

# COLLECTIVE JUDGMENT AND TEMPORAL FRAGMENTATION IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S "A ROSE FOR EMILY"

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## Abstract

William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* is a seminal work of Southern Gothic literature that treats the psychological and social consequences in regard to isolation, resistance to change, and the lingering influence of the past. Centered on the life of Miss Emily Grierson, the story unfolds through a fragmented, nonlinear structure narrated by an unidentified collective voice, the representation of the town of Jefferson. Therefore, the main aim of this research paper is to describe how Faulkner's narrative, but good techniques, specifically with the use of a first-person plural narrator and the disrupted chronology, how it changes the reader's understanding regarding Emily as both an individual character, but also as a symbolic embodiment of the decaying Southern aristocracy. By denying Emily a personal narrative voice, Faulkner defines the role of communal judgment in constructing identity, by reinforcing the emotional distance between the individual and society. This study argues that Emily's extreme isolation is not merely the result of personal psychological decline, rather a consequence of prolonged social neglect, rigid gender expectations, and most importantly the community's passive voice that does not reflect. The town's tendency to observe, speculate, and judge while refusing meaningful intervention, contributes directly to Emily's emotional repression, and eventual descent that leads into denial. The nonlinear structure of the narrative mirror's Emily distorted relationship with time, by reinforcing her inability to accept the truth which is death, loss, and social change. The elementary symbolic elements, including the decaying house, pervasive dust, and the preserved dead body of Homer Barron, further underscore themes of stagnation, decay, and the destructive desire to arrest time. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that *A Rose for Emily* functions as a critique of collective memory, and moral detachment within traditional Southern society. William Faulkner's story presents how communities that cling to nostalgia while avoiding responsibility, unfortunately can produce profound human tragedy. Through the examination of the narrative voice, temporal fragmentation, and symbolism, this study highlights Faulkner's enduring exploration of social complicity, emotional isolation, and the price of resisting inevitable change.

**Keywords:** William Faulkner, Southern Gothic, Collective Narrator, Nonlinear Narrative, Isolation, Decay, Resistance to Change, Communal Memory, etc.

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## Introduction

William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* begins with the death of Miss Emily Grierson, an event that immediately establishes the tone of the story as gloomy, nostalgic, and unsettling. The whole of town of Jefferson attends her funeral, not necessarily out of affection, but because Emily represents a symbolic monument of the town's aristocratic past. Emily for men of the town is viewed as a remnant of an earlier Southern tradition, on the other hand, for women she is a source of curiosity, especially regarding the interior

of her house (what is inside of her house), which no one has been allowed to enter for ten years. From the beginning of the scene, Faulkner describes Emily as a figure suspended between reverence and mystery, which liked as a symbol, while simultaneously scrutinized by the community. The story is narrated by an unidentified speaker who speaks in the first-person plural, which represents the collective voice of the townspeople, and through this perspective, the narrator reflects very much on Emily's life and the town's complicated relationship with her. Her family's once-prominent social status, her increasing isolation following her father's death, her resistance to change, and her refusal to pay taxes, are very strong elements that establish a Southern Gothic atmosphere rooted in decay, tradition, and resistance to change (Faulkner, 1930, p. 351). A specific reading reveals that the narrator consistently speaks in the first-person plural, by suggesting a communal rather than an individual perspective, as Faulkner writes:

*"We were not satisfied that she had done it well. We were glad"* (Faulkner, 1930, p. 353).

From this statement, readers can understand the emotional distance and the judgmental nature of the town's collective voice. Ultimately, the paper argues that Faulkner's use of a collective narrator and non-linear structure, transforms the novel into a critique of communal judgment, and social decay. With the presentation of Emily's life through fragmented flashbacks, rather than chronological order, Faulkner describes both Emily's psychological state, and the town's incomplete understanding of her. Through symbolism, foreshadowing, and narrative distance, the story highlights that Emily's tragic fate is shaped not only by her personal denial, but also by the town's passive voice, that rejects to help Emily. The conclusion of Faulkner reveals that societies that mythologize individuals, while withholding empathy, can contribute to isolation and moral decline.

### **The Collective Narrator and Communal Perspective**

The most important feature of *A Rose for Emily* is its use of an unidentified collective narrator. Even though the story is not described through Emily's own perspective or that of third-person narrator, Faulkner uses a first-person plural voice that speaks on behalf of the town of Jefferson. This narrative technique immediately positions the reader within the community, in order to encourage the participation which is in the act of observation and judgment. Thanks to the narrator, readers unfold a series of flashbacks, revealing some of the key moments in Emily's life, that include one of the best examples that of the death of her father, which had caused her to lose emotional stability, social connection, and personal independence. Her relationship with Homer Barron appears to resemble courtship, despite the whispering of neighbours who believe Emily has broken her noblesse oblige. Another important event is the presentation of the purchase of arsenic, which leads the townspeople to speculate about her intentions. These events gradually build tension and curiosity, as the town's observation and judgments about Emily intensify (Faulkner, 1930, p. 353). The repeated use of **we** throughout the whole story, reinforces the idea that Emily's life is treated as public

property, rather than a private experience. Although the narrator claims authority over Emily's story, this authority is largely based on gossip, speculation, and shared memory.

*"We were not satisfied that she had done it well. We were glad"* (Faulkner, 1930, p. 353). This statement exposes emotional detachment, suggesting that the townspeople take pleasure in asserting moral superiority over Emily. This collective voice does not seek to understand Emily as an individual, but rather defines her according to communal standards. As Lit Devices (2025) explains, *"The collective narrator reflects the town's fragmented and incomplete understanding of Emily's life"* (Lit Devices, 2025). While the narrator possesses knowledge of certain public events, Emily's inner thoughts and feelings, remain inaccessible, and this creates a limited perspective, by forcing readers to question the reliability of the narrative. Since Emily denies her own voice, Faulkner highlights how social identity is often constructed externally, without regard for personal truth. Furthermore, the collective narrator implicates the town in Emily's isolation. Even though the townspeople observe her pain, suffering, they speculate about her actions, by suspecting her in involvement in Homer Barron's disappearance, but yet consistently they choose silence over meaningful intervention. Through this narrative voice, William Faulkner strongly critiques the moral passivity of communities that prioritize tradition and appearance over compassion, and responsibility.

### **Nonlinear Narrative Structure and the Disruption of Time**

The pace of ***A Rose for Emily*** is nonlinear and gradual, shaped by the narrator's fragmented and gossip-like storytelling. Even though the story opens with Emily's funeral, the novel itself later on shifts backward to earlier events, including her father's death, and her relationship with Homer Barron, as two very important elements. The narrative story of ***A Rose for Emily*** requires from readers to reconstruct a lot Emily's life piece by piece, mirroring the town's own process of understanding her through memory and rumour. William Faulkner uses flashbacks in order readers to focus on memory, denial, and the resistance to change. Unfortunately, Emily herself exists outside of this linear time, by refusing to acknowledge her father's death, and by insisting that she owes no taxes to pay long after the law has changed. Emily's inability to accept the truth, exactly the temporal progression which is mirrored in the narrative structure, resists forward movement and repeatedly returns her to the past. As Lit Devices (2025) notes, *"This nonlinear structure reflects the collective narrator's disjointed understanding of Emily's life"* (Lit Devices, 2025). Through different crucial information until the end of the story, Faulkner heightens suspense while reinforcing the theme of repression. The fact that Homer Barron's fate remains concealed, it is because both Emily and the town refuse to confront it directly. This manipulation of the time emphasizes the stagnation of the time that defines Emily's existence. On the other hand, even though Jefferson continues to modernize, Emily remains fixed in the values of the so-called ***bygone era***. The circular movement of the narrative reinforces the sense that time has stopped within Emily's

house and thoughts, by creating a psychological and emotional space which is disconnected from reality.

### **Gender, Power, and the Policing of Female Identity**

The concept of gender plays a very important role in shaping Emily Grierson's isolation, and the town's perspective regarding her behaviour. Because of the fact that Emily Grierson was a woman of Southern aristocratic lineage, she is expected to embody passivity, purity, and social decorum, while simultaneously serving as a symbolic guardian of family honour. These gender expectations, significantly restrict her autonomy, specifically when it comes to matters related to love and personal agency. Emily's father functions as the primary enforcer of her patriarchal authority, while discouraging suitors, maintaining strict control over her social interactions and promotion. Emily as an image, standing behind her father as he holds a horsewhip, symbolizes the gendered repression which defines her early life (Faulkner, 1930, p. 352). After her father's death, the town unconsciously assumes a similar regulatory role, monitoring Emily's behaviour, and subjecting her private life into a public scrutiny. Emily's relationship with Homer Barron becomes a source of scandal, not necessarily because of class difference, but because it violates prescribed norms of femininity and social obedience. In this case it is worth emphasizing what Donaldson (1997) declares, "*Feminist critics have noted that such communal surveillance reflects broader patriarchal systems in which women's identities are constructed and controlled through public judgment*" (Donaldson, 1997). Emily's perceived moral transgression, invites intensified observation, rather than understanding, reinforcing her alienation. Emily's eventual act of violence can be interpreted as a distorted attempt to assert agency within a social structure that has consistently denied her emotional and personal autonomy. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender, defines that, "*Gender regulation helps illuminate how deviation from normative feminine behavior provokes social punishment and exclusion*" (Butler, 1990). While Emily's actions are undeniably grotesque, Faulkner presents them as the tragic outcome that are prolonged with repression, rather than with inherent deviance. In this context, Emily's sad story exposes the destructive consequences of patriarchal control and communal policing, by revealing how denied agency can manifest in extreme, painful and catastrophic forms.

### **Family Legacy and the Origins of Isolation**

The main person who influenced Emily's isolation can be traced to her family legacy, specifically her father. Through flashbacks, the narrator brings out that Emily as a person was raised in a household that was dominated by a controlling patriarch who discouraged suitors, and maintaining rigid social boundaries. As in the novel itself, Faulkner (1930) emphasizes that, "*The image of Emily standing behind her father, who holds a horsewhip, symbolizes both authority and repression*" (Faulkner, 1930, p. 365). After her father's death, unfortunately Emily's world starts to collapse, because this death had cause her

to lose everything. This loss is not just emotional, but also structural, because Emily is left without financial stability, social support, and personal independence. Through her refusal to acknowledge her father's death, she is affected a lot in her abilities to progress, adapt or change. Unfortunately, the town's response to this loss further entrenches Emily's isolation. Instead offering her genuine support, they oscillate between pity and judgment, and they interpret her denial as arrogance, rather than psychological issue, reinforcing their perception of her as an eccentric relic. Therefore, Frances (2023) argues that, "*Emily's alienation is intensified by the community's failure to recognize her emotional vulnerability, instead projecting moral judgments onto her behaviour*" (Frances, 2023, p. 17). Because she was a member of the old Southern aristocracy, she was expected to uphold certain standards of behaviour, while simultaneously being excluded from meaningful participation in a changing society. This contradiction leaves Emily to be suspended between what is called reverence and exclusion, being unable to integrate into the modern world.

### **Homer Barron and Social Transgression**

With the arrival of Homer Barron, readers are introduced with a disruptive force into Emily's life and the social order of Jefferson. Homer Barron, a Northern labourer employed in construction, was the person who represented industrial progress and cultural change. Because his background contrasts with Emily's aristocratic lineage, it makes their relationship a source of scandal and fascination within the town. The narrator reflects and suggests that Emily's relationship with Homer Barron resembles courtship, even though it violates social expectations, regarding class, gender, and regional identity. The fact that townspeople whisper that Emily has broken her noblesse oblige, indicates the belief that she has failed to uphold the moral responsibilities as a woman associated with her social position. Rather than confronting Emily directly, the town chooses gossip, reinforcing its role as an observer, and not as a participant. The purchase of arsenic, a very significant part of the novel, which occurs the critical moment marked by the narrator, and signalling the possibility of violence which deepens the story's suspense. With the disappearance of Homer Barron, the town notices this shocking fact, but they do not investigate seriously, choosing to preserve social harmony. This disappearance marks the story's climax, raising significant questions about Emily's involvement, while withholding resolution. Facing with the fact that Homer has in fact been present in Emily's house all along, a revelation occurs that recontextualizes earlier events by exposing the consequences of prolonged denial. The town's failure to act becomes a form of complicity and stagnation, enabling Emily's descent into isolation, obsession, by facing with psychology of loneliness.

### **Gothic Symbolism and Foreshadowing**

William Faulkner's use of gothic elements enhances the story's atmosphere, by reinforcing its central themes. Faulkner describes significant subtle hints throughout the

whole story that point toward its shocking conclusion. For example, the decaying house, the pervasive dust, and the mysterious odour, all of these elements, function as symbolic clues which foreshadow the story's unfortunate conclusion. According to the story, readers are informed that Emily's house is described as an eyesore among eyesores, standing in stark contrast to the modern buildings that surround it (Faulkner, 1930, p. 362). Through such information, we are informed that the physical decay, mirrors Emily's psychological stagnation and the resistance to change, and go with the time. The dust that covers the interior, symbolizes the accumulation of time and unresolved grief, while the closed rooms suggest secrecy and repression. The mysterious smell coming from the house, serves as one of the story's most significant hints. Instead of confronting Emily, the townspeople decided to sprinkle lime around her property at night, avoiding direct interaction and help. According to Lit Devices (2025), "*This response reflects the town's preference for superficial solutions over meaningful engagement*" (Lit Devices, 2025). Through the discovery of Homer Barron's preserved body, accompanied by a strand of Emily's hair, it is revealed the full extent of her isolation and denial. This haunting image, collapses time entirely, by exposing Emily's attempt to preserve love by halting decay. The gothic elements, rather than serving mere shock value, they function as expressions of emotional truth, and social critique.

### **Themes of Decay, Resistance, and Isolation**

The themes that are dominated in *A Rose for Emily* are the decay, resistance to change, and isolation, which are established from the opening scene of the novel and reinforced throughout the narrative. Emily and the town of Jefferson alike cling to the past, resisting social, cultural and moral transformation. The story's fragmented structure reinforces this resistance, because time appears frozen, rather than progressive. Emily's home, habits, and her mindset, decay slowly and quietly, reflecting the disjointed timeline of the narrative. With the refusal of Emily to adapt, the broader decline of the Old South reflects, a society struggling to reconcile tradition with modernity. As Frances (2023) states, "*Emily's alienation is shaped by both personal trauma and social expectation, making her isolation a shared responsibility*" (Frances, 2023, p. 23). William Faulkner's critique regarding the town's role in Emily is central. Through the observation without intervention and judgment, and without understanding, the community contributes to Emily's psychological deterioration. The delayed revelation of the truth mirrors the town's emotional distance, by reinforcing the idea and the concept that isolation is a collective failure.

### **Collective Memory, Historical Amnesia, and Moral Responsibility**

William Faulkner's portrayal regarding the town of Jefferson reveals a community which is deeply invested in preserving selective memory, while avoiding moral accountability. The collective narrator remembers Emily Grierson not as a living individual with emotional needs, as every human being, but on the contrary, they see her as a

symbolic remnant of a glorified Southern past. This process of mythologization allows the town to romanticize decay, while simultaneously distancing itself from ethical responsibilities. Cleanth Brooks (1963) states that, "*William Faulkner's fictional South is burdened by an unexamined inheritance, in which memory becomes a substitute for moral reflection*" (Brooks, 1963). The fragmented structure of the narrative reflects this process of historical amnesia. Most of the events are recalled out of chronological order, filtered through communal bias, and stripped of emotional continuity. Gérard Genette's (1980) concept of narrative technique, explains as how the disrupted temporality shapes meaning through omission and delayed revelation, compelling readers to reconstruct truth from fragments (Genette, 1980). The town's recollections emphasize spectacle over empathy, reinforcing emotional detachment. Paul Ricoeur (2004) argues that, "*Selective remembering often functions as a form of denial, allowing communities to suppress responsibility while maintaining a coherent self-image*" (Ricoeur, 2004). Ricoeur's theory regarding memory, illuminates the ethical implications of this narrative strategy. This is quite clear in Jefferson's response to Emily's isolation and Homer Barron's disappearance, both of which are acknowledged yet deliberately left unresolved. From the revelation of Homer's preserved body, the confrontation occurs not only with Emily's actions, but also with the town's long-standing silence and complicity. With the implication the reader within the collective voice "**we**", William Faulkner transforms this novel into a critique of communal spectatorship, and moral disengagement. The story ultimately offers that tragedy is not produced by individual pathology alone, but from collective failure, the refusal to intervene, help, empathize, and to accept responsibility regarding the consequences of sustained neglect.

## **Conclusion**

William Faulkner's ***A Rose for Emily*** remains one of the most powerful explorations that include memory, isolation, social decay, and the resistance to change. Through the use of a collective first-person narrator, and nonlinear narrative fragmented structure, Faulkner uses the illusion of communal innocence, by exposing the subtle yet devastating consequences of moral detachment. Miss Emily Grierson's tragedy does not emerge solely from individual psychological instability, but also from the sustained failure of the community that denies to engage with her as a human being, rather than a symbol. Their passive complicity, marked usually by gossip, avoidance, and superficial interventions, contributes directly to Emily's emotional repression, and distorted relationship with time, death, and love. By denying Emily an autonomous narrative voice, William Faulkner underscores how identity is constructed, and often distorted by the external observation and collective memory. Time in the city of Jefferson does not progress ethically or emotionally, instead it loops around unresolved trauma, and unacknowledged guilt. With the revelation of Homer Barron's body, past and present collapses, forcing readers to confront the effects of denial, repression/depression, and communal neglect. Therefore, Faulkner suggests that tragedy occurs not just because

overt cruelty, but from indifference disguised as tradition and silence mistaken for respect. With the examination collective narration, temporal fragmentation, and gothic symbolism, this study offers Faulkner's enduring relevance as a writer deeply concerned about ethical responsibilities of communities, and the human cost of resisting inevitable social and emotional change.

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