

William Faulkner



A Rose for Emily

Narrative Voice Review

- The Grimm Brothers utilize a point of view termed **third person narration**: Their narrators act as outside sources of information using authoritative voices who are not participating in the unfolding events of the story.
- On the other hand E. A. Poe and Charlotte Gilman use narrations told with a **first person point of view**. The narrator acts as a protagonist and creates action within the story. *Reader should confirm reliability of information.*
- William Faulkner, a *Modernist* writer, a great experimenter, utilizes a narration which is *very* complex in his story “A Rose for Emily.” This story uses a **first person plural narration**. The reader is shown a multitude of voices speaking. Much critical discussion exists on this topic.
- In this particular story the reader is exposed to a collection of contrasting opinions; sometimes the voice is presented as someone who is only casually involved in her life, sometimes the voice is intensely involved in the daily routine of Miss Emily’s existence.

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- The first sentence opens with the phrase “our town”— this immediately offers a sense of the whole community’s view of the events to unfold.
- The full story is presented as a collective group thought from one small town.
- Miss Emily herself appears as both an individual *and* as a symbol in the random collection of voices which relate stories in a montage pattern and scrambled chronology. This heightens the tension in the plot. Builds suspense and speculation. *Plus* this technique represents the manner an average person tells a story on a front porch: meandering, often stepping backwards to reveal a forgotten item, or add an element of important gossip.

William Faulkner

Quick Background

- born in 1897 in a town called New Albany
- the family moved to Oxford, MS
- Faulkner spent the majority of his life in this small northern MS town
- after 1925 he lived in seclusion in Oxford; with this in mind it is important to note the date that “A Rose for Emily” story was first published April 30, 1930

Writing Style

- his writings overall are intentionally challenging, obscure, disagreeable
- intensely experimental in some cases
- most of his writings require active mental-exercises for the audience
- he loves using long-winded sentences which can run for pages at a time
- he lets his theme evolve slowly progressively though the subtle word plays
- often, as in the case with this short story, his novels and tales do not always follow a stereotypical linear chronology

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Faulkner's Experimental Forms

- his work shows an early form of magic-realism, a genre of writing which was later popularized by the Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez
- as Modernist he utilizes a *psychological*, emotional approach rather than a *logical* sequence of events
- a majority of Faulkner's work uses experimental techniques to explore psychological and physical violence
- no matter the race, orientation, class of his characters, he works towards explaining the complexity of being human
- with “interior monologues” and projections of events through memories or the consciousness and subconscious of the protagonists, he encourages ironic psychological readings of all his characters
- will frequently mix different stream of consciousness (or interior monologues) within one sentence or paragraph

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Issues of Race

- Although Faulkner often will use racial slurs in his work, he himself is not a racist— he exposes a raw, ugly, common element of the Old South
- the “n-word” is often displayed in the voices of white males
- it is important to note what characters use the slur, and which ones do not; as well, note the situations which provoke the racism to be shown
- his African-American characters can be seen as stereotypical models if you read them too hastily— however, more often than not, these figures he creates are strong, psychological portrayals of a community quietly enduring an extreme amount of bigotry and repression

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Quick Facts

- he often evokes the past is always present with us
- often mixes colloquial language with formal polysyllabic words

In *As I Lay Dying* for instance, when one of his principle characters, a young boy, narrates a portion of the book through interior monologues.

Faulkner gives the character a highly educated formal voice—utilizing expressions and phrases a boy his age would never comprehend.

- in his writings he often recreates his home town of Oxford in the fictional mask of Jefferson MS, a small town in the fictional county of Yoknapatawpha

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Important Items to Consider

- 1. What is the conflict type in this story? What evidence defends your choice?*
- 2. Which character has a stronger disconnect with reality:
Emily, her father, or the townspeople themselves?*
- 3. Aside from the obvious conclusion, what other elements reinforce this tale as a Southern Gothic genre?*
- 4. Is Emily a figure of obsessive calculation, like Poe's unnamed narrator, — or is she a crazy old woman living in a world of delusion, like Jane? What evidence in the story defends your choice?*
- 5. Compare Miss Emily against the other protagonists in past readings for class: the Goose Girl, Mrs. Mallard, and Jane. What similar traits do these characters transform after their initial withdrawals from their communities? — what dissimilar traits?*

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Emily, the Protagonist

- the diction and syntax of the various narrations create a common view of the protagonist as a symbol of the Old South, pre-Civil War; in the beginning the town shows a reverence for her heritage and status in Jefferson— she represents what the South lost in the war; the younger generation however feel otherwise—to them she is a image of the South’s failure specificall
- she is portrayed in a traditional Southern Gothic approach; she is shown with a psychological breakdown and grotesque imagery
- her apparent rejection of the town’s values and opinions, her stern actions and reactions promote a stronger local color within the story
- her life is always on display allowing information to constantly be available for the different voices of narration

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- likewise notice *how* the information changes in the narratives
 - different scenes of her life are told by various other people
- an example of changing tones is shown in the case how most of the sections call African-Americans as the then accepted term of Negroes. Only in two sections, does the voice use racial slurs—in section two, Judge Stevens uses the “n-word” in spoken dialogue (303). In section three however, the word is shown frequently when describing the construction of sidewalks (304).
- This scene in particular shows the typical African-American character in Faulkner’s stories: the actions of the black men working is shown as steady, enduring to the opposition around them.
- Throughout the text, the community itself is shown as a place where individuals seem to lose their identity. The “we” most often can be representing anyone/everyone in the town no matter the gender, race, or class.

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- The “we” transforms and changes from different groups of people— from the large group of citizens who live in “our town,” who attend the funeral, to the “one of us,” a nameless character who lifts up a stray hair from her bed, who represents the few who enter the house to break into the upstairs room.
- At one point these same men are shown as a “they”:
“They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened (the room)” (307).
- The physical form of Emily transforms in the story. She shifts from being a young woman, virginal, symbolizing innocence, changes to a heavy-set woman with salty gray hair. In a manner of speaking, she transforms to a female version of her father, physically and mentally: the same repressive force that chased away her suitors and keep her unmarried for 28 odd years before she met Homer. (See page 306.)

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- Emotionally, just as James Joyce's Eveline can be seen as an object of obsessive attention and is physically confined, Emily is under her father's obsessive control but apparently she is *psychologically* confined, not *physically* confined.
- She can be seen both as an icon of a passive victim, and at the same time, as an angry force opposing her father's feelings, and even the town, even though she abides by the culture's expectations.
- Once her father passes away, she reacts to the outside forces of the town by keeping Homer Barron by her side as an element under her full control.

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Possible Parallel Characteristics Within Three Stories

Miss Emily can mirror either Poe's Unnamed Narrator or Gilman's Jane.

Miss Emily = Unnamed Narrator

- tragic endings
- multiple views of misrepresentation
- these drive character to murder
- intellectual, in control, willful
- controlled by father-figure / society
- imprisoned, manipulated by father-figure
- intensified transformation of personality
- suggestive, possible gender politics

Miss Emily = Jane

- tragic endings
- multiple views of misrepresentation
- these drive character insane
- naive, no control, no self-will
- controlled by father-figure / society
- imprisoned, brainwashed by father-figure
- radical, mental transformation
- definite gender politics

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Motif

- A **motif** is a recurring subject, theme, or idea which appears in literary works.
- In the case of “A Rose for Emily,” Faulkner continuously mentions smells, dust, and decay throughout the story. Almost immediately, at the beginning of the story Faulkner indicates how much dilapidation has occurred in the South. The scene in which the tax collectors appear at her door in section one describes her residence:

It smelled of dust and disuse—a close, dank smell. The Negro led them into the parlor. It was furnished in heavy, leather-covered furniture. When the Negro opened the blinds of one window, they could see that the leather was cracked; and when they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray (302).

- Faulkner continually returns to these elements throughout the story as a subconscious reminder and foreshadowing element of the story’s closing grotesque image.

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The Title “A Rose for Emily”

- It does serve a purpose despite the fact a rose does not appear in the story. The wording creates a mood through its evasive nature; it is ambivalent to establish an atmospheric tone.
- In addition numerous critics like to propose what/who in the story is *the* rose.
 - > One likely candidate is Homer himself, preserved in a sense like a dried flower pressed in a book.
 - > Another suggestion is the story itself represents the rose.
- Another discrepancy in the title is the fact throughout the story Emily is referred to as “Miss Emily,” not just by her first name. No one sees Emily, the person, they only see Miss Emily, the icon. No one knows the true nature of the woman, they simply invent their own ideas around her to suit their stories and gossip.

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The best interpretation

The title is Faulkner's voice, the author declaring his intentions.

Faulkner himself once said he imagined the writing as a gift to the character, to the Miss Emily he portrays. In this manner, using his voice for the title, he establishes the story as a tall tale, a collection of others' opinions.

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William Faulkner speaks on “A Rose for Emily” in 1955:

I feel sorry for Emily’s tragedy; her tragedy was, she was an only child, an only daughter. At first when she could have found a husband, could have had a life of her own, there was probably some one, her father, who said, “No, you must stay here and take care of me.” And then when she found a man, she had had no experience in people. She picked out probably a bad one, who was about to desert her. And when she lost him she could see that for her that was the end of life, there was nothing left, except to grow older, alone, solitary; she had had something and she wanted to keep it, which is bad—to go to any length to keep something; but I pity Emily. I don’t know whether I would have liked her or not, I might have been afraid of her. Not of her, but of anyone who had suffered, had been warped, as her life had been probably warped by a selfish father

[The title] was an allegorical title; the meaning was, here was a woman who had had a tragedy, an irrevocable tragedy and nothing could be done about it, and I pitied her and this was a salute . . . to a woman you would hand a rose.