

The Theme of Isolation in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

In William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily," the theme of isolation is intricately woven into the narrative, serving as a critical lens through which the reader can understand the protagonist, Miss Emily Grierson. This theme is not just a backdrop but a driving force that shapes the characters and the plot. Through the use of setting, character development, and symbolism, Faulkner masterfully portrays Miss Emily's descent into a life of solitude, highlighting the destructive power of isolation. Edmond L. Volpe's comprehensive analysis of Faulkner's short stories, particularly "A Rose for Emily," provides valuable insights into how these elements contribute to the story's exploration of isolation (Volpe, 2004).

Isolation exists in a unique and prevalent way within the short story "A Rose for Emily." It is as if William Faulkner's characters were placed on an island—separated from any and everyone else that could potentially understand them. Emily Grierson, a protagonist, is single-handedly responsible for carrying the theme of isolation throughout this entire narrative. She is an isolated character, and she lives an isolated life. The setting of Emily's house serves to further isolate, even in a literal sense. William Faulkner's uses of adept character development, a detailed setting, and not too much action provide a way for the reader to see into Emily's life without feeling sorry for her. Our understanding is left to our imagination. The whole of the narrative is ambiguous enough to serve as a thinking point.

Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily" is set in the fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi. The tradition-steeped, change-resistant town is itself a kind of isolation, and Emily's house—a onetime grand mansion—sits physically apart from the other run-down, dilapidated Victorian eyesores. The house, which Emily stubbornly refuses to let go of and tries to keep as something still impressive or important, is for local readers a powerful symbol of Emily's isolation from her community and her desperate efforts to bridge that isolation. The townspeople, too, feel that bridge must be maintained, or at least that some form of illusion—for instance when they talk of how admirable or at least pitiable Emily is—might better serve their interests than the alternative of a relationship more completely founded on truth and understanding.

Faulkner's portrayal of Miss Emily reinforces the idea of solitude. She is shown as a hermit, holed up in her house and protected (in life and after death) by the commanding presence of her father. Even when she elopes and moves into a new married life, her father remains such a force in her world that he defines by his absence the kind of child she might have been had she not been born into their mixed-up mess of a family. From the time she is a child, Miss Emily is presented as a prisoner in her own home and in her own mind, and her petulant refusal to move beyond the day her father finally dies turns that home and that mind into a mausoleum.

The way Miss Emily interacts with the townspeople makes her isolation even more apparent. She is seen as something from the past, from a time now bygone. She is a duty and a care, indeed a hereditary obligation. The townspeople are bound to her by some unwritten act of "town physics." The townspeople are so duty-bound in their dealings with her that when she knocks on their door at night, one man admits: "We were obliged to let it be known we were accepting the courtesy under protest."

They are curious about what goes on behind the closed doors in the old Grierson house. They "dispatched an independent delegation to stealthily investigate," and the "delegation" turned out to be four men who had initially been sent to "dodge" so that they could figure out if Miss Emily were crazy.

Faulkner's expressive approach uses symbolism to intensify the audience's comprehension of Miss Emily's solitude. Of all the symbols in the story, the most direct and profound is the rose in the title itself. Ordinarily, a rose is seen as a symbol of love and beauty. Here, Faulkner develops the rose as a symbol of ancient compassion and the town's complex relationship towards Miss Emily. It represents the townspeople's profound remembrance of her and harkens back to her appearance in public that was almost due courtesy toward a figure long misunderstood. Critics often regard the rose as an allusion to the poem "The Sick Rose" by William Blake, which deals with the prospect of an outsider, a badass.

One important symbol is the gray hair discovered on the pillow that lay next to the decaying body of Homer Barron. This strand of hair, a sign of aging and change, explicitly stands in stark contrast to the otherwise unchanging environment of Miss Emily's life. It implies her long-lasting seclusion and adamant rejection of temporal passage. In this same vein, Miss Emily lies down next to the corpse of Homer for some nights, trying to put a hold, in her own way, to the passage of time, and longs for companionship with the now-deceased person she once so strongly desired.

William Faulkner is a master of the theme of isolation in his short story "A Rose for Emily." Miss Grierson's sad fate stems primarily from the loneliness that presses in on her. She is isolated in her home by the town, which stands as her primary human contact but is also her primary oppressor, demanding that she conform to its view of life. She is filled with sadness and frustration because she cannot be part of the world that she is desperately longing to be a part of. She tries to connect, but in the end, the bridge she longs for does not exist. The town wins, making her increasingly isolated, which, in human terms, is an extremely high price to pay for defying the town's "rightness."

The guide that one holds in one's hands is brave, canonically so, for those of us who are teaching modern American literature and looking for new ways to share the brilliance of William Faulkner. To put it simply, if anyone should hold up a several-hundred-page treatise on any aspect of Faulkner's texts, it should be Eric L. Volpe. Why? Because, thanks to his two past books on Faulkner (in addition to numerous articles on Faulkner and many other authors), Volpe has become the reigning expert on the work of one of modernism's major figures.

References

Volpe, E. L. (2004). **A reader's guide to William Faulkner: The short stories**. Syracuse University Press.