

Course: English Literature (Second Year)

Lesson: "Rose for Emily" (1930) by William Faulkner

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Historical background:

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. An example of such southern families is seen in the Griersons family that is 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. "A Rose for Emily," provides an example of such resistance, where a yearning for a glorified Southern past conflicts with social and industrial change and progress.

Summary and Analysis:

Section One:

- 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 townspeople attend the funeral out of respect to Emily as they consider her as a monument to their aristocratic heritage of the pre-civil war era.
- Emily's aristocratic upbringing occurs in her act of refusing to accept charity when Colonel Sartoris excused her from paying taxes because she was damsel in distress. He ends up inventing a story that her father loaned money to the town, this is why she is now excused from paying taxes.

- The gallant town authorities of the past are replaced by the new generation's authorities who are more pragmatic and democratic; hence, they imposed taxes on Emily. She; however, keeps refusing to pay them because she preserves her past ideals and this suggests how certain aspects of the past resisted the new change.
- In her house, there is a portrait of her father standing by the fireplace. 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.

Section Two:

- Emily's neighbors started complaining about a strange smell that is developing from her house. The story of the smell remains unexplained until the end of the story. Instead of facing her, the townspeople, secretly, neutralized the smell.
- The townspeople started to feel sorry for Emily after this incident of the smell. They mention her great aunt Wyatt who had gone mad and they came to believe that Emily's madness is inherited and not an aberration.
- 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." 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 denies change and preserves her south traditions, she remains in the past and refuses to adapt to the present.
- The townspeople are ambivalent towards Emily in the way that they gossip about her and criticize her but they cherish her preserving of south ideals.

Section Three:

- 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. Soon, he and Miss Emily began to be seen together on Sunday afternoons.

- Homer is a representative of progress in the South, a rebuilders of what is decaying. He becomes popular in town, which indicates that the Southerners are 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 again show a sense of ambivalence towards Emily. First they seem to be pleased for Miss Emily, given that a lonely woman has finally found companionship and later criticise her saying that she has brought shame to Jefferson .
- The townspeople ambivalent judgment reveals the fact that although they are willing to welcome the Northerners, hence, change; they show resistance towards giving up their last living tradition, represented in Emily who acts as a relic and a monument of the southern traditions.
- The second narrative leap forward in time. The purchase of the arsenic, like the bad smell, generates suspense that made the townspeople think that she is intending to kill herself. Miss Emily's privileged status in the town makes it possible for her to defy the law in not giving an explanation to the druggist, in the same way she rejected paying taxes.

Section Four:

- The townspeople came to believe that Emily 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. This can be interpreted in two ways. Perhaps Miss Emily buys the toilet set and clothes to pressure Homer into marriage, or perhaps she merely makes a public show of buying the items to temporarily silence the scandal regarding her relationship with Homer.
- Homer suddenly disappears from Jefferson and the narrative begins moving linearly, from the date of Homer's disappearance all the way up to Miss Emily's funeral forty years later.

- As Miss Emily becomes more isolated, 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..



Section Five:

- The story returns to where the story begins, at Miss Emily's funeral. The townspeople at last discover Miss Emily's private and timeless world. Her room is like tomb that represents a world in which Emily is trapped by time, where she made of Homer a corpse husband. Emily's room is reflective of Southern society's broader refusal to move on from a glorified past, to adapt, to change. In other words, her act of killing Homer symbolises her deep refusal to adapt to change.

