

An Analysis of *A Rose for Emily* from the Perspective of Spatial Narrative

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The novel *A Rose for Emily* is one of the early works of William Faulkner, a famous American southern writer who has won The Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950. Spatial narrative theory analyzes and summarizes the spatial characteristics of modern and postmodern novels, showing the narrative characteristics of the works that the time is disrupted and suspended, and the space is extended indefinitely. This paper intends to interpret *A Rose for Emily* from the perspective of spatial narrative theory, and analyze the geological space, social space and text space in the novel, so as to reveal the important role of spatial structure in creating atmosphere and promoting narrative process, in order to better grasp the spatial metaphors in Faulkner's novels.

Keywords: *A Rose for Emily*, topographical space, social space, textual space

I. Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, there was a spatial turn in contemporary western literary theory, and narratology also integrated into this trend. Joseph Frank's concept of "spatial form" laid the foundation for spatial narratology. Later, Gabriel Zoran developed the spatial pattern in his paper "Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative". In the vertical dimension, the narrative text space is divided into three levels of topographical, chronotopic, and text, which further breaks through the research paradigm of narratology dominated by the time dimension, and is of high practical value.

William Faulkner, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950, is one of the figures in American literature in the 20th century. He wrote 19 novels and more than 120 short stories and articles. At present, the domestic research on *Rose for Emily* mainly focuses on image analysis, ethical criticism and trauma. By deconstructing the spatial environment in the article, analyzing the language features of the novel and the role of the switch of narrative perspectives, the author can reveal the survival predicament of the southern aristocrats in the United States after the Civil War, enrich the understanding of the text, and show Faulkner's superb narrative skills and the implied spatial metaphors.

II. Topographic Space in *A Rose for Emily*

According to Gabriel Zoran, the topographic space is a static physical space, which is "at the highest level of reconstructed space, independent of the temporal structure of the world and the sequential arrangement of texts"

(Zoran, 1984, p. 309). A text, like a map, is built on a series of contradictions and oppositions, such as “inside and outside, far and near, center and periphery, city and country” (Zoran, 1984, p. 313).

Literary creation and geography are intermingled. Like Hardy’s “Wessex”, “Yoknapatawpha” is also derived from Faulkner’s personal experience of topographic space, which contains specific mental states and ideological consciousness. Like other works in Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha Lineage, *A Rose for Emily* is set in Yoknapatawpha County in northern Mississippi, a fictional natural topographic space based on Faulkner’s hometown. In this specific topographical space, Faulkner recorded the rise and fall of the southern aristocratic family after the Civil War, and showed the contradictions, struggles and evolution of various classes in the post-war American Southern society in the past hundred years. In *A Rose for Emily*, Yoknapatawpha County first becomes a symbol of history and time as a natural geographic space. According to Mike Krone, “Literature is not a single lens or mirror that refracts or reflects the external world” (Krone, 2003, p. 3), and the places appearing in literary works are not only the simple description and representation of the real physical space, but also the reflection of specific social ideologies. Therefore, the setting of the natural topography space of Jefferson Town in the work also means the construction of the human geography space, which reflects the fate ups and downs and spiritual hesitation of the southern nobility living in Jefferson Town in a specific historical time and space, and Miss Emily is a typical representative of it.

In the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard discusses the living space of human beings and gives specific descriptions of Spaces ranging from houses to drawers, nests and corners, pointing out that the home is the most important spatial image in narrative works (Bachelard, 1994, p. 4). Bachelard’s point of view shows that the topographical space, as the living environment of the characters, is determined by the spatial consciousness of the characters, which provides the possibility for the portrayal of the characters and the development of the plot. In addition to the relatively open topographic space of Jefferson Town, the typical closed topographic space of *A Rose for Emily*, the Grierson family’s old house, needs more attention from readers, which is the main living place of the protagonist Emily. “It was a big, squarish frame. house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style. of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily’s house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores” (Faulkner, 1970, pp. 75-76). There is no doubt that the old house is the most typical topographic space in the novel. Faulkner’s description of the old house and its surrounding reflects the former status and glory of the Grierson family, and also indicates the transformation process of the old house from high to alien due to the changes of *The Times*. The old house of “an eyesore among eyesores” is like the southern aristocratic class represented by Emily, destined to become “the past”, but refuses to accept change, and is obsessed with the glory and tradition of the past. Inside the old house, “It smelled of dust and disuse—a close, dank smell. The Negro led them into the parlor. It was furnished in heavy, leather-covered furniture. When the Negro opened the blinds of one window, they could see that the leather was cracked; and when they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray. On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily’s father” (Faulkner, 1970, pp. 77-78). The description of the old house inside and outside of the work shows its old and decayed atmosphere, and Grierson’s carbon strokes even hint at the patriarchal

tradition carried by the old house. The contrast between the old house and its surroundings reveals the tension between Emily and the townspeople, as well as the tension between tradition and modernity.

It can be said that Emily is the personification of the closed topographical space of the old house. Different from the prosperity of the inner space of the traditional aristocratic mansion, these spatial images in Grierson's old mansion undoubtedly bring readers a feeling of gloom, depression, depression and even terror. Emily "imprisoned" herself in it, in order to stick to the deep-rooted moral concepts in her heart and the dying aristocratic tradition, trying to escape from the human terrain space that has long been changed after the civil war. The atmosphere of the old house is inseparable from the specific temperament of the owner. In *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner never gave any explanation of Emily's inner activities, but Grierson's old house, as a closed geographic space, carries the plot of the work, weakens the existence of time, presents the visual sense of the whole narrative space, and reveals Emily's mental space and personality characteristics. It perfectly reflects Emily's struggling living state and contradictory psychological reality. She is stubborn, headstrong, stuck in the past time and memory, unable to extricate herself, and is incompatible with modern life, shaping herself into a veritable "other". Therefore, "the topographic space is indeed the specific place of character generation and the best indication of character image" (Long, 2015, p. 262). The construction of this spatial form breaks the monotony of traditional narrative works that only use space as the place where stories take place and narrative scenes.

III. Social Space in *A Rose for Emily*

Henri Lefebvre put forward the concept of "social space" in his work *Production of Space*, pointing out that space is a place where social relations and social order can be derived, which is social and political. Social space is a social product and a place where various social relations depend (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 3). In literary creation, a writer will inevitably, intentionally or unintentionally, present the social features under a specific historical and cultural background in the text, thus affecting the construction of social space in the work. Social space plays an important role in literary space narration. Faulkner lived at a time of great social change in the American South after the Civil War. The writer witnessed the gradual disintegration of the traditional southern society dominated by plantation economy after the invasion of the northern industrial culture, and his thoughts were thus marked with the unique brand of that era. In his "Yoknapatawpha lineage", Faulkner recorded in detail the cultural impact brought about by the collision of different cultural traditions in the southern society of the United States, showed the desolation and suffering of Southerners in the period of social transformation, and expressed his deep affection and nostalgia for the southern society.

In *A Rose for Emily*, the town, pharmacy, garage and carriage are not only important places and tools for the production and life of the characters in the work, showing the corresponding atmosphere of *The Times*, but also important means for Faulkner to express his emotions and themes, and become important elements in the construction of social space in the work. The opening narrative of the work mentions "a Fallen monument", "the Grierson House in the 1870s", "the garage and cotton gin", "cotton wagons and gasoline pumps", "the negro slave Toby", etc. All these images bear the brand of the social culture of the American South during the Civil War. It is a symbol of the old southern tradition, with obvious marks of *The Times*. In the aesthetic field of spatial narratology, these images all indicate the social and historical time and space to which the story belongs.

According to Lefebvre's social space theory, the space of narrative works has the same identity and subjectivity as any society to some extent. "Social space has the power of construction, can influence and restrict the behavior and existence of society and people, is an infinitely open and full of various contradictions, and is a place where various forces form confrontation" (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 85-88). As the representative of the aristocracy and plantation owners in the Southern society before the Civil War, Emily was deeply influenced by the traditional moral code of the South. She was petite and charming in appearance, rebellious in heart, isolated from the world, and yearned for love and marriage. Homer, on the other hand, represents the emerging capitalist industrial civilization in the north, which embodies the elements of the emerging social space in the north. He is tall, dark and smart, wandering around, yearning for freedom and experience. It is obvious that Miss Emily, a southern aristocrat, belongs to a completely different social space from Homer, a northern road worker. The old order in the south is increasingly disintegrating, while the new system in the north is overwhelming, and the two protagonists from different social Spaces are doomed not to coexist harmoniously. The poisoning of Homer to sleep with her body reflects Emily's resistance to her identity after the change of *The Times* and her efforts to get rid of the bondage. It also highlights the confrontation between the old tradition in the South and the new order in the north after the war, suggesting a "spatial conflict" between the agricultural society and the modern industrial society, which further reflects the reorganization of social relations and the reconstruction of moral system in the southern social space represented by Jefferson Town after the war.

From the perspective of social space, the imminent disappearance of the southern tradition is a historical inevitability. Emily's death is a realistic metaphor for the collapse of traditional social Spaces in the South. The construction and contrast of two different social Spaces in the work reveals the contradiction and conflict between two different eras and two different cultures in the tide of history. It is also a symbol of the dialogue between "life" and "death", the confrontation between "past" and "present", the tension between tradition and change, and the confrontation between southern and northern social Spaces. And this is exactly the root of the tragic love between Emily and Homer, but also the root of the tragedy of the South represented by Emily. In short, by presenting the "spatial characteristics" and "spatial conflicts" of Jefferson Town and Grierson's old House, *Rose for Emily* creates characters with different values and cultural concepts, and provides readers with a window to understand the creation background, social environment and customs of that time. At the same time, it also shows the important spatial construction function of identity, history, culture and other elements, which not only presents the theme of the work, but also becomes an important way for readers to understand and think about the specific cultural background and social characteristics of the work.

IV. Text Space in *A Rose for Emily*

Text space, the narrative space of text, is also an important aspect of spatial narratology. Joseph Frank, a professor at Princeton University, noted that "successful spatial fiction must create its own meaning from the craft of writing" (Frank, 1991, p. 62). Gabriel Zoran mentioned in *Toward Spatial Narrative Theory* that text space refers to the space represented by text. Language choice, linear selection timing of text and perspective structure are three aspects that have an important impact on text space, and these factors will indeed cause different spatial reproduction effects (Zoran, 1984, p. 327). The text space in *A Rose for Emily* not only

strengthens the construction of social space and topographic space, but also highlights the aesthetic characteristics of the text narrative.

First of all, unlike traditional novels, the reading experience brought by *A Rose for Emily* is far from a pleasant aesthetic enjoyment, but a fragmented form and a chaotic collage of plots. In his book *Types of Spatial Structure in Narrative*, David Mickelson states: Juxtaposition of plot clues, narrative techniques of backtracking and flashbacks, and recurring images are all means to interrupt and destroy the chronological order and obtain the spatiality of narrative structure (Mickelsen, 1981, p. 68). In *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner presents the unique spatiality of the text through the ingenious narrative strategy. The full text is divided into five parts. The narration of the first part and the fifth part respectively take Emily's death and funeral as the starting point and echo the beginning and the end. The middle part tells Emily's various experiences through the narrative technique of retrospection and flashback. Multiple plot clues are juxtaposed, which makes the text structure present an "envelope structure". Readers will follow the narrator "we" into the text to read, thus unknowingly participate in the construction of text space. In narrative works, narrative time is very important. Narrative time is composed of two dimensions: external time and internal time. In *A Rose for Emily*, the narrative of the plot is inconsistent in the two dimensions of external time and internal time.

The development of the plot in *A Rose for Emily* does not follow the linear time flow of the beginning, development, climax and ending of traditional narrative works, and the normal order of the development of the plot is disrupted. The seemingly inverted time series creates a reminiscent space of the text, making readers focus on the story of Emily and Homer and the various suspense and value conflicts caused by them. It not only expresses the main idea of the novel smoothly, but also achieves a shocking spatial narrative effect. The fuzzy processing of time clues highlights the spatial characteristics of the text. Zoran points out that "the perspective of the text affects the spatial reconstruction in the narrative... Different focuses produce different spatial effects" (Zoran, 1984, p. 335). By breaking the linear evolution of the story, Faulkner constructs the multiple narrative levels and narrative space of the text of *A Rose for Emily*.

Secondly, in *A Rose for Emily*, the narrator "we" is not the narrator in the traditional sense, but the residents of Jefferson town who have different ages, identities and backgrounds, and have different value orientations, understanding abilities and aesthetic experiences. This multi-angle narrative strategy is one of Faulkner's most important narrative skills, which successfully promotes the construction of the multi-dimensional text space in the works, and becomes the key to promote the development of the plot, and enables the readers to fully perceive the text space constructed by the multi-dimensional narrative of the works. Traditional narrative works usually use omniscient perspective for text narration, and the narrator is omnipresent and omniscient. In *A Rose for Emily*, the narrator, "We," is only on the edge of the story, making observations, reminiscing about the past, and making inconsistent comments. The purpose of Faulkner's multi-angle narration through "we" is not to show clear plot context like traditional narrative text, but to show contradictory narrative content, narrative mode and value judgment from different perspectives. In the text space constructed by this narrative method, time series no longer has authoritative significance, and different narrative voices "sing together", forming a noisy scene, constituting an open spatial combination form of text.

It can be seen that the construction of the text space of *A Rose for Emily* is mainly achieved through the use of images, the special processing of the text plot sequence and the multi-angle narration. The combination of

these factors forms the unity and depth of the text space at the highest level, and is also the basis for the successful construction of the social space and the topographic space in the work. The construction of the text space of the work not only shows Faulkner's superb spatial narrative skills, but also enriches the grand meaning system of the work, allowing readers to feel the aesthetic characteristics of the spatial narrative dimension of *A Rose for Emily*.

V. Conclusion

William Faulkner's ingenious use of spatial narrative strategy in his short novel *A Rose for Emily* is one of the important factors that make it a classic. The combination of social space, topographic space and text space reflects the aesthetic value of the spatial narrative in this story, as well as the rich spatial metaphors in it.

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