

A Rose for Emily Historical Context & Time Period

Historical context is extremely important for understanding 'A Rose for Emily' because it explains the behavior and attitudes of the characters involved. We'll learn about the time period in which this macabre short story is set.

Geographical Setting and Time Frame

Do you ever tell stories about the place where you grew up? "A Rose for Emily" is set in **Jefferson**, the governmental center of the fictional county of Yoknapatawpha in Mississippi.

Faulkner used this setting frequently, and it's modeled on the region he grew up in - New Albany in Lafayette County, Mississippi. The story spans almost 75 years: Emily Grierson is born around the **American Civil War**, (1861-1865), and dies in the late 1920s or early 1930s.

Reconstruction

Because the events in "A Rose for Emily" occur mainly after the Civil War, they take place during what is known as **Reconstruction** in the South. Southern states had to swear loyalty to the Union (the U.S. as a single, indivisible nation), abolish slavery, and pay their war debts, but were otherwise free to rebuild and govern their own communities.

Taking advantage of this, many Southern States passed "**black codes**" legally restricting the rights of freed blacks in order to control and use them for manual labor. This is why, in "A Rose for Emily," Mayor Colonel Sartoris is able to "[father] the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron."

Freed blacks were also often imprisoned on petty or fraudulent charges and rented out to plantations, sawmills and mines to do forced, unpaid manual labor.



Black convicts leased to do manual labor in Florida

Congress Opposes the Black Codes

Outraged, Congress passed a civil rights bill stating that all American-born people were citizens and must be given equal legal protection. After 1870, blacks began to be elected into government positions, and laws were passed against racial discrimination in the areas of public transport, accommodations, and economic development programs.



The first black senator/representatives in Congress: Senator Hiram Revels, Representatives Benjamin Turner, Robert DeLarge, Josiah Walls, Jefferson Long, Joseph Rainey, and Robert B. Elliot

The South Retaliates

Equally outraged, southern whites empowered white supremacist organizations like the **Ku Klux Klan** (founded in 1866). Because the Republican party led Reconstruction efforts, these groups terrorized and committed violent acts against black and white Republican leaders.

Blacks were still seen as servants and as the property of whites, which is why Judge Stevens in Faulkner's story talks about Emily's black male servant as "that nigger of hers."

Racial injustice was further strengthened by the Republican party's shift to conservative rather than egalitarian values. The Reconstruction period ended in 1876, although its efforts toward racial equality later inspired the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

The Old South

A major theme in Faulkner's work is the decline of the **Old South**, which refers to the southern economic structure and cultural values before the Civil War. In the antebellum South, society was made up of landed gentry (historic upper-class families), merchants, tenant farmers (farmers who rented land rather than owning it), and slaves. During this period, aristocrats lived by a southern code of chivalry: men were protectors and providers, and women were the keepers of morality.

In "A Rose for Emily," the Griersons are clearly aristocrats (landed gentry), and they have the arrogance and superiority complex that goes with this. Emily's father clearly exhibits this attitude by thinking no local young man is good enough to marry his daughter, and Emily shuns society even after his death for the same reason.

Sartoris, attempting to be a good southern gentleman, concocts the white lie that the city of Jefferson owes the Griersons money. He wants to help Emily's finances by ending her city tax obligations, but doesn't want to hurt her aristocratic pride.



An aristocratic lady from the antebellum South who might resemble Emily

The New South

After Sartoris dies, the new generation of city officials wants Emily to pay her city taxes like everyone else. This is partly because profits from modern industrialization (including the railroad, motorized vehicles, and large-scale crop production) increased the power of the merchant or business class, thereby decreasing the influence and social values of the landed gentry.