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Using concepts from feminist theory to understand literature

Why should we learn about feminist theory?

As we saw in Chapter 4, psychoanalytic theory asks us to examine the ways in which our personal identity is formed by our early emotional experience within the family. In Chapter 5 we saw that Marxist theory asks us to examine the ways in which our personal identity is formed by the socioeconomic system in which we live. Feminist theory asks us to examine, instead, the ways in which our personal identity is formed by our culture's definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman. For from a feminist perspective, our experience of both the family and the socioeconomic system in which we live depends to a large extent on our sex: on the ways in which men and women are treated differently and on the way men are socialized to be masculine and women are socialized to be feminine.

Specifically, in most cultures men occupy most or all positions of power, which is why those cultures are called patriarchies or patriarchal cultures. For the word *patriarchy*, broadly defined, refers to any society in which men hold all or most of the power. In a patriarchy, women suffer varying degrees of oppression depending on, among other things, their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, religion, sexual orientation, and the country or region in which they live. Feminism, therefore, seeks to understand the ways in which women are oppressed—socially, economically, politically, and psychologically—in order to reduce, if not eliminate their oppression. Ideally, feminism would like to achieve a society in which women and men are encouraged to fulfill their full potential as human beings regardless of the extent to which their abilities and inclinations differ from traditional (patriarchal) definitions of femininity and masculinity.

Of course, patriarchal ideology (the patriarchal system of beliefs and assumptions) is difficult for most of us to recognize clearly and consistently because our everyday experience is so saturated with it. We have become so accustomed to patriarchal ideology that it often seems invisible. However, its invisibility makes this ideology all the more dangerous: it's easier to address a problem we can see than a problem that pretends it does not exist. In

addition, the word *feminist*—which, for many years, was a target of ridicule by patriarchal leaders in politics, the media, and other social institutions—remains an unpopular term among many people today. The result is that many anti-patriarchal women and men still feel uncomfortable identifying themselves as feminists or might not even recognize that they *are* feminists.

This unfortunate state of affairs should not surprise us, however, given the amount of misinformation about feminism still in circulation. To cite just one example, it is still generally assumed that feminism is directly opposed to family values. The fact is, however, that feminists continue to lead the struggle for better family policies, such as nutrition and healthcare for mothers and children; parental leave; high-quality, affordable daycare; the provision of shelters for battered women and their children; and the like. So if you need help, as many of us still do, adjusting to the idea that you're a feminist, you can start by thinking of feminism as a form of human-rights activism, which it certainly is.

We can start to use feminist theory to understand literature by asking the following question about whatever literary work we want to interpret: Do the characters conform to patriarchal gender roles? To choose the simplest example, is the role of the strong, rational protector given to a male character while the role of the submissive, emotional nurturer is given to a female character? Or to put the question another way, are the female characters depicted according to patriarchal stereotypes of women? These include, for example, virginal angels and selfless caregivers (which are patriarchal stereotypes of women who conform to traditional gender role) as well as nags, gossips, seductresses, and “bitches” (which are patriarchal stereotypes of women who violate the traditional gender role).

When a literary text portrays characters who conform to patriarchal gender roles or depicts female characters as patriarchal stereotypes, we say that the text illustrates patriarchal ideology. That is, the text shows us what patriarchal ideology “looks like,” so to speak. Now, sometimes a literary text illustrates patriarchal ideology because it approves of that ideology. For example, a story or a play might positively portray characters who conform to traditional gender roles and negatively portray characters who violate those roles. Such a literary work would be considered a patriarchal text, which, from a feminist perspective, means that it promotes damaging beliefs about women and men. But keep in mind that a literary work can illustrate patriarchal ideology in order to show us what's *wrong* with that ideology. For example, a novel or a poem might show us that the characters who conform to traditional gender roles are harmed by those roles, or it might show us the negative effects of patriarchal stereotyping. In both these cases, the literary work would be considered an antipatriarchal text, which, from a feminist perspective, means that it promotes accurate perceptions of women and men. Another, though less common kind of antipatriarchal text is one that offers positive portrayals of characters who violate traditional gender roles, for example, female characters

who are independent, who think and act for themselves in admirable ways, or male characters who are admirably sensitive and nurturing. Our interpretation exercises, which follow the “Basic concepts” section later, include examples of these various kinds of patriarchal and antipatriarchal texts.

It's often difficult, however, to tell for sure what a literary work wants us to think about the gender roles its characters embody. Does the text want us to admire or reject its patriarchal characters? Does the text want us to admire or reject its antipatriarchal characters? Even experienced readers often disagree about a text's attitude toward its characters' gender roles. So don't be upset if you find it difficult to figure out whether a literary work is patriarchal or antipatriarchal. At this point, you may have to be content, at times, with determining what patriarchal or antipatriarchal ideology the text illustrates, without being certain whether or not the text endorses that ideology. So let's start with a brief look at the patriarchal ideologies that feminist theory considers most fundamental to our understanding of patriarchal oppression. Although it's important that you read through the “Basic concepts” section that follows, don't be too concerned if you don't feel you thoroughly understand every one. You'll begin to understand these concepts much better when we use them, later in this chapter, to help us interpret the literary texts that appear at the end of this book. And you'll see that these fundamental feminist concepts can help us understand other works of literature as well.

Remember, too, that I'm offering you my own literary analyses in the interpretation exercises provided later in this chapter. You might use the same feminist concepts I use but come up with different interpretations of your own. If you disagree with any of the analyses I offer in these exercises, don't be afraid to look in the literary work in question for evidence that will support your viewpoint. A literary work can often support a number of different interpretations even when readers are using concepts from the same theory.

Basic concepts

Note that the basic concepts listed here are all examples of patriarchal ideologies that have existed for centuries and that are considered right and proper by many people. Feminism didn't invent these ideologies. Rather, feminism opposes them. For according to feminist theory, these ideologies are responsible for the oppression of women throughout the world and for the failure of most women and men to live up to their full human potential. Therefore, the definition of each patriarchal ideology is followed by feminist theory's argument against it.

Patriarchy

As we saw earlier, a patriarchy is any society in which men hold all or most of the power. Usually, a patriarchy gives men power by promoting traditional

gender roles. Patriarchal men and women believe that anyone who violates traditional gender roles is in some way unnatural, unhealthy, or even immoral. For example, in the United States, the patriarchal belief that assertiveness in a woman is unattractive, even unnatural, makes it difficult for many Americans to feel comfortable with women in leadership roles of any kind—from a woman taking charge of the White House to a woman asking a man out on the first date.

In contrast, feminist theory tells us that socializing women and men to conform to traditional gender roles means limiting people's options, denying them the choice to follow the path that best fulfills their potential. Therefore, patriarchal programming is unnatural, unhealthy, and unethical.

Traditional gender roles

According to traditional gender roles, men are naturally rational, strong, protective, and decisive. In contrast, traditional gender roles define women as naturally emotional (which, in a patriarchy, usually means irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive.

Feminist theory points out, however, that these gender roles are produced by patriarchy rather than by nature. And they have been used to justify many inequities, which still occur today. For example, women today are still excluded from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions in the family as well as in the world of business and politics. Men still tend to receive higher wages than women for doing the same job. And traditional gender roles still tell women, among other things, that they are not cut out for careers in areas such as mathematics and engineering and that, regardless of the job a wife holds outside the home, she has primary responsibility for the children and for domestic chores.

The objectification of women

From a patriarchal perspective, women who adhere to traditional gender roles are considered "good girls." They are put on pedestals and *idealized* as pure, angelic creatures whose sense of self consists mainly or entirely of their usefulness to their husbands, fathers, or brothers. In contrast, women who violate traditional gender roles are thought of as "bad girls," especially if they violate the rules of sexual conduct for patriarchal women, such as dressing or behaving in a manner that could be considered sexually provocative. Patriarchal men sleep with and then discard "bad girls"—who are relegated to the role of *sex objects*—but they marry "good girls" because only a "good girl" is considered worthy of bearing a man's name and children.

Feminist theory points out, however, that both "good girls" and "bad girls" are *objectified* by patriarchy. That is, they are not viewed as independent human beings with their own goals, needs, and desires. Rather, they are evaluated only in terms of their usefulness to patriarchal men. They are viewed only as patriarchal objects. If you consider again the examples of patriarchal stereotypes

listed earlier, you'll see that they all fall under the "good girl"/"bad girl" categorization of women. Virginal angels and selfless nurturers are examples of patriarchal "good girls"; nags, gossips, seductresses, and "bitches" are examples of patriarchal "bad girls." So even those patriarchal stereotypes that appear to be "positive," such as virginal angels and selfless nurturers, are damaging because they reduce women to their roles as patriarchal objects and suggest that "good" women aspire to nothing else.

Sexism

Patriarchy is based on sexism, which is the belief that women are innately (that is, by nature) inferior to men: less intelligent, less rational, less courageous, and so forth. For this reason, sexist individuals believe that traditional gender roles—which cast men as decision-makers and women as dutiful followers—are right and natural because men's innate superiority dictates that they should be in charge, not only in the family but in business, politics, and all other important social institutions. Although in everyday language the term *sexist* is usually reserved for a person who expresses his or her patriarchal beliefs with particular arrogance, self-righteousness, or anger, the term really applies to any person who holds sexist beliefs as well as to any practice, policy, or custom that disadvantages women only because they are women. Thus the terms *patriarchal* and *sexist* are more or less synonymous, although the term *sexist* is usually considered insulting while, at least for patriarchal men and women, the term *patriarchal* is not.

In order to oppose sexism, many feminist thinkers differentiate between our *sex*, which is our biological makeup as female or male (for example, our sex organs and body chemistry), and our *gender*, which is our cultural programming as feminine or masculine (for example, our behaving as "sweet little things" or "macho-men"). Feminism argues that while we may be born female or male, we are not born feminine or masculine. Rather, it is society that decides which behaviors are considered feminine, and therefore appropriate only to females, and which behaviors are considered masculine, and therefore appropriate only to males. As Simone de Beauvoir argues in her groundbreaking book, *The Second Sex* (1949), "One is not born a woman; one becomes one." In short, women wear pointy shoes with high heels not because they have pointy feet and need help reaching the top shelf of the cupboard, but because patriarchy tells them such footwear is feminine. And such footwear is considered feminine because, among other things, it makes women less mobile than men and therefore, in appearance at least, less able to compete.

The "cult of 'true womanhood'"

In the nineteenth century, Victorian patriarchy promoted the "cult of 'true womanhood,'" which idealized what it called the "true woman," a concept that still influences patriarchal thinking today. The "true woman," who fulfilled her patriarchal gender role in every way, was defined as fragile, submissive,

and sexually pure. Her proper sphere was the home; she would not venture beyond that sphere because to do so would be considered unwomanly. Women who had these characteristics were idealized and considered worthy of every form of masculine protection and gallantry. Today, this feminine ideal survives in, for example, various versions of the “helpless female,” whose abilities are limited to such “womanly” domains as the cultivation of personal beauty, cooking, and home fashions and who makes men feel, in contrast, capable, powerful, and in control.

As African American feminists have pointed out, however, the Victorian definition of the “true woman” excluded African American women and poor women of all races whose survival required hard physical labor and who, because their jobs took them out of the home, were vulnerable to rape and to sexual exploitation in the workplace. In other words, a woman whose racial or economic situation forced her to perform physical labor and made her the victim of sexual predators was considered unwomanly and therefore unworthy of protection from those who exploited her. Also, because the “cult of ‘true womanhood’” originated as a white cultural ideal, women of color, no matter how feminine their attire or behavior, were generally devalued, if not entirely excluded from the definition, on racial grounds. Today, the survival of this kind of feminine ideal excludes poor women of all races whose survival requires them to be tough, assertive, or in any way “unfeminine.” Such women are often stereotyped as loud, brassy, promiscuous, and unattractive to men except as sexual objects. And the devaluation of women of color has persisted wherever the definition of feminine beauty has been based on an Anglo-Saxon ideal.

There are, of course, additional patriarchal ideologies that feminism exposes and additional concepts that feminism offers to counteract patriarchal thinking. However, these are enough to get us started using feminist theory to interpret literature. Let’s begin our interpretation exercises by analyzing Ralph Ellison’s “The Battle Royal,” a story that gives us a straightforward illustration of a form of patriarchal ideology that most readers find objectionable and that the story itself clearly finds objectionable as well.

Interpretation exercises

Rejecting the objectification of women: Interpreting “The Battle Royal”

Although Ralph Ellison’s “The Battle Royal” (1952; see Appendix C) is concerned primarily with racial issues in the post-World-War-II south, in which the story is set, there is one passage in the text that lends itself readily to a feminist analysis: the passage that revolves around the exotic dancer hired to entertain the white civic leaders. Though brief, this passage illustrates patriarchal ideology so clearly, so negatively, and with such emotional intensity that it’s well worth our attention.

Because feminist concepts help us develop the habit of noticing how characters behave in terms of traditional gender roles, you might have observed that the whole scene in the hotel ballroom is one in which the white civic leaders display symbols of their male power through their indulgence in what patriarchy calls “masculine” pleasures. It is through the story’s negative portrayal of these pleasures that we can see the text’s rejection of patriarchal ideology. And as the white men’s enjoyment of the exotic dancer is depicted as the most objectionable of their pleasures, we can see that the patriarchal ideology most under attack in this story is the objectification of women. In order to see how “The Battle Royal” achieves this effect, we’ll need to examine: (1) its representation of “masculine” pleasures in general; (2) its depiction of the white leaders’ behavior toward the exotic dancer; (3) its portrayal of the dancer herself; and (4) its depiction of the reaction of the young black men to the dancer.

The portrayal of “masculine” pleasures

The party in the hotel ballroom is referred to in the story as a “smoker,” which means a men-only gathering for the purpose of pursuing pleasures that wives and sweethearts wouldn’t enjoy and that men wouldn’t want them to see. At this particular smoker, the men indulge in a number of patriarchal-male pleasures. Find the specific textual evidence that shows us how each of the pleasures listed below is portrayed.

- 1 Smoking is a traditional masculine pleasure.
 - a What do the men smoke?
 - b What are the effects of the smoke on the air in the room?
 - c What kind of emotional atmosphere does the smoke create?
- 2 Drinking is a traditional masculine pleasure.
 - a What are the men drinking?
 - b How much are they drinking?
 - c What effect does their consumption of alcohol have on them?
- 3 Watching a fight is also a traditional masculine pleasure. How does the battle royal show us the darkest side possible of this form of entertainment?
- 4 How is each of these pleasures—including the fact that the party is held in the ballroom of the best hotel in town—a symbol of masculine power for these white men?

The white leaders’ behavior toward the exotic dancer

Of all the patriarchal-male pleasures represented in the story, the one that is most often associated with a smoker—and most often associated with male power and privilege—is the exotic dancer, the stripper who, by the time the reader sees her, has already taken off every stitch of clothing and is about to

begin to dance. Note that she is not even wearing the usual minimal covering associated with strippers: the “pasties” and “g-string.”

- 1 How does the dancer’s complete nudity heighten our sense of her vulnerability and the white men’s sense of their own power?
- 2 How do most of the white men behave toward her? Find specific textual evidence.
- 3 How is their parading her before the young black men a form of male competition, and how does it show that they consider her a symbol of their male power?
- 4 How does all of this data show us that the white men have objectified the dancer, that they do not see her as a human being?
- 5 How does this depiction of the white leaders invite us to reject the patriarchal ideology they represent?

The portrayal of the exotic dancer

Note how the dancer is described: her hair, her makeup, her frozen smile, and the expression in her eyes as she begins to dance and later as the men toss her in the air.

- 1 Does the dancer like her job? How do we know that she doesn’t?
- 2 How is she trying to insulate herself emotionally from what she is doing and from the men who have hired her? Find specific textual evidence.
- 3 If she doesn’t like this kind of work, why might she be doing it? (Consider the limited educational and occupational opportunities available to women in the time and place in which the story is set. How might a beautiful woman in need of money be drawn into such a situation?)
- 4 How does this depiction of the dancer invite us to feel sorry for her rather than blame her? (Keep in mind that, even if the dancer liked her work, patriarchal ideology would still be responsible because it is patriarchal ideology that tells women their value lies in their physical beauty, as defined by patriarchy, and in their appeal to men.)

The reaction of the young black men to the exotic dancer

Look closely at the scene in which the black youths brought in for the battle royal are forced to look at the exotic dancer. Find the specific textual evidence that answers the following questions.

- 1 How do the young black men react to seeing this naked white woman?
- 2 How do we know that the young men are well aware of the danger they are in if they show their desire? In other words, how do we know that they are well aware of the dancer’s role as the white men’s sex object and possession?
- 3 In addition, note the complex reaction of the narrator when he sees the exotic dancer. Describe his conflicted response (his opposing impulses toward her).

- 4 Explain how the narrator’s responses can be understood if we realize that he is experiencing the dancer in terms of the two reactions to women patriarchy allows men to have:
 - a men are supposed to protect women, but
 - b if the woman in question is a “bad girl,” patriarchal ideology invites men to use her as a sex object and hold her in contempt.

Focusing your essay

Given the textual data you’ve collected, you should be able to focus your essay on the ways in which the story invites us to reject patriarchal ideology—that is, on the ways in which “The Battle Royal” is an antipatriarchal text. Specifically, the story attacks the patriarchal ideology that it is natural, and therefore acceptable, for men to use women as sex objects, as tokens of their male power. The dancer’s numb state, followed by her fear and the obvious danger of rape; the very negative portrayal of the white men who hired her and who objectify her; and the confusion, fear, and anger of the young black men who are forced to look at her all testify to the story’s rejection of the patriarchal ideology it illustrates. It’s as if the text were saying, “Look at this! Isn’t it terrible?” And because “The Battle Royal” does not describe the erotic dancer in a sustained sensual manner, the story does not run too great a risk of creating in its readers the very attitude it seeks to condemn, as some depictions of women as sex objects unintentionally do.

Remember, of course, that you do not have to limit yourself to the analysis of the story I’ve offered you. You might, for example, include a discussion of the self-contradictions in patriarchal ideology that are revealed in the story. After all, the white men are all leading citizens—doctors, lawyers, bankers, judges, teachers, and the like—in the post-World-War-II south, in which the story is set, and such men were expected to uphold the patriarchal values of hearth and home. The kinds of men these characters represent would have wives and children and would hold in their hands the welfare of the town as well as the welfare of their families. Yet the same patriarchal ideology that demands they be strong, rational decision-makers also justifies their behaving like sex-crazed brutes. For it is a patriarchal belief that men are born with more sex-drive than women and that it is acceptable to sexually exploit “bad girls” because “bad girls” don’t deserve to be treated with consideration. Whatever your interpretation, be sure you understand the feminist concepts you choose to employ, compose a clear statement of your thesis, and support your interpretation with adequate textual evidence.

Resisting patriarchal ideology: Interpreting “Don’t Explain”

As we just saw, “The Battle Royal” is antipatriarchal in that it illustrates patriarchal ideology in a way that invites us to reject that ideology. Jewelle

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emotional impact on many readers. For example, you might examine the problem her characterization poses for a feminist interpretation. Although her physical appearance and manner do not fit the definition of the "true woman," much of her behavior does: her natural sphere of activity is clearly the home, we do not see her performing hard physical labor, and she is apparently sexually "pure" (in contrast to Dee, Maggie is apparently saving herself for marriage). Analogously, although she violates traditional gender roles in at least one way—like Mama, she chews tobacco, or "snuff"—she nevertheless fulfills almost all the requirements of the patriarchal "good girl." Finally, although we can see that she is victimized by patriarchal ideology, her close bond with Mama and her marriage to John Thomas seem to offer her more happiness than Dee has found thus far in life. What should we make of all this data about Maggie? Do you think the characterization of Maggie we've just outlined combats patriarchal ideology, reinforces patriarchal ideology, or is conflicted in its attitude toward patriarchal ideology? Whatever your interpretation, be sure you understand the feminist concepts you choose to employ, compose a clear statement of your thesis, and support your interpretation with adequate textual evidence.

Analyzing a sexist text: Interpreting "A Rose for Emily"

In "The Battle Royal" we saw an example of a literary work that illustrates patriarchal ideology in a way which clearly invites us to reject that ideology. As we noted in the beginning of this chapter, however, not all texts that illustrate patriarchal ideology invite us to reject it. William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1931; see Appendix B) is a case in point. While I think that we can quickly learn to see how Faulkner's story illustrates patriarchal ideology, it is more difficult for many of us to figure out whether the story wants us to accept or reject that ideology. So let's look at "A Rose for Emily" in two separate steps: (1) we'll examine the ways in which the story illustrates patriarchal ideology; then (2) we'll take the harder step—we'll look at the ways in which the story fails to reject the patriarchal ideology it illustrates. In fact, we'll see that the story endorses the sexist attitudes it portrays. We'll see that "A Rose for Emily" is, therefore, an example of a sexist text.

Don't worry if you find this second step difficult to grasp at first. Just do your best. Collect the evidence from the story you're asked to collect. And trust that future practice using feminist concepts to interpret literature will help you know when a literary work illustrates patriarchy in order to show its flaws—as we saw so clearly in "The Battle Royal"—and when a literary work accepts the patriarchal ideology it illustrates, as we'll see in "A Rose for Emily."

How "A Rose for Emily" illustrates patriarchal ideology

"A Rose for Emily" is set in the town of Jefferson during the decades preceding and following the turn of the twentieth century, and illustrations of Emily

Grierson's victimization by patriarchy abound. For example, the patriarchal society depicted in the story dictates that the only acceptable way a young woman like Emily can escape from a selfish, domineering father is through marriage, and there is nothing the town can do about the fact that Mr. Grierson forbids Emily that escape. In fact, apparently no one in Jefferson even thinks about doing something. Because Jefferson's patriarchal culture also holds that a woman of Emily's rank must not work for a living, Emily wouldn't be able to survive financially if she left her father's house without a husband to take care of her. In addition, much of the gossip and speculation about Emily, which contributes to her isolation, reveals the town's steadfast belief that the only acceptable behavior for a woman is behavior that accords with traditional gender roles. And surely patriarchal ideology contributes to Emily's apparent desperation to have a husband, any husband, and to do anything to keep him. So you could write an essay in which you argued that "A Rose for Emily" illustrates the ways in which patriarchal gender roles victimize women, even to the point of driving them crazy. And that might be a good exercise for you to do at this point. So let's collect the kind of textual evidence described earlier, which you would need in order to write such an essay: (1) Mr. Grierson's patriarchal domination of Emily; (2) the limited options available to Emily due to patriarchal ideology; (3) the ways in which Emily is oppressed by the patriarchal attitudes of the townspeople; and (4) the patriarchal aspects of Emily's relationship with Homer Barron.

Mr. Grierson's patriarchal domination of Emily

Find every example you can of Mr. Grierson's patriarchal domination of his daughter and its negative effects on her. Keep in mind that a father's patriarchal domination of his offspring goes beyond the kind of decisions a parent must make in order to protect and educate a youngster. So you'll be looking for the ways in which Mr. Grierson's decisions about Emily are

- 1 motivated by his own patriarchal beliefs concerning proper behavior for a young woman,
- 2 motivated by his desire to maintain complete control, for a patriarchal man believes it is his right and duty to control the females in his family,
- 3 destructive to Emily's ability to develop social skills, and
- 4 destructive to Emily's emotional well-being.

Keep in mind that Mr. Grierson's domination of Emily continues well into her adulthood: she is around thirty years old when he dies.

Emily's limited options

What kinds of patriarchal limitations would probably be encountered by an impoverished upper-class white woman living in a small town in the American

south during the decades preceding and following the turn of the twentieth century? Many of these limitations are illustrated or implied in the story, and these limitations would exist even if Emily were not under her father's thumb. List the ways in which Emily's options are limited in terms of the following categories:

- 1 Choice of vocation (ways of earning a living).
- 2 Choice of hobbies or leisure activities.
- 3 Choice of friends.
- 4 Marital options (the option of remaining unmarried as well as the option of choosing whatever kind of husband she wants).

The patriarchal attitudes of the townspeople

Find as many examples as you can of the townspeople's patriarchal attitudes, especially those attitudes that adversely affect Emily.

- 1 Find those places in the story where the townsfolk talk about Emily in terms of her marriageability (for example, her prospects of finding a husband and the reasons for her failure to find one by a "reasonable" age), which the townsfolk apparently consider a woman's most important quality.
- 2 Find references in the story to Emily's attitude toward housekeeping and hospitality, two other feminine domains in which she fails to fulfill her traditional role, as the townspeople are well aware.
- 3 Find as much evidence as you can that the townspeople seem obsessed with the ups and downs of Homer's courtship of Emily, especially with Emily's failure to conform to the traditional behavior expected of an unmarried lady, which failure includes her assumed descent to the status of "fallen woman" (a woman who has sexual relations before marriage).
- 4 How might the townsfolk's firm belief in traditional gender roles be responsible for their inability to see the rather obvious connection among Emily's purchase of arsenic, the unexpected disappearance of Homer, and the horrible smell coming from her house shortly thereafter?

The patriarchal aspects of Emily's relationship with Homer Barron

- 1 How is Homer a patriarchal man? (Don't ignore the imagery available to you.)
- 2 Who drives the carriage in which the couple take their Sunday drives?
- 3 What does Homer hold in his gloved hand?
- 4 What aspects of Homer's behavior can be seen as rather "macho"? (See, for example, his behavior as foreman.)
- 5 After Emily's death, what evidence is found that she expected Homer to marry her?
- 6 How, then, might Emily's relationship with Homer be seen as her attempt to fulfill her traditional gender role?

Focusing your essay

The evidence you've just collected will allow you to write an essay explaining the ways in which "A Rose for Emily" illustrates patriarchal ideology. Specifically, you can show how the story illustrates a particularly severe kind of patriarchal system operating in the small-town American south, as Faulkner envisioned it, in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, the textual evidence you've gathered will allow you to argue that the story illustrates how patriarchal ideology can drive a woman insane.

Because you're studying feminist concepts, you may feel that the evils of patriarchy are obvious in this story, and you may therefore conclude that the story is antipatriarchal. However, *your* ability to see the injustice of the patriarchal ideology illustrated in the story doesn't necessarily mean that *the story* is aware of that injustice. Perhaps you are able to see the patriarchal injustice in the text because of the feminist tools you're using and not because the story is inviting you to see it. Without further analysis, we can't say whether or not this text rejects or endorses the ideology it illustrates. So let's undertake that further analysis now.

How "A Rose for Emily" endorses patriarchal ideology

As we've just seen, "A Rose for Emily" illustrates the patriarchal victimization of main character Emily Grierson. However, I don't think we can argue that the story invites us to reject the patriarchal ideology that victimizes Emily because, for one thing, the text doesn't seem consistently sympathetic toward Emily, despite its sympathetic title. On the contrary, after her father's death, Emily is portrayed as such a rude and arrogant woman that it's difficult for many readers not to be put off by her. And the closing scene makes it difficult for many of us not to be revolted by her. Some of my students, when they learn that Emily has poisoned Homer and has slept with his decaying body, say things like "Gross!" and "Oh, that's disgusting!", and even "This story is whacked out!"

The story's outrageously negative characterization of Emily thus distracts our attention from her experience of patriarchal victimization and does not invite us to sympathize with her. That is, the text does not invite us to reject the patriarchal ideology it illustrates. And when a text illustrates patriarchal ideology without rejecting it, the effect is often the same as if the text endorsed patriarchal ideology, whether or not the text is aware it is doing so. Therefore, the unsympathetic characterization of Emily Grierson—the increasingly negative portrayal of the main character in the years following her father's death—should be enough to make us wonder if "A Rose for Emily" endorses patriarchal ideology in other ways as well. For example: (1) How is Emily portrayed before her father's death? (2) If she is portrayed differently before and after Mr. Grierson's demise, what seems to be responsible for the

change? (3) Are the other female characters all negatively depicted as well? (4) If so, are the male characters positively depicted (which, by providing a contrast, would reinforce the negative portrayal of the female characters)? Finally, (5) if the answers to these questions reveal a sexist bias, does that bias reflect merely the opinion of the story's narrator, or does the text share that bias? Let's address these questions one at a time and see what we learn.

The portrayal of Emily before her father's death

We can see that Emily conforms to patriarchal gender roles as long as her father is alive, which is, roughly, the first thirty years of her life.

- 1 Whenever she is described during this period, she is portrayed as a "good girl" and depicted in a manner that elicits our sympathy. Find all the textual evidence you can to support this claim. Note, for example,
 - a the color clothing she generally wears during this time,
 - b her bodyweight,
 - c the image of her father in the doorway and how helpless she looks standing behind him,
 - d her bond to her father right after his death, and
 - e her distress during the year that follows her father's death.
- 2 How do all of these textual elements encourage us to have positive feelings for Emily in her role as the patriarchal "good girl"?

The change in Emily's portrayal

About a year after Mr. Grierson's demise, during which time she has been ill, Emily starts keeping company with Homer Barron, in defiance of social tradition and public opinion. From this time forward, until the end of her life, she violates patriarchal gender roles in a variety of ways.

- 1 With the exception of the sympathetic image of Emily giving lessons in china-painting, a traditional feminine pastime, how is she described during this period? Find all the textual data you can. Note, for example,
 - a the severe clothing she generally wears during this period,
 - b her skin color,
 - c her bodyweight,
 - d her masculine appearance, and
 - e her behavior toward the druggist, the Baptist minister, the Aldermen, and others.
- 2 Take a close look at the description of the corpse, the room, and the bed in the closing scene. What details suggest that:

- a Emily considers Homer's dead body her bridegroom,
 - b she has slept in his dead embrace, and
 - c she has shared her bed with him, not just immediately after his death, but even after she has grown to be an old woman?
- 3 How do all of these textual elements encourage us to have negative feelings for Emily once she ceases to be a patriarchal "good girl"?

Descriptions of the female townfolk

From the opening description of Emily Grierson's funeral, every time the narrator mentions the women of Jefferson—the minor female characters—he says or implies something negative about them.

- 1 Go through the story and find as many examples as you can of the narrator's references to the female townfolk. List the qualities he ascribes to them.
- 2 What patriarchal stereotypes do we see operating here? Name as many as you can.
- 3 Does the narrator seem to believe that these qualities are characteristic of women in general? How do you know he feels this way?

Descriptions of the male townfolk

From the opening description of Emily Grierson's funeral, every time the narrator mentions the men of Jefferson—the minor male characters—he says or implies something positive about them. In fact, the narrator often describes the male and female characters' responses to the same situation, contrasting some positive quality in the menfolk's behavior with some negative quality in the behavior of the womenfolk.

- 1 Go through the story and find as many examples as you can of the narrator's references to the male townfolk. List the qualities he ascribes to them, noting how the men's admirable characteristics make the women look even worse by comparison.
- 2 Does the narrator seem to believe that the qualities he ascribes to Jefferson's menfolk are characteristic of men in general? How do you know he feels this way?

The portrayal of the narrator

The narrator's biased description of Jefferson's women and men reveals his sexism. You might even feel that the narrator's sexism is also responsible for the negative portrayal of Emily once she stops conforming to patriarchal gender roles. However, a sexist narrator, by itself, wouldn't allow us to conclude that we were reading a sexist story. For the story might invite us to

reject the narrator's viewpoint by showing him in a bad light, for example, by portraying him as ridiculous, vindictive, or obnoxious. "A Rose for Emily," though, doesn't offer us this invitation. On the contrary, the narrator is portrayed as intelligent, knowledgeable, well educated, and objective (not overly emotional about the events he narrates and therefore able to be impartial). Such a narrator tends to inspire trust in the reader, and that trust influences us to accept his point of view without giving it too much thought. So unless a feminist perspective prepared us to be on the watch for his negative attitude toward women, we might very well not have noticed it. We would probably have accepted the narrator's viewpoint uncritically. Because the text thus promotes our acceptance of the narrator's sexism, we can argue that the text shares that sexism. Find all the textual evidence you can to show the ways in which the narrator is portrayed in a positive manner.

- 1 What parts of the story, or what aspects of his language, suggest that the narrator is intelligent and well educated?
- 2 How do we know he is knowledgeable about the people and events he describes?
- 3 What textual elements give the feeling that he has maintained an objective viewpoint?

Let me pause for a moment to answer a question you might have at this point: Why do we refer to the text's sexism and not the author's? While we might be able to establish that a text has a sexist viewpoint, we can't be sure this viewpoint is shared by the author. For example, the author might have written the story to mock sexism or to vent his frustration at the sexist attitudes of others or even to "test" the sexist attitudes of his readers. We might not be able to perceive this intention, however, because the author was unwilling or unable to clarify his own viewpoint in the story or because the way we respond to the story today is different from what the author expected of his audience when he wrote it. In any event, it's best to make only those claims we can support with textual evidence, which is why, unless we've undertaken to write a study of an author's life and work, we tend to avoid referring to the author's biases and refer, instead, to those of a character, a narrator, and/or a text.

Focusing your essay

As we've just seen, "A Rose for Emily" portrays Emily Grierson in positive terms when she's a patriarchal "good girl" and in negative terms when she violates traditional gender roles. In addition, the story offers a positive portrayal of a narrator whose sexism can be seen in his biased descriptions of the female and male citizens of Jefferson. You might, therefore, focus your essay on the sexist ideology promoted by Faulkner's tale. In fact, I think we can safely go so far as to say that the characterizations of Jefferson's womenfolk are blatant

examples of patriarchal stereotyping, and so is the characterization of Emily. In fact, the text seems to make a connection between Emily's gender-role violation and her descent into insanity, as if a woman's failure to conform to traditional gender roles is, itself, a form of insanity. In keeping with this idea, you might note that Emily isn't characterized as just a mentally ill person, nor even as "just" a murderess. She is portrayed as grotesque, monstrous, unnatural, as if the story were implying that when a woman violates traditional gender roles, she becomes what patriarchy fears women will become if they embrace feminism: crazed man-killers.

As always, remember that you don't have to limit yourself to the analysis of the story I've offered you, although, in this case, the evidence you've been asked to collect provides you with at least two different feminist approaches to "A Rose for Emily." (1) You can write an essay simply showing the numerous ways in which the story illustrates patriarchal ideology, even if you agree with me that this aspect of the story is overshadowed by the text's sexism. Or (2) you can write an essay showing the ways in which the story endorses the patriarchal ideology it illustrates. Of course, you or your instructor might come up with an entirely different feminist reading of the story, perhaps one which disagrees with the claim that "A Rose for Emily" is a sexist story. Whatever your interpretation, be sure you understand the feminist concepts you choose to employ, compose a clear statement of your thesis, and support your interpretation with adequate textual evidence.

**Understanding patriarchy's psychological oppression of women:
Interpreting "I started Early—Took my Dog"**

At the beginning of this chapter I offered you a question you can ask that will help you interpret a literary work using feminist concepts: Do the characters conform to traditional gender roles? Or to put the question another way, are the female characters depicted according to patriarchal stereotypes of women? As we have seen in the literary works already analyzed, this question usually works quite well because so many texts contain characters whose experience is represented in terms of their gender roles. In other words, a great deal of literature promotes, or at least illustrates, some form of patriarchal or anti-patriarchal ideology. Given that most characters, as well as the authors who create them, live in a patriarchal society, it would be strange if this were not the case.

What can we do, however, if a literary work contains no obvious examples of patriarchal or antipatriarchal ideology, such as the kinds we see in the other literary works interpreted in this chapter, and yet we feel that *something* patriarchal is going on in the text? Subtle literary representations of the patriarchal oppression of women, which may be difficult to see at first, often take the form of psychological oppression. Now, not all literary representations of the psychological oppression of women are subtle. Some are quite clear and straightforward, for example, the low self-esteem Mrs. Johnson suffers in

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