

Change is inevitable. Change occurs all the time affecting people everywhere, yet few have been so unable to adapt as Emily in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." Faulkner shows through Emily what happens when one resists or refuses to accept change. Emily's active resistance to change leads the town to have an ambivalent attitude towards her, as she wavers between different generations. Her resistance is also the catalyst for Emily's seemingly horrific and crazy actions, making it possible to understand how she could have murdered her lover and why she never leaves her house.

Many changes happen during Emily's 74 years, yet she seems to hardly change or notice the passage of time. Taking place in the South during the late 19th century, the story places Emily in a town that has just recently gone through the Civil War. Unquestionably, the Civil War had an enormous impact on all Southern towns, ushering in a new post-war era with new ideas. However, everyone does not always welcome such major changes. Emily, for one, prefers to ignore and actively refuse to accept changes. Emily is viewed by the town as being among the ranks of the Union and Confederate soldiers, and in many ways she does represent a time before the war. She is a symbol of the old South, for long after those times have passed, and the new generations have replaced the old, she still clings to the old.

As the new generation comes alive and the old generation dies, new ideas come alive and old ones die. Emily, though, passes through the generations unchanging in her ideas and her way of life. "Thus she passed from generation to generation – dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse" (p. 128). The passage of time has minimal effects on Emily, as she continues to live as she always has. Emily is like her old and worn down house, since the world changes around her, yet it does not seem able to penetrate the house or to touch Emily. Emily is like the house with "its stubborn and coquettish decay" (p. 119), in that she imposes constraints on

herself and is unwilling to change according to the times. She is as stubborn as the house, refusing to accept anything new and slowly decaying away. When the old houses are torn down to be replaced by the new “garages and cotton gins, ...only Miss Emily’s house [is] left” (p. 119); when the entire world is changing, Emily remains the same. Almost no one has seen or been inside Emily’s house for a long time; similarly almost no one has been able to reach Emily for a long time. Her house is as much a mystery as Emily is, and trying to understand it requires much effort. Emily is not one to just die off like any other tradition. When Emily finally passes away, the house seems to fall apart also. The secrets of the previous impenetrable house are discovered right after Emily’s funeral, when the townspeople enter her house for the first time in many years. The unyielding nature of Emily is similar to “the violence of breaking down the door” (p. 129). Just as the townspeople work to discover the secrets of the house, it takes a certain violence to break down Emily. The town might not have been able to bring itself to break into Emily’s life while Emily was alive, so Emily is mostly left alone, which is exactly what Emily wants.

In many ways, Emily does not want to accept a new or different life. For most of her later life, Emily never leaves her house, and rarely does anyone enter her house. “From that time on her front door remained closed” (p. 128), says the narrator. She isolates herself from the rest of society. She tries to keep everything the way it was, even things that have withered or died away. For example, she does not accept the fact that her father had died. “She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days” (p. 123). She does not let the outside world in, preferring to maintain her life as it is. Perhaps she cannot accept change in her life or perhaps change is difficult for her. When she finally does accept a change into her life, after she accepts her father’s death, she becomes sick for a long time. If change is always so painful for Emily, then it is understandable that Emily may not be very eager for change. Refusing to accept her

father's death may have served to protect her. However, Emily does not seem to rebel and resist against only changes that may harm her. When she refuses to accept that she has taxes in Jefferson or that Colonel Sartoris is no longer around, she seems to be only selfish or too lazy to leave her house. She seems to rebel against all changes, even when she could be benefited by the change. She resists against very minor changes such as refusing to install a mailbox in response to the new postal service. "When the town got free postal delivery, Miss Emily alone refused to let them fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a mailbox to it. She would not listen to them" (p. 128). For whatever reason, Emily resists all these changes. From major changes, like death, to small changes, such as a new mailbox, Emily refuses to accept or acknowledge that anything in her life can change.

Emily's resistance to change puts her in an awkward position in the town. On the one hand, she is a relic from the past that the town sees as an obligation yet she is also a mysterious woman that deserves respect. Sometimes, the town oppresses her, seeing her as "a tradition, a duty, and a care" (p. 119). The town, happy to see Emily struggling, does not really care for her alive: "We all said, 'She will kill herself'; and we said it would be the best thing" (p. 126). "People were glad" when Emily's father dies and she becomes poor since she "would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less" (p. 123). The town is glad to see her brought down to their level and more "humanized." One exception seems to be Colonel Sartoris, who is very charitable to Emily, remitting her taxes. However, the narrator, speaking for the whole town, discredits Colonel Sartoris and ridicules him by mentioning that he fathered the ridiculous "edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron" (p. 119-20). The Colonel belongs to a different generation, just like Emily. The newer generation is not so lenient with Emily on her taxes or on other matters. "When the next

generation, with its more modern ideas, became mayors and aldermen, this arrangement created some little dissatisfaction” (p. 120). The town is not quite sure how to treat Emily, who is a person of another time and generation.

Although most of the town treats her badly at times, viewing her as the object of much gossip, on many things, the town also respects Miss Emily and gives her a certain amount of freedom to be left alone. In a way, Emily’s oddities makes the town feel sorry for her, trapped in her house and her never changing life. For example, the town respects or perhaps fears her when they secretly rid her house of the awful smell, rather than telling her to her face that her house smells. Besides respect, Emily is also able to get her way many times, with even the Board of Alderman deferring to her. Emily is easily able to send the tax collectors away, even though all she tells them is to see the dead Colonel Sartoris. “So she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell” (p. 121). The townspeople give in easily to Emily. Another example is when Emily is buying poison. Even though the law may have required that Emily disclose what she is planning to use the poison for, the druggist just gives in to Emily’s stare and gives her the arsenic.

Besides generating differing views among the townspeople, Emily’s resistance also causes her to act in more appalling ways. Emily, facing a new challenge in her life, falls in love with Homer. Emily is left in a dilemma as to what to do with Homer, her love interest. Homer is a Northerner and a laborer, almost the antithesis of what society or her father might have deemed an appropriate husband for Emily. “Some of the ladies began to say that it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people” (p. 128). Understandably, then, Emily is scared of losing Homer, especially since he says that he is “not a marrying man” (p. 126). “All the young men that her father had driven away” (p. 124) must have given Emily the idea that men will not

stay near her. With men never staying near her, with “none of the young men [being] quite good enough for Miss Emily and such” (p. 123), and left without any close relatives, Emily is alone for most of her life. Being alone as she is makes it easy for her to resist outside influences. The poisoning of Homer is almost logical, with the very few options available to Emily. Emily does not “forget noblesse oblige” (p. 124), and she also gets to have the man that she loves until her death. A dead Homer is more permanent to Emily than Homer alive, since there was a high possibility of him leaving. With Homer dead and with Emily staying inside her house all the time, Emily is able to guarantee that her life will go on perpetually the same. In a strange way, Emily does what she believes to be right and best for her, so as to maintain her life as it is for eternity.

Emily is just a victim of the circumstances and situations changing around her. Preferring to keep everything as it once was, Emily avoids all kinds of changes for whatever reasons she may have. Emily lives her life never responding to the changing world around her. For most of her later life she stays in her house and chases out the few visitors that she has, keeping herself isolated from the rest of the town. This pressure on her to resist change culminates in her murder of Homer. She poisons Homer so she can have him forever and not have to worry about Homer leaving her. Even though nothing can stay pretty forever and nothing is eternal, Emily tries to find a way to maintain her love through death. Emily is a tradition that is obsolete and a remnant from the past. Like all traditions that wither away and die, Emily slowly withers away in her house with her dead lover. Perhaps not all change is good, but the consequences of not changing can be deadly.