Critical Essay William Faulkner's Writing Style

Faulkner's style in his short stories is not the typical Faulknerian stream-of-conscious narration found in his major novels. However, some of his novels' narrative techniques are also present in the stories and include extended descriptions and details, actions in one scene that then recall a past or future scene, and complex sentence structure. What is important to remember is that Faulkner always has a purpose in choosing which different stylistic technique to use at which point in his stories: The narrative devices mirror the psychological complexity of the short stories' characters and settings.

One of the most effective ways Faulkner establishes depth of character and scene is by using long lists of descriptions. Oftentimes, a description of an object will be followed by a description of a character: In this way, the object and character, because they have been similarly described, take on the appearance of each other. For example, at the beginning of "A Rose for Emily," Faulkner describes the Grierson house: "It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street." Following this, Faulkner then characterizes Miss Emily, and the "heavily lightsome" style of the house parallels her physical appearance: Her skeleton is "small and spare" — "lightsome" — yet, because of her slight figure, "what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her" — "heavily lightsome." The woman and the house she lived in her entire life are inseparable. Both are now dead — she literally, the house figuratively — but even in their deaths they are described as physically similar: The house is "filled with dust and shadows," and she dies with "her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight." Stylistically, the "yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight" describes the house, the pillow, and Miss Emily, all ancient relics of a time long past.

Another example of Faulkner's using extended descriptions is in "That Evening Sun," in which the first two paragraphs describe the town of Jefferson in the present and in the past. The first paragraph, one long sentence, portrays the town's present condition: The streets are paved, there is electricity, and black women still wash white people's laundry, but now they transport themselves and the laundry in automobiles. The second paragraph, like the first, is one complete sentence, but it portrays Jefferson's past: The shade trees, which in the present have been cut down to make room for electrical poles, still stand, and the black women who wash for white people carry the laundry in bundles on their heads, not in automobiles. By juxtaposing these two paragraphs, with their lengthy descriptions of Jefferson, Faulkner establishes one of the major themes found throughout all of his short stories, the difference between the present and the past, and how that difference affects people in dissimilar ways. We are reminded of section V in "A Rose for Emily," in which that section's second paragraph, composed of a short sentence and then a very lengthy one, describes how old-timers, "confusing time with its mathematical progression," psychologically still live in the past even though a "narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years" separates them from it.

Because many of the short stories juxtapose past conditions with the present and include jumping between different times, Faulkner needed a narrative technique that would seamlessly tie one scene to another. His solution was to make an object or action in one scene trigger another scene in which that same object or action was present. For example, in "A Rose for Emily," the new aldermen's attempting to collect Miss Emily's taxes prompts the narrator to recall another scene 30 years earlier, when Miss Emily's neighbors complain that a smell is coming from her property, and they want the city fathers to do something about it. Faulkner links these two scenes by simply using the same verb — "vanquished" — to describe Miss Emily's actions: "So she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell."

Stylistically, Faulkner is best known for his complex sentence structure. Generally, the more complex the sentence structure, the more psychologically complex a character's thoughts. Such is the case in "Barn Burning," in which young Sarty Snopes is torn between being loyal to his father and doing what he innately senses is right. This conflict culminates in Sarty's warning Major de Spain that his father is going to burn the major's barn.

It is after Sarty warns de Spain and then runs toward the major's barn that we have one of the best examples of Faulkner's narrative complexity. The third paragraph from the story's end hinges on Sarty's running, just as the paragraph's last sentence itself seems to run on and on. The preceding sentence reads, "So he ran down the drive, blood and breath roaring; presently he was in the road again though he could not see." Coupled with this blindness is Sarty's loss of hearing: He is so caught up in his conflicting loyalties — and, perhaps, the guilt he might feel for being disloyal to his father — that he temporarily loses his physical senses.

Additionally, Faulkner emphasizes Sarty's psychological instability in this energized scene with descriptive terms that suggest Sarty's increasing confusion. Even before Sarty hears gunshots, he is "wild" with grief as the "furious silhouette" of de Spain's horse thunders by. When he hears the shots, he instinctively cries out to his father and then begins to run. Faulkner intensifies the scene by repeating the verb "run" and quickens the pace by including words that end in "ing": ". . . running again before he knew he had begun to run, stumbling, tripping over something and scrabbling up again without ceasing to run, looking backward over his shoulder at the glare as he got up, running on among the invisible trees, panting, sobbing, 'Father! Father!' " The sentence builds and builds, faster and faster, until it culminates in Sarty's desperate cry to his father, who he fears has been killed. The increasing intensity of the sentence mirrors the young boy's increasing concern for his father's safety.

Another example of Faulkner's complex sentence structure is in "Dry September," in which a lynch mob led by John McLendon kills Will Mayes, a black man who they suspect raped Miss Minnie, a white woman. In part, the weather is to blame for the mob's irrational behavior; it has not rained in 62 days. Faulkner creates sentences that, through a series of interrupting phrases, emphasize the weather's effect on the townspeople. One example

of this technique is the last sentence in the story's opening paragraph. Rearranged so that the subject phrase and verb stand side by side, the sentence reads, "Attacked, insulted, frightened: none of them knew exactly what had happened." However, Faulkner hints that the dry weather has clouded the men's logical thinking by interjecting between the subject phrase and the verb numerous descriptions about the stagnant air and the stagnant minds of the men. These phrases include ". . . the ceiling fan stirred, without freshening it, the vitiated air, sending back upon them, in recurrent surges of stale pomade and lotion, their own stale breath and odor . . ." Stylistically, these descriptions interrupt the sentence's natural progression of subject-verb and emphasize the weather's negative effect on the men gathered in the barbershop.

Part of Faulkner's greatness lies in his style and the way he adjusts this style to fit the subject under narration. He can adapt a more traditional type of writing to his stories — as he does in "Spotted Horses," in which he uses the Old Southwest humor formula of writing — as easily as he can invent new, complicated narrative techniques. Whichever he chooses, his style parallels the complexity of his characters and gives a unique flavor to his short stories.