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Narrative Motivation in Faulkner's A ROSE FOR EMILY

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24 indicates the day of the month, leaving the number 4 to designate the fourth month in the year, April. This date, April 24, 1916, was Easter Monday, when Padraic Pearse as commandant-general and president of the provisional Irish Republican Government read aloud the proclamation of that government on the steps of the General Post Office in Dublin. His act initiated the five-day-long "rising," which received its enduring literary memorial in Yeats's poem the following September (Jeffares 224) and was a major step toward independence for most of Ireland. The formal-numerical emphasis on this date in Yeats's poem implies the importance of the date in the mind of Irish people at the time that the poem was written. It is an all-encompassing image that corresponds with the limited image of the "stone. . . in the midst of all" (43, 55), which serves "to trouble the living stream" (44).

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KEYWORDS

Easter 1916," Irish Revolution, William Butler Yeats

NOTES

1. Some other cases where the number 4 is associated with wholeness and completion include the tetragrammaton ("YHWH"), the four-letter name of the God of the Old Testament; Aristotle's "foursquare" man; the four Gospels of the New Testament; the four angels of the Apocalypse; and the "foursquare" construction of the New Jerusalem.

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In the far-off light of Helen E. Nebeker's articles "Emily's Rose of Love" and "Emily's Rose of Love: A Postscript," this article presents another, further possibility that at best compounds and at worst exceeds the horror-effect in Faulkner's tale that Nebeker so diligently traced back in 1970.[1] Using Nebeker's articles, Menakhem Perry's exhaustive 1979 chronological-textual study, and Laura J. Getty's 2005 argument for intentionality, I will show that Faulkner's tale uses a more nuanced and subtle narrative strategy than critics have

previously perceived to achieve an even more psychologically complex effect than the hackneyed notion of "horror" encompasses.

Nebeker examines the complicated use of pronouns in light of the story's timeline. As she notes, "the truth of the Miss Emily episode lies . . . in the identity of the narrator," which is textually comprised of the pronouns "our" and "we," with references to "they" ("Thematic Implications" 4). Faulkner here effects one of his most ingenious narrative innovations: a first-person-*plural* narrator. But the narrative voice makes nothing simple: as Nebecker further notes,

> Within all five sections, we note a continual shifting of person, from *our* to *they* to *we*. . . . Thus, in the first two sections, we have ambiguously but definably presented before us three groups—the general townspeople of the inclusive *our*; the *they* of a contemporary society functioning when Mis Emily was in her late 50s or early 60s and to whom she refuses to pay taxes; and the *they* of an earlier group. ("Thematic Implications" 4; emphasis in original).

Thereby, Faulkner effects a further complexity: a composite or collective narrative voice, that may or may not span generations, that certainly convolutes the plot-timeline of its delivered narrative for motives as yet undisclosed. Examining the narrator's manipulations of the timeline, however, may indicate a motive or motives that, when taken into consideration with the directions in which the narrative steers reader attention, potentially compound if not outright reclassify whatever horror results from the text's final image. Nebecker rightly questions earlier interpretations of the narrator as singular and male, suggesting a more plausible first-person collective—and multi-generational—narrator (although phrases such as "Faulkner permits his *first person narrator* to mask" sometimes fail to specify a *plural* narrator ["Thematic Implications" 8; emphasis added]). Furthermore, in teasing out this collective narrator's presentation of Miss Emily Grierson's story—how a suitor of hers, Homer Barron, mysteriously disappears and his remains are found, after Emily dies years later, on a bed (which Emily appears to have slept in as well) in a stagnant, upstairs room of Emily's house—Nebeker concludes that by abetting if not aiding these acts, the narrative "we," representative of the Old South, triumphs over the later "they," representative of the New South ("Thematic Implications" 11).

But perhaps such a reading misses the woods for the trees. The one element that Nebeker's study appears to ignore is motive—not Emily's motive for killing and hiding Homer, which has been variously explored over the years through psychological, psychosexual, historical, metaphorical, and other various critical methods, but rather the *narrator*'s motive for presenting a text in which the clues, as Nebeker states, "are all there as early as the second section" but are presented in such a way that when we reconstruct the timeline, we can easily predict for ourselves what seems to have surprised

the "we" narrator ("Thematic Implications" 8). That is, while exploring the effects of chronology on interpretation, or untangling the chronology, or setting the chronology into stylistic context, neither Nebeker's nor any other scholar's extant criticisms attend to *why* the tale is told in the chronologically convoluted way that it is. Even after analyzing it in light of the story's pronoun usage, the story's timeline remains taken for granted—its existence goes unquestioned.

As Umberto Eco proposes in the second chapter of his *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (himself glossing Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*), "story" and "plot" actually refer to two different narrative phenomena or experiences. In short, "plot" refers to events in the story *in the order we are told them by the narrator* (34). "Story," rather, comprises events *in the order in which they occurred* in (the story's own) "actual" space-time.[2] Few short stories illustrate this distinction better than "A Rose for Emily," as the mountain of scholarship on the tale's time scheme and the effects of that scheme attests. For example, as Perry's massive study suggests, the story's "sophisticated rhetoric is designed to prevent the inversion of the story from being complete" and thereby denies the reader access to a cohesive chronology (326).

In his discussion of "rhetorical or reader-oriented motivations" whereby a text's "sequence is justified through its effect on the reader," Perry proposes that such a text's function is "to control the reading process and to channel it in directions 'desirable' for the text, so as to induce the reader to opt for the realization of certain potentialities" (40). In keeping with Nebeker's earlier proposals, we may also say that "A Rose for Emily" channels the reading process in directions desirable to *its narrator* throughout the text. As early as the story's opening lines, wherein the narrator delineates the disparate motives the townsmen and townswomen had for attending Emily's funeral, Perry discerns a tension "between two rival views of Emily" revealed by the narrator: a "magnifying" or favorable view, and a "minimizing" or suspicious view (313). Such a tension might signal ambivalence within the narration as a whole. Perry describes the interpretive effect of the text's contortions as though they both occur independently of the narrative voice and are deliberately manipulated by that same narrative voice. However, the motivation within that narrative voice remains unexamined.

More recently, Getty writes that "what the chronology *does* is as important as when the events actually take place" yet insists on "[t]he narrator's ultimately limited understanding of what has been happening" (230; emphasis in original). In proposing that the tale's "rose" exists only in the story's title, Getty extrapolates that the entire tale operates in a sub-rosa logic of silence, particularly silence in relation to Christian confession (232). Getty maintains that confession rests between Faulkner (the author) and Emily (his character) and that "the entire story operates sub rosa to conceal that iron-gray hair on

the pillow after Emily is dead. . . . The 'Rose' represents secrecy: the confidential relationship *between the author and his character*" (232; emphasis added). Getty forms this argument in two logical steps: First, "the concept of the confessional, with the carved rose above it, applies more to the Episcopal Emily than it does to her Baptist neighbors." Second, "in Emily's case, the possibility for a full confession exists only with her author, and his knowledge of her actions remains confidential until after her death" (232). That is, Faulkner deliberately convolutes the tale's chronology to delay the reader's reception of Emily's final secret out of either affection for or deference to his fictional creation.

Whatever sentimentality might be detected in such an explication (Getty's dismissal of Faulkner's own oft-quoted explanation for the story's title as "evasive" [233, n. 2] seeks only to substantiate her authorial-affection thesis), it nevertheless remains doubly helpful not only because it resurrects the notion of confession in respect to the tale, but also because it does so, contradictorily, by overlooking that the narrator is just as much Faulkner's creation as is Emily herself. Getty's and similar arguments, for all their admirable qualities, not only dangerously skirt the edge of speculating on authorial intent, but also imply a hierarchy between protagonist and narrator—to the detriment of the narrator.

Rather than reflecting Faulkner's authorial fealty to his fictional character, the narrator's finessed timeline constitutes a reflexive luxury. Similarly to Colonel Sartoris, who fabricates an excuse to remit Emily's taxes to preserve her honor, the collective narrator here seeks to escape blame (in this case, for what happened) or deflect accusations (that the townspeople should have known better and done something about it). By employing such a convoluted narrative method—often known as "stream-of-consciousness," "counter-chronological," or "Faulknerian" narration—the narrator is at the same time able to admit what the townspeople found and hint at their own possible abetting of it. The citizens of Jefferson certainly interfere in Emily's life by sending in a minister and requesting cousins come stay with her (and then cheering when Emily expels them). The townsfolk view Emily simultaneously as an idée fixe and a bête noir whose cruising with Homer Barron they monitor through the slats of their jalousies. Even if they did not know about Emily keeping Homer's body—and with so many eyes on her house, the fact that nothing approaching the size of a grown man's corpse ever exited it might well have given them pause—by the very evidence the narrator discloses they might well have suspected the murder at least. As the collective narrator states near the beginning of section V when the town has buried Emily and immediately descend upon her house, "Already *we knew* that there was one room in that region above the stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced" (Faulkner 129; emphasis added). How could the collective narrator—who clearly self-implicates here—"know" this, and what could they be after in that room *if they*

did not already have some inkling? Drawing further attention to the pronouns of the line quoted above, Nebecker deduces the point: "the implications here are overwhelming. *We* knew what was in that room; *we* had known it for forty years!" ("Thematic Implications" 9; emphasis original).

Even when not armed with the dozens of extant chronologies provided by scholarship or the constraint logic programming utilized by Burg, Boyle and Lang's 2000 study, if relatively young readers inexperienced with non-chronological narratives can deduce from the narrator's deliberate but ambivalent clues that *something* is amiss before finishing reading the story, then certainly the tale's narrator could have suspected something at Homer Barron's disappearance but either did not suspect anything (my partial contention), or actually colluded in it (Nebecker's contention). If the townspeople did not realize what was happening even as they lived the clues eventually related to the reader, then the collective narrator's convoluted time-scheme either indicates a belated realization (which the time scheme seeks to cover up), or else it reflects a subconscious inability to admit that knowledge as a result of repression (through an evasive conception of reality, which manifests itself in the story's convoluted chronology) or sublimation (achieved through the narrator's use of effusive language, which is common among Faulkner's characters, such as Gavin Stevens in *Go Down, Moses*).

If, however, the narrator remains willfully complicit in the murder and concealment of Homer Barron's body (although not necessarily complicit in any ostensible necrophilia), as Nebeker insists, then the issue of narrative chronology—the distinction between manufactured plot and temporal story—only increases the potential for the tale's horror, since the narrator admits knowledge (if not complicity) but does not confess. Getty overlooks that in Christianity, regardless of the specific denomination, confession—the admission of guilt—is only a first step toward contrition and penitence. As Nebeker indicates, the narrator of "A Rose for Emily" is anything but contrite or penitent: because the townspeople can only admit knowledge, they cannot properly confess, either because they do not perceive their complicity as wrongdoing (and so announce their involvement, even if obliquely), or cannot bring themselves to perceive it as wrongdoing (and so structure the narrative retelling of events in a way that subconsciously hints at but does not explicitly admit to anything).

If the latter is the case, then a problem persists. Not only does the story's narrator go unquestioned while obsessing over and interfering in Emily Grierson's life, but the same narrator finds it impossible even to face what the townspeople's own evidence allows careful readers to detect: their complicity in the very thing that dumbfounds them. If the former case, however, then Nebeker's schema presents us with an intensely cynical,[3] self-aware narrator who is guilty but has evaded—and must be acquitted of—guilt, and who nevertheless gets

to tell the story. Emily and the narrator get away with their respective "it"s and leave readers in an impossible moral quandary in which the nuances and subtlety exceed the boundaries described by "horror": *we* know, but we cannot act based on the evidence.

Whichever case, by focusing on the simple "horror" of Emily Grierson, we miss the degree to which the townspeople exhibit obsessive and manipulative behavior of their own. In focusing on the timeline or, going further, seeking to untangle it, we overlook the possible implications of the timeline's tangling in the first place. Somewhat as in Agatha Christie's novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Christopher McQuarrie and Bryan Singer's film *The Usual Suspects*, the audience's attention is specifically focused and manipulated *away from* as much as *toward* textual evidence by the very source of information.[4] And the ramifications fall to us.

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KEYWORDS

First-person-plural narrator, guilt, horror, motive, narrative

NOTES

1. Nebecker quotes others' use of "horror" in reference to readers' responses to the implications of the text's final image, and deploys the term herself as well ("Thematic Implications" 3). While Nebecker never clarifies her sense of "horror," by context it follows conventional notions, e.g. as defined by Linda Beyer-Berenbaum: a sense of revulsion or repulsion, differentiated from "terror" as less immediate and emotional, and therefore more intellectual (31–32). I imply the same meaning.

2. Eco's use of the English term "plot" translates the terms *fabula*, *histoire,* and *récit raconté*, and "story" translates *syuzhet, discours,* and *récit racontent,* that readers will find in any of the various extant literary guides and lexicons (such as Segre 1–56).

3. "Cynical" in Slavoj Zizek's sense, itself derived from Peter Sloterdijk: "The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask" (Zizek 29); "[cynics] know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" (Sloterdijk 5).

4. Ironically, Lawrence R. Rodgers poses the reader's relationship to the text (and by extension to the narrator) in terms of *reading and interpreting evidence*: "Cloaking an additional layer of mystery on Emily's story, the narrator's disjointed, associational recollection of details has led readers and critics to become the surrogate detectives of Faulkner's world" (121). Rodgers continues to state that "what infuses this particular story with its force is the *manner* in which the plot is related to us by the purportedly innocuous observer of Emily's life" in which "the narrator/detective's favored posture is, in the classic mode of the [detective] genre, one of surveillance and, less classically, one of judgment" (122). If so, then my extension of Nebecker's thesis brings "A Rose for Emily" in closer alignment to a text such as Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

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Mike Fink and Frontier Cosmopolitanism in Morgan Neville's THE LAST OF THE BOATMEN

In "The Last of the Boatmen" (1828), Morgan Neville uses his account of the legendary Ohio River keelboatman Mike Fink as a vehicle for his own thoughts on the development of the Appalachian region. Ostensibly a nostalgic tale of a bygone frontier era, the text cautions against provincialisms and intimates that successful western expansion will occur only through the employment of a frontier cosmopolitanism. Neville, who narrates the tale of a steamboat voyage from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati, embodies this trait, for he is well educated and from an affluent Pittsburgh family, and he has experience on the frontier. Thus, he can negotiate with ease both the Ohio River frontier and the urban centers of the East. By contrasting his own ability with the inabilities of others, Neville presents his theory of frontier cosmopolitanism.

Neville sees the potential of the Ohio River region to be an economic and cultural hub. This potential gives the "philosophic traveller" (45) an even more pleasing view than the current beauty of the undeveloped area. As Neville states, "The reflection possessing the most intense interest is not what has been the character of the country but what shall be her future destiny" (46). He writes in similar fashion of "the beautiful city of Cincinnati, which, in the course of thirty years, has risen from a village of soldiers' huts to a town, giving promise of future splendour equal to any on the sea-board" (55). According to Neville, the development of the region from frontier into settled and flourishing country should be anticipated and welcomed.