

Note: This essay was given a final grade of C+ because of its length and a type I grammatical error. The grade was quite disappointing as I spent more time on this piece than anything else I've ever written for a class. For history's sake errors have not been corrected here.

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English 1102-07

15 April 2002

Emily's Rose: Social Isolation in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

Until the 1950's and 60's when space flight and experiments in long-term underwater diving brought attention to the issue, there were no major studies on the psychological impact of isolation (Man, 2). But William Faulkner addressed the issue of isolation more than twenty years before those studies in his 1930 short story "A Rose for Emily." "Rose" briefly but succinctly explains the life of Emily Grierson, a woman who kept her fiancé's corpse in their shared bed for more than thirty years after murdering him. This behavior seems insane and even inexplicable, but the details of Faulkner's story indicate Emily's actions are the result of mental illness caused by a lifetime of social isolation and emotional neglect. Almost everything Emily did in her life was intended to fill the deep void of loneliness she had experienced from early childhood. As psychologist Martin Kantor explained in Distancing, "like sex or hunger [social isolation] serves as a primary determinant of behavior and creates as much social distress as ignorance and poverty" (IX).

The name "Emily" was not common until the latter half of the 19th century and was until that time considered appropriate only for a family pet (Crawford). This is the type of relationship Emily had with her father - distant and cold, more for utility than companionship, the kind of interaction a person would have with a lapdog instead of a child. He always treated her "more as the lady of the house (particularly in terms of social functions) than his daughter" (Crawford). Even though the family's prominence had faded with the abolition of slavery, Mr. Grierson still held his daughter to the highest of standards and expected her to marry a high class gentleman. Unfortunately for Emily, the town of Jefferson had no such high class gentlemen - or at least none high enough to satisfy her father. So it was no shock to anyone in Jefferson when "she got to be thirty and was still single" (Faulkner).

Emily's total social isolation and poor family relationship caused her to develop Avoidant Personality Disorder, a mental condition broadly defined as a paranoia about rejection resulting from years of isolation. An avoidant, or sufferer of APD, develops an "almost paranoid hypersensitivity to rejection, so that he imagines rejections that don't exist" (Kantor, IX). The paranoia then causes avoidants to have low self-esteem, become unassertive, and grow increasingly angry (Kantor, IX).

Ironically, Emily's fear of rejection made her even more dependent on her father for emotional support, even though their relationship was obviously unhealthy. That clinginess was made apparent at Mr. Grierson's death when Emily held his body for three days while telling visitors he was still alive. "We believed she had to do that. 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). The death devastated Emily and she was physically ill from the time of her father's death until a year later when she met her eventual fiancé, Yankee contractor Homer Barron.

By that point Grierson was so sick with loneliness that she was willing to be in a relationship with anyone who would accept her. Homer came into town and, for reasons not entirely clear, started courting her. Perhaps he loved her initially, was attracted to her sexually, needed a cover for some rumored homosexual lifestyle, or was interested in her name and wealth - but it is clear that their relationship was not built on the firmest of foundations. Emily was in a position to know this fact but obviously chose to ignore it, deciding to take attention from anyone willing to provide it.

Homer was fine with that situation until their relationship progressed and Emily started pressuring him to marry her - a proposal that he had no fondness for. Mr. Barron decided it would be better to leave than be married, but Emily liked the idea of him leaving even less than he liked the idea of being married. "Like other personality problems/disorders, APD can be time-limited, diminishing with age, with or without treatment. ... Avoidance diminishes with positive feedback, when others are accepting" (Kantor, 5). But the only source of that positive feedback during Emily's adult life was apparently Homer - thus adding to her distress when she learned of his plans to leave. So, driven by her anger over being rejected or her desperate need to have someone around, Emily decided she would rather have Homer dead than not have him at all and took the man's life.

After Homer's demise Emily kept him in her bed for some forty years as the neighbors

continually complained to Jefferson's perplexed city counsel about a stench coming from her home. Like so many old ladies with a dry, gray flower pressed between pages of a Bible, Homer is truly Emily's rose - long dead, dry and gray, kept only as a reminder of what once was and what could have been. A single, thorny rose representing perpetual love and the only tangible remnant of a brief time period when Emily Grierson received the acceptance she was so denied during the rest of her miserable life (Crawford).

According to Kantor's Distancing, Maurice Lorr and Leslie Phillips categorize personalities as being either socialized or unsocialized, describing the latter as prone to "avoidance of others" and having "fantasy preoccupations" (10). One imagines that such "fantasy preoccupations" would be necessary for Emily to spend almost half her life sleeping every night against a deteriorating corpse.

The symptom of avoidance grew stronger after Homer's demise as Emily became more and more of a recluse, only rarely spotted at night through an open window and never again seen in public. Not even the old servant man sent out to do her shopping and chores spoke to her, since "He talked to no one, probably not even to her, for his voice had grown harsh and rusty, as if from disuse" (Faulkner). She even prevented the city from putting a mailbox or numbers on her home, a symbol of her paranoia and deep desire to avoid society in every way.

According to Dr. John E. Rasmussen, the words "isolation" and "confinement" have similar definitions to most people but are clearly different to psychologists: "At the most gross level of description, isolation might be considered primarily a psychological concept and confinement primarily a physical concept. Isolation is seen as a reduction in level of normal sensory and social input without necessarily involving a limitation in physical space or freedom of movement" (Man, 3). We can all see that Emily Grierson had the physical capacity to go out and do anything she desired to do, but the internal struggle with APD confined the woman inside her own mind. As Rasmussen noted, "It is possible, therefore, to conceive of an old person in a large city as being far more isolated than a lighthouse keeper or a solitary trapper in the Canadian wilderness" (Man, 3). This describes Emily perfectly: she was financially stable, living in a large home in the midst of a community, and physically able to go out, but mentally locked inside with the dank dust, the darkness, and her late fiancé. Mr. Grierson's forced isolation during her youth led to Emily willingly isolating herself during her old age. "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).

Dr. Maurice Small studied the life stories and writings of more than five hundred people who led solitary lives, concluding that the root cause of their isolation “was an extreme egoism, the failure to realize that in society the opinions of no one person can be absolute” (Wood, 7). Thus we get to the root of Emily’s problems: the total isolation at the end of her life was caused by several hundred years of collective family pride. Pride kept her father from being as close to her as he should have been. Pride kept Emily from asking anyone for help or friendship. Pride kept the outsiders out and the insiders in, leaving Emily locked inside her own mind for decades. “Faulkner shows that Emily's solution--to destroy, not to be betrayed; to conceal, not to be discovered; to withdraw to be alone with her memories--is not workable” (Skei).

So although Faulkner was certainly no psychologist or mental health expert, he clearly addressed the condition of APD in “A Rose for Emily.” Even if the author had no concept of such a mental condition, he described its symptoms, causes, and effects quite well. “Rose” can be considered a near-textbook (if slightly exaggerated) example of the impact social isolation can have on psychological health.

Works Cited:

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