed that continues to captivate readers. Why would she do something so ghastly? How could she kill a man and bed his corpse? This line of questioning leads to a psychological examination of Emily's character. David Minter, in *William Faulkner: His Life and Work*, notes in several different passages the significant influence that Sigmund Freud the father of modern psychoanalysis, had on Faulkner's fiction. Freud theorized that repression, especially if it is sexual in nature, often results in psychological abnormality. In the story, Emily's overprotective, overbearing father denies her a normal relationship with the opposite sex by chasing away any potential mates. Because her father is the only man with whom she has had a close relationship, she denies his death and keeps his corpse in her house until she breaks down three days later when the doctors insist she let them take the body. Later in the story, the ladies of the town and her two female cousins from Alabama work to sabotage her relationship with Homer Barron. Of course, the narrator suggests that Homer himself may not exactly be enthusiastic about marrying Emily. However, it is left to the reader to imagine the exact circumstances leading to Homer's denouement. Finally, Emily takes the offensive

by poisoning Homer so he can't abandon her. The discovery of a strand of her hair on the pillow next to the rotting corpse suggests that she slept with the cadaver or, even worse, had sex with it. Emily's repressive life therefore contributes to her (rather severe) psychological abnormality: necrophilia.

Some readers have interpreted the story as an allegory of the relations between the North and the South. This is apparently because the character of Homer Barron is a Yankee and Emily kills him. However, it would be difficult to argue that Emily's motivation in dating Homer is to kill him because he is a Northerner. The most obvious explanation for her willingness to date a man outside of her social caste would be that she is simply a very lonely woman. A less obvious, but nonetheless reasonable, explanation for her relationship with Homer would be that is her way of rebelling against her dead father. During his lifetime, her father prevented her from having an "acceptable" suitor. Thus, she rebels by associating with a man her father would have considered a pariah: a Yankee day-laborer. There is really little to suggest that the story is an allegory of the Civil War other than the fact that a Yankee is killed by a Southerner. Faulkner himself, in his lecture on the story at the University of Virginia, denies such an interpretation. He said that he believed that a writer is "... too busy trying to create flesh-and-blood people that will stand up and cast a shadow to have time to be conscious of all the symbolism that he may put into what he does or what people may read into it."

One can more confidently argue that "A Rose for Emily" is a meditation on the nature of time. Although the story is only a few pages long, it covers approximately three-quarters of a century. Faulkner cleverly constructed the story to show the elusive nature of time and memory. Several critics have written papers in attempts to devise a chronology for the story. It would surely please Faulkner that few of these chronologies are consistent with each other. In "A Rose for Emily," he is not concerned with actual dates. He is more interested in the conflict between time as a subjective experience and time as a force of physics. For example, in section five of the story, the narrator describes the very old men gathered at Emily's funeral. The old men, some who fought in the Civil War, mistakenly believe that Emily was a contemporary of theirs when in fact Emily was born sometime around the Civil War. The old men have confused "... 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." Here, Faulkner profoundly and poetically comments on the human need to deny the passage of time and the astounding capacity of the human mind to use memory in that ultimately futile denial. Emily, of course, has other methods of denying time.

Since the denial of time is futile, it is also tragic. This is one reason the story can be read as a tragedy. But every tragedy needs a hero or heroine. Can Emily actually be considered a tragic heroine? At first glance, this is a tough sell. Many readers quite reasonably believe that Emily is some kind of monster, regardless of what Freud might have said. However, as many critics have noted, Faulkner's title suggests that he may think otherwise. "In his fiction," notes Minter in his biography of Faulkner, "he characteristically mingles compassion and judgement. Even his most terrible villains ... he treats with considerable sympathy." Emily is such an example. In fact, the narrator twice describes Emily as an idol. Although she commits a foul crime, Faulkner views Emily as a victim of her circumstance. Faulkner despised slavery and racism, but he admired much of the chivalry and honor of the old South. Emily is a product of that society and she clings desperately to it as when she refuses to give up her father's body. She also becomes a victim of her old society. The one time in her life that she dares to let the past become a "diminishing road," that is, when she dates Homer, she is ridiculed, ostracized, shamed, and finally jilted. Her response is an effort to actually freeze time by poisoning Homer and keeping his corpse in her ghoulish boudoir.

Finally, it is a tribute to Faulkner's talent that this compact yet expansive story lends itself to so many interpretations. The discussion above briefly describes the most common interpretations made by readers and critics. However, there is a great deal of scholarship, entire volumes, written on "A Rose for Emily." Several critics, including Isaac Rodman in *The Faulkner Journal* and Milinda Schwab in *Studies in Short Fiction*, have presented convincing arguments of the town's complicity in Homer's murder. Many critics have written

interesting papers on literary allusions that they find in the story; alternately, many critics find allusions to “A Rose for Emily” in contemporary literature. (An interesting paper might be written comparing and contrasting Faulkner's Emily with the character of Norman Bates, the schizophrenic, homicidal hotel-keeper/amateur taxidermist of Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film, *Psycho*.) “A Rose for Emily” remains a remarkable, provocative work regardless of the critical approach.

**Source:** Donald Akers, Overview of “A Rose for Emily,” for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999. Akers is a freelance writer and editor.

## Essays and Criticism: Another View of Faulkner's Narrator in “A Rose for Emily”

In a recent article, Hal Blythe discusses the central role played by the narrator in William Faulkner's gothic masterpiece “A Rose for Emily.” Focusing on Miss Emily's bizarre affair and how it affronts the chivalric notions of the Old South, the narrator, according to Blythe, attempts to assuage the grief produced by Miss Emily's rejection of him by relating her story; telling her tale allows him to exact a measure of revenge. Faulkner's speaker, without doubt, serves as a pivotal player in this tale of grotesque love. Although Blythe grasps the significance of the narrator's place in the story, he bases his argument on a point that the story itself never makes completely clear. Blythe assumes that Faulkner's narrator is *male*. The possibility exists, however, that Faulkner intended his readers to view the tale-teller as being *female*.

Hints in the text suggest that Faulkner's speaker might be a woman. The narrative voice (the “we” in the story), a spokesperson for the town, appears very concerned with every detail of Emily's life. Faulkner provides us with an important clue concerning the gender of this narrator when he describes the townspeople's reaction to Emily's attachment to Homer Barron: “The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister ... to call upon her.” Jefferson's male population seems apathetic regarding Emily's tryst; the men are not the least bit scandalized. The females in town (the “we” in the tale) are so concerned with Emily's eccentricities that they force their men to act; one very interested female in particular, the narrator, sees to it that Emily's story is not forgotten.

This coterie of Jefferson's “finer” ladies (represented by the narrator) seems highly offended by Emily's actions. This resentment might stem from two primary causes. First, the ladies (the phrase “the ladies” appears throughout the tale and might refer to the “proper” Southern belles living in town) find Miss Emily's pre-marital relationship immoral. Second, they resent Emily's seeing a Yankee man. In the eyes of these flowers of Southern femininity, Emily Grierson becomes a stain on the white gown of Southern womanhood.

Despite their bitterness toward Emily, the ladies of Jefferson feel some degree of sympathy for her. After her father's death, the ladies reminisce: “We remembered all the young men her father had driven away....” Later, Homer Barron disappears, prompting this response: “Then we knew that this was to be expected too, as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and furious to die.” These intensely felt statements suggest how a woman might react to another woman's loneliness; the narrator seems to empathize with Miss Emily on a woman-to-woman basis. Faulkner himself sheds interesting light on this matter when he describes Miss Emily as a woman “that just wanted to be loved and to love and to have a husband and a family.” The women of Jefferson know that Emily, a fellow woman, possessed these feelings, and as women they feel as if some sort of biological bond links them to “the last Grierson.” Unlike the majority of the ladies in town, Miss Emily experienced neither the joys of marriage nor the fulfillment of child-bearing. If the ladies did not view Emily in a sympathetic way, would they have sent their daughters to her house for china-painting lessons?

Another possible reason exists for the speaker's sympathetic view of Emily. Our narrator knows (perhaps from the druggist) that Emily purchased poison, ostensibly to kill "rats." One slang use of the term "rat" applies to a man who has cheated on his lover. Perhaps Faulkner's tale-teller suspects that Emily feared that Homer would not remain faithful to her. In order to "keep" Homer by her side, Emily poisoned him. The speaker might sympathize with Emily somewhat because she believes that Emily did what she could to retain Homer's companionship and insure that he would not give her up for another woman. Faulkner's female narrator does not approve of Miss Emily's methods, but she understands what prompted them: Emily's weariness of being alone.

An additional clue regarding the narrator appears toward the end of "A Rose for Emily" when Faulkner's speaker emphasizes the first-person pronoun "they." Previously, our narrator has used "we" to indicate the town's collective female element. After Miss Emily is buried, the tale-teller relates how the residents of Jefferson learned of the gruesome secret lying upstairs in the long-closed bedroom. She makes one point very clear: "They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before *they* opened it [my italics]." The "they" in this sentence are people strong enough to break down the door of this death chamber. Since most ladies in Jefferson would not be strong enough to force in a door, might not the reader assume that these initial intruders are men? The ladies follow the men into the room and make their ghastly discovery: "For a long while *we* [my italics] just stood there looking down at the profound and fleshless grin."

The reader is left with a very important question: why would a lady desire to repeat Miss Emily's story? The narrator's "dual vision" (as Blythe calls it) provides a clue. As a woman offended by Emily's actions, the speaker relates this tale of necrophilia in an attempt to vindicate Southern womanhood. She wants her listeners to understand that Emily was not representative of the typical "Southern Lady." Perhaps familiar with Caroline Bascomb Compson, Joanna Burden, and Rosa Coldfield, other infamous females living in the Jefferson vicinity, the narrator wants to convey to her audience that virtuous women (such as herself?) *do* still live in Jefferson. On the other hand, the speaker's sympathy for Emily, a woman lost in her own particularly lonely world, also prompts her to recall the tragic events of Emily's sterile life. As a woman, the tale-teller allows her heart to go out to "poor Emily."

Viewing the narrator of "A Rose for Emily" as a woman allows the reader to enjoy Faulkner's tale from a unique perspective. Indeed, such an interpretation offers an interesting alternative reading that emphasizes the important role women play in the fiction of Oxford, Mississippi's Nobel laureate.

**Source:** Michael L. Burdick, "Another View of Faulkner's Narrator in 'A Rose for Emily,'" in *The University of Mississippi Studies in English*, Vol. VIII, 1990, pp. 209-11.

## **Essays and Criticism: Another Flower for Faulkner's Bouquet: Theme and Structure in "A Rose for Emily"**

Nearly everyone familiar with the writings of [William Faulkner](#) is aware of the fracturings of time so common in his work. Many of his major characters spend much of their fictional lives trying to piece together their experiences and lives, to put them in some kind of chronological or existential order. Few of them succeed; and when they do, as is perhaps the case with Quentin Compson ([The Sound and the Fury](#) and [Absalom, Absalom!](#)) they most often find that to make sense of their lives is to create the necessity for self-destruction. But, most often, Faulkner's characters are like Charles Bon of *Absalom, Absalom!* who, when he leaves for college, is only on the periphery of an area of knowledge about himself and his world. Bon is described as "almost touching the answer lurking, just beyond his reach, inextricable, jumbled, and unrecognizable yet on the point of falling into a pattern which would reveal to him at once, like a flash of light, the meaning of his whole life."

But if Faulkner's characters are often at a loss with respect to the movements of their existences through time, his critics cannot be. Indeed, such detailings of temporal chronology, together with structural elaborations, provide some of the most lucid and meaningful understandings of Faulkner's fiction. Almost all of Faulkner's stories and novels can be better appreciated and more accurately understood and interpreted through a detailing of the interrelationships of time and structure. In Faulkner's world theme exists as the hyphen in the compound temporal-structure. Not the least of such cases is "A Rose for Emily."

"A Rose for Emily" is divided into five sections, the first and last section having to do with the present, the *now* of the narration, with the three middle sections detailing the past. The story begins and ends with the death of Miss Emily Grierson; the three middle sections move through Miss Emily's life from a time soon after her father's death and shortly after her beau Homer Barron, "had deserted her," to the time of her death.

Late in the fourth section of the story, Faulkner writes of Miss Emily, "Thus she passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse." On first reading, this series of adjectives appears to be only another catalogue so familiar in Faulkner. Often it seems that Faulkner simply lists such a series of adjectives as if to say, "Take your choice of these, I don't care." Not so in this instance. Rather, it would seem that Faulkner uses these five adjectives to describe Miss Emily with some care and for a specific purpose. It could be argued that they are intended to refer to the successive sections of the story, each becoming as it were a sort of metaphorical characterization of the differing states through which the townspeople of Jefferson (and the readers) pass in their evaluation of Miss Emily. Correlating the two present sections with the adjectives that fall to them, we see Miss Emily as the paradox she has become in death, "dear" and "perverse," while before her death she was "inescapable, impervious, tranquil." Thus, during her life, the enigma of Miss Emily's personality, which kept her seemingly immortal, impenetrable, and almost inevitably inescapable, has been clarified and crystalized by her death. A woman who, alive, "had been a tradition, a duty, and a care," and thus "dear" in several senses of that word, is revealed, in death, to have been what for years she had been suspected of being, "perverse."

But indeed even in the first section of the story there are numerous hints at the final portrait of the Miss Emily of section five. The men go to her funeral "through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument." Her house is "an eyesore among eyesores," it symbolizing Miss Emily herself in its "coquettish decay"; inside there is a "tarnished gilt easel"; Miss Emily has an "ebony cane with a tarnished gold head"; and she herself looks "bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water."

Section two details the inescapable smell which surrounded Miss Emily's house after the disappearance of her suitor, Homer Barron. Section three recounts Miss Emily's romance with Homer Barron and the imperviousness of her position even after the townspeople feel pity for her (four times in this section—and once in section four—she is referred to as "poor Emily"). "She carried her head high enough—even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than even the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness." And section four moves from the time Miss Emily bought the arsenic, through the departure, return, and final disappearance of Homer, to the time of her death.

Miss Emily, who had been idle most of her life, is looked upon as an idol by the people of Jefferson. The word "idol" occurs twice in the story: when the men are sprinkling lime around her house a window is lighted "and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol"; and in later years, on and off at intervals, "we would see her in one of the downstairs windows—she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house—like the carven torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which." Miss Emily is indeed a kind of living avatar (she doesn't believe in death and refuses to admit that her father is dead until the townspeople "were about to resort to law and force") of the past of Jefferson. In the first section of the story she is described as a "fallen monument." Often she is referred to as a kind of deity, or at least as a representative, if not of the religious at least the political and

social hierarchy of Jefferson: “the high and mighty Griersons.” “When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows—sort of tragic and serene.” And at death, catching up the earlier detail of “submerged in motionless water,” Miss Emily is described as if she were in some sacred vault, “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.” “They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath an amass of flowers.” The townspeople “waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground” before they opened the upstairs room. The room and the corpse are described as if they are the accouterments of an ancient tomb.

The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust. A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and 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. The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him. What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust.

Thus, with respect to the relationships of time and structure in “A Rose for Emily” Faulkner seems to be saying that although Miss Emily resists the passage of time, resists change, time ultimately fixes her in a rather perverse manner. In terms of life and existence, Miss Emily's past and her passages through and within time are “inescapable”; her struggles against time are of no avail. Time moves forward tranquilly, imperviously, and inescapably. Miss Emily is seen in the story, first and last, as she is in death. The struggle for existence and meaning in the now of every present is commendable, but to have too high a regard for the dearness of one's own life is ultimately to deny the possibility for its realization. To covet life too highly, thereby attempting to stop time, to freeze the flux of life, is to make of something “dear” a perversity.

**Source:** William V. Davis, “Another Flower for Faulkner's Bouquet: Theme and Structure in ‘A Rose for Emily,’” in *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, Vol. VII, No. 2, Fall, 1974, pp. 34-8.

## **Essays and Criticism: Atmosphere and Theme in Faulkner's “A Rose for Emily”**

The first clues to meaning in a short story usually arise from a detection of the principal contrasts which an author sets up. The most common, perhaps, are contrasts of character, but when characters are contrasted there is usually also a resultant contrast in terms of action. Since action reflects a moral or ethical state, contrasting action points to a contrast in ideological perspectives and hence toward the theme.

The principal contrast in William Faulkner's short story “A Rose for Emily” is between past time and present time: the past as represented in Emily herself, in Colonel Sartoris, in the old Negro servant, and in the Board of Aldermen who accepted the Colonel's attitude toward Emily and rescinded her taxes; the present is depicted through the unnamed narrator and is represented in the new Board of Aldermen, in Homer Barron (the representative or Yankee attitudes toward the Griersons and through them toward the entire South), and in what is called “the next generation with its more modern ideas.”

Atmosphere is defined in the *Dictionary of World Literature* as “The particular world in which the events of a story or a play occur: time, place, conditions, and the attendant mood.” When, as in “A Rose for Emily,” the world depicted is a confusion between the past and the present, the atmosphere is one of distortion—of unreality. This unreal world results from the suspension of a natural time order. Normality consists in a decorous progression of the human being from birth, through youth, to age and finally death. Preciosity in children is as monstrous as idiocy in the adult, because both are *unnatural*. Monstrosity, however, is a sentimental subject for fiction unless it is the result of human action—the result of a willful attempt to circumvent time. When such circumvention produces acts of violence, as in “A Rose for Emily,” the atmosphere becomes one of horror.

Horror, however, represents only the extreme form of maladjusted nature. It is not produced in “A Rose for Emily” until the final act of violence has been disclosed. All that has gone before has prepared us by producing a general tone of mystery, foreboding, decay, etc., so that we may say the entire series of events that have gone before are “in key”—that is, they are depicted in a mood in which the final violence does not appear too shocking or horrible. We are inclined to say, “In such an atmosphere, anything may happen.” Foreshadowing is often accomplished through atmosphere, and in this case the atmosphere prepares us for Emily's unnatural act at the end of the story. Actually, such preparation begins in the very first sentence:

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years.

Emily is portrayed as “a fallen monument,” a *monument* for reasons which we shall examine later, *fallen* because she has shown herself susceptible to death (and decay) after all. In the mention of death, we are conditioned (as the psychologist says) for the more specific concern with it later on. The second paragraph depicts the essential ugliness of the contrast: the description of Miss Emily's house “lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores.” (A juxtaposition of past and present.) We recognize this scene as an emblematic presentation of Miss Emily herself, suggested as it is through the words “stubborn and coquettish.” The tone—and the contrast—is preserved in a description of the note which Miss 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 of the interior of the house when the deputation from the Board of Aldermen 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.” In the next paragraph a description of Emily discloses her similarity to the house: “She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue.”

Emily had not always looked like this. When she was young and part of the world with which she was contemporary, she was, we are told, “a slender figure in white,” as contrasted with her father, who is described as “a spraddled silhouette.” In the picture of Emily and her father together, framed by the door, she frail and apparently hungering to participate in the life of her time, we have a reversal of the contrast which has already been presented and which is to be developed later. Even after her father's death, Emily is not monstrous, but rather looked like a girl “with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows—sort of tragic and serene.” The suggestion is that she had already begun her entrance into that nether-world (a world which is depicted later as “rose-tinted”), but that she might even yet have been saved, had Homer Barron been another kind of man.

By the time the deputation from the new, progressive Board of Aldermen wait upon her concerning her delinquent taxes, however, she has completely retreated into her world of the past. There is no communication possible between her and them:

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.

Such contrasts are used over and over again: the difference between the attitude of Judge Stevens (who is over eighty years old) and the attitude of the young man who comes to him about the "smell" at Emily's place. For the young man (who is a member of the "rising generation") it is easy. For him, Miss Emily's world has ceased to exist. The city's health regulations are on the books, "Dammit, sir," Judge Stevens replied, "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.

Such incidents seem, however, mere preparation for the final, more important contrast between Emily and Homer Barron. Emily is the town's aristocrat; Homer is a day laborer. Homer is an active man dealing with machinery and workmen—a man's man. He is a Yankee—a Northerner. Emily is a "monument" of Southern gentility. As such she is common property of the town, but in a special way—as an ideal of *past* values. Here the author seems to be commenting upon the complex relationship between the Southerner and his past and between the Southerner of the present and the Yankee from the North. She is unreal to her compatriots, yet 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." It appeared for a time that Homer had won her over, as though the demands of reality as depicted in him (earthiness) had triumphed over her withdrawal and seclusion. This is the conflict that is not resolved until the final scene. We can imagine, however, what the outcome might have been had Homer Barron, who was not a marrying man, succeeded, in the town's eyes, in seducing her (violating her world) and then deserted her. The view of Emily as a monument would have been destroyed. Emily might have become the object of continued gossip, but she would have become susceptible to the town's pity—therefore, human. Emily's world, however, continues to be the Past (in its extreme form it is death), 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.

It is important too, to realize that during the period of Emily's courtship, the town became Emily's allies in a contest between Emily and her Grierson cousins, "because the two female cousins were even more Grierson

than Miss Emily had ever been.” The cousins were protecting the general proprieties against which the town (and the times) was in gradual rebellion. Just as each succeeding generation rebels against its elders, so the town took sides with Emily against her relations. Had Homer Barron been the proper kind of man, it is implied, Miss Emily might have escaped both horns of the dilemma (her cousins' traditionalism and Homer's immorality) and become an accepted and respected member of the community. The town's attitude toward the Grierson cousins represents the usual ambiguous attitude of man toward the past: a mixture of veneration and rebelliousness. The unfaithfulness of Homer represents the final act in the drama of Emily's struggle to escape from the past. From the moment that she realizes that he will desert her, tradition becomes magnified out of all proportion to life and death, and she conducts herself as though Homer really had been faithful—as though this view represented reality.

Miss Emily's position in regard to the specific problem of time is suggested in the scene where the old soldiers appear at her funeral. There are, we are told, two views of time: (1) the world of the present, viewing time as a mechanical progression in which the past is a diminishing road, never to be encountered again; (2) the world of tradition, viewing the past as a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from (us) now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years. The first is the view of Homer Barron and the modern generation in Jefferson. The second is the view of the older members of the Board of Aldermen and of the confederate soldiers. Emily holds the second view, except that for her there is no bottleneck dividing her from the meadow of the past.

Emily's small room above stairs 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. It is the monstrousness of this view which creates the final atmosphere of horror, and the scene is intensified by the portrayal of the unchanged objects which have surrounded Homer in life. Here he lay in the roseate atmosphere of Emily's death-in-life: “What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust.” The symbols of Homer's life of action have become mute and silent. Contrariwise, Emily's world, though it had been inviolate while she was alive, has been invaded after her death—the whole gruesome and unlovely tale unfolded.

In its simplest sense, the story says that death conquers all. But what is death? Upon one level, death is the past, tradition, whatever is opposite to the present. In the specific setting of this story, it is the past of the South in which the retrospective survivors of the War deny changing customs and the passage of time. Homer Barron, the Yankee, lived in the present, ready to take his pleasure and depart, apparently unwilling to consider the possibility of defeat, either by tradition (the Griersons) or by time (death) itself. In a sense, Emily conquered time, but only briefly and by retreating into her rose-tinted world of the past, a world in which death was denied at the same time that it is shown to have existed. Such retreat, the story implies, is hopeless, since everyone (even Emily) is finally subjected to death and the invasion of his world by the clamorous and curious inhabitants of the world of the present.

In these terms, it might seem that the story is a comment upon tradition and upon those people who live in a dream world of the past. But is it not also a comment upon the present? There is some justification for Emily's actions. She is a tragic—and heroic—figure. In the first place, she has been frustrated by her father, prevented from participating in the life of her contemporaries. When she attempts to achieve freedom, she is betrayed by a man who represents the new morality, threatened by disclosure and humiliation. The grounds of the tragedy is depicted in the scene already referred to between Emily and the deputation from the Board of Aldermen: for the new generation, the word of Colonel Sartoris meant nothing. This was a new age, a different time; the present was not bound by the promises of the past. For Emily, however, the word of the Colonel was everything. The tax notice was but a scrap of paper.

Atmosphere, we might say, is nothing but the fictional reflection of man's attitude toward the state of the universe. The atmosphere of classic tragedy inveighed against the ethical dislocation of the Grecian world merely by portraying such dislocation and depicting man's tragic efforts to conform both to the will of the gods and to the demands of his own contemporary society. Such dislocation in the modern world is likely to be seen mirrored in the natural universe, with problems of death and time representing that flaw in the golden bowl of eighteenth and nineteenth-century natural philosophy which is the inheritance of our times. Perhaps our specific dilemma is the conflict of the pragmatic present against the set mores of the past. Homer Barron was an unheroic figure who put too much dependence upon his self-centered and rootless philosophy, a belief which suggested that he could take whatever he wanted without considering any obligation to the past (tradition) or to the future (death). Emily's resistance is heroic. Her tragic flaw is the conventional pride: she undertook to regulate the natural time-universe. She acted as though death did not exist, as though she could retain her unfaithful lover by poisoning him and holding his physical self prisoner in a world which had all of the appearances of reality except that most necessary of all things—life.

The extraction of a statement of theme from so complex a subject matter is dangerous and never wholly satisfactory. The subject, as we have seen, is concerned not alone with man's relationship to death, but with his relationship as it refers to all the facets of social intercourse. The theme is not one directed at presenting an attitude of Southerner to Yankee, or Yankee to Southerner, as has been hinted at in so many discussions of William Faulkner. The Southern Problem is one of the objective facts with which the theme is concerned, but the theme itself transcends it. [Wallace Stevens](#) is certainly right when he says that a theme may be emotive as well as intellectual and logical, and it is this recognition which explains why the extraction of a logical statement of theme is so delicate and dangerous an operation: the story *is* its theme as the life of the body *is* the body.

Nevertheless, in so far as a theme represents the *meaning* of a story, it can be observed in logical terms; indeed, these are the only terms in which it can be observed for those who, at a first or even a repeated reading, fail to recognize the implications of the total story. The logical statement, in other words, may be a clue to the total, emotive content. In these terms, "A Rose for Emily" would seem to be saying that man must come to terms both with the past and the present; for to ignore the first is to be guilty of a foolish innocence, to ignore the second is to become monstrous and inhuman, above all to betray an excessive pride (such as Emily Grierson's) before the humbling fact of death. The total story says what has been said in so much successful literature, that man's plight is tragic, but that there is heroism in an attempt to rise above it.

**Source:** Ray B. West, Jr., "Atmosphere and Theme in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" in *William Faulkner: Four Decades of Criticism*, edited by Linda Welshimer Wagner, Michigan State University Press, 1973, pp. 192-98.

## Analysis

The extraordinary degree to which the young Faulkner managed to compress into this, his first published story, many of the elements that came to be characteristic of his fiction is the effect of his unusual use of the first-person point of view and his control of the motifs that flow from it.

By confining himself to the pronoun "we," the narrator gives the reader the impression that the whole town is bearing witness to the behavior of a heroine, about whom they have ambivalent attitudes, ambiguously expressed. The ambiguity derives in part from the community's lack of access to facts, stimulating the narrator to draw on his own and the communal imagination to fill out the picture, creating a collage of images. The narration gives the impression of coming out of a communal consciousness, creating the effect of a peculiar omniscience. An entire novel could be developed from the material compressed into this short story.

Is the narrator telling the story in the southern oral tradition or is he or she writing it? To ask basic questions about this unusual collective mode of narration—who, what, where, when, and why—is to stir up many possibilities. The oral mode seems most appropriate, but the style, consisting of such phrases as “diffident deprecation,” suggests the written mode.

A pattern of motifs that interact, contrasting with or paralleling one another, sometimes symbolically, sometimes ironically, flows naturally from the reservoir of communal elements in the narrator’s saturated consciousness as he tells the story: the funeral, the cemetery, the garages, cars, cotton gins, taxes, the law, the market basket and other elements of black existence, the house, its front and back doors, its cellar and upper rooms, the window where Emily sits, the idol image that becomes a fallen monument, images that evoke the Civil War, images of gold, of decay, the color yellow, dust, shadows, corpses and bodies like corpses, the smells, the breaking down of doors, the poison, and the images of hair.

To lend greater impact to the surprise ending and to achieve greater artistic unity and intensity of effect, Faulkner uses other devices: foreshadowing, reversal, and repetition. Most of the motifs, spaced effectively throughout, are repeated at least three times, enabling the reader to respond at any given point to all the elements simultaneously.

Imitators of the surprise-ending device, made famous in modern times by O. Henry, have given that device a bad name by using it mechanically to provoke a superficial thrill. In raising the surprise-ending device to the level of complex art, Faulkner achieves a double impact: “The man himself lay on the bed” is shock enough, justified by what has gone before, but “the long strand of iron-gray hair,” the charged image that ends the story, shocks the reader into a sudden, intuitive reexperiencing and reappraisal of the stream of images, bringing order and meaning to the pattern of motifs.

## **Analysis: Historical Context**

### **The South after the Civil War**

The Reconstruction after the Civil War had a profound and humbling effect on Southern society. The South’s outdated plantation economy, based so long upon slave labor, was devastated by emancipation. Northern opportunists, known as “carpet-baggers,” came in droves to take advantage of the economic chaos. Some Southern aristocrats found themselves working the land alongside tenant farmers and former slaves. Faulkner came from a family that once owned a plantation. The history of his family and of the South in general inspired Faulkner’s imagination.

The short stories and novels Faulkner wrote about Yoknapatawpha County combine to create an epic, mythical history of this era. David Minter, in his biography *William Faulkner: His Life and Work*, notes that as a teenager, Faulkner was known for being observational to the point of oddness: “Sometimes he joined the old men of Oxford on the town square ... there he sat or stood motionless, quiet, as though held fast by some inner scene or some inner sense of himself.” It was in this manner that Faulkner soaked up the legends of his region. He heard Civil War stories from the old veterans, hunting stories from his father, stories of his great-grandfather’s heroic exploits from his grandfather, and fables about the animals in the forest told by Mammy Caroline Barr, an ex-slave who watched over him when he was a small boy. The stories he heard, along with his experiences in Oxford during his own lifetime, greatly inform the scope of his work.

“A Rose for Emily,” in a few pages, covers approximately three-quarters of a century. The birth of Emily Grierson takes place sometime around the Civil War. Her death takes place sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s—that is, sometime around the year Faulkner wrote the story. Because Faulkner came from a family with an aristocratic bearing and associated with other similar families, he was familiar with the arrogance of characters like the Griersons. Some of these people continued to behave as if they were still

privileged plantation owners although their wealth was gone. However, Faulkner spent much of his time observing ordinary townspeople as well, and this is why he was able to capture the voice of the common people of Jefferson in the character of the narrator.

The narrator in “A Rose for Emily” notes a change in the character of his town when Jefferson’s Board of Aldermen attempts to collect Emily’s taxes. Originally, the town was governed by men of the old South like Colonel Sartoris and Judge Stevens. Men like this operated under a code of chivalry that was extremely protective of white women. Thus, Colonel Sartoris is unable to allow the town to tax a poor spinster, and Judge Stevens is unable to confront Emily about the smell coming from her house. As each generation passes the torch, however, the newer generations are further and further away from the antiquated social mores of their forebears. The men who try to collect Emily’s taxes don’t operate under the same code of conduct as their grandfathers and great-grandfathers did. Emily is not a “damsel in distress” to these men; she is a nuisance, a hindrance to progress. Faulkner was very interested in this conflict between nineteenth and twentieth-century Southern society. The old Southern families of his novels, such as the Compsons in [The Sound and the Fury](#), ultimately collapse under the weight of their histories. In “A Rose for Emily,” Emily Grierson is certainly a character trapped in her genteel past, although she literally has a “skeleton in the closet.”

## **Analysis: A Rose for Emily**

Miss Emily met Homer Baron, a foreman with a construction company, when her hometown was first getting paved streets. Her father had already died but, not before driving away her eligible suitors. As rumors circulate about her possible marriage to a Yankee, Homer leaves town abruptly. During his absence, Miss Emily buys rat poison.

When Homer returns, the townspeople see him enter Miss Emily’s house but not leave. Only when she dies do the townspeople discover his corpse on a bed in her house and, next to it, a strand of Miss Emily’s hair.

This Gothic plot makes serious points about woman’s place in society. Throughout the story, the reader is aware that these events are taking place during a time of transition: The town is finally getting sidewalks and mailboxes. More important, values are changing. The older magistrates, for example, looked on Miss Emily paternally and refused to collect taxes from her; the newer ones try, unsuccessfully, to do so.

Caught in these changing times, Miss Emily is trapped in her role as genteel spinster. Without a husband, her life will have no meaning. She tries to give lessons in painting china but cannot find pupils for this out-of-date hobby and finally discontinues them. If Homer is thinking of abandoning her, as his departure implies, one can understand her desire to clutch at any sort of union, even a marriage in death.

The theme is developed through an exceptionally well-crafted story. Told from a third-person plural point of view, it reveals the reactions of the town to Miss Emily. As this “we” narrator shifts allegiance--now criticizing Miss Emily, now sympathizing with her--the reader sees the trap in which she is caught, and the extensive but unobtrusive foreshadowing prepares the reader for the story’s final revelation without detracting from its force.

## **Analysis: Literary Style**

### **Flashback and Foreshadowing**

Flashback and foreshadowing are two often used literary devices that utilize time in order to produce a desired effect. Flashbacks are used to present action that occurs before the beginning of a story; foreshadowing creates expectation for action that has not yet happened. Faulkner uses both devices in “A Rose for Emily.”

The story is told by the narrator through a series of non-sequential flashbacks. The narrator begins the story by describing the scene of Emily's funeral; this description, however, is actually a flashback because the story ends with the narrator's memory of the town's discovery of the corpse in the Grierson home after Emily's funeral. Throughout the story, the narrator flashes back and forth through various events in the life and times of Emily Grierson and the town of Jefferson. Each piece of the story told by the narrator prompts another piece of the story, regardless of chronology. For example, the narrator recalls Emily's funeral, which leads him to remember when Colonel Sartoris relieved her of taxes. This of course leads to the story of the aldermen trying to collect Emily's taxes after the death of the Colonel. The narrative thus works much in the same haphazard manner as human memory does.

The narrator foreshadows the grisly discovery at the end of the story with several scenes. First, when the aldermen attempt to collect Emily's taxes, her house is described as decrepit, almost a mausoleum. Emily herself is compared to a drowned corpse. Then, in section two, the stench that emanates from the Grierson house is most certainly one of death. Another powerful example of foreshadowing comes when Emily refuses to let anyone take the body of her father after his death until she relents after three days. When Emily finally has access to another corpse, she jealously guards it for over forty years!

### **Point of View**

The point of view in "A Rose for Emily" is unique. The story is told by an unnamed narrator in the first-person collective. One might even argue that the narrator is the main character. There are hints as to the age, race, gender, and class of the narrator, but an identity is never actually revealed. Isaac Rodman notes in *The Faulkner Journal* that the critical consensus remains that the narrator speaks for his community. (Rodman, however, goes on to present a convincing argument that the narrator may be a loner or eccentric of some kind speaking from "ironic detachment.") Regardless of identity, the narrator proves to be a clever, humorous, and sympathetic storyteller. He is clever because of the way he pieces the story together to build to a shocking climax. His humor is evident in his almost whimsical tone throughout what most would consider to be a morbid tale. Finally, the narrator is sympathetic to both Emily and the town of Jefferson. This is demonstrated in his pity for Emily and in his understanding that the town's reactions are driven by circumstances beyond its control ("Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town").

### **Setting**

"A Rose for Emily" is set in Faulkner's mythical county, Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi. The town of Jefferson is the county seat of Yoknapatawpha. In *William Faulkner: His Life and Work*, David Minter writes, "More than any major American writer of our time, including [Robert Frost](#) Faulkner is associated with a region. He is our great provincial." Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha County are based upon the real city of Oxford and Lafayette County in Mississippi, where Faulkner spent most of his life. Once he established this fictional, yet familiar, setting, he was able to tap his creativity to invent a history for Yoknapatawpha and populate the county with colorful characters like Emily Grierson and Colonel Sartoris. The land and its history exert a great influence over many of Faulkner's characters. Emily is no exception; she is trapped in Jefferson's past.

### **Structure**

The best of Faulkner's fiction is characterized by the craftsmanship of its structure. [The Sound and the Fury](#) and [As I Lay Dying](#) are both examples of daring experimentation with point of view and time in the novel. He wrote "A Rose for Emily" during the same period he worked on those novels. The story moves seamlessly back and forth in time through almost fifty years in its five sections. Each episode in the life of Emily and the history of Jefferson is obviously interconnected, yet the clues aren't given in chronological order. Thus, the final scene is powerful because the narrator does not tell the story in a straightforward, beginning-to-end fashion. This is why the story is even more entertaining and enlightening when read for the second time.

## Analysis: Compare and Contrast

- **1930s:** The 1929 collapse of the stock market in the U.S. leads to the Great Depression. Unemployment grows from 5 million in 1930 to 13 million in 1932 (24.9% of the population).  
**1990s:** The U.S. economy booms. The stock market climbs to unprecedented levels, while unemployment is at a quarter-century low.
- **1930s:** The thirties are part of a three-decade long golden age of radio. Families gather around the radio after dinner to listen to news, sports events, and dramas such as “The Shadow” and “Little Orphan Annie.”  
**1990s:** Media is pervasive in late twentieth-century life. The choices seem endless; radio, television (with hundreds of channels), film, and the Internet provide people with information and entertainment twenty-four hours a day.
- **1930s:** Bruno Hauptmann is tried for the kidnapping and murder of the Lindbergh baby. (Charles Lindbergh was the first man to fly across the Atlantic Ocean on a solo voyage.) Although many believe that there is a rush to judgement in Hauptmann's conviction, he is executed in 1936 via the electric chair. The press dub the proceedings the “Trial of the Century.”  
**1990s:** Former football star O. J. Simpson is arrested for the brutal murder of his ex-wife Nicole and her friend Ron Goldman. The most incendiary topics of the time are involved: race, class, sex, gender, and fame. Simpson is acquitted (although a later jury finds him liable for the murders in a civil case). The press dub the proceedings the “Trial of the Century.”

## Analysis: Topics for Further Study

- Except for the title, roses are never mentioned in the story. Why do you think Faulkner chose this title? Do you think the rose symbolizes anything in the story?
- As the narrator is telling the story of how Emily's taxes were remitted, he remarks that Colonel Sartoris is the father of an edict declaring that “no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron.” Why do you think the narrator mentions this law? What does this remark tell us about the Colonel Sartoris and the narrator?
- Look up the definition of “eccentric” in the dictionary. Find examples of eccentric characters in literature and film. Compare your examples with Emily Grierson. What qualities do these characters share? What is there to admire or dislike about them?
- Only once in the story does the narrator place an event in a specific year. Find that event and year and see if you can put together a chronology. Does it seem consistent and realistic? Why or why not?

## Analysis: Media Adaptations

- “A Rose for Emily” was adapted for film by Chubbuck Cinema Co. It was produced and directed by Lyndon Chubbuck and written by H. Kaye Dyal. Anjelica Huston plays the role of Miss Emily.

## Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

- *Collected Stories* (1950) by [William Faulkner](#) is an exhaustive collection of his short fiction. The volume includes “Barn Burning” and many other stories about Yoknapatawpha County.
- [The Sound and the Fury](#) (1929) by William Faulkner is the novel that established his reputation as an important writer. This experimental novel concerns the decline of the once proud Compson family of

Yoknapatawpha County. The story is told in four sections, each one detailing the disintegration of the Compsons from a different character's viewpoint. Faulkner used this technique in other novels as well, including [As I Lay Dying](#) (1930) and [Absalom, Absalom!](#) (1936).

- Many of the works of Flannery O'Connor are in the same Southern Gothic tradition as "A Rose for Emily." Her short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1955) details a vacationing family's doomed encounter with an escaped criminal known as the Misfit.
- Southern playwright [Tennessee Williams](#) examined many of the same themes in his work as Faulkner. His play [A Streetcar Named Desire](#) (1947) is the story of aging, tarnished Southern belle Blanche DuBois, and the tense relationship she has with her brutish brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski.
- Some of Truman Capote's fiction concerns life in the South in the 1930s. His novel [The Grass Harp](#) (1951) tells the story of a group of eccentrics who disrupt their community when they retreat to the woods and begin living in a treehouse.
- The 1996 film *Kissed*, directed by Lynne Stopkewich and written by Barbara Gowdy, Angus Fraser, and Stopkewich, is the story of a woman (Molly Parker) whose obsession with death as a young girl leads her to a job in a mortuary and necrophilia.

## Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading

### Sources

Birk, John F. "Tryst Beyond Time: Faulkner's Emily and Keats." In *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Spring 1991, pp. 203-13.

Gregory, Horace. Review of *The Collected Stories of William Faulkner*. In *New York Herald Tribune*, August 20, 1950, p. 1.

Gwynn, Frederick L., and Joseph Blotner. *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958*. University of Virginia Press, 1959, p. 26.

Hays, Peter L. "Who Is Faulkner's Emily?" In *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Spring 1988, pp. 105-110.

Levitt, Paul. "An Analogue for Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily.'" In *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 9, 1973, p. 91.

Littler, Frank A. "The Tangled Thread of Time: Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily.'" In *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1982, p. 80.

Mellard, James M. "Faulkner's Miss Emily and Blake's Sick Rose: Invisible Worm, Nachtraglichkeit, and Retrospective Gothic." In *The Faulkner Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Fall, 1986, pp. 39-41.

Minter, David. *William Faulkner: His Life and Work*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, 1997, pp. 1, 14, 16.

Rodman, Isaac. "Irony and Isolation: Narrative Distance in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily.'" In *The Faulkner Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring, 1993, pp. 3, 7.

Schwab, Milinda. "A Watch for Emily." In *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Spring 1992, p. 216.

Warren, Robert Penn. Introduction to *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966, p. 9.

## Further Reading

Allen, Dennis W. "Horror and Perverse Delight: Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily.'" In *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Winter 1984, pp. 685-96. A fine overview of the story, featuring an in-depth psychological analysis of the character of Emily.

Blotner, Joseph. *Faulkner: A Biography*. New York: Random House, 1974. This exhaustive study written by one of Faulkner's colleagues at the University of Virginia is considered by most critics to be the definitive Faulkner biography.

Jacobs, John T. "Ironic Allusions in 'A Rose for Emily.'" In *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1982, pp. 77-79. Jacobs provides a critical analysis of the role that the character of Homer Barron plays in the story.

Wilson, G. R., Jr. "The Chronology of Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' Again." In *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Fall, 1972, pp. 43-62. Wilson devises a seemingly logical time-line for the story.

Winchell, Mark Royden. "For All the Heart's Endeavor: Romantic Pathology in Browning and Faulkner." In *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1983, pp. 57-63. Winchell compares "A Rose for Emily" with Robert Browning's poem "Porphyria's Lover."

## Bibliography

Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963. This venerable classic of Faulkner criticism is one of the best introductions, treating Faulkner's characteristic themes and historical and social background and offering detailed readings of the major novels and stories. Includes carefully prepared notes, appendixes, and a character index.

Kirk, Robert W., and Marvin Klotz. "A Rose for Emily." In *Faulkner's People: A Complete Guide and Index to the Characters in the Fiction of William Faulkner*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963. Identifies all the named characters in "A Rose for Emily" and describes the role of each character in terms of the plot.

Porter, Carolyn. *William Faulkner*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. A concise and informative biographical work that spans Faulkner's entire life but focuses primarily on his most prolific period, from 1929 to 1940. Offers insightful analysis of his major works.

Skei, Hans H. "A Rose for Emily." In *Reading Faulkner's Best Short Stories*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999. Skei addresses critical questions about apparent inconsistencies in the narrator's voice and the appropriate genre designation for this story.

Towner, Theresa M. *The Cambridge Introduction to William Faulkner*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. An accessible resource, aimed at students and general readers. Provides detailed analyses of Faulkner's works and information about the critical reception for his fiction.

Towner, Theresa M., and James Carothers. "A Rose for Emily." In *Reading Faulkner's Collected Stories*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999. Towner and Carothers survey criticism about the story, including criticism of Miss Emily's personality. Also explains key phrases used in the story.

Wagner-Martin, Linda, ed. *William Faulkner: Six Decades of Criticism*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002. A collection of critical essays interpreting Faulkner's work from perspectives such as

language theory, feminism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis.

## Questions and Answers: When was "A Rose for Emily" published?

William Faulkner's (1897-1962) short story "A Rose for Emily" was originally published in the April 30, 1930 edition of *The Forum*, a widely-read American magazine founded in 1885. It was the first story Faulkner published in a national magazine, and is set in Yoknapatawpha County, the fictional county featured in many of Faulkner's other novels and stories.

## Questions and Answers: What is the order of events in "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner?

One of the things that makes William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" intriguing and memorable is its enigmatic plot. Events are not related in linear order; rather, the story travels back and forth in time. The reader is yanked in and out of spaces and across years, making Emily's crime hard to immediately discern.

While the plot can be a fun puzzle, it can also be frustratingly difficult to follow at times. Here is a list of what occurs in the story in chronological order:

1. Emily's father dies
2. Colonel Sartoris pays Emily's taxes
3. Colonel Sartoris dies
4. Homer comes to town
5. Emily purchases arsenic
6. Homer goes missing
7. A smell emerges and becomes stronger
8. Aldermen try to collect taxes from Emily
9. Emily dies and Homer's body is discovered

## Questions and Answers: What are the conflicts in "A Rose for Emily"?

All literature involves conflict of some kind. Without conflict, there is not much of a story. There are four types of conflict. Most works will involve more than one. In "A Rose for Emily," William Faulkner employs all four. The types of conflict are:

1. Man\* v. Man
2. Man v. Nature
3. Man v. Society
4. Man v. Self.

\*Note: "Man" refers to both men and women.

1. Man v. Man

There are two primary man v. man conflicts in the story.

## Emily v. Her Father

Emily's father deliberately keep his daughter single by chasing away all her suitors:

None of the young men were quite good enough for 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 back-flung front door. So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated; even with insanity in the family she wouldn't have turned down all of her chances if they had really materialized (II.25).

## Emily v. Homer

There are both class and social conflicts between Emily and Homer. Emily is of Southern aristocracy, while Homer is a day laborer. Emily is desperate for marriage, while Homer is not ready to settle down.

So the next day we all said, "She will kill herself"; and we said it would be the best thing. When she had first begun to be seen with Homer Barron, we had said, "She will marry him." Then we said, "She will persuade him yet," because Homer himself had remarked—he liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks' Club—that he was not a marrying man (IV.43).

## 2. Man v. Society

When an individual's values and needs conflict with society's values and needs, conflict results. There are three types of "man v. society" conflicts in "A Rose for Emily."

### Emily v. Aldermen

When Emily's father was alive, he paid the property taxes on their home; he arranged for his friend, Colonel Sartoris, to continue paying the taxes after his passing on behalf of his daughter. After the colonel's death, the younger generation was no longer interested in maintaining their "hereditary obligation." For her part, Emily feels no sense of duty to pay the taxes herself.

When the next generation, with its more modern ideas, became mayors and aldermen, this arrangement created some little dissatisfaction. On the first of the year they mailed her a tax notice. February came, and there was no reply. They wrote her a formal letter, asking her to call at the sheriff's office at her convenience. A week later the mayor wrote her himself, offering to call or to send his car for her, and received in reply a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in faded ink, to the effect that she no longer went out at all. The tax notice was also enclosed, without comment (I.4).

### Emily vs. Public Acceptability

There are two areas of Emily's private life encroaching on the public, and the public finds her choices unacceptable.

The first is her outings with Homer. The town views her suitor as beneath her:

At first we were glad that Miss Emily would have an interest, because the ladies all said, "Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer." But there were

still others, older people, who said that even grief could not cause a real lady to forget noblesse oblige—without calling it noblesse oblige. They just said, “Poor Emily. Her kinsfolk should come to her.” She had some kin in Alabama; but years ago her father had fallen out with them over the estate of old lady Wyatt, the crazy woman, and there was no communication between the two families. They had not even been represented at the funeral (III.31).

The second is the smell that begins wafting from her home and becomes increasingly intolerable:

The next day he 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 graybeards 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 . . .”

“Dammit, sir,” Judge Stevens said, “will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?”

So the next night, after midnight, four men crossed Miss Emily’s lawn and slunk about the house like burglars, sniffing along the base of the brickwork and at the cellar openings while one of them performed a regular sowing motion with his hand out of a sack slung from his shoulder. They broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there, and in all the outbuildings (II.21-24).

### 3. Man v. Nature

At the turn of the twentieth century, an unmarried woman past the age of thirty had very few chances of ever finding a husband. Aging is not helping Emily’s prospects, and whatever beauty she may have had is fading fast. Here is a description of her appearance when the aldermen pay her a visit:

They rose when she entered—a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked 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 while the visitors stated their errand (I.6).

### 4. Man v. Himself

For Emily, the entire story is one large internal conflict. She has suitors and seems interested, but her father chases them away. She must experience some conflict when she dates Homer, a man well beneath her social station. The most obvious conflict she has is whether to let the man with whom she has fallen in love go or keep him with her. Forever.

The man himself lay in the bed.

For a long while we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin. The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him. What was left of

him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust.

Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair.

## Questions and Answers: Where is there symbolism in "A Rose for Emily"?

Symbolism is a literary device in which a writer uses a concrete object to represent an abstract idea. While not all writers use symbolism, Faulkner has chosen to employ symbolism in at least seven different ways in "A Rose for Emily."

1. Dust: Dust can be symbolic of many things: neglect, aging, things that are overlooked, and/ or the biblical concept of ashes to ashes, dust to dust. There are seven different mentions of dust throughout the story. Here is an example of those instances:

It smelled of **dust** and disuse—a close, dank smell. The Negro led them into the parlor. It was furnished in heavy, leather-covered furniture. When the Negro opened the blinds of one window, they could see that the leather was cracked; and when they sat down, a faint **dust** rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray. On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father (I.5).

2. Rat/ Snake: Both of these animals are associated with conniving and dishonesty. The druggist offers Emily "rat" poison.

"I want some poison," she said to the druggist. She was over thirty then, still a slight woman, though thinner than usual, with cold, haughty black eyes in a face the flesh of which was strained across the temples and about the eye-sockets as you imagine a lighthouse-keeper's face ought to look. "I want some poison," she said.

"Yes, Miss Emily. What kind? For rats and such? I'd recom—" (III.33-34)

Later, the townspeople begin looking for the source of the terrible smell emanating from Emily's home:

It's probably just a snake or a rat that nigger of hers killed in the yard. I'll speak to him about it (II.20).

3. Iron: this metal is associated with being cold and inflexible. Emily's hair is described as "iron gray."

When we next saw Miss Emily, she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray, when it ceased turning. Up to the day of her death at seventy-four it was still that vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man (IV.48).

4. Black: The color black is associated with death and funerals, but it also has a more abstract meaning of being psychologically "dead."

Emily is described as “a small, fat woman in black” and she has “cold, haughty black eyes” (I.6, III.34).

5. Closed houses or rooms: There is a psychological component to doors shutting and rooms being sealed off. Here are two examples of “closing” in the story:

The Negro man went in and out with the market basket, but the front door remained closed (IV.47).

From that time on her front door remained closed (IV.49).

6. Barron: Homer’s last name is “Barron.” If the vowel is changed to an “e,” his name can take on a new meaning. If something is “barren,” it cannot bear fruit. Therefore, the relationship was doomed before it began. His first name may also be a clue as to his nature; perhaps this Homer has something in common with the ancient Greek master in that they both spin stories.

7. Rose: There is no “rose” in “A Rose for Emily.” Using this symbolic flower in the title may conjure up some abstract meanings, including love but also, due to its strong scent, may hint at death. The tradition of bringing flowers to a funeral comes from the need to cover the smell of decay.

## Questions and Answers: What is Faulkner's primary metaphor in "A Rose for Emily"?

A metaphor is a literary device in which a writer compares two things that seem to have nothing in common but actually do have some similarities. The metaphor Faulkner uses most often compares Emily to a “fallen monument.”

In "A Rose for Emily," the pre-Civil War aristocracy is fading. The old homes are falling into decay and repairs are being neglected. The old ways are being ignored and replaced with new values.

Likewise, Emily is aging. Her slight beauty is gone. No one in the new generation is interested in maintaining the “hereditary obligation with which they have been bestowed” to pay Emily's taxes on her behalf. While Faulkner only uses the words “fallen monument” once, the entire story revolves around this essential metaphor:

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old man-servant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years.

It was 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. . .

Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town, dating from that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor—he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron—remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity. Not that Miss

Emily would have accepted charity. Colonel Sartoris invented an involved tale to the effect that Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town, as a matter of business, preferred this way of repaying. Only a man of Colonel Sartoris' generation and thought could have invented it, and only a woman could have believed it.

When the next generation, with its more modern ideas, became mayors and aldermen, this arrangement created some little dissatisfaction.

(I.1-4)

## Questions and Answers: How does the idea of the "grotesque" impact the story?

In meeting Faulkner's Emily Grierson of Jefferson, Mississippi, one is reminded of several inhabitants of another fictional town—Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, the setting of his book by the same name. In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson introduces the word "grotesque" to characterize the individuals in the town whose lives have been determined by cruel chance or circumstance, turning them into obsessed, twisted versions of humanity. In a literary essay, "Sherwood Anderson's Idea of the Grotesque," critic David D. Anderson alludes to the grotesques of Winesburg as "spiritual cripples, deformed by their inability to distinguish between appearance and reality." They are "turned in upon themselves, isolated, and alone." The grotesques in *Winesburg, Ohio* are human beings, the essay points out, who are "worthy of love, of compassion, and of understanding."

Each of these descriptors captures the character of Emily Grierson, and just as Sherwood Anderson felt compassion for his grotesques, Faulkner evinces sympathy for Miss Emily, robbed of her life by her heritage as a Grierson. Through no fault of her own and despite her early efforts to live a normal life, Emily is isolated in Jefferson. An overbearing father runs off her suitors, consigning her to spinsterhood, and the town, developed as a character in Faulkner's story, does not relate to her as a fellow human being. Miss Emily's family name and social status as one of the "high and mighty Griersons" separate her from the ebb and flow of daily life in Jefferson. When her father dies, she clings to his presence in the Grierson family home until she is forced to give up his body, foreshadowing her subsequent obsession with Homer Baron's corpse. Emily's having pursued a scandalous romantic relationship with the socially unacceptable Yankee illustrates a desperate need to end her isolation and loneliness, as does her eventual murder of him and continuing possession of his body.

In murdering Homer and sleeping for years beside his decaying corpse, Miss Emily crosses the line between being a grotesque and being a madwoman, but her behavior originates in circumstances that thwart her development as a healthy, fulfilled individual. Like Anderson's grotesques, Miss Emily struggles to live within the confines of her sad life. She is a twisted spirit whose suffering serves as a subtle subtext in Faulkner's story.

## Questions and Answers: How is this story a Southern gothic tale?

"A Rose for Emily" is an iconic example of Southern Gothic literature, a subgenre of Gothic literature that developed in twentieth-century American fiction. Like Gothic literature in general, Faulkner's story contains elements of mystery and horror, and the narrative is permeated with other Gothic elements, as well—ruin, decay, darkness, insanity, and hereditary curses. Gothic stock characters—the tyrant, the villain, and the madwoman—are found among the people in Jefferson, the small Mississippi town that serves as the setting.

Faulkner weaves these Gothic elements seamlessly into an examination of Southern society and the post-Civil War culture of the South, the distinguishing characteristic of Southern Gothic fiction.

Through Faulkner's narrator, who knows personally the history of Jefferson and the events of Emily Grierson's life and death, the town itself becomes a character in the story, a collection of citizens imprisoned by Southern heritage, Southern social dynamics, and a singular point of view. Through the town's obsession with Emily Grierson and her behavior, the weight of the past is revealed. The citizens of Jefferson live the shadow of the past, their attitudes and actions controlled by what once was but is no more, except in memory. The nineteenth-century Grierson house, once grand, now stands in "stubborn and coquettish decay" among cotton wagons, garages, and gasoline pumps, "an eyesore among eyesores"; the names of Jefferson's august families are found in the town's cemetery, "among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson." The narrator's description of Jefferson, its history, and its citizens establishes the culture and the atmosphere that make the events in the story and its macabre conclusion plausible.

The tyrant in Faulkner's Southern Gothic is, of course, Emily's selfish, domineering father, who destroys any possibility that she could marry and leave him. Homer Baron seems to be the villain of the piece, an itinerant Yankee who publicly pursues a romantic relationship with Miss Emily in a shocking disregard for her reputation and who apparently has no intentions of marrying her—or not. Homer's intentions are never clarified, but Emily's murdering him suggests that marriage was not a part of Homer's plans for the future. In the shocking conclusion of the story, Miss Emily is revealed as a woman driven mad, perhaps by the circumstances of her life or perhaps by inheriting the insanity that curses the Griersons. In any event, Emily Grierson is insane, the mystery of her behavior and the depth of her madness evident in the horror that lies behind the locked bedroom door in her house.

As the story unfolds, the mystery unfolds slowly, as Faulkner moves the reader backward and forward in time. In retrospect, clues throughout the story, when pieced together in chronological order, suggest Homer Baron's fate, but the ultimate manifestation of Miss Emily's insanity, revealed in the story's final sentence, is not anticipated. Throughout the narrative Faulkner sustains the atmosphere of a Gothic mystery in scenes etched in darkness. Visitors to the Grierson house are admitted to "a dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow." One evening at dusk, Homer is observed entering Miss Emily's house, never to be seen again. Men slink about in the shadows in Miss Emily's yard late one night, spreading lime to eradicate a terrible smell, and a light suddenly appears in a solitary darkened window, illuminating her silent, motionless form. The mysterious room in the "region above stairs that no one had seen in forty years" is permeated with dust, "[a] thin acrid pall as of the tomb." The story is dark, both literally and figuratively.

Beginning with Miss Emily's funeral and ending with Homer Baron's decayed corpse in her bed, "A Rose for Emily" develops the primary motif found in many Gothic tales: death. In Faulkner's hands, the motif is inextricably related to the past that continued to inform the culture of the South as he knew it. "The past," he once wrote, "is never dead. It's not even past." The truth of his perception is evident throughout the story, making "A Rose for Emily" a classic Southern Gothic tale.

## **Questions and Answers: Could the town be the antagonist of the story?**

The town of Jefferson, which is personified in the form of the narrator, becomes one of the most important and active "characters" in the story: the town actively interferes in Miss Emily's life in such a way that it becomes, at times, the antagonist.

The town struggles to force Emily to pay her taxes, which Emily believes were permanently remitted by Colonel Sartoris. With her stubbornness, Emily "vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers before about the smell." In an earlier episode, when neighbors detect a foul smell coming from Emily's property, the town--this time, the older, pre-democratic town--takes care of the smell by secretly spreading lime around Emily's house. This conflict is solved silently because the town still respects the aristocratic social stratum that Emily represents. In yet another episode of conflict, however, the town acts overtly against Emily.

When it appears that Emily and Homer Barron are courting, the town is at first happy for her but then becomes outraged because people believe Emily's association with a working man and, worse, a Yankee, is a violation of her aristocratic obligations, her *noblesse oblige*. The town brings in the minister to convince her to give up Homer, and he fails so miserably that he can never talk about what happened. The town then calls in her cousins from Alabama, the town's last hope of influencing Emily, who also fail to change her mind. The town is glad the cousins failed because, as the narrator tells us, the cousins "were even more Grierson than Miss Emily had been." The town, then, is not happy about the fact that Miss Emily may still be able to find some happiness. Rather, the town is pleased with the result because it dislikes the cousins *more* than it dislikes Miss Emily's violation of her obligations as the last vestige of southern aristocracy. The town, as antagonist, attempts to make Emily into society's version of the southern aristocratic lady who behaves in accord with the town's collective idea of appropriate behavior.

In every episode in which the town and Emily interact, the town sets itself up as the arbiter of Emily's behavior and becomes not just an observer or judge of Emily's behavior but an active antagonist whose goal is to conform Emily's behavior to its view. In a sense, the town and Emily have been locked for decades in a power struggle over the rights of the many against the rights of the one. If we were to keep score, though, the rights of the one have prevailed.

## Short-Answer Quizzes: Questions and Answers Section I

### Study Questions

1. What hints are given in Section I that "A Rose for Emily" takes place in the South?
2. What is the name of Miss Emily's manservant?
3. Why does the Board of Aldermen send a delegation to Miss Emily's house?
4. Whose portrait sits on an easel by Miss Emily's fireplace, and what material was used to make it?
5. What "color" is Miss Emily's house?

### Answers

1. Faulkner mentions a cemetery where Union and Confederate soldiers who were killed during the Battle of Jefferson are buried; the former mayor of Jefferson, Colonel Sartoris, was the father of an edict prohibiting Negro women from appearing in the street without an apron; and cotton gins have sprung up around Miss Emily's house.
2. The name of Miss Emily's manservant, a "combined gardener and cook," is Tobe.
3. Miss Emily had not been paying taxes for many years, and the new town leaders wanted to rectify the situation.

4. The portrait of Miss Emily's father, made from crayons, is on the easel.
5. Miss Emily's house is described as "a big squarish frame house that had once been white...."

## Short-Answer Quizzes: Questions and Answers Section II

### Study Questions

1. Why doesn't Judge Stevens want to confront Miss Emily about "the smell"?
2. What did Miss Emily inherit from her father?
3. What were the minister and the doctor trying to convince Miss Emily of doing after her father's death?
4. How many years pass between "the smell" in Section II and the deputation in Section I that visits Miss Emily about her taxes?
5. What do town members finally do about "the smell"?

### Answers

1. Judge Stevens believes that he can not "accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad...."
2. Miss Emily's father willed her the house but apparently left her with no money.
3. The men were trying to convince Miss Emily of disposing of her father's body properly.
4. Thirty years pass between the two events.
5. A group of men sprinkle lime around Miss Emily's house and in her cellar.

## Short-Answer Quizzes: Questions and Answers Section III

### Study Questions

1. What does the term "noblesse oblige" mean?
2. What events cause some of the townspeople to say "Poor Emily"?
3. Why is Homer Barron in town?
4. What does Miss Emily purchase from the druggist?
5. What does Miss Emily tell the druggist the poison is to be used for?

### Answer

1. "Noblesse oblige" is a French term that means "nobility is an obligation." In the English usage, it refers to the "honorable" behavior that persons of high birth or rank are expected to display.
2. Miss Emily appears in public with, and expresses an interest in, Homer Barron, a Yankee day laborer.
3. Homer Barron is on a crew paving the sidewalks.

4. Miss Emily buys arsenic from the druggist.
5. Miss Emily refuses to tell the druggist why she wants the poison.

## **Short-Answer Quizzes: Questions and Answers Section IV**

### **Study Questions**

1. Why did the Baptist minister call on Miss Emily?
2. What did Miss Emily buy from the town jeweler?
3. About how many years pass between the time of Homer Barron's disappearance and Miss Emily's death?
4. What change took place in Miss Emily's relationship with the town for a period of several years when Miss Emily was in her forties?
5. Were the new generation of town leaders able to collect taxes from Miss Emily?

### **Answers**

1. The minister was forced by some of the ladies in town to talk with Miss Emily about her being a bad example for the town.
2. Miss Emily purchased a man's silver toilet set with the initials "H. B." engraved on each piece.
3. Miss Emily was in her thirties when she met Homer Barron, and she was seventy-four when she died.
4. Miss Emily opened up her house for china-painting lessons for the town's children.
5. No, the town was never able to collect taxes from Miss Emily. Each year the request for the taxes was returned by the post office unopened.

## **Short-Answer Quizzes: Questions and Answers: Section V**

### **Study Questions**

1. What happens to Tobe after Miss Emily's death?
2. What are some of the older men wearing at Miss Emily's funeral?
3. Which room do the townspeople open once Miss Emily is "decently in the ground...?"
4. What kinds of objects are found in the room once it is opened?
5. What is found on the pillow next to the skeleton?

### **Answers**

1. Tobe leaves Miss Emily's house and is never seen again.
2. Some of the old men are wearing brushed Confederate uniforms.
3. The townspeople open a room above the stairs that has not been opened for forty years.

4. Among other things, there is an array of crystal, a man's silver toiletry set, a collar with a tie, and a man's suit.
5. On the pillow next to the skeleton there is a long strand of iron-gray hair.