

Representation of the gothic element in American short fiction

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Abstract

American writers of short fiction particularly exploited the genre to write gothic stories. Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulkner wrote some of the most popular gothic stories of their times. Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* and Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* are two of the most famous works among gothic stories written in America. Both authors use their respective ingenious ways to present their stories of horror including narrative skills, arrangements of time order, the use of images and themes. Both the authors represent the age that produced this sub-genre and popularized it. All in all, the two authors successfully not only create but also reinforce the feeling of horror with such unreliability and images. Hence, readers are being horror-struck and left in suspense throughout the whole stories. This paper discusses the gothic element in both the short stories.

Keywords: element, American, short fiction, throughout, *A Rose for Emily*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*

Introduction

American writers of short fiction particularly exploited the genre to write gothic stories. Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulkner wrote some of the most popular gothic stories of their times. Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* and Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* are two of the most famous works among gothic stories written in America. *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a story about a murder case. The narrator secretly gets into an old man's room and watches him sleep at midnight every day. Eventually, the insane narrator kills the old man, cutting his dead body into pieces and hides them under the floorboards. When the police come and ask him questions, he begins to hear the old man's heart beating under the floorboards. As the beating gets louder and louder and cannot take it anymore, he ends up admitting that he killed the old man.

In *A Rose for Emily*, the story begins with Emily's funeral. All people in the town go to her funeral and discuss about this eccentric spinster. They talk about her weird behavior after her father dies, and her affair with Homer Barron, who suddenly disappears on a particular day. Nobody sees or hears of him ever again. After the funeral, the townspeople get into Emily's house. To their consternation, they find upstairs a corpse in the bedroom, the dead body of Homer Barron. On the pillow is Emily's "strand of iron-gray hair" (Faulkner 2061). The beginning of the story gives the reader a chill down the spine.

Faulkner and Poe successfully create gothic atmosphere in their respective story. Both the stories are representative of the kind of gothic they adhere to, even though both the stories have their respective differences and similarities. Both authors use their respective ingenious ways to present their stories of horror including narrative skills, arrangements of time order, the use of images and themes. Poe uses the technique of monologue and first-person singular narration whereas Faulkner uses first-person plural technique of narration. Poe resorts to confession by the murderer after not being able to

take the psychological trauma anymore, while Faulkner uses the gossip of the residents of the town as a vehicle to make the culprit identified. Poe, just like in his other stories, uses flashback as an important technique to transport the reader to past and bring him forth in time using the technique of flash-forward. Faulkner scarcely uses flashback but is not chronological in his treatment of the story. Both the authors use images as strong elements in their respective story. If Poe's story has images of the old man's eye and his heart-beat, Faulkner uses the portrait of Emily's father and her quality to be statue-like. Both the stories are gothic though Faulkner's story adheres to the Southern America's gothic style.

By using the monologue form, Edgar Allan Poe mimics the crazy narrator's behavior, which is his repetitive saying that he was not mad. Importantly, the narrator is entitled to uninterruptedly tell his own story and thoughts. Since he says "how calmly I can tell you the whole story," all the readers become his audiences (Poe 381).

However, when he actually tells his story, he tells it in a delirious way, which is contrary to what he asserts, "calmly." Also, readers can find that the man has serious fancy, since something he says is impossible to happen. In the first paragraph, the narrator states firmly that "Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?" (Poe 381). Generally, people cannot hear the voices from heaven and hell, so it must be his fancy. Although he denies the truth that he is mad, readers are aware of his insanity and of its degree too.

There is only one narrator in the story: the man. Therefore, readers have no choice but to receive all the information he gives. However, his words are unreliable because he is mad. The narrator in this story is an insane man who insists on his sanity. To prove his point, he enthusiastically tells readers how cautiously he kills an old man in detail. He also

repeatedly emphasizes that a man with an insane brain cannot do such a discreet task; he asserts that he is sane since he is able to do that. However, the truth is that nobody would commit a murder in the way he does. To give an example, every night the man spends an hour or more putting his head into the old man's room:

... and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly — very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see the old man as he lay upon his bed (Poe 382).

The narrator is also haunted by his strong fancy. After he kills the old man, he can still hear the old man's heartbeat. "In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then sat upon the bed and smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on, with a muffled sound" (Poe 383). However, a dead heart won't beat unless it is an outcome of the murderer's fancy or a sense of guilt. When the police come, he hears the sound of the old man's beating heart again. Other than the narrator himself, no one hears the sound of the beating heart. Not only is it a demonstration of paranoia but it is also a symptom of mental sickness.

It is not the case with *The Tell-Tale Heart*; both the stories have unreliable narrators. In *A Rose for Emily*, readers become one of the narrators while in *The Tell-Tale Heart* they are the listener of the narrator. On account of the first person plural point of view, the narrators in *A Rose for Emily* are "we", and it makes readers easily consider themselves one of the narrators concealed in the word "we." Therefore, they feel up and down with the narrators. Differently, in the case of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator keeps saying "you" when he refers to his listeners, such as "what will you say that I am mad?" (Poe 381), and "But you should have seen me" (Poe 381). Thus, when he talks, readers will assume that he is talking to them instead of regarding themselves as the "I." As a result, the readers feel like they are listening to the narrator's story of committing the murder case.

Through different viewpoints, they both bring a sense of horror. In *A Rose for Emily*, readers feel horrified because the narrators' words are not so believable. Townspeople's gossip leaves out some parts of the story as the story has an element of cleverness. Therefore, readers have to work out the whole story by themselves. The truth that Homer Barron has been killed possibly by Emily has not been revealed until the end of the story and the truth is ghastly. As for *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the readers feel horrified on account of the crazy narrator's tone. The man does not view himself as insane. What he says, especially the particular paragraph about how he gets into the old man's room and the way he kills the old man, successfully brings the feelings of horror to readers. The images of a heinous, cold-blooded murder come swaying to the reader due to vivid description given by Poe.

For the narration of the story, Faulkner uses first person plural, "we". There is a group of people, instead of a single narrator, conveying the story. This kind of narrative makes readers assume themselves as one of the narrators and

fluctuate with the narrators' sentiments. As a result, readers feel the same horror as the narrators feel when they read the part that there is a corpse in Emily's bedroom. Much to their horror, they realize the dead body belongs to Homer Barron, with whom Emily has slept for more than 40 years. Though the narrators do not have a name, readers can find that the narrators are actually the townspeople by judging from the content of their gossip while reading the story. For example, when the story unfolds, the narrators say "When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral" (Faulkner 2053). Since the narrators say "our whole town," it is obvious that they belong to the town.

The story is based on the gossip of townspeople and Faulkner uses it for two reasons. One is to make the story unreliable. Another is to delineate a figure of Emily in townspeople's eyes. It starts and ends in the same setting, Emily Grierson's funeral. In the first paragraph of the story, it says, "When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral" (Faulkner 2053). People in the town gather together at funeral and talk about Emily and her weird behavior. When villagers recall certain event, they may quickly remember another one that is related to what is said previously. For instance, after the narrators mentions the weird smell from Emily's house, it occurs to them that the house "was all that was left to her" by Emily's father when he died (Faulkner 2056). Because of the association between the house and Emily's father, the focus of the townspeople's gossip shifts onto the event that happens on the day after the death of Emily's father. That day when people call at her home, they find her behaving strangely. She meets them at the door and is "dressed as usual and no trace of grief on her face" (Faulkner 2056). To everyone's surprise, she declares that her father is "not dead" (Faulkner 2056). The sequence of the events is not told in time order but in the order that the villagers associate one event with another. In terms of these, townspeople continually discuss one event after another.

Yet, these people cannot remember everything so the story appears to be several snatches of events. The narrators appear unaware of the contradictions in their gossip. Some of their accounts of Emily are even only their guess. For example, after Emily goes to buy arsenic, townspeople all think that she wants to kill herself. The next day they all say "She will kill herself" (Faulkner 2058), but in fact she doesn't. As a result, what the townspeople says about Emily is not reliable at all.

Despite the unreliability of the townspeople, they depict Emily Grierson as a character who should fit their stereotype of nobility. Faulkner uses townspeople's viewpoint to characterize a daughter from the noble family, and such a figure should behave according to people's expectation and conservative view toward her. The villagers think of her as "a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" (Faulkner 2054). Also, townspeople's judgments on her behavior are central to the characterization of Emily. They expect that Emily will get married to someone who is of ancestry so that he will match her well. Therefore, when she seems to fall in love with Homer Barron, they all think that she merely has an interest. The ladies all conclude, "Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer" because she should not forget her "noblesse oblige" (Faulkner 2057). And the older people even

comment on such an affair and think of her as “Poor Emily” (Faulkner 2057). In this way, the villagers’ judgment and gossip sometimes deliberately blur the real facts of what Emily does. Rather than being what kind of a person she is, their image of Emily is how as a person she should be. Their moralistic view hinders them to see what Emily actually is like.

Faulkner purposefully breaks the whole story into small pieces and puts them separately and non-chronologically. The way in which author recombines these pieces of story, makes the story look like people’s gossip whose content is all related to Miss Emily. When people talk at will, they don’t really care about the time order of events. Therefore, it makes the subject of conversation vary from time to time.

Therefore, the way Faulkner presents these pieces of story is according to the way people talk instead of the sequence of the events. For example, townspeople remember that when new generation comes, the mayors and aldermen go to Emily’s house to ask her to pay tax, but Emily sends them away. They then associate this event with another one, “So she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell” (Faulkner 2055). Emily does what the narrators say in both events, but the time lag between the two events is almost thirty years. In term of these, the arrangement of story time order is to achieve the target of making the story more like townspeople’s gossip.

Poe uses flashback in the story to give an impression that the murder case has truly happened. The narrator first chatters about himself and his unusual talents, such as what he can hear. Also, he insists that he is not mad. To prove that he is right, he starts telling his story of how and why he commits the murder case. He even boasts of his sanity by saying “how calmly I can tell you the whole story” (Poe 381). Then, an appalling murder is disclosed in order. Through the whole story, the narrator enjoys having an audience, because he keeps mentioning “you.” Yet, the audience does not involve themselves in his murder case, so the narrator’s description of his story becomes a monologue. Additionally, combination of the monologue and flashback form makes what the narrator says sound like his confession and makes the story appear to be true. Therefore, the readers can imagine the setting like this: The police arrest the murderer who now is sitting in the room, confessing to the police agitatedly. What he says is going to be taken down as the record of a murder case. Thus, the story sounds like a true story, a horrible crime committed by someone with sheer insanity.

The two authors arrange the time order of the stories to emphasize the distinctive characters of narrators. Besides, both of time arrangements are not chronological and both of them perfectly fit the way the narrators tell the story. The narrators in *A Rose for Emily* are townspeople, so Faulkner uses skillful non-chronological narrative to represent the gossip among the villagers. It fits the way they talk because the subject of their gossip changes from time to time, according to the order of their association. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the application of flashback causes the narrator’s confession to be more real-life. If Poe merely used the chronological order to narrate, it would be hard to give readers the impression that the narrator is telling the event happening in his life. Then, it would look like only an imaginary tale.

In comparison, the arrangement of time order of *A Rose for Emily* is far more complicated than *The Tell-Tale Heart*. In addition, the former enhances the effect of unreliability. Readers are confused since the events are out of order. On the other hand, readers won’t get confused while reading *The Tell-Tale Heart*, because the way the narrator tells the story is much more straightforward. However, both the arrangements of time order in the two stories serve the purposes well. Equally, confused by the unreliability and non-chronological narrative in *A Rose for Emily*, readers have to break the code and find out true sequence of the events, and therefore the end of the story is quite a shock to them. As for *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the use of flashback makes the story sound like a real event and readers are horror-stricken.

Readers’ feelings of horror in these two stories are intensified through the author’s use of images. The portrait of Miss Emily’s father symbolizes his control over his daughter. Here is the description of the portrait: “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 clack flung front door” (Faulkner 2056). That is, Emily is in the background of the portrait and her father is in front of her. With such a position, he seems to protect her well. When it goes too far, the protection becomes domination. Namely, he rules her life and emotion. While she is still young, Emily is discouraged from dating with other young men because he thinks “None of the young men were quite good enough” for her (Faulkner 2056). Like what the portrait represents, her father always controls her and dominates her life. Furthermore, his influence over her continues even if he has been dead. As townspeople say, her father “had thwarted her woman’s life so many times has been too virulent and too furious to die” (Faulkner 2059). Townspeople have observed her father’s domination and great effect on her. Since she is prevented from doing what she wants to do when she is young, she is eager to enjoy her new found freedom after her father passes away. To be with Homer Barron forever is something she longs for. However, the odds are against her, partly because of the villagers’ intervention and partly because of Homer Barron’s own free will. That explains why she kills Homer Barron when she knows that he may leave her. She wants to keep him for good, even though Homer Barron has become a dry corpse. Under such a situation, she can even dominate him well. Readers read in horror as Emily’s murder of Homer Barron unfolds.

In the narrators’ description, Emily sometimes appears to be a statue more than to be a real person. For example, Emily is “like the carven torso of an idol in a niche” (Faulkner 2060). In the eyes of the villagers, she is also “inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse” (Faulkner 2060). At the same time, she is seen as “a tradition, a duty, a care” (Faulkner 2054). These words, taken together, are to emphasize her image of a statue, which is as old as a tradition. Since it is eternal, the statue itself and Emily the person cannot be changed. Moreover, the townspeople have long “thought of them [Emily and her father] as a tableau” (Faulkner 2056). A tableau has something in common with a statue. Both of them are timeless and never effected by time. Importantly, this quality is what the townspeople think of these nobilities. Because of this never-changing quality, Emily, in a way,

cannot catch up with time, which in turn reflects her stubborn personality. Her attitude never changes: she is always demanding, and those who ask her to cooperate all fail. There are four examples. The first one is a deputation of the Board of Aldermen. When they ask her to pay tax, she replies them in a “dry and cold” voice, “I have no taxes in Jefferson” (Faulkner 2055). She even asks them to see Colonel Sartoris to verify her statement. However, Colonel Sartoris has been dead for almost ten years. It is amazing that Emily lives in a world where time is at a standstill. Then it is Judge Stevens that avoids confronting her face to face. Even though Emily’s neighbor complains bad smell from her house fills the air, he does not think of it as a proper manner to accuse “high and mighty” Grierson of bad smell (Faulkner 2055). Thirdly, the druggist fails to ask Emily why she buys arsenic despite the fact that the law requires Emily to state her purpose of using it (Faulkner 2058). The fourth example is the Baptist minister, whom the ladies force to interfere in Emily’s affair with Homer Barron (Faulkner 2058). Yet, he fails his mission. He will not disclose what happens during his interview of Emily, nor is he willing to go back again. Thus, he asks his wife to “write to Emily’s relations to Alabama” (Faulkner 2056). Moreover, when the town gets free postal delivery, she alone refuses to let them fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a mail box to it (Faulkner 2059). Not only does she refuse to be affected by time, she is also stubborn, refusing to listen to others. All in all, these qualities of timelessness and arrogance closely correspond to the image of a statue that Emily presents. As a result, Emily is seen as an eccentric.

In the story, the narrator describes the old man’s eye as “a vulture- a pale eye, with a film over it” (Poe 381). The vulture-looking eye of the old man is the reason (the cause) that drives the narrator to murder. As what he says, “Whenever it [the eye] fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees-very gradually-I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever” (Poe 381). Since the old man’s eye makes him extremely uncomfortable, anger surges up. He feels there is an urgent need to get rid of the old man’s vulture-looking eyes. Also, the eye symbolizes reason (the ability to think in an intelligent way, make sensible decisions and form clear arguments). Eyes are organs to see something clearly. When the narrator murders the old man because of the eye, he symbolically murders reason. Namely, he can’t see things clearly and can’t act sensibly, either. In this way, he shows his insanity. None of normal people would kill a person only because of his eye. However, the narrator does so. Furthermore, he insists on killing the old man with his eye open, because “it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye” (Poe 382). His cling to the eye is unusual and proves how crazy he is.

The beating heart which only the narrator can hear reflects the guilt he feels. Now that he does not insist his innocence but his sanity, the narrator does not feel guilty at all when he tells his audience what has happened previously. The heart-beat he hears at first is the reflection of the old man’s terror. At the beginning, it is “a low, dull, quick sound.” Later, the sound increases, and it becomes “quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant” as the old man’s terror grows more and more intense (Poe 383). After the old man has been killed, the narrator can still hear his heart-beat, particularly when the

police come. His head aches and his face grows pale and the sound increases, too. The narrator tries not to notice the sound, “but the noise steadily increased” (Poe 384). The sound he hears grows “louder-louder-louder” (Poe 384) and his tone becomes wild, careless and crazy. He takes it for granted that the police all hear the sound. In fact, what he hears is a reflection of his mental condition. When people do something bad or inappropriate, they think their deeds are known by others, and it is no longer a secret. It is a sense of guilt at play, and it is how the narrator feels. At last, the noise of the heart-beat is too loud for him to endure. Namely, he feels so guilty that he cannot bear it. Therefore, he confesses his crime to the police.

With impressive images, the two authors convey the great horror of two stories. Simultaneously, the two stories are conspicuous Gothic stories. Generally, a Gothic story is a genre that creates great terror and suspense. According to the definition in *A Hand Book to Literature*, it is: “A form of novel in which magic, mystery, and chivalry are the chief characteristics. Horrors abound: one may expect a suit of armor suddenly to come to life, while ghosts, clanking chains, and charnel houses impart an uncanny atmosphere of terror” (Poe 204). Poe creates a typical Gothic story in *The Tell-Tale Heart* through its setting. Generally, all the actions in a Gothic story always take place at night. Similarly, in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator secretly gets into the old man’s room and watches him sleep every night for a week. Gothic stories are often to set in an isolated castle, mansion, monastery or the claustrophobic interior building such as dungeon, crypt and locked room. Likewise, Poe uses a dark, shuttered chamber as the setting of the story: a claustrophobic, sunless environment. With the two images in the story, the old man’s eye and heartbeat, and the insane narrator’s mental condition, Poe successfully creates gruesome atmosphere.

William Faulkner is one of the best-known writers of Southern gothic. *A Rose for Emily* is one of his works that discusses the American South. Similar to a Gothic tale, American Southern Gothic gives readers the great horror and suspense. However, it mainly deals with American South. In addition, characters with eccentric behavior are another feature of American Southern Gothic. For example, Emily behaves quite strangely in the story, like her lack of time sense. In Faulkner’s works, America South is full of the atmosphere of a fallen south. There are usually the characters who look more like ghosts and spirits from the past than real person. Like Emily, she is been described as “tableau” several times in story and this quality is accorded with her lack of time sense. The two images successfully create Emily, the daughter of noble family. When the new generation comes, her time stands still and she refuses to change or be changed.

With skillful narrative and impressive images, both *A Rose for Emily* and *The Tell-Tale Heart* bring great horror to readers. William Faulkner creates gossip of townspeople to present the story in non-chronological order. Edgar Allan Poe depicts the crazy murderer’s confession with flashback to make the story look like a real event. Though one story’s viewpoint is singular and the other is plural, and the arrangements of time are quite different, both of the narrations make the story unreliable. The unreliability is of central importance when the two authors keep readers be in suspense. Also, Faulkner and

Poe both use effective images to represent the gruesome atmosphere, which is a distinguishing characteristic of Gothic story. Differently, *A Rose for Emily* is an American Southern Gothic which emphasizes the eccentric characters while *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a traditional Gothic story. The south nobility in *A Rose for Emily* have much to do with the fallen south. Faulkner juxtaposes Emily the person and the timeless quality. Also, the portrait of Emily's father symbolizes his control over her which leads to Emily's eccentricity. As for *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Poe uses the images of the old man's eyes and heart-beat to emphasize insanity of the narrator because they are all his fancies. All in all, the two authors successfully not only create but also reinforce the feeling of horror with such unreliability and images. Hence, readers are being horror-struck and left in suspense throughout the whole stories.

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