Summary

Plot Overview

The story is divided into five sections. In section I, the narrator recalls the time of Emily Grierson's death and how the entire town attended her funeral in her home, which no stranger had entered for more than ten years. In a once-elegant, upscale neighborhood, Emily's house is the last vestige of the grandeur of a lost era. Colonel Sartoris, the town's previous mayor, had suspended Emily's tax responsibilities to the town after her father's death, justifying the action by claiming that Mr. Grierson had once lent the community a significant sum. As new town leaders take over, they make unsuccessful attempts to get Emily to resume payments. When members of the Board of Aldermen pay her a visit, in the dusty and antiquated parlor, Emily reasserts the fact that she is not required to pay taxes in Jefferson and that the officials should talk to Colonel Sartoris about the matter. However, at that point he has been dead for almost a decade. She asks her servant, Tobe, to show the men out.

In section II, the narrator describes a time thirty years earlier when Emily resists another official inquiry on behalf of the town leaders, when the townspeople detect a powerful odor emanating from her property. Her father has just died, and Emily has been abandoned by the man whom the townsfolk believed Emily was to marry. As complaints mount, Judge Stevens, the mayor at the time, decides to have lime sprinkled along the foundation of the Grierson home in the middle of the night. Within a couple of weeks, the odor subsides, but the townspeople begin to pity the increasingly reclusive Emily, remembering how her great aunt had succumbed to insanity. The townspeople have always believed that the Griersons thought too highly of themselves, with Emily's father driving off the many suitors deemed not good enough to marry his daughter. With no offer of marriage in sight, Emily is still single by the time she turns thirty.

The day after Mr. Grierson's death, the women of the town call on Emily to offer their condolences. Meeting them at the door, Emily states that her father is not dead, a charade that she keeps up for three days. She finally turns her father's body over for burial.

In section III, the narrator describes a long illness that Emily suffers after this incident. The summer after her father's death, the town contracts workers to pave the sidewalks, and a construction company, under the direction of northerner Homer Barron, is awarded the job. Homer soon becomes a popular figure in town and is seen taking Emily on buggy rides on Sunday afternoons, which scandalizes the town and increases the condescension and pity they have for Emily. They feel that she is forgetting her family pride and becoming involved with a man beneath her station.

As the affair continues and Emily's reputation is further compromised, she goes to the drug store to purchase arsenic, a powerful poison. She is required by law to reveal how she will use the arsenic. She offers no explanation, and the package arrives at her house

labeled “For rats.”

In section IV, the narrator describes the fear that some of the townspeople have that Emily will use the poison to kill herself. Her potential marriage to Homer seems increasingly unlikely, despite their continued Sunday ritual. The more outraged women of the town insist that the Baptist minister talk with Emily. After his visit, he never speaks of what happened and swears that he’ll never go back. So the minister’s wife writes to Emily’s two cousins in Alabama, who arrive for an extended stay. Because Emily orders a silver toilet set monogrammed with Homer’s initials, talk of the couple’s marriage resumes. Homer, absent from town, is believed to be preparing for Emily’s move to the North or avoiding Emily’s intrusive relatives.

After the cousins’ departure, Homer enters the Grierson home one evening and then is never seen again. Holed up in the house, Emily grows plump and gray. Despite the occasional lesson she gives in china painting, her door remains closed to outsiders. In what becomes an annual ritual, Emily refuses to acknowledge the tax bill. She eventually closes up the top floor of the house. Except for the occasional glimpse of her in the window, nothing is heard from her until her death at age seventy-four. Only the servant is seen going in and out of the house.

In section V, the narrator describes what happens after Emily dies. Emily’s body is laid out in the parlor, and the women, town elders, and two cousins attend the service. After some time has passed, the door to a sealed upstairs room that had not been opened in forty years is broken down by the townspeople. The room is frozen in time, with the items for an upcoming wedding and a man’s suit laid out. Homer Barron’s body is stretched on the bed as well, in an advanced state of decay. The onlookers then notice the indentation of a head in the pillow beside Homer’s body and a long strand of Emily’s gray hair on the pillow.

Themes

Tradition versus Change

Through the mysterious figure of Emily Grierson, Faulkner conveys the struggle that comes from trying to maintain tradition in the face of widespread, radical change. Jefferson is at a crossroads, embracing a modern, more commercial future while still perched on the edge of the past, from the faded glory of the Grierson home to the town cemetery where anonymous Civil War soldiers have been laid to rest. Emily herself is a tradition, steadfastly staying the same over the years despite many changes in her community. She is in many ways a mixed blessing. As a living monument to the past, she represents the traditions that people wish to respect and honor; however, she is also a burden and entirely cut off from the outside world, nursing eccentricities that others cannot understand.

Emily lives in a timeless vacuum and world of her own making. Refusing to have

metallic numbers affixed to the side of her house when the town receives modern mail service, she is out of touch with the reality that constantly threatens to break through her carefully sealed perimeters. Garages and cotton gins have replaced the grand antebellum homes. The aldermen try to break with the unofficial agreement about taxes once forged between Colonel Sartoris and Emily. This new and younger generation of leaders brings in Homer's company to pave the sidewalks. Although Jefferson still highly regards traditional notions of honor and reputation, the narrator is critical of the old men in their Confederate uniforms who gather for Emily's funeral. For them as for her, time is relative. The past is not a faint glimmer but an ever-present, idealized realm. Emily's macabre bridal chamber is an extreme attempt to stop time and prevent change, although doing so comes at the expense of human life.

The Power of Death

Death hangs over "A Rose for Emily," from the narrator's mention of Emily's death at the beginning of the story through the description of Emily's death-haunted life to the foundering of tradition in the face of modern changes. In every case, death prevails over every attempt to master it. Emily, a fixture in the community, gives in to death slowly. The narrator compares her to a drowned woman, a bloated and pale figure left too long in the water. In the same description, he refers to her small, spare skeleton—she is practically dead on her feet. Emily stands as an emblem of the Old South, a grand lady whose respectability and charm rapidly decline through the years, much like the outdated sensibilities the Griersons represent. The death of the old social order will prevail, despite many townspeople's attempts to stay true to the old ways.

Emily attempts to exert power over death by denying the fact of death itself. Her bizarre relationship to the dead bodies of the men she has loved—her necrophilia—is revealed first when her father dies. Unable to admit that he has died, Emily clings to the controlling paternal figure whose denial and control became the only—yet extreme—form of love she knew. She gives up his body only reluctantly. When Homer dies, Emily refuses to acknowledge it once again—although this time, she herself was responsible for bringing about the death. In killing Homer, she was able to keep him near her. However, Homer's lifelessness rendered him permanently distant. Emily and Homer's grotesque marriage reveals Emily's disturbing attempt to fuse life and death. However, death ultimately triumphs.

Motifs

Watching

Emily is the subject of the intense, controlling gaze of the narrator and residents of Jefferson. In lieu of an actual connection to Emily, the townspeople create subjective and often distorted interpretations of the woman they know little about. They attend her funeral under the guise of respect and honor, but they really want to satisfy their lurid

curiosity about the town's most notable eccentric. One of the ironic dimensions of the story is that for all the gossip and theorizing, no one guesses the perverse extent of Emily's true nature.

For most of the story, Emily is seen only from a distance, by people who watch her through the windows or who glimpse her in her doorway. The narrator refers to her as an object—an "idol." This pattern changes briefly during her courtship with Homer Barron, when she leaves her house and is frequently out in the world. However, others spy on her just as avidly, and she is still relegated to the role of object, a distant figure who takes on character according to the whims of those who watch her. In this sense, the act of watching is powerful because it replaces an actual human presence with a made-up narrative that changes depending on who is doing the watching. No one knows the Emily that exists beyond what they can see, and her true self is visible to them only after she dies and her secrets are revealed.

Dust

A pall of dust hangs over the story, underscoring the decay and decline that figure so prominently. The dust throughout Emily's house is a fitting accompaniment to the faded lives within. When the aldermen arrive to try and secure Emily's annual tax payment, the house smells of "dust and disuse." As they seat themselves, the movement stirs dust all around them, and it slowly rises, roiling about their thighs and catching the slim beam of sunlight entering the room. The house is a place of stasis, where regrets and memories have remained undisturbed. In a way, the dust is a protective presence; the aldermen cannot penetrate Emily's murky relationship with reality. The layers of dust also suggest the cloud of obscurity that hides Emily's true nature and the secrets her house contains. In the final scene, the dust is an oppressive presence that seems to emanate from Homer's dead body. The dust, which is everywhere, seems even more horrible here.

Symbols

Emily's House

Emily's house, like Emily herself, is a monument, the only remaining emblem of a dying world of Southern aristocracy. The outside of the large, square frame house is lavishly decorated. The cupolas, spires, and scrolled balconies are the hallmarks of a decadent style of architecture that became popular in the 1870s. By the time the story takes place, much has changed. The street and neighborhood, at one time affluent, pristine, and privileged, have lost their standing as the realm of the elite. The house is in some ways an extension of Emily: it bares its "stubborn and coquettish decay" to the town's residents. It is a testament to the endurance and preservation of tradition but now seems out of place among the cotton wagons, gasoline pumps, and other industrial trappings that surround it—just as the South's old values are out of place in a changing society.

Emily's house also represents alienation, mental illness, and death. It is a shrine to the living past, and the sealed upstairs bedroom is her macabre trophy room where she

preserves the man she would not allow to leave her. As when the group of men sprinkled lime along the foundation to counteract the stench of rotting flesh, the townspeople skulk along the edges of Emily's life and property. The house, like its owner, is an object of fascination for them. They project their own lurid fantasies and interpretations onto the crumbling edifice and mysterious figure inside. Emily's death is a chance for them to gain access to this forbidden realm and confirm their wildest notions and most sensationalistic suppositions about what had occurred on the inside.

The Strand of Hair

The strand of hair is a reminder of love lost and the often perverse things people do in their pursuit of happiness. The strand of hair also reveals the inner life of a woman who, despite her eccentricities, was committed to living life on her own terms and not submitting her behavior, no matter how shocking, to the approval of others. Emily subscribes to her own moral code and occupies a world of her own invention, where even murder is permissible. The narrator foreshadows the discovery of the long strand of hair on the pillow when he describes the physical transformation that Emily undergoes as she ages. Her hair grows more and more grizzled until it becomes a "vigorous iron-gray." The strand of hair ultimately stands as the last vestige of a life left to languish and decay, much like the body of Emily's former lover.

- ### Emily Grierson

  The object of fascination in the story. A eccentric recluse, Emily is a mysterious figure who changes from a vibrant and hopeful young girl to a cloistered and secretive old woman. Devastated and alone after her father's death, she is an object of pity for the townspeople. After a life of having potential suitors rejected by her father, she spends time after his death with a newcomer, Homer Barron, although the chances of his marrying her decrease as the years pass. Bloated and pallid in her later years, her hair turns steel gray. She ultimately poisons Homer and seals his corpse into an upstairs room.

  Read an in-depth analysis of Emily Grierson.

Emily is the classic outsider, controlling and limiting the town's access to her true identity by remaining hidden. The house that shields Emily from the world suggests the mind of the woman who inhabits it: shuttered, dusty, and dark. The object of the town's intense scrutiny, Emily is a muted and mysterious figure. On one level, she exhibits the qualities of the stereotypical southern "eccentric": unbalanced, excessively tragic, and subject to bizarre behavior. Emily enforces her own sense of law and conduct, such as when she refuses to pay her taxes or state her purpose for buying the poison. Emily also skirts the law when she refuses to have numbers attached to her house when federal mail service is instituted. Her dismissal of the law eventually takes on more sinister consequences, as she takes the life of the man whom she refuses to allow to abandon her.

The narrator portrays Emily as a monument, but at the same time she is pitied and often irritating, demanding to live life on her own terms. The subject of gossip and speculation, the townspeople cluck their tongues at the fact that she accepts Homer's attentions with no firm wedding plans. After she purchases the poison, the townspeople conclude that she will kill herself. Emily's instabilities, however, lead her in a different direction, and the final scene of the story suggests that she is a necrophiliac. *Necrophilia* typically means a sexual attraction to dead bodies. In a broader sense, the term also describes a powerful desire to control another, usually in the context of a romantic or deeply personal relationship. Necrophiliacs tend to be so controlling in their relationships that they ultimately resort to bonding with unresponsive entities with no resistance or will—in other words, with dead bodies. Mr. Grierson controlled Emily, and after his death, Emily temporarily controls him by refusing to give up his dead body. She ultimately transfers this control to Homer, the object of her affection. Unable to find a traditional way to express her desire to possess Homer, Emily takes his life to achieve total power over him.

- Homer Barron

  A foreman from the North. Homer is a large man with a dark complexion, a booming voice, and light-colored eyes. A gruff and demanding boss, he wins many admirers in Jefferson because of his gregarious nature and good sense of humor. He develops an interest in Emily and takes her for Sunday drives in a yellow-wheeled buggy. Despite his attributes, the townspeople view him as a poor, if not scandalous, choice for a mate. He disappears in Emily's house and decomposes in an attic bedroom after she kills him.

  Read an in-depth analysis of Homer Barron.

Characters

Homer Barron

Homer, much like Emily, is an outsider, a stranger in town who becomes the subject of gossip. Unlike Emily, however, Homer swoops into town brimming with charm, and he initially becomes the center of attention and the object of affection. Some townspeople distrust him because he is both a Northerner and day laborer, and his Sunday outings with Emily are in many ways scandalous, because the townspeople regard Emily—despite her eccentricities—as being from a higher social class. Homer's failure to properly court and marry Emily prompts speculation and suspicion. He carouses with younger men at the Elks Club, and the narrator portrays him as either a homosexual or simply an eternal bachelor, dedicated to his single status and uninterested in marriage. Homer says only that he is "not a marrying man."

As the foreman of a company that has arrived in town to pave the sidewalks, Homer is an emblem of the North and the changes that grip the once insular and genteel world of the South. With his machinery, Homer represents modernity and industrialization, the

force of progress that is upending traditional values and provoking resistance and alarm among traditionalists. Homer brings innovation to the rapidly changing world of this Southern town, whose new leaders are themselves pursuing more “modern” ideas. The change that Homer brings to Emily’s life, as her first real lover, is equally as profound and seals his grim fate as the victim of her plan to keep him permanently by her side.

- Judge Stevens

  A mayor of Jefferson. Eighty years old, Judge Stevens attempts to delicately handle the complaints about the smell emanating from the Grierson property. To be respectful of Emily’s pride and former position in the community, he and the aldermen decide to sprinkle lime on the property in the middle of the night.

- Mr. Grierson

  Emily’s father. Mr. Grierson is a controlling, looming presence even in death, and the community clearly sees his lasting influence over Emily. He deliberately thwarts Emily’s attempts to find a husband in order to keep her under his control. We get glimpses of him in the story: in the crayon portrait kept on the gilt-edged easel in the parlor, and silhouetted in the doorway, horsewhip in hand, having chased off another of Emily’s suitors.

- Tobe

  Emily’s servant. Tobe, his voice supposedly rusty from lack of use, is the only lifeline that Emily has to the outside world. For years, he dutifully cares for her and tends to her needs. Eventually the townspeople stop grilling him for information about Emily. After Emily’s death, he walks out the back door and never returns.

- Colonel Sartoris

  A former mayor of Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris absolves Emily of any tax burden after the death of her father. His elaborate and benevolent gesture is not heeded by the succeeding generation of town leaders.