

Elements of crime writing: Text overview – Poetry collection: Crabbe, Browning and Wilde

What follows is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of crime. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of the genre. There are some brief comments on how some elements of the genre can be linked to the text, although teachers and students may well think of other relevant ideas. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.



"That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
looking as if she were alive." – *My Last Duchess*

Overview

This collection of poems offers a variety of insights into different elements of the crime writing genre. What is particularly interesting are the voices that the poets choose to tell stories which have crimes of some magnitude at their heart. The voices Browning chooses are those of murderers or in the case of the female speaker in *The Laboratory*, one who has murderous intent. All Browning's speakers reveal their crimes with confidence and impunity and have no fear of detection. Crabbe's narrator is censorious, condemning Peter for his ghastly crimes though giving him a long confessional in which some sympathy is established for the fallen and hopeless man. Wilde's speaker, so easy to identify as the poet himself given that his personal story of his own imprisonment in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is interwoven in the narrative, writes elegiacally and sympathetically not about the victim of crime but about the criminal who is punished by incarceration and then hanged. The focus in Wilde's poem paradoxically is on the injustice of justice and the horrors of Victorian punishment.

Murder and violence

Crabbe's and Browning's stories centre on a murder or murders while Wilde's poem has a murder in its back-story. Crabbe describes how Peter abuses his father, indirectly bringing about his death and is then responsible for the deaths of three "piteous orphans" he buys from the workhouse. Browning's jealous Duke in *My Last Duchess* "gave commands" and stopped the smiles of his young wife permanently; the lover of Porphyria strangles her so that she remains eternally his and the female poisoner in *The Laboratory* wants her rivals in love to suffer agonising deaths. Their behaviour marks them as criminals of the most heinous of crimes. Wilde also writes about a murderer – here a real life figure, trooper Charles Thomas Wooldridge, who cut the throat of the wife whom he loved out of jealousy. Wilde says little about the crime itself other than that she was a "poor dead woman whom [Wooldridge] loved" and he slightly romanticises and sanitises the real story by saying she, like Desdemona, was "murdered in her bed" (in real life Wooldridge had been violent to his wife some weeks before the murder, had told a colleague that on the day of the murder he was "going to do some damage" and had actually put a razor to his wife's throat in the street). Significantly Wilde also says nothing of her apparent unfaithfulness or of Wooldridge's jealousy. What Wilde focuses on is the potential for murder that is in all human beings ("Yet each man kills the thing he loves"). He does not single out Wooldridge as an aberrant individual; he is simply a flawed human being, one who like others has been ensnared in the "iron gin that waits for Sin".

In crime stories, a key element that is often found is violence. Violence is described explicitly in *Peter Grimes* and *Porphyria's Lover*. Peter's "savage" acts are listed and repeated (the first boy has bruises that make him stoop and the third suffers "vile blows" that lead to his death); and the lover calmly explains how "he found a thing to do" and strangles Porphyria with her yellow hair. In *My Last Duchess* the violence is implied. The Duke resents his wife's cheerfulness and smiling at others so gives commands so that "all smiles stopped", implying that he commissioned the violence done to her rather than committing it himself. In *The Laboratory* the female speaker delights in the brutal and painful deaths her rivals will suffer. The violence is vividly imagined and although it does not occur in the poem itself, the speaker's desire that the poison will "brand, burn up, bite into" her victims is disturbing. In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, there is no description of the violence inflicted on the murdered woman, but Wilde details both the psychological and physical violence inflicted on all prisoners (sewing sacks until hands bleed, tearing ropes to shreds, walking past graves that gape for those who are executed) and in particular there is a focus on the horror of hanging: although it might be sweet, Wilde suggests, to dance to violins, it is "not sweet with nimble feet/To dance upon the air". In this respect the poem is a protest poem about the dehumanisation of prison life and the use of capital punishment in the 19th century.

The criminal psyche

All five poems explore the criminal psyche in some detail but in very different ways. Peter's motive appears to result from a psychopathic need to subject a "feeling creature" "to his power" and when the ability to buy a victim is finally removed by the burghers, Peter begins a descent into madness, coaxed along both by the "spirits" of his victims and the village people's cries of "wicked man" as he begins to experience guilt for what he has done. His speech to the priest at the end of the poem is a confession of sorts, but while he appears to feel some remorse, in particular for the second boy whose death "hit [his] conscience", the main focus of his ramblings is self-pity and terror of "the place of horrors", presumably the hell to which he fears he is headed. His confessional is also interwoven with a desire to defend his actions, perhaps to save himself from everlasting torture. Peter clearly is terrified of punishment. This is not the case with Browning's characters who do not fear or expect punishment; neither do they exhibit any regret for crimes committed or, in the case of the poisoner, any moral qualms about the deed to be done. Browning's poems offer disturbing insights into the darker side of the human psyche in which no moral framework operates. Porphyria's lover justifies his act by claiming that his victim felt "no pain" and that her death was a result of "her darling one wish" to be with him forever, implying a psychopathic inability to emotionally engage with Porphyria and a desire to justify his actions, evidenced most clearly when he boasts that he has sat with her body all night long and God has not said a word. The speaker here is coldly objective in his delivery and it could be argued that he displays signs of madness, hardly surprising perhaps given that Browning first published the poem under the title *Madhouse Cells*. In *My Last Duchess* the Duke's criminal psyche is conterminous with his aristocratic male power. There is undisguised arrogance and pride in his speech and the feeling that he is convinced he was right to take things in hand with his wayward wife who ranked his "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name/With anybody's gift". In *The Laboratory*, Browning perhaps encourages some sympathy for his narrator who, while plotting her murders, describes her motives which are borne of imagining her rivals' laughing at her suffering as the abandoned lover. The speaker is excited as she plots her revenge, delighted in the pain she will inflict. There is something manic and perhaps also enchanting about the way she savours the exquisite colours and textures of the ingredients for the poison. All three Browning poems are dramatic monologues and this form allows the writer to make readers complicit in the dark deeds of the speakers. In this respect the poems are discomfiting. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* works differently in the way that it offers insights into the criminal psyche. Here the first person narrator, who is himself a criminal – though significantly Wilde does not say what his crime is – seems to suggest that there is a collective criminal consciousness that suffers guilt and shares a common humanity, a consciousness that is not depraved or insane. The poem is interesting in that Wilde bypasses the crimes that have led to incarceration and says nothing of the mindset or motivations of the offenders. He focuses instead on the thoughts and feelings of the criminals in relation to

their punishments, their humiliation, emptiness and shared misery: “I never saw sad men who looked/With such a wistful eye/Upon that little tent of blue/We prisoners call the sky”.

Victims

There are victims in all the stories of Crabbe, Browning and Wilde, though given that Browning uses first person narrators who are murderers and speak with impunity, there is little sympathy given to the victims by the speakers, though some is afforded by the writers in spite of the narrators. Porphyria is shown to be warm and loving, trusting her lover as she places her smiling rosy little head on his shoulder. After he has murdered her, the lover claims that she felt “no pain” but his eerily detached voice makes this an unconvincing assertion. Browning allows us to see that the duchess is open, friendly and free of any kind of pride that might be associated with her social position. She clearly loves life, appreciates nature and is grateful to anyone who shows her kindness. All activities draw “from her alike the approving speech/Or blush”. No details are given of how the duke’s commands are carried out and readers can only speculate on how her smiles are stopped. The narrator of *The Laboratory* excitedly imagines how her victims will die: Pauline will have only thirty minutes to live and Elise, “with her head/and her breast and her arms and her hands” will simply “drop dead” but the narrator’s focus is more on the power of the poison than the victims who, in the narrative present, are happily dancing at the King’s. The child victims in *Peter Grimes* are directly presented as innocent and Peter’s father, who is God-fearing, caring and a hard worker, is elevated by the writer. The boys are “pinn’d, beaten, cold, pinch’d, threaten’d and abused”; their cries are heard by the town and their injuries are stark. In contrast, in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Wilde only gives brief mention in the opening stanza of the wife-victim of Wooldridge’s crime. There is no discussion of her suffering, her unfaithfulness or her loss of life. Instead Wilde casts the murderer as the victim in his crime story: Wooldridge is depicted as a casualty of a punitive judicial system which claims to uphold Christian values yet shows itself incapable of forgiveness, denying sinners the possibility of redemption. Wilde pities his doomed fellow prisoner who killed the thing he loved. He wonders what Wooldridge must have thought during his last three weeks on earth, how he felt when he was watched during prayer and when he wept and how on the scaffold he will have been wistful as he took his “last look at the sky”.

Punishment

In terms of the key crime writing element of punishment, the three writers clearly differ. In *Peter Grimes*, Crabbe includes a detailed description of Peter’s torment as he is punished by the society which rejects him and by the “three spirits” who torture him. In the poem Crabbe presents the trial and punishment of Peter, both elements we would expect to find in crime writing. After the death of the third child, Peter is summoned to appear before the town’s burghers. Although the mayor allows him to go free Peter can never again have a “boy

abide” with him and he is hated and shunned by the people of the town. His isolation is the first part of his punishment and he becomes oppressed with “misery, grief, and fear”. Like Macbeth, his sleep is disturbed by horrible images that shake him nightly. Crabbe suggests that Peter’s terrors are a result of his meditating on his crimes, though there is no certainty. What is clear is that he becomes a “distempered man”, haunted by images of those he killed or abused. Significantly it is his father who rises before him, like the ghost of old Hamlet, and it drives his son to madness. The poem ends with the implication that his punishment will continue beyond the grave. Even in death the spirits will never allow him to rest in peace: “Again they come”, he mutters as he dies.

In Browning’s poems there is no sense of punishment or moral resolution. This is unusual in terms of crime writing. In *My Last Duchess*, the Duke is free to negotiate another wife and dowry and Porphyria’s lover appears to feel vindicated because “God has not said a word” against his crime. In *The Laboratory* the focus of the poem is on the plotting of multiple murders rather than the consequences. The alchemist seems happy to comply with the speaker’s wishes to concoct the lethal poison and there is no indication in the poem that her criminal intentions will be discovered or that she will be punished. Punishment is not Browning’s concern; he simply wants to show the speaker’s lust for poisoning and her desire for revenge. Some readers may well admire and sympathise with the narrator who presents herself as wronged and betrayed in love, though whether they want her to carry out her plan is more unlikely. While much crime writing is reassuringly moral, with the criminals ultimately being caught and punished and justice being done, Browning’s poems provide a snapshot of events which do not have a predictable moral structure. In this respect they are unsettling.

In Wilde’s poem criminals are punished and there is moral retribution of sorts. However, it is the efficacy and humanity of punishment itself that is questioned rather than the criminal acts committed by individuals. Punishment is in fact the subject and key crime element of the poem and it is unreservedly condemned. Wilde’s perspective on punishment opens up interesting questions for readers especially when their own contexts are taken into account and when the changes in legislation over the past 150 years are considered. Is it straightforward, though, to judge the speaker and the criminals about whom he writes from a modern standpoint? Are there further complexities even if we do this? How far, therefore, do we concur with the sentiments Wilde propounds? Is it justified to overlook the victims of crime in the way Wilde does? How much attention should be given to what Wilde does not say? Why, for example, is so much consideration given to the prisoners’ deprivation of freedom and humanity and none to Wooldridge’s depriving his wife of her life? Wilde also sidesteps the crimes of the other prisoners, including his own; those crimes are not even adumbrated but are loosely placed under the umbrella of the actions of “the fool, the fraud, the knave” and he seems to sympathise with them all.

Given the autobiographical nature of the poem and Wilde’s belief that his homosexuality was not wrong, it is easy to see why he is on the side of the

criminal. Many readers will similarly condemn the injustice and immorality of his incarceration given that attitudes and laws have now changed. Sodomy, for example, the crime for which Wilde was convicted in 1895, is no longer punishable by law. However, making judgements on the issues raised by what is both said and unsaid in the poem is problematic. In his own case, an interesting contextual point is that many of Wilde's lovers were boys and by modern standards this would of course make him a paedophile, a crime for which today he would be condemned and sentenced, though interestingly the age of the boys was not a specific issue for Victorian moralisers or legislators. (Children had few rights in the nineteenth century and there was no law against heterosexual males having sexual relationships with young girls or of their marrying them if the girls had parental consent).

But Wilde neither attacks the legislative system in this poem (he says he knows not whether laws be right or wrong) nor the behaviour of the criminals (the trooper's murder of his wife is only fleetingly mentioned and when it is, it is rewritten as an act of bravery). His concern is the degradation of prison life (every cell in which prisoners dwell is a "foul and dark latrine" and "every prison that men build/Is built with bricks of shame") and the horror and inhumanity of capital punishment (when he is taken to the gallows, the trooper is hooked to the blackened beam by a greasy rope and his final prayer is strangled into a scream by the hangman's snare). The horror of the execution is intensified by the description of the contempt that is shown to the prisoner's body after his death. The warders mock the "swollen purple throat" and laugh at the shroud in which the convict lies. For the other prisoners who are witnesses, something dies in each of them - and that is "Hope". Wilde's experiences in *Reading Gaol* broke his spirit and the poem suggests why this was. As a Christian, Wilde despairs that prison is so cruel and unforgiving, that there are no flowers to grace the air, but only shards, pebbles and flints which harden the heart.

Settings

The settings crime writers choose for their stories are always significant. Crabbe chooses a variety of settings for his grim tale. *Peter Grimes* is part of a collection of rural poems Crabbe published in 1810 called *The Borough*. The location for Peter Grimes is a quiet Suffolk fishing town. Given that Peter is a fisherman, many scenes take place on the sea on his fishing boat and this is where his criminal behaviour is carried out. The isolation of the sea is also used to reflect Peter's emptiness when he is exiled from his community. A remote setting is also chosen by Browning for the story of *Porphyria's Lover*. The lover lives in an isolated cottage and on the night of the murder, the winds are howling and vexing the nearby lake mirroring his inner turmoil and psychotic nature. The secluded setting from which the lover tells his story as he sits with the dead body of Porphyria propped up on his shoulder triumphing in God's not passing judgement, also suggests that the murder may never be discovered. *My Last Duchess* is set in the Duke's aristocratic residence in Ferrara where his valuable art collection is on display, as a sign of his power. The fact that he reveals his

crime to an envoy who is being shown the portrait of his last duchess during negotiations for his next marriage, suggests that he has no fear of any repercussions. He gave commands to have his last duchess killed because he could. His magnificent residence is his power base. The setting for *The Laboratory* is as the title suggests central to the story. The speaker refers to it as the “devil’s smithy” and she enjoys the associations the various chemicals and the curling white smokes have with hell. Here she delights in the construction of the poison that will destroy her rivals, the gold oozing and the phial of exquisite blue. The laboratory is secretive and apart and contrasts with both the empty church where she has apparently gone to pray and with the aristocratic dance at the King’s, part of the world of the Ancien Régime. Wilde’s setting is also announced in the title of his poem. Reading Gaol, a place of much suffering and much introspection, was where he spent two years of his life and where his identity was removed; he was simply C33: cell block C, landing 3, cell 3. In the poem’s narrative, he himself does not refer to the trooper (or anyone by name), other than giving his initials C. T. W. in the inscription at the start of the poem. The prison is grey, oppressive and forbidding, contrasting always with the little patch of blue the prisoners call the sky. It is also the place of execution for the trooper and the place where he is ignominiously buried, “a stretch of mud and sand by the hideous prison-wall”.

Social commentary

All the poems imply criticism of the societies in which the crimes are committed and of which the murderers are products. Crabbe expresses clear disgust with the workhouses where boys are bought, describing them as “slave shops”, and he criticises the values of a society where “none put the question” to Peter about his treatment of the boys. Although there is some disquiet about the ways he procures boys, nothing is done to stop him. Even after the death of the third boy, Peter is free. If the town’s people and the burghers are seen as detectives of a sort, then they are ineffective, simply turning a blind eye. Similarly, Browning could be seen to be challenging the arranged marriages of both the Renaissance and Victorian times, through his reference to the Duke’s desire for control over his young wife even in death, shown metaphorically through the curtain over her painting that “none puts by” but himself, and of his next wife, the sea-horse that Neptune will tame. Females in both *Porphyria’s Lover* and *My Last Duchess* are presented as being at the mercy of cold and controlling men who view them as possessions while the seedy, criminal setting of *The Laboratory* paints a picture of a world with few morals or principles. Wilde is clearly condemning a society that sanctions capital punishment and a prison system that allows human beings to suffer “degraded and alone” without hope of forgiveness. He deliberately chose a ballad form for his poem so that he could speak widely to the proletariat. The ballad was circulated in Reynolds’ Magazine, a magazine frequently read by members of the criminal classes with whom he came to identify.

Acknowledgement of copyright-holders and publishers

DEA / A. DAGLI ORTI / Getty Images