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The Shackles of Mr. Grierson: An Analysis of “A Rose for Emily”

In William Faulkner’s Southern Gothic short story “A Rose for Emily” the secretive life of Miss Emily Grierson, a mentally unstable spinster is observed and commented on by the townspeople of Jefferson. The story unfolds through a series of flashbacks initially revealing the passing of Miss Emily, followed by the enduring consequences of her deceased father’s dominating role in her life. After Mr. Grierson’s passing Miss Emily seeks to gain control over her life by pursuing a relationship with a suitor by the name of Homer Barron. When it comes to light that Homer is not the marrying type Miss Emily, in an effort to secure the love her father deprived her of, murders Homer and lays with his body for many years. In this final scene, the act of murder is a result of Miss Emily’s submission to her father as he robs her of a healthy mental state, social life, and love life. Through committing this heinous act she ensures freedom from her father’s grasp by securing her control in the areas she was previously submissive.

Miss Emily’s unstable mental state comes as a result of her social alienation and lack of meaningful relationships. Mr. Grierson exercised his control over his daughter by isolating her from the rest of society through their upper class status and disapproving of her suitors, thus preventing her from forming relationships with the working class townspeople. Her relationship with her father was all she had in life and in his passing, she feels her time has come to steer her life in her own direction. She eagerly assumes this directive role by keeping her father’s body for three days and refusing to give it up for burial. As he was a controlling man in life, Miss Emily is

able to seize this control in his death. When she finally decides to produce his body for the burial, the townspeople reflect on her actions stating “We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will” (Faulkner 661). This reinforces the idea that through her father’s restrictive approach towards her relationships, she has subsequently formed an unhealthy attachment to the pursuit and preservation of love. Faulkner uses her response of clinging to her father’s cadaver for three days to clue readers in on her instability and comfortability with dead bodies, this foreshadows her murder of Homer (Neill Lecture 1, Part A). The ease she feels with a corpse foreshadows the necrophilic acts she engages in with Homer’s body, emphasizing her delusional idea of love. In her mental instability resulting from her father’s strict reign, Miss Emily finds comfort in keeping Homer’s body as this act has given her a newfound sense of control.

The extent of Miss Emily’s mental instability is revealed in the final scene as the townspeople discover she has murdered Homer and kept his body for many years. Faulkner utilizes the elements of suspense, grotesque imagery, and a motif to ensure a sense of closure within his Southern Gothic work. Throughout the story an atmosphere of uncertainty and eeriness known as suspense is established (Neill Lecture 1, Part A). This is heightened in fifth part as the townspeople are met with “A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb” upon their entrance into the room above the stairs (Faulkner 664). The lingering smell is compared to that of death by way of a simile, building suspense and foreshadowing their discovery of death (Neill Lecture 1, Part A). When the townspeople’s discovery is made, Homer’s body is described as laying on the bed having “rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt” (Faulkner 664). This grotesque imagery details his state of decomposition and period of time he lay dead. The image of an even

coating of dust is repeatedly described as having covered the room, sealing in the life Miss Emily created. This motif represents the permanence of Miss Emily's control, outlasting her death.

Faulkner achieves narrative closure by revealing the spinster's motive through the position in which Homer lay, depicted as "The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him" (Faulkner 664). Homer's murder comes as an act of desperation by Miss Emily to ensure she will have an everlasting love. As a result of her father depriving her of relationships, she consequentially acts to protect the longevity of her control in love through committing the act of murder.

As part of upper class society, Miss Emily isolates herself from the rest of Jefferson resulting in her lack of platonic relationships. When alive Mr. Grierson raised his daughter to follow the class structure in place which is why after his death she continues to hold herself to higher standards and privileges. The townspeople successively share this view as they in turn separate Miss Emily from their communal circle. She is referred to as a hereditary obligation placed upon the town that the residents no longer care to uphold (Faulkner 659). They comment on a circumstance which connects her to the rest of Jefferson, a pungent smell. This connection is described as "It was another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons" (Faulkner 660). Here the residents are envisioning Miss Emily's view on them based on how she creates division between herself and the town. The horrid smell in reference foreshadows Homer's death, as the smell itself is from his decomposing body. An instance of Miss Emily's superiority over the townspeople is when she purchases arsenic without revealing the reason for her purchase, although mandated by the law (Faulkner 661). The purchase of poison is another example of foreshadowing as its use is discovered in the final scene to have

been on Homer. Miss Emily's privilege at the hands of her wealthy father has bittersweet effects for her. She is able to live her life according to her own standards, however she is missing out on enriching connections which would ease her loneliness. When she finally makes a social connection in the form of Homer, she is unable to cope with his unwillingness to marry her. After having been robbed of social connections by her father, she is unwilling to be robbed of a meaningful connection in his passing, hence the murder of Homer to ensure a partner.

It has taken the death of Mr. Grierson for the townspeople to view Miss Emily as a person much like themselves. This showcases the classist views of Jefferson, which were held even though Miss Emily was now the only remaining Grierson in the town. The residents announce their new view of her as "At last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized" (Faulkner 661). Miss Emily has become humble in their eyes through losing her wealth and her only immediate relationship. The townspeople's tone changes from a gossipy annoyance when first discussing her class rank to a sympathetic condolence as a result of her father's death. However, this does not deter her from living above the law as raised by her father. Instead of adapting to the new Jefferson she continues to not pay her taxes and live on her own accord. Nonetheless the faults and oddities of Miss Emily are forgiven by the town and they allow her to carry on with her own governance. The residents' depiction of Miss Emily as the motif of an idol appears in the text as they observe her through a window in the room above the stairs. The image of an idol is representative of the past as Miss Emily is unchanging. While the town may have new views on Miss Emily and are more willing than ever to accept her, her upbringing does not allow for her to form relationships with the townspeople. It is in this way that Mr. Grierson sabotaged his daughter, leaving her lonesome and in desperate need of a fulfilling and long lasting relationship.

Mr. Grierson exerts his opinion of no one being good enough for his daughter which impedes her from finding a husband and fulfilling her societal expectations. Miss Emily is in her thirties after his passing and is left lonesome due to having never been in a relationship. The townspeople are aware of Mr. Grierson's impact on his daughter's love life and characterize their dynamic as a still picture, describing it as "We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door" (Faulkner 660). In this depiction Miss Emily is pictured submissively in the background dressed in white, a colour symbolizing purity and forfeiture of her rights. Mr. Grierson is in the foreground clutching a horsewhip that represents his power and dominance over his daughter. Him facing away from her represents his disregard for her feelings towards his controlling actions. This emphasizes the theme of patriarchal control as the wants and needs of Miss Emily are continuously stifled by her father, as if they do not matter. First person plural narration by way of the townspeople is crucial here as it reveals the extent of Mr. Grierson's authority. His impact on his daughter's love life is so forceful that the residents make note of it. This is why when Miss Emily finally does gain control over her own life and pursues a relationship with Homer, she acts to ensure she will never again be a submissive character in the background. This means murdering her lover when he tries to leave her so she can secure the permanence of love in her life.

The progression of Miss Emily and Homer's relationship is noted by the townspeople, however they are soon met by news of his disappearance. Unbeknownst to the residents, Miss Emily has murdered Homer and that is perceived as him skipping town on their wedding, as it was previously made known that he is not the type for marriage (Faulkner 662). The community,

while saddened for Miss Emily are not surprised as they remark “Then we knew that this was to be expected too; as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman’s life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die” (Faulkner 663). This enforces the extent of Mr. Grierson’s power and control over Miss Emily’s life, as the townspeople believe it is continuing from beyond the grave. The way in which she was met with suppression at every opportunity of a suitor is noted by the residents while revealing her father’s character. In being “virulent” and “furious to die” he is strong willed and eager to ensure his way is had. Miss Emily acts in rebellion against the patriarchal society that is Jefferson, asserting her power by taking the life of Homer. When taking into consideration her survival under her father’s overexertion of control, it is comprehensible why she is desperate to sustain her first chance at love. Through her willful actions, her aim to preserve her longtime desires of love and control is evident.

Miss Emily Grierson is a victim of a patriarchal society in which her need for love and control is suppressed by her dominating father. The effects of his rule in her life have proven to be everlasting as they have affected her mental state, and ability to form both social and romantic relationships. This is evident in the final scene of the text through the discovery of Homer Barron’s body. The act of murder is an act of assertion of control, of which Miss Emily finally possessed. In her lonesome life after her father’s passing, Miss Emily rebels against the society and ideals she was forced to conform to. In this rebellion she takes the life of Homer, but ensures the permanence of her newfound control through his death.

Works Cited

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