When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral. The men went out of a sort of affection for a fallen monument. The women went to see the inside of her house. No one but an old servant had seen it in at least ten years. It was a big house with balconies on what was once the best street in town. But like the street, the house was now in a state of decay. A

Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care. It began in 1894, after her father died. At that time, the mayor, Colonel Sartoris, eliminated her taxes (not that Miss Emily would have accepted charity). Colonel Sartoris made up a tale that Miss Emily’s father had loaned money to the town, and this was the town’s way of paying it back.

When the next generation came to power, they rejected this arrangement. On the first of the year, they mailed her a tax notice. But February came, and there was no reply.

A group of aldermen1 went to see her. The old Negro servant let them into a dim, stale-smelling hall. B The parlor was furnished in worn, leather-covered furniture.

They rose when she entered. She was a small, fat woman in black, leaning on a cane. She looked bloated, like a drowned body. She did not ask them to sit. She just stood in the door and listened.

When she spoke, her voice was dry and cold. “I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me.”

“But there is nothing in our records. We must go by the—”

“See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson.”

1. Here, aldermen are town officials.
“But, Miss Emily—” the aldermen protested.
“See Colonel Sartoris,” she repeated. (Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years.) “Tobe!” The Negro appeared.

“So she sent them away, just as she had sent away their fathers thirty years before about the smell. That was two years after her father’s death and a short time after her sweetheart deserted her.

After her father’s death, she went out very little. After her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all. The only sign of life about the place was the Negro coming and going.

“As if any man could keep a kitchen properly,” the ladies said. So they were not surprised when the smell developed.

The Board of Aldermen had to deal with the smell. “It’s simple,” the youngest said. “Send her word to have her place cleaned up. Give her a certain time to do it in, and if she don’t...”

Judge Stevens said, “Will you accuse a lady of smelling bad?”

So the next night, after midnight, four men slunk around Miss Emily’s house like burglars. They broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there. As they recrossed the lawn, they saw Miss Emily in the window. After a time the smell went away.

People in our town believed that the Griersons had thought they were better than everyone else. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such. When her father died, we learned that the house was all that was left to her. In a way, people were glad. Being left alone and poor, she had become a more sympathetic figure.

The day after his death, all the ladies prepared to call at the house, as is our custom. Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days. Just as they were about to resort to law and force, she broke down, and they buried her father quickly.
We did not say she was crazy then. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away. It was natural that with nothing left, she would cling to the one who had robbed her. A

III

She was sick for a long time. When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, like a girl's.

The town had just arranged for paving the sidewalks, and in the summer after her father's death, they began the work. The construction company's foreman was a Yankee named Homer Barron—a man with rough good looks. Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group. B Soon we began to see him and Miss Emily on Sunday afternoons driving in a yellow-wheeled buggy.

The ladies all said, "Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer." C But eventually the old people began saying, "Poor Emily."

She carried her head high—even when we thought she was fallen. It was as if, as the last Grierson, she demanded more respect than ever. For instance, there was the arsenic matter.

"I want some poison," she said to the druggist. She was over thirty then, still a slight woman, with cold, haughty black eyes.

"I want some poison," she said.

"Yes, Miss Emily. What kind? For rats and such? I'd recom—" "Arsenic," Miss Emily said. "Is that a good one?"

"Why, of course," the druggist said. "If that's what you want. But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for."

Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic. When she opened the package at home, she saw "For rats" had been written on the box. D
So the next day we all said, “She will kill herself”; and we said it would be the best thing. It seemed as if Homer Barron would never marry her. We began saying, “Poor Emily,” as they passed on Sunday in the buggy, Miss Emily with her head high and Homer Barron with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth. Some of the ladies said that it was a disgrace.
Then, suddenly, we were sure that they were to be married. We learned that Miss Emily had purchased a man’s hairbrush, comb, and mirror, with the letters H. B. on each piece. Two days later, we learned that she had bought an outfit of men’s clothing, including a nightshirt. We said, “They are married.” We were really glad.

A neighbor saw the Negro man let Homer Barron in at the kitchen door one evening. That was the last we saw of Barron and of Miss Emily for some time. For almost six months she did not appear on the streets.

When we next saw Miss Emily, she had grown fat. During the next few years, her hair turned iron gray.

From that time on, her front door remained closed. Each December, we sent her a tax notice, which would be returned by the post office a week later, unclaimed. Thus, she passed from generation to generation.

She died in one of the downstairs rooms, her gray head propped on a pillow moldy with age.
V

The Negro let the ladies in at the front door. He walked right through the house and out the back and was not seen again.

They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers. Already we knew that there was one room upstairs that no one had seen in forty years and which would have to be forced. They waited until Miss Emily was buried before they opened it.

The room was decked out as if for a bride, but dust lay everywhere: on the curtains, on the dressing table, on the man's brush and mirror. Upon a chair hung the suit, carefully folded; beneath it, the two shoes and the discarded socks.

The man himself lay in the bed.

For a long while we just stood there, staring. The body had apparently once lain in the position of an embrace. What was left of his rotting corpse had dissolved into the bed.

Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it.

Leaning forward—the dust dry and bitter in our nostrils—we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair. What do you think is the importance of the long strand of iron-gray hair on the pillow?