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Insiders, Outsiders, and the Voice of Community

In literature, a first person narrative can be used to forge an intimate connection between the reader and the characters, setting, or universe the author has created. It is human nature to connect more with an individual who appears to be speaking directly to us than it is to connect with someone we are only told about by a third party. Third person narrative can certainly create the same connection, but it takes an extra step on the reader's part to achieve it. When the words come directly from a character, there is no artificial construct or fourth wall to separate the audience from the subject. This connection can be quite useful to the author, who may want to show the reader something more than just the experiences of his characters. Writing has been used for centuries not just to entertain and tell stories, but to comment on society, and open the eyes of the masses to realities and existences that they would otherwise never learn about. When used to comment on society, a first person account can take one of two forms: an insider's voice, or an outsider's. Neither perspective is inherently better or worse than the other. However, depending on what the author wants to convey, it may be easier to do it with one than the other. In the case of George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," the outsider's perspective is used very effectively to comment on Colonialism. In contrast, Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" would necessarily be far less insightful into the post-Civil War culture of the south if it were told by an outsider, and is thus told from the perspective of an insider. Though they do so differently, both authors do a good job of giving the reader a glimpse into two very different but equally important societal time periods.

George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" is superficially about a policeman in a faraway place who has to do an unpleasant job. It is an interesting tale in and of itself, but has far more significance

than a mere day in the life of one man, interesting though his day might be. The story takes place in Burma, during the British Colonial period. The main character is never named. He tells the story as a reflection or a remembrance, as if it was something that happened to him many years before. The story opens with the man telling us that he was “hated by large numbers of people.” Right there, in the very first sentence, Orwell establishes that the speaker is an outsider to the culture he is living in. Without going any further, it is difficult to discern how much of an outsider he is. Is he an outsider in the sense that he has been shunned, such as in *The Scarlet Letter*? As it turns out, no. In the second sentence, the speaker goes on to identify himself as having been a European police officer. This makes him as much of an outsider as can be, in every sense of the word. If he were simply another European living in Burma, the anti-European sentiment would have only affected him in an “aimless, petty kind of way.” As a policeman, however, he is an authority, a representative, of the Europeans. The speaker is an outsider because he represents a culture that has imposed itself upon another. What makes the speaker interesting is that he is insightful enough to know not only that Colonialism is often tyrannical, but that his day to day life made him hate the people he felt were the victims. In his own words, all he knew was that he was “stuck between [his] hatred of the empire [he] served, and [his] rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make [his] job impossible. This internal struggle between the man's day to day struggles in a hostile environment and his acknowledgment of the part he plays in something he considers wrong is the central backdrop to his entire narrative.

Where Orwell gives us the perspective of an outsider stuck in a foreign societal interaction he despises, Faulkner gives us a warm insider's reflection on the not-so-vanquished South just after the end of the Civil War. William Faulkner's “A Rose for Emily” is a perplexing story, for many reasons, not least among them the fact that it is told in first person perspective by someone whose identity is never established. The reader can draw inferences, but it is never stated who the speaker is, where he comes from (and yes, it is a he, but we'll get to that later), or what his relation is to the rest of the

society he is part of. So who is he? This question seems to be very important, but in fact it is not. The most effective way to think of the speaker is as the personification of the entire town of Jefferson. As an amalgamation of the experiences of everyone who has ever lived there, the speaker is both upper and lower class, and simultaneously an outside observer and privy to the most intimate details of the lives of the characters. Only when speaking for the town as a whole would it be possible to root for all the different social classes and generations, seemingly at once, while always taking a privately hostile stance towards anyone from outside the town, such as, Miss Grierson's relatives.

The gender of the narrator is the only obvious thing about him. Political correctness aside, women are generally nurturing, and men are not. Even a tough mother like in *Malcolm in the Middle* would still speak of the people of Jefferson in a matronly, protective way. The narrator does not do this. The facts are simply related, with no mention made of warm feelings of adoration towards one individual, or a group of people. There is admiration, to be sure, but it is the masculine kind of admiration – never stated, just assumed to be understood. Also, he frequently minimizes the importance and decorum of the women. The men went to Emily's funeral out of “a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument,” bringing to mind images of granite stoicism, while the women went to the funeral “mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house” – that is, to gossip, flit about, and generally dance on the grave of her memory. When the smell developed due to the rotting body of the man Emily murdered, the narrator makes sure to tell us that the first person to complain is a woman, and that the mayor does nothing, until someone important, namely, a man, makes a similar complaint. Once a man did, the elders met that very night to discuss the problem. The narrator may or may not hate women, but he spares no opportunity to make digs like these at the fairer sex.

The narrator as an amalgamation of the entire town is not the only possible explanation, but there is a strong case for it. Consider the tone he uses to describe the Griersons. In the opening lines, she is introduced as “Miss” Grierson. This implies one of two things: it is a sign of recognition that she

is a lady, upper class in a way that the rest of the women are not, or it is used sarcastically and derisively. The evidence points towards the former. When the authorities seek to confront her over the decades-old agreement whereby she has no taxes in Jefferson, the narrator does not say that the delegation's mission was derailed by the unreasonable stubbornness of an old hag. He says, "So she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell." This sentence conjures up images of knights and folk heroes, as if he is rooting for her and is glad that she held firm against the forces of tyranny. Clearly, he admires her.

How then, is it not possible that the narrator is simply one of the older generation, who admires (or at least respects) Emily out of class loyalty, if nothing else? There is no clear-cut answer to that, but again, the evidence suggests he is not. To be of the older generation, he would have to be a very old man, and he does not speak like an old man. His words are full of youth and energy, and his narrative spans several generations, from when Colonel Sartoris made the agreement regarding the taxes, to the leaders who were driven away about the smell, to the generation after that, which tried to make her pay taxes, and to a final generation that comes of age learning to paint from Emily. All the facts are presented as if with the authority of a historian, with nothing faded by age, as if it is not the relation of a single individual's memories, but the combined past of an entire town's cumulative existence. No such chronicler is mentioned in the text, and there are far too many conversations and incidents to which only a small number of people were privy for them to have been witnessed by one man. Examples include the druggist who sold her the arsenic (the conversation was no doubt gossiped to everyone he met the next day) and the final scene in which the narrator describes the investigation of Emily's house as if he were there personally (just like how everyone says they were at Woodstock). These are the combined stories of the entire town, and that is the reason that the question of the narrator's identity is largely irrelevant. He has no identity because he is not an individual. He does not have a relationship *to* the culture of the town; he *is* the culture of the town. Just as the policeman in

“Shooting an Elephant” was the outsider of outsiders, the narrator of “A Rose for Emily” is the insider of insiders.

These two stories, “Shooting an Elephant” and “A Rose for Emily,” are very good selections to compare the insider's perspective and the outsider's perspective, because both are on the extremes of their viewpoint. On the one hand, you have a young man who has gone to the far corners of the world, where he experiences firsthand some of the barbarity which makes his culture's way of life possible, who understands why the natives hate his people so much, but spends his waking hours wishing he could simply kill them all. This man is an outsider not just to the culture he is participating in the oppression of, but also to his own. On the other hand, you have a story told with such familiarity to the subjects and events that it is impossible to conclude that the speaker is anything else but the shared memory of the culture itself given voice. Both of these stories are told in the first person, but this critical difference in self-image between the two narrators results in completely different tones. Statements like “and if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh [at me]. That would never do” feel very different than “When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral.” The first makes us instantly identify with the policeman, and understand his feeling of me-against-the-world (it also, perhaps, makes us think that he is a pompous ass). The second is intrinsically inclusive in its construction, and think what we will of the dynamics of Jefferson, the first feeling we get from the story is one of community. Two stories, same literary point of view, extremely different effects. Held up to each other, “Shooting an Elephant” and “A Rose for Emily” prove that what an author says is far more important than what literary technique he uses to say it.