

The Dramatic Monologue: Definitions and Mechanics

1. Dramatic Monologue

- a. **Debated definitions.** Definitions of the dramatic monologue, a form invented and practiced principally by Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, Dante Rossetti, and other Victorian poets, have been much debated in the last several decades.
- b. **Common elements:** everyone agrees that a dramatic monologue a poem must have
 - i. a speaker and an implied auditor
 - ii. the auditor often perceives a gap between what speaker says and what that speaker actually reveals.
 - iii. the reader adopts the POV of an auditor (or narratee, whether one is present or not in the poem)
 - iv. the speaker uses a case-making, argumentative tone
 - v. the auditor completes the dramatic scene from within, by means of inference and imagination

2. Browning's aesthetic: demanding work from the reader

- a. Browning's contemporaries at first found him obscure and inaccessible; later they called him "unreadable." That 20thC readers find these reactions startling indicates the degree to which Browning inaugurated modernist traditions with which we are now comfortable.
- b. Browning wrote to Ruskin that "I cannot begin writing poetry until my imaginary reader has conceded licenses to me" and noted that he didn't believe in "painting it plain out," but wanted to put his ideas indirectly. He concluded: "I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which succeed if they bear the conception from me to you."

3. The reader's judicial role: transform monologue into dialogue

- a. Typically a reader enters a poem ready to identify with the implied author/speaker. Example: in Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," we identify with the first-person speaker when he describes himself as

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.
- b. The dramatic monologue presents a two-step sequence: we enter what looks like a normal situation, but become aware of discrepancies that gradually encourage us to suspect the speaker's reliability, motives, and actions.
- c. As the self-justifying ("case-making") speaker bombards us with a rationalization/explanation of his actions, the auditor begins to construct a fully detailed alternative vision of the speaker and the events he describes, in effect creating an "untold story" or alternative poem in the auditor's head.
- d. Browning typically provides metonymic "chunks" of evidence about the victim (such as Porphyria's hair or the donkey on which the Duchess sat) that incriminate the speaker.
- e. The reader acts as a judge, appreciating the depth of the speaker's conscious or unconscious shortcomings - usually a discrepancy in role (Fra Lippo is a "bad monk," Porphyria's lover a "bad lover," the Duke of Ferrara a "bad husband," etc.)

- f. The outcome of the events - like the effect of our judgment - is impossible to determine: as Glen Everett says, "We and the listeners in these dramatic monologues can only speculate, for within the text neither they nor we can find conclusive proofs. This indeterminacy, which his first readers found so distressing, accords with Browning's own "uncertainty" about what happens in his poems: most famously his comment to Hiram Corson that the Duke might have had his Duchess put to death--"or he might have had her shut up in a convent" (Corson viii). Since the envoy cannot know conclusively, neither can we. "

4. **Why is the auditor/narratee almost always silent?**

- a. If the poem has an auditor/narratee, he or she remains silent, because for this person to speak would destroy the illusion that the reader has become the Other participant in the dialogue - and might also allow the reader to remain a passive observer.
- b. The speaker may ask rhetorical questions in order to anticipate the reader/auditor's demands for information.
- c. The reader's alternative poem is constructed in the poem's gaps, interstices, and omissions.
- d. By participating in the dialogue, we are implicated in it. We have already been duped into momentarily identifying with the speaker; perhaps we continue to identify with him throughout the poem. This uneasy mixture of identification and judgment puts the reader him or herself in the dock.