

Analysis of Narrative Style in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

From the very first line of William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," the reader is encapsulated in the story. It begins, "When Miss Emily died, our whole town went to her funeral," (Faulkner, 500). The narrative style in "A Rose for Emily" is intentionally designed to include the reader in a small-town tale, making us feel as if we are yet another member of the city, and another bystander to Emily's misfortune.

"A Rose for Emily," while narrated in the first-person point of view, never makes use of singular first-person pronouns such as "I" or "me." The narrator is also anonymous and without any personal description. Instead, the narrator refers to themselves only as a part of the townspeople as a whole. This, in effect, leads the reader to also feel like an anonymous member of the town and an onlooker to Emily's story. The narrative voice in this story denotes a sort of mob mentality, creating an "us versus her" structure. In this seemingly normal cookie-cutter town, Emily seems so out of place because of her sour disposition and tragic backstory. We can never really understand things from Emily's point of view. Feeling like a part of the crowd also creates a sense of helplessness for the reader.

Although we know her fate, we are unable (or like the townspeople, unwilling) to interfere. "Poor Emily" is a phrase often repeated throughout the story, denoting a sense of sympathy from the town. Despite this, however, none of the townspeople truly make an effort to reach out to Emily. Even when they believe she may commit suicide, the town treats her as a spectacle. After Emily grows close to Homer Barron, a supposed homosexual, she purchases arsenic from the druggist. Although the law required the druggist to know her intended use, he

sold the poison to Emily even when she refused to give him her reason. The narrator states, “We all said, “she will kill herself,”; and we said it would be the best thing” (Faulkner, 504).

Interestingly, this is likely what the reader is feeling at this point as well. That is, not that she *should* kill herself, but that suicide is most likely the cause for her death, which was mentioned in the first line. At this point in the story, we conclude that her death most likely results from suicide. Faulkner is intentionally peering into the mind of the reader, reminding us that we are not unlike the townspeople, and they are not unlike us. We draw many of the same conclusions. The reader, just like the townspeople, treats Emily as a spectacle. They make assumptions about her from very few facts. Because we know that Emily’s death is imminent, the reader is especially prone to drawing hasty conclusions.

The cause of her death, however, remains a mystery, and the reader spends the duration of the story nosing around for details on when and how Emily will die, in the same way that the citizens nose around for juicy details on Emily’s life. When the corpse-like smell emanates from Emily’s house after she purchases the arsenic, the reader assumes this may signal her death. The townspeople, however, don’t seem to draw this conclusion, nor do they consider Homer Barron’s sudden disappearance as anything more. Rather than checking in on Emily directly, they went to sprinkle lime around her property to cover the smell. In peeking around her house, they see Emily sat in a window, “her upright torso motionless as that of an idol” (Faulkner, 503). The reader may certainly conclude at this point that, indeed, Emily’s body is the source of the odor and she has, in fact, committed suicide. As the story continues, however, we learn that Emily was not dead at the time of the horrible smell. Rather, she seems relatively well and sociable as she decides to teach china-painting classes. Her death becomes a mystery to the reader yet again.

Throughout the story, the reader resembles the crowd of citizens in that we watch Emily's tragic life like a train wreck. We know how it will end, but the suspense of not knowing how draws us in, and we can't resist the opportunity to surmise the details of her death. Emily's death, in the end, was actually rather anticlimactic. She died of illness in her old age, with "her head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight" (Faulkner, 506). Of course, immediately following her death, the spectators began to pour in. Just like the reader, they are in search of some post-mortem details. After her death, the town finally had access to all the mysteries of her house, and they certainly took advantage of the opportunity. When they broke into the sealed-off upstairs bedroom, both the townspeople and the reader learned more than we ever really wanted to know. As if the shock of finding Homer's decomposed body in the bed wasn't enough, the people discover one of Emily's long, gray hairs on the pillow next to his. From the beginning of the story, we were prepared to discover details about a gruesome death, but not the possibility of necrophilia! Throughout the story the reader feels a sense of omniscience over the townspeople. This shocking conclusion knocks us right down to their level again and is a delightfully horrible twist to the story.

Works Cited

Faulkner, William. "A Rose for Emily." *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, edited by Richard Bausch and R.V. Cassill, W.W. Norton & Company, 2015, pp. 500 - 507