
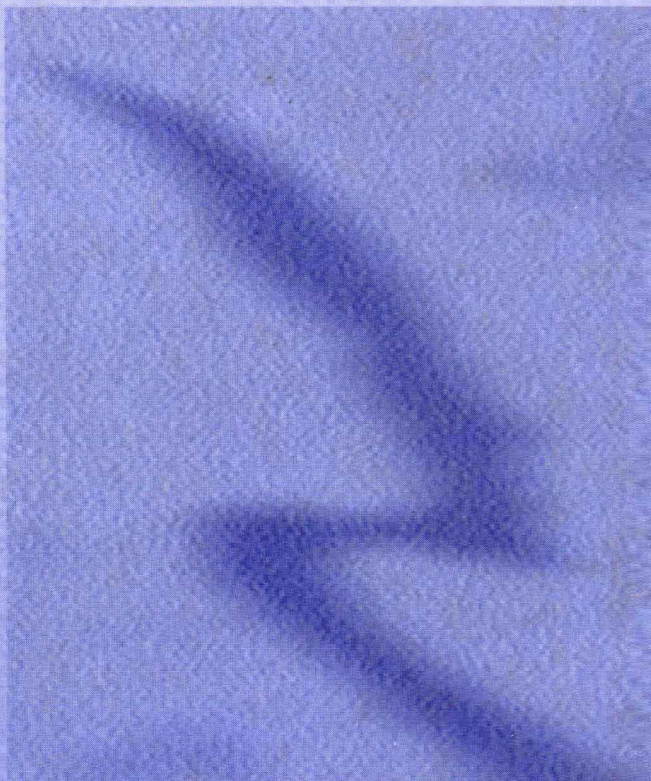


# **Dramatic Monologue**

Glennis Byron

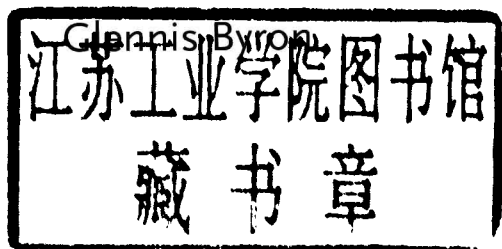
New Critical Idiom

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# DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

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## DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

The dramatic monologue is traditionally associated with Victorian poets such as Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson, and is generally considered to have disappeared with the onset of modernism in the twentieth century. Glennis Byron unravels its history and argues that, contrary to belief, the monologue remains popular to this day. Alongside the canonical figures of Tennyson and Browning, she includes in her analysis lesser-known poets such as Charles Kingsley and recently rediscovered women writers such as Augusta Levy and Charlotte Mew. By focusing on monologue's status as a form of social critique, the author successfully demonstrates the longevity and relevance of the form, and accounts for its current popularity due to the increasingly politicised nature of contemporary poetry with reference to the work of poets such as Ai and Carol Ann Duffy.

This refreshingly clear guide provides students with a compact introduction to a key topic in literary studies.

**Glennis Byron** is a Reader in English Studies at the University of Stirling. She is the author of *Letitia Landon: The Woman behind L.E.L.* (1995) and various articles on Victorian literature and the Gothic.

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SERIES EDITOR: JOHN DRAKAKIS, UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

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## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

*The New Critical Idiom* is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature since the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Extract from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* by T.S. Eliot. Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber.

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# 1

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## INTRODUCTION

A woman hangs upon a cross. Blinded, bleeding and wearing a crown of thorns, her husband hangs beside her. They are the Christian martyrs Saint Maura and Saint Timothy, and this is a poem by Charles Kingsley. Maura begins to speak to her husband: 'Thank God! Those gazers' eyes are gone at last!' (1); she speaks, straining credibility somewhat given her situation, for seven whole pages. He is silent, or rather silenced, since she anticipates and cuts off any possibility of interruption: 'No – you must not speak ... Now you must rest' (14, 16). Through Maura's words we are, nevertheless, made aware that the occasional groan and sigh escapes from her suffering husband as she recalls her part in the events that led to their crucifixion. When Maura remarks towards the end that in spite of her own suffering, 'my voice has never faltered yet' (222), for example, she then immediately pleads, 'Oh! do not groan, or I shall long and pray / That you might die; and you must not die yet' (223–4). He must endure the pain, she urges, and save his strength in order to be able to start preaching to the crowd which will gather the next morning; after all, 'they told us we might live three days ... / Two days for you to preach! Two days to speak / Words which may wake the dead!' (225–7). Poor Timothy, apparently less enthused by this prospect, decides it is time for a nap – 'Hush! is he sleeping?' (227) – bringing Maura's speech to its end. And just as well, the post-Monty Python reader might conclude, before a

chorus pops up and breaks out in a rousing rendition of 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'.

Charles Kingsley's 'Saint Maura. A.D. 304' (1852) is not a particularly well-known poem; it certainly has not attracted the attention of any recent anthologists of Victorian poetry. Nevertheless, given this brief summary, those familiar with that central Victorian poetic form the dramatic monologue would be likely to agree in identifying the poem as an example of that genre. It is highly unlikely, however, that they would demonstrate similar accord when it came to defining what a dramatic monologue might be. As Herbert Tucker observes, dramatic monologue is one of those generic terms 'whose practical usefulness does not seem to have been impaired by the failure of literary historians and taxonomists to achieve consensus in its definition' (Tucker 1984: 121-2).

The term 'dramatic monologue' was not in widespread use until late in the nineteenth century, the poets initially demonstrating their own uncertainty about defining the new form in which they were working by naming their collections with such titles as *Dramatic Studies*, *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Dramatic Idylls*, and the critics adding to the confusion with such terms as 'mental' or 'psychological monologues'. Simultaneously drawing upon and reacting against the three primary poetic kinds, lyric, dramatic and narrative, the genre has resisted from the start all attempts at definitive classification, all attempts to impose uniformity, and what we now know as the dramatic monologue is a category that embraces a wide and diverse variety of forms. The problems of establishing any generic uniformity have recently begun to escalate as the general expansion of the Victorian poetic canon has started to have implications for the specific categorisation of the dramatic monologue. If the critics have failed to achieve any consensus in discussing the traditional canon of monologues, dominated by Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson, what happens when we begin to include such 'minor' writers as Kingsley or such women poets as Augusta Webster? This is a question to which I will be continually referring throughout this study.

Ina Beth Sessions is usually considered to have initiated the drive towards fixing and codifying the dramatic monologue as a genre, and her taxonomic article of 1947 offers a useful starting point for clarify-

ing the terms of the debate. Chapter 2 will consider some of the key moments in the history of attempts to define the dramatic monologue, and explore the ways in which the formal terms set out by Sessions have been interrogated and adapted as theoretical positions changed. Since Robert Browning is seen by Sessions and so many subsequent critics as the foremost practitioner of the dramatic monologue, and his 'My Last Duchess' (1842) as the paradigmatic form, I will trundle the duke back out on the stage once more and give him the attention and pre-eminence upon which he has insisted. In order to suggest how the interrogation of terms has begun to be intensified by the recent expansion of the canon of dramatic monologues, however, the duke will be placed in company he would be unlikely to find congenial, in particular with such speakers as the voluble Maura on her cross, Eulalie, the prostitute of Augusta Webster's 'A Castaway' (1870), and the madened infanticidal mother of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' (1848).

Chapter 3 will then move on to consider the origins of the dramatic monologue. While some critics have considered the form to belong to a poetic tradition that begins with the early Greeks, this is a position that has gradually lost favour. As genre theory has moved critical attention away from formalist concerns and towards questions of historical process, critics have begun to identify the dramatic monologue as the product of a particular set of cultural conditions. It is now generally believed to be a form that originates in the early nineteenth century, and which emerges primarily in reaction to Romantic lyricism and Romantic theories of poetry.

This is the first position that will be explored in Chapter 3, with particular reference to those poems of Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning that are usually considered to be the first examples of the genre. As these seminal works show, the dramatic monologue begins as a poetry of contestation: by placing the speaking self in context, Tennyson and Browning expose the illusory nature of the autonomous and unified Romantic subject. The challenge to Romantic lyricism, however, also needs to be placed in a broader context of social and cultural change. Victorian literature generally moves away from an emphasis on the autonomous individual and begins to represent the self in context, focusing upon the individual in relation to others and upon

the individual's position in society. Furthermore, the new mental sciences were further pushing the limits placed upon personal autonomy as they began to recognise that hidden dimensions of the mind could have significant consequences for the conscious self. The rise of the dramatic monologue was frequently considered by contemporary critics to be closely related to the emergence of these new schools of psychological thought. Turning to issues of gender, this chapter will conclude with an alternative look at possible origins by examining a recent challenge to the position that the form was first developed by Tennyson and Browning. The work of Felicia Hemans will be used as a test case for the claim of those critics who have begun to suggest that it might instead have been women poets writing during the transitional period of the 1820s who invented the monologue.

While this would appear to be a position that remains debatable, it is certainly true that gender issues play a significant role in the development of the dramatic monologue as a form, and Chapter 4 will address three main gender-related issues. The first section of this chapter will consider the way women poets use the monologue to critique conventional assumptions concerning the feminine and the innovative ways in which they manipulate the form. This will be followed by a section on men's monologues in order to demonstrate how, while gender remains a crucial issue, the main focus is not so much on masculinity as on the gendered dynamics of self and other. The cross-gendered monologue, which became a significant sub-genre and a particular interest of male poets, will then be examined, with particular reference to notions of role playing and performance. While there is no doubt that gender is an important issue in men's monologues, it is nevertheless true that it does not play quite such a dominant role as it does in women's monologues. The question that consequently needs to be addressed is whether men and women can be said to conceptualise and exploit the dramatic monologue differently. An emphasis on gender issues in women's monologues, I will argue, does not in fact place them within a different tradition; rather, it demonstrates that they are working primarily in that line of development which focuses on social critique.

Chapter 5 will move on to consider the two main lines of development during the nineteenth century, the historical and the social, and the innovative ways in which the form's central dynamic of self and

context begins to be exploited. In the hands of such poets as Robert Browning and William Morris, that dynamic of self and context is brought together with the Victorians' concern to locate themselves within history, and narrative subsequently becomes an increasingly important element of the form. This historical line of development focuses primarily on questions of epistemology, that is, questions concerning the ways in which knowledge is produced and truth known. The dramatic monologue is exploited not simply to animate the past but also to interrogate history and the historical subject, to demonstrate that any attempt to reconstruct history will always be partial and interested. Questions of representation and interpretation consequently become central to the form, and the exploration of these questions leads to various developments in the genre. Browning, for example, experiments with multiple voices in *The Ring and the Book*, while such poets as Augusta Webster explore the possibilities of duologue, where two distinct but related monologues are juxtaposed.

Women poets like Webster, however, continue to be more particularly interested in the other line of development, in the social and polemical rather than the historical monologue. Their representations and interpretations of the self in context primarily serve the function of social critique. Opening up the canon consequently results in a need to rethink our overall assessments of the dramatic monologue as a form. The recovery of monologues by woman poets, and by 'minor' male poets, has demonstrated that polemic was far more important than traditional criticism has allowed. In light of this recognition, the work of such poets as Algernon Charles Swinburne, with his constant attack on the ideological constructs of his age, becomes as important to the evolution of the form as the work of Robert Browning. As the final chapters will begin to suggest, it is the social and polemical line of development that has survived most vigorously up until the present day.

At the end of the nineteenth century, as the Aesthetes and Decadents turned back to the lyric in their explorations of states of intense self-consciousness, interest in the dramatic monologue began to decline. Modernist poets such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot initially appropriate the form for the purposes of experimenting with poetic voice, but out of these experiments a new kind of poem begins to evolve, and the speaking 'I' fragments into a multiplicity of voices. In the past, critics

have generally considered this to mark the end of the dramatic monologue as a significant poetic form; after this, it is usually agreed, the monologue is put only to occasional use. As Chapter 6 will argue, however, assessments of the decline of the monologue in the Modernist period are based primarily on the work of a small number of canonical and primarily male poets. Once again, opening up the canon to include 'minor' poets suggests a slightly different story. The elusive and impersonal voice cultivated by such poets as Pound and Eliot was of little use to those more overtly political poets, both men and women, for whom identity was still something that needed to be established. Although the dramatic monologue was by no means the central poetic form during the first part of the twentieth century, the work of such poets as Charlotte Mew and Langston Hughes suggests it survived in a far healthier state than is generally assumed, and that it did so primarily as an instrument of social critique.

Furthermore, as the final section of Chapter 6 will suggest, the 1960s saw a gradual revival of interest in the dramatic monologue. Richard Howard, for example, following in the tradition of Browning, began to use the form to engage with and interrogate history and the historical subject. Looking back to the historical past, however, Howard's monologues appear somewhat anachronistic in comparison with Edwin Morgan's work within the genre. In his direct exploration of contemporary events and concerns, his concern with the destabilisation of the self and his engagement with the media, Morgan anticipates many of the ways in which the form will subsequently develop in the late twentieth century.

The last twenty or so years have seen a striking resurgence of interest in the dramatic monologue, and Chapter 7 will suggest that this is at least partly due to the increasingly politicised nature of contemporary poetry and its status as social discourse. As an increasingly accessible poetic form, the dramatic monologue is now considered particularly appropriate for the purposes of social critique. The historical line of development continues to have some influence, but primarily in those revisionist monologues that draw upon characters from literature, history or myth. Such monologues, frequently marked by an overt feminist politics, focus on the ways in which cultural beliefs are fixed and formalised. Unlike earlier monologues, they present an incongruous 'I'

which conflates the historical or fictional speaker's world with the contemporary world of the writing poet, consequently drawing more attention than ever before to questions of representation. Perhaps the most striking feature of contemporary monologues, however, is the way in which they have been influenced by the rise of a global electronic media. Contemporary monologues not only exploit various types of media discourse, they also frequently appropriate specific people, events and issues publicised by the media. The 'I' who speaks in today's monologue is quite likely to be the man or woman splashed across yesterday's headlines. The path that leads from Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover' (1836) to Ai's 'The Good Shepherd: Atlanta, 1981' (1986), Carol Ann Duffy's 'Psychopath' (1987) and Ken Smith's 'Brady at Saddleworth Moor' (1990), however, no longer seems quite as clear and direct as the critics who describe such poems as 'Browningesque' might believe. This study, then, will consider the development of the dramatic monologue from its nineteenth-century origins to the present day. Throughout, the focus will be upon the ways in which recent theoretical and canonical developments have challenged traditional understandings of the genre. In order to understand the nature of these challenges, however, it is first necessary to establish the main terms of the debate, and it is to this question that I will now turn in the following chapter on definitions.



# 2

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## DEFINITIONS

### SETTING THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

Ina Beth Sessions's taxonomic article on 'The Dramatic Monologue' (1947) is usually considered to have initiated the drive towards fixing and codifying the dramatic monologue as a genre, and offers a useful starting point for clarifying the terms of the debate. Responding to the marked differences in early critical opinion as to what constituted a dramatic monologue, Sessions focused on its formal features to offer a working definition of the 'Perfect' dramatic monologue which would include seven definite characteristics: 'speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present' (Sessions 1947: 508). As an example of such a 'Perfect' form, Sessions offered 'My Last Duchess'. So enters the duke, our speaker, and the envoy, our audience or auditor; and, without problematising the terms of Sessions's definition for the moment, consider how neatly the monologue slides into place. The 'occasion', the 'concatenation of circumstances which initiates the action of the piece' and 'provides the background and the personalities involved' (509), is that the duke is negotiating a marriage settlement with the envoy of the count, whose daughter he wants for his next wife. The dramatic action involves the duke showing the envoy a painting of his last wife, and this action unfolds in the present, so the