

THE EXPRESSION OF PART–WHOLE RELATIONS IN “A ROSE FOR EMILY” BY WILLIAM FAULKNER

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Abstract. *This thesis explores the use of part-whole relations as one of the structural and thematic engines in William Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily.” Through an interdisciplinary approach that brings together insights from partonymy in linguistics to theories in cognitive narratology, spatial theory, psychoanalytic criticism, and reader-response criticism, it is argued that meaning is made in Faulkner’s short story through elements that are intentionally disaggregated so that it is up to the reader to make something meaningful out of them. Instead of having linear unity in terms of its narrative structure, meaning in the short story is made through non-linear elements in terms of its temporality, space, objects, and collective narrative voice.*

Keywords: *Part-whole relations, Partonymy, Narrative fragmentation, Faulkner, Symbolism.*

"A Rose for Emily," a story by William Faulkner, has stood out among the most closely analyzed pieces in American literature, and this was made possible because of its novelistic narrative technique, rich symbolical content, and psychologically deeper characteristics. But even with the profound analysis, the piece continues to offer various readings, and this was made possible through its resistant and fragmentary textuality.

In linguistic semantics, part-whole relationships are associated with the organization of entities in terms of their parts.²⁴ Cognitive linguistics expands this idea, emphasizing that human understanding of wholes is often contingent upon salient or emotionally charged parts²⁵. Within literary studies, part-whole relations intersect with narratology, semiotics, and reader-response theory. Narratology demonstrates how narrative order fragments chronology into significant units²⁶, while semiotics suggests meaning often resides in

²⁴ Cruse, D. A. (2011). *Meaning in language: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.

²⁵ Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.

²⁶ Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse*. Cornell University Press.

resonant details²⁷. Reader-response theory emphasizes the reader's synthesizing role in transforming fragments into coherence²⁸. Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for analyzing Faulkner's story as a system of interrelated narrative parts.

The story's most distinctive feature is its non-linear chronology. Opening with Emily Grierson's funeral, the narrative subsequently moves backward and forward in time, presenting events as isolated fragments. Episodes such as the tax dispute, the father's death, and Homer Barron's disappearance appear out of sequence, each functioning as a partial narrative unit whose full significance is only retroactively conferred. This structure compels active readerly interpretation and mirrors the operations of collective memory, which preserves the past as affectively charged fragments rather than a linear record²⁹.

Emily Grierson's psychological identity is constructed through fragmentation. The narrative reveals emotional states—denial, repression, pathological attachment—as discrete components that fail to integrate into a stable whole³⁰. Her refusal to acknowledge her father's death illustrates repression, while her actions toward Homer Barron signify a desperate attempt to impose permanence on transience. These unresolved psychological fragments distort her perception of reality, culminating in pathological behavior.

The fragmentation of Emily's psyche is paralleled by the fractured narrative structure, reinforcing the theme of psychological disintegration. The Grierson house functions as a spatial whole composed of symbolically charged parts. Its rooms, stairways, and, crucially, the sealed upstairs bedroom operate as compartments storing psychological memory. The locked bedroom represents a concealed narrative part³¹; its eventual revelation retroactively reshapes the meaning of the entire house and of Emily herself.

Faulkner employs material objects as symbolic fragments contributing to the narrative whole. Objects such as the strand of gray hair, the arsenic, and the father's portrait function as metonymic details. The discovered hair operates as a small but decisive narrative element, revealing prolonged intimacy with death. Similarly, the purchased

²⁷ Barthes, R. (1974). *S/Z*. Hill and Wang.

²⁸ Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

²⁹ Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory*. University of Chicago Press.

³⁰ Freud, S. (1957). *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14). Hogarth Press.

³¹ Bachelard, G. (1994). *The poetics of space*. Beacon Press.

arsenic transforms an ordinary commodity into a thematic component representing the control of time and loss. Such details serve as hermeneutic keys to the story's coherence.

The first-person plural narrator ("we") constitutes a collective voice composed of communal assumptions, rumors, and partial knowledge³². This composite narration reflects multiple subjective viewpoints, each functioning as a narrative part. The town's fragmented understanding of Emily mirrors the reader's own interpretive process and underscores the limitations of social perception. The narrative whole remains deliberately incomplete until the final, communal confrontation with the truth.

Emily's crime cannot be understood as an isolated moral failure. The town's silence and reluctance to intervene—exemplified by its response to the odor from her house—render the community complicit in the concealment of truth. Moral meaning, therefore, emerges within a social framework³³; Emily's actions constitute one fragment within a broader ethical breakdown characterized by avoidance and failed responsibility. Emily's position is fragmented by patriarchal structures that define her as a dependent extension of male authority. Her father's dominance governs her early life, while the town subsequently regulates her social image. Such structures fragment female identity and deny autonomy. When these external frameworks collapse, Emily's identity disintegrates rather than achieving stability, demonstrating how the social whole shapes its constituent parts.

Ultimately, meaning in "A Rose for Emily" does not reside statically within the text but emerges dynamically through the reader's engagement with its fragments. The story's final revelation compels a retrospective reinterpretation of all prior narrative elements, demonstrating that literary meaning is produced through the interaction between text and reader.

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³² Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse*. Cornell University Press.

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