A Rose for Emily

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

William Faulkner was born to a wealthy family in Mississippi, the oldest of four brothers. His mother and grandmother, both avid readers and artists themselves, were among the early influences in his creative life, as was Caroline Barr, the black woman who raised and educated him. When he was still a boy, Faulkner's family moved to Oxford, Mississippi, where his grandfather owned several businesses; Faulkner would go on to spend most of his life there. Both a high school and college dropout despite obvious intelligence and talent, Faulkner published his first book in 1924, a collection of poetry entitled *The Marble Faun*, after which he dedicated himself exclusively to fiction, including novels, short stories, and screenplays. Despite persistent financial difficulties and his crippling alcoholism, Faulkner would go on to complete a multitude of novels, including such masterpieces as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). For his literary achievement, Faulkner was awarded the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature. He died some thirteen years later of a heart attack in Byhalia, Mississippi.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After the North defeated the South in the American Civil War (1861-1865), slavery was abolished and many of the wealthy white Southern families consequently lost their primary source of income in agriculture, as is quite likely the case with the Griersons featured in "A Rose for Emily." During the Reconstruction Era that followed the Civil War, the U.S. government implemented policies designed to economically rehabilitate the South and secure the rights of freed blacks, but with relatively little success. Soon after the Reconstruction Era ended in 1877, many Southern communities defiantly regressed to old cultural norms which involved aristocratic ideals founded on those established during the heyday of Southern slave-owning plantations and the marginalization and persecution of black Americans. This is the world of "A Rose for Emily," where a yearning for a glorified Southern past conflicts with social and industrial change and progress.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"A Rose for Emily" participates in the Southern Gothic genre, which applies the conventions of Gothic fiction—such as gloomy and eerie settings, eccentric and grotesque characters, as well as a sense of dreadful mystery and ghostly hauntedness—to the American South after the Civil War. Earlier Gothic fiction includes works like Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and those composed by the American Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). It was by drawing on works like these that Faulkner and other Southerners he influenced—including Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and Cormac McCarthy—examined and conveyed with such effective horror how haunted and paralyzed the South was after the Civil War by its conception of its own glorified and genteel past—a past nonetheless morally contaminated by the racist, oppressive, and dehumanizing institution of slavery.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "A Rose for Emily"
- **Where Written:** Oxford, Mississippi
- **When Published:** April 30, 1930
- **Literary Period:** American Modernism
- **Genre:** Southern Gothic
- **Setting:** The fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi, located in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, where many of Faulkner's works are set
- **Climax:** The townspeople's discovery that Miss Emily murdered Homer Barron and lived with his corpse
- **Antagonist:** Southern society's paralyzing nostalgia for a glorified past, as well as its rigid customs and conventions
- **Point of View:** First-person plural ("we") limited

EXTRA CREDIT

A Rose for the Title. Readers will notice that, though the story is entitled "A Rose for Emily," Emily never receives a rose. Faulkner explained in an interview: "Oh, that was an allegorical title: the meaning was, here was a woman who had had a tragedy, an irrevocable tragedy and nothing could be done about it. And I pitied her and this was a salute. Just as if you were to make a gesture, a salute to anyone: to a woman you would hand a rose."

A Family Legacy. Colonel Sartoris, a minor character in "A Rose for Emily," appears in other works by Faulkner, including the novels *Flags in the Dust* and *The Unvanquished*; he is modeled on Faulkner's own great-grandfather, William Clark Falkner, a Confederate colonel in the Civil War, a businessman, and an author.

PLOT SUMMARY

"A Rose for Emily" opens in the twentieth century on the day

Miss Emily Grierson's funeral, held in the once grand, now decaying **Grierson family house**. Many townspeople were in attendance, not only to pay their respects but also out of curiosity, for no one had seen the interior of the Grierson house in ten years.

However, the narrative quickly shifts back in time, and describes an episode in which Colonel Sartoris, the then-mayor of Jefferson, Mississippi, excused Miss Emily from having to pay taxes in 1894 (he did so because she was both impoverished and unmarried despite being in her forties). Almost twenty years after Sartoris granted this amnesty to Miss Emily, however, a newer generation of men had assumed power in Jefferson, with "modern ideas" and a more pragmatic approach to governance. This generation found the arrangement Sartoris had made with Miss Emily dissatisfying; but, despite their persistence, they failed in their several attempts to exact taxes from the increasingly reclusive woman.

The narrator then likens this small victory of Miss Emily's (her continuing avoidance of taxes) to one she secured thirty years earlier, when she was in her thirties. Neighbors complained to the then-mayor of Jefferson, Judge Stevens, that a bad smell was issuing from Miss Emily's place, but Stevens refused to inform Miss Emily of this for fear of humiliating her. Instead, four men were dispatched to investigate the smell in secret and to spread an odor-neutralizing agent, lime, on Miss Emily's property. The smell went away thereafter.

The narrative takes a final step back in time, to two years before the bad smell was detected. Miss Emily's father died, leaving her a "pauper." Miss Emily denied that he was dead, however, and would have kept his corpse had town authorities not intervened.

In the same year as her father's death, a construction company headed by a Northerner named Homer Barron arrived in town to pave the sidewalks; he and Miss Emily came to be sweethearts despite the scandal of a Southern woman of genteel birth being romantically involved with a Northern laborer. The townspeople were only further scandalized, however, when they learned that Homer was by his own account "not a marrying man." Consequently, the Baptist minister's wife wrote to two of Miss Emily's haughty female cousins, who duly arrived in Jefferson to live with Miss Emily and oversee her conduct. Soon after, Homer deserted Miss Emily. She bought poison, arsenic—to commit suicide, the townspeople assumed. Yet her cousins departed within the week, and Homer returned to her within three days of their departure, leading the townspeople to suspect that it was only the haughty cousin who had driven Homer away. The day he returned, Homer was admitted into Miss Emily's house at dusk. Yet Homer Barron was never seen again, and the townspeople assumed that he had abandoned her after all.

The narrative then moves forward, back up to Miss Emily's funeral. The narrator recalls how, after Miss Emily was buried, the townspeople found and eventually forced entry into a locked room in her house, where they discovered Homer Barron's corpse laid out in a bed and, on a pillow next to his head, **a strand of Miss Emily's hair**.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Miss Emily Grierson – A proud woman born to a highly respected Southern family, Miss Emily seems frozen in the past, bearing herself aristocratically even when she is impoverished after her controlling father's death. Though her thoughts and feelings are as impenetrable as the imposing, decaying **house** in which she lives, Miss Emily is nonetheless subject to intensive town scrutiny and gossip: the townspeople gossip about her haughtiness, her lack of a husband, and, in the days after her father's death, her bizarre denial of his death and attempt to keep his corpse. But Miss Emily is not as frozen in the past as she first appears to be: after all, she becomes romantically involved with a laborer from the North named Homer Barron—despite the Southern social convention that women of genteel heritage not marry men of a lower class, especially men from the North. Ms. Emily seems to be, for the first time, taking control of her own life, despite what other people think. However, when it becomes apparent that Homer has no intention of marriage—which only further scandalizes the townspeople—Miss Emily goes to mad extremes to maintain control of her life: she poisons Homer, and not only lives with but sleeps next to his corpse, going so far as to create a tomb-like room for him where she can relive forever the one hopeful, self-determined period of her life. She becomes increasingly disconnected from her community, more and more reclusive, bloated-looking and pale, with **"iron-gray" hair**, more and more resistant to change; and it is only after her death and funeral that the townspeople realize how deeply, tragically damaged Miss Emily was.

The townspeople – The story is narrated by "we," the townspeople in general, who also play a role in Miss Emily's tragedy. The townspeople respect Miss Emily as a kind of living monument to their glorified but lost pre-Civil War Southern past, but are therefore also highly judgmental and gossipy about her, sometimes hypocritically. They think Miss Emily is too haughty and choosy when it comes to her romantic involvements, and yet when she begins to see Homer Barron they think she is not choosy enough. For all that the townspeople scrutinize and judge Miss Emily, for all that they stick their noses in her business and intervene in her romantic affairs, they ironically fail to recognize that she is deeply damaged, even criminally insane, and they also fail to discover that she murdered Homer till some forty years after the fact.

Homer Barron – The "big, dark, ready" foreman of a

construction company that arrives in Jefferson to pave the sidewalks, Homer is from the North but nonetheless becomes popular in town, a social drinker at the local Elks' Club. His presence in Jefferson suggests the reunification of North and South after the Civil War, and he himself is an agent of progress and industrialization in a heretofore rigidly conservative community. Indeed, even Miss Emily falls for his charms, and the two become romantically involved with one another, riding together on Sundays in Homer's "yellow-wheeled buggy" despite the townspeople's judgmental gossip about his connection to the genteel Southern Miss Emily. However, Homer is "not a marrying man." So, desperate to keep him with her, Miss Emily poisons Homer and keeps his corpse in **her house**, a ghastly husband indeed; it is evident that she lies next to and even embraces his rotting flesh.

Miss Emily's father – A proud Southern gentleman, controlling of his daughter, who thinks that no suitor is worthy of her hand in marriage. As a result, she never does marry when he is alive, and is close to being beyond "marriageable age" after he dies. When he dies, Miss Emily insists for three days that he is not dead at all, and would have kept his corpse had the town authorities not intervened.

The Baptist minister and his wife – Scandalized by the relationship between Miss Emily and Homer, some ladies in town coerce the Baptist minister into speaking with Miss Emily. He does so; and the day after their meeting the minister's wife writes to Miss Emily's two female cousins in Alabama, presumably advising them to come live with Miss Emily and oversee her conduct.

Colonel Sartoris – The mayor of Jefferson in the 1890s, Sartoris is a representative of the old genteel per-Civil War South (he was a Confederate Colonel in the war). Sartoris passed a racist law that forces black women in Jefferson to wear their aprons in public, and in 1894 he comes to the financially impoverished Miss Emily's aid by excusing her from having to pay her taxes in Jefferson. The town authorities who succeed him with their "modern ideas" are frustrated by this arrangement with Miss Emily, but are unable to change it.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The druggist – Sells Miss Emily arsenic even though she does not comply with the law requiring "'you to tell what you are going to use it for'," as he puts it.

Miss Emily's two female cousins – Even haughtier than Miss Emily is, these cousins come from Alabama to Jefferson to live with Miss Emily and oversee her conduct, presumably to make sure that she doesn't violate their Southern society's strict code of propriety while she and Homer are romantically involved with one another.

Judge Stevens – The mayor of Jefferson some time after Sartoris, Judge Stevens receives complaints that Miss Emily's property is issuing a bad smell, but, so as not to humiliate the woman, he dispatches men to investigate the smell in secret and to neutralize it by spreading lime around Miss Emily's property.

Tobe – Miss Emily's black servant.

Wyatt – Miss Emily's great aunt; according to the narrator, she went "completely crazy," and in this her fate foreshadows Emily's own.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE POST CIVIL-WAR SOUTH

Before the American Civil War (known as the "antebellum South"), the South's economy relied on the agricultural output of plantations, large farms owned by wealthy Southern whites who exploited black slave labor to keep operating costs as low as possible. By its very nature, plantation life gave rise to a rigid social hierarchy—one in which wealthy white farmers were treated like aristocrats, middle-class and poor whites like commoners, and blacks like property. Along with this social hierarchy, plantation life also gave rise an aristocratic culture that valued very highly chivalric ideals (those associated with the institution of medieval knighthood) like courage, honor, courtesy, social propriety, female virginity, and a readiness to help the weak. "A Rose for Emily" is set in the South after the Civil War (the "postbellum" South), after slavery had been abolished and plantation life had collapsed. With their society in economic ruins, however, Southerners did not give up on their aristocratic culture but rather clung to it nostalgically, and yearned to return to a past more glorious in memory than it ever was in reality.

This historical situation underlies Faulkner's depiction of the Southern (and fictional) town of Jefferson, Mississippi in "A Rose for Emily." The very epitome of the Old South in the short story is Colonel Sartoris, who as mayor passed a racist law forcing black women to wear their aprons in public—an insidious reminder of the old social hierarchy of the South—and who in 1894 excuses Miss Emily from paying taxes to Jefferson on a chivalric impulse. In addition, Miss Emily Grierson's family is presented as having been once wealthy and still highly respected in their Southern community; they quite likely belonged to the aristocratic class of slaveholders before the Civil War, though their fortune in the postbellum world has since dwindled. Nonetheless, the family is as proud of its aristocratic heritage as Sartoris is, so much so that Emily's

father refuses to let his daughter become romantically involved with anyone of a lower social class. The townspeople of Jefferson not only approve of but seem to protect and uphold such rigid adherence to their old traditions. Even after Miss Emily's father dies and Miss Emily comes to think of herself as being socially better than her poverty would justify, the townspeople nonetheless tolerate her haughtiness because she is a living monument to their glorified past, just as significant to them in this respect as the **Grierson family house** itself, or the cemetery where Civil War soldiers are buried.

TRADITION VS. PROGRESS

Even as white Southerners in the short story cling to their pre-Civil War traditions, ideals, and institutions, the world around them is quickly changing. Agriculture is being supplanted by industry, and aristocratic neighborhoods with their proud plantation-style **houses like the Grierson's** are being encroached upon by less grandiose but more economically practical garages and cotton gins. Likewise, the post-Sartoris generation of authorities in Jefferson—those men who belong to the Board of Aldermen that governs the town—are increasingly moving away from their forbears' aristocratic and chivalric ideals toward "more modern ideas" and practical, progressive governance—hence their decision to try to exact taxes from Miss Emily after all (even if unsuccessfully). While many years earlier, the gallant old Judge Stevens balks at the idea of telling a lady to her face that her property stinks, the authorities from this newer generation, we might imagine, would have fewer qualms about doing so.

The principal figure of progress in Jefferson is Homer Barron, who has not only been contracted to pave the sidewalks in town—thereby making the town more accessible to all members of society, in what is a small act of both technological progress and a small act of democratization—but who also becomes a great favorite in town despite being from the North. It seems like the North and South, torn apart during the Civil War, are becoming reconciled to one another and reintegrated once more. However, the townspeople's conflicted attitude toward Homer—they think him a fine fellow, yet don't think he is good enough to court Miss Emily—is indicative of their broader ambivalence about progress in Jefferson. They are perhaps prepared to industrialize and modernize their infrastructure and methods of governance, they are even prepared to socialize with Northerners, but they are not yet prepared to part with the last vestige of the Old South or its rigid social hierarchy and culture of honor and sexual propriety.

Miss Emily herself is perhaps the character in the short story most conflicted over tradition and progress, and most victimized by her society's cultural paralysis. She retains her aristocratic manner even after sinking into poverty, she refuses eligible suitors as beneath her even as she passes from the prime of her youth, and she even bizarrely denies her father's death, as though incapable of psychologically surviving the financial and social change his death entails for her. But, just as a future of spinsterhood seems imminent, Miss Emily almost miraculously adapts to the times by becoming romantically involved with Homer, a man not only from a lower social class than she but a Northerner to boot. Financial necessity no doubt influences her change in standard and manner, but also a genuine human need for companionship. However, the townspeople, who are charmed and friendly with Homer, nonetheless think this a step too far in the direction of progress, and are at first piteous of Miss Emily's fall, and later scandalized by the possibility that she is having physical relations with a man not serious about marriage—progressive behavior indeed. It is her society's inability to commit wholly to progress, to adaptation, that in part compels the already mentally unstable Miss Emily to create with poison and dusty secrecy a private world safely frozen in the past, unchanging.

PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY AND CONTROL

Members of Jefferson's Board of Alderman, whether old and gallant and nostalgic for the Old South like Sartoris or young and business-like such as the newer generation of authorities, all have something in common: they are all male and govern over—and to the exclusion of—women. Faulkner foregrounds this dynamic when he has his narrator recall Sartoris's law requiring all black women to wear their aprons in public, and dramatizes it in Miss Emily's relationships with her father and the town authorities themselves. For even in private life, the men in Jefferson exert full control over women's lives, as Emily's father does in telling his daughter which suitors she may and may not allow to court her. Indeed, social repression, stiff propriety, and a fetishization of female virginity characterize the Southern culture portrayed in the story.

However, one reason Ms. Emily draws so much attention to herself in town is because she often resists patriarchal authority, as when she flat-out refuses to pay her taxes (here she plays the old generation of patriarchal authority against the newer), or when she forbids the installation of a mailbox and postal numbers on her property. Even courting Homer Bell is a subtle act of rebellion on Miss Emily's part, against her society's social conventions and, presumably, the wishes of her dead father.

Given how pre-determined the course of her life has been—not only by the Jefferson patriarchs but also by the Civil War and its aftermath and the code of conduct enforced on her by her society—it is no wonder that Miss Emily attempts to take control of her own life, to live on her terms, to be the master of her fate. Her ultimate gesture to this end, of course, is the murder of Homer and her lifelong marriage, as it were, to his

rotting, dust-suffused corpse—instead of letting Homer leave her, Miss Emily asserts absolute control over his life, literally turning him into an object which she can manipulate at will. The madly desperate, horrific nature of this crime speaks to just how oppressed and stifled Miss Emily is, as well as to the huge denial of freedom which her society subjects her to. That her great aunt Wyatt went mad too suggests that Miss Emily's is not an isolated case. Although it would be misguided to insist on this comparison past a certain point, the subjugation of women in this story quietly reflects the even more virulent subjugation of black Americans at the hands of the white South, as Tobe's presence in the story quietly reminds us.

TIME AND NARRATIVE

"A Rose for Emily" is not a linear story, where the first event treated brings about the next, and so on—rather, it is nonlinear, jumping back and forth in time. However, there is a method to this temporal madness: the story opens with Miss Emily's funeral, then goes back in time, slowly revealing the central events of Miss Emily's life, before going back forward in time to the funeral. There, in the story's final scene, the townspeople discover in Homer's corpse and the strand of Miss Emily's **hair** the facts that make sense of all the events described before—for example, that Miss Emily bought arsenic from the druggist while in her thirties not to commit suicide as the townspeople suspected, but rather to murder her defective sweetheart.

So, why does Faulkner structure his story like this? Toward the end of the story, its narrator makes a generalization about time that can be brought to bear on this question: for old people "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 bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years." Looked at in this light, doesn't the non-linear nature of the story present the past it describes less as a "diminishing road" and more as a "meadow", in which one might meander backward toward a glorified past? It is almost as if the townspeople's nostalgia for the Old South, their desire to go back to a time they remember or mythologize as better, infects their storytelling practices. Perhaps—at least for now—it would be better if Jefferson got back onto the road of time, paved and lined with garages, and left their increasingly irrelevant social conventions in the dust. If only the past had been a diminishing road for Ms. Emily, rather than a huge rose-colored meadow where only corpses and the dust grow.

GOSSIP, SOCIAL CONVENTIONS, AND JUDGMENT

"A Rose for Emily" is narrated by a plural "we" voice, which stands in for the memory of the collective town. In this way, the story can be read as the town's collective, nostalgically tinged, darkly disturbed memory. And yet that collective voice has a darker edge than a simple collective memory. Because of that collective narrator, "A Rose for Emily" is also a collection of town gossip centering on Miss Emily, generated by decades of intense scrutiny on her life.

The townspeople watch Miss Emily very closely, both because their own nostalgia for the pre-Civil War South makes her necessary to them as a representative of their aristocratic heritage, but also because, as an individual, she is eccentric, pitiable, exciting to watch and exciting to judge behind closed doors. Indeed, the "we" narrator almost seems sometimes aware that they have darker motives for scrutinizing Miss Emily's life, like taking a pleasure in her fall to poverty, a feeling of social superiority over her when she begins to court Homer and the like. But it is also through scrutiny and gossip that the society in Jefferson enforces its social conventions: for example, it is the gossip of "ladies" that leads the Baptist minister's wife to write to Miss Emily's cousins, who themselves come to Jefferson to scrutinize and oversee Miss Emily's conduct with Homer, whom, not serious about marriage, the town implicitly judges a danger to Miss Emily's virginity (and her ability to uphold the lost social conventions the town requires her to). It is almost as if the town needs Miss Emily to be the representative of its lost, mythologized past, and hates her for it.

Ironically, for all that the townspeople watch and judge Miss Emily, for all that they intervene to make sure that she doesn't violate the social conventions of Jefferson, they nevertheless fail to realize—despite her buying the arsenic, despite the bad smell issuing from her place—that Miss Emily has in secret committed a dreadful and horrifying crime, nor do they realize just how damaged a woman she is prior to committing the crime itself. The implication is that close scrutiny does not a close community make; social bonds consisting solely of gossip and judgment are not enough for people living together to truly know and care for one another.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE GRIERSON FAMILY HOUSE

Built during or just after the Reconstruction Era in the 1870s, the **Grierson family house**, passed down from Emily's father to his daughter, was once grand and lovely, an embodiment of Southern pride, and built in a style of ornate architecture of which defiantly recalls the plantation houses of the Old South from before the Civil War. This house and those like it are monuments that symbolize for the townspeople of Jefferson the glorified aristocratic past of the

South. But the house is also a more complex symbol than that. It is, after all, physically decaying—the narrator even calls it "an eyesore"—and the highly respected neighborhood in which the house is located is being encroached upon by garages and cotton gins, structures of industrialization, signs of cultural and social progress. As such, the house also comes to symbolize just how untenable the culture of the Old South is, its moral ugliness in its foundation on slavery and its irrelevance in the face of the modern world—a world increasingly reliant not on agriculture but industry, a world that increasingly holds not aristocratic but democratic values. However, as ugly as the house is on the outside, the inside is pure ghastliness and nightmare, a literal tomb where Homer Barron's corpse rots. In this, its condition reflects that of Miss Emily herself: more and more impoverished as the years pass, more and more decrepit, both house and owner present merely a proud face to the public which conceals eccentric desires and dreadful secrets within. Moreover, Faulkner is suggesting that the Southerners' attempt to freeze time and in some ways relive their Confederate past is, at its core, as profoundly unnatural and grotesque as Miss Emily's preservation of her dead sweetheart; it is in this way that his story breaks down the walls of Southern nostalgia to reveal the social and moral harms thereof.

MISS EMILY'S HAIR

In a sense, one of our greatest sources of insight into Miss Emily's character, who she is and how she changes, is (shockingly enough) **her hair**. For example, after her father dies, Miss Emily falls ill for a long time; when she reappears in public, "her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl." Earlier Miss Emily denies that her father is really dead, and her subsequent girlish haircut only seems like a subtle affirmation of this denial, a sign that she still thinks of herself as daddy's little girl, as it were. Later, after Homer Barron disappears into the **Grierson house**, Miss Emily is next seen with "iron-gray" hair, "like the hair of an active man." First, like an iron helmet, the "iron-gray" hair suggests that Miss Emily has something to protect—and indeed she is protecting a dreadful secret: Homer's murder. Second, that her hair resembles the hair of an active man suggests that Miss Emily has rejected her community's norms for female conduct, which she indeed has, albeit perversely so, in asserting her control over Homer by murdering him. And, finally, it is only by discovering a strand of Miss Emily's hair on a pillow next to Homer's corpse that the townspeople realize just how damaged, even criminally insane Miss Emily was. Given all of this, we might conclude that Miss Emily's hair symbolizes both the woman's turbulent mental life as well as her radical isolation from her community.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Modern Library edition of *Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner* published in 1993.

Section 1 Quotes

❝ 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 woman 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.

Related Characters: The townspeople (speaker), Miss Emily Grierson, Tobe

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes at the very beginning of the short story, even though chronologically the event it narrates comes after most of the story's other events. By beginning the story at its end, the townspeople who act as communal narrators repress the painful events of their past and focus instead on the monumental memory of the pre-Civil War South that is so important to them. And yet as the story moves back from this moment into the past, and then back again to what the funeral-goers discover in the house, the horrors of the past prove inescapable, both in Miss Emily's personal story and in the larger story of the slave-owning South.

Miss Emily, like her once grand house, is "a fallen monument" in the sense that she represents for her community a glorious aristocratic past, but this past has been rendered painful and shabby after the Civil War and modernization. One irony of this passage is that this Southern community is so committed to preserving its idealization of the past that it never investigates that past from the inside—the inhumanity and injustice of slavery in the South, the psychological damage done to masters and slaves alike—just as no one has entered the Grierson family house in years.

Notice also the different motives men and women have for visiting the house. The men dehumanize Miss Emily by treating her as merely a monument of their Southern

heritage, while the women violate her posthumous privacy out of curiosity, even nosiness. In idealizing Miss Emily, the townspeople ironically neglect and even violate her humanity.

> It [the Grierson family house] 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 the neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps...

Related Characters: The townspeople (speaker), Miss Emily Grierson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

The narrating townspeople give this description just after telling how they've come to the Grierson family house for Miss Emily's funeral.

The house, built in the 1870s, during or just after Reconstruction, once embodied Southern pride. With its aristocratic grandeur, it defiantly recalls the plantation houses of the Old South where slaves were forced to labor before the Civil War. The house is also a conspicuous sign of luxurious wealth.

However, only the memory of the house remains intact; in reality, it is in decay, doomed for obliteration, like many reminders of the Old South (including "the august names of the neighborhood"). Progress, technology, and industry, represented in this passage by garages and cotton gins, are encroaching on what was once a slave-based, aristocratic, agricultural society. The garages and the vehicles they house threaten to render the gallantry of horse and carriage obsolete. The cotton gins (machines that separate cotton fibers from seed) had previously made cotton extremely profitable and expanded the plantation economy of the South, but ironically they now encroach on and obliterate the very neighborhoods they once made so grand.

Throughout the story, the townspeople ascribe Miss Emily's qualities to her house, as though the two were one and the same. Here the house is described as "stubborn and coquettish," qualities a house can't literally have but which Miss Emily does seem to exhibit to some extent. This is consistent with the townspeople's idealization of Miss Emily, which ironically reduces her to the status of an inanimate monument.

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

Related Characters: The townspeople (speaker), Miss Emily Grierson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Here at Miss Emily's funeral, the townspeople recall what Miss Emily meant to their community while alive. She was "a tradition" in that she represented the survival of aristocratic Southern pride despite the South's defeat in the Civil War. She was "a duty, and a care" in that she was unable to care for herself after the death of her father and the loss of her fortune, and the townspeople, if they were to maintain her as a "monument" to their idealized past, needed to care for her. In the time of Colonel Sartoris, for example, Miss Emily is excused from paying taxes altogether, and parents in town also send their children to be taught china-painting by Miss Emily only for the sake of providing her with a source of income.

However, the townspeople of Jefferson also have a very different attitude toward Miss Emily, one that is revealed more and more as the story unfolds—an attitude that casts this quote in an ironic light. After all, they savor Miss Emily's fall into poverty as something that humanizes her, in their eyes; they stigmatize her for her relationship with Homer Barron; and the later generation of town leaders try (but fail) to exact taxes from Miss Emily after all. She may be a tradition and a duty, but only begrudgingly so, only ideally and not when it comes to the practical work of tolerating and maintaining her. This reflects a broader tension in the story between a nostalgia for the past and the needs of the present.

Section 2 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Judge Stevens (speaker), Miss Emily Grierson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when the Board of Alderman in Jefferson is debating what to do about complaints concerning a bad smell emanating from Miss Emily's house.

A younger man, a member of the more progressive rising generation, suggests that Miss Emily simply be told to clean her place up. Judge Stevens, an old man committed to maintaining old Southern values, explodes at the idea (his curse word here reveals just how passionately committed to the old values he is, so much so that he breaches decorum). From his perspective, it is a trespass of good etiquette to tell a woman that her home smells bad, especially given that Miss Emily is such a socially prominent woman. Simmering beneath such a perspective is a patriarchal attitude: women in Old Southern culture were often treated like delicate objects, to be spared reality so that men could gallantly take pleasure in them all the more.

It is only at the end of the story that we learn what the cause of the bad smell is: the rotting corpse of Homer Barron. In superficially protecting Miss Emily's dignity, Judge Stevens ironically prevents her madness and crime from being discovered. Stephens would rather repress dark truths about Southern culture than face them by the light of day.

She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days... We did not say she was crazy then. 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.

Related Characters: The townspeople (speaker), Miss Emily Grierson, Miss Emily's father, The townspeople

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Emily's father was a proud, controlling man, and he rejected many of his daughter's potential suitors out of this pride, and despite his daughter's wishes. When he dies, he leaves to his daughter only the family house, leaving her poor and unmarriageable, as this quote reveals.

However, Miss Emily insists that her father is not dead at all—that is, she insists that the passage of time is not real, that there is no such thing as change. This is indeed a kind of madness, and it is telling that the townspeople do not think of it as such—yet. This is because the townspeople themselves deny the reality of time and change, albeit in a subtler way. They live as though their glorious Southern heritage were a living tradition, and not what time has revealed it to be: dead, unrealistic, and ultimately repellent. The townspeople's madness in this respect is very similar to Miss Emily's, and Homer Barron's corpse becomes, in one sense, an image for what the South has become.

Ironically, Miss Emily most protects from the ravages of time the very father who denied her the full richness of life and self-determinatio—"that which had robber her," as the townspeople put it. But the townspeople cling to what robbed them, too: they cling to an aristocratic plantation economy that cut against the fundamental American values of democracy and equality, and they cling also to the moral evils of the institution of slavery.

Section 3 Quotes

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*.

Related Characters: The townspeople (speaker), Miss Emily Grierson, Homer Barron, The townspeople

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after the death of Miss Emily's father, when Miss Emily begins to take a romantic interest in Homer Barron.

The division in Jefferson between the attitudes of the young and the old, the progressives and the conservatives,

is complicated here. The younger people think it good that Miss Emily has a romantic interest, precisely because they don't think it is serious. The older people, those who fully experienced the South's defeat in the Civil War and its humiliations, know firsthand, however, that grief can override pride, and that Miss Emily may indeed be serious about Homer. "Noblesse oblige" means, literally, "nobility obliges"—in other words, that one's conduct should match one's social position. It was a concept at the heart of the Southern aristocracy, and perhaps the old people can't refer to it by name without bringing back painful memories of what they've lost.

In Jefferson, public opinion is fickle; for eventually most everyone in Jefferson comes to disapprove of Miss Emily's interest in Homer. This suggests how arbitrary and meaningless social conventions really are when it comes to judging conduct—and how dangerously oppressive they can be. Miss Emily is so repressed by social convention, after all, that she resorts to murder in order to achieve self-determination.

> She carried her head high enough—even when we believe that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness.

Related Characters: The townspeople (speaker), Miss Emily Grierson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

After Miss Emily takes a romantic interest in Homer Barron, the townspeople vocally disapprove, thinking that she is lowering herself by becoming involved with a Northerner of low social station. However, Miss Emily maintains her pride through it all, at least in appearance. (Although the image of Miss Emily carrying her head high is a quietly grisly foreshadowing of the discovery of her hair on a pillow next to Homer's corpse—the horrifying place where her head goes when she lowers it, as it were.)

The townspeople themselves prey on Miss Emily's fall and endurance despite everything. They take pleasure in the penny-pinching shame she suffers after her father dies and she is reduced to poverty, which suggests their resentment of the aristocrats they (ironically) idealize. Here, they express a seemingly contrary feeling—a kind of wonder and collective pride that Miss Emily should endure her social fall with so much dignity. The townspeople are ambivalent about Southern culture, its inequalities and glories, and they express this ambivalence in their conception of Miss Emily.

The even deeper irony is that Miss Emily is anything but dignified and impervious, at least outside of the public gaze. She is mentally unstable, as we know from her denial of her father's death and eventual murder of Homer. The people project so much onto Miss Emily that she becomes, as a real human being, invisible to them.

Section 5 Quotes

> ...and the very old men—some in their brushed Confederate uniforms—on the porch and the lawn, talk[ed] of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing 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 bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years.

Related Characters: The townspeople (speaker), Miss Emily Grierson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, from late in the story, returns to the point in time when the story begins and ends: Miss Emily's funeral. The old men are on the lawn, talking about Miss Emily "as if she had been a contemporary of theirs," even though she is from a younger generation. This confusion is significant: it shows that these old men, like Miss Emily in denying her father's death, deny that their Southern heritage is in steep decline. They act as though Miss Emily were a Southern aristocrat from their own generation, even though she was, in private at least, something quite different altogether, as evidenced by her poverty and her love for the day laborer Homer Barron. The irony is further intensified by the fact that the men believe they danced with Miss Emily, even though it was her lonely reality to live as an unmarriageable woman by the social conventions of the Old South.

The metaphor of time as a meadow presents in a single, concrete image the nostalgic idea of time that the story is so

critical of. There is a faint allusion to the Biblical Garden of Eden here, from which Adam and Eve "fell" after disobeying God. So too have the Southern gentleman "fallen" from their plantations into the modern world. Of course, their nostalgic vision conveniently and insidiously conceals the true horrors of Southern slavery that built and supported the old plantation lifestyle. The only paradises are lost paradises, remembered from a future time that has forgotten or repressed their darker aspects. It's better to travel the hard road of progress than to dwell in a nostalgic and artificial past, the passage implies.

> For a long time 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.

Related Characters: The townspeople (speaker), Homer Barron

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58-59

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes during Miss Emily's funeral. The townspeople politely wait for Miss Emily's corpse to be buried before they force their way into Miss Emily's room, and there they discover the corpse of Homer Barron, described here at length.

The phrase "profound and fleshless grin" adopts the dark, chilling, grotesquely ironic tone and diction of Gothic novels, which Faulkner often alludes to in his work. Faulkner relies on these technical means here in order to express the townspeople's shock and horror at discovering what Miss Emily has so long repressed. Homer's corpse is also an image for all the moral decay and ugliness of the Southern heritage which the townspeople repress through nostalgia and idealization. Miss Emily has slept with Homer's corpse for years, it would seem, just as the townspeople embrace their dead traditions.

A "cuckold" is a husband whose wife sleeps with another man. Homer Barron, the collective narrator says, has been cuckolded by death, in the sense that now Miss Emily sleeps with death and only with death—no longer with Homer, as time and death have wasted him away and replaced him altogether. The sexual freedom Miss Emily seemingly desired but was prohibited from in life she achieves, in a grotesque parody, after life.

> 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 irony-gray hair.

Related Characters: The townspeople (speaker), Miss Emily Grierson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes during Miss Emily's funeral, after the townspeople discover the corpse of Homer Barron in Miss Emily's room.

The indentation on the second pillow and the "strand of iron-gray hair" (presumably Miss Emily's) are evidence that Miss Emily did indeed sleep with Homer's corpse. This is what Aristotle in his literary criticism would call the "anagnorisis," or the scene of recognition, where the townspeople and the reader at least see just how horrifically oppressed and deranged Miss Emily was (and where the mysteries presented previously in the story are resolved). Earlier Miss Emily had denied her father's death, and here she goes further and lives with a corpse as though it were alive. The image of Miss Emily sleeping next to the corpse is also one the story associates with the relationship between the townspeople and their dead Southern heritage.

Dust is a common image in Faulkner's work; here, as elsewhere, it suggests stasis (for dust only settles on what doesn't move), humiliation, and mortality. Recall also that dust appears earlier in the story, when the Aldermen visit Miss Emily's house about the taxes, for example. The image accumulates a sense of fatality and despair as the story unfolds.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SECTION 1

The narrator, speaking in the first person plural that represents the entire town, recalls that, when Miss Emily Grierson died, all the townspeople of Jefferson, Mississippi, attended the funeral held in **her house**, the interior of which no one save an old black servant (later identified as Tobe) had seen in ten years. This house had once been grand, located in a respected neighborhood, but both neighborhood and house have since fallen into decay. In death, Miss Emily has gone to join all the respected dead who used to inhabit this once-respected neighborhood, in the cemetery ranked with the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who perished in the battle of Jefferson during the Civil War.

The townspeople attend the funeral both out of respect for Miss Emily as a monument to their aristocratic heritage, and out of a kind of curiosity, even nosiness. The sense of the town as interested in, invested in—and always watching—Miss Emily is suggested by the odd third person plural narrative representing the entire town. The house is, like its owner, a monument on the outside and a curiosity on the inside, a building that resists modernization even as it decays. The mention of the cemetery, another monument to the past, reminds us that—as is often the case in Faulkner's works—to understand the present, we must also understand the past.

When alive, Miss Emily had been respected and cared for by the townspeople. In fact, in 1894, the then-mayor of Jefferson, Colonel Sartoris—who made it illegal for black women to go into the town streets without an apron on—excused her from paying taxes, dating from the time her father died on into perpetuity. Miss Emily would not have accepted this excusal were she to think of it as charity, so Sartoris invented a story about how Emily's father had once loaned money to the town, claiming the excusal of Miss Emily from paying taxes was the town's preferred method of repaying the loan.

The first narrative leap back in time. Colonel Sartoris is a gallant Southern gentleman (and former Confederate Army colonel) who chivalrously, if condescendingly, excuses Miss Emily from paying her taxes as though she were a damsel in distress. He knows that Miss Emily is a proud woman of genteel upbringing, though, and that in her pride she would refuse charity, hence the story he invents. The narrator chauvinistically suggests that Emily believes the story because she, like all women, is naïve.

However, the next generation of town leaders came to find the tax arrangement with Miss Emily dissatisfactory; so one January they mailed her a notice of taxes due. By February, however, there was no reply. Miss Emily was subsequently sent a formal letter inviting her to the sheriff's office, then a letter from the mayor himself. The mayor received a reply note from her explaining that she no longer went out at all; enclosed without comment was the tax notice.

A narrative leap forward in time. The chivalric traditions of the Old South become diluted as time passes; so it is that the newer generation of town authorities attempt to exact taxes from Miss Emily—these leaders are not gallant, but they are pragmatic and democratic. Miss Emily is so disconnected from the present that she ignores and evades these attempts, though (which also suggests how certain aspects of pre-Civil War Southern culture resisted change in the Cold War world).

In response, the authorities of Jefferson dispatched members of the Board of Alderman to Miss Emily's **house**. Tobe showed the men into the dusty interior; a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father stood by the fireplace. Once Miss Emily entered—a bloated-looking woman leaning on a cane—the deputation's spokesman informed her that her taxes were due; but Miss Emily countered that Colonel Sartoris excused her from paying taxes long ago, and that the town's authorities should speak to him (though he had been dead almost ten years by this point). Miss Emily then instructed Tobe to show the dissatisfied gentlemen out.

The portrait of Miss Emily's father anticipates the revelation that she denied his death years earlier. The portrait also suggests the extent to which Miss Emily is frozen in the past, just as her father's image is forever frozen in the photograph. Emily's father isn't the only man looking down over her, either: by invoking Colonel Sartoris and the tradition he represents in Jefferson she succeeds in vanquishing the newer generation of authorities.

SECTION 2

So Miss Emily vanquished the town authorities in the matter of her taxes, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before—two years after her father's death, and shortly after her sweetheart (later identified as Homer Barron) had deserted her—in the matter of a bad smell issuing from **her house**. Miss Emily had become reclusive. When the smell developed, some women suspected that it was because Tobe, her only servant, did not know how to keep a kitchen properly.

The second narrative leap back in time. The bad smell goes unexplained till story's end, thereby generating suspense. The gossiping women here both pity Miss Emily for being single and alone, but also seem to take some pleasure from the fact that they keep tidier homes than this former aristocrat who is left with just a single insufficient servant.

Soon enough, a female neighbor complained about the smell to the then-mayor, old Judge Stevens. Judge Stevens placated the complainant, only to receive two more complaints the next day. That night, the Board of Alderman met to discuss the matter; the youngest member proposed that Miss Emily be given a deadline by which to clean up her property, but Judge Stevens cursed and asked, "Will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?"

So as not to humiliate her, no one speaks to Miss Emily directly about the smell—another "genteel" act meant to protect her, which, ironically enabling her to get away with murder and sink into madness. As is typical in Jefferson, the younger generation proposes the no-nonsense if tactless solution to a problem, while the older generation upholds propriety to a fault.

So the next night, after midnight, four men went to Miss Emily's **house** in secret to investigate the smell and to attempt to neutralize it by sprinkling lime on the property, in both the cellar and all the outbuildings. As they moved back across the lawn, a window that had been dark was lighted, and the men saw Miss Emily motionless in silhouette. "After a week or two the smell went away."

Part of solving problems in Jefferson means hiding them under the rug—the townspeople neutralize the bad smell (after two weeks!) only to overlook entirely whatever is generating it. The window here anticipates the final scene of the story, as Miss Emily is looking out of her "secret" room.

The narrator recalls that this was when the townspeople had begun to feel sorry for Miss Emily. Remembering how her great-aunt Wyatt had gone mad, they came to believe that the Griersons "held themselves a little to high for what they really were." When she was young all Miss Emily's suitors were rejected as being beneath her, but, at the age of thirty, she was still single, indicating that no chances to marry had materialized. Consequently, the town felt vindicated in believing Miss Emily to be too proud. When her father died and she was left with only **the house**, the town could at last pity her, humbled and humanized as she was by her relative poverty.

The third narrative leap back in time. Mention of Wyatt suggests that Miss Emily's madness is not an aberration, but inherited, even caused in part by the nostalgic and repressive culture in which both women live. Note how the townspeople both value Miss Emily as a monument to their past, yet hypocritically criticize her for acting the part despite her poverty. They want her to be a Southern ideal but also take perverse pleasure in watching her fall to earth.

The day after Miss Emily's father died, the ladies of the town visited Miss Emily and, as was the custom, offered condolence and aid. Without a trace of grief, Miss Emily told the ladies that her father was not dead. She did that for three days while ministers and doctors called on her, "trying to persuade her to let them dispose of the body." She only capitulated upon the threat of law and force. The townspeople did not say that she was crazy then, on the grounds that, since she was unmarried and impoverished, "she would have to cling to that which had robbed her," namely, her father's corpse.

Miss Emily's insistence that her father is not dead is the first sign we have of her deeply disturbed relationship to time, or to reality—she takes control of her life simply by denying change—and also the first sign that this effort extends to a delusional capacity even to deny the reality of death. Yet, as crazy as Miss Emily's behavior is, it differs only in degree, not in kind, from this Southern town and its people's relationship to time, which is also marked by a paralyzing nostalgia and a resistance to progress.

SECTION 3

Thereafter, Miss Emily fell ill for a long time. When next seen by the townspeople, she had a **girlish haircut** and looked "tragic and serene." Around this time, a construction company, which the town authorities had contracted, arrived to pave the sidewalks in Jefferson, led by a big Yankee named Homer Barron, who came to know everybody in town. "Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group." Soon, he and Miss Emily began to be seen together on Sunday afternoons driving in a horse-drawn yellow-wheeled buggy.

Miss Emily's haircut suggests that she has not gotten over her father's death, as her haircut indicates that she sees herself still as a girl. "Tragic and serene" might also describe how the South idealized its lost pre-Civil War post. In contrast, Homer is a herald of progress in the South, a rebuilder of what is decaying. He becomes popular in town, which indicates that the Southerners are perhaps prepared to rebuild relations with their Northern counterparts. Though her father would have no doubt disapproved, Miss Emily surprises us by taking control of her life in becoming involved with Homer.

The townspeople were at first glad that Miss Emily had a romantic interest, even though they thought she would never think seriously about marrying a laborer from the North. Some older people, however, thought that Emily might be serious about Homer out of financial need. "Poor Emily," they said, and they agreed that her kin should come to aid her in avoiding a marriage that was beneath her. But Emily's father had fallen out with what family the Griersons had in Alabama because of a disagreement about Emily's great-aunt Wyatt's estate. Even though the town was scandalized by her relationship with Homer, Miss Emily carried her head high as befitted the last Grierson.

The townspeople are rather fickle in their judgments, first pleased for Miss Emily, later scandalized. The first case seems more justified by the facts: a lonely woman has taken control of her life and found companionship. What is there to be displeased about? The older people's harsher judgment is based on an old, even irrelevant social hierarchy. However, much as they're willing to work with and fraternize with Northerners, the townspeople at large are at last not willing to sacrifice their traditions, and Miss Emily is one of their traditions.

A year after some townspeople began saying "poor Emily"—and while two female cousins visited her—Miss Emily went to the druggist to buy poison, arsenic. The druggist told her that the law required explanation of how the poison was to be used, but Miss Emily just stared at him till he got the arsenic and packaged it for her. A black delivery boy brought her the package, and the druggist didn't come back. At **her house**, Miss Emily opened the package to see the words "For rats" written on the box by the druggist.

The second narrative leap forward in time. The purchase of the arsenic, like the bad smell, generates suspense. Miss Emily's privileged status in the town makes it possible for her to circumvent the law in not giving an explanation to the druggist, a demonstration that aristocratic social relations make equality before the law a mere illusion. (Similar to Miss Emily's circumvention of her taxes.)

SECTION 4

The townspeople immediately suspected that Miss Emily intended to kill herself with the arsenic, and agreed it was for the best, especially because Homer had once confided in some of the men in town over drinks at the Elks' Club "that he was not a marrying man." It was after learning this of Homer, but before Miss Emily bought the arsenic, that some of the ladies in town soon began to say that the relationship between Miss Emily and Homer "was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people." They coerced the Baptist minister into calling on Miss Emily, but he never revealed what happened during their meeting. The day after, the minister's wife wrote to Miss Emily's kin in Alabama.

The fourth narrative leap back in time. The townspeople think women passive, impotent, which is perhaps why they suspect that Miss Emily intends to commit suicide instead of homicide. Their notions of honor and overvaluation of female virginity (the fear here is that Miss Emily is having sex with a man who will not marry her) also lead them to perversely think that Miss Emily's suicide would be for the best. Ironically, the townspeople who cry out for the female cousins to come almost as quickly want them gone—mob judgment is not only blind but also irrational. They hold up these genteel woman as monuments to their past, and also don't like them.

Consequently, her two female cousins came to live with Miss Emily. Nothing changed at first, but soon the townspeople came to believe that she and Homer were to be married—especially after she went to the jeweler's and ordered a man's toilet set (hairbrush, comb, mirror, etc.) with Homer's initials on each piece, as well as many articles of men's clothing. The town was glad, not least because Miss Emily's two female cousins were haughtier than even Miss Emily and were presumably expected to leave town in the event of Miss Emily's marriage.

In hindsight, it seems like Miss Emily buys the toilet set and clothes either to coax or pressure Homer into marriage, or else as part of an ultimatum, as if she will say: you will marry me, and here are the things to prove it. Or perhaps she merely makes a public show of buying the items to temporarily placate the scandalized townspeople. Or perhaps the purchase is preparation for the insane and delusional act she really does end up making. In any case, the act signifies her intention to control her unstable situation.

The townspeople were not surprised when Homer Barron disappeared from Jefferson. They were disappointed that his departure was preceded by no public conflict, but also hopeful on Miss Emily's behalf that he had just gone off to prepare for Miss Emily's coming to join him, or else to give her a chance to get rid of her two female cousins, whom all in the town wanted gone. After another week, the cousins indeed departed, and within three days Homer returned. Tobe admitted him into **Miss Emily's house**—and that was the last the townspeople saw of Homer Barron, and of Miss Emily for some time, save for at her window.

The townspeople are not surprised by Homer's departure because they assume that Miss Emily's two haughty, disagreeable cousins—or his own inclination not to marry— drove him away. It is ironic that Jefferson residents hold in high esteem the representatives of the Southern aristocracy as ideals, yet can't stand them in person. Strange, also, is the fact that the townspeople never investigate where Homer went after seeing him for the last time—do they suspect murder, but collectively agree to let a sleeping dog lie?

When the townspeople next saw Miss Emily in person, she had grown fat and **her hair** had turned an "iron-gray." From that time on, her door was always closed, save for a period of six or seven years when she was about forty and gave lessons in china-painting to the daughters and granddaughters of Colonel Sartoris's contemporaries. This was also around the time that Sartoris had excused her from paying her taxes.

The narrative begins moving linearly, from the date of Homer's disappearance all the way up to Miss Emily's funeral forty years later. We now understand the events that conspired to make Miss Emily such a recluse, as well as why Sartoris comes to her aid in 1894. We might wonder if these parents—themselves old enough o have some connection with that pre-Civil War genteel society—send their daughters to paint with Miss Emily only as a pretense for diverting money in her direction.

The narrator again recalls (as in Section 1 of the story) how the newer, post-Sartoris generation rose to power in town. The narrator also recalls how Miss Emily's painting pupils grew up and did not send their children to her, how Miss Emily became permanently reclusive, and how when the town got free postal delivery Miss Emily alone refused to have metal numbers fastened over her door and a mailbox installed. The townspeople watched as the reticent Tobe grew older. Then one day, having fallen ill, Miss Emily died in bed.

As Miss Emily becomes more reclusive, she becomes increasingly invisible to, and disconnected from both the townspeople and the general progress and development of the town, exemplified by her refusal to have postal numbers and a mailbox installed.. That no one any longer sent their children to paint china with Miss Emily further illustrates that disconnection, and how the further generations have moved on from the genteel traditions of their parents. Tobe is the only sign of life around her house, which suggests just how alone Miss Emily is

SECTION 5

During Miss Emily's funeral, held in what had been **her house**, Tobe admitted the ladies of the town inside, all whispering and glancing about. Tobe himself went to the back of the house and was not seen again. Miss Emily's two female cousins had arrived at once to oversee the funeral. The townspeople viewed Miss Emily's corpse, over which stood the crayon portrait of her father. On the porch, the very old men, some in Confederate uniform, talked of Miss Emily as though she had been their contemporary, some believing they had danced with and even courted her. For the old, the narrator says, time "is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches."

We return to where the story begins, at Miss Emily's funeral. Just as her conduct in life was overseen by a controlling father and a convention-bound, judgmental society, so here is Miss Emily's corpse presided over by her father's portrait and the scrutinizing eyes of the townspeople. The old Confederates on the porch misremember Miss Emily, suggesting that she was always primarily a representative of an ideal rather than a person to the town; their attitude toward time is nostalgic, counter-progressive, and untethered from reality.

Even during the funeral, the townspeople were aware of a room upstairs which no one had seen in forty years. Later, the narrator recalls—after Miss Emily was buried—they used force to open the door and gain entry. Dust pervaded the tomb-like room, which was "decked and furnished as for a bridal." On a table, they saw the man's toilet Miss Emily had ordered for Homer Barron, and the articles of men's clothing. In the bed lay Homer's rotted corpse, which had fused with the bed itself, grinning profoundly. On the pillow next to his head, the townspeople noticed the indentation of another head, and one person lifted from the pillow "a long **strand of iron-gray hair**"—Miss Emily's.

The townspeople at last discover Miss Emily's private, timeless world: a world disgusting with dust for never having changed, a world where the happy bridal chamber that should renew life is instead a shocking tomb, a world in which a woman trapped by time and the social conventions of her society finds "companionship" the only way she can, by killing her lover and making a "husband" of his corpse. Homer's grin is a grotesque travesty of happiness. However, this room is not an aberrant horror, but reflective of Southern society's broader refusal to move on from a falsely glorified past, to adapt, to change. Miss Emily's tragedy stands in judgment on her society.

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