Narrative Time in Faulkner's "a Rose for Emily"

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Abstract: This paper attempts to make an analysis of the functions of narrative time in William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily" from the narratological perspective. Through construing the discordance between narrative time and story time, it explores the indispensable role of narrative time in setting a series of suspenses, constructing Emily's identities in a dynamic way, and revealing the themes relating to time, thereby highlighting the inseparability of the story's form and content.

1. Introduction

"A Rose for Emily" written by William Faulkner tells a horrifying story of a supercilious spinster called Emily Grierson. Bizarrely, this story is not told in the traditional linear fashion, but cut into several tiny plots in disorder and threaded subtly by the narrator.

Arguably, time is the target of criticism for this story. For instance, the chaotic time sequence can be deemed as a reflection of townspeople's thoughts (Rodman, 1993); the time of death may pose a suspension between present and past, between life and death (Harris, 2007); and the violation of the chronological order is positioned to hint two opposing attitudes about time (Vartany, 2011). However, these critics only make oblique references to the concept of time but fail to conduct a systematic analysis. While on the contrary, a few scholars pay more attention to formal methods, some extrapolating the chronologies (Bu & Jiang, 1982) and others basing their textual analyses on Genette's narrative discourse (Ahmadian & Jorfi, 2015).

Hence, it is highly required to make a compromise and improvement. On the one hand, Genette (1983) concerns the discordance between the successive order of events in the story and narrator's disposition of them, known as story time and narrative time respectively, terming this kind of arrangement as "anachronies" (p. 35). On the other hand, the ingenious form of the story should still condescend to serve under its content. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the narrative time in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and explore its requisite role in creating a strand of suspenses, shaping Emily's identities, and revealing the themes of time in this story.

2. Time Used for Setting Suspenses

In the course of the narrative, the unnamed narrator "fractures, shifts, and manipulates time" (Ahmadian & Jorfi, 2015, p. 220). The story starts with Emily's funeral at which townspeople flock to pry into the secret of her house. However, the narrator delays the exposure and retrospects to the period when Emily is "alive" (Faulkner, 1993, p. 47), leaving the readers in puzzlement. Also, when Emily vanquishes the new mayors, the narrator moves to her obnoxious smell occurring "thirty years before" (p. 50) without explaining its cause and retraces further to her buying of arsenic and the disappearance of Homer, both unexplained and unsearchable. The readers, beyond all doubt, would be overwhelmed by rapid-fire riddles: where the smell comes from, what Emily buys the poison for, and how Homer vanishes without a trace. These elements, according to Watkins (1954), contribute to the "excellent suspense" (p. 509).

Then, as pointed out by Abbott (2008), temporal words "provide a grid of regular intervals within which we can locate events" (p. 4); by locating those disorderly events, the readers can rearrange the story on their own. Therefore, to begin with, an exact time is provided in Emily's story, that is, in "1894" (Faulkner, 1993, p. 47) when the old mayor exempts Emily from her taxes, and

this exemption dates from her father's death. After that, it is Homer Barron who comes to work in Jefferson "after her father's death" (p. 53). After his stay for a spell, Emily is disturbed by her uninvited cousins, buys a full set of men's wear, and demands some poison from the druggist "over a year after" (p. 54), then coming the smell. Ultimately, the depiction in Emily's funeral helps the readers solve the mystery: the arsenic is used for poisoning Homer and the smell is emitted from his corpse.

However, a careful scrutiny may discourage those readers who attempt to figure out the specific story time. But to cite Perry (1979), the rearrangement of a story inevitably results in "the structuring of a recognizably different whole" (p. 35). With only one specific date provided, a lot of unspecified temporal expressions make those calculators flinch. To name a few, Emily buys the poison when "over thirty" (Faulkner, 1993, p. 54); the smell goes away "after a week or two" (p. 51); and she teaches china-painting "eight or ten years earlier" (p. 48). Story time should be unequivocal and unambiguous since the story itself takes place linearly; whereas, the narrative time, as shown in the case of Emily, turns out to be so vague and obscure that any inference of the specific story time is doomed to fail. According to Moore (1992), there are "no few than eight different chronologies" (p. 195) which all make sense in interpreting Emily's story. Though giving a few clues for the readers to detect the deceit, the narrator, a master of time, resourcefully moors them to more suspenses and enigmas.

3. Time Used for Constructing Identities

As Rippin (2003) recollects in the interview, Faulkner maintains that the writer must "write about people, their problem, their folly" (p. 98), and so he does, in a tactful way. Preemptively, he compels his readers to look into Emily, first in awe, then in pity, finally in horror.

The narrator first and foremost sketches Emily as a self-opinioned lady of the nobility. For this purpose, narrative time is either prolonged or shortened, designedly inconsistent with story time. In "A Rose for Emily", at the very beginning part, the narrator delineates Emily's house in one whole paragraph, interrupting the events in the story and concentrating on a static scene. This pause calls the readers' attention to the house, which is antiquated, stubborn, and aloof, just as its owner be. Then, when relating the clash between Emily and the new generations, the narrator speeds up narrative time through such temporal phrases as "February came" (Faulkner, 1993, p. 48) and "a week later" (p. 48), in which case, the story time of months or weeks is compendiously narrated within one line or even several words. These summaries emphasize an "invariable state" (Shen & Wang, 2010, p. 116), that is, no matter how many mails or letters rush to Emily, she refuses any reply.

With the narrative time stepping back a span of thirty years, Emily, apart from a blue-blooded diehard, also evokes some sympathy in the readers' hearts. Influenced by the dissociation of time, the readers "compartmentalize their thoughts" (Rodman, 1993, p. 8), construct different identities of Emily, and get the whole picture of her. Emily, after her father's death, rejects others' disposition of the corpse, and becomes sick "for a long time" (Faulkner, 1993, p. 53), which, by giving a summary, indicates Emily's breakdown and sufferings. Her purchase of arsenic, under the circumstance of dislocated narrative time, naturally reminds us of the high possibility of her suicide. The readers, if marveling at Emily's invincibility in the former part, must drown themselves in heartfelt pity now, sighing with an utterance of "poor Emily" (p. 54).

Nevertheless, the story, bypassing the readers' expectation misled by the narrative time, transmutes Emily's identity into a macabre necrophile in the end. The narrator summarizes Emily's almost forty-year reclusion through three temporal verbs "daily, monthly, yearly" (Faulkner, 1993, p. 58) to amplify the mystery of her life, and then continues to narrate the mentioned funeral, at which, a pause is applied to picture the interior of that forbidding house. The story time seemingly frozen, much ink is spilled over the narrative time to create a "doom-laden atmosphere" (Skei & Faulkner, 1999, p. 153), in which, the narrator tells the truth unhurriedly, but precipitates the readers into deadly horror. Melczarek (2009) deems this as a "reflexive luxury" (p. 240). That is to say, the reflections of readers conduce to painting the panorama of Emily, not just a resister, a sufferer, or a

murderer, but a round and tragic character.

4. Time Used for Revealing Themes

As Shen & Wang (2010) state clearly, the narrator, not infrequently, rearranges narrative time for "revealing the themes" (p. 119), and this tenet shows itself more pronouncedly in "A Rose for Emily".

Primarily, the intermixing of past and present is fully displayed by anachronies. In the recollections of Rippin (2003), Faulkner highlights the influence exerted by the past on the present, perceiving that the problems in the past are "much more insurmountable" (p. 100) than those at present. It is obvious that "the past is part of the present, and vice versa" (Liu & Wang, 2007, p. 94), so Emily, the spokesperson of the past, inevitably has a brush with the North and the new generations that speak for the present. In the face of time, the new generations obey the tick of "watch" (Faulkner, 1993, p. 49), something like clock time or story time, but what they defer to is just "invisible" (p. 49) for Emily.

In addition, death, like a ghost, haunts life all the time, in the form of the narrator's repetitive telling. As pointed out by Harris (2007), narrative time "partakes of a life-in-death and death-in-life" (p. 171). In "A Rose for Emily", the narrator mainly speaks of three characters' death, from Emily to Emily's father then to Homer. The story opens with Emily's death and ends in revealing Homer's death, with in the middle parts the death of Emily's father mentioned repeatedly, that of Homer implied, and that of Emily narrated three times more. Story time allows every character to die once only, but narrative time tells the death time and time again so that the whole story is shrouded in the atmosphere of death. At the end of the story, Homer is subdued by "the long sleep that outlasts love" (Faulkner, 1993, p. 60), so death finally triumphs over love, life, even time. According to Liu & Wang (2007), this conveys that "life means death" (p. 94).

Last but not least, the variability of narrative time sparks up our contemplation of the conflict between time and human in reality. As Vartany (2011) states emphatically, the eternal theme of Faulkner's story is "man's relation to time" (p. 189). To a large extent, this relation finds expression in time's marching forward and man's looking back. Just as the characters in "A Rose for Emily" are puzzled by time's "mathematical progression" (Faulkner, 1993, p. 59), the readers also get over the barrier of story time, take in the narrative time designed by the narrator, and surrender to the memories that float in the river of time. There are a pile of "lingering events and emotions" (He & Lv, 2012, p. 132) that spring up to intrude the present life. Though going ahead on the wheels of time, everyone cannot get rid of the lingering memories and the unending reflections.

In "A Rose for Emily", Faulkner successfully takes the narrative time as his clever trick, cajoling his readers into a labyrinth and compelling them to grope their ways through their own inference and speculation. Under his pen, narrative time, when breaking through the limits of story time, manages to create a spellbinding beauty in the story's form. It does not function as an obstacle to the readers' reading and understanding, but rather, an effective means to attain three aims: setting suspenses, constructing identities, and revealing themes.

Moderately and somewhat creatively, this paper poises somewhere between two existing approaches and provides a new idea for literary researches on "A Rose for Emily". It manages to inextricably link the form and the content of this critically-acclaimed short story. Not only can the story give us full rein to admire the beauty of literature, but we, the masters as well as slaves of time, will also pay closer attention to self-examination and self-reflection so as to seek an outlet for human spirit from the perspective of time.

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