The Decline of the Old South

One of the major themes in Faulkner’s fiction is the decline of the Old South after the Civil War. There are many examples of this theme in “A Rose for Emily.” Before the Civil War, Southern society was composed of landed gentry, merchants, tenant farmers, and slaves. The aristocratic men of this period had an unspoken code of chivalry, and women were the innocent, pure guardians of morality. For example, Colonel Sartoris concocts an elaborate story to spare Emily’s feelings when he remits her taxes; the narrator states, “Only a man of Colonel Sartoris’s generation and thought could have invented [the story], and only a woman could have believed it.”

When the smell develops around the Grierson house, a younger man suggests that Emily should be confronted with it. Judge Stevens, who is from the same generation as the Colonel, asks him, “Dammit, sir. . . will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?” It is also noted that Emily’s father is from this same generation, an arrogant Southern aristocrat who believes that no man is good enough for his daughter.

However, post-Civil War society in the South was radically different. At one time, the Grierson home was in one of the finest neighborhoods in Jefferson; by the time of Emily’s death, “. . . garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood.” The generation that follows Colonel Sartoris is not swayed by his old Southern code of honor. This is why the twentieth-century Jefferson Board of Aldermen attempts to collect Emily’s taxes a decade after the Colonel’s death. The reaction to the Yankee, Homer Barron, also serves to delineate the difference between the generations. The younger generation finds it easier to accept Homer, while the older folks find his relationship with a woman born to old Southern gentility unacceptable. Emily’s china-painting lessons also show the change in Southern society. Her pupils are the daughters and granddaughters of
Colonel Sartoris’s contemporaries. However, the narrator notes that “. . .the painting pupils grew up and fell away and did not send their children to her with boxes of color and tedious brushes and pictures cut from the ladies’ magazines.” Finally, Emily’s dark secret might serve as a metaphor for the general decadence of the Old South.

Community vs. Isolation
The odd relationship between the town of Jefferson and Emily is a recurrent theme in “A Rose for Emily.” At her funeral, the narrator notes that Emily has been “. . .a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town.” However, Emily has very little to do with the townspeople during her life. Her father prevents her from dating anyone because he doesn’t believe any of the men in Jefferson are good enough for her and, after his death, Emily continues to isolate herself from the rest of the community for the better part of her life. The only notable exceptions to her isolation are her Sunday rides with Homer Barron, her shopping trips for arsenic and men’s clothing, and the china-painting lessons she gives to the young women of the town for a few years. These exceptions only serve to show how alienated Emily is from the rest of Jefferson.

Although Emily is indifferent to the town, the town seems to be almost obsessed with her. The reaction Jefferson has to her relationship with Homer Barron exemplifies this obsession. The ladies of Jefferson are mortified because they think the relationship is “. . . a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people.” The older people dislike the relationship because they think it is bad form for a Southern woman to associate with a Yankee. The narrator pitied Emily and secretly hopes that she will outsmart her cousins and marry Homer. These various reactions demonstrate an interesting conflict. Even though Emily views herself