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ENG 200: Weather-worn and House-hidden

Sarah Krebs

Western Kentucky University, sarah.krebs360@topper.wku.edu

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Sarah Krebs

Professor Hughes

English 200

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Weather-worn and House-hidden

The characteristics of one's house speak volumes about the owner. Oftentimes, one can judge a person's social position, income, and personality traits simply from the appearance of her home. This rings true for Miss Emily Grierson. The fickleness of her community and their assessment of her mental stability drive her into solitude. She was born into a family which had already been placed on a pedestal and never knew acceptance or privacy. Cognizant of her neighbors' tendencies to scrutinize her through their window blinds, her house becomes a refuge. Unable to stop their curious eyes, she tries to place a boundary between herself and the world. In "A Rose for Emily," William Faulkner uses the setting of her house to indirectly characterize Emily, prompt suspicions of narrator bias, and mirror Emily's strong intention to separate herself from the town.

Throughout the course of the story, Emily's home is almost as much of an object of curiosity as she is. Within the first few paragraphs, it is notable for "its stubborn and coquettish decay" (part 1, par. 2). The readers come to find Miss Emily is just as obstinate and uses her intimidation to an advantage, refusing to pay her taxes or to provide a reason for her arsenic purchase. These qualities are only heightened as she ages, or, more crudely put for the sake of parallelism, decays. Rare visitors also note how her "stairway mounts into still more shadow" and how the smell of "dust and disuse" pervades the house (part 1, par. 5). Emily rebels against the gossip of the town, making herself as difficult to discern as a dark staircase. The poor

conditions of the home also signify her lack of motivation to impress others. She does not see a point in doing so if they will judge nevertheless. Toward the end of her life, Emily closes the top floor of the house. This is a significant detail. Earlier in the story, after complaints of a smell emanating from Miss Emily's house, the town Judge orders four men to eliminate the stench by sprinkling lime along the foundation. Completing their job, they cross through the front yard and see a light in one of the windows. Faulkner writes, "Miss Emily sat in it...her upright torso motionless as that of an idol" (part 2, par. 11). Later, the closed top floor of the house is described as "the carven torso of an idol in a niche" (part 4, par. 10). The repetition of the words "torso" and "idol" further draws the comparison between Emily and her home.

The references to the colors white and yellow in relation to the setting are present in Faulkner's story. Emily's home is initially described as "a big, squarish frame house that had once been white" (part 1, par. 2). The color white is commonly found in literature as a symbol of purity. This begs the question: where did Emily's "insanity" stem from? Was it hereditary or did the town provoke it? Emily may have led a normal life if her neighbors had not made a spectacle of her sickness and her father's death. As a result of the townspeople's cruelty, she became the product of a harsh environment. Her purity or innocence dwindled away as the town made her into the unvarying topic of gossip. Just as the weather discolors the outside of a house, the criticisms made by the town push Emily to the brink of madness. It is also a curiosity as to why she kills her fiancé, Homer Barron. Throughout the story, the imagery of her time with him includes the color yellow. On their dates, they drive in a "yellow-wheeled buggy" (part 3, par. 2). The narration also mentions he wears a "yellow glove" (part 4, par. 1). In literature, yellow symbolizes joy and happiness. Homer was the only person to bring light into her life. While with him, she held "her head high" (part 4, par. 1). However, later in the novel, a different

interpretation of yellow is used. Yellow is the next hue when white ceases to be white. The narration states, “She died...her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight” (part 4, par. 12). Once again, terms signifying decay are used to describe the inside and outside of the house, as well as Miss Emily.

The inside descriptions of a house that is strictly unseen by the town prompt the reader to consider narrator bias. Faulkner’s narration models that of a townsman relaying Emily’s history to an outsider. In the town, word travels fast, but it is well-known that these types of messages often become exaggerated and misconstrued. Through the “out of order” nature of this narration, it becomes clear that each added detail is an attempt to dehumanize Emily. The reason behind Emily’s attachment to her house connects back to her poor treatment by society. She likely killed Homer out of fear he would hear the rumors about her and leave her. She had to force him to stay in her safe space. The outside world had hurt her too badly and would judge him unfavorably once he associated with her. Locking the upper portion of her house, Emily could live in an alternate reality with Homer. She would never have to fear him leaving her for the allure of the world outside. The outside world molded Emily into an untrustworthy person. Emily in turn transformed her house into a prison---submitting to a self-inflicted captivity. The reward for such captivity was freedom from the prying eyes of her community.

Regarding the physical structure of a house, the front door can be considered the most accessible entryway. Toward the end of the story, it is stated that, “The front door closed upon the last one [of her painting pupils] and remained closed for good” (part 4, par. 8). From then on, she only has contact with her servant and her mummified lover. She views the outside world behind the protection of her window. The glass makes her less vulnerable. One could argue that the closing of the front door is symbolic of Emily’s resolve to cut all toxic relationships out of

her life. She had reached her breaking point, perhaps thinking the outside world had forced her to kill Homer. Not long after, the town asked to fasten metal numbers above her door or attach a mailbox. Since Emily has many connections to the house, her choice not to let them add to the front symbolizes her desire to sever communication with the outside world. Emily lives in a town where societal pressure is always present. She chooses to “go against the grain.” The irony is that the town attempts to point out every one of Emily’s flaws, but they refuse to identify their own. The story bears a possible psychological component. The town could be projecting their own insecurities onto Emily or emphasizing them in the hope of hiding their own.

The house bears much significance and symbolism in this short story. Its characteristics mirror those of Emily. With the gradual degradation of the house, the readers witness a decline in the resolve of their main character. At face value, Emily can be viewed as a horrible person, and she is horrible for killing her fiancé. However, once the narration is considered, it is easy to feel sympathy for her. Being the daughter of a controlling and restrictive father, Emily did not know how to live on her own after he passed. No one in the town came to her assistance. No flowers were sent out of courtesy and respect. Emily did not choose the family she was born into. It is ironic that the town could have ended the line of “high and mighty Griersons” by taking Emily under their wing and raising her in a normal family (part 2, par. 3). They created their own “hereditary obligation” (part 1, par. 3). The town even had a second chance at allowing happiness for Emily with the arrival of Homer. Instead, they reiterated their high standards for her, saying, “Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer” (part 3, par. 3). Throughout the entirety of the story, Homer is Emily’s only glimpse at happiness, and they keep her from it. In killing him, Emily is portrayed as a monster and

rightfully so, but the reader must not forget who created the monster. The reader must not forget the weather that caused the white, pure house to deteriorate so rapidly.

Works Cited

Faulkner, William. "A Rose for Emily." *Pullman Strikes Out Introduction*,

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