



# "An Eyesore among Eyesores" : The Significance of Physical Setting in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

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## Abstract

It is the purpose of this paper to study the significance of the physical setting of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily". The two main geographical settings are Jefferson Town and the Grierson's house . The researcher will show how Faulkner's treatment of the details of the house (the microcosmic geographical settings) which include the upstairs bridal chamber, the crayon portrait, the front door, and window frame leads to a better understanding of Miss Emily's motivations and actions, and gives us insight to her lonely isolated life. At a certain point, Emily's decaying smelly house is refuge from the modernised outside world to which she does not belong. Furthermore, the house is the source of Miss Emily's power. Inside the walls of the house, she is a strong woman, a killer; yet a woman falling in love. Nevertheless, Faulkner presents another horrifying image of Emily's house. It harbours death and decay. In this sense, the house is closer to dark setting we read about in Gothic Romance. On the other hand, the town is the macrocosmic setting. It is a fallen legacy as it becomes a symbol for the fall of the old South which Emily's house still harbours.

**Keywords:** Faulkner, physical setting, , decaying setting, isolation, confinement, Gothic Romance, fallen legacy, physically enclosed space

## 1. Introduction

"A Rose for Emily" tells the story of the spinster Emily Grierson who is left to live alone and lonely after her father and lover's death in a decaying house in Jefferson town in the late nineteenth-century in the decade following the Civil War. It is the purpose of this paper to study the significance of the physical setting of the story represented by the town and the Grierson's house (the macrocosmic and microcosmic geographical settings). Faulkner's treatment of the details of the house help us to understand Miss Emily's motivations, actions, what she stands for, and gives us insight to her lonely life. These details are the upstairs bridal chamber where Miss Emily keeps Homer's corpse for forty years, the front door and the window frame which become symbols of Miss Emily's isolation, and finally the portrait of her father which reflects dominance and control over her life. Jefferson Town, on the other hand stands as an opposition to whatever Emily's house stands for. The town rejects the old bourgeoisie and slavery, and it adopts a new social system which Miss Emily rejects. The researcher will show how the two geographical settings contradict each other and how such juxtaposition deepens our understanding of the main character.

## 2. The Macrocosmic versus Microcosmic Settings

The town is the macrocosmic setting. It represents the South in its two historical phases: the old rural South which Miss Emily's house has become a symbol, and the modern urban South represented by the new generation, "garages and cotton gins", "gasoline pumps" (119), and paved sidewalks (122). Nevertheless, the town is a fallen legacy as it becomes a symbol for the fall of the old South which Emily's house still harbours. The town stands as a direct opposition to Emily's house. Jefferson Town has denounced the old bourgeoisie and slavery to embrace the new industrial changes. While the macrocosmic setting responds to the fast changes; Emily's house remains static, firm, and isolated.

Not only does Miss Emily's house harbour slavery (she keeps a Negro -Tobe- to take care of her and the house), but it also stands as a reminder of the previous class system which has disappeared and been replaced by a more democratic system incarnated by the new generation. Miss Emily is "a fallen monument" as much as her house is as a symbol of a fallen legacy (119). While the street where her house is located has once been the most select, it is now encroached and obliterated. It has become something ugly; "an eyesore" (119). The decaying ugly house of the Griersons with its out of date structure and furnishing symbolises the decay of the old social system. Among the newer buildings, it is an image of decay. It is isolated from the other modern buildings as much Emily is isolated inside its walls. In this sense, the house is an embodiment of Emily's wilful isolation and loneliness. On the other hand, the degeneration of the house into "an eyesore" justifies Emily's ghastly appearance when she balloons as a drowned corpse. Looking like a corpse, Heller (1972) suggests that Emily's appearance is the result of the same process of decay which has made the house into an eyesore (86). Heller adds that Emily becomes the sinister heroine or the villainess of Gothic Romance (86). In addition,

Frank Littler, in an essay published in *Notes on Mississippi Writers* regarding the chronology of the story, writes that "A Rose for Emily" has been read variously as ". . . a Gothic horror tale..." (83). Faulkner himself suggested in a lecture delivered in The University of Virginia that "A Rose for Emily" is a "ghost story" (Gwynn and Blotner, 26).

### 2.1 "A Rose for Emily" as a Gothic Romance

The question is which elements of the house emphasise reading "A Rose for Emily" as a Gothic Romance? How much does this reading provide an insight to Emily's personality? Gothic Romance deals with desolate settings, mysterious and grotesque events, the themes of death, alienation and isolation. Events usually take place in gloomy and dark settings. Gothic Romance introduces sinister characters and unexplained phenomena (Littler, 82). First, we have the image of Miss Emily as a fat old woman resembling death itself (120). Then, the image of the house itself; the "dim hall" (119), the dark window (121), a "house filled with dust and shadows" (124), and the upstairs locked bedroom which no one has seen in forty years. When townsmen broke down the door violently, "[a] thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for bridal" (125). Indeed, the house is tomblike, dark, damp, and dusty. The stairway ascends into shadow and disappears in the darkness (119). Homer himself is received "at dusk one evening" (124) and disappears inside the dark house. The narrator tells us "that was the last we saw of Homer Barron" (124). Emily chooses to live in the darkness. She finds solace and consolation inside her house which hides her secret desires, a horrifying murder, and more important forty years of isolation and deprivation from a real human contact.

Another piece of mystery in Faulkner's Gothic story is Emily's iron-gray strand of hair. It is a token of love which is never really attained and a symbol of a perverse relationship. Turner (2013) suggests that the discovery of the strand of hair reveals the true personality of Emily both as eccentric, and necrophiliac murderess. Martins (2014) likewise views the strand of hair next to the decomposing body as an "evidence suggesting she [is] practicing necrophilia.

### 2.2 The House as a Symbol of Refuge, Safety, and Power

On the other hand, the house is Emily's refuge from the modernised world to which she does not belong and from which she retreats to a decaying smelly house "filled with dust and shadows" (124). She shuts herself in away from the surrounding chaos of industrialisation. She is not to be seen outside the front door for years and years. When Emily is threatened with desertion by Homer, she takes refuge inside the house. We are told that "after her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all" (120). Her house is her only shelter. It is her safe world where, ironically speaking, she finds harmony with death. Inside the house, in the upstairs bridal chamber, she embraces Homer's corpse for forty years. "The body [has] apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace..." (125). Similarly, the old soldiers who attend Miss Emily's funeral identify and sympathize with Emily's world. "On [Emily's] porch and the lawn," they talk of Miss Emily as if she is a contemporary of their own "believing that they [have] danced with her and courted her perhaps" (125). Though narrative suggests that such company is mere hallucination and a confusion of "time with its mathematical progression" (124) as old people would do, the hints of accepting Emily's world (symbolized by the house and its porch) and maybe forgiving the hideous crime cannot be overseen.

Furthermore, the house is the source of Miss Emily's power. Inside the walls of the house, she is a strong woman, a killer; yet a woman falling in love. Outside the house, she is the subject of the townspeople gossip and criticism. In other words, while the house empowers Miss Emily, the town represented by its people and streets deprives her of the source of her strength: the class to which she belongs and the power she has inherited from her father.

### 2.3 The House as a Symbol of Death and Decay

On the other hand, Faulkner presents another horrifying image of Emily's house. It harbours death and decay. The theme of death is clear in the very first lines of the story, with Miss Emily's funeral outlining the stage of the story. Death is no more an abstract fact; it has a physical existence symbolised by the Griersons' house. It is the deathbed of Mr. Grierson, Emily's father, Homer Barron, her so-called lover, and herself. In addition, the house which is the only thing left for her after her father's death is decaying. "It smell[s] of dust and disuse, a close dank smell," (119), and the leather covered furniture is also "cracked" (119). Miss Emily finally "[falls] ill in the house filled with dust and shadows"(124). Despite the harsh effect of Time which "[has] obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood"(119), the house lifts "its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps". The house is an ugly scene, "an eyesore among eyesores" (119) and its inhabitant is equally decaying. Miss Emily looks lifeless. We are told that when a deputation awaits upon Miss Emily, she looks "bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue"(120). Her eyes look like "two small pieces of coal" while her voice is "dry and cold"(120). Like her own house, Miss Emily has lost all signs of life and turned into a decaying body struggling with a meaningless life. The bad smell which develops over years in Miss Emily's house is another sign of death. Though it continues to bother the neighbors, Miss Emily, as much as her "stubborn and coquettish" house which defeats and ignores modernization, neglects their complaint. In fact, Emily's house is empty, lifeless and ugly. "Instead of life, laughter, and happiness, she can bear stagnation and emptiness" (Lombardi, 2017).

## 3. Details of the House

### 3.1 The Portrait

One further element of Emily's house is her father's crayon portrait. In the living room, the portrait of Emily's father stands as a firm reminder of the past which Emily cannot let go or live without. Emily refuses to accept the fact of her father's death; she keeps his body inside the house for three days. She refuses to allow the ministers and the doctors to

dispose the body. Before they resort to force, she breaks down and they bury her father (122). Miss Emily couldn't keep her father's body, but she keeps his crayon portrait "on a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace" (119). The portrait is a reminder of the head of the Aristocratic Grierson family and the glory they enjoyed in the past era of the Confederacy. It is a symbol of the power- her father has been close to the mayor, Colonel Sartoris- which Emily believes she still possesses when she refuses to pay the taxes. "I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me," she said (120). Obviously, the Colonel is an extension of her father's power and her sole ally in the town. Emily's father is the only male figure she holds on before she meets Homer Barron. He has had much power over here as the tableau which the narrator describes suggests: "Emily a slender woman in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door" (122). He controls her as much as he controls a horse. He never allows her to date anyone and turns down all her suitors. Townspeople now believe that "[n]one of the young men are quite good enough for Miss Emily" (122). Her need for a male authority in her life motivates the hideous action of killing Homer. She couldn't keep him as a lover, so she keeps his body for forty years.

### 3.2 The Bridal Chamber

Furthermore, the house is the physical setting where the union of the traditional South represented by Emily and the more modernised North represented by Homer, a Yankee day labourer, takes place. Homer is admitted by Tobe "at the kitchen door at dusk one evening" (124) and is not to be seen by townsmen anymore. However, the reconciliation of the thought to be lovers ends tragically. Emily faces Homer's threats of desertion by killing him. She poisons him with arsenic. Thus, the house is similarly ugly from the inside. It conceals horrifying secrets and weird desires. The upstairs bridal chamber is a literal tomb where Homer's body rots for forty years. What is left of Homer's body and of his nightshirt, Emily's iron-gray hair, and "the patient and biding dust" (125) all join on a marital bed in a nightmarish union which takes place inside the walls of Emily's ghastly house.

### 3.3 The Window Frame and the Front Door

The last details of Emily's house are the window frame and the front door. They are two concrete elements which emphasise Miss Emily's Isolation and loneliness. When Emily shuts herself in after Homer deserts her, townspeople can only see her slender figure from the window frame; an interesting image of confinement. The narrator tells us: "Now and then we would see her at a window for a moment" (123), and "[n]ow and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows--she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house. . ." (123). The townspeople think of Miss Emily and her father as a tableau in which the two of them are "framed by the back-flung front door" (122). After killing Homer, "the front door remain[s] closed" (124) for forty years save for a period of six or seven years when she has received her female students of China-painting. When those students grow up, the lessons stop and the "front door closed upon the last one and remain[s] closed for good" (124). What is then the significance of the frames? Frames are images of enclosure used to portray the figurative imprisonment (whether forced by her father or chosen by herself as a style of life) Emily has felt in her life with her father and later.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1984), in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, comment on the use of the "obsessive imagery of confinement" to portray the dominant force of patriarchy (64). In 'A Rose for Emily', Emily's father symbolizes this force which has deprived Emily of choosing a life partner and enjoying her womanhood. Enclosed inside a 'frame', Emily is isolated from the outside world of Jefferson Town. In other words, our female protagonist is depicted in a physically enclosed space. Nevertheless, Emily's later enclosure which concurred with poisoning Homer is not an act of social repression. It is an act of defense against desertion and rejection. In this sense, Emily's closing of the front door until the day of her death, is her own choice. She chooses to live as an 'enclosed' woman inside a house features by dust and darkness. The latter reflects Emily's feelings of loneliness and her desperate yearning for love.

## 4. Conclusion

Physical settings represented by Jefferson Town and the Grierson's house with all its details inspire a better understanding of Faulkner's heroine, her lonely isolated life, and her pains and dark motivations. At a certain level, the house is Emily's refuge from the modernised outside world which she rejects, and a source of power. Inside the walls of the house, Emily is a strong woman falling in love with a Yankee workingman. Nonetheless, the house is featured by death and decay though it is the physical setting where the union of the traditional South represented by Emily and the more modernised North represented by Homer, takes place. On the other hand, the town is a symbol for the fall of the old South which Emily's house still harbours. In other words, the town stands as a direct opposition to Emily's house. Faulkner's depiction of setting is perceptive as it deepens our understanding of the major character, the social and historical background of the era, and it definitely enriches the plot.

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