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Defamiliarizing Traditions: A Formalist Study of *A Rose for Emily* by William Faulkner

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This study examines William Faulkner's A Rose for Emily through the lens of defamiliarization, a key concept in Formalist literary theory. By employing close reading and I.A. Richards' analytical model, the analysis explores how the text transforms familiar themes of love, death, traditions, and societal norms into strange and thought-provoking concepts. The fragmented narrative structure, vivid imagery, symbolism, and ironic contrasts work to reframe the understanding of the past and its impact on the present. This study mainly focuses on the use of figurative language and the title, which adds layers of complexity to the story. The study highlights A Rose for Emily as a profound critique of resistance to change and the haunting power of memory, offering new perspectives on the interaction between individual and societal struggles.

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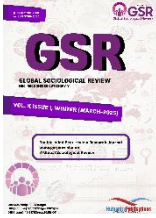


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Title

Defamiliarizing Traditions: A Formalist Study of *A Rose for Emily* by William Faulkner

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Abstract

This study examines William Faulkner's A Rose for Emily through the lens of defamiliarization, a key concept in Formalist literary theory. By employing close reading and I.A. Richards' analytical model, the analysis explores how the text transforms familiar themes of love, death, traditions, and societal norms into strange and thought-provoking concepts. The fragmented narrative structure, vivid imagery, symbolism, and ironic contrasts work to reframe the understanding of the past and its impact on the present. This study mainly focuses on the use of figurative language and the title, which adds layers of complexity to the story. The study highlights A Rose for Emily as a profound critique of resistance to change and the haunting power of memory, offering new perspectives on the interaction between individual and societal struggles.

Keywords: Formalism, Defamiliarization, Society

Introduction

William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* is widely regarded as a key work in Southern Gothic literature, intertwining themes of tradition, decay, and psychological complexity. This story goes beyond portraying just a woman's life and delves into how societal expectations, the passage of time, and the nature of memory influence and distort human actions. The plot centers on Miss Emily Grierson, a

solitary character ensnared by her family's history and the pressures of an evolving Southern society. Although the narrative seems simple at first glance, Faulkner's unique storytelling techniques challenge traditional narratives, prompting readers to reconsider familiar ideas such as love, death, and community.

Defamiliarization, a concept developed by Russian Formalists such as Viktor Shklovsky, aims at making familiar things appear unfamiliar or strange.



In his essay *Art as Technique*, Shklovsky explains defamiliarization as a process of “making objects unrecognizable; to increase the difficulty and length of perception is an important act because the ‘process’ of perception in art must be prolonged (Shklovsky). This recollection is reflected in Faulkner's disjointed narrative form, symbolic imagery, and figures of speech that subvert the familiar. The non-linear storytelling mirrors the chaotic, selective nature of memory, while what may appear to be mundane details are interposed with rich depictions of Miss Emily herself and her mansion, as well as their transactions within the town, creating multiple-layered truths.

This article applies I.A. Richards' "close reading" model to explore the functioning of defamiliarization in *A Rose for Emily*. Analyzing Faulkner closely, it shows how he deploys literary methods, including irony (to create new contexts), symbolism, and imagery, to recast well-known concepts. Also, the paper examines how 'The Title Defies Normal Expectations of a Reader' by looking at the juxtaposition of the delicate rose image with Emily's harsh reality. This essay will demonstrate how these methods integrate the broader concepts of resistance to change and social disintegration, as well as tradition against progress in America's Southern society.

Statement of the problem

A Rose for Emily, the plot of which is driven by various cultural as well as psychological symbols and images combined with an unorthodox character/s and narration, has defamiliarized conventional ideas on identity, individuality, and community. This study seeks to explore how these stylistic devices are deployed in the text to estrange conventionalized views of self, identity, and community. The analysis approaches the relations proposed by the fragmented narrative, literary devices, and themes as an intricate slag that rewrites these categories in a more complex way to allow a deeper comprehension of social dynamics and human experience involving issues such as tradition, memory, or changing society.

Research objectives

- To identify the symbols, imagery, and

unconventional characters used in the story *A Rose for Emily*.

- To analyze how these literary devices, including symbols, imagery, and narrative techniques, defamiliarize the concepts of individuality, identity, and community in the story *A Rose for Emily*.

Research questions

- What symbols, imagery, unconventional characters, and narrative style are used in the Story *A Rose for Emily*?
- How do the literary devices, including symbols, imagery, and narrative techniques, defamiliarize the concepts of individuality, identity, and community in the story *A Rose for Emily*?

Literature review

Ahmadian *et al.* (2015) investigate the time shift processes in the short story *A Rose for Emily*. This study applies Genette's narratological framework of time. It consists of two parts: the first part discusses the key theoretical concepts of narratology, narrative, and time, distinguishing story time and discourse time, and the second part analyzes the story using Genette's time categories, which are order, duration, and frequency, to identify and examine the temporal shifts in the narrative. The study concludes that understanding of time leads to a better understanding of the story, and these narratological techniques can make clear the borders of past, present, and future. Moreover, Bai *et al.* (2020) interpret the story *A Rose for Emily* from a narrative style and analyze how Faulkner constructed the narrative of the story and the character of Emily.

In addition, Asmarani (2017) has explored "A Rose for Emily from the perspective of female identity oppression. This study centers on the cognitive, constructive, and conative dimensions of identity development as well as the consequences of stunted identity. For analysis, the study employs Marica's identity statuses and stereotypes of women from the 19th century. The study concludes that the women's primary oppression leads to identity foreclosure, making them more susceptible to identity crises. An

and Li (2022) elaborate on the tragic life of the southern traditional noble women by analyzing the short story *A Rose for Emily*. This study portrays the overcoming of Emily, the protagonist, by the forces of the patriarchal society and her deep-rooted powerlessness. Moreover, some scholars undertook the study of Evelyn and *A Rose for Emily* with the aim of revealing the submissiveness theme contained in the work of both authors. The focus of analysis is the methods of portrayal of submissiveness by the female characters. The research illuminates the dominance of gender power relations through the close reading of the two stories, as well as the understanding offered by these literary works of the intricacies of human life.

Also, Ajmal (2023) notes, and Giang and Dan (2024) further analyze the image of women in traditional society through the lens of *A Rose for Emily*. This research seeks to explain the themes of oppression, control, and the inadequate avenues of participation available to women in a patriarchal society using feminist theory and textual analysis. Furthermore, it analyzed how such oppression impacts the characters' choices, relationships, and identity.

Furthermore, Zhao (2018) considers the composition of William Faulkner's short story *A Rose for Emily* by describing its setting, plot, characters, and conflicts. She investigates the principal themes of death and the resistance to change in Emily's life from a structural perspective. Additionally, she examines other symbols, such as the rose, the house, and the town.

From the review of the literature above, it appears that *A Rose for Emily* has received ample attention from feminist scholars, narratologists, and, more recently, through a structural lens. There is still much work to be done explaining the story from the angle of Viktor Shklovsky's defamiliarization theory. While feminist critiques center on the oppression of identity and narratological studies focus on time shifts and the narrative structure, Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization, which looks at the familiar becoming strange, offers an intriguing approach to analyzing Faulkner's story. Filling this gap can reveal

the ways defamiliarization transforms the readers' engagement with the story's temporal disjunctions, recurring motifs, and character arcs.

Methodology

Research Design

This study analyzes literary devices aimed at defamiliarizing specific concepts employing qualitative research. The methodology applied in this study is close reading, which is a type of literary analysis focused on the language of a text, its structure, and its themes. With *A Rose for Emily*, this approach supports the analysis of defamiliarization of themes. Close reading is aligned with I.A. Richards' model of literary analysis, which, as noted by Richards in 1929, advocates for careful reading of a text as the basis for revealing its meanings and the words and forms in which they are couched. Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* utilizes abundant symbolism, irony, and imagery in a complex narrative that provokes the reader's understanding of time, memory, and identity. The study examines Faulkner's literary devices with a non-linear narrative and symbolic representation through defamiliarization theory coupled with Richards' close reading approach and how they disrupt the Southern Gothic genre and comment on societal complete Southern Gothic genre sentiments.

Theoretical framework

This study adopts a Formalist perspective, with a focus on the concept of defamiliarization as by Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay *Art as Technique*. Formalism emphasizes the aesthetic and structural aspects of a text, prioritizing form over content. According to Shklovsky (1917), the primary aim of literature is to make the familiar appear unfamiliar, disrupting the reader's habitual perception. He defines defamiliarization as "making objects 'unfamiliar,' making forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged (Shklovsky, 1917). It allows the reader to experience ordinary objects and ideas in new and unexpected ways. In *Art as Technique*, Shklovsky (1917) argues that the function of art is to prolong the process of

perception, making the "ordinary" seem unfamiliar and intensifying the reader's engagement with the text by prolonging their awareness of the object being described.

The short story *A Rose for Emily* employs various literary devices such as fragmented narrative structure, symbolic imagery, and ironic contrasts. Through these techniques, the text reframes traditional concepts of time, decay, and memory, inviting the reader to reexamine conventional ideas about love, death, and societal norms.

Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization sheds light on how a text's interpretation of Southern customs and norms is intricately and skillfully disrupted—changed, if you will inviting readers to look again and reconsider what the Southern traditions and human behavior mean. This approach uncovers additional layers of meaning within the text, for the description of Miss Emily and her environment illustrates the dense and complex struggle against change or the struggle between the present and a haunting past, and the decay of society.

Data Analysis and Discussion

As the central figure of the story, Emily is the protagonist in William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*. The story was able to defamiliarize time, love, tradition, and death, exposing the reader to notions that challenge the customary outlook. The story employs a fragmented narrative and symbolic contrasts to provide a novel outlook on a decaying Southern society. Different literary devices aim to present the conflict between time, society, and personal aspirations.

The title *A Rose for Emily* is ironic. At first glance, it seems like love and respect are offered to the protagonist, Emily. However, in the story, it is evident that Emily's life is devoid of the very qualities that the rose traditionally symbolizes. Her life is marked by control, isolation, and tragedy. Love, beauty, and companionship are absent from her life. Her life is full of deprivations and rejections, which make her isolated and emotionally stunted. In the beginning, her aunt and father do not allow her to have a meaningful relationship as they do not find anyone

worthy of their family name and status, leaving her alone and isolated from others. Afterwards, her lover, Homer Baron, also fails to provide her with the stability and commitment she desperately seeks, which pushes her to an act of morbid defiance. Additionally, the people of the town, who observe her life from a distance, fail to provide her with genuine support. They treat her more like a subject of gossip rather than a member of the community. Hence, the rose becomes a symbol of what is

absent in Emily's life rather than what is present. Rose signifies love, beauty, and companionship, but here this creates a sense of dissonance.

Furthermore, when we see the title, it seems like a happy or romantic narrative. However, it is the dark and unsettling tale of loneliness, decay, and rebellion against societal expectations and norms. It is a mysterious tale. The title seems happy, but it is not in the story. Through this contrast, the writer wants to show the disconnection between appearance and reality, that is, the surface appeal of tradition and the underlying decay of changing Southern society. The story shows how societal constraints can affect human lives. The "rose" in the title symbolizes both the lost potential and bitter irony. The writer uses this title to challenge the readers to rethink the societal oppression by contrasting Rose's positive symbolism with the grim reality of the protagonist, Emily.

Moreover, the unconventional narrative style is used to defamiliarize the conventional storytelling method. The writer uses fragmented narratives to present the events in the story. The story starts with the death of the protagonist, Emily: "*When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral*". The story does not present the events in chronological order; rather, the events are presented in a fragmented way. After her death, the story suddenly shifts to different moments in her life, like her refusal to pay taxes, her relationship with her lover, Homer Baron, and then the decay of her home.

This fragmented structure helps to show how the past can be reconstructed. This non-linear structure defamiliarizes the conventional method of storytelling. The story has a proper structure that is beginning, middle, and end. It usually starts with the

descriptions of setting, characters, and more. However, this story begins with the death of the protagonist and then presents the events of Emily's life. Through this technique, Faulkner highlights the complexity of her character and the impact of society's expectations and traditions. Moreover, this technique helps in presenting the chaotic and subjective reality of individual experience rather than the order society imposes.

Furthermore, the imagery of Miss Emily's house in the story transforms the familiar into something unfamiliar by highlighting its gradual decay and stagnation. The house is "*once white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies*". It was once a symbol of Southern pride. It is in one of the most elite neighborhoods. Now, it is "*an eyesore among eyesores*" as the surrounding neighborhood modernizes, but this house remains the same. No renovation has ever been made in the house. This decaying house symbolizes the decline of the traditions of the Old South and Miss Emily's resistance to change.

The writer further extends this imagery to Miss Emily herself, whose physical appearance is the same as that of her house. She is described as "*bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water,*" and her eyes are likened to "*two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough.*" Like her house, she does not take care of herself. This distorted description makes her appear ghostly. It looks like she belongs to a different time. She froze in the past. This imagery shows her isolation and resistance to change. The decay of both Emily and her house shows the decline in her personal life as well as the Southern culture of which she is the emblem. Through this imagery, the writer defamiliarizes the idea of decay. It is not the decay of her house or her, but the Southern society.

Irony plays a significant role in challenging societal norms and expectations in the story. The people of the town see Emily as a symbol of Southern pride and traditions. However, her actions contradict these ideals, revealing a distorted reality. For example, she refuses to pay taxes as she says to the new authorities, "*See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson.*" Colonel Sartoris has been dead for over a decade, which shows her detachment from reality and

her inability to accept the societal changes and the present time. Her refusal to accept reality exposes her isolation and disconnection from contemporary life.

Furthermore, Miss Emily's relationship with her lover, Homer Barron, deepens the irony. Homer is a Northern day laborer. Emily is in love with him, although he is not a suitable partner for her social class. Her love for Homer shocks the community, but she does not care about society. She accepts her love for Homer rather than elevating her status as a Southern elite. The irony in how Miss Emily is perceived by society versus who she truly is forces us to question the validity of societal ideals and norms. Ultimately, through this use of irony, the story defamiliarizes the idea of societal pride, tradition, and identity.

Symbolism also plays an important role in defamiliarizing normal concepts of love, death, and traditions. One of the most haunting symbols in the story is the gray hair that was discovered on the pillow next to the dead body of Homer Barron. This detail makes sense in Emily's life and context of existence, in other words, her changeable and dark vision of love: "*Then we noticed that on the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and dry dust ubiquitous and acrid in the nostrils leaping up, we saw a large, long roll of iron-grey hair.*" The strand of hair shows Emily's possessiveness of her lover, Homer. She wants to possess and control Homer, transforming love, which is supposed to be tender and life-giving, into something lifeless and melancholic. Instead of fostering companionship, her version of love becomes a form of domination and stagnation, frozen in time like the decayed body she keeps in her home.

In *A Rose for Emily*, Jefferson serves as an important symbol of the Old South and its customs, deeply ingrained values, and its staunch resistance to evolution. Faulkner depicts Jefferson as more than just a geographical location, instead as a representation of a collective psyche that clings to an eroding past. The townspeople consider Miss Emily as an esteemed southern aristocrat, (grand) dame, and a part of the old-based society, a living reminiscence of a bygone age. She is almost mythologized and viewed as a link to a lost era.

Nonetheless, this form of adoration is laced with

scrutiny and intrigue surrounding her unconventional behaviors, like her tax payment aversion and dalliance with Homer Barron. These complicated and encumbered narratives through the gaze of Emily shed light on the town's social and moral biased exuberance, which is contradictory to the attitude of lavish celebration over tradition, for they equally disown Emily for her iconoclastic whims.

The dilapidated condition of Miss Emily's house reinforces Jefferson's symbolic role as a representation of the decaying Old South. The house's decline also parallels the loss of the Old South's values, as it succumbs to the unrelenting forces of modernization. Similarly, the townspeople's reluctance to directly confront Miss Emily, whether over her unpaid taxes or the noxious odors wafting from her house, reveals a stubborn adherence to a South rooted in outdated norms of genteel and genteel denial. Through the portrayal of Jefferson, the text critiques the South's self-romanticization, demonstrating how stubbornness leads to moral and cultural stagnation. Using Jefferson as a symbolic setting, the text disputes the idealized interpretation of Southern tradition, illustrating how the South's obsession with preserving a decaying past transforms heritage into a haunting relic instead of a vibrant legacy.

Moreover, the concealed watch in *A Rose for Emily* serves as a powerful reminder of the unrelenting march of time and its inevitability in human affairs. It transforms the concept of time into an intangible force that subtly shapes life, even when life is disregarded. In the context of the story, Emily's unwillingness to accept change starkly clashes with the quiet, rhythmic timekeeping of her watch, which is tucked away. The townspeople find the detail of the watch interesting and note, "They could hear the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain." This particular excerpt captures the essence of untethered life and serves as a reminder of the constancy of time.

In Emily's case, the stubborn refusal to yield to the relentless march of time, coupled with the rigid adherence to customs, rejection of new ways, or the eerie mummification of Homer Barron's body, becomes counterproductive, as time hides away

reality, undermines resistance, and unveils the frailty of the values she symbolizes. The lack of visibility of the watch creates the illusion of the watch itself and hints at the spine-chilling reality of time—it always moves forward. Such a lack of visibility illustrates the unnoticed influence time possesses, in Miss Emily's case, and the Southern society on the society erasing its glory. The text compels us to confront the reality of decline and decay by demonstrating the role of the invisible watch, suggesting time in its essence exists as a relentless shadow hanging over life's every moment.

In the social setting of *A Rose for Emily*, Miss Emily's father functions as a symbol and case study of the all-encompassing system of patriarchy, of dominionist rule that men practiced over women's aspirations and self-identification. The text makes this notion strange by presenting her father as both a guardian and a protector, complicating the narrative of parental power. And his influence, far from waning with death, continues to dog and haunt Emily's life. This duality is vividly expressed in the following: "We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing to lose, she would have to hold on to that which had taken everything." This striking imagery indicates the extent to which his power and dominion controlled her life. As evil as it may sound to hope for a life of love, he extinguished her chances at a life of love and independence, opportunity.

The effects of control like this permeated Emily's psyche, making her feel utterly dependent on her father's care. The way she oscillates between being unable to accept, refusing to let go of, and insisting her father's death means he's alive demonstrates her all-encompassing need for her father. Even in death, she symbolizes patriarchal violence that leaves her isolated and powerless. Through the emblem of Miss Emily's father, the text critiques the patriarchal oppression that seeks to confine women in life, and also leaves consequences for them long after his death. Ultimately, the text, by changing the father's role from a protector to a figure of anguish and grief, transforms the father's role, thereby undermining the concept of patriarchy and exposing its disturbing and self-destructive nature.

The figure Tobe, referred to as "Negro" in the story, epitomizes the racism that Southern society, as depicted by Faulkner, harbors. Tobe's identity was reduced to his race, which epitomized the systematic, post-Reconstruction marginalization of blacks in the South. The moniker of "Negro" strips Tobe of all dignity and reduces him to a mere appendage of society. He is a disembodied existence who is reduced to the functional position of a servant in relation to Miss Emily and, more tragically, as a servant to her dead father. The narrator's description of him as "an old negro who comes in and out carrying a market basket" illustrates how Tobe is reduced to an automaton laboring to perform tasks. Even after decades of service, the old man remains a loyal servant, but Tobe's loyalty and service deny him the dignity of being a person with worth. His character suggests the South class, and the extremist expectations that blacks and people of color were subjected to by the South, entrenched in the expectation that blacks were to serve and not be considered as humans with hopes and dreams of their own.

With regard to Tobe, his significance to the story hinges on matters regarding Miss Emily and is virtually absent from the narrative framework. The text depicts him as a passive, quiet man who comes and goes from the house doing his work, devoid of any expression of his thoughts or wishes.

The narratorial depiction of Tobe as "an old negro man who goes in and out with a market basket" stresses his servile and animalistic dehumanization in the text as a consequence of his status as a slave. While Tobe may not speak, he does choose to observe and witness the happenings in the life of Miss Emily. Under no circumstance does he allow any dissenting voice to disrupt the customary order. The instant of his vanishing in the wake of Miss Emily's death underscores his total erasure from the text and accentuates, in the eyes of society, the ephemeral and enduring dimensions of his existence. As the narrator observes, "no one knew if he was dead or not," which points to his vanishing from the social order. Through Tobe's positioning, the text compels readers to confront the sociocultural reality of the time and the brutal violence of racism, which not only relegated

individuals like Tobe to the margins but systematically obliterated them, in a literal and figurative sense, from the social topography of the era.

The subtle elements in *A Rose for Emily* deepen the story's discomfiting tone and create an atmosphere of impending dread. One such detail is the description of the odor emanating from Miss Emily's house. While it appears to be an insignificant detail, it becomes crucial as the narrative unfolds. First, the townspeople either tiptoe around the subject for fear of confrontation or because of an awkward sociocultural courtesy. Judge Stevens, for example, has socially offensive bluntness. When he is confronted with the smell, he jokingly attacks the culprit with, "Dammit, sir, will you charge a lady to her face for smelling bad?" This reaction exemplifies the blunt reality bound along with Southern sociocultural precepts. Society is bound by social manners and cannot act upon reality. Southern society stands as a contrasting example of energizing politeness instead of social disregard of the uncomfortable truth. Paired with the humor in Stevens' remark, the unanswerable "why" the city has with Stevens' quote points to the unanswerable smirk at reality. Rather than engage in the disconcerting truth of reality, society chooses appearances. With the advancement of the plot, the townspeople's persistent disregard for egregious reality suggestions becomes more tangible.

The transformation into a moment of horror reveals the truth behind the smell emanating from Miss Emily's house: it is the decaying body of Homer Barron, her supposed suitor. The change from the seemingly inconsequential detail of a smell to a revelation of murder amplifies the sense of horror and suspense throughout the story. It also serves to illustrate how the townspeople, and, by extension, society, more often than not ignore unsettling details for the sake of soothing their fragile sensibilities, only to find far too late the horrifying reality they have chosen to look away from. That omission of Shreve's detail, which is quite small yet powerful, not only reinforces the uneasy and oppressive atmosphere of the story but proves the case that the most inconsequential details of existence can possess the deepest and most profound significance. This text

ultimately serves as a warning about the dangers of ignoring history and resisting change. Through its fragmented narrative, vivid descriptions, and symbolic oppositions, "A Rose for Emily" turns well-known concepts into unsettling generalizations. This illustrates the themes of love, death, and tradition while depicting how the society's unwillingness to let go of the past causes decay, both physically and spiritually.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the short story *A Rose for Emily* is a

masterful demonstration of the use of symbolism, imagery, unconventional characters, and a non-linear plot to defamiliarize the routine understandings of individuality, identity, and community. The text scrutinizes the dialectics of societal change, change resistance, and the tension between tradition and modernity in the American South via defamiliarization. This study validates that in Emily's case, defamiliarization not only enhances the aesthetic appreciation of the text but also encourages reflection on the intricate and at times paradoxical realities of the individual, society, and time, thereby underscoring the timelessness of the story's theme.

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