**A Rose for Emily** (Beford/StMartins)

**Introduction**

Considered one of America’s greatest and most influential authors, William Faulkner is often credited with inventing the stream of consciousness style of writing, but many other authors had used it before him. He did, however, perfect the art. He was born in Mississippi, and his southern upbringing contributed heavily to his most famous works, including [*The Sound and the Fury*](http://www.enotes.com/sound-fury) and [*Absalom! Absalom!*](http://www.enotes.com/absalom/) In addition to novels, Faulkner wrote a number of short stories (most notably [“A Rose for Emily”](http://www.enotes.com/rose-emily)), and he also dabbled heavily in mysteries and crime fiction. Faulkner won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949.

**Essential Facts**

1. Although William Faulkner is one of literature’s best-known alcoholics, he insists he never drank while writing. He used liquor as a way to escape his life, but he did not feel that it aided the creative process in any way.
2. The author Joan Williams claims to have had a four-year affair with Faulkner. She wrote about it in the novel *The Wintering*.
3. Faulkner lived in Hollywood during the 1930s and wrote screenplays, including *The Big Sleep* and the film adaptation of *To Have and Have Not*.
4. The main character in the 1991 film *Barton Fink* is said to be based on William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald.
5. Faulkner used to write notes about his current project on the walls of his home office. Visitors today can still see his notes for *A Fable* there.

[William Faulkner's](http://www.enotes.com/authors/william-faulkner) “A Rose for Emily” was originally published in the April 30, 1930, issue of *Forum*. It was his first short story published in a major magazine. A slightly revised version was published in two collections of his short fiction, *These 13* (1931) and *Collected Stories*(1950). It has been published in dozens of anthologies as well. “A Rose for Emily” is the story of an eccentric spinster, Emily Grierson. An unnamed narrator details the strange circumstances of Emily’s life and her odd relationships with her father, her lover, and the town of Jefferson, and the horrible secret she hides. The story’s subtle complexities continue to inspire critics while casual readers find it one of Faulkner’s most accessible works. The popularity of the story is due in no small part to its gruesome ending.

Faulkner often used short stories to “flesh out” the fictional kingdom of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, for his novels. In fact, he revised some of his short fiction to be used as chapters in those novels. “A Rose for Emily” takes place in Jefferson, the county seat of Yoknapatawpha. Jefferson is a critical setting in much of Faulkner’s fiction. The character of Colonel Sartoris plays a role in the story; he is also an important character in the history of Yoknapatawpha. However, “A Rose for Emily” is a story that stands by itself. Faulkner himself modestly referred to it as a “ghost story,” but many critics recognize it as an extraordinarily versatile work. As Frank A. Littler writes in *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, ‘‘A Rose for Emily’’ has been ‘‘read variously as a Gothic horror tale, a study in abnormal psychology, an allegory of the relations between North and South, a meditation on the nature of time, and a tragedy with Emily as a sort of tragic heroine.’’

**A Rose for Emily Summary**

The story, told in five sections, opens in section one with an unnamed narrator describing the funeral of Miss Emily Grierson. (The narrator always refers to himself in collective pronouns; he is perceived as being the voice of the average citizen of the town of Jefferson.) He notes that while the men attend the funeral out of obligation, the women go primarily because no one has been inside Emily’s house for years. The narrator describes what was once a grand house ‘‘set on what had once been our most select street.’’ Emily’s origins are aristocratic, but both her house and the neighborhood it is in have deteriorated. The narrator notes that prior to her death, Emily had been ‘‘a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town.’’ This is because Colonel Sartoris, the former mayor of the town, remitted Emily’s taxes dating from the death of her father “on into perpetuity.’’ Apparently, Emily’s father left her with nothing when he died. Colonel Sartoris invented a story explaining the remittance of Emily’s taxes (it is the town’s method of paying back a loan to her father) to save her from the embarrassment of accepting charity.

The narrator uses this opportunity to segue into the first of several flashbacks in the story. The first incident he describes takes place approximately a decade before Emily’s death. A new generation of politicians takes over Jefferson’s government. They are unmoved by Colonel Sartoris’s grand gesture on Emily’s behalf, and they attempt to collect taxes from her. She ignores their notices and letters. Finally, the Board of Aldermen sends a deputation to discuss the situation with her. The men are led into a decrepit parlor by Emily’s black man-servant, Tobe. The first physical description of Emily is unflattering: she is ‘‘a small, fat woman in black” who looks “bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue.” After the spokesman awkwardly explains the reason for their visit, Emily repeatedly insists that she has no taxes in Jefferson and tells the men to see Colonel Sartoris. The narrator notes that Colonel Sartoris has been dead at that point for almost ten years. She sends the men away from her house with nothing.

**A Rose for Emily**

<http://www.sparknotes.com/short-stories/a-rose-for-emily/>

### 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.

### Character List

**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.

**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.

**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.

### Analysis of Major Characters

#### 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

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.

### Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

#### 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.

### Faulkner and the Southern Gothic

Southern Gothic is a literary tradition that came into its own in the early twentieth century. It is rooted in the Gothic style, which had been popular in European literature for many centuries. Gothic writers concocted wild, frightening scenarios in which mysterious secrets, supernatural occurrences, and characters’ extreme duress conspired to create a breathless reading experience. Gothic style focused on the morbid and grotesque, and the genre often featured certain set pieces and characters: drafty castles laced with cobwebs, secret passages, and frightened, wide-eyed heroines whose innocence does not go untouched. Although they borrow the essential ingredients of the Gothic, writers of Southern Gothic fiction were not interested in integrating elements of the sensational solely for the sake of creating suspense or titillation. Writers such as Flannery O’Connor, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Harper Lee, Eudora Welty, Erskine Caldwell, and Carson McCullers were drawn to the elements of Gothicism for what they revealed about human psychology and the dark, underlying motives that were pushed to the fringes of society.

Southern Gothic writers were interested in exploring the extreme, antisocial behaviors that were often a reaction against a confining code of social conduct. Southern Gothic often hinged on the belief that daily life and the refined surface of the social order were fragile and illusory, disguising disturbing realities or twisted psyches. Faulkner, with his dense and multilayered prose, traditionally stands outside this group of practitioners. However, “A Rose for Emily” reveals the influence that Southern Gothic had on his writing: this particular story has a moody and forbidding atmosphere; a crumbling old mansion; and decay, putrefaction, and grotesquerie. Faulkner’s work uses the sensational elements to highlight an individual’s struggle against an oppressive society that is undergoing rapid change. Another aspect of the Southern Gothic style is appropriation and transformation. Faulkner has appropriated the image of the damsel in distress and transformed it into Emily, a psychologically damaged spinster. Her mental instability and necrophilia have made her an emblematic Southern Gothic heroine.

### Time and Temporal Shifts

In “A Rose for Emily,” Faulkner does not rely on a conventional linear approach to present his characters’ inner lives and motivations. Instead, he fractures, shifts, and manipulates time, stretching the story out over several decades. We learn about Emily’s life through a series of flashbacks. The story begins with a description of Emily’s funeral and then moves into the near-distant past. At the end of the story, we see that the funeral is a flashback as well, preceding the unsealing of the upstairs bedroom door. We see Emily as a young girl, attracting suitors whom her father chases off with a whip, and as an old woman, when she dies at seventy-four. As Emily’s grip on reality grows more tenuous over the years, the South itself experiences a great deal of change. By moving forward and backward in time, Faulkner portrays the past and the present as coexisting and is able to examine how they influence each other. He creates a complex, layered, and multidimensional world.

Faulkner presents two visions of time in the story. One is based in the mathematical precision and objectivity of reality, in which time moves forward relentlessly, and what’s done is done; only the present exists. The other vision is more subjective. Time moves forward, but events don’t stay in distant memory; rather, memory can exist unhindered, alive and active no matter how much time passes or how much things change. Even if a person is physically bound to the present, the past can play a vibrant, dynamic role. Emily stays firmly planted in a subjective realm of time, where life moves on with her in it—but she stays committed, regardless, to the past.

### The Narrator

The unnamed narrator of “A Rose for Emily” serves as the town’s collective voice. Critics have debated whether it is a man or woman; a former lover of Emily Grierson’s; the boy who remembers the sight of Mr. Grierson in the doorway, holding the whip; or the town gossip, spearheading the effort to break down the door at the end. It is possible, too, that the narrator is Emily’s former servant, Tobe—he would have known her intimately, perhaps including her secret. A few aspects of the story support this theory, such as the fact that the narrator often refers to Emily as “Miss Emily” and provides only one descriptive detail about the Colonel Sartoris, the mayor: the fact that he enforced a law requiring that black women wear aprons in public. In any case, the narrator hides behind the collective pronoun *we*. By using *we*, the narrator can attribute what might be his or her own thoughts and opinions to all of the townspeople, turning private ideas into commonly held beliefs.

The narrator deepens the mystery of who he is and how much he knows at the end of the story, when the townspeople discover Homer’s body. The narrator confesses “Already we knew” that an upstairs bedroom had been sealed up. However, we never find out *how* the narrator knows about the room. More important, at this point, for the first time in the story, the narrator uses the pronoun “they” instead of “we” to refer to the townspeople. First, he says, “Already we knew that there was one room. . . .” Then he changes to, “They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it.” This is a significant shift. Until now, the narrator has willingly grouped himself with the rest of the townspeople, accepting the community’s actions, thoughts, and speculations as his own. Here, however, the narrator distances himself from the action, as though the breaking down of the door is something he can’t bring himself to endorse. The shift is quick and subtle, and he returns to “we” in the passages that follow, but it gives us an important clue about the narrator’s identity. Whoever he was, the narrator cared for Emily, despite her eccentricities and horrible, desperate act. In a town that treated her as an oddity and, finally, a horror, a kind, sympathetic gesture—even one as slight as symbolically looking away when the private door is forced open—stands out.

### Important Quotations Explained

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

This quotation appears near the beginning of the story, in section I, when the narrator describes Emily’s funeral and history in the town. The complex figure of Emily Grierson casts a long shadow in the town of Jefferson. The members of the community assume a proprietary relationship to her, extolling the image of a grand lady whose family history and reputation warranted great respect. At the same time, the townspeople criticize her unconventional life and relationship with Homer Barron. Emily is an object of fascination. Many people feel compelled to protect her, whereas others feel free to monitor her every move, hovering at the edges of her life. Emily is the last representative of a once great Jefferson family, and the townspeople feel that they have inherited this daughter of a faded empire of wealth and prestige, for better or worse.

The order of Faulkner’s words in this quotation is significant. Although Emily once represented a great southern tradition centering on the landed gentry with their vast holdings and considerable resources, Emily’s legacy has devolved, making her more a duty and an obligation than a romanticized vestige of a dying order. The town leaders conveniently overlook the fact that in her straightened circumstances and solitary life, Emily can no longer meet her tax obligations with the town. Emily emerges as not only a financial burden to the town but a figure of outrage because she unsettles the community’s strict social codes.

2. 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 iron-gray hair.

These lines end the story. Emily’s secret, finally revealed, solidifies her reputation in the town as an eccentric. Her precarious mental state has led her to perform a grotesque act that surpasses the townspeople’s wildest imaginings. Emily, although she deliberately sets up a solitary existence for herself, is unable to give up the men who have shaped her life, even after they have died. She hides her dead father for three days, then permanently hides Homer’s body in the upstairs bedroom. In entombing her lover, Emily keeps her fantasy of marital bliss permanently intact.

Emily’s excessive need for privacy is challenged by the townspeople’s extreme curiosity about the facts surrounding her life. Unsatisfied with glimpses caught through doorways and windows, the townspeople essentially break into the Grierson home after Emily’s death. Convincing themselves that they are behaving respectfully by waiting until a normal period of mourning has expired, they satisfy their lurid curiosity by unsealing the second-floor bedroom. There is no real moral justification for their act, and in light of their blatant violation of Emily’s home and privacy, Emily’s eccentric, grotesque behavior takes on a layer of almost sympathetic pathos. She has done a horrible, nightmarish thing, yet the confirmation of the townspeople’s worst beliefs seems sad, rather than satisfying or a cause for celebration.

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