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A Rose for Emily: Navigating the Tensions of Privacy and Collective Intrusion

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Abstract
This paper investigates the intrusive nature of the Southern community's concern for individual lives as depicted in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." The aim is to analyze the narrative perspective and its implications for understanding Emily's tragic fate. Based on a comprehensive examination of critical literature, this study focuses on the narrator's identity and the societal dynamics at play in Jefferson. It is found that the townspeople's ostensibly protective behavior serves to suppress Emily's individuality and privacy, underscoring the detrimental effects of gossip, voyeurism, and collective judgment on individual autonomy.

Keywords
Faulkner, collective voice, voyeurism, Southern community

1 Introduction

For William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily," critics are instantly bemused by the narrator "we." Existent studies on this issue are often concerned about the identity of the narrator, with different conclusions drawn. The seemingly anonymous narrator, Helen E. Nebeker claims, is in fact a group of Emily's suitors who know or even conspire to carry out the murder of Homer, thus deepening the horrible theme of this story.[1] Nick Melczarek, contemplating the narrative motivation of this story, rejects previous critics' specification of any possible narrator, including Nebeker's.[2] By telling the story in a retrospective way, this confusing narrator causes problems with the chronology of Emily's life, which siphons another group of critics' long-time effort. Michael L. Burduck explores the possibility that the narrator may be female, which allows for a richer understanding of the themes of gender, loneliness, and societal judgment in the story than the interpretation based on a previously assumed male voice.[3] Ruth Sullivan states that the narrator is a collective of townspeople who have watched Emily over decades. It is not just a passive observer but an emotional participant in Emily's life.[4]

As shown above, different answers to "who the narrator is" entail different understandings of the text. This paper adopts Sullivan's interpretation of the narrator and goes on to study the interpersonal relationship in Jefferson and reveal how the "we" narrator disguises its constant intrusion into the personal life of Emily as well as other town residents under the pretext of the good tradition of caring for others.

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2 Discussion

The narrator's voice spans from the older generation to the younger one and takes place at various locations at different times. The beginning of this story says that "our whole town went to Miss Emily's funeral" [5]. It indicates that "we" should be all alive, ranging from toddlers to "the very old men," the Civil War veterans. When Emily's father is still alive, "we" who chase away her suitors refer to Emily's contemporaries and/or people older than her who can articulate their dissatisfaction at Emily's remaining single after thirty. "We" who speak of "the next generation, with its more modern ideas" [5] visiting Emily and talking about taxes deliberately keep a distance with this generation, implying that "we" do not belong to this generation. Before this incident, "we" deny "our" identity with Colonel Sartoris' generation as well. More often, the narrator denies allegiance to a certain generation under some circumstances while claiming the affiliation elsewhere. As for the location, "we" sometimes could only see Emily distantly as she drives with Homer Barron on the street. Other times, "we" seem to stand extremely close to her as "we" could see the words "for rats" [5] inside the package of the arsenic. "We" could only watch the Negro going through the back door of her house without knowing what happens inside, which suggests "we" are not able to enter it. However, the sentence "we knew that there was one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years and which would have to be forced"[5] reveals that "we" know this mansion and its secrets. These discourses make it effort-consuming to define this narrator in a specific place at a particular time, namely, to figure out who "we" really are and what "our" relationship to Emily is.

Thomas Klein, noticing the narrator's evasion of identifying with a specific sex or generation and comparing the style to that of the society columnists of New Yorker, suggests this short story is constructed in a gossipy style.[6] In other words, this story comes into being through people's gossip, and it is a combination of different people's saying, synthesized into the collective "we" voice. The third plural person "they" also merges into the strong "we" voice eventually, as a matter of fact. Each person who accidentally sees, hears, or smells Emily from her youthful age to her death contributes to this collective voice from time to time, which renders the voice sound inconsistent, fragmented, and discontinuous, clearly reflected in the retrospective order of this story. Klein's opinion is illuminating, but he stops at this point. This paper argues that the socially collective voice bears conforming power over individuals, and Faulkner's short story exemplifies its operation and entailing consequence.

The collective power of the South, embodied in the "we" narrator, is overwhelming for Emily as an individual. It attempts to penetrate Emily, in order to ideally transform her as identical as to the rest of Jefferson or to at least make her knowable and available to be talked about, another way of containing her. Jefferson people do it out of their enduring concern for Emily, which they have never questioned before. The reason for this desire lies deep in the origin of the South, a massive plantation society. This rural life confined to a limited space decides that people in one community know every detail of each other. Community members are present in a certain sense throughout individuals' life. They act in this way out of their seldom-doubted concern for others. They believe people should care for their neighbors, others are in desperate need of their help, and that what they do is good for others. For instance, in Faulkner's novel As I Lay Dying, neighbors go to Addie's deathbed saying farewell to her and then attend her funeral trying to consulate the family.

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[7] But to be present in time presupposes that people keep an eye on others in order to detect anything that might be abnormal and then spread new information to others around. When developed into an extreme form, such a tradition becomes voyeurism, paranoia to pry others' life, and even control freak. To put it simply, the collective rural society does not tolerate an individual who is different and is beyond their gaze and knowledge. How the townspeople treat Emily is such extreme voyeurism. Because of her aristocratic heritage, which is distinctively different from the majority of the town, people's fanaticism to intrude and bring to light her privacy is more intense. Therefore, there is an acquiescent agreement that everybody watches her closely and disseminates what they learn and then all the information gathered could hopefully make a full picture of her and thus destroy her frustrating difference. Nevertheless, people carry this mission out under the cover of "for her sake and for the community's sake."

The opening paragraph reveals the passion of Jefferson people for digging out Emily's secret life. Faulkner begins by depicting death and funeral. The sentence "when Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral" [5] marks the beginning of this story. Without going further, readers assume from this line that Emily is a respectful person acknowledged by the whole town. The latter half of this long sentence, ironically, breaks this illusion. Women in particular go there to "see the inside of her house"[5]. Their keen desire is the exposure of Emily's privacy. The supposedly sublime funeral turns into a revelry of these ordinary people who rush into a palace with all the curiosities waiting for them to see, touch, study, and destroy at last for a frenzied pleasure. Of them is the body of Homer, a key element in Emily's notorious life. As Aubrey Binder writes, a good dusting would uncover the past [8], which finally leads to the unravelling of Emily's mystery, which is ultimately left unguarded by her death. In fact, before the final fall of the wall screening Emily's secretive life, marked by Emily's virtual death and the figurative collapse of her house, there are numerous attempts to tear it down.

The aldermen's visit to Emily for taxes is a long-expected invasion into Emily's life. It appears that the aldermen do it out of duty, making everyone pay their taxes for the welfare of the whole town, which is a social norm. Since Emily does not obey it, they have the right to intervene. In essence, they give in to Emily on this issue until they have nothing to yield. They finally decide to visit her for her convenience instead of forcing her to come to the municipal office. They think they can surrender in this way to show respect to a lady. However, the truth is that they look forward to getting into her house and seeing her closely, dealing with taxes as a mere pretext. The thorough description of the inside of the house and Emily's appearance takes up far more space than the negotiation over taxes. The hidden aspiration of this delegation is betrayed by the narrator. Even though the cunning narrator uses a whole paragraph to tell the reason why the aldermen have to visit Emily at her residence, their real purpose, to peep into Emily's life, cannot be covered.

If the tax visit is more or less lawful, the invasion to help Emily deodorize her house is illegitimate. When unable to get into her house, "we" keep opening "our" eyes, nose, and ears to anything relevant. Therefore when the smell comes from her house, neighbors immediately get excited. They report it to the mayor and discuss it with each other, spreading the gossip. The smell catches "our" attention because it offers a new opportunity for "us" to interfere with Emily's withdrawal. Ladies feel sorry for her guessing the male servant cannot keep a clean and decent kitchen. They believe that hearing their talks, Emily might get

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ashamed, clean up her house, and lead a respectful life thereafter. In a word, they believe they are defending the traditional honor codes. The one who complains to the mayor considers it “a law” to keep clean and not to bother neighbors[5]. But according to the mayor’s response, this is less a law than a social convention. As “we” perceive, Emily is condemned for her disobedience of the general rule that everybody else follows, which is the same as her evasion of taxation. The sprinkling of lime is symbolic here. ”We” think we are covering her filthy secrets and preserving her dignity as a lady, but by doing this, “we” probe deeper into her personal life. And by gossiping over what “we” do, “we” proliferate her secrets and make her a laughing stock. ”We” seem to do it on behalf of her, while the truth is that “we” intervene with her privacy violently. However, the irony here is that while the death of Homer creates a chance for a forced entrance into Emily’s isolation[9], the sprinkling of lime adds to the fortification of her seclusion, signifying the townspeople’s futility.

When “our” trespassing in Emily’s private space for the tax and smell issues are to some extent explicable in terms of good citizenship, “our” meddling with her marriage is conducted in the name of the collective defending of the so-called lady’s honor code of the South. First, “we” object to her singleness. “So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly.”[5] The logic is that women should get married before thirty, and “we” appear to guard this norm rigidly. Emily’s singleness challenges “our” authority. Another aspect is that “we” consider singleness as dangerous and unhealthy to the whole society in a similar sense as prostitution. Therefore, Emily’s singleness is considered a shame by the townspeople.

Furthermore, the collective interference is reflected in “our” dissatisfaction with Emily’s choice of a potential spouse. When Emily begins to date Homer, “we were glad” [5] because it shows her willingness to succumb to the rule that women must get married. However, Homer’s identity as a Yankee day laborer goes against “our” expectation about a Southern aristocrat’s marital choice. Emily’s riding with Homer in the town for two years is defined by “us” as “a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people”[5]. It is confessed that “we” constantly regard Emily as a disgrace to the whole town. Therefore, what “we” do to Emily is for the community’s sake; ”we” do not intend to hurt Emily personally. In “our” opinion, her behavior ruins her and her family’s reputation, which transforms her into a target of “our” irony despite our social inferiority[10]. Therefore, “we” again pity her, whispering “poor Emily” behind her. The collective pity represents the townspeople’s assumed moral superiority to Emily and a spiritual victory.

The collective voice of the community reveals a paradoxical relationship with Emily, as they simultaneously impose social conventions upon her while eagerly anticipating her downfall. Despite “our” discontent with Emily’s choice of husband, when Emily purchases wedding materials “we were really glad”[5]. The reason is that the townspeople regard her marriage as a collective victory, as if Emily finally yields to their imposing request. They expect the coming wedding to be a culmination of their celebration of success. However, “we were a little disappointed that there was not a public blowing-off” [5], reassuring readers that these residents are nothing but a group of lookers-on who look forward to sensational scenes. As the marriage is aborted, “we knew that this was to be expected too”[5]. The word “expected” betrays the narrator’s desire for control over Emily’s life. Love and marriage are supposedly Emily’s freedom of choice, but “we” impose “our” will upon her by whispering and gossiping. In the name of collectivism and social goodness,

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"we" do not allow for her uniqueness. In Judith Caesar's words, "(Emily is) buried alive in a house that has literally become a tomb; buried alive in the concept of Southern ladyhood".[11] The townspeople, as defenders of ladyhood, attempt to lock Emily in the prison of social convention, although they secretly wait for her fall, even joining their hands together to tear her down.

3 Conclusion

This short story illustrates how gossip functions as a powerful social force that suppresses individual freedom. Emily, due to her aristocratic background and isolated lifestyle, becomes a target of voyeurism masked as concern for her dignity and adherence to social norms. The final scene, where the townspeople force open the locked room to discover Homer's body, symbolizes their perceived victory over Emily's secretive life. However, this "victory" ultimately leaves them in a state of emptiness, as the fragmented truths they uncover only serve to reinforce their collective delusions.

Furthermore, the townspeople's actions reveal a paradox: while they seek to control and define Emily through their gossip and judgments, they simultaneously revel in her downfall. Their participation in her funeral, marked by an ironic tribute, underscores their complex relationship with her. This collective gaze, which ostensibly aims to care for Emily, instead demonstrates a profound disregard for her individuality. In essence, Faulkner's narrative serves as a critique of societal conventions that prioritize collective identity over personal autonomy, ultimately portraying the tragic consequences of such intrusions. The story itself then transforms into the "rose" in the title, offered among the other flowers for Emily at her funeral, paying the last tribute in an ironic way.

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