

ANALYSIS

“A Rose for Emily” (1930)



William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“I feel sorry for Emily’s tragedy; her tragedy was, she was an only child, an only daughter. At first when she could have found a husband, could have had a life of her own, there was probably some one, her father, who said, ‘No, you must stay here and take care of me.’ And then when she found a man, she had had no experience in people. She picked out probably a bad one, who was about to desert her. And when she lost him she could see that for her that was the end of life, there was nothing left, except to grow older, alone, solitary; she had had something and she wanted to keep it, which is bad—to go to any length to keep something; but I pity Emily. I don’t know whether I would have liked her or not, I might have been afraid of her. Not of her, but of anyone who had suffered, had been warped, as her life had been probably warped by a selfish father... [The title] 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.”

William Faulkner
Faulkner at Nogano (Tokyo 1956) 70-71
ed. Robert A. Jelliffe

“If there’s a symbolism in which the lover represented the North and the woman who murdered him represents the South, I don’t say that’s not valid and not there, but it was no intention of the writer to say, Now let’s see, I’m going to write a piece in which I will use a symbolism for the North and another symbol for the South, that he was simply writing about people... It was a conflict not between the North and the South so much as between, well you might say, God and Satan.... There was the young girl with a young girl’s normal aspirations to find love and then a husband and a family, who was brow-beaten and kept down by her father, a selfish man who didn’t want her to leave home because he wanted a housekeeper...”

William Faulkner
Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958

eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner
(U Virginia 1959) 58, 184

“Miss Emily, it becomes obvious fairly early in the story, is one of those persons for whom the distinction between reality and illusion has blurred out. For example, she refuses to admit that she owes any taxes. When the mayor protests, she does not recognize him as mayor. Instead, she refers the committee to Colonel Sartoris, who, as the reader is told, has been dead for nearly ten years. For Miss Emily, apparently, Colonel Sartoris is still alive. Most specific preparation of all, when her father dies, she denies to the townspeople for three days that he is dead....

Miss Emily is obviously a pathological case. The narrator indicates plainly enough that people felt that she was crazy. All of this explanation prepares us for what Miss Emily does in order to hold her lover—the dead lover is in one sense still alive for her—the realms of reality and appearance merge.... Ironically, because of Emily’s perversion of an aristocratic independence of mores and because of her contempt for ‘what people say,’ her life is public, even communal.... Miss Emily, then, is a combination of idol and scapegoat for the community. On the one hand, the community feels admiration for Miss Emily—she represents something in the past of the community which the community is proud of. They feel a sort of awe of her, as is illustrated by the behavior of the mayor and the committee in her presence. On the other hand, her queerness, the fact that she cannot compete with them in their ordinary life, the fact that she is hopelessly out of touch with the modern world—all of these things make them feel superior to her, and also to that past which she represents. It is, then, Miss Emily’s complete detachment which gives her actions their special meaning for the community....

She never cringes, she never begs for sympathy, she refuses to shrink into an amiable old maid, she never accepts the community’s ordinary judgments or values. This independence of spirit and pride can, and does in her case, twist the individual into a sort of monster...her funeral is something of a state occasion, with ‘the very old men—some in their brushed Confederate uniforms—on the porch and lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps’.... She would marry the common laborer, Homer Barron, let the community think what it would. She would not be jilted. And she would hold him as a lover. But it would all be on her own terms. She remains completely dominant, and contemptuous of the day-to-day world.”

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren
“An Interpretation of ‘A Rose for Emily’”
Understanding Fiction, 2nd edition
(1943; Appleton-Century Crofts 1959) 350-54

“A score of [his] stories are among the finest written in America; two or three are unquestionably on a par with those of Hemingway and hence the best short stories written in the world in the twentieth century.... Among the earlier stories ‘A Rose for Emily’ and ‘That Evening Sun’ are the masterpieces, while ‘The Bear’ may be taken as an excellent example of his later style. Not since Poe has an American produced a horror tale to match ‘A Rose for Emily,’ which is a perfect story from a technical point of view, and one of the most effective and violent stories.... Its gradual unfolding of the character of Miss Emily, its fully acquiescent gifts of revelation, the carefully sown clues and the well-prepared yet shocking climax and denouement, are among the marvels of the Faulkner virtuosity....

We learn, at the outset, that Miss Emily had died, that she was somehow queer and a recluse...and the object of the townspeople’s curiosity... We see that [she] was of the Southern aristocracy, that she had fallen upon lean days, and yet had eked out her decadent respectability with that force of character and will which is sometimes the alleged attribute of Southern aristocracy... And upon her death, the townspeople crowded into that house like vultures. One room ‘in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years’ was forced open.... Miss Emily’s ‘rose’ is bequeathed and discovered and becomes a charnel house flower all in one breath.... There is a penultimate and incredibly more devastating revelation, that ties up every vagrant thread and makes the horror of Miss Emily final and absolute: in the pillow next to the murdered man is 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.’ Subtle,

fiendishly brilliant, 'A Rose for Emily' surpasses anything of its kind in the short story done so far in America."

George Snell
"The Fury of William Faulkner"
The Shapers of American Fiction
(Dutton 1947) 96-99

"The trouble with her is her obstinate refusal to submit to, or even to concede, the inevitability of change. Hence her refusal to pay taxes. Hence the dust in her house, which no other woman of her standing would have permitted. Hence the murder of Homer Barron (and her tolerance of his rotting corpse); he was slipping out of her life. She acts out of character only in allowing her father to be buried. Social pressure had been too great, but she learned from that incident the necessity for concealment. The story is a success story—of success in maintaining an untenable position.... The theme of the story can be stated: 'If one resists change, he must love and live with death,' and in this theme it is difficult not to see an implied criticism of the South."

C. W. M. Johnson
"Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily'"
Explicator VI (May 1948) item 45

"Faulkner implies that there was once a time when Emily would have participated in the normal activities of her age and would have been acceptable to the young men except for her father. Then she was not a 'monument' but 'a slender figure in white'.... Emily becomes monstrous when she resists the passage of time... Faulkner's theme is suggested as a paradox in the two conflicting views of Time which he presents: (1) Time as a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, (2) Time as a mechanical progression in which the past is a diminishing road.... The first suggests the South (Emily, the Griersons, the old Confederate soldiers), the second the North (Homer Barron and the 'modern' younger generation).

It was unnatural—even monstrous—for Emily to deny death. Death is the final sign of the passage of time, and Emily pretends that it, like the sheriff's tax bill, does not exist.... Likewise, it proved fatal for Homer Barron to deny the traditional obligations of social decorum (past-time) and to act as though all time were present-time.... If one must have a statement of theme, I would propose: 'One must neither resist nor wholly accept change, for to do either is to live as though one were never to die; i.e., to live *with* Death without knowing it.' Ironically...Emily's resistance is better than Homer Barron's, for, while it is no more effective in the long run, it is certainly more 'heroic'.... Here it is difficult not to see an implied criticism of the North."

Ray B. West, Jr.
"Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily'"
Explicator VII (October 1948) item 8

"The past is represented in Emily herself, in Colonel Sartoris, in the old Negro servant, and in the Board of Aldermen who accepted the Colonel's attitude toward Emily and rescinded her taxes; the present is depicted through the unnamed narrator and is represented in the *new* Board of Aldermen, in Homer Barron (the representative of Yankee attitudes toward the Griersons and through them toward the entire South), and in what is called 'the next generation with its more modern ideas'....

The description of Miss Emily's house 'lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores.' (A juxtaposition of past and present.) We recognize this scene as an emblematic presentation of Miss Emily herself, suggested as it is through the words 'stubborn and coquettish'.... Emily's world...continues to be the Past (in its extreme for it is death), and when she is threatened with desertion and disgrace, she not only takes refuge in that world, but she also takes Homer with her, in the only manner possible.... Had Homer Barron been the proper kind of man, it is implied, Miss Emily might have escaped both horns of the dilemma (her cousins' traditionalism and Homer's immortality) and become an accepted and respected member of the community.... From the moment that she realizes that he will desert her, tradition becomes magnified out of all proportion to life and death, and she conducts herself as though Homer really had been faithful—as though this view represented reality....

Miss Emily's position in regard to the specific problem of time is suggested in the scene where the old soldiers appear at her funeral. There are, we are told, two views of time: (1) the world of the present, viewing time as a mechanical progression in which the past is a diminishing road, never to be encountered again; (2) the world of tradition, viewing the past as a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from (us) now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years. The first is the view of Homer Barron and the modern generation in Jefferson. The second is the view of the older members of the Board of Aldermen and of the confederate soldiers. Emily holds the second view, except that for her there is no bottleneck dividing her from the meadow of the past. Emily's small room above the stairs has become that timeless meadow. In it, the living Emily and the dead Homer have remained together as though not even death could separate them. It is the monstrosity of this view which creates the final atmosphere of horror."

Ray B. West, Jr.
"Atmosphere and Theme in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily'"
The Writer in the Room: Selected Essays
(1949; Michigan State 1968) 205-11

"All the ingredients of surrealistic humor are in it. The reverential connotations cluster about romantic love, the bridal night, and Southern womanhood. By the incongruous juxtaposition of murder and the image of a woman who passes her bridal night in the arms of her murdered lover and later sleeps with his rotting corpse, these hallowed clusters are brutally violated. The iron-gray hair resting on the pillow by the corpse serves as an objective correlative precipitating the ambivalent emotional state with which we react to the situation—we are both attracted and repelled.

We view with loathing the grisly trappings of fleshly decay, but are drawn perversely back with a shocked fascination to the image of Miss Emily and her incredible perversity...we now suddenly see behind the mask, as it were, and the entire anterior action of the story appears suddenly, spatially, in a new and now grisly perspective. It is grimly humorous in retrospect to think of the city fathers, sitting in the parlor of a murderess, mumbling apologetically about her past taxes...[while] the decaying corpse of her lover even then rests unperturbedly in the upper room. It is an allegory Kafka might have used...posing allegorically the Wastelandian question, 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden, Stetson, has it sprouted yet?'" [reference to a line in 'The Waste Land' (1922) by T. S. Eliot]

Harry Modean Campbell and Ruel E. Foster
William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal
(U Oklahoma 1951) 99-100

"Faulkner is a kind of Mississippi Balzac... Perhaps a review of Ray West's account of 'A Rose for Emily' will indicate the dangers in the 'historical' emphasis. West reads the story as a conflict between the values of the Old South and the new order, business-like, pragmatic, self-centered. But it can't be read in these terms because the Old South and the new order are merely a part of the flavor and tone of the story, not the poles of conflict. The theme is that a denial of normal emotions invites retreat into a marginal world, into fantasy. The severity of Miss Emily's father was the cause of her frustrations and her retreat. The past becomes a part of her fantasies, just as the present does. It is incidental that her relationship to the Old South makes her a part of the town's nostalgia; it was the nostalgia, not her being a 'lady,' which caused her to be treated reverently by the town's board when she refused to acknowledge her taxes; presumably even ladies paid their taxes in the Old South.

If the conflict is between the two orders it seems curious indeed that Miss Emily would choose Homer Barron, Yankee, amoral, and without loyalty, as her beloved. And her murder of the new order, Homer Barron, is the reverse of what actually happened, the destruction of the old order by the new. The story is simple enough when read as an account of Miss Emily's becoming mad as a consequence of her frustrations, the denial to her of normal emotional relations. That the Old South, which as a physical presence (in its houses, memories, and so on) lingers in the new order and in doing so seems unreal, has its parallel, obviously, in Miss Emily, who was most strangely detached from reality. But this is a parallel only—it is not the dramatic pull or struggle that composes the action."

William Van O'Connor

“The State of Faulkner Criticism”
Sewanee Review LX (1952) 182-84

“If analyses in periodicals and inclusion in anthologies are a dependable criterion for a short story, William Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’ is not only his best story, but also one of the best written by any modern American writer. Most of these treatments have especially noted the conflicts in the story between the past and the present, the South and the North, the old and the new, the traditional and the traditionless, and the gentility and the middle-lower class....”

He divided the story into five parts and based them on incidents of isolation and intrusion. These divisions have a perfect symmetry that is encountered often in the works of Hawthorne but seldom in those of Faulkner. The contrast between Emily and the townspeople and between her home and its surroundings is carried out by the invasions of her home by the adherents of the new order in the town. Each visit by her antagonists is a movement in the overall plot, a contributing element to the excellent suspense in the story, and a crisis in its own particular division of the story.... The inviolability of Miss Emily’s isolation is maintained in the central division, part three, in which no outsider enters her home.... The symmetry of the story is rounded out in the fifth part when the horde comes to bury a corpse, a Miss Emily no longer able to defy them. This structural pattern, unnoticed in any of the previous analyses of the story, makes ‘A Rose for Emily’ as symmetrical as *The Scarlet Letter*, with the platform scenes at beginning, middle, and end.... At the center of the story is the indomitableness of the decadent Southern aristocrat, and the enclosing parts reveal the invasion of the aristocracy by the changing order.”

Floyd C. Watkins
“The Structure of ‘A Rose for Emily’”
Modern Language Notes LXIX
(November 1954) 508-10

“In what is perhaps his most famous story, ‘A Rose for Emily’...Emily’s attachment to the will of the father—it is said that he had driven all the young men away—has stunted her growth. She keeps a fading crayon portrait of him, tries to deny the fact that he has been dead for three days (the townspeople bury him by force), and wants to assume his role as father when she informs the group of people who come to collect taxes that they should see Sartoris. In her own way Miss Emily is as masculine as Joanna [in *Light in August*] or Drusilla [in “An Odor of Verbena”], but like the two women, she discovers that she cannot contain her feelings, that she has to express herself through a sexual relationship. Homer Barron represents wild virility, and she has an affair with him. Of course this cannot last. Her passionate, almost sexual relationship with her dead father forces her to distrust the living body of Homer and to kill him so that he will resemble the dead father she can never forget.”

Irving Malin
“Miss Emily’s Perversion”
William Faulkner: An Interpretation
(Stanford 1957) 37-38

“The noun rose does not appear in the story itself; but when the bridal suite is broken open after Miss Emily’s death, there is a ‘thin, acrid pall...upon the valence curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights....’ The adjectival use of rose at the end of the story harks back to the title and links the idea of the local curiosity-admiration for Emily with the perverted love-death of the bridal chamber. One implication of the title, of course, is that Miss Emily deserves a rose for having attempted, like the lovers on Keats’ Grecian urn, to triumph over time and place in her quest for love.... ‘We of Jefferson’ offer her a rose, the traditional symbol of love, as a mark of affection and admiration...Miss Emily has come ironically to stand for a rose—the treasured memory of old Confederate veterans... Like Great-grandfather Faulkner’s *The White Rose of Memphis*, she has become the ‘rose of Jefferson’....There lurks behind Faulkner’s [ironic] use of the rose Shakespeare’s familiar phrase... ‘That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.’ Faulkner’s subtle and gruesome treatment of odors in the story makes this implication inevitable in the same way that his reference, in punning fashion, to Miss Emily in the first sentence as a ‘fallen monument,’ implies the ‘fallen’ woman, the ‘Poor Emily’ of common gossip.”

William T. Going

“Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’”
Explicator XVI (February 1958) item 27

“Both Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens’ novel *Great Expectations* and Miss Emily Grierson in William Faulkner’s short story ‘A Rose for Emily’ are disappointed in their hopes of marriage.... In ‘A Rose for Emily’ Homer Barron, never a subtle man, arrives in person to tell Emily Grierson that he does not intend to marry her. More suspicious than Miss Havisham, Miss Emily has anticipated this possibility, and she poisons Homer with arsenic. In death he receives some engraved silver toilet articles for which he did not qualify in life. Dead, he is placed in a prepared bridal chamber. Here Miss Emily, like Miss Havisham, keeps everything unchanged....

The external circumstances in the two works are so similar that it seems reasonable to assume a direct influence of *Great Expectations* on ‘A Rose for Emily.’ Also, the psychological reactions of the two ladies are identical: each tries to stop time.... Anything Miss Emily dislikes, she refuses to recognize; it is therefore understandable that she refuses to permit Homer Barron to destroy completely her wedding plans.... Her refusal to admit the passage of time or to accept changes which result from the passage of time constitutes a criticism of Southern adherence to pre-Civil War traditions and ideals. Like Miss Emily, the South has attempted to stop time and has refused to accept changes.... Faulkner expands the figure of a woman who tries to stop time until it encompasses broad cultural implications.... In Faulkner’s novel *The Town* (1957)...a minor character is given the name ‘Miss Emily Habersham’.”

James T. Stewart
“Miss Havisham and Miss Grierson”
Furman Studies VI (Fall 1958) 21-23

“Miss Emily Grierson’s love for Homer Barron in ‘A Rose for Emily’ is partly based on the marriage of Miss Mary Louise Neilson and Captain Jack Hume.... Captain Jack, a Yankee from New England, worked for the W. G. Lassiter Paving Company, which built streets in Oxford in the 1920’s. I worked with him on the streets. Captain Jack had a fine vocabulary of cuss words, which he used expertly, and little boys did follow him around and learn to cuss....

The name Grierson is similar to Neilson and we called her Miss Mary instead of Miss Emily. Miss Mary’s mother died before I can remember, and her father practically reared her. The Neilson people were among the aristocrats in the county, and they objected to the marriage. Good people predicted that she had blundered and made a mistake. But old Captain Jack proved to be as fine a citizen as any man in the county. He stayed here and took care of Miss Mary in her old age and sickness and death. The main plot in ‘A Rose for Emily’ is totally invented. What Faulkner did in this instance was to make a story out of fears and rumors. He wrote about events that were expected but never actually happened.”

John B. Cullen and Floyd C. Watkins
“Miss Emily”
Old Times in the Faulkner Country
(U North Carolina 1961) 70-71

“Emily becomes Jefferson’s sickness, its heritage from the past, fostered upon the town by the same Sartoris, upholder of the chivalric code, who ordered the freed female slaves to appear on the streets in aprons to symbolize their subservience to the whites. Though the new generation makes an effort to shrug of this burden, it cannot, because Emily’s pride is the town’s pride; the sympathy of the plural narrator is with her. The town harbors the decayed Grierson house, a symbol of the past, and just as Emily, in her pride, tries to retain what was hers even when it is dead, so, the author seems to suggest, does the South. Faulkner destroys chronological time in his story; his narrator, extending over several generations, knows the significance of all the events that he relates. ‘A Rose for Emily’ is a masterfully developed tale, in which human beings without losing their individuality become resonant symbols of an entire society.”

Marvin Magalaner and Edmond L. Volpe
“Society in ‘A Rose for Emily’”
Teachers’ Manual to Accompany Twelve Short Stories

(1961; Macmillan 1969) 17

“Southern writers single out the materialistic modern world as the chief offender and look back to the traditional societies of the past for environments favorable to the dignity of man.... In ‘A Rose for Emily’ he pictures Miss Emily living behind barricaded doors, protecting herself from a hostile world.... Whenever the present laps too high, she hurls back the waves. Hence ‘a rose for Emily,’ an accolade for her. But she wins her victory at too great cost—she is a distorted personality.... Her father dominates her, keeping the young men away from her—presumably because the eligible bachelors have been killed off in the war. After his death she asserts her own will by taking up with a Yankee construction foreman, Homer Barron. Then when Homer proves to be a ‘naturalistic’ man, a hollow man, she keeps him faithful by killing him. That is, the dead Homer continues to share her bed, as the townspeople discover many years later when she herself dies.”

Danforth Ross
The American Short Story
(U Minnesota 1961) 36-37

“It may reasonably be assumed that her hair was graying during the affair with Homer Barron, and that the ‘one long strand’ found in his bed was left there the night she murdered him. In adding to the complexity and richness of the story, the iron-gray hair is a tribute to the power of Faulkner’s narrative technique. Unfortunately, it has led many readers...into the easy assumption that ‘A Rose for Emily’ is merely a horror story, ‘without implications’ [Lionel Trilling].... Emily Grierson is more than a crazed old woman. She is more than the last member of a decayed Southern family. She is a person of great strength and dignity; and in the uneven battle which she fights with circumstance, she demands our respect.... However abnormal her mental processes may be, there is no basis for the assumption that Emily spends the last forty years of her life cohabiting with a corpse. Furthermore, this emphasis on the morbid, at the expense of any moral implication, is not consonant with Faulkner’s sympathy for the lady, to whom he hands a rose in salute.”

Elmo Howell
“Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’”
Explicator XIX (January 1961) item 26

“Mr. Howell’s contention rests on the assumption ‘that her hair was graying during the affair with Homer Barron, and that the “one long strand” found in his bed was left there the night she murdered him.’ The details of the story, however, do not warrant such an assumption. Nowhere is there an explicit statement or suggestion that the strand of hair was left the night of the murder. But we do know that her hair was cut short after her father’s death, just prior to her meeting Barron; it would ordinarily take months for it to grow long, and, depending on precisely what lengths ‘short’ and ‘long’ denote, it might take years. More important, though there are many opportunities for the townspeople to observe Emily, there is no mention of her hair graying during the affair...”

It is not until almost six months after the murder that Emily appears on the streets and people notice for the first time that ‘her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray, when it ceased turning.’ Faulkner pointedly concludes the story with the phrase ‘a *long* strand of *iron-gray* hair.’ (Italics mine) These facts of the story concerning gray hair imply that Emily did lie beside the decaying corpse of her lover. On the other hand, the pervading dust in the room indicates that she had not done so for some years prior to her death.... That ‘no one had seen [the room] in forty years’ could mean that no one of the townspeople had seen it, or, even if we read ‘no one’ as including Emily, it is still possible for her to have lain with Barron for some months or years after his death, because she died at seventy-four and murdered her lover when she was about thirty—‘she was over thirty’ when she bought the poison.”

Arthur L. Clements
“Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’”
Explicator XX (May 1962) item 78

“I agree with Mr. Elmo Howell that the suggestion that ‘Emily kept the body of her dead lover for morbid purposes’ is artistically untenable.... One pattern that is most evident throughout the story is the

analogy between Emily and the Old South. Her family connections, her home, the kind of patriotic homage—all point to Emily as a symbol of the Old South, of the tradition of chivalry and culture which that name evokes.... The whole texture of the story is wrought of this ambivalence of love and hate, respect and contempt. It is most fitting that the final paradox sums up this texture in a complex image in which we have, on the one hand, a rose offered in admiration to a woman of indomitable spirit who clung, in the very process of dissolution, to the vision of an ideal; and at the same time, we have the revolting spectacle of an aging and impotent culture couching with a corrupt materialism which its nobler components had rejected.”

Sister Mary Bride
“Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’”
Explicator XX (May 1962) item 78

“The narrator is involved in the event; the depicted reality and the world of the narrator coalesce. His being is a part of the viable whole of the town; he participates in the events of this community and pulls the reader into this participation.... In the course of her life, Miss Emily never received a rose. But her casket was decorated with flowers... If anyone took Miss Emily’s part, then it was Captain Sartoris and the members of the older generation who still had respect for the aristocratic tradition....

In the irony-laden title the narrator preserves his separateness from the attitude of the people who ordered the flowers for the burial.... Through the title and thence through the story, the narrator strives to demonstrate his genuine sympathy for Miss Emily and to make up, so to speak, for his neglect of her during her lifetime. The narrator feels sympathy and probably also guilt and attempts to reach some understanding of Miss Emily through his tale. He defends Miss Emily, for her fate was sealed by powers and forces against which she could not contend.... The meaning of the story’s title...is ambivalent...

People slink around and sniff like beasts because it is unseemly to call ‘lady’s’ attention to a ‘smell’ for which she is essentially to blame. The druggist dares not ask Miss Emily a second time what use she intended to make of the arsenic she requested. Here too the peculiar effect of consideration or deference for the ‘lady’ is evident. The druggist suspects something, for he lets the ‘Negro delivery boy’ bring Miss Emily the bottle; and he has himself labeled the bottle...‘for rats’.... The comic effect inheres in the sudden mental transposition of the person for whom the poison is intended with the idea of ‘rats’... Comic and tragic aspects are even connected with Miss Emily’s attitude. For example, some comic effects are evidenced in her behavior, vis-à-vis the ‘aldermen’; her refusal to pay taxes; the attempt not to accept the death of her father; the observation ‘She carried her head high’; her bearing in the drugstore, etc.; in fact, her entire manner insofar as it carries the mark of a certain rigidity and fanaticism.”

Nikolaus Happel
“William Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’”
Die Neueren Sprachen 9 (1962) 396-404

“Critics still refer to it as ‘the most famous of them all’ (Millgate) and as ‘among the very greatest written in our time’ (Wagoner). Like most of Faulkner’s fiction, it is based on real-life events which occurred in Lafayette County—especially on the much discussed marriage of Miss Mary Louise Neilson, a Southern aristocratic lady, with a Captain Jack Hume, the Yankee foreman of a construction company that paved the streets of Oxford in the 1920’s; and on the grotesque episode of a crazy woman, Mag Hellrod, who drove public officials off her property at the point of a gun and allowed the dead body of her son to lie in bed for more than a week until it stank so badly that the undertaker had to drink a pint of whiskey before he could bring himself to bury it (see John B. Cullen, *Old Times in the Faulkner Country*). The latter episode also serves as the basis for *As I Lay Dying*...

The narrative moves relentlessly toward a shocking revelation in a magnificently structured shuttling back and forth in time. The shock does not negate the moral: Emily has assumed the proportions of a tragic figure strangely pathetic in her desperate passion and refusal to face reality. The tragedy that Faulkner describes does, of course, involve the passing of time and the concomitant changing of customs. Thus, time in ‘A Rose for Emily’ is significant as (1) cultural history, (2) personal experience, and (3) aesthetic technique.... Since each section of the story moves toward a climax in death, the structural pattern

obviously does not control the focus of our attention simply to the intrusions of the present upon the privacy of the past. Rather, it heightens the element of horror that is undeniable at the heart of the story....

The ending of 'A Rose for Emily' clearly out-does the Jacobean dramatists and Poe in its Gothicism and ...melodrama. What could be more morbid than the description of the corpse of Homer Barron, 'rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt'?... The final shock of the discovery of the strand of iron-gray hair reveals the motive for the crime; Emily Grierson, a lady of the old Southern aristocracy and at heart a sentimentalist, profoundly insulted by a man who had betrayed her, living no longer in a community in which a gentleman of the old code would revenge her honor for her, is compelled to do the deed herself. Yet she would gladly have abandoned the old code, with the approval of the rest of the town who have also abandoned it... The woman who in the public eye remained upright as a community monument, 'a tradition, a duty, and a care'; and who appeared in her window 'like the carven torso of an idol in a niche'; but who, in private, collapsed into a macabre ghoul, is a tragic figure."

John V. Hagopian, W. Gordon Cunliffe, and Martin Dolch
"A Rose for Emily"
Insight I: Analyses of American Literature
(Frankfurt am Main: Hirschgraben-Verlag 1964) 43-50

"When Miss Emily Grierson was young, her domineering father drove away her suitors. Shortly after his death she was courted briefly by a Northern day laborer, Homer Barron, in spite of interference from her relatives, who were concerned solely with respectability. Barron disappeared and for forty years Miss Emily scarcely left her house. After her death at seventy-four, the townsfolk find an upstairs bedroom decked as a bridal boudoir. On the bed are the remains of a man, on the pillow beside him, a single strand of iron-gray hair.

'A Rose for Emily' has the Gothic atmosphere of a typical ghost story—the decaying Victorian mansion, the mystery created by Miss Emily's seclusion, and finally the macabre revelation in the upstairs bedroom—but it is also a study of a strangely pathetic, perhaps even tragic, character. The townsfolk, who had thought that the Griersons 'held themselves a little too high for what they really were,' felt smugly vindicated when Miss Emily seemed likely to remain a spinster; when her father died, word got around that 'the house was all that was left to her; and in a way, people were glad. At last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized.

The chief irony in the story lies in the contrast between the townspeople's envious attitude toward Miss Emily and the profound misery of her actual condition. Her neighbors can never quite forgive her seeming arrogance and feeling of superiority; yet, cheated of a chance for a 'suitable' marriage, Miss Emily desperately sought love with an unworthy partner, murdered him rather than lose him, and thus doomed herself to even more hopeless isolation for the rest of her life. Driven from the world of the living by her acts, Miss Emily had only the dead to turn to. But the dead have no pity, and the townsfolk—with the reader—feel only horror at the discovery of murder so deliberately perpetrated and concealed, and a further horror at the suggestion of necrophilia."

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 175

"The forward and backward narrative flow of the story is a studied technique on the part of Faulkner in keeping with the familiar point of view of the anonymous townsman who narrates the story....When did that long strand of iron-gray hair come to fall on the second pillow?... The chronology is something like this: [by section of the story; the following is adapted]....

- II (1890): Before the death of her father, Emily has a slender figure.
Death of father, after which Emily goes out very little.
- III (1892): Emily is sick for along time after her father's death.
- (1893): Arrival of Homer Barron
Courting: people say "poor Emily."

- IV (1893): Baptist minister makes call on Emily.
Blood-kin under Emily's roof again.
- (1894): Emily buys man's silver toilet set.
Two days later she buys complete outfit of men's clothing.
Homer leaves.
- III Emily buys poison—over a year after courting began.
- IV Cousins depart a week after Homer leaves.
Three days later Homer returns, disappears.
- II The smell—two years after the father's death, shortly after Homer disappears.
- II,IV Townspeople sprinkle lime.
Emily in seclusion about six months, people hardly see her at all.
- I,IV Emily's taxes are remitted.
- IV During next few years, Emily's hair grows grayer, becomes 'irony-gray'; and she gets fat.
Emily gives china-painting lessons for six or seven years; then her front door is closed.
- I No one enters house until tax disputation.
- (c.1914): Death of Colonel Sartoris.
- II (1924): Tax deputation, thirty years after smell.
- V (1934): Death of Emily."

Robert H. Woodward
 "The Chronology of 'A Rose for Emily'"
Exercise Exchange XIII
 (March 1966) 17-19

"The fact remains that Miss Emily's relation with Homer is an abnormal, degenerate, and meaningless human association which is unworthy of the pride it took to attain it.... Faulkner's purpose becomes more clear by seeing Miss Emily in contrast to her Negro servant. While Emily occupies the foreground and provides the primary movement (a movement toward decay), the servant hovers in the background and offers a counter-movement of purposeful activity.... He...engages in purposeful and altruistic action. Miss Emily, by contrast, gives an impression of immobility, 'motionless as that of an idol'... Emily's one set of deeds, performed without the servant's being present in the story, results in violence and destruction.... She does not even talk with him, for, as the narrator says, his voice 'had grown harsh and rusty, as if from disuse'....

The Negro servant's...name, 'Tobe,' emphasized by avoiding the usual spelling of 'Toby' and clearly implying that he is 'to be,' that once he is liberated from the foul atmosphere of Miss Emily's alienation and paralysis his fulfillment will be.... Dilsey is like Tobe in that she is the only person in *The Sound and the Fury* who is able to engage in meaningful action and who provides a moral center to the story. Also like Tobe, she sustains and protects her white masters, outlives them, and suggests the indomitability of the human spirit.... Tobe, like Dilsey is to the Compsons, has thus been more than a servant to Miss Emily's physical needs.... But she has been unable to avail herself of his humanity and in so failing she suggests the explanation for her abnormal and depraved relation with Homer Barron, which is in itself symbolic of her relationship with the human heart, her own, Tobe's, and human kind's....

Tobe...reveals humility, patience, endurance, courage, and pity. A clearer picture of Miss Emily's true nature is therefore given by her sharp contrast with Tobe's wholeness. Toward the end, a feeling of release is associated with Tobe as he disappears into the future and the narrator turns to lead the reader into the room of dust, death, and decay which Emily Grierson has created."

T. J. Stafford
 "Tobe's Significance in 'A Rose for Emily'"
Modern Fiction Studies XIV
 (Winter 1968-69) 451-53

"It has been Faulkner's most widely anthologized story and has been translated into French, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, Greek, Turkish, Romanian, Danish, Icelandic, Polish, Czech, and other languages....

Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1840)...is like Faulkner's tale in that, as Brooks and Warren observe... 'We have a decaying mansion in which the protagonist, shut away from the world, grows into something monstrous...'"

M. Thomas Inge, ed.
William Faulkner: 'A Rose for Emily' casebook
(Charles E. Merrill 1970) 1

"The text moves along two parallel lines, one Miss Emily's real biography, the other the biography that the townspeople write for her. The real biography is progressive, moving forward, it is revealed only after the story's climax... Both Miss Emily and the townspeople work together to make her a symbol of the decline of the Old South.... The repetition of words and images, as well as the pervasive irony, illustrates how the meaning of a text is not so much an accumulative progression as it is a tapestry or network of significance...The process of reading Faulkner's tale includes an exploration of the individual and collective unconscious of the South....

If Miss Emily creates her own world, so does the town. Students recognize that the story's irony is located between the two versions, in the fact that the townspeople are unaware that the senile old lady is actually a deranged murderess. The town's acceptance of Miss Emily's eccentricity and pride parallels the reader's faith in the narrative voice of the text, which, it turns out, also has sinister underpinnings. The townspeople's ability to understand (read) the facts of Miss Emily's life is severely compromised by their indulgence of the anachronistic spinster and by their presuming to know the details of her private life. Into the gaps in their knowledge they inscribe a likely and conventional version of what they imagine happened. The opening paragraphs of part 4 express the certainty in the town's gossip: 'We all said'; 'Then we said'; 'Then we were sure'; 'later we learned...and we said'; 'So we were not surprised'; 'but we believed'; 'as we had expected all along.' A close examination of the wording exposes the story's irony and lets students discover for themselves the unreliability of the narrator....

Ironically, the townspeople, in their respect for Miss Emily, share similarities with her; they ascribe a special status to Homer. Like her, they are unable to acknowledge the irrevocability of time. The town's deference to Miss Emily is a barely sublimated desire to recapture some of its own historical exclusivity. In this way, everyone shares in the production of personal and historical significance. And so Miss Emily becomes associated with time, with history. Her unwillingness to abandon her noblesse oblige reflects the town's reluctance to confront reality, which would mean abandoning its noblesse oblige.... Miss Emily is the town's emblem of history. At her funeral the past is momentarily re-created. Old men in Confederate uniforms imagine how they might have courted Miss Emily. Her death is their avenue to a romantic and chivalrous past. Only the horrible revelation at the end, the opening of the tomb, restarts the clock."

Claudia Clausius
"A Rose for Emily": The Faulknerian Construction of Meaning"
Approaches to Teaching Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury
Stephen Hahn and Arthur F. Kinney, eds.
(MLA 1996) 144-46, 148

Michael Hollister (2015)