A Rose for Emily

Faulkner's most famous, most popular, and most anthologized short story, "A Rose for Emily" evokes the terms Southern gothic and grotesque, two types of literature in which the general tone is one of gloom, terror, and understated violence. The story is Faulkner's best example of these forms because it contains unimaginably dark images: a decaying mansion, a corpse, a murder, a mysterious servant who disappears, and, most horrible of all, necrophilia — an erotic or sexual attraction to corpses.

First published in the April 1930 *Saturday Evening Post*, "A Rose for Emily" was reprinted in *These Thirteen* (1931), a collection of thirteen of Faulkner's stories. It was later included in his *Collected Stories* (1950) and in the *Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner* (1961).

Most discussions of the short story center on Miss Emily Grierson, an aristocratic woman deeply admired by a community that places her on a pedestal and sees her as "a tradition, a duty" — or, as the unnamed narrator describes her, "a fallen monument." In contrast to the community's view, we realize eventually that Miss Emily is a woman who not only poisons and kills her lover, Homer Barron, but she keeps his rotting corpse in her bedroom and sleeps next to it for many years. The ending of the story emphasizes the length of time Miss Emily must have slept with her dead lover: long enough for the townspeople to find "a long strand of iron-gray hair" lying on the pillow next to "what was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt" and displaying a "profound and fleshless grin."

Section 1: The story's opening lines announce the funeral of Miss Emily, to be held in her home — not in a church — and the reasons for the entire town's attending-the men out of respect for a Southern lady, the women to snoop inside her house. Her death symbolizes the passing of a genteel way of life, which is replaced by a new generation's crass way of doing things. The narrator's description of the Grierson house reinforces the disparity between the past and the present: Once a place of splendor, now modern encroachments — gas pumps and cotton wagons — obliterate most of the neighborhood and leave untouched only Miss Emily's house, with its "stubborn and coquettish decay."

This clash between the past and the present is evidenced by the different approaches that each generation takes concerning Miss Emily's taxes. In the past, Colonel Sartoris had remitted them for her, believing it uncivilized to remind a Southern woman to pay taxes, which Miss Emily does not do after her father dies. But the next generation, with its more modern ideas, holds her responsible for them. Miss Emily, however, returns the tax notice that the new aldermen send to her; when the young men call upon her, she vanquishes them, saying, "I have no taxes in Jefferson" and "See Colonel Sartoris," who has been dead for at least ten years.

One of the most striking contrasts presented in this first section entails the narrator's portrayal of Miss Emily's physical appearance and her house. Descriptive phrases include terms that add to the gothic quality of the story: She is dressed in black and leans on a cane; her "skeleton" is small; and she looks "bloated," with a "pallid hue." But Faulkner doesn't say outright that she looks much like a dead person, for it is only in retrospect that we realize that the dead-looking Miss Emily has been sleeping with the very dead Homer Barron.

Miss Emily's decaying appearance matches not only the rotting exterior of the house, but the interior as well. For example, the crayon, pastel, picture mentioned prior to the narrator's description of Miss Emily is supported by a "tarnished" stand, and Miss Emily supports herself by leaning on the "tarnished" handle of her cane. Also note that the picture is a colored chalk portrait of her father, no doubt drawn by her when she was a child. Miss Emily has some artistic talent: She teaches china painting, which is highly detailed and usually done in soft colors. But if she painted her father's portrait using the same techniques she uses to paint china, then the portrait would not be an accurate representation of the fiercely authoritarian man who was Mr. Grierson. It would be washed out, pale as death, a shadow of his real self.

Section 2: We return to the past, two years after Miss Emily's father's death. There have been complaints about an awful stench emanating from Miss Emily's house. The older generation, which feels that it is improper to tell a lady that she stinks, arranges for a group of men to spread lime on her lawn and inside the cellar door of her house. All the while, she sits at a window, motionless.

Of primary importance in this section is Miss Emily's relationship to her father and her reaction to his death. The town views the father and daughter as a "tableau," in which a sitting Mr. Grierson grasps a horsewhip and affects an oblivious attitude toward his daughter, who, dressed completely in white, stands behind him. This image reinforces the physical relationship and the emotional distance we feel between the two, and it recalls the crayon picture standing before the fireplace. Also, the horsewhip that Mr. Grierson clutches suggests a bridled violence in this most gothic of tales, a violence that will reveal itself by the end of the story.

When her father dies, Miss Emily cannot face the reality of his death and her loneliness. Because she has no one to turn to — "We remembered all the young men her father had driven away . . ." — for three days she insists that her father is not dead. Her clinging to him after his death prepares us for her clinging to Homer Barron after she poisons him, and we feel that her father ultimately has some responsibility for his daughter's killing her lover.

Section 3: During the summer after Mr. Grierson's death, Homer Barron, a happy-go-lucky type who "was not a marrying man," and his construction crew begin to pave the town's sidewalks. Soon the townspeople begin to see Miss Emily and Homer often riding together in a buggy. At first, they acknowledge her right to date him, but they also believe that she would never consider him seriously — after all, he is "a Northerner, a day laborer," and she is a Grierson. Then the townspeople relegate her to adultery, condemning her as "fallen," and we recall the first sentence of the story, when the men of the town go to Miss Emily's funeral to pay their last respects to "a fallen monument."

A year later, Miss Emily, now over 30, enters the town's drugstore and announces, "I want some poison." When the druggist is reluctant to sell her any without a reason, she uses her aristocratic bearing to intimidate him: "Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye to eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up." At this point, we have no idea why she wants the poison, although it will become clear later that she uses the arsenic to kill Homer Barron.

Section 4: The townspeople, never suspecting that the poison is intended for Homer, conclude that Miss Emily will likely use it to kill herself. After Homer announces to the men that he is not the marrying kind, the townspeople think that his and Miss Emily's

relationship is a disgrace, and they try to stop it. When they can't put an end to the relationship between the perceived lovers, they write to Miss Emily's relatives in Alabama, and two cousins come to stay with her. The town then learns that Miss Emily has bought a man's toilet set — a mirror, brush, and comb — inscribed with the initials "H.B.," and also men's clothing, including a nightshirt, which, ironically, will serve not as a nuptial nightshirt, but as a burial nightshirt for decades.

Homer disappears after Miss Emily's cousins move into the house, and everyone assumes that he has gone to prepare for Miss Emily's joining him. A week later, the cousins leave. Three days later Homer returns. The narrator notes, "And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron." The townspeople never suspect the horror of what happens, believing that such an aristocratic woman as Miss Emily could never do any wrong. She secludes herself for six months, and when she next appears in public, she is fat and her hair is "pepper-and-salt iron-gray," the same color of the strand of hair that will be found on the pillow next to Homer's decayed corpse.

Years pass, and a new and more modern generation of people control the town. Miss Emily refuses to pay her taxes; she will not even allow postal numbers to be put on her house, a symbolic gesture on her part to resist what the town sees as progress. The narrator notes Miss Emily's staying power: "Thus she passed from generation to generation — dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse." The term "perverse" undoubtedly carries a double meaning — her perverseness both in refusing to pay taxes and to permit postal numbers on her house, and in nightly sleeping with a corpse.

Section 5: We return to the present and Miss Emily's funeral. Her black servant meets the mourners, who arrive at the house, then he walks out the back door and disappears forever, apparently fully aware that Homer's decayed body is upstairs.

Even in death, Miss Emily cannot escape her father: "They held the funeral on the second day . . . with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier . . ." When the townspeople break into a locked room upstairs, they find carefully folded wedding clothes and Homer's remains. Only after their initial shock at seeing his skeletal corpse do they notice an indentation on the pillow next to him, with a long strand of iron-gray hair lying where a head once rested.

Because Faulkner presents his story in random fragments, it is not until the final sentence that the entire picture of Miss Emily is complete. We realize that, having been

denied male companionship by her father, she is desperate for human love, so desperate that she commits murder and then uses her aristocratic position to cover up that murder. But by killing Homer, she sentences herself to total isolation. With no possibility of contact with the living, she turns to the dead.

One way of explaining the excellence of "A Rose for Emily" is by considering its lack of chronological order. Such a dissection of the short story initially might appear to weaken it, but this approach allows us to see Faulkner's genius at work — particularly his own, unique way of telling a story. Unlike other writers of his era, such as John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway, who usually narrate their stories in a strictly linear progression, Faulkner violates all chronological sequences.

Only a few specific dates are mentioned in the story, but a close reading makes it possible to assign certain sequential events. We know, for example, that Colonel Sartoris remits Miss Emily's taxes in 1894, and that he has been dead for at least ten years when she confronts the new aldermen. Likewise, we know that she dies at the age of 74. Using these facts, we can build a framework on which to hang the following chronology:

Section IV: Miss Emily is born.

Section II: She and her father ride around the town in an old, elegant carriage.

Section II: Her father dies, and for three days she refuses to acknowledge his death.

Section III: Homer Barron arrives in town and begins to court Miss Emily.

Section IV: She buys a man's silver toilet set — a mirror, brush, and comb — and men's clothing.

Section III: The town relegates her to disgrace and sends for her cousins.

Section IV: The cousins arrive, and Homer leaves town.

Section IV: Three days after the cousins leave, Homer returns.

Section III: Miss Emily buys poison at the local drug store.

Section IV: Homer disappears.

Section II: A horrible stench envelops Miss Emily's house.

Section II: Four town aldermen secretly sprinkle lime on her lawn.

Ironically, when we reconstruct the chronological arrangement in this linear fashion, we render Faulkner's masterpiece an injustice: Looking at the central events chronologically, Miss Emily buys poison, Homer Barron disappears suddenly, and a horrible stench surrounds the house — it is apparent why she buys the poison, and what causes the stench. The only surprise would be the shocking realization that Miss Emily has slept for many years in the same bed with her dead lover's rotting corpse. The horror of this knowledge makes the murder almost insignificant when compared to the necrophilia. However, the greatness of the story lies not in linearly recounting the events, but, instead, in the manner that Faulkner tells it; he leaves us horrified as we discover, bit by bit, why this so-called noble woman is now a "fallen monument."

In contrast to a traditional narrative approach, the story, as Faulkner presents it, begins with Miss Emily's funeral and ends shortly thereafter with the discovery of Homer's decayed corpse. Among other themes, it emphasizes the differences between the past, with its aristocracy — Colonel Sartoris' gallantry, the Griersons' aloofness and pride, and the board of old aldermen's respect for Miss Emily — and the modern generation's business-like mentality, embodied in the board of new aldermen and the many modern conveniences we hear about.