

# A Narratological Study of William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

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William Faulkner (1897-1962) is usually regarded as one of the most important American novelists of the 20th century, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949. "A Rose for Emily" is one of Faulkner's famous short stories which applies the conventions of Gothic fiction, and it has drawn the attention of a large number of scholars and inspired their enthusiasm of interpretation owing to its use of many experimental techniques. This article attempts to analyze the narrative techniques of "A Rose for Emily" in terms of tense, mood and voice, three concepts introduced by Gerald Genette, a distinguished French critic of structuralist narratology in his *Narrative Discourse* (1980).

*Keywords:* William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily", narrative techniques, Gerald Genette, narratology

## Introduction

Published in *Forum* on April 30, 1930, "A Rose for Emily" is one of the earliest and most famous short stories by William Faulkner (1897-1962), an American writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949. The story is mainly about the tragic life of Emily Grierson, a declining aristocratic lady in a small town called Jefferson in the South after the American Civil War. When she was young, Emily's father, in order to maintain the so-called family status and dignity, drove away all the men who came to her door to woo Emily, depriving her of the right to pursue happiness. After her father's death, Emily fell in love with a foreman named Homer Baron who came to town to pave the sidewalks. However, their marriage was opposed and hindered by the townspeople and Emily's relatives, and Homer had no intention of marrying her, as he once said that he liked men. In desperation, Emily poisoned him with arsenic and shared a bed with his corpse for 40 years. It was only when she died at the age of seventy-four that the townspeople discovered the secret after attending her funeral.

In the presentation speech when awarding Faulkner the Nobel Prize in 1950, Gustaf Hellström, Member of the Swedish Academy, described William Faulkner as "the great experimentalist among twentieth-century novelists" (quoted in Kinney, 1978, p. xi). Faulkner has applied many experimental techniques in the "A Rose for Emily" as is mainly reflected in the use of embedded structures, alternating inversion of text time, interspersing and jumping, the first person plural narrator and the use of multiple voices and perspectives, all of which fit in well with Gerald Genette's narrative theory.

In *Figures III*, Gerald Genette, a French structuralist narratologist, divides narrative works into three levels: *histoire* (story), the content of the story told; *recit*, the text (narrative) read by the reader; and *narration*, the act or process of producing the discourse (Genette, 1972, pp. 71-76). The content of the story is relatively fixed, but there are many ways to tell the story. So the theory of narratology is generally used to study literary works, mainly from the aspect of narrative discourse. In his *Narrative Discourse*, Genette explores the narrative discourse of the novel from three aspects: tense, mood and voice, with tense concerning the relationship between story time and text (narrative) time, mood about narrative distance and perspective, and voice about the relationship between narrator and story (Genette, 1980, pp. 31-32).

### A Narratological Study of "A Rose of Emily"

#### Tense (Temporal Order)

According to Genette, the relations between the time of the story and the (pseudo-) time of narrative can be studied according to three essential determinations: order, duration and frequency (Genette, 1980, p. 35), among which we will mainly focus on order, that is, the "temporal order of succession of the events in the story and the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative" (Genette, 1980, p. 35), as is the most conspicuous feature in "A Rose for Emily". Genette uses "the general term anachrony to designate all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative," which is mainly divided into two types: *analepsis* (flashback) and *prolepsis* (flash-forward) (Genette, 1980, p. 40). Obviously, Faulkner has used the narrative technique of anachrony in "A Rose for Emily". Just as Wang says, "A characteristic of Faulkner's novels is to break the linear narrative order, to disrupt the chronological order, to break the story into many fragments, and to have various characters tell the story from different perspectives" (Wang, 2001, p. 35). We'll follow Genette's method of presentation in his *Narrative Discourse* by using different ways to number the events in the temporal order in both the story and narrative level. Hence, capital letters A, B, C, D... will be used to number the events in "A Rose for Emily" in the order in which they are narrated in the text; Arabic numerals 1, 2, 3, 4... will be used to describe the chronological order of the events when they happened in the story, and the chapters of the short story are numbered by Roman numerals I, II, III, IV, and V. Then we get the following table:

Table 1  
*Narrative Order and Story Order in "A Rose for Emily"*

I	A23 When Emily died, the whole town went to her funeral. B13 Emily was exempt from the tax by Colonel Sartoris. C18 Ten years after Colonel Sartoris's death, a new government demanded that Emily pay taxes and send a delegation to her house, but in vain.
II	D11 After the neighbors complained about the smell issuing from Emily's house to the 80-year-old mayor, Judge Stevens, four men sneaked into Emily's yard to sprinkle lime, and the smell disappeared a week or two later. E1 When Emily was young, her father shut out all the young men who intended to propose. F2 When Emily's father died, she insisted that he wasn't dead, refused to let the body be disposed of, and three days later broke down so that her father could be buried
III	G3 After being ill for a long time, Emily reappeared in the public with short hair and looked like a little girl. H4 Northerner Homer Barron led the team to pave the sidewalks in the town, the two got acquainted with each other, and drove together every Sunday afternoon. I8 Emily went to the drugstore to buy arsenic. She was in her early thirties, still slim, thinner than ever.
IV	J5 Concerning the gossip of Emily's marrying Homer, the men did not want to interfere, and the women forced the Baptist minister to visit Emily at her house.

	<p>K6 The minister's wife wrote to Emily's relatives in Alabama.</p> <p>L7 Two cousins arrived; Emily was busy preparing for the wedding; Homer left.</p> <p>M9 A week later the two cousins left.</p> <p>N10 Three days later Homer returned, but soon disappeared, and the front door of Emily's house closed.</p> <p>O12 After six months off the streets, the next time people saw Emily, she had put on weight and her hair had gone grey.</p> <p>Q14 The front door of Emily's house remained closed, except when she was about forty, and for six or seven years it was open to teach porcelain painting lessons to the daughters and granddaughters of Sartoris's contemporaries.</p> <p>R15 A new generation took the reign, the students of the painting class grew up, left, and the front door of Emily's house closed forever.</p> <p>S16 Emily refused to let them fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a free mailbox to it.</p> <p>T17 The government sent her a tax notice every December, but they were always returned a week later by the post office as unclaimed.</p> <p>U19 Emily closed off the upstairs floor and occasionally appeared in the downstairs window.</p> <p>V21 Emily died in a room downstairs with only an old servant looking after her.</p>
V	<p>W20 The black servant greeted the first of ladies at the front door, then went out the back door and disappeared.</p> <p>X22 Emily's cousins arrived and held Emily's funeral the next day.</p> <p>Y24 People forced open a room upstairs that no one had seen for 40 years.</p> <p>Z25 The remains of Homer, in an embrace position, were seen on the bed of the room arranged as a wedding house, with an indentation and a lock of iron-gray hair on the pillow next to it.</p>

As can be seen from the table above, the first chapter of "A Rose for Emily" begins with Emily's funeral, the fifth chapter returns to her funeral, and then people break into the door to uncover the mystery. This is Faulkner's preferred "circularity" (Blotner, 1991, p. 160), just like Genet's embedded frame theory. Faulkner freely used flashbacks, flashforward, interspersed narratives, interweaved and leaping narrative in the novel, making the text time staggered and inverted. The story seems to be broken into pieces of fragments, making the reader's reading experience fresh and exciting just like playing a large jigsaw puzzle.

### **Voice (Narrative Voice)**

The narrative features of "A Rose for Emily" are also reflected in the use of first person plural narrator and multiple voices and perspectives. Genette argues that the difference between mood and voice is who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective (who sees)? and who is the narrator (who speaks)? (Genette, 1980, p. 186). Susan S. Lanser differentiated between authorial voice, personal voice and communal voice in her *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (1992). She used "the term authorial voice to identify narrative situations that are heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential" (Lanser, 1992, p. 15), which is usually called the traditional "third-person" narration in which the narrator is not a participant in the fictional world (Genette, 1980, pp. 244-245). The term personal voice is used to refer to "narrators who are self consciously telling their own histories", but not necessarily to designate all "homodiegetic" or "first-person" narratives, that is, "all those in which the voice that speaks is a participant in the fictional world" (Lanser, 1992, pp. 18-19), but only those "autodiegetic" by Genette in which the "I" who tells the story is also the story's protagonist (Genette, 1980, pp. 227-247). By communal voice Lanser means "a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority... a practice in which narrative authority is invested in a definable community and textually inscribed either through multiple, mutually authorizing voices or through the voice of a single individual who is manifestly authorized by a community" (Lanser, 1992, p. 21).

Lanser also distinguish three types of communal vice: "a singular form in which one narrator speaks for a collective, a simultaneous form in which a plural 'we' narrates, and a sequential form in which individual members of a group narrate in turn" (Lanser, 1992, p. 21). Just as Cheng Xilin claims, the narrator in "A Rose for Emily" belongs to the simultaneous form of "communal voice", and the narrator "we" "is actually only a resident of the town, but it represents the observation and opinion of the residents of the southern town (Jefferson) in the novel about the heroine Emily. The narrator is limited in what he sees and hears, and is unable to personally observe many of the events that take place in Emily's mysterious mansion" (Cheng, 2005, p. 68). Therefore, the narrator's perspective is limited, and the use of multiple perspectives is inevitable.

Kirchdorfer argues that "A Rose for Emily" uses "an unknown, omniscient narrator, fond of using the plural we, a narrative strategy that establishes more distance between author and narrator than if the author had employed the singular I" (Kirchdorfer, 2017, p. 147). Just as Sullivan notes, "Faulkner gives the narrator neither face, sex, name, occupation, nor age" (Sullivan, 1971, p. 166). Moreover, this enigmatic narrator chooses an unpredictable narrative person, switching back and forth between "our", "they", "people", "we" and "they", the narrator "we" and the reflector "they" are used interchangeably. In the first chapter, "they mailed her a tax notice" (Faulkner, 1942, p. 8); in the fourth chapter, "we sent her a tax notice" (Faulkner, 1942, p. 20), and "they" seem to merge with "we". Thus, the reader "realizes immediately the vagueness of the pronoun focus within this story. Within all five sections we note a continual shifting of person, from *our* to *they* to *we* (all italics added). And this shift is further complicated by implied shifts of referents for the various pronouns. That is, *our* does not always have the same referent, nor do *they* and *we*!" (Nebeker, 1970, p. 4). As a result, the meaning of the text has become ambiguous and confusing, causing certain difficulties for readers' interpretation. According to Richardson, "It is the very ambiguity and fluctuations of the precise identity of the 'we' that are among its most interesting, dramatic, and appealing features..." (Richardson, 2006, p. 56).

### **Mood (Narrative Perspective)**

In "A Rose for Emily", not only does Faulkner use multiple person narration, he also uses multiple narrative perspectives. For example, after the description of Emily's house in the first chapter, the narrator uses the highly subjective words "an eyesore among eyesores" (Faulkner, 1942, p. 7). When the second generation of mayors and aldermen sent a delegation to visit Miss Emily, they described the interior of her house and her appearance from the perspective of the members of the delegation, saying that "She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water..." (Faulkner, 1942, p. 9). In both cases, the voice is obviously of an omniscient narrator, but viewed through the perspective of the new generation, because the older generations who respected the old Southern tradition and regarded Emily as a symbol of that tradition would never have used such expressions to describe their monument and her house.

Both an omniscient narrative voice and perspective is used in the description of the smell incident, when four men sneaked into Emily's yard to sprinkle lime and in the third chapter, and when Emily went to the drugstore to buy arsenic, where the narrator was not present, but there was a detailed description of Emily's appearance and her conversation with the drugstore owner. The law requires the buyer to explain the purpose before the purchase, but neither did the owner dare to ask questions due to Emily's aggressive eyes and arrogant posture, nor did he dare to come out again, instead he sent a negro delivery boy to bring her the package. In view

of the fact that no third person was present at that time, and the pharmacy's owner's conduct was in violation of the law, he could not disclose the details to the third person, so the narrator here also adopts an omniscient perspective. The omniscient narrator also reveals to us what he has seen, "When she opened the package at home there was written on the box, under the skull and bones: "For rats" (Faulkner, 1942, p. 16).

However, there are also other cases where the narrative voice and perspective of the omniscient narrator is totally replaced by the plural narrator "we". After Emily's funeral, people forced open a room upstairs that no one had seen for 40 years. "The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust. A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal..." (Faulkner, 1942, pp. 21-22). Then the eyes of the observers pass, in turn, over "the valence curtains of faded rose color", "the rose-shaded lights", "the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver", "a collar and tie", the carefully folded suit, "the two mute shoes and the discarded socks", and then the man lying in the bed. Then everybody in the room was shocked by the scene, "For a long while we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin... Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head" (Faulkner, 1942, p. 22).

The first thing we need to think about is, who are the "they" that broke down the door? Obviously, it can not be the predecessors of the deceased Emily, nor can it be the peers of Emily who is already 70 or 80 years old, and it is likely to be her next generation or even younger generation. As early as the fourth chapter, during Emily's cousin's visit, the narrator informs us that Emily has gone to order men's toiletries, and that it has been more than 40 years since they were engraved with H. B., Homer's initials. So it's possible that the people who broke into the room did not know what was inscribed on it, hence, "the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured" (Faulkner, 1942, p. 22). In addition, Homer's name does not appear in this scene, but is referred to as "The man", "him", etc. The narrator is no longer omniscient, his voice and his perspective has been completely replaced by that of a "we" narrator.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the narrative techniques in "A Rose for Emily" mainly lie in the use of anachrony, the employment of first person plural, we-narrator, and multiple voices and perspectives, etc. The use of anachrony, or the inconsistency between text time and story time makes the text seem to be upside down, messy, broken, and illogical; due to the rapid changes of pronouns and their references, and due to the overt and covert shift of narrative perspectives, the identity of the mysterious first-person plural narrator is difficult to distinguish, all these make readers' interpretation of the text rather challenging but also inspires their wild imagination and brings them a new reading experience. Although the narrator knew Emily's secret very well, he chose to reveal the suspense at the last moment, so he pretended not to know everything that happened in Emily's room, and never entered Emily's consciousness from beginning to end. All that we know about Emily is through the gossips of the people in the town of Jefferson. "We' narration is especially effective in juxtaposition to other, traditional modes of narrating. This results in a distinctive kind of multiperson narration that continuously defamiliarizes the conventional nature of traditional narrative forms" (Richardson, 2006, p. 56).

William Faulkner applies the conventions of Gothic fiction in creating "A Rose for Emily" with its gloomy and uncanny settings, eccentric and grotesque characters, sensational murder, mysterious disappearance as well

as a sense of dreadful mystery. Owing to Faulkner's experimental application of various narrative techniques, the mysterious horror atmosphere and the shocking effect of the story has been successfully achieved. Such effective horror not only provokes us to reflect on Emily, the tragic protagonist who impresses us as obstinate, eccentric, isolated, asocial, twisted in personality, refusing modern changes, living in the past, but still deserves our sympathy, as she is a victim of southern aristocratic traditions, alone, penniless, innocent, longing for love, defying conventions, considered to be a living monument, dead while alive as a symbol of tradition. It also arouses us to meditate on how haunted and paralyzed the South was after the Civil War by its conception of its own glorified and genteel past.

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