

The Concept of Time in Modern Fiction: A Study of William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

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Abstract

In modern literature the concept of time plays an important role in the process of narration. Modern writers look at time as a domain through which they can go forward or backward. The past and the present are overlapped. In this sense, the present is continuum to the past which can be revealed during narrating the events of the present.

Faulkner deals with the concept of time in a special way. This paper tries to shed light upon his use of time in one of his famous stories. "A Rose for Emily" reveals Faulkner's ability in dealing with time in a modern way at its peak. In this story he seems a master of this art: the art of narrating the past by stepping out of the present. However, this is done smoothly without breaking the reader's sense of the flow of the events.

1.1 . The Sense of Time in Modern Literature

Reading a modern text makes the reader who used to read stories by Austen, Dickens, or Thackeray face to face with a lot of difficulties. The biggest difficulty that the reader faces is that he

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changes his point of view totally after reading the first page and meets the writer in his special world. He finds that what he has concluded from reading Dickens for example never helps him to understand the aims of Woolf or Joyce. Instead of the long stories which present characters in a logical and chronological narration the reader will find a tense concentration and quick leaps from an idea into another (Taha: 78).

It is observed that the modern writer makes use of music. He tries to imitate music in its effect to affect the emotion easily and quickly. Moreover, he tries to submit the words and sentences to accomplish the same complex process done by the musical tunes and sounds. Furthermore, he imitates painting when he stops or freezes time and gives pictures which show the colours and shadows in an impressionistic way. In fact these arts liberate fiction from the time- place bounds (Ibid.).

In modern fiction time and place are no more logical dimensions. They are disturbed by going and coming back between the present and the past, the here and there. They shift from a time into another in an illogical sequence. The events move from the present to the past and then to the present again.

Many scientific theories affected the writers' view concerning the setting, especially the time. Albert Einstein's theory of relativity influenced fiction in a way or another. It holds that:

if, for all frames of reference, the speed of light is constant and if all natural laws are the same, then both time and motion are found to be relative to the observer.

(*New Encyclopaedia*: 511)

The theory of relativity changed man's view toward the nature of time which was known to people before. It concludes that time is relative. That is a day full of events seems longer than a year without any experience. Time passes quickly in moments of joy and pleasure (Taha: 36). Time may stop at moments of grief or horror. It becomes a painted picture at special situations in man's life.

To achieve their vision of time, modern writers invented or developed many techniques such as the flash back technique which enables the writer to go and come back through different periods of time. Thus to fulfil their end they make their characters swim swiftly through time: once they go to the past and another they come back to the present and vice versa. Also the stream of consciousness is used in a special way to make the present stop to let the flow of the character's memories swim freely to bring the past alive again.

1.2. The Flashback Technique

Many literary works reveal their events in a chronological sequence of time. That is the events move step by step till they are revealed at the end. This is the simplest way of telling a story. However, the flashback technique is used to reveal the events not in their time to discover a mystery or to explain something missing.

Robert Diyanni explains that a story is usually composed of a sequence of causally related actions or events that are not necessarily presented in a chronological order. Flashbacks that interrupt the linear movement of the plot to present an earlier action are employed in many stories. For example to distill the plot from William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" the reader must untangle a set of events that shift between past and present (Diyanni: 45).

The flashback technique can be defined as a device by which the writer presents events or scenes that occurred prior to the opening scene of his work. C . Hugh Holman comments on the devices of using the flashback technique. He says that "various devices may be used, among them recollections of the characters, narration by the characters, dream sequences, and reveries" (Holman: 204).

In a work where the flashback is used some of the story is related in the logical time-sequence, but part is narrated by one of the characters or by another way such as a letter or through the

narrator and this explains what has gone before. Marjorie Boulton suggests that a flashback is almost inevitable in any novel, or any other literary work, in which a mystery is revealed. He adds " flashbacks may also be used to give variety , or to let a character reveal himself by telling something from his own point of view" (Boulton: 61- 2). Therefore, "a work may begin with a funeral or other such terminal event and then go back into the past to show what passed before" (Holman: 204).

2.1. The Sense of Time in Faulkner's Works

Faulkner had a special technique. Commonly his work is stuffed with many things: deliberately confused narrative lines, stream of consciousness, numerous narrators, and intricate and elaborate style. Time and chronology are rarely straightforward in his work. It is said that "this merely reflects Faulkner's thematic belief that past and present flow into each other, and do not exist in neat, separate compartment" (Stephe: 342).

Walter Allen says that in Faulkner's novels and stories the sense of the past in the present has been most comprehensively embodied (Allen: 113). A notable example of Faulkner's technique of mixing the events of the past and those of the present is his horror struck "A Rose for Emily". Its title suggests something beautiful and joyful. But through moving from the present to the

past and vice versa till the final scene, the reader finds an ugly and horrible end.

2.2. "A Rose for Emily": Between the Present and the Past

Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" begins by telling the reader that Miss. Emily died and the whole town go to her funeral. In the first three lines the narrator says that the women of the town go to see the inside of Emily's house, which no one has seen for at least ten years. Only a man servant lives there and has seen inside it.

Throughout the other pages the narrator wonders in Emily's past, her lifetime: "a live Miss. Emily had been a tradition, a duty and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town"*. Then he mentions details about how the town is obliged to her late father and so to her because he loaned money to the town.

The story moves into another time in the past when Emily vanquished some of the men of the town who came to ask her to pay the taxes. It seems that there are two events in Emily's life of considerable importance: her father's death and the disappearance of her sweetheart. The action of the story jumps between these two events:

**That was two years after her
father's death and a short time
after her sweetheart- the one we
believed would marry her- had**

**deserted her. After her father's
death she went out very little;
after her sweetheart went away,
people hardly saw her at all.**

(ARE.: 219)

Scofield suggests that the narrator's role in the gradual reveal of the events is important:

**The power of the story comes from the
contrast between the bland
respectfulness of the narrator's tone
and the gradual revelation-disguised by
the ordering of the narrative– of Aunt
Emily's murder of**

* William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily". In *The Best Short Stories*.
(ed.) Douglas Angus. New York: CBS Publication, 1974 p.218
(Henceforth will be parenthetically cited within text as ARE.,
followed by page number).

**her unfaithful lover, which does
not become fully apparent until
the last scene in which his
decomposing body is found in a
bed in her house; the full moral**

**horror of it is withheld until the
very last sentence.**

(Scofield: 163).

In the second part of the story the narrator describes how the people of the town are annoyed by a bad smell about Emily's house. The smell occurred after a short time of her lover's disappearance. Then he moves to describe how her father had driven away her suitors. Within two pages of the story, the narrator shifts from an event in the past into another in the farther past then he comes back to talk about the first event.

In the third part, the narrator talks about Emily's relationship with Homer Barron. This happens in the summer after her father's death. People think that this relationship will succeed and she will get married. After a year of their affair she buys the rat poison, the arsenic:

**"I want some poison," she said to
the druggist. She was over thirty
then, still a slight woman, though
thinner than usual, with cold,
haughty black eyes in a face the
flesh of which was strained across
the temples and about the eye look.**

(ARE: 222)

However, the narrator does not show for what she wants the poison. The reader thinks that she wants it to poison rats. But the gradual revelation of the story discovers her real intention.

The forth part displays the circumstances of her sweetheart's disappearance. After many years Emily dies. In the last part, the narrator goes back to her funeral. He describes the emotions of some of the old men towards her

the very old men... talking of Miss. Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, 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 from them now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years.

(ARE: 225).

This passage shows Faulkner's opinion concerning time. The past overlaps with the present and a small string separates them.

Also, the final scene shows how Miss. Emily's neighbours enter a room upstairs in her house which is locked for forty years. That is since her lover's disappearance. They find Homer's body lain in the attitude of an embrace. A long strand of Emily's hair lain on the second pillow (ARE: 226).

The overlapping between the events of the past and the present leads to the gradual revelation of "A Rose for Emily". This gives the story a special flavour. The element of suspense is powerfully existed. The reader is engaged to the last scene with the narrator's special way of moving in Emily's history.

Emily's history seems quite without any great events. Only two events dominate her life: her father's death and her lover's sudden departure. The end shows another face of her history: she commits an ugly crime. A long time ago she killed her sweetheart with the poison she bought from the druggist. Thus, the reader's point of view is completely changed after reading the last lines.

Conclusion

William Faulkner is one of the modern writers who used new techniques and devices. His technique is travelling through time. In "A Rose for Emily" he uses the flashback technique to reveal the events gradually without missing the past. In fact the whole story talks about Emily's history, but the sequence of time is disturbed by

moving from an event in the past into another previous to the first one.

The story is not stuffed with many details. It concentrates on the most important events in Emily's life. But the last scene tightens the reader's response towards her personality. Throughout the story the narrator's tone suggests that Emily is a sorrowful woman who deserves pity and the whole town wishes that she may get happiness. But the end totally reverses the reader's attitude towards her. All of this is done through Faulkner's excellent use of the element of time.

Using the concept of time in such away is one of the features of modern literature. In fact it reflects the modern writers' interest in science. Einstein's theory of the relativity of time fascinated the writers who started to look at time in a different way from the classical view. Time is no more a sequence of chronological events revealed day after day. A new taste is given to the stories which captures the reader's attention to the last sentence.

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