What Houses and Buildings Represent and Their Connection with People

Most of the time, houses are mere places where people live. But on some occasions, they have a special meaning. They represent something else. Their walls, rooms, and objects may let us know many things about the present and past dwellers and happenings. They also give information about the history of the place, and especially about their influence upon people, and the way those houses affect their lives.

We are now going to see what the houses and buildings in the stories represent and mean. When houses are full of history, they also reflect tradition and origins like the house where “Rip van Winkle” lived: “Some of the houses of the original Dutch settlers were built of small yellow bricks brought from Holland” (page 4, lines 28 – 31).

On watching a house we can also see how time has gone by and its consequences as well as the effect of the elements on it: “In one of these very houses, which to be more precise was sadly time worn and weather beaten there lived Rip van Winkle” (Page 4, lines 33 – 35).

When “Rip van Winkle” comes back, he discovers eventually that a long time has elapsed. His house is abandoned and the other houses and the village itself are different: “He found the house gone to decay, the roof fallen in, the windows shattered and the doors off the hinge” (page 8, lines 15 – 17).

In the story “The Fall of the House of Usher”, the description of the mansion gives us an idea of not only its origins but also its antiquity as well: “The real aspect of the building, its principal feature seemed to be that of excessive antiquity. The discoloration of the ages had been great. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered” (page 13, lines 34 – 46).

In the story “A Rose for Emily”, the house reflects the time which has passed: “It was a big, squarish frame that had once been white. In the heavily lightsome style of the seventies set on what had once been our most select street” (page 192, lines 5 – 7).

Houses and buildings sometimes, and not surprisingly, also identify with their owner’s personality. For instance, in “Rip van Winkle”, the plight of his farm is in fact a consequence of his attitude towards it: “He also had an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labour, but as to doing family duty and keeping the farm in order, he found it impossible. In fact, it was the most pestilent little piece of ground in the whole country” (page 4, lines 28 – 30).

In “The Masque of the Red Death”, Prince Prospero decides to retire to the deep reclusion of one of his castled abbeys to escape from the fatal pestilence. The building reflects the personality of the
Prince, powerful, eccentric: “It was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the Prince’s own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girdled it (page 27, lines 11 – 13).

In “A Rose for Emily”, we can also find the identification between the house and its dweller. Emily Grierson was part of the past and so was the house. They represented the glorious past: “When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went the funeral, the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument. It was a big, squeamish frame house that had once been white decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies” (page 192, lines 1 – 7).

No one was allowed to come in. Miss Emily did not have any contact with anyone wither, not even with the occasional neighbours who tried to speak to her: “She did not ask them to sit. She just stood in the door and listened quietly until the spokesman came to a stumbling halt” (page 193, lines 28 – 29).

In “The Yellow Wall-paper”, we can see throughout the story how the influence of the room with the yellow wall paper affects the protagonist being an obsession for her. The influence is such that she eventually becomes a part of it: “I don’t mind the room, only the paper. I’m getting really fond of the room in spite of the wall paper. Perhaps, it dwells in my mind because of the wall paper” (page 77, lines 14 – 16).

In “The Fall of the House of Usher”, the identification is almost total: “The result was discoverable, he added in that silent yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family and which made him what I now saw him” (page 13, lines 10 – 12).

The identification reaches its climax when the disappearance of its dwellers brings about or maybe coincides with the destruction of the house: “For a moment she remained trembling. Then with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother and in her violent and now final death agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse and a victim of the terrors that he had anticipated. I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder” (page 24, lines 9 – 11).

Occasionally, a contrast between the former and present situation of houses and dwellers is appreciated, especially after having passed some time. So when Rip van Winkle came back and went to live with his daughter, there was an obvious contrast between the old unattended farm, and his daughter’s house: “Yet it was the worst conditioned house of the neighbourhood. Rip’s daughter took him home to live with her. She had a sung, well-furnished house” (page 10, lines 37 – 38).

In “Chickamauga”, the change which brings the contrast is sudden, draconian. In only one night, the child’s life is completely different: “One sunny autumn afternoon, a child strayed away from his rude home in a small field and entered a forest unobserved” (page 104, lines 1 – 3).

In “A Rose for Emily”, there is contrast between the past splendour of the house and the present isolation, dirtiness, and poverty: “It was a big, squeamish frame that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spared and scrolled balconies. Only Miss Emily’s house was left above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps. It smelled of dust and disuse” (page 192, lines 5 – 7).
Houses and buildings are sometimes a source of problems for different reasons. In “Rip van Winkle”, the condition of the farm was the main cause of conflicts with his wife: “In fact he declared it was no use to work in his farm. His wife kept continually dining in his ears about his idlelessness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family” (page 5, line 29 – 31).

In “Bartleby, the scrivener”, the premises of his office represented a serious problem for its owner when he discovered that his employee Bartleby practically lived there and refused to leave the place even after having been dismissed: “What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this properly yours? He answered nothing. In a word will you do anything at all to give a colouring to your refusal to depart the premises” (page 53, lines 27 – 35).

In “A Rose for Emily”, Miss Grierson has to pay for the taxes. Anyway, she ignores this fact completely and hides in her world of memories and fantasy: “I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me. Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff. I have no taxes in Jefferson. See Colonel Sartoris” (page 193, lines 33 – 42).

In “The Yellow Wall Paper”, the couple has a different opinion about the rented house, especially about the room where she stays: “I suppose John never was nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this wall paper. You know the place is doing so good, he said, and really dear. I don’t care to remove the house just for a three months rental” (page 75, lines 15 – 20).

In “The Witch of Coos” there is something in the house which disturbs the peace of its dwellers. It is a skeleton, a conflict brought about as a consequence of past actions: “The bones, they were a man’s his father killed for me. I mean a man he killed instead of me” (page 132, lines 14 – 15).

In “The Key”, Bessie the protagonist has to face problems with her neighbours and other people who try to make life hard for her. But she has also other added difficulties: “Besides human tormentors, Bessie suffered from demons imps, evil powers. She hid her eyeglasses in the night table and found them in a slipper” (page 305, lines 9 – 15).

Sometimes houses or dwellings become hiding places or safe shelters where its owners feel protected from outside menaces or perils. In “The Masque of the Red Death”, Prince Prospero retired to one of his possessions to escape from the fatal pestilence: “with these retired to the deep reclusion of one of his castled abbeys. This was an extensive and magnificent structure. This wall had gates of iron. The abbey was amply provisioned. The external world could take care of itself” (page 27, lines 10- 18).

In “A Rose for Emily”, she tried to protect her from the authorities who wanted her to pay the taxes: “See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson. The Negro appeared. Show these gentlemen out” (page 193, lines 43 – 44).

In “The Key”, Bessie feels relatively safe in her house away from neighbours and degenerates and only leaves it when it is absolutely necessary: “going out was connected with many difficulties. Then making sure that while she was out her neighbours would not break into her apartment and steal linen, clothes, documents or just disarrange things and make them disappear” (page 305, lines 2 – 8).
Some people find it difficult to be in their own house and try to spend most of their time outdoors for different reasons. For example, in “Rip van Winkle” it was his wife who tormented him talking about his idleness and careless and the ruin that he was bringing to his family: “He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head cast up his eyes and said nothing. He was fain to draw off his forces, and take to the outside of the house, the only side which in truth belongs to a hen, pecked husband” (page 5, lines 35 – 41).

In “A Clean, well-lighted Place”, the man drinking, once tried to commit suicide, he does not want to go home. He prefers to stay up and be in the café, when the waiter complains: “I wish he would go home. I never get to bed before three o’clock. What kind of hour is that to go to bed?” (page 165, lines 20 – 21).

Some odd people like Bartleby may have no home at all and live in the most strange places like an office or a jail: “It was the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office, up stairs of a building entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations, an uncarpeted office doubtless of a dusty haggard sort of appearance” (page 53, lines 5 – 10).

Occasionally houses become unusually eternal or temporary dwellings for the dead, unusual graves. In “The Fall of the House of Usher”: “one evening having informed me that the lady Madeleine was no more. He stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight, in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building” (page 19, lines 25 – 28).

When brother and sister die and the house falls to pieces it becomes the definite entombment for both. Disappearing the last dwellers the house could not stand up anymore either: “I saw the mighty walls rushing as under. There was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters, and the deep and dark tarn at my feet closed suddenly over the fragments of the house of Usher” (page 24, lines 22 – 24).

In “The Masque of the Red Death” The abbey would become eventually a grave for the prince and his friends: “And now was knowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night, and one by one dropped the revellers in the blood, bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall” (page 29, lines 20 – 25).

In “A Rose for Emily” in the day of her funeral, Miss Emily’s was not the only corpse they were going to bury: “there was a room, no one had seen in forty years. The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervaded dust. A thin acid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal” (page 198, lines 8 – 20).

In “The Witch of Coos”, Toffile, the husband, killed a man for his wife and dug him in the cellar. His skeleton now wanders around the house: “We know they had a grave down the cellar. It left the cellar forty years ago” (page 131, line 30).

As we have seen, houses are not only the place where we live but apart from that, they represent for us something that we may not notice. Our house affects consciously or unconsciously our daily life becoming in the end a part of us and henceforth our personality.
Bibliografía

García Lorenzo, María M. American Literature after 1900. Madrid: UNED, 2005