

A Short Lecture on
“A Rose for Emily”
by William Faulkner

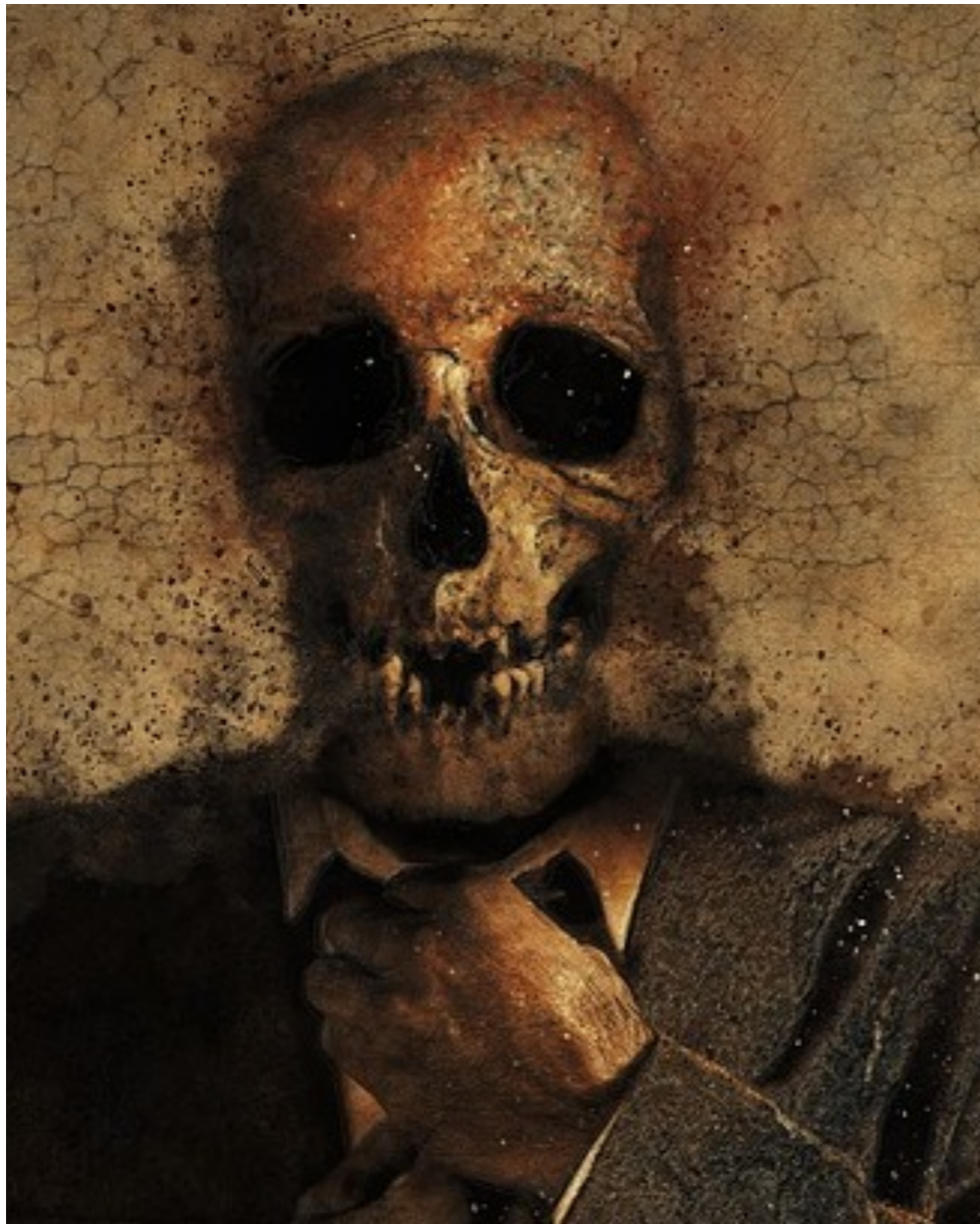
True Horror

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In many ways "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner is a Gothic horror story. It has all the required elements: a spooky house, insanity, murder, poison, a rotting corpse, and the faithful Igor-type character in the person of Tobe.

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Yet the true horror of "A Rose for Emily" lies beyond these details. The author himself said these words about the protagonist: "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 meaning (of the title) 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 . . . to a woman you would give a rose."



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These sentiments expressed by the author may strike you as strange. He speaks of Miss Emily as if she weren't his own creation but a living, breathing person. He is expressing how, in the writing process, his invented character began to take on a life of her own and create her tragic story on the page.

These remarks by Faulkner also point to what is at the heart of the tragedy.



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Think of the *tableau vivant* which the townspeople envision when they think of the Griersons. This image tells much about Emily's relationship with her father.

Throughout his life he has blocked the door to any young men who might have wanted to court his daughter. In doing this he also blocked Emily's possibilities for a normal life. Remember that in the 19th and early 20th Centuries it was a rare woman who enjoyed a career beyond that of a wife and mother.

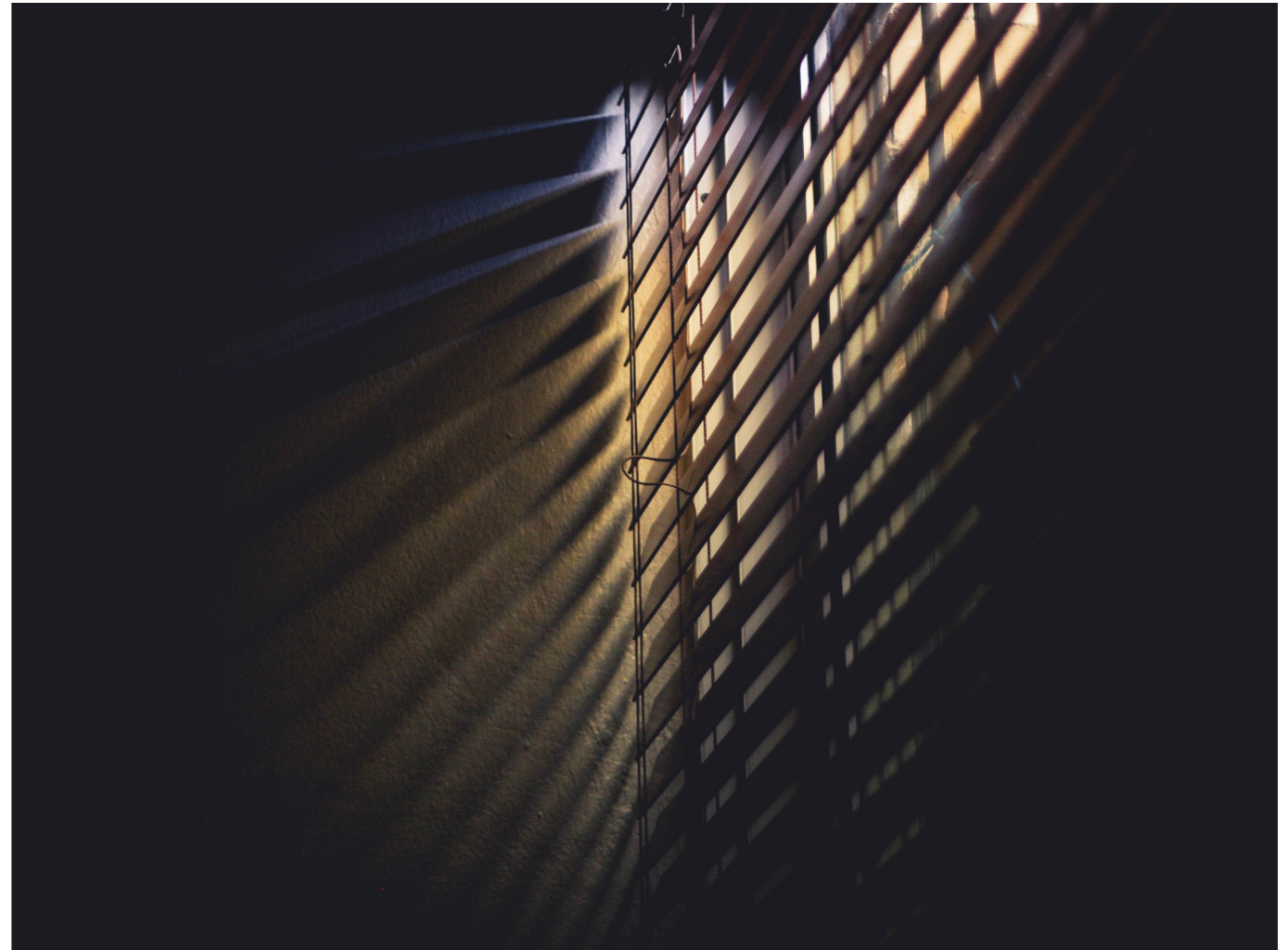
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Miss Emily is a tragic, lonely figure, thanks to the domination and selfishness of her father. This may also explain how hardened and "impervious" she becomes over the years. But she is also a fiercely determined, iron-willed woman, who stubbornly and somewhat valiantly persists in living as she sees fit. Many readers even come to understand why she would be moved to do what she does towards the end of the story. The one person in her life, her father, has left her alone with nothing. She cannot allow herself to be left alone again, and so she takes certain steps to be sure this does not happen.



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Notice the unusual narration of the story, which is the first-person plural "we." It is the town that is telling this story, piecing it together to form a whole. Is this because there is no one who could tell Emily's story from beginning to end? Has any one single person been close enough to her during the span of her life to recount her story? Maybe you see other reasons for why the author might have chosen this unusual point of view for his narrator(s).



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Notice too the distortion of time in the story. At first this may have confused you a bit as the narrator jumps backward and forward in the chronology. There is a practical reason for this, of course. Faulkner, the author, had to distort time so that you would not figure out the shocking ending too early.

But the distortion of time also relates thematically to the story. Miss Emily is stuck in time. In almost every description of her, she is motionless, like a statue or painting. She refuses to change with the changing world. We see this in her belief that old Colonel Sartoris, who has been dead for ten years, is still the mayor and in her refusal to modernize and have a mailbox installed on her

house. Even her house is lost in time, raising its "stubborn and coquettish head"

above the neighborhood that is being overtaken by industrialization. Read the very illuminating article "Time and Town" (link below) for a very lucid discussion of these themes.



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Most people are deeply shocked by the ending of this story. Some have feelings of outrage about what Miss Emily has done. Others, however, experience the pangs of sympathy described by William Faulkner. While not condoning her behavior, many readers come to understand her psychology. They can see how after losing her father and being left with no one, she would do whatever it might take to cling to her last chance at love.



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