**Narrative Structures in Browning's Poetry**

**When studying how narratives work, you need to ask yourself how the writers structure their stories, using such varied techniques as openings, symbols, echoes and climaxes. Examiner Pete Bunten considers these techniques in relation to some of Browning’s narrative poems.**

Around eighty years ago, the novelist E.M. Forster famously distinguished between ‘story’ and ‘plot’. He saw ‘story’ as a sequence of chronological events but ‘plot’ as involving a significant sense of cause and effect. The illustration he gave was the distinction between ‘The king died and then the queen died’ (story) and ‘The king died and the queen died of grief’ (plot). It is possible to argue that ‘causality’ might reasonably be seen to be implied by the first of these two examples, but what is certainly clear is the central importance of sequence and structure to any narrative. Structure, which might be seen as involving the way that parts relate to the whole, is central to any analysis of narrative method. The identification of the form of a narrative is often dependent on consideration of structural features, and the importance of an aspect of language may be linked to its function in the overall structure of a text.

Structural patterns can emerge in many ways: through the manipulation of time sequences, through a change in setting, through different narrative voices, through metaphor and symbol. Structure can also be indicated in many ways, through reference to openings, echoes, climaxes and variations in pace. What is always important, however, is that you relate any comment about the structure of a text to its narrative effect and explain in what ways it is important to the telling of the story.

Many of the poems of Robert Browning allow for an exploration of interesting aspects of structure within a very specific literary form: the dramatic monologue. We can, however, ask the same questions of these poems as we can of all narratives:

• What is their movement?   
• How is this movement achieved?   
• From the beginning to the end of the text, how does the writer shape the journey of the narrative for the reader?

**Three Examples**

Let us take as examples three of Browning’s poems: 'Porphyria’s Lover', 'My Last Duchess', and 'The Laboratory'. These three poems in many ways tell rather similar stories. In each a lover is driven by jealousy to destroy the person they love. There are, however, subtle and not so subtle differences between these stories and the ways in which they are told. At the heart of these storytelling processes lies narrative structure.

**Porphyria’s Lover**

In 'Porphyria’s Lover' Browning’s use of narrative time is significant. When the poem begins, Porphyria is already dead. The narrative opens with a recollection of the recent past, and a hostile, unfriendly atmosphere is evoked:

The rain set early in tonight  
The sullen wind was soon awake.

This is swiftly followed by the description of the crucial moment ‘When glided in Porphyria’. The speaker then moves fairly quickly through the events within the cottage until a pause ‘While I debated what to do’, and his subsequent decision to carry out the murder is conveyed in terse, matter-of-fact tones. The poem ends with a chilling sense that some time has passed in a macabre stillness since Porphyria’s death, ‘And all night long we have not stirred’. The whole story has taken place in one night, with only the briefest of glances into the past, and at the end time seems to have frozen and stopped. Porphyria has given herself to him ‘for ever’.

**My Last Duchess**

The narrator of 'My Last Duchess' seems equally psychotic, but has none of the anguish of the marginalised lover of the previous poem. The Duke’s own words reveal his cold, egotistical need for absolute control. In death, his wife has been reduced to an inanimate possession, a likeness ‘painted on the wall’. This is where the poem begins, at the end of the story, a captured snapshot of ‘now’ where the Duchess only looks as ‘if she were alive’. From this point the narrative moves us into a series of events from the past, from an account of the portrait painting to a sequence of what may appear to the reader as increasingly insignificant ‘triflings’. The list ends with an icy account of her ‘smiles’ and undiscriminating expressions of thanks. These, it seems, were the final straw. The Duke’s trawl through past events chillingly concludes with ‘then all smiles stopped together’ when the reader presumes the life of his wife also stopped. The narrative then returns us to the present, but a present with uncomfortable echoes of the past as the Duke negotiates for a new wife while making what we might read as unwittingly ironic references to his ‘object’ and boasting about his possession of other works of art.

**The Laboratory**

'The Laboratory' offers yet another variation on the theme of jealous hate. The monologue is spoken by a woman who has come to a laboratory to buy poison from an alchemist. With it she intends to destroy a hated love-rival. Again, we begin in a dramatic present, ‘Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly’, in which the narrator gloatingly immerses herself in the physical world of the laboratory. The narrative then changes to a parallel present, where ‘he is with her’ and she imagines their scornful laughter at her expense. By the sixth stanza we have moved to an imagined future where she will act out her terrible revenge:

Soon, at the King’s a mere lozenge to give  
And Pauline should have just thirty minutes to live!

The focus now switches urgently back to the present and the ongoing work of the alchemist:

Quick – is it finished?

This brings temporary anticipatory glee, but the mood abruptly alters as a bitter memory of ‘last night’ intrudes when even the intensity of her hatred could not shrivel her rival. The poem finishes with the speaker’s chilling gaze into the future and her soon-to-be-achieved triumph: ‘next moment I dance at the King’s’.

**Place, Time and Structure**

Browning’s movement of these narratives from one place to another has a similar structural significance. The narration of 'My Last Duchess' is delivered in one place, a room in the Duke’s castle, only moving at the end to a descent to ‘the company blow’. This closely controlled stage for the story is characteristic of dramatic monologues and here also represents the Duke’s power; even the picture of the Duchess is protected by a curtain – again a touch of theatre. In the centre of the poem, however, the imagined scene shifts to a terrace, the distant ‘dropping of the daylight’ and an orchard, all giving glimpses of a freer world, more spontaneous and alive.   
This claustrophobic effect is also created in the other two poems. In Porphyria’s Lover almost all the story is acted out in the cottage. Only at the beginning is there a glimpse of the rather hostile world outside which gives an ironic suggestion that the cottage might be being presented as a place of refuge. As the narrative moves deeper and deeper into the little world of the cottage we get a brief glimpse, just for a moment, of the society that Porphyria has left, ‘tonight’s gay feast’, then the trap shuts again.

As we move back and forwards in time in 'The Laboratory', so we are also moved from place to place, despite in one sense never leaving the laboratory. The narrator’s broodings take her to the ‘drear empty church’ and the place where ‘they whispered’. But most significant, like a refrain running through the poem, is the repeated reference to ‘the King’s’, twice placed emphatically at the end of the line. The King’s, where men dance, represents not only a public world of gaiety and riches, a striking contrast with the secluded laboratory, but also what she hopes will be the ultimate stage for her victory.

**Listeners and Actors**

A dramatic monologue requires a dominant narrative voice, but structural patterns can be created through the use of the imagined listener and other actors in the story being told. In both 'Porphyria’s Lover' and 'My Last Duchess' the dead women are a constant presence, despite the fact that they have ultimately been silenced. Porphyria, once she has established herself in the cottage, ‘called me’. Then, ‘when no voice replied’, she murmurs ‘how she loved me’. There is no indication anywhere in the story of the lover speaking to the living Porphyria. All his thoughts are internal; he ‘listened’, he ‘debated’ and finally ‘found a thing to do’. But in the telling of the story, of course, the narrator has all the voice he needs. Even God, we are told at the end of the narrative, ‘has not said a word’. In 'My Last Duchess', the Duke delivers the monologue, but the Duchess is everywhere. Until the moment when he tersely describes giving ‘commands’, she is identified by name or pronoun 25 times in just over 40 lines. And into the monologue Browning drops the vocative ‘sir’ at intervals, reminding us that we have an engaged listener here, rather ironically the envoy of a count whose daughter is the Duke’s next marriage object.

The listener in 'The Laboratory' is the alchemist. Like the other listeners he does not speak directly, but the story requires his silent presence, repeatedly signalled to us. He is addressed in the opening stanza, and again in the third and fourth. The speaker’s narrative, however focused on her offstage rival, turns back again and again to the fascinating actions being performed in front of her. The grimly dedicated figure of the alchemist in some ways represents her own fixed purpose. In the sixth, eighth and ninth stanzas her mind is fixed on Elise, her past and her imagined future, but in the last two stanzas the alchemist again becomes the focus of her, and our, attention, even being elevated to a grotesque sort of lover himself:

You may kiss me, old man, on my mouth if you will.

What makes 'The Laboratory' structurally very different from 'Porphyria’s Lover' and 'My Last Duches's is that from the opening lines, ‘What is the poison to poison her, prithee?’ we witness a relentless pounding away at the narrator’s obsession. In 'Porphyria’s Lover' and 'My Last Duchess', the crisis in the story, the moment when we realise that the woman has been killed, is held back by the structure of the narrative, almost as if the speaker is deliberately taunting us with his privileged position as narrator.

What is common to all three poems by Browning, however, is that the shape of the narrative is moulded by the author’s manipulation of time, place and narrative voice, all blending together to tell the stories through the form we call the dramatic monologue.

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