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THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE OF THE LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

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ABSTRACT

The following discussion of The Life of Charlotte Brontë is an examination of the narrative techniques Elizabeth Gaskell employs in the biography. The structure of The Life of Charlotte Brontë is such that the narrative 'voice' of Elizabeth Gaskell is heard in alternation with the 'voice' of Charlotte Brontë, the latter through the numerous letters which Gaskell has selected and placed throughout the biography.

Chapter One of the discussion indicates the ways in which Gaskell has divided the text into volumes and chapters. Gaskell's methods in organising the overall structure of the biography are important because they highlight issues that recur when studying Gaskell's other narrative techniques.

Chapter Two examines the chronological sequence to show in particular the effect on the text of the large number of chronological disruptions. These disruptions play a major role in providing background material concerning Charlotte.

Chapter Three considers several important features of the narrative including digression, anecdote, summarisation of incidents, dramatisation of scenes, method in introducing and describing characters, and, finally, use of dialogue.

Chapter Four looks at the issue of judgement in the biography. The narrator states in the text that it is not her role to judge, yet she does so often. As well as considering this point, I have examined the ways in which she passes judgement.

Finally, Chapter Five considers Gaskell's characterisation of Charlotte as a tragic heroine. The focus in this chapter is on Gaskell's use of affective language; the selective manner in which she includes Charlotte's letters in the text is also taken up for discussion.

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to publishing The Life of Charlotte Brontë in 1857, Elizabeth Gaskell had published three novels, and she later went on to write several more works of fiction. Although this is a biography and as such stands alone among the collected writing of Gaskell, I have approached the subject of narrative techniques and stylistic concerns in the same way I would approach a novel and in some examples I have made comparisons, with explanations, between the biography and two of Gaskell's novels.

Previous discussion of The Life of Charlotte Brontë has centred on the issue of content. This concern has led to debate on the truthfulness or otherwise of the material within the biography and this debate has continued from the time of publication. I have avoided this issue entirely and examined instead the methods and techniques of narration and style. Gaskell has often been stereotyped by critics as a female, mid-Victorian writer who, although capable of telling a story, is incapable of controlling and structuring it to any great extent. When considered closely, however, this contention lacks credibility. Although, as I will demonstrate, Gaskell does disrupt the chronology and add anecdotal evidence on many occasions, which indicates a lack of control on the part of the narrator, the primary reason for doing this is an important part of Gaskell's strategy. At various points in the text, particularly in the structuring of volumes and chapters, characterisation of Charlotte and her family, in the making of judgements, and dramatisation of scenes and episodes, Gaskell's shaping hand is evident. In the following chapters, I intend to demonstrate the extent to which narrative structure and style control our reading experience of The Life of Charlotte Brontë.

CHAPTER ONE

The Life of Charlotte Brontë is written in two volumes, both consisting of fourteen chapters. The division into Volume I and Volume II occurs at the stage in Charlotte's¹ life when her poetry and that of her sisters, Emily and Anne, had been published, but before any of the three had been acclaimed as major authors:

Once more, in September, she writes, 'As the work has received no further notice from any periodical, I presume the demand for it has not greatly increased.'

In the biographical notice of her sisters, she thus speaks of the failure of the modest hopes vested in this publication. 'The book was printed; it is scarcely known, and all of it that merits to be known are the poems of Ellis Bell. The fixed conviction I held, and hold, of the worth of these poems, has not, indeed, received the confirmation of much favourable criticism; but I must retain it notwithstanding' (p. 297, End of Volume I)².

The decision to divide the book at that point is interesting because Gaskell's stated intention in writing the biography was to emphasise Charlotte's private and family life: "if I live long enough, and no one is living whom such a publication would hurt, I will publish what I know of her and make the world ... honour the woman as much as they have admired the writer"³. Nevertheless, it is Charlotte as writer that is focused upon at the important volume break, an acknowledgement of the readers' interest in her work and an understanding on Gaskell's part that she is writing the life-story of a major author.

Although the division into volumes is extremely regular, occurring as it does at the end of the 14th chapter in the 28 chapter book, the breaks between chapters are more unpredictable. The number of pages in each chapter ranges from two to forty-seven and on inspection the only pattern that emerges is that the shorter chapters are found at the beginnings and ends of volumes: Volume I, Chapter I consists of seven pages, Volume I, Chapter XIV consists of thirteen pages, Volume II, Chapter I consists of eleven pages and Volume II, Chapter XIV consists of two pages. The two shortest chapters in the book occur at the beginning and end of the biography and both contain as their subject matter information about Charlotte's death:

ADJOINING LIE THE REMAINS OF
 CHARLOTTE, WIFE
 OF THE
 REV. ARTHUR BELL NICHOLLS, A.B.,
 AND DAUGHTER OF THE REV. P. BRONTË, A.B., INCUMBENT.
 SHE DIED MARCH 31st, 1855, IN THE 39th
 YEAR OF HER AGE. (p. 59, Chapter I)

Few beyond that circle of hills knew that she, whom the nations praised far off, lay dead that Easter morning. Of kith and kin she had more in the grave to which she was soon to be borne, than among the living (p. 525, Chapter XIV).

The economical style used here is indicative of the manner in which Gaskell approached Charlotte's death. It is a tragedy that is foreshadowed throughout the book not only by references to Charlotte's early death but by the placing of her death within the context of the whole family's tragic circumstances. Although Gaskell dwells in detail on the deaths of Branwell, Emily and Anne, she is succinct in her description of Charlotte's death. The reason for the final chapter's brevity is that the chapter describes only the burial and pays a final tribute to Charlotte. All of the other deaths in the Brontë family are described in chapters that contain information on many other aspects of their lives. One example of this is Volume II, Chapter II, which is forty-seven pages in length and not only deals with the deaths of Branwell and Emily but also describes visits to London by Charlotte and Anne, the publication of the sisters' first novels with their subsequent reviews and the beginnings of the correspondence between Charlotte and people involved in the literary scene in London. It is Charlotte's death then that is of most importance and some chapter divisions reinforce this.

Other chapters in the biography are divided for similar reasons; that is, to emphasise an emotional or troubled stage in the Brontës' lives. The end of Chapter II in both Volumes I and II is a case in point:

One wonders how the bleak aspect of her new home - the low, oblong, stone parsonage, high up, yet with a still higher back-ground of sweeping moors - struck on the gentle, delicate wife, whose health even then was failing (p. 76).

As the old, bereaved father and his two surviving children followed the coffin to the grave, they were

joined by Keeper, Emily's fierce, faithful bull-dog. He walked alongside of the mourners, and into the church, and stayed quietly there all the time that the burial service was being read. When he came home, he lay down at Emily's chamber door, and howled pitifully for many days. Anne Brontë drooped and sickened more rapidly from that time; and so ended the year 1848 (p. 358).

The first example from Volume I, referring to the physical condition of Maria Brontë at the time of her arrival in Haworth, occurs at the end of the second chapter and is not mentioned again until several pages into Chapter III. This heightens the emotion concerning her ill-health and effectively gives the end of the chapter an atmosphere of pathos. Similarly, the end of Volume II, Chapter II, showing the Brontë family in mourning for Emily, also gives prominence to the emotion surrounding that event because it is separated by the structural break immediately after it. Several other chapters end in this manner and they all serve to heighten the sense of peculiar isolation surrounding the family.

Many of the chapter divisions in the biography can be explained in terms of a movement in time. Sometimes this movement is from the more distant past to the more recent past but at other times Gaskell uses the break more definitely to move from the end of one year to the beginning of another, or from the end of a certain stage in Charlotte's life forward to the next. The division between Chapters VI and VII is an example of the latter. Chapter VI concerns Charlotte's life at Roe Head with the final sentence of the chapter summing up her experiences there: "And among them, beloved and respected by all, laughed at occasionally by a few, but always to her face - lived, for two years, the plain, short-sighted, oddly-dressed, studious little girl they called Charlotte Brontë" (p. 142). Chapter VII begins, "Miss Brontë left Roe Head in 1832, having won the affectionate regard both of her teacher and her school fellows" (p. 143), and the structural break allows Gaskell to complete her account of that part of Charlotte's life, remind the readers at the beginning of the next chapter that that period has been covered and consequently move onto another topic.

There are several examples of Gaskell's technique of using chapter breaks to move from one year to another. Volume I, Chapter VIII, ends with a letter written by Charlotte dated, "'December 21st, 1839'"

(p. 194), while the following chapter begins, "The year 1840 found all the Brontës living at home, except Anne" (p. 196). The effect of this is to make the narrative seem orderly; although the subject matter is carried over into the following chapter, the time has changed and the chapter break reinforces this. Gaskell uses the chapter/year break on other occasions, "Meanwhile, they enjoyed their Christmas all together inexpressibly" (p. 249, Volume I, Chapter XI), and, "Towards the end of January, the time came for Charlotte to return to Brussels" (p. 250, Volume I, Chapter XII); "'Anne is now much better, but papa has been for near a fortnight far from well with the influenza; he has at times a most distressing cough, and his spirits are much depressed'. So ended the year 1846" (p. 311, Volume II, Chapter I), and, "The next year opened with a spell of cold dreary weather, which told severely on a constitution already tried by anxiety and care" (p. 312, Volume II, Chapter II). The Brontës' lives, lived as they were in a remote village with few close friends, were far from exciting with at times the only measure of living in this way being the chronicling of the extreme sicknesses and consequent deaths of each member of the family, so Gaskell by using chapter divisions in these ways is able to make distinctions between ill-health and monotony from one year to the next.

Another technique Gaskell uses when making divisions between chapters is the device of repeating subject matter so that the content of the opening sentence of a chapter is also carried over to the end of the chapter. This method is employed by Gaskell seven times during the course of the biography and in the majority of examples emphasises the state of health of Charlotte or a member of her family. Volume II, Chapter I therefore opens with, "During this summer of 1846, while her literary hopes were waning, an anxiety of another kind was increasing. Her father's eyesight had become seriously impaired by the progress of the cataract which was forming. He was nearly blind" (p. 301), and concludes with, "'papa has been for near a fortnight far from well with the influenza; he has at times a most distressing cough, and his spirits are much depressed'" (p. 311). This circularity in narrative, so that the end repeats the beginning, is common to all narrative, from journalism through to the ballad and even ordinary conversation, and contributes both to the understanding and to the aesthetic appeal of the story being told.

A distinctive feature also noticeable in the manner Gaskell has organised her volumes and chapters is the frequency with which she hands over the narrator's role to Charlotte, allowing her to finish off chapters. In Volume I, six out of the fourteen chapters are completed by Charlotte's words; in one case this consists of a poem, with the remaining five consisting of letters. In Volume II, where it is the adult writer as opposed to the younger Charlotte of Volume I, ten of the fourteen chapters conclude with Charlotte's letters.

Of the sixteen chapters ending with Charlotte's words only two display her sense of wit. The first involves her own rather harsh self-awareness:

'You tantalize me to death with talking of conversations by the fireside. Depend upon it, we are not to have any such for many a long month to come. I get an interesting impression of old age upon my face; and when you see me next I shall certainly wear caps and spectacles' (p. 223).

The second is a response to the local curate's reading of Shirley:

'It is a curious fact that, since he read "Shirley", he has come to the house oftener than ever, and been remarkably meek and assiduous to please. Some people's natures are veritable enigmas: I quite expected to have had one good scene at least with him; but as yet nothing of the sort has occurred' (p. 406).

Throughout the biography there is evidence of Charlotte's rather dry, often self-mocking humour, but in the majority of chapter endings in which Charlotte speaks, it is either to the family's poor health or to her efforts in being published, that she addresses herself. This is significant because the structural breaks give emphasis to the last words in any chapter and once again the impression gained is of Charlotte as the tragic heroine. While writing the biography in Charlotte's words as far as possible, Gaskell has organised the breaks at chapter and volume ends so as to give prominence to Charlotte the suffering woman, not Charlotte the extraordinary writer.

Footnotes

- ¹ In speaking of Charlotte Brontë I have used her first name throughout this thesis to distinguish her from other members of the Brontë family.
- ² Elizabeth Gaskell, The Life Of Charlotte Brontë, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1975). All further page references given are for this edition.
- ³ J.A. Chapple and A. Pollard, ed., The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 345.