SOME BASIC STRUCTURES IN LITERATURE
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Not all novels or plays begin at the beginning and go on to the end. In crime fiction, for example, if a thriller begins with the sentence *Mrs. Blenkinsopp screamed loudly and long, on discovering Sir William slumped over his desk with a neat bullet hole in the back of his head,* probably the entire book will be geared to finding out who did the murder. The murder is the main event of the story, but it has already taken place before the book started. Many stories, in fact, start somewhere in the middle.

Again, it is not unusual for a story to begin at the end, or very near to the end, and for the author then to use a flashback technique, by means of which he narrates and describes the events that have led up to the point where he began his tale. This is a technique which has often been used to good effect in the cinema.

An elementary study of the structure of plays shows that dramatists often locate a sequence of scenes in different places with different characters. In *Macbeth,* for example, the play opens with the Witches. In the next scene King Duncan and his retinue come on and go off. In Scene III the Witches re-enter to meet, a little later, Macbeth and Banquo. The start of Scene IV has Duncan & Co. again, then adds Macbeth and Banquo. Scene V begins with Lady Macbeth, alone. And so on.

These structural patterns are not random and arbitrary. They serve artistic purposes by creating variety, dramatic interest, suspense. Instead of being in dully predictable sequence, where A leads to B, which leads to C, which inevitably leads to D and E, which in turn lead to F and then G - instead of this, varied patterns of structure mean that events now contain an element of surprise, and, even more important, events and their causes become interwoven. E.M. Forster had this to say about it:

Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. *The king died and then the queen died* is a story. *The king died, and then the queen died of grief* is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: *The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.* This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say 'and then?' If it is in a plot we ask 'why?' That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel.

From *Aspects of the Novel* by E M Forster

Foster's words are worth remembering by anyone who has ambitions to take his or her own writing to a level higher than straightforward narrative governed by strict chronological order.

The use of a narrator in a play or novel is one method of giving the work a planned, structured form. Using a narrator enables a writer to link together diverse events and scenes like threading coloured beads on a string.

The following example was written as a play for radio and is subtitled *A Play for Voices*. It makes use of two narrators, the First Voice and the Second Voice.

FIRST VOICE:	The sunny slow lulling afternoon yawns and moons through the dozy town. The sea lolls, laps and idles in, with fishes sleeping in its lap. The meadows still as Sunday, the shut-eye tasselled bulls, the goat-and-daisy dangles, nap happy and lazy. The dumb duck-ponds snooze. Pigs grunt in a wet wallow-bath, and smile as they snort and dream. They mud-bask and snout in the pig-loving sun; their tails curl; they rollick and slobber and snore to deep, smug, after-swill sleep. Donkeys angelically drowse on Donkey down.
MRS. PUGH:	Persons with manners,
SECOND VOICE:	snaps Mrs. cold Pugh,
MRS. PUGH:	do not nod at table.
FIRST VOICE:	Mr. Pugh cringes awake. He puts on a soft-soaping smile: it is sad and grey under his nicotine-egg yellow weeping walrus Victorian moustache worn thick and long in memory of Doctor Crippen.
MRS. PUGH:	You should wait until you retire to your sty,
SECOND VOICE:	Says Mrs. Pugh, sweet as a razor. His fawning measly quarter-smile freezes. Sly and silent, he foxes into his chemist's den and there, in a hiss and prussic circle of cauldrons and phials brimful with pox and the Black Death, cooks up a fricassee of deadly nightshade, nicotine, hot frog, cyanide and bat-spit for his needling stalactite hag and badinage of a pokerbacked nutcracker wife.
MR. PUGH:	I beg your pardon, my dear,
SECOND VOICE:	he murmurs with a wheedle.
FIRST VOICE:	Captain Cat, at his window thrown wide to the sun and the clippered seas he sailed long ago when his eyes were blue and bright, slumbers and voyages...

From *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas (slightly adapted)

The first Voice sets the scene and, later, tells us something about Mr. Pugh's physical appearance, since we, the listeners, cannot see him for ourselves. Mrs. Pugh has been heard earlier in the play, so her voice is likely to be recognized at once. But the Second Voice helps us by confirming that she is speaking, and adds an apt verb and adjective to describe her aggressive personality. The Second Voice also describes Mr. Pugh's violent inner reactions to his wife's nagging.

Notice the clean break between *Donkeys angelically drowse on Donkeys Down* and the sharply critical tone of Mrs. Pugh's first three words. The structure here is one of juxtaposition. Mrs. Pugh's remark is set by the side of

the First Voice's pleasing description of nature *without any linking comment*, so that the contrast between the two is all the more dramatic. And the scene has been changed, with great skill. By implication, Mrs. Pughs' first sentence tells us in an instant that we have moved from the fields and open air into the Pugh's dining-room. Then, at the end of the extract, we see another method of structuring: the First Voice changes the scene by telling us *directly* that we have left and Mr. and Mrs. Pugh and have joined Captain Cat at his window.

The employment of these narrators gives the writer great flexibility, allowing him to move easily from one scene to the next and from one group of characters to another. The narrators describe and comment on the action and provide us with necessary information. They set scenes, link together the various elements of the play, and thus give it a simple, structured unity.

Sometimes a story is narrated in the first person, with I being the writer himself or one of his characters, as in *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens. Sometimes several characters share the telling of a story, or relate aspects of it from different points of view, as in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, where the narrator of *Justine* and *Balthazar* becomes a character in *Mountolive*. In Robert Bolt's drama, *A Man for All Seasons,* his narrator, known as the Common Man, actually plays several minor parts, rather than merely relating the plot, and in this way helps to steer the course of the action.

Obviously, a narrator is not always needed. Much writing is reflective or evocative or philosophical in intention and doesn't have a story or a plot. In such cases structural patterns are often created by the words themselves, by how and where they are placed, by their music and imagery. This is especially true of poetry, as, for example, in 'The Divine Image' by William Blake:

> To Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
> All pray in their distress:
> And to these virtues of delight
> Return their thankfulness.
>
> For Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
> Is God our father dear:
> And Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
> Is Man his child and care.
>
> For Mercy has a human heart
> Pity, a human face:
> And Love, the human form divine,
> And Peace, the human dress.
>
> Then every man of every clime,
> Then prays in his distress,
> Prays to the human form divine
> Love Mercy Pity Peace.

> And all must love the human form,
> In heathen, Turk or Jew.
> Where Mercy, Love and Pity dwell,
> There God is dwelling too.

This poem deals with one of Blake's most deeply felt themes: that mercy, pity, peace, and love are attributes both human and divine, and that God dwells in people who display these qualities.

Apart from the development of the poem's theme, its structure is shown in the steady beat of its rhythm, in its division into four-line stanzas, and in the varied repetition of its key words. These are the things which give the poem its coherent shape and at the same time bind its separate parts together.

Finally, the briefest comparison between the structure of a novel by Jane Austen and one by Thomas Hardy will reveal a basic difference in technique. Jane Austen's novels are structured around social events - dinners and dances, visits, marriages. Hardy deals with momentous affairs - the power of Nature, love which leads to ruin, characters ranged against impersonal forces which shape man's fate. We are always aware in reading Hardy that the author is in control of everything. Jane Austen, too, is always in control of her novels' shape and structure, but in reading *Emma*, for example, we find most events are seen through the heroine's eyes and we are never conscious of the structural impositions that occur in a novel such as *Two on a Tower*. Dynamic growth surely involves a greater complexity and greater skill on the part of the writer than objective authorial structuring.