

Narrative voice and chronology in a rose for emily research paper example

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In Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," the story is told through the collective consciousness of the town, acting as a narrator that constantly switches between events and events. Gossip is the means by which the combined information about Emily is disseminated throughout the town; this adds an air of mystery to the woman, as everyone wonders about her relationship with Homer. By the time the townspeople happen upon Homer's body, they certainly learn that, but in the meantime, all they can do is speculate. Faulkner expresses this speculation and fascination with Emily's activities by having the narration and voice spread among several people, allowing everyone in the town to get their say in about what they saw Emily doing or saying.

According to Nebeker (1970), the narrator says that "he is a kind of innocuous, naïve, passive citizen of Jefferson, who relates for the reader the story of Miss Emily's life and death." (p. 3) The narrator hardly ever judges, providing as objective a viewpoint as possible on Emily's activities – her shyness, her alienation from the people of Jefferson, and her general malaise. Faulkner plays with point of view to make the narrator deliberately ambiguous, making them the ultimate omnipresent figure. They are far from an active participant in the action, merely recording everything that is happening. "The narrator does not indicate having been present, yet the degree of detail suggests that he or she either was, or has become omniscient." (Klein, p. 230) Each of the different episodes has a different section of events, all relayed by a different narrator, from children in the town to Emily's former servant. This lends credence to the idea that everyone in the town is receiving the same information through gossip. The

people of the town are almost ghostlike, knowing everything and observing all, but without taking an active role in the events that are unfolding. (Klein, p. 233)

The use of pronouns is interesting when writing the story, as the collective ‘we’ is used many times. This helps to further the theory that the story is being told by and among the people who live in the town. We never hear anything from Emily’s perspective, painting her as an outside figure and helping to hammer home the fact that she does not really belong with the others. An important distinction to make is when they finally discover Homer’s body, as the pronoun ‘they’ is used for the first time, rather than ‘we.’ The narrator says “ They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened [the door].” (Faulker, p. 796) Up until this point, the narrator was complicit in the activities of the rest of the town, but the active narrator at this juncture was not present for this discovery, perhaps in an attempt to distance him or herself from the responsibility of breaking down that door and seeing the truth of Emily’s life. (Nebeker, p. 4)

The distance between the narrator and the woman is also necessary for the climax, as the narrator(s) cannot bear to comprehend or accept what they eventually discover about Emily – that she had trapped Homer in her home and starved him to death in order to keep him for her own. This horrifying fact is something the narrator cannot bear, and so they remove themselves from the equation entirely. The shift from ‘we’ to ‘they’ indicates a refusal to be held accountable for what ended up happening; it cannot possibly be their fault, so it must be the fault of the townspeople – ‘them’. Before that

point, the townspeople were even making fun of her: “ So the next day we all said, ‘ She will kill herself’; and we said it would be the best thing.”

(Faulkner, p. 790) Therefore, whoever is narrating at that time may feel guilty for those words – if they didn’t say them personally, they took authorship of them when they joined the collective – and checked out of the communal interest in Emily, shifting to describing them instead.

The fractured chronology in William Faulkner’s “ A Rose for Emily,” in addition to the skewed perspective that comes from having the townspeople as a whole become the narrators of the short story, lends the short story an air of mystery and suspense that adds to the Gothic horror atmosphere Faulkner has created. Constantly giving the audience clues as to the eventual twist at the end of the story keeps the audience reading, and the lack of information the rest of the townsfolk have allows the audience to be just as much in the dark of the situation until the very end.

Faulker, using this unanchored chronology, takes us through a thematically significant (if not chronologically accurate) journey through the highlights of Emily’s life. By starting the audience at the funeral, it is clear that Emily will die – also, they just may get to see how by the end of the story. Then, in 1894, the audience sees the defining moment of Emily’s life – it is the point when she believes she does not need to interact with society anymore. Emily puts her foot down and says “ I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me” (Faulkner, 1970). Her stubbornness (far from becoming of a lady of the time period) leads her to become isolated from the rest of Jackson, her only other significant communication with the townsfolk being the annual tax bill, which is always ignored.

In conclusion, the narrative voice of “ A Rose for Emily” is one of the more interesting found in a short story of this type. There is no one, single narrator, as the first person plural style lends itself to a communal experience throughout the town of experiencing the life of this mysterious, reclusive woman. It creates a fascinating picture of what an entire group of people can come to conclusions about regarding a single person outside that group, as well as what happens when their curiosity goes too far.

Works Cited

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