



A Rose for Emily

William Faulkner

William Faulkner



*Alive, Miss Emily
had been a
tradition, a duty,
and a care; a sort of
hereditary
obligation upon the
town . . .*

Born in 1897 to an old southern family, William Faulkner grew up in Oxford, Mississippi, where he lived for most of his life. He worked on his novels and short stories on his farm outside Oxford. He died there in 1962.

Faulkner created a saga of his own, inventing a host of characters “typical of the historical growth and subsequent decadence of the South. The human drama in Faulkner’s novels is then built on the model of the actual, historical drama extending over almost a century and a half. Each story and novel contributes to the construction of a whole, which is the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County and its inhabitants” (Nobelprize.org). Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947.



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Historical Context

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 The South's outdated plantation economy, based so long upon slave labor, was devastated by emancipation.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



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Historical Context (cont.)

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.



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Historical Context (cont.)

“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.



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Historical Context (cont.)

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



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Historical Context (cont.)

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.”



A Rose for Emily

Genre

- Southern gothic

Setting

- Location: Jefferson, the county seat of Yoknapatawpha County

Mood

- Distorted reality; horror

Point of view

- First person narrator



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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.



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Characters (cont.)

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.

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.”



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Characters (cont.)

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."



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Characters (cont.)

Emily Grierson

Emily Grierson, known as Miss Emily,” is the main character. An unnamed narrator tells her strange story through a series of flashbacks. She is essentially the town eccentric. 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, for she denies that her father is dead at first and she will not 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. The narrator’s various clues 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.



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Characters (cont.)

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.

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.



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Characters (cont.)

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.



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Characters (cont.)

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."



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Characters (cont.)

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.



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Characters (cont.)

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 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.



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Structure

“A Rose for Emily” is divided into five sections, with the first and last sections having to do with the present and 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.



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Flashbacks

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, similar to the narrative mode of stream of consciousness.



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Foreshadowing

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.



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Themes

- Community vs. isolation
- Death
- Decline of the Old South



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Source

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