



A Stylistics Analysis of *A Rose for Emily*

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Abstract

A Rose for Emily is a paradigm of William Faulkner's stories of Yoknapatawpha County. The main thrust of the paper is to apply the foregrounding theory to the analysis of this short story, and to appreciate William Faulkner's unique features from a stylistic perspective.

The paper consists of six parts. The introduction briefly describe the incorporation of the foregrounding theory and the foregrounded features of *A Rose for Emily*. Chapter one gives the panorama of foregrounding theory, the establishment, development and important usages. Chapter two elaborates on the quantitative deviations that are one aspect of the theory. Chapter three exemplifies the qualitative deviations that are the other aspect of the theory.

The major mission of the paper is to unravel the stylistic effect produced through foregrounding theory by means of thematic elaboration and concrete exemplifications.

Key words: Foregrounding theory; Quantitative deviation; Qualitative deviation

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INTRODUCTION

A Rose for Emily is a classic story representing the favorite subject matter, theme and style of William Faulkner, who has been considered America's greatest novelist in the

20th century. His mythic picture of the south, his fictional world as epitomised in his Yoknapatawpha County, his distinctive narrative method and his skillful use of language all reflect in this short story. The contradictory combination of many long sentences that are pushed together in peculiar ways and the brief conversations are collateral. The short story also delivers the most important message that the spiritual deterioration, which characterizes modern life, stems directly from the loss of love and want of emotional response, which can be seen as the theme of the short story.

All these particular features are in collision with the content of foregrounding theory. Foregrounding refers to the deviations from accepted linguistic norms. The paper will put the emphasis on the applying of foregrounding theory in the short story—*A Rose for Emily*, through which to unravel the theme and highlight the stylistic devices Faulkner employs in delicate ways.

1. INTRODUCTION OF FOREGROUNDING THEORY

1.1 The Definition of Foregrounding Theory

Foregrounding is opposite to automation. If an act is automatized, it becomes less obvious; if it is foregrounded, it becomes more conscious. Foregrounding theory contains two aspects—qualitative deviation, that is deviation from the language code or some convention of English; quantitative deviation, that is deviation from some expected frequency.

1.2 The Development of Foregrounding Theory

The term foregrounding has its origin with the Russian formalism. The formalists have attempted to elucidate the artistic features and the deviation of poetic language from the perspective of foregrounding.

However, it is the Prague school that further defines the concept of foregrounding. The Czech theorist Jan

Mukarovsky first employs “aktualisace” to stand for this concept. The Paul L Garvin renders it as “foregrounding”. (Leech, 2001, p.53) It refers to the range of stylistics effects that occur in literature, whether at the phonetic level (e.g. Alliteration, rhyme), the grammatical level (e.g. Inversion, ellipsis) or the semantic level (e.g. Metaphor, irony). In 1964, Jan Mukarovsky of Prague School published “Standard Language and Poetic language” clearly defined “foregrounding”. He holds that foregrounding is to deautomatize the conventional language. In 1966, Leech issued “Linguistic and the Figures of Rhetoric”; foregrounding was divided into two groups, syntagmatic foregrounding and paradigmatic foregrounding. The former is also called parallelism while the later called deviation. Halliday distinguished foregrounding from prominence (Chatman, 1971). Foregrounding is prominence that is motivated. Only when prominence is related to the integrated meaning of the whole text, could it generate the true foregrounding. So it is not enough only to find the deviation of the language. The deviation that does not reflect the purpose of the writer has no art value. Behind any deviation, there is always the narrator’s purpose.

1.3 The Effect Achieved through Foregrounding Theory

Stylistic deviations, known as foregrounding, hypothetically prompt defamiliarization, evoke feelings, and prolong reading time. Foregrounded segments of the story are associated with increased reading time, greater striking ratings, and greater affect ratings.

In this view, the immediate effect of foregrounding is to make strange, to achieve defamiliarization. In this respect, Mukarovsky and Shklovsky, although they seem unaware of it, show continuity with earlier work by Coleridge and Shelly. (Erlich, 1981, p.179). It “produces the strongest impressions of novelty” and it also “rescues the most admitted truths from the importance caused by the very circumstances of their universal admission.” thus one reason why we don’t become weary of the novelty is because it provides us with a window on the truth with an issue of major concern to us, even repeated re-readings of the same text may afford new perspectives on its complexities. Common threads in these ideas, offered by Mukarovsky, Shklovsky and Coleridge enable formulation of the psychological process that a reader undergoes when encountering foregrounding. Briefly stated, we propose that the novelty of an unusual linguistic variation is defamiliarization evokes feelings, and feelings guide “refamiliarizing” interpretative efforts. There seems little doubt that foregrounding, by creating complexity of various kinds, requires cognitive work on the part of the reader; but it is our suggestion that this work is initiated and in part directed by feeling.

If highly foregrounded passages of literary texts are striking and affectively evocative, such passage may, in

Shklovsky’s phrase, “increase the difficulty and length of the perception.” For several reasons, readers may be expected to dwell on foregrounded passages. First, at the phonetic level, such features as alliteration or rhyme may produce a slight “drag” on reading. Such prolonged reflection on phonetic features may allow realization of their feeling connotations. Second, at the grammatical level, such features as inversion or ellipsis may produce comprehension difficulties. Deviations in normal syntax impede processing and increase reading time. Extended reflection on those complexities may enable recognition of implicit emphases or irony may refer to less salient attributes of textual referents. Lengthy reflection may be necessary to identify those less salient—and often affective attributes. In general, foregrounding may motivate an affection pause that allows emergence of belated feelings.

In addition, during an encounter with foregrounded text, the reader may review the textual context in order to discern, delimit, or develop the novel meaning suggested by the foregrounded passage.

At the phonetic level, the reader may reconsider the context that enables identification of the feeling connotations of alliterative or assonant passages.

At the grammatical level, the reader may consider the context that helps to identify the “absent” referent of an ellipsis. At the semantic level, the reader may recall other passages that extended or embellish a metaphor. Readers take longer to interpret foregrounded passages, to savor their effective implications and to evaluate the contributions of those passages to understanding the story as a whole.

The story happens in Yoknapatawpha County. Emily Grierson is the main character in the short story. In this short story, Faulkner shows Emily’s efforts to hold the South tradition and her sufferings in facing the moral confusion and social decay of the south. The people in the South are in conflict with themselves, with each other, with their past and with the present forces that lie beyond their control and yet so relentlessly shape their destinies. Emily is singled out as the representative of them and she is a victim, a tragic character, who is worth sympathy. We can know this from the implication of the story’s title. Faulkner said to the effect that there was a woman, who experienced a miserable life, and her tragedy was unchangeable and nobody could help her. I showed my sympathy for her and presented a rose for her to pay my respect to her.

2. QUANTITATIVE DEVIATIONS IN A ROSE FOR EMILY

Quantitative deviations is a certain kind so language phenomenon compared to normal case, occurring too often or the repetitive use of a word or a phrase, which even can extend to sentences or images.

2.1 Repetitive Uses of Certain Words in *A Rose for Emily*

Free repetition of forms means some previous part of a text has been copied. In this short story, Faulkner makes the full use of repetition.

The first repetitive use of some particular phonemes in “*A Rose for Emily*” is the sibilant sound.

The direct dialogue in the short story is comparatively rare, however, the “sibilant sound” nonetheless runs through the whole passage and echoes in every reader’s ear and mind.

At the beginning of the story, when the board of aldermen were admitted into Emily’s house by the Negro, the scene is “a stairway mounted into still more shadow. It smelled of dust and disuse---a close and dark smell. When they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sunray”. This is the first time people in the town have entered into her house and there are thirteen /s/ occurs in this short description. The second time they entered into her house, they attempted to get rid of the bad smell remitting from Emily’s house. “So the next night, after midnight, four men crossed Miss Emily’s lawn and slunk about the house like burglars, sniffing along the base of brickwork and at the cellar openings while one of them performed a regular snowing motion with his hand out of a sack slung from his shoulder they broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there, and in all the buildings.” The two sentences are laden with eleven /s/. When Emily died, the people in the town have the third chance to go into the house. “The first fo the ladies stepped in with their hushed and sibilant voices. As they went further, the ladies sibilant and macabre. The atmosphere of the house poses heavily upon all these ladies”. Although Miss Emily died and the house maybe empty, the influence of this old name is still tangible.

The only three times the townspeople are admitted into Miss Emily’s house unceasingly accompanied with the /s/ sound, which creates a kind of choking, mysterious and stiffening atmosphere, which mercilessly drains people’s vigor, vitality and dynamism. At the same time the mixed feeling of the townspeople---admiration, curiosity, caution and fear are vividly conveyed.

The second one is “dust”. In the scene of taxing, Faulkner’s description is like this, “a dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow. It smelled of dust and disuse.” When the servant opened window, “the single sunray” can be seen. After the representatives sat down, “a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs”. When Emily died, “the house filled with dust and shadows and lack of sunlight”. As the curious people in the town entered the house, “the violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust”. The repetitive use of “shadow” and “dust” is conspicuous. Faulkner is a deep-thinking and meticulous

writer, so this repeated use of words and patterns are by no means accidental, for he is well aware that short stories are required to be acute, “almost every word has to be correct and proper”. (Tao, 2001, p.1) In fact, through the repetition, Faulkner achieves the effect of expressing his own meaning. The “dust” pervades Emily’s world, bespeaking her decay, which reminds us of the bible. “... for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Genesis 3, p. 9) The dust at Emily’s might suggest the idea that her house features as a tomb and herself a mummified figure. The sense of being isolated that permeated in the air forms a strong contrast with the outside world, indicating that the heart and the feelings of the heroine are buried with the past.

The third repetitive use is the utterance of “poor Emily”.

When Emily began to date with Baron, “people in the town” just said, “poor Emily, her kinsfolk should come to her”. (I) “And as soon as the old people said, ‘poor Emily’, the whisper began”. (II) They gossip her affair with Barron. “As they passed by their windows, others uttered ‘poor Emily’”. (III) And then “that was over a year after they had begun to say ‘poor Emily’, Emily went to buy arsenic”(III)

In these paragraphs, the repetition of ‘poor Emily’ plays several important roles here, which causes the reader to ponder over. The connotations of sympathy, anger, and dissatisfaction in these simple words cannot be ignored. They not only function as the mark, but also echo Faulkner’s theme, respect and his sympathy towards this victimized southern woman. Faulkner’s attitude is fully revealed by the narrator’s uttering “poor Emily” four times.

2.2 Idiolect

The speech of the characters in the short story accordingly is the idiolect.

One feature of the short story is the elaborate sentence structure. It follows that the brevity of the dialogue or the conversation is a sort of deviation from the whole, which forms a contrast with the elaborate sentence structure. There are only two dialogues in two episodes in this story. Faulkner lively portrays her as a strong figure in the tragedy and her strong personality can be reflected from these two episodes. The first is that Emily refuses to pay taxes.

When the younger generation was dissatisfied with her delinquent taxes, “they called a special meeting and waited upon her without being asked to sit, they stated their errand to a stumbling halt”. How Emily reacts to this?

Her voice was “dry and cold”, “I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me. Perhaps one of you can gain access to the city records and satisfy yourself.”
“But we have. We are the city authorities, Miss Emily. Didn’t you get a notice from the sheriff signed by him?”

"I received a paper, yes," Miss Emily said, "Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff... I have no taxes in Jefferson."
"But there is nothing on the books to show that, you see. We must go by the ---"
"See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson."
"But, Miss Emily---"
"See Colonel Sartoris (Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years). I have no taxes in Jefferson. Tobe!" The Negro agreed. "Show these gentlemen out" (292)

To specify the Cooperative Principle, Grice introduced four categories of maxims as follows: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. (Hu, 2002, pp.457-458) Miss Emily violates, at least, three maxims of this principle. The utterance of "See Colonel Sartoris" does not conform to the maxim of quality (try to make your contribution one that is true), for "*Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years*", which leaves her words not be confirmed. From the beginning to the end, she only repeats "*See Colonel Sartoris*" and "*I have no taxes in Jefferson*", which are far away from the maxim of quality (Make your contribution as informative as it is required). Furthermore, her repetitive words and commands show her arrogance, which can be considered as the violation of the maxim of manner. During this conversation, Emily maintained her aristocratic dignity.

They cannot accept the social change, and cling to its cold tradition and convention although they are on their way to degradation. They isolated themselves from the actual society, so what they could do was only to miss the past desperately until at last they died with deep agony.

The implication can be derived by the reader from character speech, very often in circumstances where the character themselves may be assumed not to be "in the know". Through the conversation between Emily and the board of Aldermen, the reader is obviously intended to perceive the rigid control and arrogance. Emily exercises over these men and the authority she has created.

The silence permeating the house indicates the indifference of Emily, which is the confrontation before the battle. From the content above we can deduce the indication of the spokesman's stumbling halt. They have already lost the battle at the first collision.

The three sentences Emily said at the beginning are imperative with barely a thread of tangible politeness. Note that she uses "perhaps" as a suggestion but the tone of command is perceived. It is as if what she wants to happen has already taken place. The spokesman's reply is polite, which can be known from the choice of form of address: "Miss Emily" and he wants to reason with her, for he must have been fully prepared before coming into this house. But her answer to his question is not direct, even in a sarcastic tone by uttering, "perhaps he considers himself the sheriff..."

In full sentence, it may go like, "perhaps he considers himself the sheriff, I do not." Having failed to get his question answered, the spokesman loses his temper but

still attempts to reason while the politeness disappears, for the form of address has changed from "Miss Emily" to "you". This must be perceived by Emily and irritate her. The speech act status of the two sentences is that of commands. His refusal to accept the answer he has received can be seen in his use of the antithetical coordinator "but", challenging the reasonableness of her reply (*Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years*). He does not submit to her authority but states more politely (note the change of vocative to Miss Emily). Emily still refuses to answer his question, or she thinks she has answered his question in her own way. She reacts to this challenge by interrupting him (note the use of dash). Hence each time he tries to reason with her, Emily responds to it by giving him an unconnected command and by doing so attempts to establish her control. She interrupts the spokesman, takes the floor, and exercises her dominance verbally. At last, the way she orders the Negro to show them out is extremely impolite. The implied suggestion is that she does not consider these "gentlemen" capable of understanding and acting reasonably. No danger is being ordered about, they are denounced. The denunciation leaves the "denounce" no part to play. The second thing is that Emily goes to buy arsenic.

"I want some poison," she said to the druggist..... With cold, haughty, black eyes...

"I want some poison," she said.

"Yes, Miss Emily. What kind? For rats and such? I'd recom---"

"I want the best you have. I don't care what kind."

"They'll kill anything up to an elephant. But what you want---"

"Arsenic," Miss Emily said. "Is that a good one?"

"Is...arsenic? Yes, ma'am. But what you want---"

"I want arsenic." (297)

"I want some poison." It is a declarative rather than an imperative. Compared with the words of the druggist, whose words are colloquial (All the three short sentences are informal and do not conform to the syntactic rules), polite (note the address of "Miss Emily") and helpful (I'd recommend, if the sentence would not be interrupted.), Emily seems rude, formal, forceful and arrogant. From the first antithetical coordinator "But", we know that the druggist wants to switch the talk to her purpose. This sentence, if it were a full sentence, would be like this "But what you want it for?" Emily's answer, however, shows that she has no intention to be cooperative and tell him anything he wants to know. So far, the conversation has taken the form of a struggle for control, where the participant, Emily has finally won. It seems to us that Emily has always been fighting with the world around her so as to keep her dignity and her high position.

Faulkner gives us a great deal of meaning in short space mainly through inference rather than direct statement. The significance comes directly from the inferences we draw from what is said: inferences about the characters, their attitude to one another.

3. QUALITATIVE DEVIATIONS IN A ROSE FOR EMILY

Qualitative deviations refer to the deviations from the widely accepted norms and habits.

3.1 Symbolism in *A Rose for Emily*

Symbolism enables a common story to be filled with profound implications. Accordingly, we are justified to list symbolism into a kind of violation of the normal rule, that is when decoding symbolism, we cannot take the word purely as is denoted, instead exploring the implications of it. From the semantic level, the meaning of the word has changed; in other words, symbolism is the deviation of the semantic meaning of words. As qualitative deviation is the breach of some rule or convention of English, it is justifiable to classify symbolism into qualitative deviation. The symbolism is fully displayed from the title of the short story *A Rose for Emily*, the symbolism of “rose” and that of “Emily”.

Faulkner uses a rose to symbolize love tradition in this story. When being asked why he presents *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner said to the effect that there was a woman who experienced a miserable life, her tragedy was unchangeable and nobody could help her. I showed my sympathy for her and presented a rose for her to pay my respect to her. The heroine is worth sympathy and respect.

In this story, rose symbolizes that Emily’s life is similar to a rose. She has experienced torment through her whole life. Although she has encountered with happiness and love, all these are just like roses, which fade and wither. Just as the description in the last part, “A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere...upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights...”(302)

The other important symbolism is about Emily.

Faulkner is well aware of the fact that the southerners stick to the south tradition, so he tries to describe a group of southerners sticking to the old way of life. Emily is just such a southern traditional representative of America. She witnessed that the northern industrialization penetrated the South, but their inherited southern aristocracy forbade their acceptance of the new order of my life, but in vain. So the Southern descendants had to suffer from the loneliness and bitterness of being an apart-from in a new world. The disillusionment of the southerners was well reserved in the portrayal of Emily. Hence the words “Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition”, her death is “a fallen monument”, which symbolize the doomed defeat of the old tradition.

The girl is like a rose, but the girl degenerates from an angel to an old murderer while the rose withers.

3.2 The Point of View

Point of view is the position from which the story is told. It is the author’s relationship to his or her fictional world, especially to the minds of the characters. There are four

common points of view as follows, omniscient point of view (The author assumes complete knowledge of the character’s actions and thoughts.), limited omniscient point of view (The author still narrates the story but restricts his or her revelation.), first person point of view (Only one of the characters tells the story.) and objective point of view (The author is the narrator but refuses to enter the minds of any of the characters.) (Long, 2004, pp.406-407)

In *A Rose for Emily*, adopting a first plural-person narrative style, Faulkner not only foregrounds the voice of narration, for it is hardly to categorize it as any fixed kind of narration style but also implies a close relationship between reader and narrator. This unique narrative style cannot be categorized as omniscient point of view, for Faulkner intentionally withholds Miss Emily’s thought. It is as impervious as Miss Emily herself. It is far-fetched to classify it as limited omniscient point of view or objective point of view, for Faulkner manages to hide the author himself. We are justified to draw a clear line between the first person point of view and the narrative style in this short story, as we by no means single out one definite person as the narrator.

First the narrator identifies himself with the first person central character. This creates the illusion that the story happens to the readers themselves. The readers naturally share the thoughts and actions of the central character and observe what is happening around them. At the same time, the narrator speaks for the whole town of Jefferson throughout the story. He always says “we” instead of “I” and he is never named. He is an interested observer, not a participant in the story’s main event. By using “we”, the narrator can report events with detachment, and the tone of his story, often matter-of -fact

And the gossip seems factual and convincing. It prepares the reader to accept and trust his latter, more surprising disclosure.

From this foregrounded point of view, Miss Emily, though a recluse, does not act in a social or moral vacuum, what that she does is being observed, surmised and reacted to by the community as re[presented through the narrator, and therefore she is inevitably linked to it and forms part of it. In addition, we are aware of various sub-groups and generations within the community partly because of the contradictory ways in which Emily is described.

CONCLUSION

Foregrounding theory is initially meant to analyze poetry, but in this paper, it is extended to the domain of short story. In *A Rose for Emily*, the uses of repetition, dialect and idiolect, which are the obtruding features of William Faulkner’s works, are expounded to demonstrate the quantitative deviations of foregrounding theory. William Faulkner uses symbolism to its full, narrates the story from a first plural-person point of view, which testify the success of qualitative deviations of the theory.

To be truly creative, an artist must be destructive, destructive of rules, conventions and expectations. Faulkner is such as artist. But in this sense, creativity of the writer also requires creativity from the reader. Faulkner is also a difficult writer. Like all the modern authors, his demand on the cooperative response of the readers is exacting.

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