

“Let’s do the Time Warp again!”: “A Rose for Emily” Analysis

“A Rose for Emily” is a short story by the highly acclaimed American author William Faulkner. It was his third-ever publication, and it was first seen in *The Forum Magazine* in 1930 ([seen here](#)). It tells the story of Emily Grierson, a rich southern woman who goes insane after her father’s death, murders her lover, and keeps his dead body in her home while the town speculates. In this story, William Faulkner uses an interesting writing technique in which he slowly trickles information to the audience out of order. This creates a compelling story and gives it the air of a mystery novel which makes the audience more invested and captures their attention quickly. William Faulkner’s use of this technique makes “A Rose for Emily” a better story overall with his use of the order of events given and his careful selection of word choice/context.

Faulkner separates the story into five sections which jump back and forth in a timeline from 1850 to 1924. Some people might find this form of narrative direction too confusing or incoherent. Though in actuality, it makes the story more compelling if a person can get past the initial bewilderment. Reading it a second time, paying more attention, or using a tool such as Digital Yoknapatwpha’s chronological timeline (expanded here → <https://youtu.be/rdKxK5mOmT8>)

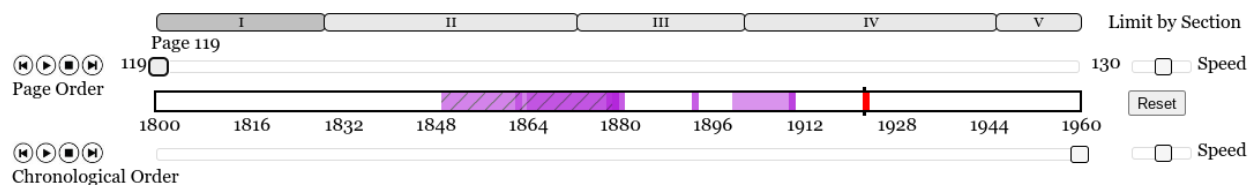



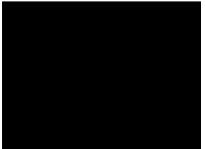
Fig. 1 Still from “A Rose for Emily” page and chronological order timeline of events. *Digital Yoknapatawpha*, University of Virginia, <http://faulkner.iath.virginia.edu/?&text=RE>



can help clear up any misunderstanding and or make things more transparent. William Faulkner's use of time jumps creates a mystery-like situation. We start section I at the end of the timeline with Emily's funeral and then work backward from there. We get information about her father through the use of the tax collector scene. We also get a short glimpse into Emily's common tactic of denial. This is seen in her repeating the fact to the tax collectors to "See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson"¹ even though Colonel Sartoris is assumed to be dead. In section II, we then jump farther back in time to when her father died and see more of Emily's use of denial. We also get a bit of foreshadowing for the future with the smell that comes from the house which is later revealed to be the smell of her father's corpse that she kept for three days after his death. This is the first main point in which Faulkner's use of time becomes beneficial overall. Faulkner now has planted a seed of curiosity into the reader's mind on "why in the world would Emily keep the body of her rotting father and why did she deny his death." With this information, a reader has now been hooked into the story and continues to read on eagerly to find out how this is all connected, but Faulkner doesn't give away that information chronologically.

Next, we jump forward in time and learn that Emily spent a long while after her father's death "sick" until she finally came back outside, a summer after her father's death. She then starts a relationship with Homer Barron, a lower-class member of society. Everything points to her and Homer getting married until halfway through the section we end it with her buying poison, arsenic, for a purpose that Emily does not specify. This is another hook to keep the readers intrigued and rather than telling them what it is going to be used for, he goes back in time again leaving the audience on an informational cliffhanger. We go back in time again and learn

¹ Faulkner, William. "A Rose for Emily." *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, edited by Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data, Random House Inc., 1950



more about Homer Barron until Faulkner drops a massive bombshell of information that is “A neighbor saw the Negro man [Tobe, Emily’s servant] admit him at the kitchen door [into Emily’s home] at dusk one evening. And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron. And for Miss Emily for some time.”² This is one of the climactic moments for the reader because they have finally stored up a plethora of information that can now be used to start connecting plot lines. This is only about halfway through the story though, and Faulkner intentionally left out key information requiring the viewers to continue in the story to finish the puzzle.

Section IV continues with the audience learning that the next time the town folk sees Emily, she has grown larger and her hair has become grayer. An interesting foreshadowing moment here is the line “Up to the day of her death at seventy-four it was still the vigorous iron gray, like the hair of an active man”³ which refers to the final line of the story in which the narrator says “we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair”.⁴ Emily integrates in society for a few years and then goes into her final seclusion until she dies of old age. We finally finish off by jumping to Emily’s death in which Tobe lets folks finally inside the house after she passed. They find in the home a room with the dead body of Homer and next to his body is an indentation of another human with a strand of Emily’s hair on the pillow. This is the final grand moment in which everything comes together and the readers’ picture of events is finally full-fledged. Emily’s father passed away, and Emily finally had the freedom to date. She started to date a lower-class man named Homer Barron who due to unclarified circumstances cause Emily to poison him and keeps his rotting corpse. She sleeps with it until she finally passes of old age at seventy-four.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The story itself isn't the only source in which one can find the expertise that Faulkner uses on revealing his information. A great example of how well thought out William Faulkner was in writing this story is in the unpublished manuscripts of a conversation between Tobe and Emily. People may argue that the extra character information and insight into Tobe would have added to the overall story since it would have provided more background on another character. The problem arises not in the extra information mentioned about Tobe, but in the words spoken by Emily Grierson specifically on the first page. Miss Emily says "Hah. Then they can. Let 'em

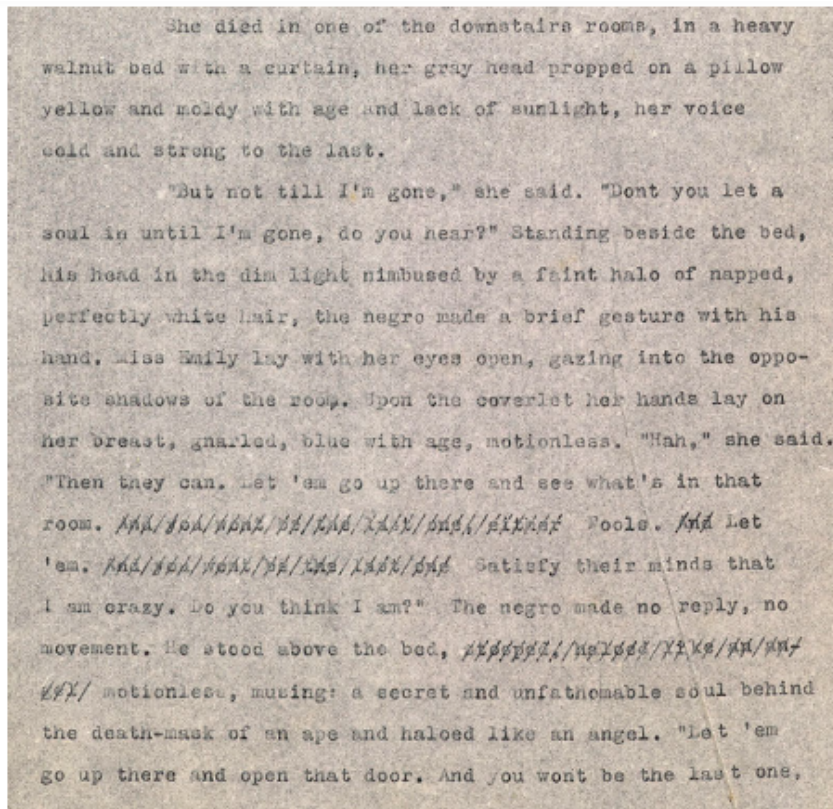
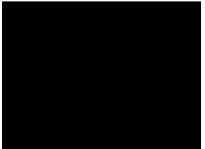


Fig. 2 Still from the typescript of "A Rose for Emily." Railton, "Manuscripts &c: 'A Rose for Emily,'" Digital Yoknapatawpha, University of Virginia, <http://faulkner.iath.virginia.edu/media/resources/MANUSCRIPTS/EmilyMS2.html>

go up there and see what's in that room. Fools. Let 'em. Satisfy their minds that I am crazy" This is extremely strong evidence for the fact that Emily is crazy and that she did in fact murder Homer, but it's given a whole section early before the main climax. The final paragraph of the story is as follows "...in the second pillow was the indentation

of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint invisible dust dry, and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair."⁵ This is an indirect way of

⁵ Ibid.




saying that Miss Emily kept the dead body of her husband in her home, and would lay next to it. This is the biggest evidence for the insanity theory and is the moment in the story where all the pieces connect into place, the “ah-ha” moment if you will. It is this moment in which the reader goes “oh everything makes sense now, so she is crazy...wow.” The problem with the extra dialogue in the manuscript is that it ruins this “ah-ha” moment. This mystery of connecting the information given to you all in scrambled order disappears with this addition to the story. If the manuscript was included, it would have ruined the tension that William Faulkner had spent the entire story building on and all the careful planning he made on the information he gave out.

During the entire reading of the story, the audience is constantly given out-of-order information which leaves the reader more invested in the overall experience. The story is formatted in a puzzle in which the audience member is almost indirectly forming the story themselves by connecting the information that Faulkner is giving them creating an immersive and intriguing experience. Faulkner’s format of this story was so successful that it would go on to influence many other writers to follow in his footsteps. One example is “The Stranger” by Harlon Coben. It is obvious not only in the text of this story but in the information not finally included that Faulkner was an expert on writing and making amazing plotlines.

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