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Unlocking the Narrative Style of *A Rose for Emily*

I. Introduction

William Faulkner's short story *A Rose for Emily* has been something of a curiosity ever since its first appearance in the 1930 April edition of *Forum*. In particular, the story's pluralistic point of view and non-chronological plot structure set it apart from other works of its genre. Nothing quite like it had ever been seen before, and to this day, the debate over its proper interpretation continues. Who exactly is the narrator of *A Rose for Emily*? And why did Faulkner chose to tell the story as he did, shuffling the timeline and putting events all out of order? While many conflicting theories have been put forward over the years, the answer may actually be encrypted in the text itself. A single quote, tucked away near the end of the story, hints at both a narrator and a reason behind the non-linear telling of the story. Describing the atmosphere of Miss Emily's funeral, Faulkner writes:

“[T]he very old men – some in their brushed Confederate uniforms – [stood] on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road, but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years.” (686)

At first, this description may seem like a superfluous, although undeniably artistic, sidetrack from the main point of the story. Far from a tangent however, this quote is essential to unlocking the strange narrative style of *A Rose for Emily*. In these few lines, Faulkner provides the key to understanding the point of view, plot structure, and pacing of his remarkable story.

II. The Old Men

To find the narrator of *A Rose for Emily*, one need look no further than the opening words of the description above: “[T]he very old men – some in their brushed Confederate uniforms – [stood] on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps... (Faulkner 686). Here, Faulkner establishes the point of view from which the story is told as that of the “old men,” an archetypal group of elders speaking for the town as a whole.

Throughout the narrative, Faulkner makes use of an unusual first person plural voice to signal that the story is a collective or group telling. However, certain passages indicate that, in some way, the old men are telling the story more than the rest. As the curtain rises on the scene of Emily’s funeral, it is significant to note that, apart from Miss Emily herself, the first characters to be mentioned are the men of the town: “When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house...” (Faulkner 681). While the entire town is present, only the men are ascribed with the motive of commemorating the dead. In a lecture, Faulkner once explained that he intended the story as a memento, or “rose,” to the tragic figure of Miss Emily (“Authors on Their Works” 688). As the only town members interested in remembering Emily, the old men become the natural narrators of her story.

In his essay, *The Ghostly Voice of Gossip in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily*, Thomas Klein suggests yet another possible narrator, arguing that the voice of the story is not the townspeople, but rather the disembodied whisperings of gossip, as he points out, “First, the narrator studiously avoids identifying his or her own sex... Similarly, the narrator avoids signaling allegiance to a particular generation” (701). Though a valid consideration, Klein’s

point does not ultimately rule out the old men as the narrators of the story. On the contrary, Faulkner's careful avoidance of sex and generational identifiers suggest that the old men are a representative set. They are not so much characters in and of themselves as a voice expressing the general feelings of the town – archetypal figures much like the Chorus of Elders in Greek tragedies. This is seen most clearly in the fourth section of the story, where the narrator expresses the confusion of the town over whether or not Emily will marry her suitor, Homer Barron: “When she had first begun to be seen with Homer Barron, we said, “She will marry him.” Then we said, “She will persuade him yet.”” A few lines further down they conclude, “They are married.” We were really glad,” and then in a capricious twist of illogic, “So we were not surprised when Homer Barron... was gone” (Faulkner 685). Such a string of contradictions could not possibly come from a single person, or even a small group of like-minded individuals. In order to voice such a jumbled train of logic, the old men must be speaking for the town as a whole, not themselves alone.

III. Confusing Time and its Mathematical Progression

Just as the point of view in *A Rose for Emily* reflects that of the town fathers looking back in commemoration, the plot structure of the narrative follows the rambling pattern of their collective memory. The majority of fictional works adhere to a time-bound chronology, moving sequentially from one event to the next. Faulkner's story, however, traces the course of memory, not time, and while time is linear, memory is not. Memory follows no orderly sequence, but rather jumps from recollection to recollection, “confusing time with its mathematical progression” as Faulkner so eloquently phrased it (686). In a quantitative study on the human perception of time, Researchers F. Thomas Bruss and Ludger Rüschemdorf confirm this observation when state, “[H]uman beings remember, first of all, major events of their life.

Periods of these major events are memorized in a particular way and leave an accessible track on the human mind” (363). Understanding this by commonsense if not by scientific knowledge, Faulkner strategically disorganized the events of his story to capture the rambling quality of memory.

The tale is divided into five sections, the first opening with the day of Miss Emily’s funeral, and moving backward. The main body of the story begins with a general summary of the town’s relationship with the now deceased Emily: “Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation on the town, dating from the day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris...remitted her taxes...” (Faulkner 681). The mention of taxes sparks a story about how Miss Emily’s force of character defeated the Aldermen in a confrontation over the same. The beginning of part two sums up the encounter, “So she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell” (Faulkner 682). This leads into an account of how the town leaders tried to go behind Emily’s back to rid her property of a bad odor because they were too afraid to speak to her about it face to face.

The narrative pursues this same rambling pattern, one story recalling another, through the next two sections, ending simply and abruptly with the statement, “And so she died. Fell ill in the house filled with dust and shadows with only a doddering Negro man to wait on her. We did not even know she was sick” (Faulkner 686). Thus, the story comes full circle, back to where it began, with the death of Miss Emily. Throughout these first four sections, the reader is given a web of events, but no chronology to put them in context. Without a timeline to make sense of the episodes, the reader, and the townspeople themselves, are left to guess at their significance. Only in part five, when the story moves out of reminiscence and into “real” time, does the chronological order of events, and the meaning of the story as a whole, begin to come into focus.

IV. The Bottleneck of Years:

Whereas the memory-like plot structure of *A Rose for Emily* reflects the perspective of the town's elderly spokesmen from one angle, the pacing of the story reflects it from another. It has been widely remarked among gerontologists that, as people age, their perception of time seems to speed up, leading to an effect much like that described by Faulkner when he writes of his old men "to whom all the past is not a diminishing road, but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years" (686). Among scientific circles, this phenomenon is known as "Time Paradoxon." In their study on time perception, Doctors Bruss and Rüschildorf explain, "Periods which are filled with new things are momentarily seen as passing by quickly. Looking backwards they have made an impression, and now they seem much longer than less exciting periods of life" (363). Thus, to elderly populations, such as Faulkner's old men, the distant past does indeed seem like "a huge meadow" where time barely moves at all, compared to the "narrow bottleneck" of recent years into which time seems to rush like water through a narrow channel.

The pace of narration in *A Rose for Emily* follows just such a pattern. The first several sections of the story are told at a rambling, almost lethargic pace. Most of the episodes in these sections have to do with events that occurred in the more distant past. As the narrative winds its way back up toward the present toward the end of section four, however, the speed of the telling accelerates. The last decade before Miss Emily's death pass in three short paragraphs, composed primarily of summary: "From that time on her front door remained closed... Daily, monthly, yearly we watched the Negro grow grayer and grayer... Each December we sent her a tax notice, which would be returned by the post office a week later"... "And so she died (Faulkner 685). One has barely time to get readjusted to the idea that Emily is dead before being thrust back into the

present with a description of her funeral at the beginning of section five. Back in real time, the pace of the story continues to speed up, rushing toward the climax where, with the breaking down of a door, an onslaught of revelations is released which carry the feeling of momentum well beyond the physical conclusion of the story.

V. Conclusion

The narrative elements of Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* have been the subject of argument for years, and doubtless the debate will continue as long as literary criticism endures. Nevertheless, as this discussion has sought to show, it seems that Faulkner has provided his own answers to the some of the issues in question. In the quote cited at the beginning of the paper, Faulkner appears to have laid out a key for interpreting the point of view, plot structure, and pacing of his story. Unlike the townsfolk at the end of *A Rose for Emily*, we have no need to break down the door by force, Faulkner has already given us the key.

Works Cited

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