

Patterns of Enclosure in Morris' Early Stories

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A striking aspect of the eight short prose romances which appeared in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*¹ is that Morris chose for them a variety of techniques connected with patterns of enclosure. If an enclosure is marked off by some kind of boundary line, Morris spends considerable time erasing or blurring many of these lines. Conventional distinctions between such categories as life and death or dreams and reality are removed in many of the stories.² Morris deliberately blurs these traditional demarcations in order to widen many of our narrow, conventional ideas about life. Not all enclosures have negative connotations in these stories. Morris suggests not only that enclosures which limit and confine should be expanded, but also that enclosures which focus on something of value should be highlighted.

What is especially curious and typical of Morris's early writing is his propensity for creating many levels and kinds of narration. The buried chest of armour in 'Golden Wings' and the image of the "hidden ore" of thoughts in 'A Dream' point to Morris's fondness for using images and narrative techniques associated with embedding. (pp.294; 175) In this group of stories, 'A Dream' and 'Lindenberg Pool' are especially notable for a multiplicity and convolution of narrative levels. The outer level of 'A Dream' is about a dreamer who falls asleep; within this level of narration is his dream of four narrators; and within this dream is an inset tale of two lovers. In a similar manner 'Lindenberg Pool' is a tale within a tale, and within this is a dream. Public and private pasts, in addition to dreams and tales, are also framed through the use of chronicles, dreams of past centuries and flashbacks into characters' own pasts. In 'Frank's Sealed Letter' levels of narration involving the past, present and future become convoluted as Frank imagines a future in which he recalls the past. Florence Boos points out that "configurations of tales-within-tales and lives-within-lives clearly appealed to Morris, and variants of them reappear throughout his writings."³ In all of these stories, the use of enclosed levels within other enclosed levels moves the reader toward the heart of this Chinese box-like structure.

The centre and focus of these enclosures is frequently an art emblem. The book of romance in 'Frank's Sealed Letter' (p.320), the painted face in 'The Hollow Land' (p.286), the picture of the Crucifixion in 'Svend and his Brethren' (p.232), the wrought images of Margaret and Florian on the Palace walls in 'The Hollow Land' (p.290), the conduit carved with biblical histories and the carved church in 'The Story of the Unknown Church' (pp. 151, 150), the pictures of brave men in the chapel where Cissela takes her oath in 'Svend and his Brethren' (p.231) and "the painted hall" where Lionel and Alice live in 'Golden Wings' (p.305), all have a similar role to the songs and verses that are a focal point for many of the stories. The songs sung by Margaret in 'The Hollow Land' (pp.277), by Gertha in 'Gertha's Lovers' (p.179), by Lionel's mother and the minstrel in 'Golden Wings' (pp.292, 301), by the anonymous singer in 'The Hollow Land' (p.259), as well as the verses quoted by Mabel in 'Frank's Sealed Letter' (pp.312, 317) are embedded within layers of narrative. In the very epigraph to 'The Hollow Land', Morris quotes Carlyle's words on the wonders of ancient stories. (p.254) The emphasis upon various kinds of art highlights the centrality of it in this world.

Images of art are also frequently embedded within another type of enclosure in these stories – enclosed buildings and other types of man-made structures. In 'A Dream', as the four narrators tell their tale, they sit in Dickensian fashion by "the winter fire" in "a house that the wind howled round." (p.159) In a similar way, Lionel's mother in 'Golden Wings', as she sang and worked at her frame every St. Peter's Day, "shut the shutters against the windows." (p.291) And the palace in the midst of the Hollow Land that has the carvings of Ella and Lawrence on it, is "cloistered off." (p.290)

In 'The Story of the Unknown Church' a Chinese-box like setting is particularly evident. The town housing the Abbey was "girt about with great walls that had overhanging battlements" (p.150); the Abbey was girt by "a circle of poplar trees" (p.150); the buildings of the Abbey were joined to the Church "by a cloister of round arches, and in the midst of the cloister was a lawn, and in the midst of a lawn, a fountain of marble, carved round about with flowers and strange beasts." (p.150)

As always with Morris's writing, such a pattern draws attention to what is at the centre of it – often something of great beauty and significance, and usually connected with art. In 'Svend and his Brethren' Cissela asks her son of Suir, the craftsman, "Did you not tell me that his words led you, whether you would or no, into dreamland?" (p.237) Such a dreamland is where visions of a better world are born. By constricting our focus and highlighting the theme of art, Morris paradoxically expands our horizons and enlarges our vision.

NOTES

- ¹ References to the first volume of the *Collected Works of William Morris* ed. May Morris (1910; New York: Russell and Russell, 1966) are given parenthetically in the text by page number.
- ² For a detailed examination of this technique see Amanda Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- ³ Florence S. Boos, 'The Structure of Morris' Tales for *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 20 (Spring 1987), 8.