

Interpreting A Rose for Emily

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Abstract: *William Faulkner is a famous American writer, who receives the 1950 Nobel Prize for Literature. His short story, A Rose for Emily, makes a deep impression on me. Different people hold diverse opinions on the short story since its publication. Here is my thought: Emily is the victim of tradition and love.*

Keywords: William Faulkner, Emily, Southern Literature.

William Faulkner is one of the most important American writers in the 19th century. He is the representative of Southern Literature and awarded Nobel Prize in 1950. *A Rose for Emily* is one of his famous short stories. From the name of the story, we'll naturally imagine Emily is a pure, pretty and happy lady with sweet love. But as a matter of fact, the case is contrary. The story describes, set in a small southern town in America, the poor Miss Emily's odd behavior and fateful tragedy by the recalling of the residents in the town. At a superficial glance, many readers will think that *A Rose for Emily* is just a horror story about an abnormal woman. But is it true?

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of Emily's tragic character and her actions, as well as how these are revealed through her movements and the plot. The paper points out that Emily's tragedy is mainly caused by "mistakes" or "frailty", which stem from the decay of tradition and societal errors, as well as her own unwillingness to change, leading to an inevitable tragedy.

A Rose for Emily is a short story by American author William Faulkner, which tells the story of Miss Emily Grierson, the last member of the Grierson family in the post-Civil War Southern town of Jefferson. Emily's father was a man with severe patriarchal tendencies, who maintained the family's status and dignity by driving away all the men who courted Emily, depriving her of the right to pursue happiness. After her father's death, Emily fell in love with Homer, a northern foreman who came to the town to build a railroad. However, bound by family dignity and her father's influence, she could not marry Homer. When she discovered that Homer had no intention of starting a family with her, she poisoned him with arsenic and slept with his corpse for 40 years until her own death. The townspeople only discovered this secret at Emily's funeral.

The novel employs a non-traditional narrative technique, with a back-and-forth timeline that creates suspense and forces the reader to pay attention to the theme of time in the story. The image of Miss Emily represents the pride and dignity of Southern ladies; she was self-admiring and isolated from the world, becoming the embodiment of the old Southern tradition. Her story reflects the decline and demise of the Southern aristocracy and also reveals the inevitable collapse of backward, inhumane folk culture in the face of modern civilization. The title of the novel *A Rose for Emily* contains the word "rose", which usually represents love, passion, life, and happiness, but the novel describes a tragedy with a theme imbued with death and sadness. The rose in the novel

symbolizes the love that Emily never received in her life, and at the end of the novel, the Southerners offer her a rose, expressing sympathy for Emily's life and nostalgia for the vanished Southern tradition.

Let's make a detailed analysis of Emily — the main character in the short story. Many reviewers hold very different opinions on her. Some people think Emily is the defender of tradition; others see her as the victim of tradition. I agree with the latter. Or it might be nearer my opinion to say that Emily is the victim of tradition and love.

Emily is born in a declining noble family and her father is an apologist of tradition with the outworn concept. He is arrogant, selfish and takes his daughter, Emily, as a piece of private property. When Emily is a young lady, her father drives away all the young men and cruelly robs Emily of her youth, love and happiness. This is a wonderful description in the story.

"Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a straddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door."

In the eyes of the local residents, Emily is to her father what a small animal is to the tamer. It's her father who destroys all her chances to lead a normal life that an ordinary woman should have. Furthermore, we must point out that Emily can't walk out of her father's shadow at all even after his death. We can also get some hints in the story.

"On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father"

"..... with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier....."

Here, we know that her father's shadow accompanies Emily all her life. It's just in such suppressed circumstances that Emily's character is twisted and becomes a proud, conceited and strong-minded woman. Her unusual character is so incompatible with other people in society, which is doomed to her tragedy.

Emily's character is vividly reflected in the story. For instance, she refuses to pay taxes when a new mayor takes office. Confronted with the mayor and the aldermen, she repeats one sentence for four times in dry and cold voice: *"I have no taxes in Jefferson!"* And when buying the rat poison, she refuses to tell the reason why she buys it though the law requires it.

From the two instances, we can sense clearly that Emily is a strong-minded woman. Emily's conceit makes her not be understood by others.

"She carried her head high enough — even when we believed that she was fallen..."

"Her expression is as you imagine a lighthouse-keeper's face ought to look."

Like a lighthouse-keeper, Emily leads a lonely life. What the keeper sees is darkness; however, his light is used by the public. Emily wishes to hide herself in the house in order not to be noticed. In a sense, it's a kind of self-protection. But that cannot prevent her from being considered *"a tradition, a duty, and also a care"*. In the story, we know that even after Emily's death, she is still regarded as a fallen monument. It's really a kind of sadness of society! In such inescapable suppressed circumstances, Emily's heart is full of great agony.

Besides, Emily has confusion of time: she can't distinguish the living and the dead. We can see that point clearly in the story.

"Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them her father was not dead ..."

And when she refuses to pay taxes, Emily asks the new mayor to see Mayor Colonel Sartoris, who has remitted her taxes. But then Colonel Sartoris has been dead for nearly ten years.

It's a typical case of illness resulted from too much suppression. Obviously, it's tradition that destroys Emily. We can get that idea between the lines in the story. Therefore, the author presents *A Rose for Emily* to express his sympathy, and also shows his admiration for her insistence on love.

Emily falls in love with a Yankee named Homer Barron after her father dies. At that time, there is still some prejudice on the North in the heart of the local residents. So the residents think that Emily, the lady of a noble family, won't think seriously of a Northerner. But to their surprise, Emily is ready to marry that man. It's perhaps a kind of subconscious struggle or true love to Homer Barron. At this time, in order not to lose the southerners' face, the local residents unexpectedly think it would be the best thing that Emily kills herself after her buying the rat poison. What a cruel idea!

As a person out of the ordinary, Emily can be indifferent to the rumors and slanders; but as a woman, she can't bear to be abandoned, which are determined by her character. Finally, her unusual character makes her no choice but to kill her lover, which is reasonable because she has confusion of time. Having killed her lover and stayed with him for nearly forty years, she gets some satisfaction; but meanwhile, she also suffers great pain. Although the author doesn't describe this kind of pain directly, his wonderful description gives us a shocked effect and makes us sense it.

"A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the

valence curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscure."

"After her father's death, Emily was sick for a long time. When she was seen again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows — sort of tragic and serene."

Here, it seems that her father's death gives Emily some freedom, but in fact, that freedom is rather limited and superficial. Emily can't get rid of her father's control forever in her mind. And defeated in love, Emily, this tragic character, walked to the end of her life. Therefore, we come to the conclusion that Emily is the victim of tradition and love.

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