

# The Absence of the Rose:

## Emily, Faulkner and the Reader

Ausência da Rosa: Emily,  
Faulkner e o Leitor

Die Abwesenheit der Rose:  
Emily, Faulkner und der Leser

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### Summary

The objective of this paper is to analyse some aspects of William Faulkner's short story "A rose for Emily" using as basic theoretical reference some of the concepts developed by C.S. Peirce in his theory of signs and also some of the ideas found in the psychoanalytical work of J. Lacan. As theoretical instruments of analysis they will be used with the specific purpose of elucidating the process of reading and interpreting the literary text.

### Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho consiste em analisar alguns aspectos do conto *A rose for Emily* de William Faulkner usando como referência teórica básica alguns dos conceitos desenvolvidos por C. S. Peirce em sua teoria dos signos, assim como algumas das idéias encontradas no trabalho psicanalítico de J. Lacan. Enquanto instrumentos teóricos de análise tais conceitos serão utilizados com o propósito específico de elucidar aspectos do processo de leitura e interpretação do texto literário.

**A** rose for Emily<sup>1</sup> is the title given to a story narrated by a first person plural narrator. The point of view seems to be that of a whole town, for whom Miss Emily Grierson is an object of both their admiration and their fear. When she dies all of them go to her funeral:

"The men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house"... (Faulkner, 1948, 119). Throughout the story all her movements and acts are observed by this attentive audience, sometimes with sympathy and in other occasions with a mixture of resentment and fear. But all we readers get to know about Miss Emily is that nobody knows who she really is or what exactly she is doing.

What the reader has is a sequence of events organized in such way that he has access to what the townspeople get to know about Miss Emily through the same limited means established by their relationship with the character. We seem to have at least two possible interpretational layers here, one established by the townspeople's observation of Miss Emily's life and the other established by our apprehension of their observations through the narrative itself. Both their curiosity about Miss Emily and our interest in the story through their curiosity converge to determine the relationship between the two layers, which creates a third one, where a more elaborate interpretation takes place.

The reader is informed first that Miss Emily is dead. The story begins with her funeral. She had finally gone "to join those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers"... (Faulkner, 1948, 119). Then we are informed that "Alive, she had been a tradition, a duty and a care: a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town"... (119). She had had her tax obligations remitted after her father's death. But the new authorities do not find such "

\* This was presented as a term paper in Prof. Júlio Pinto's graduate course on narrative fiction at FALE, first semester, 1988.

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record in their books, and thus send a deputation to see her about the matter. At this point we have the first description of Miss Emily's physical appearance and of the interior of her house, by then already inaccessible to the townspeople. Nobody had passed through her door for at least eight years. Through the eyes of the city representatives we can see that she is a small, fat little woman and that she looks "bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water". (121) In this episode her description, sluggish dust and the ticking of an invisible watch together with the fact that Miss Emily refers her visitors to Colonel Sartory, already dead for almost ten years, work as indexical signs<sup>2</sup> of an important interpretant in the text: time.

Time is at the level of narrative that which organizes the reader's apprehension of the events in the text. In Faulkner's story we have a series of time shifts from past to present. We begin with Miss Emily's funeral, go on to the above mentioned episode, then back thirty years before, when a smell developed from her house, bothering the whole community around her. Again retrospectively, from this episode backwards we are told about her father's death and her peculiar attitude towards it. Then we come to the Homer Baron episode, which is retrospective concerning the smell and posterior to her father's death. The limitations encountered by both the reader and the narrator as an observer of a series of events whose interpretation refers always to other events located at a different period, bring about a new perspective concerning the role of time, and contingently of memory, in the significance of the whole text.

In that respect time seems to fit into at least two different categories, which may be illustrated and clarified by resorting to Peirce's idea of secondness and thirdness. According to Peirce

*predominant in the ideas of causation and of statical force. For cause and effect are two; and statical forces always occur between pairs. Constraint is a Secondness. In the flow of time in the mind, the past appears to act directly upon the future, its effect being called memory, while the future only acts upon the past through the medium of thirds.*<sup>3</sup>

About Thirdness he says that

*A fork in a road is a third, it supposes three ways; a straight road, considered merely as a connection between two places is second, but so far as it implies passing through intermediate places it is third. Position is first, velocity or the relation of two successive positions second, acceleration or the relation of three successive positions third. (Peirce, 80)*

So we have that in the development of the narrative, time constitutes, in a certain sense, an element of Secondness as it establishes through indexical reference to past events the relationship of cause and effect between what happened before and what is happening now. Miss Emily's refusal to admit the death of her father and her withholding of his body are described by means of a recollection of her past experiences. However, such a recollection is the townspeople's interpretation of her past experiences: "We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will". (Faulkner, 1948, 124). Consequently they did not say that she was crazy then, but they did produce an argument of an abductive nature, a third, on the basis of indexical (dicent) signs.

This shows that when it comes

to time as a third what we have is a relation involving meaning. As Peirce says meaning is a triadic relation, inexpressible by means of dyadic relations alone. Therefore time as thirdness involves not just the straight connection between events, as the cause and effect relationship between past and present, but a more elaborate process of understanding which requires a more elaborate interpretation of what had previously been established by such connection. What we have is the future acting upon the past, as we have quoted from Peirce, through the medium of thirds.

In *A rose for Emily* the narrative advances, through a series of time shifts, to the unclosing of a room which had been locked for forty years. The room is forced open by the townspeople and what is revealed to the reader takes him back again in time, now to reconstruct his interpretation of the story. Now, the fact that the narrator, knowing all through the story what was inside the locked room, chooses not to reveal it until the end of his narrative leads the reader to realize that he had been tricked into an interpretive construction that does not correspond to what was "really" happening. It is only by interpreting the text at this new level introduced by the realization of the missing information that the reader can advance to apprehend time as a new interpretant for the text. The narrative device represents, itself, an important clue to this new level of interpretation.

Rimmon-Kenan (1983) makes a very interesting comment about what she calls "the paradoxical position of the text vis-à-vis its reader":

*There is one end every text must achieve: it must make certain that it will be read; its very existence, as it were, depends on it. Interestingly, the text is caught here in a double bind. On the one hand, in order to be read it must make itself understood, it must ..*

*The idea of second is*

enhance intelligibility by un-  
choring itself in codes, frames,  
Gestalten familiar to the  
reader. But if the text is under-  
stood too quickly, it would  
thereby come to an untimely  
end.<sup>4</sup>

If we look into the process of exchange within the narrative and between text and reader we may be able to find that such process is based not on the exchange of things, such as a mere sequence of events, but on the exchange of something we could call an absence. In our story, instead of time as a factor of textual coherence, what we have is a series of time shifts interwoven in such a way that what is exchanged between text and reader could be said to be the absence of time. This absence is marked by traces of the deletion of certain events along the temporal axis. The sequence presented by the narrative is a creation, invented by the townspeople and all based on what their own framework of reference made them believe to be true. But that could not in fact be otherwise, for the past, as we realize from their mistaken interpretation, is not what determines the future; it happens that it is the future what determines the past! If we carry on with our interpretation we have that after all there is no such thing as time as linear flow, for it seems to be just an illusion when it comes the realm of literature. Meaning is not related to what is there, but to our interpretation of what is not. It is by reading that we "recover" time, through the filling of meaning gaps.

Returning to Miss Emily, to the townspeople's curiosity about her and to our interest in the story we again come across an absence. Nobody knows exactly who she is or what she means. There is no exchange between Miss Emily and the other inhabitants of Jefferson. The narrator tells us that they had long thought of the Griersons "as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and

clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door". (Faulkner, 1948, 123). If we take Peirce's definition of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness as "the being of positive qualitative possibility, the being of actual fact, and the being of law that will govern facts in the future" (Peirce, 75) we seem to be able to relate Miss Emily to Firstness, the presentation of events to Secondness, and narrative and our interpretation to Thirdness.

Peirce (76) explains Firstness as

*the mode of being which consists in its subject's being positively such as it is regardless of aught else. That can only be a possibility. For as long as things do not act upon one another there is no sense or meaning in saying that they have any being, unless it be that they are such in themselves that they may perhaps come into relation with others.*

"We could also try to establish a relation with Lacan's classification of mental processes into the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Within discourse the Real corresponds to that which commands the unknown. It is not an object of definition but one of evocation. It escapes symbolization and is situated outside language. The only way it can be apprehended is through the Symbolic. The Symbolic corresponds to the realm of the exchange between subjects. It is the place of mediation, of triangular relations, of desire and meaning. The Imaginary is the region of relationships forming pairs of mutually exclusive terms, the region of symmetry and oppositional dualities. From this perspective we would be able to take Miss Emily as fitting within the category of the Real, narrative within the Imaginary and interpretation or the exchange between the text and the reader within the Symbolic.

The similarities between Peirce's categories of being, First-

ness, Secondness and Thirdness, and Lacan's proposed functions, the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic are striking and deserve further consideration; but this is not our objective here and therefore we will take into account only those aspects that can be used to help with the clarification of the specific points of our analysis of Faulkner's story.

Back to Miss Emily, refusal seems to be what consistently punctuates her behavior and what defines her relationships. She refuses to pay her taxes, refuses to move from her old house, which lifts "its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps — an eyesore among eyesores" (Faulkner, 1948, 119). Time for her does not flow. When she is visited by the representatives of the Board of Alderman about the payment of her taxes she sends them to see Colonel Sartori, who had been dead almost ten years. When her father dies she does not admit of his death. When the ladies came to her house "Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead". (123) In spite of her attitude the townspeople did not say she was crazy.

In psychoanalytical terminology the words rejection, refusal and disavowal are used related to the idea of refusal, which constitutes the point of departure in the development of psychosis. It is opposed to repression, which is the correspondent basic mechanism constituting neurosis. In Lacanian terms the psychotic repudiates the "name-of-the-father", or the Law, and therefore does not access the Symbolic order, which is the domain of language.

According to the theory, it is through the Symbolic relationship of the Oedipus complex that the child is integrated into a dialectical and triangular relationship where the mediation of desire makes possible the emergence of language.

The Symbolic order is constructed around the "name-of-the-father" or the Law. If the Law is rejected (and not repressed) the whole Symbolic order will be rejected with it and therefore there will be no language. In his delusions the psychotic employs a language in which signifier and signified are not distinguished from one another. His discourse would be then a message about words, instead of a message employing words.

At this point we have seen that there is no exchange between Miss Emily and the townspeople-narrator of the story. Thus we have a lack. The analysis of the temporal signs has led to the conclusion that what we have in fact is another lack. Based on that there should be no difficulty in our understanding the complete absence of a ROSE all through the narrative of **A rose for Emily**. It is by means of our interpretation of the other elements in

the story that we arrive at the meaning of the rose. The rose is exactly what is not there and therefore can be exchanged. It refers us to the representation relation itself and can be regarded as the very condition for the existence of the story we have just read or of any other story, each of them their own "emily" and their own "rose". ♪

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## NOTES

- 1 FAULKNER, William. *Collected stories of William Faulkner*. New York, Random House, 1948. (p. 119-130). All further references to the story are to be made in the text to page numbers.
- 2 "An index is a sign, or representation, which refers to its object not so much because of any similarity or analogy with it... as because it is in dynamical (including spacial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand..." (From Peirce's *Collected writings*, p. 107).
- 3 PEIRCE, C. S. *Philosophical writings*,. Buchler, J. (ed.). New York; Dover. (p. 79). Henceforth mentioned parenthetically in the text.
- 4 RIMMON-KENAN, Schlomith. *Narrative fiction: contemporary poetics*. New York; Methuen, 1983. (p. 122)