

A short overview of the poetic genre-the Dramatic monologue

Dramatic monologue refers to a type of poetry. These poems are dramatic in the sense that they have a theatrical quality; that is, the poem is meant to be read to an audience. To say that the poem is a monologue means that these are the words of one solitary speaker with no dialogue coming from any other characters. It's a poem in which an imagined speaker addresses a silent listener, usually not the reader. Examples include Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and Ai's "Killing Floor." A lyric may also be addressed to someone, but it is short and songlike and may appear to address either the reader or the poet.

M.H. Abrams in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* notes the following three features of the *dramatic monologue* as it applies to poetry:

1. The single person, who is patently *not* the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment
2. This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors' presence, and what they say and do, only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker.
3. The main principle controlling the poet's choice and formulation of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker's temperament and character.

One of the most important influences on the development of the dramatic monologue is romantic poetry. However, the long, personal lyrics typical of the Romantic period are not dramatic monologues, in the sense that they do not, for the most part, imply a concentrated narrative. Poems such as William Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, to name two famous examples, offered a model of close psychological observation and philosophical or pseudo-philosophical inquiry described in a specific setting. The conversation poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge are perhaps a better precedent. The genre was also developed by Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, beginning in the latter's case with her long poem *The Improvisatrice*.

The novel and plays have also been important influences on the dramatic monologue, particularly as a means of characterization. Dramatic monologues are a way of expressing the views of a character and offering the audience greater insight into that character's feelings. Dramatic monologues can also be used in novels to tell stories, as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and to implicate the audience in moral judgements, as in Albert Camus *The Fall* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

The abundant use of this genre by the Victorian poets:

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Ulysses*, published in 1842, has been called the first true dramatic monologue. After *Ulysses*, Tennyson's most famous efforts in this vein are *Tithonus*, *The Lotos-Eaters*, and *St. Simon Stylites*, all from the 1842 *Poems*; later monologues appear in other volumes, notably *Idylls of the King*.
- Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* and *Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse* are famous, semi-autobiographical monologues. The former, usually regarded as the supreme expression of the growing scepticism of the mid-Victorian period, was published along with the latter in 1867's *New Poems*.
- Robert Browning produced his most famous work in this form. While *My Last Duchess* is the most famous of his monologues, the form dominated his writing career. *The Ring and the Book*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Caliban upon Setebos*, *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* and *Porphyria's Lover*, as well as the other poems in *Men and Women* are just a handful of Browning's monologues.