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# Miss Emily Grierson: A Thorn in Jefferson's Bed

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### Miss Emily Grierson: A Thorn in Jefferson's Rose Bed

Judgment, pressure, or failure to live up to a name - although expectations may be inevitable, they often have tragic consequences. In William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily," a Southern antebellum town holds many expectations for its Grierson family. The narrator relates Jefferson's changing regard for Miss Emily between her father's death, lover's disappearance, and final seclusion, and also assesses whether she behaves how a legendary Grierson "should". The town's judgmental, unrealistic expectations cause Miss Emily's social exclusion and her descent into a solitary, crazed condition.

From the beginning of the piece, the town's attitude may seem strange – after all, it is unusual for a town to liken an elderly citizen to a "fallen monument." However, Jefferson's standards for its wealthy are rooted in Southern history, and the Griersons date back to the Civil War. Their impressive legacy heightens the people's expectations for them, and the narrator reveals an old fashioned reverence. Their dwelling, "a big, squarish frame house... in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies," became "encroached and obliterated" by "cotton gins and garages" (Faulkner 1). Although the Griersons' have long passed their height, generations later, they remain prominent. Not only the house, but also the family members are still acknowledged. A feeling of "duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation" toward the family is present, so much so the governor justifies Miss Emily's tax evasion (Faulkner 1). The general regard for the Griersons necessitates they live up to the town's expectations, lest they degrade their societal position.

Accustomed to the Griersons' high status, the town views Miss Emily as a faultless and transcendent aristocratic figure. Throughout, the narrator portrays her as a "monumental" and legendary town symbol, even a kind of deity (Davis 7). Being the last of "the high and mighty

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Griersons,” it falls upon her to meet the traditional expectations. She is likened to a holy icon as well, “...her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows — sort of tragic and serene” (Faulkner 3). Even as generations pass, the town retains its idealizations. As late as “when the smell began” and after her death, the narrator describes her as an “idol” and “fallen monument.” The townspeople only see Miss Emily as a figure, sculpted by years of tradition and history.

However, the figure shatters when, for the first time in decades, aldermen visit her mansion to collect taxes. They discover a very imperfect Miss Emily, one whose “skeleton was small and spare”, her “pallid” eyes “lost in fatty ridges”, and her body bloated as if “submerged in motionless water” (Faulkner 2). For generations, the people’s sole familiarity with the Griersons resulted from their societal position and wealth. The aged Miss Emily, a “slender figure in white in the background” now a “small, fat woman in black,” destroys the town’s abiding perception. Miss Emily fell short of the expected standard, and suddenly seems abnormal and withdrawn. Had the town based its opinion on Miss Emily’s personality instead of the Grierson social status, perhaps it could have spared her from isolation and gossip.

However, bearing in mind its traditional expectations, the town made no such effort. Because of her wealth and position, the people wished her to seem more “human, but only by degradation of her prosperity. They hope for her grief, “glad” when her father died, leaving her nothing besides the house (Faulkner 3). A disconnect exists between the townspeople and Miss Emily’s personality; all they know is her status, and are happy when she fails to act accordingly. The town is relieved that “she [Miss Emily] too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less” (Faulkner 3). Having set the bar high for Miss Emily’s behavior, they are pleased when she cannot meet it. Although they expect her to act in ways

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appropriate to her rank and status, simultaneously they dislike her for her pride (Sniderman 91).

As she becomes a “pauper,” Miss Emily’s form of isolation changes: she is no longer isolated because her class, but instead because she fails to maintain it as expected.

The insensitive attitude continues as the narrator exposes several of Miss Emily’s faults to reveal her flaws, uniting the town against her. After all, insanity runs in Miss Emily’s family (her great-aunt had it) and she descends to courting a commoner. According to the town, the Griersons must have “held themselves a little too high for what they really were.” By passing judgment, the town tries to separate itself from the Griersons’ faults. The ladies say “Poor Emily,” and others gossip, but they do not comfort her - they whisper their pities behind the jealousies. Instead of truly feeling sorry, they chatter among themselves, drawing attention to how far a once-high figure fell. Their hushed conversations and the prevailing opinion against Miss Emily contributes to her societal exclusion.

Now that the town perceives Miss Emily as an isolated figure, it becomes preoccupied with gossip, deepening her isolation. Because the town views Miss Emily as a celebrity, everyone takes careful note of her activities, and enjoys speaking about when her behavior deviates from the expected code. The tabloid style makes it seem as if the town that gains entertainment by watching Miss Emily, but never interferes. All of her actions, examined against the strict Grierson standard, are related in third person, while disturbing conclusions are implied, and crucial information is left missing (Sniderman). The collective “we,” as in the emphasizes the idea that the town is right, and Emily is the bizarre character. Additionally, the narrator often lapses into third person when speaking of Emily - when the four men broke in through a window to sprinkle lime, “they” saw her silhouette sitting erect in the window; as the aldermen talked to her about her taxes, “they” witnessed her bloated figure as well as her cold, rude manner

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(Faulkner 2), and “at home,” she saw the inscription on the box of arsenic “for rats.” It becomes obvious that the narrator has heard these intimate details secondhand, enforcing the idea that the town has its own widely-held opinions about Miss Emily. The incriminating facts are common knowledge, and the tabloid style with which they are related proves the town is only interested in the celebrity’s faults, not her personality.

Among all her scandals, however, perhaps most impressive to the town is that of Miss Emily courting a “Northerner, a day laborer” (Faulkner 4). The townspeople judge Miss Emily’s relationships, and believe that she should be married, yet her failure to meet *noblesse oblige* furthers her alienation. She is looked down upon while she sees Homer, and people whisper: “Do you suppose it’s really so?’ ...’Of course it is. What else could . . .” (Faulkner). Conversely, when she continues to see Homer but it is rumored he will not marry, “Then some of the ladies began to say that it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people.” Whichever direction her actions, Miss Emily cannot escape the town’s judgment, and becomes solitary. After her cousins leave and Homer is not seen again, Miss Emily withdraws completely, and generations pass as she ages in her mansion. The town’s expectations for the last Grierson failed her, trapping Miss Emily in isolation.

Despite the skewed narration of a townspeople, it becomes easy to see that the community is at fault for Miss Emily’s poor, sorrowful end. Its expectations for the Griersons lead to gossip, judgment, and spite, causing Miss Emily’s seclusion and lonely death. While Emily may be the thorny rose of the Grierson family, the people of Jefferson are keen on spotting thorns.

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