

## Slipping Through Fingers

Every piece of writing needs a hook, captivating and enchanting the reader to read on. In the short story “A Rose for Emily,” William Faulkner does just that: tempts the reader to delve into Miss Emily’s life by starting at the end of hers. This story about the passage of time uses several methods to examine the concept of control. In William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," the fear of losing control is a theme displayed through the narrative structure as well as symbolic imagery.

The sequence of events in the story jumps around quite often. Flashing back, forward, and back again can be confusing to readers as they struggle to piece everything together for themselves. This adds to the theme of lessened control. The readers are at risk of feeling lost in the plot and allows them to experience the yearning for control. This narrative structure reflects the natural thought process. It is natural for events to be jumbled in one’s mind, which can be confusing to remember exactly when things have happened. Likewise, time seems to have passed quickly in this small town and they cannot seem to chronologically piece together Emily’s life. As they recall moments of Emily’s life they believe stand out, they piece together more and more.

A [narrative analysis](#) (Fig. 1) on Digital Yoknapatawpha illustrates the jumps of time. The story begins with Emily’s death in 1920, jumps to 1863, and back again towards the later days of

Emily's life, as illustrated by the red line below (Burgers). There are several more timeline jumps, but for the most part, the story progresses onward somewhat chronologically.

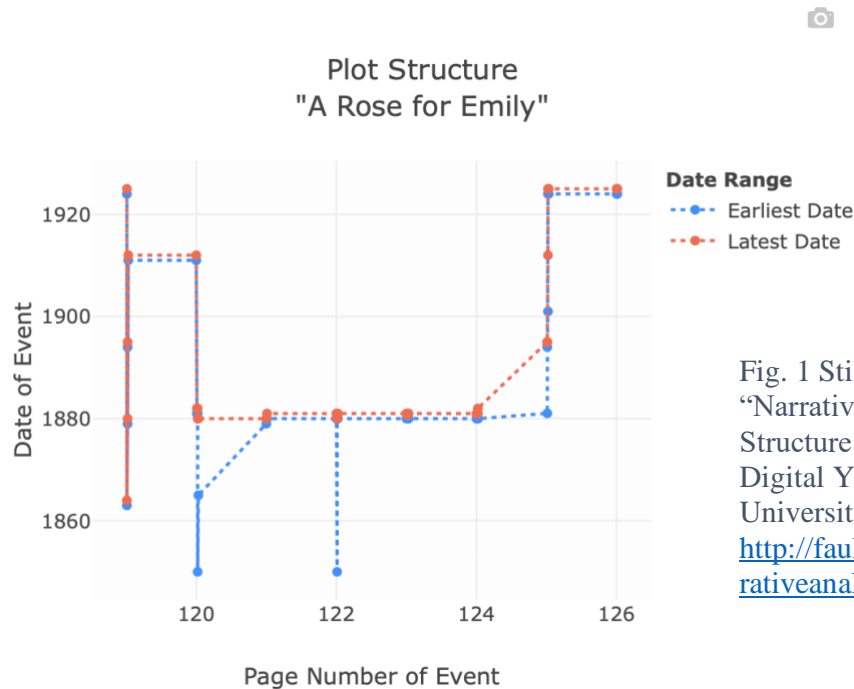


Fig. 1 Still from Burgers, "Narrative Structure Analysis: Plot Structure 'A Rose for Emily,'" Digital Yoknapatawpha, University of Virginia, <http://faulkner.iath.virginia.edu/narrativeanalysis.html>

The narrators in this story, the townspeople, struggle to control their understanding of time, but when they reach a conclusion, they feel more at peace and authoritative of their own lives. At Miss Emily's funeral, the old men were reminiscing of Emily's life. At this point, Faulkner incorporates a long metaphor on the aspect of time:

"[T]he very old men... talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs... 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 by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years" (Faulkner 859-860).

This quote is significant because it relates time to control. Humans have no control over time. It is continuous and stops for no one. Though it is a concept created by humans, it is barely

understood. These old men cannot find the end of the road, as Faulkner explains in the metaphor. Their memory is vast and not time stamped. Therefore, they have no control. By attempting to control Miss Emily's life, the town feels more at ease about not having control in their own lives.

On another note, Faulkner uses symbolic imagery to emphasize the loss of control. Miss Emily's father, Mr. Grierson represents Emily's loss of authority over herself. Although knowledge of Mr. Grierson is patchy and limited, it is clear he is a heavy pressure on Emily's life. During the time frame this story takes place, the civil war and post-war era, women played a specific role in society: to cook, clean, and be married off, mainly in the name of financial gain. Mr. Grierson didn't marry off his daughter. Rather, he kept her within the house as a housekeeper for himself. In [an interview](#) on Digital Yoknapatawpha, William Faulkner stated that Emily was "browbeaten and kept down by her father, a selfish man." When Mr. Grierson died, the town waited for Emily to go out and marry, but instead she held onto the body of her father (855). For Emily, she had had enough. She had always had her father there, controlling her every move, rejecting one man after another, and keeping her within the walls of his house. Now that he was gone, the house was hers (855). Emily kept him from leaving *her* walls. She was in control now, and she would do anything to keep that control for the rest of her life.

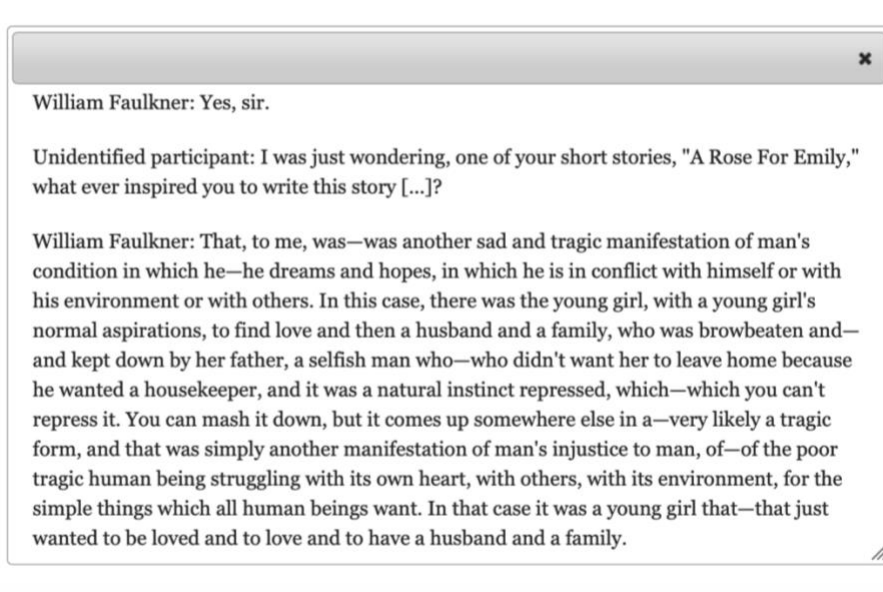


Fig. 2 Still from <https://faulkner.drupal.shantivirginia.edu/node/8140?canvas#>. Digital Yoknapatawpha, University of Virginia

Another symbol Faulkner uses is the grey hair on the pillow. A strand of grey hair typically represents old age, but in this circumstance, it represents more than that. Faulkner wrote, “Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head... one of us lifted something from it... a long strand of iron-gray hair” (860). The narrators knew it was Emily that laid beside her husband, content to have him forever. She feared losing the one thing she ever gained: control. The one thing Emily didn’t have control over was time, but Emily did everything she could to get it. By sleeping next to the body of her dead husband, she got to grow old with the cards in her hand. Not even time would take away the thing she dreaded living without.

Lastly, another symbol in this story is the rose in the title. This rose is a symbol for Homer. Emily chose him. Homer was “not a marrying man” and had already left Emily once (857). The threat of losing control caused Emily to take matters into her own hands to keep what was about to slip through her fingers. She did not want him to leave her, so instead she “plucked” him to save his beauty and the last of him for herself. She feared losing the one thing she had: control.

In conclusion, "A Rose for Emily" uses narrative flow and symbolism to describe the theme of wanting to stay in control. Faulkner focuses on control in his short story through symbols while simultaneously giving his readers a taste of being out of power. Overall, it is clear feeling a lack of authority in one's life can lead to grim consequences. When things are slipping through one's fingers, is it best to grab on tight or just let go?

### Works Cited

- Burgers, Johannes. "Narrative Structure Analysis." *Digital Yoknapatawpha*. U of Virginia, 2020, <http://faulkner.iath.virginia.edu/narrativeanalysis.html>. Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.
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