A Rose for Emily: A Literary Analysis

In “A Rose for Emily”, William Faulkner tells the story of an old and lonely lady stuck in her own timeframe. Her controlling father died some thirty years ago and she has never quite found her own ground. Her house has become the most hideous looking home on the once most select street in the city. Previously elegant and white with scrolled balconies, it was now encroached with dust and decay. The people in Miss Emily’s city gossip about her and pity her lost soul. She soon begins dating a young bachelor by the name of Homer Barron, whom is part of the construction company paving sidewalks on her street. They begin taking buggy rides together, and townspeople talk more, and pity Miss Emily more. Things change quickly though, as Miss Emily is seen less with Homer, and is witnessed purchasing arsenic from the local drug store. Eventually no more is seen of Homer, and Miss Emily dies at age seventy-four. After Miss Emily’s death the townspeople breakdown her upstairs room that had been sealed shut for some forty years. They find Homer’s dead decaying body, an imprint of another body beside it, and a single grey strand of hair. “A Rose for Emily” tells the story of tradition versus nontraditional and old versus new, which is brought to light through the story’s plot, characters, and setting.

Right the beginning of the story it is clear that it will be about old versus new. The writer begins by describing Miss Emily’s house, which was once luxurious, is now old and dusty. “It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white [Now] an eyesore among eyesores” (Faulkner 146). The house itself stands for tradition, it has aged, and instead of moving along with the rebuilding of the South, it has stayed the same. As the story begins to speak about Miss Emily’s past, it is clear that her family is well respected in the town. So much so that when she walks into a room, people are expected to rise in reverence of her. Miss Emily is the old lady that everyone feels pity for. Her father, who sheltered her very much so, had once contributed a large sum of money to the own, exonerating Miss Emily of any future tax payments. Again, the familiar theme of old versus new arises when Miss Emily is asked to give a tax payment. She does not only refuse, but she does so in a way that says she should not have even been asked the question. These “new” authorities should know better than to ask the “old” Miss Emily for such a thing. “I have no taxes in Jefferson” (Faulkner 147). No further information is sought after because they know that old trumps new. A similar occurrence arises when Miss Emily purchases rat poisoning; state law says that she must give the reason for her buying it, Miss Emily doesn’t, she simply pays and leaves. The most dramatic act is Miss Emily killing her lover. Miss Emily is trying so hard to stay old and live how she knows how, and this in turn causes her to murder her lover. The only way she knew how to keep him with her, was to kill him. This was the way she was raised.

Miss Emily was raised by a controlling father, who did not let her go out of the house, much less date anyone. When he dies, she does not know what to do. So much so that she keeps his body for a short time. The world around her is changing and maturing, but she is not. Faulkner uses a very peculiar symbol of this in his opening paragraphs. "A small fat women in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt" (Faulkner 147). Time is literally not in eye sight for her. It has "vanished into her belt", where she cannot see it. Miss Emily is lost, and the only way she knows how to act is traditionally. When she meets Homer Baron, he is everything that she knows that she should not be doing. He is questionably gay, he's a bachelor of some sorts, and he is a simple construction worker. In dating him, she is going against everything she has been taught; either to get back at her father for sheltering her so much or because she is so unaware of what she should be doing. As the story unfolds, Homer starts spending less and less time with Miss Emily, and they break up. Emily is not done with him though, and wants nothing more than to marry him; she even goes as far as to buy a wedding outfit for him. However, Homer was not of the marrying type and had no intentions of marrying her. The only way she knew to keep him with her was to kill him, and so she did. "Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. [And on it lay a] long strand of iron-gray hair" (Faulkner 152). She lay next to Homer's dead, decaying body until she could no longer do so. She poisoned him, because for her, this was how she knew to stop time, and in turn she could stay with Homer for as long as she wanted to.

Looking deeply into the setting of the story we see a huge transition period for the South in general, which would include Miss Emily and the townspeople. The time this took place was somewhere between the 1860s and the 1930s. Slavery had just ended, the middle class was becoming more prominent, and society as a whole was becoming less cliquish. The Grierson family was one of high status, most likely with lots of money and many slaves. After Miss Emily's father dies, everything that they had believed in is turned upside down. Slavery, which was very common, is now thought of as an evil, an atrocity. The townspeople seem to be transitioning very well, but Miss Emily, with no one to guide her, is not. "Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, a care; sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" (Faulkner 146). Her father dies, her compass to life, the New South emerges, and she is left to figure out things for her own. This was difficult for her, and added to her madness and bad sense of judgment. Miss Emily only knew how to follow; she did not know how to lead. This is clearly seen in her relationship with her father. "Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her, clutching a horse whip" (Faulkner 148). Her father clearly controlled her like a horse, and this is the way she lives her life. When Homer comes along, she feels as if she has someone to lead her again,

when he decides to leave her, she has to kill him. She kills him because she needs a male figure in her life, and for her, this is the only way to keep him around.

William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is filled with character, plot, and setting symbolism. They all seem to say that Miss Emily is stuck in time, with no way out. She poisons Homer Barron for many different reasons. She needs a male in her life to take the lead because her life is being turned upside down, and she has no one to look to. Was this act out of love or sheer selfishness? She was clearly mentally unstable, but she also had loads of pressure on her with every human being around her gossiping and judging her every move. Maybe she did it for shock factor. Whatever the reason may be, she certainly got to keep her 'rose', Homer Barron, forever.