

# ***The Dual Construction of Symbolic Imagery and Double-voiced Discourse: The Hierarchical Order in A Rose for Emily***

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**Abstract:** Social structure and hierarchical order, as the key issues throughout human history, continue to stimulate the academic community to deeply explore the relationship between social form and individual destiny. With its unique artistic perspective, William Faulkner's masterpiece, *A Rose for Emily*, vividly shows the social landscape of a specific historical period, which has aroused a wide range of academic discussions. This paper focuses on the subtle symbolism in the novel, and at the same time takes the narrative strategy of two-voice discourse as a clue to deeply analyze how the two work together to construct a complex and profound social hierarchy order framework in *A Rose for Emily*. This analysis not only highlights the diversity and innovation of novel techniques but also reveals the intricate correspondence between them and the background of social reality at that time, providing a new perspective and insight for understanding how literature reflects society and criticizes reality.

**Keywords:** William Faulkner, *A Rose for Emily*, symbol, double-voiced discourse, hierarchical order.

## **1. Introduction**

William Faulkner, an outstanding writer in the history of modern American literature, is known for his deep insight into American Southern life and his unique narrative style. Born in 1897, Faulkner's works mostly focus on American Southern society, especially the rise and fall of his family and the struggles and resistance of his characters in the changing times. *A Rose for Emily*, one of his masterpieces of short fiction, has been widely acclaimed since its publication in 1930, not only for its exquisite literary skills but also for its profound revelation of social hierarchy and the complexity of human nature.

In the field of domestic and international literary studies, *A Rose for Emily* has been the focus of scholars' attention. Foreign scholars have earlier conducted in-depth analyses of the novel, exploring the rich connotation of symbolic imagery in the novel and its unique use in the text, showing Emily's persistence and nostalgia, and also reflecting the solidification and impenetrable social hierarchical order. At the same time, the use of double-voiced discourse makes it possible to present the voices of different social classes in the novel, further highlighting the contradictions and conflicts of the hierarchical order. However, although many scholars have conducted in-depth studies on *A Rose for*

*Emily*, there is still some research space in the construction of double-voiced discourse and its correlation with symbolic intention. This paper attempts to explore from this perspective how the symbolic imagery in the novel interacts with double-voiced discourse to construct a hierarchically ordered world jointly. The current research mostly stays on the surface of the text and lacks in-depth theoretical support when exploring the correlation between symbolic imagery and double-voiced discourse. Therefore, based on previous studies, this paper will utilize the relevant theories to interpret the novel more in-depth.

This paper will first analyze the symbolic imagery in *A Rose for Emily* divided into characters and objects to clarify its significance and role in the novel. Subsequently, the paper will examine in detail the correlation between symbolic imagery and double-voiced discourse in *A Rose for Emily*, and explore how they work together to build up the hierarchical order. This paper not only reveals how literary works reflect and criticize the social hierarchical order through the interweaving of symbolic imagery and dual-voice discourse, providing a new perspective for understanding the complexity and contradictions of Southern society in William Faulkner's writings, but also providing a reference for subsequent studies exploring the themes of power structures, identity, and cultural critique.

## 2. Main Character Imagery - Discourse of the Narrator: “We”

Faulkner's narration in the “first person plural, collective, across multiple generations of narrators” [1]. The novel portrays the two main characters, Emily Grierson and Homer Barron, revealing the contradictory feelings of the townspeople towards the fallen aristocrats, who are both revered and pitied, familiar and strange at the same time. It is also through the discourse of the narrator, that the novel reflects the American Civil War, in the social and historical transition of the American southerners on the one hand, unhesitatingly into the reconstruction of the new South, on the other hand, but still stubbornly stay in the former glory of the American South and the splendor of the look back in the remembrance of the contradictory situation.

### 2.1. Emily Grierson

The North was the victor of the American Civil War, and the Southern aristocracy was doomed to decline with the collapse of the plantation economy. Emily, the fallen Southern aristocrat, represents the traditional morals and values of the Old South. In the eyes of the townspeople, she is not able to pursue happiness the way she wants to because “Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care” [2]. When they think about Emily killing herself with arsenic, they all think that it would be the best thing. For them, Emily's life is not as important as the dignity of the last generation of Griersons, because the preservation of this dignity is a “tradition” in the town.

Meanwhile, the “duty” in the sentence is reflected in the fact that when Emily falls in love with the soon-to-be-married Northern foreman Homer Barron, no one in the town gives her blessing, but rather sees her behavior as a disgrace to the town, a bad example to the young people and even asks the pastor and Emily's cousins to stop her. Because in the minds of the townspeople, Emily should be a monument that will always represent the last dignity of the Old South, and they don't care if Emily is happy or not. This monumental role is evident in the beginning of the essay, “our whole town went to her funeral” [2]. It uses a “Defamiliarization” perspective to give the reader room to think and reflect, i.e., to force the reader to understand and experience the story in a new light by breaking away from the conventional plot development and gender role stereotypes [3]. This breaks the traditional narrative of the story and the reader's expectations by allowing reacquainting oneself with the identity position of the monument, thus deepening the reader's knowledge of the social order of the time.

It is also because of the above-mentioned “tradition” and “duty”, that “we” as the discourse of the narrator gives Emily a sense of “care”: Colonel Sartoris feels that he has a hereditary obligation to

help Emily maintain her aristocratic dignity and to relieve her financial stress, so they find an excuse to exempt her from paying taxes. This “care” also reveals the role of Southern values, which makes Emily a victim of the clash of old and new civilizations. Through this image, the author reveals that the conflict and struggle between the North and the South of America at that time brought great pain to the hearts and minds of the innocent people, and also suggests to the reader the background of the South's defeat at that time.

## 2.2. Homer Barron

The conflict between Emily and Homer is rooted in the clash between the plantation economy of the South and the capitalist society of the North [4]. Homer, who comes from the North with the construction crew, embodies the expansion of the advanced Northern civilization, i.e., capitalism: he is the foreman of the construction crew, who seeks financial gain; he indulges in drinking and enjoying himself and living in the moment; he is in love with Emily and dates her but does not want to be tied down by marriage; he is enthusiastic and energetic and makes good friends and is always in the center of the group. All of these illustrate the great attraction of the emerging Northern civilization that the Southern civilization is far from being able to resist, and the tension between capitalism and plantation economy is further intensified.

Emily, as a representative woman of traditional southern society and the standard of traditional southern morality, was raised with traditional moral standards and values instilled in her by her father, like the society she lived in, Emily lived in a closed space, craved a stable married life, and refused to accept change. She is unable to resist the charm and intrusion of the northern civilization. When the two social values collide in an irreconcilable contradiction, Emily, though traumatized, finally chooses to defend her dignity and nobility without hesitation, and lets Homer end his life with himself in the form of a dead body. Under the patriarchal dictatorship of the Old South aristocracy, she is both a victim and an unconscious defender, and the hold of the Old South culture is something that no one in it can get rid of.

The discourse of the narrator is also deeply reflected in it. As witnesses to the story of Emily and Homer, “We” also find it difficult to break the shackles of the conflict between the South and the North. “We” are attracted to the northern civilization while unable to break free from the cage of the southern civilization, and sometimes they even point their fingers at the behavior of the two men they are counting on Emily, the monument of social civilization, to remain standing. This kind of social mass's general being shaken but still relying on authority reflects the incomplete collapse of the Southern civilization and the inevitable impact of the clash of old and new cultures on the mass's psyche.

## 3. Main Object Imagery – Authorial Discourse: “I”

In addition to the narrator's perspective, the writer is equally ubiquitous in his Authorial Discourse, the idea of the hidden “I”. The writer tends not to express his opinion directly, but to reflect his inner world by depicting objects and things. With the help of the house and rose, two typical images in the text, the writer's intention is reflected in the plot and details in a roundabout way, leaving the reader a wide space for thinking.

### 3.1. House

The house, the only legacy left to Emily by her father, symbolizes alienation, decay, and degradation, as well as the gradual decline of the Southern plantation order. It is undoubtedly a paradoxical imagery that the large, square log house set on what had once been their most select street, is now an ugly old mansion in disrepair and out of place in its surroundings. It is in this house that Emily

accompanies her father when he is alive, but in other words, Emily is imprisoned in it by the authoritarian patriarchy. When she meets Homer, she comes out of the house and is happy and free. The house was supposed to be a warm home for them after their marriage, but it ended up being her and Homer's grave. For the past forty years, Emily has lived in the house like a dead woman, isolated from the world. Anything that lacks care and enclosure fades and ages with time, just as Emily and the defeated Southern culture have lost their colors to the constant onslaught and scrubbing. The authorial discourse is highlighted in this sense of contradiction, as the author isolates herself and the townspeople from both systems, as a bystander, but also as a clear stream independent of social strife.

### 3.2. Rose

The rose is a symbol of love, representing romance and the beloved, but in the author's writing, its meaning is even more profound. As a synonym for love, the rose symbolizes Emily's desire for marriage. Emily breaks through all the barriers and goes out with Homer despite the world's expectations. In love, Emily is brave and determined, alive and happy. With Homer, she is no longer "Miss Emily Grierson" or "Poor Emily", but just Emily. Homer is the only love of Emily's life, and she thinks she's met a precious love, even preparing a rose-colored room for marriage. But Homer's insistence on leaving is tantamount to taking away Emily's life and destroying her last illusion of happiness. At this point, the rose takes on a deeper meaning, symbolizing death and destruction. Emily in her youth is like a rose in full bloom, but roses are destined to fade. Under the suppression of traditional morality in the American South and the betrayal of her lover, Emily suppresses her desires and distorts her humanity. The withering of the rose means the end of love. In order to keep her love fresh, Emily even goes so far as to make a specimen of her lover and store it, accomplishing a permanent companionship. At the same time, the rose symbolizes the author's sympathy and compassion. Throughout Emily's life, she was never able to get rid of the influence of traditional Southern values and aristocratic identity and eventually became a victim of the conflict between the North and the South of the United States. The sense of alienation and contradiction brought by this symbolism is an indirect manifestation of the order of the American South and a further manifestation of the authorial discourse.

## 4. Double-voiced Discourse

As an important argument for Bakhtin's polyphonic novel, double-voiced discourse is famous for its complexity in the construction of the structure of the text's content and the diversity of perspectives in literary-critical discourse [5]. It distinguishes the discourse of the narrator from authorial discourse, aiming to avoid the singularity of the text's ideas and the monotony of its assertions. It is also through these two discursive perspectives that Faulkner creates an idealized breeding ground for the construction of the novel's intentions, characterization, and even context.

### 4.1. Discourse of the Narrator

The Narrator, "We", is a collective personality that is both the narrator and the participant of the story. The fact that the novel begins with the statement that "our whole town" came to Emily's funeral seems to indicate that the Narrator is a collective of all the townspeople and thus tries to use the collective voice to prove the objectivity of his standpoint and the credibility of the narrative, but it is sometimes full of loopholes in the text. This is because the narrator and the older generation of townspeople have markedly different attitudes toward Emily. The narrator mocks the older generation's blind defense of Emily while gloating that "we" the new generation are more enlightened than the older generation. In the case of the odor incident, "we" try to use the law or punishment to blame Emily, regardless of her ladylike status and aristocratic decency. In addition, "we" are not interested in Emily's china

painting class. When the students grow up, they do not send their children to Emily to learn painting. In these ways, the new generation of townspeople, as a group, has become significantly less dominated by Old South culture and has emerged from its shadows to a greater extent, accompanied by reflection. They do not treat Emily with the same respect as the older generation of townspeople and try to rely on the power of law and authority to remove her unreasonable privileges. However, the narrator's related reflections remain more limited. "We" dare to dispute Emily's privilege, but not confront it head-on. Before visiting Emily's home, "we" spend three months sending Emily a notice, and even hold an overnight meeting to send a delegation to demand taxes after she ignores them. In the face of public office, the law, and the authorities, she defused the situation with a few simple words. In fact, "we" were not defeated by Emily as a person, but by the power of Old South culture. As a descendant of the aristocracy, she symbolizes the spirit of the Old South, and it seems only natural that she should be privileged, and the narrator seems to subconsciously agree with Emily. Therefore, the narrator goes further than the older generation and dares to reflect on the irrationality of the existing system, but in terms of deeper cultural structure and deeper emotions, "we" ourselves still have greater limitations and are unable to change the status quo.

#### 4.2. Authorial Discourse

Faulkner skillfully utilizes core images such as house and rose to profoundly embody his Authorial Discourse, that is, the idea that hides behind the text and silently guides the reader to think about the author. These images not only enrich the background of the story as a physical presence but are also important tools for the author to convey deeper meanings and support his narrative intentions. By portraying the changing values of the house and the hearts of the characters represented by the roses, the author reflects the American Old South's obsession with past glories and its resistance to change and also reveals the repression and bondage of individuals under the hierarchical system, as well as the helplessness and struggle of individual destinies in the midst of social change.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that establishing contradictory narratives is also an important means of enriching the authorial discourse. The narrator "we" embodies the voice of the new generation of townspeople, but a more detailed reading reveals that "we" also includes the former "I," the former author. In addition to glimpsing the authorial discourse through the depiction of the object imagery of the previous text, the text implicitly includes the author's reflection on and critique of the former "I," the "we" that merges with the group of narrators (i.e., the new generation of small-townners). It is in this critique that Faulkner truly realizes the transcendence of self-limitation. The narrator describes Emily in terms of "monument," "a tradition," and so on, giving her a veil of nobility, but also revealing her vulnerability from time to time. People seem to care about Emily, saying that everything about her is a big deal in the town, but there is another implication in the narrative. People emphasize the nobility of Emily's family line while repeatedly alluding to her family's "insanity" lineage; they are happy for Emily's romance while despising Homer and waiting to see what happens to her. This inconsistency and discrepancy in the narrator's account is the very object of the author's satire. The author creates "partial unreliability" in individual words and phrases, individual paragraphs, and individual parts of the text within an overall reliable narrative [6]. This results in the narrator sometimes disagreeing with the author's values. By setting up these points of contradiction, the author implies the unreliability of the narrator and separates his values from those of the narrator.

#### 5. Conclusion

Through rich symbolic imagery and complex dual discourse structure, *A Rose for Emily* profoundly reveals the deep-rooted hierarchical order of American Southern society and the intense collision and fusion between the old and new civilizations. The novel is not only a depiction of a woman's tragic

fate, but also a profound reflection on the power structure, moral concepts, and struggle of human nature in the social changes at that time. However, there is still room for improvement in this study, for example, by comparing similar works across countries to reveal their cultural significance more comprehensively. With the help of postcolonial theories, future research could explore the Southern American society in the novel as an “internal colonization” phenomenon, reflecting the marginalization of the South after the American Civil War and its impact on the identity and cultural resistance of the locals.

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