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The Fallen Monument: On Spatial Boundaries and Southern Cultural Reproduction in Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*

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William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* has long been interpreted as an allegory of the conflict between Southern tradition and modern civilization. This paper attempts to examine Emily Grierson from the dual perspectives of "spatial boundaries" and "cultural reproduction", exploring how she is constructed by the old Southern order as a "monument" and how she moves toward both cultural and physical death under the penetration of Northern modernity. The study finds that Emily's house is not merely a physically enclosed entity but constitutes a superimposition of three boundaries: physical, social, and bodily. Her poisoning of the Northern suitor, Homer Barron, is not simply a matter of personal love or hatred, but an extreme response triggered by the complete failure of the "cultural reproduction" mechanism when Southern aristocratic culture encounters Northern capitalist values. Through this interpretation, this paper seeks to reveal Faulkner's ambivalent attitude toward the fate of the South—mourning the passing of tradition while keenly perceiving its inherent decay and violence.

Keywords: spatial boundaries, cultural reproduction, Southern belle myth, William Faulkner

Introduction

Since the publication of *A Rose for Emily*, scholarship both domestically and internationally has developed a mature research tradition, engaging with the story from such perspectives as narrative form, psychoanalysis, feminism, and the Southern Gothic. In the field of narrative art, scholars have focused primarily on the story's temporal structure and narrative point of view. Wang Minqin (2002, pp. 66-70) and Lu Rong (2004, pp. 104-107) point out that the work's circular anachronistic time sequence and ambiguous personal pronouns not only create narrative suspense but also metaphorically represent the Southern community's ambivalent attitude toward Emily—both voyeuristic and distanced. Wang Zijun (2023, pp. 125-128), drawing on Genette's narratological framework, further argues that temporal distortion and external focalization together reinforce the Gothic atmosphere, achieving a unity of form and theme. While such studies clearly reveal Faulkner's narrative skill, most treat space as a neutral background for the story, neglecting the ideological attributes of space itself.

In the domain of character interpretation, psychoanalytic criticism offers an important avenue. Li Fude (2010, pp. 7-11) and Song Tianyu (2024, pp. 50-54), employing Freud's structural model of the psyche, attribute Emily's tragedy to an imbalance among id, ego, and superego, emphasizing how external social pressures are transformed into internal psychic conflict. Li Meng (2021, pp. 18-20) adds factors such as patriarchal oppression, family history, and class decline, enriching the explanation of the character's psychological motivations. However, such studies tend to focus on individual psychological mechanisms and rarely integrate psychological

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distress with social space structure and cultural transmission mechanisms. Feminist and Southern Gothic perspectives constitute another major interpretive thread. Cao Shenghua (2014, pp. 121-124), Shi Zijuan (2008, pp. 139-141), and Yuan Minmin (2018, pp. 150-152) argue that Emily is a victim of Southern patriarchy and the "belle myth", with her bodily alienation symbolizing the objectification and destruction of women under the male gaze. Huang Weitao (2015, pp. 130-131), from a female Gothic perspective, reads her extreme behavior as a form of passive resistance to the patriarchal order. These studies profoundly reveal gender oppression mechanisms, but they offer insufficient discussion of the structural roles of class reproduction, spatial enclosure, and historical transformation.

In recent years, spatial perspectives have gradually entered scholarly view. Wang Zhuoxia (2020, pp. 126-127) uses spatial boundaries as an entry point to analyze the isolating function of the house and the paradox of boundary crossing. Since the pagination of Lin Keying's (2025) work is unavailable in the reference list, this citation does not include page numbers. Adopting transitivity analysis, the study examines characters' agency in space. Although a spatial turn has begun to emerge, existing research still has clear limitations: Most studies treat space merely as a symbolic sign, attending primarily to the descriptive function of boundaries as separation, without integrating spatial order with the dynamic process of cultural reproduction. Discussions of Southern culture tend toward static symbolic interpretation, lacking analysis of its intergenerational transmission, renewal, and rupture. No study has yet incorporated spatial boundaries and cultural reproduction within a unified framework to systematically answer the question of how the old Southern order solidifies itself through space and then fails in cultural reproduction because of spatial closure.

In light of this, this paper adopts the dual perspectives of spatial boundaries and cultural reproduction, treating Emily's house, body, and social identity as multiple nested spatial structures. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of "cultural capital" and "habitus", it seeks to reveal the intergenerational transmission mechanism of Southern aristocratic culture and its process of rupture, thereby offering a deeper explanation of the structural roots of Emily's tragedy and providing a new path for understanding Faulkner's Southern writing.

Spatial Boundaries in *A Rose for Emily*

Space is not a neutral physical container but the concretization of social relations, power orders, and cultural ideology. In Faulkner's fictional world, the geographical space of the Southern town is always entangled with historical memory, class order, and racial politics. Emily's house is not merely a dwelling; it is the symbolic space produced by the closed, old Southern order. Through physical boundaries, it solidifies class boundaries, gender boundaries, and cultural boundaries, eventually becoming a spatial metaphor for the Southern culture that cannot renew itself.

The story's opening describes Emily's death as the fall of "a fallen monument". This metaphor superimposes Emily's body with her house and the entire old Southern order. In Lefebvre's sense, space is the materialized form of ideology and social order. The house's material features—once painted white, then becoming "stubborn decay" and "dusty" with age—are both a direct depiction of the decay of the Southern plantation economy and a metaphor for the disappearance of its cultural confidence. Significantly, the house is not only Emily's residence but also her barrier from the outside world. The curiosity of the town's women about the interior and the statement that "at least ten years passed before anyone went inside to see the house" visually present the enclosed and exclusive nature of the physical boundary. By means of this physical boundary, Emily shuts out the penetration

of Northern industrial civilization while inwardly preserving the emotional imagination of Southern aristocratic tradition. Through her self-enclosed spatial practice, she clings to a long-outdated old order, making the house a concrete symbol of Southern culture that refuses to renew itself and thus remains stagnant and dead.

Beyond the physical boundary of the house, the story also presents multiple invisible social boundaries. Emily's father "drove away all the young men who came to court Emily", defending the dignity of the Grierson family name. This act draws a class chasm between the aristocracy and commoners. In Bourdieu's theoretical view, this kind of distinction, founded on lineage, blood, and breeding, is a typical means by which the upper class maintains "cultural capital" and achieves class reproduction. Even more subtle is the townspeople's ambivalent attitude toward Emily, a mixture of "veneration" and "pity". This attitude itself reproduces class boundaries: The townspeople recognize Emily's aristocratic status as above ordinary people, yet they condescendingly pity her. The contradiction between these two attitudes reveals precisely the deep anxiety of Southern society during a period of class transformation: The old hierarchical order has already shaken, but new egalitarian ideas have not yet taken root. The townspeople can neither fully include Emily in "us" nor completely abandon her; this state of suspension is the specific spiritual dilemma of the Southern community during its historical transition.

Beyond the two boundaries mentioned above, the story presents a third boundary: Emily's own body. In the era dominated by the "Southern belle" myth, the body of an aristocratic woman was endowed with high symbolic value: It was the material carrier of family honor, the embodied presentation of purity and elegance. By strictly controlling her social life and depriving her of marital autonomy, Emily's father in effect shaped her body as the most direct display of the Grierson family's "cultural capital".

However, as her father dies and the family declines, Emily's body gradually transforms from a display object into a battlefield. She grows fat, bloated, and pallid, described by the townspeople as "like a body long submerged in motionless water". This transformation of body image is not merely the natural process of aging; it also symbolizes the self-alienation of Southern aristocratic culture after losing its material base. When normal intergenerational transmission through marriage and childbirth becomes impossible, the body transforms from an open cultural carrier into a closed, rotting "monument". In this sense, the body of Homer Barron discovered at the story's end is also a mirror image of Emily's own bodily fate. These three boundaries—physical, social, and bodily, are not isolated from one another but mutually reinforce each other. The physical enclosure of the house ensures the effectiveness of social distinction, while social distinction endows the bodily boundary with symbolic meaning. In turn, the body's alienation and rot further reinforce the house's mystique as a site of taboo.

Notably, spatial boundaries are not purely obstacles; they possess the dual nature of both isolation and connection. Emily's house both isolates her from the townspeople and, to some degree, makes her the focus of their collective imagination. The townspeople's sustained attention to Emily's life, their intervention in the smell incident, their gossip about the relationship between Emily and Homer—all indicate that the boundary never truly blocks connection; it merely transforms connection into a power relation of gaze and discourse. The townspeople, as "external observers", define, judge, and discipline Emily, while Emily resists external intervention through silent enclosure. This paradox—connection arising from isolation, attention intensifying through exclusion—is a structural portrait of the old Southern culture's inability either to reconcile with or truly separate from modern society.

The Failure of Cultural Reproduction: From "Southern Belle" to "Bloated Corpse"

The theory of cultural reproduction, proposed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, seeks to reveal how culture participates in the intergenerational transmission of class structure in modern society. Bourdieu argues that "cultural capital"—the knowledge, cultivation, tastes, etc., acquired by individuals through family and schooling—has a "hereditary" character. Children of the upper class inherit cultural capital that is highly consistent with the elite culture promoted by the school, enabling them to achieve academic success and convert it into social status with relative ease. Children of the lower class, lacking such cultural capital, are at a structural disadvantage. In this process, although the school ostensibly adheres to "equality of opportunity", it in fact establishes the cultural "habitus" of the dominant class as the sole legitimate standard, thereby reproducing class positions. This paper introduces Bourdieu's theoretical framework into the analysis of *A Rose for Emily* to explore how Southern aristocratic culture attempts to achieve intergenerational transmission through mechanisms such as family, marriage, and ritual, and how this reproductive mechanism fails thoroughly in Emily's case.

The "Southern belle" is an ideal female image constructed by plantation culture: pure, submissive, elegant, and the embodiment of family honor. Faulkner's Emily is precisely the bearer of this myth. Her father fashions her as the "last flower" of the Grierson family, depriving her of her desires and choices as an independent individual. This process is precisely what Bourdieu calls the early inculcation of "cultural habitus": The family, through rigorous identity discipline, internalizes class order into the individual's actions and cognition, thereby achieving the intergenerational reproduction of aristocratic culture. However, the maintenance of the "Southern belle" myth depends on two conditions: the family's economic capital (wealth and prestige) and the woman's internalized submission to the patriarchal order. After the Civil War, the Southern plantation economy collapsed, and the Grierson family declined. Emily inherits not only negligible material wealth from her family but also becomes entangled in an awkward relationship with the town government because of the controversial privilege of being "remitted from taxes". Cultural capital loses its economic foundation, and cultural reproduction loses its driving force at the root, laying the groundwork for Emily's identity collapse.

The death of Emily's father is the first significant death in the story, and its symbolic meaning lies in this: After the concrete agent of patriarchy disappears, its disciplinary force does not dissipate but becomes internalized into Emily's own psychic structure. After her father's death, Emily "refuses to admit that he is dead" and "refuses to give up the body". This act is both a stubborn attempt to retain the patriarchal order and a revelation that the cultural reproduction mechanism can no longer function normally—genuine cultural transmission requires autonomous renewal after internalization, not mechanical adherence to external authority. More ironic still is that the "only property" the father leaves Emily "was the house". The house, once a symbol of aristocratic identity, becomes a heavy material burden. Emily must maintain aristocratic respectability (she cannot engage in "lowly" work) yet lacks the means to cover basic living expenses. This contradiction pushes her into a marginalized existence: She must rely on the town government's "tacit consent" to be exempt from taxes, while simultaneously maintaining a haughty distance from the townspeople. The dual rupture of cultural capital and economic capital plunges her into the double bind of survival and identity.

The story repeatedly describes the changes in Emily's physique: as a young woman, "slender and dressed in white"; in old age, "bloated" and "pallid", looking "like a body long submerged in motionless water". This transformation of body image can be understood on two levels. On a physiological level, it is a natural process

of aging. On a symbolic level, it is a metaphor for the "decay" of Southern culture in the face of historical change. Emily's body becomes a "battlefield" for the conflict between Southern tradition and Northern modernity. Her obesity, pallor, and bloat are both physiological and semiotic: They signal that the Southern "belle" ideal has become impossible to realize in reality. An aristocratic identity without economic foundation can only linger on in a rigid, morbid, self-negating form.

Significantly, this body image forms a powerful mirror relationship with the corpse of Homer Barron discovered at the story's end. When the townspeople open the sealed room, they see the rotting corpse "of the Northerner" and, on the pillow, "a long strand of iron-gray hair". Emily, while alive, long lived her life as a "walking corpse", and Homer' corpse is merely the externalization of her own fate. This complex entanglement of life and death, of rot and preservation, forms the story's most unsettling aesthetic core.

The Gendering of North-South Conflict: The Tragedy of Emily and Homer

Homer Barron's identity is highly symbolic. He is a "foreman of the construction crew building the railroad", a "Yankee", a "day laborer". In the class order of the old Southern aristocracy, Homer occupies the bottom rung: He has neither prestigious lineage nor gentlemanly cultivation. But in the logic of Northern capitalism, he is a carrier of technology, capital, and progress, a representative of an emerging class in ascendance. The relationship between Emily and Homer is thus not merely a matter of personal emotional choice, but a "cross-boundary encounter" between Southern aristocratic culture and Northern industrial civilization. The townspeople's objections, the minister's intervention, and the cousins' involvement all indicate that this relationship touches the deep anxieties of Southern society: If even the last Grierson girl "falls" to the point of associating with a Northern foreman, what dignity remains for Southern culture? The collective intervention by the townspeople and Emily's relatives is essentially a final defense of class boundaries and cultural boundaries. They cannot stop the tide of history, but they can, through public opinion, define Emily's behavior as "madness" or "degeneracy", thereby preserving the legitimacy of the old order on a symbolic level.

When Emily discovers that Homer "had no intention of marrying her", she chooses to poison him. The symbolic meaning of this act is multiple. From a gender perspective, it is an extreme form of resistance by a woman deprived of normal marital rights within the patriarchal order. From a cultural perspective, it is the South's "reverse devouring" of the North, a violent reaction after the failure of cultural reproduction. Since the fusion of two classes and two cultures through marriage is impossible, the permanent possession of the "other" is achieved through death. Significantly, Emily's act of poisoning is not purely destructive; it eerily combines destruction with preservation. She keeps Homer's corpse on the bridal bed and "shares the bed" with him for forty years. This horrifying scene has profound significance: Southern culture cannot coexist with Northern civilization in a living, dynamic way, and can only sustain its obsession with the past by "preserving corpses". This is akin to the white South's fixation on the "Lost Cause": unable to resurrect slavery, they "preserve" its spiritual essence in monuments, historical narratives, and segregation laws.

The act of poisoning and preserving the corpse constitutes the deep paradox of Southern culture's relationship to tradition. Normal cultural reproduction requires sustained interaction between cultural capital and economic capital, and creative transformation across generations. But Emily is incapable of this: She has no children, no wealth, and no ability to interact normally with the outside world. So she resorts to a kind of "pathological reproduction" to cope with the rupture of culture: By killing the other from the North and preserving

the corpse within her private space, she creates a closed, static "private museum" that belongs only to herself. As scholars have noted, Faulkner's South tends to "live in the past", and Emily takes this metaphor to its extreme. Her tragedy lies not in her madness, but in the fact that the cultural system in which she is embedded offers no viable way forward for her desires, her identity, or her future. The "Southern belle" myth provides her with an impossible ideal but offers no resources for living once that ideal shatters. The arsenic and the deathbed are the only "way out" she can devise within this structural dilemma.

Narrative Strategy and Cultural Attitude: Faulkner's Double Voice

The story employs a first-person plural "we" as its narrative voice, one of Faulkner's subtlest narrative designs. "We" represents the collective voice of Jefferson, functioning both as the teller of the story and as a participant in Emily's fate. The "we" narration has a dual function: On one hand, it attempts to distance itself from Emily, constructing her as an "other"—a madwoman, a murderer, a necrophiliac. On the other hand, in the act of telling, it constantly reveals its own voyeurism, intervention, and judgment concerning Emily's life. From Bourdieu's perspective, the "we" narration is itself a form of "symbolic violence". By telling Emily's story, the Southern community engages in "defining what is normal": Emily is abnormal, mad, degenerate, while "we" are normal, rational, moral. This division is not merely a narrative technique; it is also a way of performing cultural reproduction. By repeatedly telling and retelling the story of a boundary figure such as Emily, the community reinforces its internal members' sense of belonging and identity, while simultaneously expelling those who cannot fit into the new order into the category of "madness".

The "rose" in the title never actually appears in the text. This absence is itself a significant narrative gesture. Faulkner's gift of this absent rose to Emily is a mourning for her tragic fate and an acknowledgment of her "incomprehensibility". From a Derridean perspective, Emily is always the "unpresentable" other, never fully approachable. The townspeople's narrative attempts to incorporate her into existing frameworks of meaning (madwoman, murderess, necrophiliac), but Faulkner, through the fissures within the narrative, allows the reader to see Emily's complexity that transcends these labels. Her silence, her seclusion, her refusal to be understood are themselves a form of resistance to symbolic violence. The act of "giving" in the title is a compensatory gesture by Faulkner on behalf of the community: The community has relegated Emily to the realm of "madness" through narrative, and the author offers an apology for that expulsion by means of a virtual "rose".

Faulkner's attitude toward the South has always been complex. Born into a Southern family, he has a deep emotional attachment to Southern history and culture, but he also clearly sees the evils of the Southern legacy—slavery, patriarchy, racism—and perceives its inherent closure, rigidity, and violence. In general, Faulkner holds a dual attitude of mourning and critique toward the Southern tradition.

In the figure of Emily, this double attitude is concentratedly embodied. Faulkner allows the reader to see both Emily as a victim of patriarchy (deserving of sympathy) and Emily as a murderer (inspiring fear). He presents both the elegance of the old Southern culture (white dresses, silver, Southern hospitality) and its corruption and violence (arsenic, the stench of decay, rot). The story offers no simple moral judgment, allowing these two perspectives to constantly entangle, cancel each other, and yet complement each other. This double attitude likely stems from Faulkner's inability to bid farewell completely to the South on an emotional level, nor to defend it on an intellectual level. He can neither accept the Northern industrial civilization's crude negation of the Southern tradition, nor the white South's selective forgetting of its own historical crimes. Thus, "Emily's

death" becomes an event that cannot be incorporated by any single narrative: It is the fall of a monument, the end of an era; it is a woman's tragedy and the epitaph of a culture.

Conclusion

This paper reinterprets the cultural conflict between North and South in *A Rose for Emily* from the dual perspectives of spatial boundaries and cultural reproduction. The findings are as follows. First, Emily's house, social identity, and body constitute multiple nested spatial boundaries. The physical house, the social distinction of class, and the body as the material carrier of the Southern "belle" myth, these three boundaries mutually reinforce each other, jointly constructing a closed cultural space that refuses renewal. Second, the reproductive mechanism of Southern aristocratic culture fails completely in Emily. After her father's death, Emily can neither fulfill the ideal expectations of the "Southern belle" nor establish a new identity. The dual rupture of cultural capital and economic capital reduces her to a suspended figure after the collapse of the old order. Third, the relationship between Emily and Homer is a gendered presentation of North-South cultural conflict. The act of poisoning symbolizes the South's "reverse devouring" and "corpse preservation" of the North, revealing how Southern culture, unable to coexist with the North in a living manner, turns to pathological possession to sustain its obsession with the past. Fourth, through the "we" narrative strategy, Faulkner simultaneously presents the symbolic violence of the Southern community and its mourning for Emily. The absent "rose" in the title is Faulkner's acknowledgment of Emily's "incomprehensibility" and embodies the author's own ambivalent attitude toward the Southern tradition, both nostalgic and critical.

Emily as a "monument", her fall is both the end of the old Southern order and a revelation of its inherent violence and rigidity. The interpretive framework offered here can also be applied to other Faulkner works with Southern themes (such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*) to provide new paths for understanding the cultural politics of Southern literature. When a monument falls, what we lose is not only the memory of the past, but also all the bloodshed and injustice that memory concealed—and this, perhaps, is what Faulkner most wanted readers to see.

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