

# Analysis of the Symbolic Meaning of “Death” in *A Rose for Emily*

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**Abstract:** *William Faulkner is good at telling the stories of the Old South, A Rose for Emily is one of his masterpieces. This essay has systematically explored the symbolic meaning of the death of the three major characters by analyzing the symbolic meaning of them. Emily and her father died of natural causes, implying that the old traditions are inevitably to fade away. The old values are bound to withdraw from the stage of history. History has its laws and the development will not be changed by personal will.*

**Keywords:** *William Faulkner; A Rose for Emily; Emily; Southern Belle*

## 1. Introduction

William Faulkner (1897-1962), who had won the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, “has been considered America’s greatest novelist to come out of the 20th century” [1-2]. As a writer, Faulkner’s primary concern was to probe into the history of his region, the Deep South. He has been considered to be one of the most important writers of the Southern Literature of the United States. Though William Faulkner is an American writer of novels, short stories, poetry and occasional screenplays, nowadays he is mainly known and acclaimed for his “Yoknapatawpha saga”, because many of his novels and short stories are set in the fictional “Yoknapatawpha County” and Jefferson, the setting Faulkner created based on Lafayette County and Oxford, “where he was brought up and studied briefly at the university” [3]-230. Some of his “Yoknapatawpha saga” reproduces the myth of southern belle from a unique perspective. The truthful portrayal of the rise and fall of southern aristocratic families has touched readers all over the world. Among them, *A Rose for Emily* is considered to be one of the best short stories.

The use of symbolism is a particular subtle feat of Faulkner’s consummate craftsmanship. In *A Rose for Emily*, symbolism runs through the whole story where the main characters and everything related are endowed with deep symbolic meaning, which has aroused widespread interest of many scholars both at home and abroad. A great deal of researches had been done on the symbolic meaning in *A Rose for Emily*, but few of them has paid attention on the implied meaning of the death of the three protagonists. In fact, the death of the three main characters contains a deep meaning which has played a vital role in understanding the whole story as well as Faulkner’s south complex. This paper would systematically make an analysis of the symbolic meaning of “death” in *A Rose for Emily*, and try to provide a new perspective on understanding this short story.

## 2. Plot Overview of *A Rose for Emily*

*A Rose for Emily* tells the tragic story of Miss Emily, a typical “Southern lady” in Jefferson. Emily was born in a declined old Southern aristocratic family with a long pedigree, the famous Griersons. Although the family has lost the past glories, Emily’s father (Mr. Grierson ) still regarded himself as a noble man and thought that no one was worthy of his daughter. With the manipulation of her father, Emily had to live with many restrictions in life, resulting in an aging spinster at the age of 30. After her father’s death, Emily’s financial and spiritual pillars collapsed. The same summer, she fell in love with a Yankee road paver named Homer Barron. Knowing that Homer Barron was not intending to get married, Emily was heartbroken. She poisoned him and slept with the corpse for decades.

### 3. Symbolic Meaning of the “Three deaths”

The main characters in *A Rose for Emily* are all dead, including Emily Grierson, Emily’s father (Mr. Grierson) and Homer Barron. Due to their different identities, the death of the three protagonists are endowed with different symbolic meanings.

#### 3.1 *Symbolic Meaning of the Death of Emily’s father (Mr. Grierson)*

Before the Civil War, planters tried to establish themselves as aristocrats. They lived in mansions with tall white colonnades. With black slaves working on the plantation, and house-serfs playing the piano in front of the colonnades, they themselves came slowly on horses like knights [14]. Emily’s father Mr. Grierson was a plantation owner when the Southern plantation system was at its height. As a traditional aristocracy, their family was once prominent and had enjoyed a high social status. Their mansion was “a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street” [5]-148. In the novel *Swallow Barn*, John Pendleton Kennedy has written that the South was a paradise, the planter’s mansion was at the core of the social and moral order throughout the South, the male master who dominates the family and society is a noble, respectable, chivalrous and brave gentleman [9]. According to Xiao Minghan, the south is mainly an agricultural society based on the manor economy [11]. In such a social and economic structure, the family is the center of society, and the father of the manor is naturally the head and the undisputed master of the family [11]. So the Griersons had lived a comfortable and happy aristocratic life and Emily’s father is the head of the family.

In order to keep their social status, Emily’s father upheld Southern traditions on his daughter, Emily. He tried his best to train his daughter into the image of a gentle, beautiful, kind, and humble southern lady to show the dignity of the family. According to George Fitzhugh, Southern ladies in patriarchy were admired by gentlemen as long as they remained neurotic, critical, vulnerable, timid, and submissive ... actually, just like children, their only right was to be protected, and to be protected meant obedience [1]. Emily’s father naturally acted as the protector of the southern belle [10]. As to Daniel J. Singal, the standard of a southern lady requires a woman to be free of any sexual desires and to devote herself entirely to caring for her family [4]. Under such a situation, Emily’s father definitely sacrifice his only daughter, Emily’s happiness for their family reputation. Class conception is the direct cause that makes Emily an old maid. Her father had not locked her physically, but had imprisoned her in the rigid ladylike notions of the Old South, holding her high beyond the reach of the Jefferson lads. [8]

Based on the above analysis, Emily’s father is a firm defender of the Old South as well as all the values and traditions represent by the Old South. As an aristocratic male, Emily’s father is a symbol of the boom of the southern civilization. In the eyes of the Jeffersonians, he symbolizes the glory of the Old South, the plantation system and all the traditional values during the southern boom [12]. In no other time in the story is the patriarchal power of Emily’s father more intense than at the moment when he manipulates Emily’s marriage. So the death of Emily’s father marks the decline of the plantation economy and the corresponding traditional concepts, such as Patriarchy society, the culture of Southern Lady and the glory of the Old South.

#### 3.2 *Symbolic Meaning of the Death of Emily*

Emily was born in a typical plantation family. As a representative of a southern lady, people expected Emily to inherit the traditional concept of the aristocracy and have a noble life and love. Emily’s social identity as a southern lady was recognized by the public. For example, “a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town, dating from that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor - he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron- remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity.” [5]-149

According to Faulkner, the South economy had gone from boom to bust by the time Emily came of age. The Civil War completely disintegrated the single-plantation economy on which the southern aristocracy relied. The traditional values of the South were challenged, and a difficult industrial transformation had to begin. During the period of social transition, for the southern ladies, the most important thing to do was to keep their Lady image. And the people around, who were nostalgic for the lost glory of the South, were willing to regard them as a symbol [14].

Emily was awe-inspiring in the story, and she represented the glory and dream of the old South [8]. Emily was in the center of town because she was a tradition and a monument, she was looked up with respect as well as with gloating, merciless stares [6]. The townspeople needed Emily as their spiritual monument to resist the invading northern industrial and commercial civilization and their disillusioned dreams [10]. “Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care” [5]-149. When her father was alive, “We had long thought of them as a tableau” [5]-151. With her hair cut short, she was seen as “those angels in colored church windows” [5]-152. When a bad smell came out of her house 30 years ago, Emily in the window looked like an “idol”. Decades later, when Emily reappeared in the window, she “like the carven torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which.” [5]-155.

At the beginning of the story, Faulkner tells us that “When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument” [5]-148. The reason why she has won the high respect of the public in the community is that she has undertaken a grand mission and exercised a symbolic function of an institution and culture [8].

At the funeral, the town people see “the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier...” [5]-155, which on the one hand indicates that Emily has inherited the will of his father, on the other implies that Emily is the last advocator of the Patriarchy.

From the analysis above, it is clear that, being the last member of the Grierson family, Emily herself is also a loyal defender of the Old South. Emily had always adhered to and maintained Southern traditions to maintain her pride and alienation, which was her way to protect the Old Southern traditions from the invasion of the northern industrial civilization [10].

Generally speaking, Emily herself is a representative of the Old South. From the view of the people around her, Emily represents an old southern conception of life, a traditional lifestyle, and an important symbol of the past glory. Similar to her father, Emily also symbolizes plantation civilization and the related old values, but during the waning years of the traditional economy. As the last member of her family, Emily is also the last continuator of the Old South. Emily’s death looks like the collapse of a monument, heralding the end of an old era. “The ladies sibilant macabre; and the very old men – some in their brushed Confederate uniforms – on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily...” [5]-155 shows that the age of the glorious Old South has gone with the death of Miss Emily. In conclusion, the death of Emily symbolizes the dying out of the old south, old south system, old-fashioned ideas and old traditions. Specifically, Emily’s death marks the deterioration of the Southern patriarchal mode of life, Southern belle civilization, traditional Southern moral codes as well as the totally impoverishment and decay of the old southern planters. Emily is a “monument” of the old system, and the fall of this “monument” heralds the eventual triumph of progressive institutions over backward ones.

### ***3.3 Symbolic Meaning of the Death of Homer***

In the summer, not long after the death of Emily’s father, the town began to pave the sidewalks, here came a northern construction company with a foreman named Homer Barron, “a Yankee--a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face. [5]-152” Compared with Emily, Homer Barron is a typical social, enthusiastic, open and free-spirited person. “Pretty soon he knew everybody in town. Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group. [5]-152” Simply put, Homer Barron, a pavement worker from the north, represents the northern industrial civilization and a powerful northern cultural invasion.

As mentioned above, Emily was the “monument” revered by the town, the incarnation of nobility, the symbol of southern civilization and traditions, the model of the past moral codes and the last legacy of the southern aristocracy. But she fell in love with Homer, who represented the North. So “the combination between Emily and Homer Barron posed a threat to the southern traditional values. [7]” When Emily and Homer drove out together on Sunday, the ladies said, “Of course, a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer” [5]-152, the old people said, “poor Emily” to express their objection. As Emily and Homer further their relationship, some of the ladies around said that Emily “was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people. [5]-153”

The reason why the town residents showed various attitudes was that Emily and Homer belonged to different classes. Homer’s behavior had hurtled the feelings of the Jeffersonians and destroyed the moral myth of the South. Emily came from a famous family, while Homer was just a day laborer leading the road construction. From the perspective of social status, the two were totally different. Their closeness across class differences was certainly unacceptable in a closed, hierarchical culture [8].

Homer Barron's class background and the region he came from made their love affair double hostile to the symbolic social order [4].

And the high-profile appearance of Emily and Homer in front of the townspeople showed Emily's pride as a noble class and her control over Homer Barron who represented the northern industrial civilization [10]. Honestly speaking, their relationship is a cultural contest between the North and the South.

Though Emily stuck to the tradition and refused everything, she fell in love with Homer, who symbolized the North. Emily's fascination for Homer indicates the backward southern tradition is vulnerable in the face of the emerging northern civilization. The decaying old culture is destined to be replaced by the new one [8].

Although healthy and cheerful, lacking responsibility, Homer, who just wanted to have fun at the moment, symbolized the nascent culture of the north and was a product of the industrial age [13]. According to Li Yang, the North represents freedom, but this freedom is uncontrolled [8]. Homer was no exception. Homer longed for freedom and preferred to get along with men. So the possible betrayal of Homer together with the rumors of the town residents led to Emily's unethical behaviors of killing her lover and sleeping with the corpse for several tens of tears. To some extent, she just actively maintained her social identity through such extreme behavior [10].

Homer Barron died. However, compared with the death of Emily and his father, Homer's death is unnatural and artificial. His death has a strong symbolic meaning. Homer Barron was murdered by Miss Emily with arsenic. As mentioned above, while Miss Emily represents the old south and its social system, Homer Barron refers to the north system and the industrial civilization. In the third part of the short story, Homer appears as a free-thinking, cynical young man then in the fifth or last part, he reappears as a rotting corpse. The sharp contrast transition of Homer leaves readers stunned and thoughtful. On one hand, the unnatural death of Homer implies an inevitable setback in the process of social progress. During the transition between the old and the new systems, new ideas will inevitably encounter resistance and persecution from old ones. As long as there is reform, there will be resistance and obstruction, as well as bloodshed and sacrifice. On the other hand, Homer's death symbolizes that the power and influence of the Old South have not dissipated, but still persist in southern life and the fantasy of the Old South aristocrats still trying to conquer the new industrial system of the North.

Besides, Emily and her father both died of natural causes. This kind of death indicates that the old traditions are bound to fade away. The old system, backward concepts, and outdated lifestyle will eventually withdraw from the stage of history. The world is moving forward and the development will not be changed by personal will.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner creates a Southern belle, who is just the representative of the Old South, to express his love and south complex. Through the symbolic meaning of the death of the three protagonists, Faulkner vividly reveals the social reality that the old defenders of the Old South try to survive in the constant conflict between the declining decadent system and the ever-changing new social thought in the South. The final death of Miss Emily and her father represents the irresistible decline of the Old Southern Order, the inevitable fall of the Southern Patriarchy and implies William Faulkner's regret and complicated feelings for the backward and decaying southern culture being replaced by the emerging northern culture after all. At the same time, Homer Barron's death means that the development of the new system will not be a plain sailing.

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