

The Revelation of Characters in Narrative Space of *Dry September*

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Based on the chronotopic level of narrative space introduced by Gabriel Zoran, this paper examines the three main characters in William Faulkner's *Dry September* in the hope of getting closer to the real nature of them. It is found that Minnie Cooper and McLendon are more characters at rest who are tied to places not only geographically but also mentally, which may give clues to their tragic life. Though Hawkshaw may be narrated as a character in motion, his movements reveal the flawed human nature.

Keywords: chronotopic space, *Dry September*, characters, human nature

Introduction

Compared with his famous novels such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* which help William Faulkner win the Nobel prize, his short story *Dry September* published in 1931 may be less known to the world. But it is unquestionably a remarkable work for not only the profound meaning it carries but also the narrative mode it creates. In this short story, William Faulkner gives more description than narration with frequent mention of the weather, the detailed presentation of the environment, and the juxtaposition of multiple plot lines. The story begins with the barber Hawkshaw and his righteous acts, but then the depiction of Miss Minnie Cooper inserts and it ends with McLendon's violence.

To understand the theme of the story and to discover what behinds the characters' behaviors, we may need integrate the fragmented plots and read the work as a whole. Just as what John K. Crane (1985) puts forward as an approach to the interpretation of the title's meaning, three main characters in the story should be investigated with equal importance, and he believes the motivation of their actions can be explained by their common anxiety in middle ages. Like Crane, Brian Sutton (1991) discusses the irrationality for men's motivation behind their acts of horror. In addition to the study of the motivation of the characters, some scholars also figure out Faulkner's accusation for White racists. Paul Rogalus (1990) clarifies Faulkner's depiction of brutal Whites. Thomas Claviez (2009) states the violence of Whites in the story is illustrated by blank spots. Besides, he also points out the trap of Faulkner, "The moment we judge the acts of Minnie Cooper and McLendon as acts either distorting (Minnie) or ignoring (McLendon) the facts out of racist/sexist motivations, we fall into it" (Claviez, 2009, p. 30).

Since the short story, like Faulkner's former masterpieces, demonstrates distinctive narrative techniques, a lot of scholars examine the narrative features of it. Wen-Ning Jin (2010) analyzes the characterization by

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clarifying the modes of focalization in this story. Xiao-Dong Liang (2006) decodes the metaphors in it such as “rumor”, “bloody twilight”, and “dust” to discuss their functions for the theme of the story.

For further investigating the relationship between narration and characterization, this paper tries to uncover the real nature of the three main characters Hawkshaw, McLendon, and Minnie Cooper by following their movements in space and observing the features of their living space. Particularly, this paper uses Gabriel Zoran’s theory of space in narrative and his defined level of chronotopic structure to view characters as well as their insane acts.

Zoran in his article “Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative” mentions three different levels of the structuring of space in the text, namely the topographical level, the chronotopic level, and the textual level. These levels are in a “vertical” viewpoint, and by referring the chronotopic level, Zoran means there is space constructed by movements and events. Within the chronotopos, it contains both synchronic relations and diachronic relations.

Zoran (1984, p. 318) says, “At every point of the narrative, that is, at every synchronic situation, some objects may be found at rest and others in motion”. If we examine the synchronic relationship between characters in *Dry September*, we may find Minnie Cooper and McLendon are characters at rest compared with Hawkshaw as a character in motion. For diachronic relations, the chronotopos determines directions or axes of movement which may show several powers, and in the text it may be reflected by the brutal Whites’ insane acts and their doomed fate.

A Desperate Minnie Cooper in Her Confined Space

Miss Minnie Cooper is arranged in a spatial juxtaposition with that of Hawkshaw and McLendon since Faulkner inserts her walk to square between the scene of the outskirts and McLendon’s return to home. All that happen in Saturday evening. We could assume that when McLendon and the white men drive the car for lynching Will Mayes, Miss Minnie Cooper may walk through the square and be on the verge of losing her mind in the picture show.

Minnie Cooper in Spatial Relations

In Minnie Cooper’s synchronic relationship with Hawkshaw, we may find she is actually a character at rest. According to Zoran (1984, p. 318), “rest is the state of being bound to a given spatial context”. Though Minnie Cooper can move freely in the town, in the structure of a given narrative space where the main plot develops she exclusively lives in a single context.

From the barber shop to the car and then to the wild places, the scenes that Hawkshaw experiences shift frequently. But for Minnie Cooper, her movement is limited from home to the square. We can compare their movements and the changed scenes accordingly.

In that Saturday evening when Hawkshaw runs after McLendon, Miss Minnie Cooper may be still in her house and dress for supper. Then her friends call for her, and at that moment Hawkshaw is likely to get on the car with McLendon and Will Mayes and suffer from his inner struggles. When Hawkshaw finally gives up his defense for Will and jumps out of the car, Minnie Cooper may walk toward the square with her friends. The two characters may be in a synchronic relation because when Minnie Cooper enters the square and in the center of the group, we get to know the news about Will’s absence from the town men, which may imply that the white men who take away Will have not come back yet.

Finally comes the climax scene of the story. In the picture show, a place like a miniature fairyland, Minnie Cooper is caught by a terrible mood and cannot help laughing. At the same time, the scene in the wilderness where Will is cruelly treated may be more horrible. It comes to end when Minnie Cooper lies in her bed, laughing and screaming, and Hawkshaw limps toward town.

In the chronotopos of the narrative space, Minnie Cooper is confined to the single context that features limited movement and distorted spatial images like “lighted lobby and colored lithographs of life caught in its terrible and beautiful mutations” (Faulkner, 1995, p. 124). Compared with Hawkshaw’s moving track, Minnie Cooper lives in isolation not only geographically but also mentally. So to speak, Hawkshaw has capacity for movement while Minnie Cooper remains at rest and is tied to her places.

Miss Minnie Cooper’s Doomed Going Mad

Miss Minnie Cooper realizes that she is tied to her closed place when she walks slower and slower through the square, and her lips begin to tingle in the picture show which is occupied by young men and girls. She sees “the young men and girls entered...their paired backs...their slim, quick bodies awkward, divinely young, while beyond them the silver dream accumulated, inevitably on and on” (Faulkner, 1995, p. 124). She knows that she has lost her youth and glory completely. Thus she goes mad and laughs at her previous ridiculous acts for trying to regain attention.

As a matter of fact, the fate of Minnie Cooper is doomed as the chronotopic space “is structured as a network of axes having definite directions and a definite character” (Zoran, 1984, p. 319). Minnie Cooper’s movement in the narrative space determines the direction of her story. Though we say Minnie Cooper is a character at rest paralleled by Hawkshaw’s movements, she does move and always moves in front of town men. In the second part of the story, the narrator introduces Minnie Cooper’s living space and routine. Before the imaginary rape happens, she lives in a small house with her mother and aunt, spending her day on the porch and in the downtown stores, which may constitute her space on the topographical level. Her movement in the topographical space to some degree may reflect her dull and static life, but it is the definite direction in chronotopic space that makes her get closer to desperation step by step.

She is always on her path for places where men are. The places such as the high school party and church where the young Minnie catches men’s eyes, as well as the crowded store fronts, in the doors of which sit men and the square she nervously walks through when she is old, all are defined as the point where men are. In diachronic relations, Minnie Cooper moves toward her definite direction for pursuing feminine charm or saving her dignity as a woman. Thus once that direction is certain, her insane acts and her fate of going mad are doomed.

The Commander McLendon in His Car

From the barber shop the first scene of this story to McLendon’s home the last scene we see, McLendon is existed as the character who controls the direction. And along his motion trail, we may find that the car is the major space where he stays, and he is also tied to this place.

McLendon in Spatial Relations

We are deeply impressed by the scene where Hawkshaw in the weeds sees McLendon’s car come but there are just four people in it. The absence of Will Mayes implies the tragedy that he is killed. The theme of racial discrimination is also illustrated here.

For McLendon, though he may be a character in motion by contrast with Minnie Cooper, he acts as a character at rest reflected in Hawkshaw's eyes. When Hawkshaw jumps out of the car, he sits in the car with impatience and cold attitude. When Hawkshaw limps on the road toward town, he comes back in his car. He is really trapped in the car. The narrow and sweltering space of the car not only refers to the physical space McLendon dominates but also her narrow mind space where racial discrimination is rooted and his imperious commanding attitude toward others cannot be challenged. In his mind, he is the commander, and he must prove it by practicing in actions even though they are irrational, for example, lynching the suspected black guy.

The different states of motion and rest between Hawkshaw and McLendon impose on us a strong emotion of horror that the cruelest thing is executed by the one at rest. The one in motion just acts as a witness to observe the things happen in an unchanged position. When the car that McLendon drives disappears in the dust, the axes in the narrative space imposed by powers are clearer.

McLendon's Power of Controlling Direction

Since the movements of characters are actually determined by several powers such as "will, obstructions, ideal, characters' intentions, and so forth" (Zoran, 1984, p. 319), McLendon's movements from the barber shop to an abandoned brick kiln are also a result of certain powers: McLendon's pursuit of authority.

McLendon once "had commanded troops at the front in France and had been decorated for valor" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 117), but now he has retired and becomes an ordinary man at middle age. It seems that what he does to Will Mayes is out of his racial prejudice or what he believes as rightful action for protecting white woman, but actually he just wants to make sure that he is still in authority, and he enjoys being a commander and controlling events.

In the diachronic structure of the chronotopos, the defined direction from place to place is mainly determined by McLendon's movements. The evidence may be found in several places where he interacts with others.

In the barber shop, it is him that initiates the movement for lynching Will. He asks other white men, "are you going to sit there and let a black son rape a white woman on the streets of Jefferson?" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 117) He means they should take actions. Thus he ends the quarrels abruptly and takes immediate action to seek supports for his movement, "Who's with me?" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 118) Even when some rational clients ask him to find out the facts first, he still insists, "All that're with me get up from there. The ones that ain't..." (Faulkner, 1995, p. 118) The axes leading that movement from the barber store to where Will is are determined. McLendon's commanding attitude is also accompanied by his body language. He always roves his gaze to try to command other men just like he is still the commander in the army.

Then McLendon leads his followers to come for Will and bring him to the car. He repeats "Get in" to Will in such a commanding voice that it makes him like the victor who gives orders to the captive in the battlefield. But at that place, it is McLendon's fascination with power for controlling black people that acts in space.

Finally, McLendon drives his car to an abandoned place for lynching Will. He ignores Hawkshaw's request for pulling over and leaving, but suggests him to jump out without turning his head.

Thus, during the whole action concerning four places, it is determined by McLendon's pursuit of authority and controlling movements.

A Struggling Hawkshaw From Place to Place

Hawkshaw is definitely a character in motion within the overall narrative space. When Miss Minnie Cooper lingers in her limited living space and McLendon keeps driving his car to a deserted place where he commits sin, Hawkshaw moves from place to place to try to stop the insane action. But unfortunately, he fails to insist the right way and changes direction after experiencing painful inner struggles, and becomes an invisible witness in the end.

Hawkshaw in Spatial Relations

At every synchronic situation, Hawkshaw's motion, compared with that of other Whites, indicates his difference. In the barbershop, he explains his opinions about the rumor to the clients to speak for Will. When he sees those irrational people under the leadership of McLendon come for Will, he rushes out, while other barbers just lean out from the door, "looking up the street after him" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 118). Unlike other barbers as characters at rest, he acts in motion. The good side of his nature is revealed by contrast.

Though the narrator gives a large part to the scene of the barber shop, the scene that Hawkshaw is left on the narrow road, though in short narration, is of more significance. On the level of textual structure, space is presented with several lines. And with a glance of them, we may find the time in the narrative space passes quickly and at the moment when Hawkshaw rises from the ditch and limps on the road, presently he hears the cars run back. It seems that all the things happen as the dust grows and dies away.

The scene is not only narrated by a few words, but also limited by Hawkshaw's focus. Though the process of committing the violence is not given, we can clearly read the cruelty behind the lines. We may find the same effect in following Hawkshaw's movement to the outskirts in McLendon's car. Limited by narrative focus, we can hardly know why he still gets on the car after he strikes Will, why he finally decides to jump out of the car, and what's on his mind when Will calls him. But it is certain that Hawkshaw must suffer from a long time's inner struggles. With no access to Hawkshaw's mind, we may have a deeper thought about human nature.

Hawkshaw's Flawed Human Nature

If we say McLendon's movement is dominated by his pursuit of authority, then Hawkshaw's following movement is a result of the common humanity though sometimes it has flaws.

Before he goes out of the barber shop and runs after McLendon, he repeats his statement that he knows Will Mayes that he is a good Black who has never done it. But we should notice that his judgement about Minnie Cooper is also biased. In his arguments with his customers, he is implying that an unmarried old woman like Miss Minnie Cooper has lost her sexual charms. And what Hawkshaw believes may represent the social attitudes toward unmarried women, which in turn causes Minnie Cooper's insane acts.

Besides, though Hawkshaw's movement from the store to the ice plant where Will works is to save Will, he cannot help striking Will together with other racists when Will hurts him accidentally. We may believe that it is the human nature that drives his violence, and therefore he consciously or unconsciously gives up many chances for rescue. When he jumps out of the car, he does not bring Will together. It may be relevant to Will's former behavior, and after a long time's inner struggles, he makes his decision to give up.

What's more, the reason why he jumps out of the car is also his lack of courage to fight against the whole society. What he does for Will is limited. At the scene where he limps on the narrow road toward town in dust, his converted motion also shows his limited compassion for other ethnics. This is the weakness of human nature.

Conclusion

The space of *Dry September* is constructed by synchronic relations and diachronic relations on the level of chronotopic structure. Thus by examining the three main characters as well as their movements in the chronotopic space, readers may get to know who they are and understand what Faulkner wants to convey through the characterization. Miss Minnie Cooper, as a character at rest in synchronic relations, cannot get rid of the social bias about the unmarried woman, and her anxiety causes her doomed psychological disorder. McLendon, in the whole narrative space, may serve as a character who helps stretch the axes of defined directions. His movements reveal his fascination with power. Hawkshaw may be the most complicated character in the story, whose movements show both the goodness and the wickedness of human nature. Readers may also figure out the theme of the short story in those characters.

But this paper also has its limitations in analyzing the space narrative which Faulkner adopts for some dramatic effects on the reconstructed world. It may not involve the horizontal structure of space introduced by Gabriel Zoran, and the total space, spatial complex, and the spatial units he mentions are of great significance to the study of space in fiction. But this paper still hopes it can shed some light on investigating the characters of *Dry September* by focusing on the space in narration.

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