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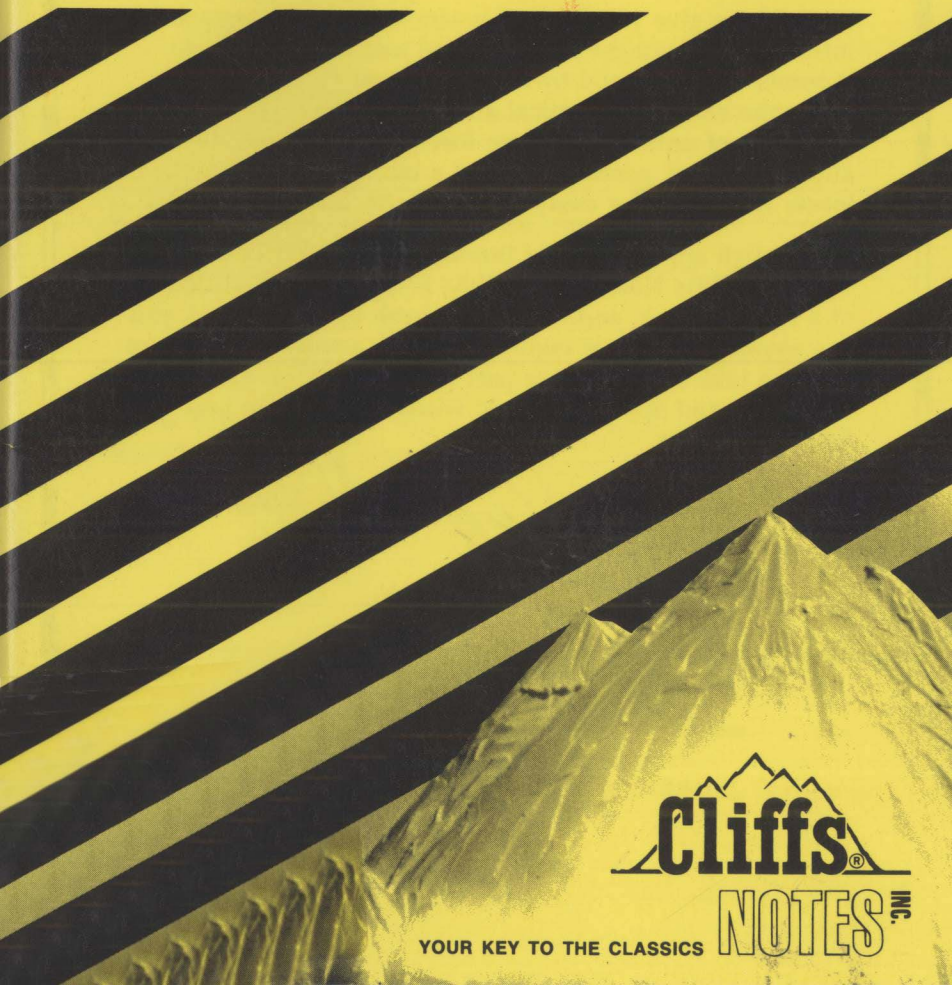

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FAULKNER'S SHORT STORIES

NOTES

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FAULKNER'S SHORT STORIES

Notes

LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

Reading William Faulkner's short stories is an excellent way to approach his major works. Although his novels are better known and more widely read, many of the same characters and ideas found in them are introduced in his stories.

Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897, but soon thereafter his family moved to Oxford, Mississippi, a site he would rename Jefferson in his fiction and would use as the setting for almost all of his novels and short stories.

Faulkner came from an old, proud, and distinguished Mississippi family, which included a governor, a colonel in the Confederate Army, and notable business pioneers. His great-grandfather, Colonel William Clark Falkner (the "u" was added to Faulkner's name by mistake when his first novel was published, and he retained the misspelling), emigrated from Tennessee to Mississippi during the first part of the nineteenth century. Colonel Falkner, who appears as Colonel John Sartoris in Faulkner's fiction, had a distinguished career as a soldier, both in the Mexican War and the American Civil War. During the Civil War, his fiery temper caused him to be demoted from colonel to lieutenant colonel.

Falkner was heavily involved in events taking place during Reconstruction, the twelve years following the end of the Civil War in 1865, when the Union governed the secessional Confederate states before readmitting them. He killed several men during this time and became a rather notorious figure. With a partner, he oversaw the financing and construction of the first post-Civil War railroad in the South; then, after quarreling with his partner,

the relationship dissolved. When this former business associate ran for the state legislature, Falkner ran against him and soundly defeated him.

Once asked how much he based his characterization of the genteel Colonel Sartoris on his great-grandfather, Faulkner responded:

> That's difficult to say. That comes back to what we spoke of—the three sources the writer draws from—and I myself would have to stop and go page by page to see just how much I drew from family annals that I had listened to from these old undefeated spinster aunts that children of my time grew up with. Probably, well, the similarity of raising of that infantry regiment, that was the same, the—his death was about—was pretty close, pretty close parallel, but the rest of it I would have to go through to—page by page and remember, did I hear this or did I imagine this?

What does not appear in Faulkner's fiction is that during all of his great-grandfather's projects and designs, the colonel took time to write one of the nation's bestsellers, *The White Rose of Memphis*, which was published in book form in 1881. He also wrote two other novels, but only *The White Rose of Memphis* was successful.

Falkner was finally killed by one of his rivals, and his death was never avenged. Today, a statue of him stands in the Oxford, Mississippi, cemetery. Dressed in a Confederate uniform, he looks out over the region for which he fought so desperately and so valiantly. Only William Faulkner, of all the Falkner clan, is as distinguished—and, ultimately, became more distinguished—than his great-grandfather.

Faulkner's personal life fits seemingly into the romantic cliché of what a writer's life is like, and he often contributed deliberately to the various stories circulating about him. For example, in 1919, during the final months of World War I, he was rejected for service in the U.S. Armed Forces because he was too short. Not easily deterred, he went to Canada and was accepted into the Royal Canadian Air Force, but World War I ended before he finished his training. Returning to Oxford, he adopted an English accent and walked around his hometown in a Royal Canadian Air Force uniform, which he had purchased, along with some medals to adorn the uniform.

To write about Faulkner's personal life is to put oneself at risk of not being able to separate the facts from the imaginary life he con-

ceived for himself. Critics generally agree that he did not graduate from high school, and that he dropped out of the University of Mississippi after a couple of years. He moved to New York City's Greenwich Village at the invitation of an established Mississippi writer, Stark Young, who used his influence to get Faulkner a position as a bookstore clerk, but he returned to Oxford after a few months. He then traveled to New Orleans, where he got a job running a boat that carried bootleg liquor. There, he met the established American writer Sherwood Anderson, author of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Observing the leisurely life Anderson led, Faulkner decided that he wanted to become a writer, and Anderson helped get his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), published—with the promise that he would never have to read it.

Because *Soldiers' Pay* was not successful commercially, Faulkner again was forced to find employment. This time, however, he found an ideal job: He shipped out as a deck hand on a freighter bound for Europe, where he spent many weeks loafing about the Mediterranean, especially in France and in Italy. His own imaginative reports of his life abroad have never been corroborated.

In 1929, Faulkner married Estelle Oldham Franklin, a high-school sweetheart who had been married previously, and he began a period of serious writing. Over the next few years, three of his greatest novels—*The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and *Light in August* (1932)—were published. Despite his numerous publications, however, he still did not earn enough money to support his and Estelle's lifestyle. In 1933, a daughter, Jill, was born, and by the mid-1930s, Faulkner was deeply troubled with debt: In addition to his own family and servants, he supported his brother Dean's children after Dean died in a plane crash, in a plane Faulkner had bought for him.

Mounting financial problems forced Faulkner to publish short stories as quickly as he could, and he finally capitulated to the monetary rewards of working as a screenwriter in Hollywood for a thousand dollars a week. He hated the work, but he returned to it off and on during the 1930s, working long enough to pay off his significant debts, and then returning to Oxford, where he wrote at least three novels—*Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Wild Palms* (1939), and *The Hamlet* (1940), in addition to several short stories.

Despite Faulkner's having produced some of the finest twenti-

eth-century novels, his early works were never commercial successes; the exception is *Sanctuary* (1931), at first thought to be a sensational potboiler but later viewed otherwise. He struggled financially until the 1948 publication of *Intruder in the Dust*. The novel was made into a movie, filmed in Oxford, and Faulkner found himself an important figure in and around the town, the same town that earlier had spurned him, calling him such names as "Count No 'Count."

When Faulkner won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949, only one of his novels was in print. Almost overnight, he was acclaimed by critics, writers, teachers, and reporters. From being an obscure, backwoods country writer, he was catapulted suddenly to the highest echelons of literary achievement. He took advantage of this newfound acclaim by encouraging young writers not to quit their craft. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he seized the spotlight of worldwide attention "as a pinnacle from which I might be listened to by the young men and women already dedicated to the same anguish and travail, among whom is already that one who will some day stand here where I am standing."

In 1957, Faulkner accepted a position as writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia. There, in informal class settings, he answered many questions about his novels and his artistic vision. Although he sometimes confused aspects of one novel with another, his answers attest to his characters' vibrant personalities and expand on his panoramic vision for the Yoknapatawpha saga.

In June 1962, Faulkner was thrown from his horse and injured his back. He suffered intense pain and was admitted to Wright's Sanitarium, in Byhalia, Mississippi, on July 5. The next day—ironically the date of the old Colonel's birthday—he died, leaving behind him a body of work unsurpassed in twentieth-century literature.

Faulkner uses new techniques to express man's position in the modern world. The complexity of his narrative structures mirrors the complex lives we lead. Most of his novels and short stories probe into the mores and morals of the South, which he was not hesitant to criticize. In his early fiction, Faulkner views despairingly man's position in the universe. He briefly voices this same sense of futility and defeat in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit.

There is only the question: When will I be blown up?" Man is a weak creature incapable of rising above his selfish needs.

In his latter works, however, Faulkner's tone changes, and he emphasizes humankind's survival. He believes human beings to be potentially great, affirming that "man shall not only endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance." Penetrating deeply the psychological motivations for human beings' actions, Faulkner concludes that hope remains for our salvation from despair.

AN INTRODUCTION TO YOKNAPATAWPHA COUNTY

In his third novel, *Flags in the Dust*, Faulkner created a mythological Mississippi county and named it Yoknapatawpha (**Yawk**-naw-puh-**toff**-uh), with its county seat in Jefferson. This particular novel, however, was not published during Faulkner's lifetime; it appeared posthumously in 1973. What did appear in 1929 was a heavily edited and much shorter version of *Flags in the Dust*, renamed *Sartoris* to emphasize the importance of one of the county's major families, the Sartorises.

The county of Yoknapatawpha and its county seat of Jefferson are based on the real county of Jefferson, Mississippi, and its county seat of Oxford. The name "Yoknapatawpha" is derived from authentic Native American names found on old maps of Jefferson County. In 1936, Faulkner drew a map of his fictional county, showing where various scenes from his novels and short stories take place, and he first included the map in *Absalom, Absalom!*, published that same year. The creation of this mythological county is one of modern literature's greatest feats.

Many of Faulkner's same characters are found in his various novels; a character who appears in a minor role in one novel might reappear as a significant character in another. For example, a Snopes appears briefly in the first novel of the Yoknapatawpha series, and Faulkner comments that this Snopes is one of an inexhaustible number of Snopeses who have invaded the county. Later in his career, the Snopes family becomes the subject of three different novels and many short stories. His other characters appear and

reappear in varying roles, and, therefore, in reading more than one of his novels or short stories, we come to know a great deal about the diverse people who inhabit Yoknapatawpha County.

The Southern Aristocracy. The aristocracy of Yoknapatawpha County is represented by Colonel John Sartoris and his family, the General Jason Compson family, Major de Spain, and the Griersons. Because members of the Sartoris family appear more frequently than do the other members of the aristocracy, Colonel Sartoris best represents this class.

Sartoris appears as a major or minor character in many Faulkner short stories, including "A Rose for Emily," in which he tells Miss Emily that she does not have to pay the taxes on her property; in "Barn Burning," Colonel Sartoris ("Sarty") Snopes, named for the genteel colonel, is the only ethical Snopes in the entire county. Because Colonel John Sartoris epitomizes Southern values—gallantry, generosity, hospitality, valor, pride, honor, and a dedication to the protection of the region's ideals—in "Barn Burning," when young Sarty Snopes is called to testify before the Justice of the Peace and gives his name as "Colonel Sartoris Snopes," the Justice says, "I reckon anybody named for Colonel Sartoris in this country can't help but tell the truth, can they?"

Although the colonel is the most admired man in Yoknapatawpha County and best represents the values associated with the Old South, he is also one of the most difficult people to get along with. At the beginning of the Civil War, he is the first man to raise a regiment to fight the Yankees. But within a year, he is voted out of his command because of his arrogance and intolerance. He returns to Yoknapatawpha County and organizes his own troop of "irregulars." As the leader of this troop, he becomes somewhat of an instant legend; he seems to be always in the local vicinity or in the neighboring land, protecting the women and children left defenseless while their menfolk are off fighting.

Colonel Sartoris is also admired for his cleverness and ambition. Once, with only a few men, he unexpectedly rides upon an encampment of about sixty Yankees, but his innovative reaction is superb: Pretending to have a large number of troops surrounding the Yankees, he yells commands to make-believe lieutenants, demanding that the Yankees surrender. Afterward, he takes their food and their rifles, and he makes them strip down to their underwear. He

then pretends to relax his guard, allowing the prisoners to escape in small groups. This way, they think that they have outwitted him and his regiment, never realizing that the colonel has only a few men with him.

Supremely self-assured and exuding confidence in everything he does, the absolute and undeviating loyalty that Sartoris inspires among the men in his regiment attests to his ability to lead with authority and respect. The fact that his arrogance causes his demotion in his official capacity does not detract from the fact that, as the commander of his own troop, he receives extraordinary loyalty and devotion from his fellow rebels.

The colonel also inspires men's confidences in matters other than wartime tactics. At the end of the war, he is broke and destitute, but he dreams of building a railroad. He is able to communicate that dream to others and convince enough of them to finance the project—not just once, but again and again—so that the railroad, and even the first engine, are built with capital from others. Although Colonel Sartoris himself has no money, he has a vision and a dream. Most important, he is a determined man who refuses to be vanquished—by anything or anyone.

The Snopeses. During his writing career, Faulkner wrote numerous short stories featuring members of the Snopes family. He also wrote a trilogy of three novels—*The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*—that has the Snopes family as the central concern. Throughout the trilogy, he often revised his short stories about the Snopeses and included them in the novels.

As a class of people, the Snopeses are the antithesis of the highbrow society represented by Colonel Sartoris. Whereas Sartoris is refined and carries about himself an Old World gentility, the Snopeses are crass, poor, and ill-mannered. V. K. Ratliff, the narrator of "Spotted Horses," sums up the Snopeses' shady character with the deceptively simple saying, "Them Snopes," an expression that underscores the astonishment and exasperation of Yoknapatawpha County's citizens viewing the Snopeses' behavior.

The Snopeses are best represented by Flem, who in "Spotted Horses" symbolizes the rise of an amoral materialism that will eventually overpower all other moral values. He is the elemental and destructive force of invincible greed opposed to all other forces in Faulkner's fiction, and he accomplishes his ends with a perverse and

distorted vitality. The Snopeses' ubiquitous inhumanity infiltrates every aspect of the community life, and their calculating and dehumanizing exploits leave their victims stupefied and in abject rage.

Singularly, the descendants of Abner Snopes, who in "Barn Burning" epitomizes the single-mindedness of his family, are inveterate liars, thieves, murderers, blackmailers, and the personification of every type of treachery. As a clan, they present an insurmountable and insidious example of the horrors of materialistic aggrandizement, and they accomplish their aims with complete, unshakable calm. They are so impersonal that their gruesome inhumanity must be viewed in a comic manner. When we cease to view the Snopeses with ironic and humorous detachment, we lose all perspective. In "Spotted Horses," it is almost impossible to define our reaction to Flem Snopes' audacious gift—"A little sweetening for the chaps"—to Mrs. Armstid, except to agree with Ratliff that if he himself were to do what Flem does, he would be lynched.

Flem and his spotted horses represent the infiltration of unorthodox behavior into a heretofore serene community life. The disorder that he causes forms the basic pattern of his strategy. He does not pit himself against the community in personal combat; rather, he incites diverse elements within the community to battle each other. His last name symbolizes everything unprincipled and amoral in society.

CRITICAL COMMENTARIES

"A ROSE FOR EMILY"

Faulkner's most famous, most popular, and most anthologized short story, "A Rose for Emily" evokes the terms Southern gothic and grotesque, two types of literature in which the general tone is one of gloom, terror, and understated violence. The story is Faulkner's best example of these forms because it contains unimaginably dark images: a decaying mansion, a corpse, a murder, a mysterious servant who disappears, and, most horrible of all, necrophilia—an erotic or sexual attraction to corpses.

First published in the April 1930 *Saturday Evening Post*, "A Rose for Emily" was reprinted in *These Thirteen* (1931), a collection of thirteen of Faulkner's stories. It was later included in his *Collected*

Stories (1950) and in the *Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner* (1961).

Most discussions of the short story center on Miss Emily Grierson, an aristocratic woman deeply admired by a community that places her on a pedestal and sees her as "a tradition, a duty"—or, as the unnamed narrator describes her, "a fallen monument." In contrast to the community's view, we realize eventually that Miss Emily is a woman who not only poisons and kills her lover, Homer Barron, but she keeps his rotting corpse in her bedroom and sleeps next to it for many years. The ending of the story emphasizes the length of time Miss Emily must have slept with her dead lover: long enough for the townspeople to find "a long strand of iron-gray hair" lying on the pillow next to "what was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt" and displaying a "profound and fleshless grin."

The contrast between the aristocratic woman and her unspeakable secrets forms the basis of the story. Because the Griersons "held themselves a little too high for what they really were," Miss Emily's father forbids her to date socially, or at least the community thinks so: "None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such." She becomes so terribly desperate for human love that she murders Homer and clings to his dead body. Using her aristocratic position to cover up the murder and the necrophilia, ironically she sentences herself to total isolation from the community, embracing the dead for solace.

Although our first reaction to the short story might be one of horror or disgust, Faulkner uses two literary techniques to create a seamless whole that makes the tale too intriguing to stop reading: the suspenseful, jumbled chronology of events, and the narrator's shifting point of view, which emphasizes Miss Emily's strength of purpose, her aloofness, and her pride, and lessens the horror and the repulsion of her actions.

Faulkner's Chronology.

One way of explaining the excellence of "A Rose for Emily" is by considering its lack of chronological order. Such a dissection of the short story initially might appear to weaken it, but this approach allows us to see Faulkner's genius at work—particularly his own, unique way of telling a story. Unlike other writers of his era, such as

John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway, who usually narrate their stories in a strictly linear progression, Faulkner violates all chronological sequences.

Only a few specific dates are mentioned in the story, but a close reading makes it possible to assign certain sequential events. We know, for example, that Colonel Sartoris remits Miss Emily's taxes in 1894, and that he has been dead for at least ten years when she confronts the new aldermen. Likewise, we know that she dies at the age of seventy-four. Using these facts, we can build a framework on which to hang the following chronology:

Event	Section
Miss Emily is born.	IV
She and her father ride around the town in an old, elegant carriage.	II
Her father dies, and for three days she refuses to acknowledge his death.	II
Homer Barron arrives in town and begins to court Miss Emily.	III
She buys a man's silver toilet set—a mirror, brush, and comb—and men's clothing.	IV
The town relegates her to disgrace and sends for her cousins.	III
The cousins arrive, and Homer leaves town.	IV
Three days after the cousins leave, Homer returns.	IV
Miss Emily buys poison at the local drug store.	III
Homer disappears.	IV
A horrible stench envelops Miss Emily's house.	II
Four town aldermen secretly sprinkle lime on her lawn.	II
Colonel Sartoris, the mayor, remits her taxes (1894).	I
She gives china painting lessons.	IV
Colonel Sartoris dies.	I
Miss Emily's hair turns iron-gray.	IV
She receives tax notices but returns them unopened.	I
Newly elected aldermen seek to collect her taxes, but she summarily dismisses them.	I
Miss Emily dies at age 74.	IV
Townspeople arrive at Miss Emily's house, and her black servant disappears.	V
The remains of Homer Barron are discovered.	V

Ironically, when we reconstruct the chronological arrangement in this linear fashion, we render Faulkner's masterpiece an injustice: Looking at the central events chronologically—Miss Emily buys poison, Homer Barron disappears suddenly, and a horrible stench surrounds the house—it is apparent why she buys the poison, and what causes the stench. The only surprise would be the shocking realization that Miss Emily has slept for many years in the same bed with her dead lover's rotting corpse. The horror of this knowledge makes the murder almost insignificant when compared to the necrophilia. However, the greatness of the story lies not in linearly recounting the events, but, instead, in the manner that Faulkner tells it; he leaves us horrified as we discover, bit by bit, why this so-called noble woman is now a "fallen monument."

In contrast to a traditional narrative approach, the story, as Faulkner presents it, begins with Miss Emily's funeral and ends shortly thereafter with the discovery of Homer's decayed corpse. Among other themes, it emphasizes the differences between the past, with its aristocracy—Colonel Sartoris' gallantry, the Griersons' aloofness and pride, and the board of old aldermen's respect for Miss Emily—and the modern generation's business-like mentality, embodied in the board of new aldermen and the many modern conveniences we hear about.

Section I. The story's opening lines announce the funeral of Miss Emily, to be held in her home—not in a church—and the reasons for the entire town's attending—the men out of respect for a Southern lady, the women to snoop inside her house. Her death symbolizes the passing of a genteel way of life, which is replaced by a new generation's crass way of doing things. The narrator's description of the Grierson house reinforces the disparity between the past and the present: Once a place of splendor, now modern encroachments—gas pumps and cotton wagons—obliterate most of the neighborhood and leave untouched only Miss Emily's house, with its "stubborn and coquettish decay."

This clash between the past and the present is evidenced by the different approaches that each generation takes concerning Miss Emily's taxes. In the past, Colonel Sartoris had remitted them for her, believing it uncivilized to remind a Southern woman to pay taxes, which Miss Emily does not do after her father dies. But the next generation, with its more modern ideas, holds her responsible

for them. Miss Emily, however, returns the tax notice that the new aldermen send to her; when the young men call upon her, she vanquishes them, saying, "I have no taxes in Jefferson" and "See Colonel Sartoris," who has been dead for at least ten years.

One of the most striking contrasts presented in this first section entails the narrator's portrayal of Miss Emily's physical appearance and her house. Descriptive phrases include terms that add to the gothic quality of the story: She is dressed in black and leans on a cane; her "skeleton" is small; and she looks "bloated," with a "pallid hue." But Faulkner doesn't say outright that she looks much like a dead person, for it is only in retrospect that we realize that the dead-looking Miss Emily has been sleeping with the very dead Homer Barron.

Miss Emily's decaying appearance matches not only the rotting exterior of the house, but the interior as well. For example, the crayon, pastel, picture mentioned prior to the narrator's description of Miss Emily is supported by a "tarnished" stand, and Miss Emily supports herself by leaning on the "tarnished" handle of her cane. Also note that the picture is a colored chalk portrait of her father, no doubt drawn by her when she was a child. Miss Emily has *some* artistic talent: She teaches china painting, which is highly detailed and usually done in soft colors. But if she painted her father's portrait using the same techniques she uses to paint china, then the portrait would not be an accurate representation of the fiercely authoritarian man who was Mr. Grierson. It would be washed out, pale as death, a shadow of his real self.

Section II. We return to the past, two years after Miss Emily's father's death. There have been complaints about an awful stench emanating from Miss Emily's house. The older generation, which feels that it is improper to tell a lady that she stinks, arranges for a group of men to spread lime on her lawn and inside the cellar door of her house. All the while, she sits at a window, motionless.

Of primary importance in this section is Miss Emily's relationship to her father and her reaction to his death. The town views the father and daughter as a "tableau," in which a sitting Mr. Grierson grasps a horsewhip and affects an oblivious attitude toward his daughter, who, dressed completely in white, stands behind him. This image reinforces the physical relationship and the emotional distance we feel between the two, and it recalls the crayon picture