

### Poetic Technique: Dramatic Monologue

Dramatic monologue in poetry, also known as a persona poem, shares many characteristics with a theatrical monologue: an audience is implied; there is no dialogue; and the poet speaks through an assumed voice—a character, a fictional identity, or a persona. Because a dramatic monologue is by definition one person's speech, it is offered without overt analysis or commentary, placing emphasis on subjective qualities that are left to the audience to interpret.

Though the technique is evident in many ancient Greek dramas, the dramatic monologue as a poetic form achieved its first era of distinction in the work of Victorian poet Robert Browning. Browning's poems "My Last Duchess" and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," though considered largely inscrutable by Victorian readers, have become models of the form. His monologues combine the elements of the speaker and the audience so deftly that the reader seems to have some control over how much the speaker will divulge in his monologue. This complex relationship is evident in the following excerpt from "My Last Duchess":

Even had you skill  
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark' -- and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
—E'en then would be some stooping...

In the twentieth century, the influence of Browning's monologues can be seen in the work of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. In Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," readers find the voice of the poet cloaked in a mask, a technique that Eliot mastered in his career. More recently, a number of poets have offered variations on the form, including "Mirror" and "Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath, and "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" by John Ashbery. John Berryman used the form in his series of *Dream Songs*, writing poems with shifting narrators, including his alter egos "Henry" and "Mr. Bones."

One powerful example of the interplay between a dramatic monologue and the perception of the audience is "Night, Death, Mississippi," by Robert Hayden. In the poem, Hayden adopts the shocking persona of an aging Klan member, listening longingly to the sounds of a lynching outside, but too feeble to join. He says to himself:

Christ, it was better  
than hunting bear  
which don't know why  
you want him dead.

The effect of reading the casual violence of the poem is more devastating than any commentary the poet could have provided. Hayden wrote many other dramatic monologue poems, including several dramatizing African American historical figures such as Phillis Wheatley and Nat Turner, as well as inventive characters such as the alien voice reporting his observations in "American Journal."

Though not written in the first person, James Dickey's long poem "Falling" is inspired by a true story, and offers the impossible narrative of a stewardess who is accidentally blown from a plane and falls helplessly to the ground. The poem is voiced by an omniscient speaker who seems to fly invisibly beside her, observing her calm descent, her twists and tumbles, listening as she imagines herself as a goddess looking for water to dive into, and then finally watching as she removes her clothes, unsnapping her bra and sliding out of her girdle, before finally coming to rest in a Kansas field. Dickey transforms this terrifying reality into sensual transcendence, as he writes: "Her last superhuman act the last slow careful passing of her hands / All over her unharmed body desired by every sleeper in his dream."

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