

The Dramatic Monologue

From Ulysses

by Lord Alfred Tennyson

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (Tennyson, 66-70)



DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

Poem that presents a moment in which a speaker discusses a topic and, in so doing, reveals his feelings and state of mind to a listener or the reader. Only the speaker, talks—hence the term *monologue*, meaning "single (*mono*) discourse (*logue*).\" During his discourse, the speaker intentionally and unintentionally reveals information about himself. The main focus of a dramatic monologue is this personal information, not the speaker's topic. A dramatic monologue is a type of character study. Perhaps the most famous dramatic monologue in English literature is Robert Browning's \"My Last Duchess.\"

The dramatic monologue is a unique genre that blends poetry, drama and narrative, in a present and engaging poetic experience. It is “regarded as the most significant poetic innovation of the [Victorian] age” (Chapman 80)

The dramatic monologue came into popularity during a wave of innovative poetry. This “refashioning of old hybrids [was a method] that Romantic poets had already begun, in the lyrical ballads of Wordsworth and Coleridge, or the lyrical drama of Byron and Shelley” (Chapman 81). This genre borrows many aspects from the lyric (to see more about this topic [click here](#)) and is known as a “lyrical-dramatic narrative hybrid” (Chapman 80), further sharing similarities with other precedent genres like expressing complex emotions (lyric), having a speaker that is not the poet (drama) and having a retrospective structure (narrative) (Chapman 80-81).

FORM

The dramatic monologue is known as a “dynamic, unfixed genre” (Chapman 85). Unlike other genres, the dramatic monologue has no “set structural – metrical, rhyme, stanzaic – requirements” (Chapman 82). But a few other prerequisites are needed to give a poem the title of dramatic monologue-- i.e., the dramatic monologue must:

- Be written in the voice of an individual character (Landow 1).
- Have an audience (or listener) as well as “some interplay between speaker and listener” (Langbaum 76). The listener can be present or not, they can even be imagined, but the speaker talks to them despite this.
- Have elements of introspection/internalization/isolation (Chapman 81).
- Produce a sense of immediacy (Chapman 81).

Broadly speaking, a dramatic monologue is a poem in which the speaker, in some significant moment, reveals his or her essential character. Sometimes an identifiable listener is addressed, but responses are not revealed. The monologue may be in the form of a letter. The speaker may be static or dynamic, either clinging to an attitude or experiencing a revelation. The speaker may be naïve, making the self-revelation unintentional, and certainly the speaker may be unreliable: imperceptive, ignorant, self-deceived.

SPEAKER

All poems have a voice, which can be called a speaker.

- Who “tells” the poem? Are there things you can say about the speaker’s personality, point of view, tone, society, age, or gender?
- Does the speaker assume a persona at any point in the poem, and speak “as” a particular person
- Does the speaker seem attached or detached from what is said?
- What effect do the speaker’s characteristics have on the poem?

The dramatic monologue speaker is vital to the poem and is a complicated aspect. Though the speaker may take on other character's voices to relay their story and propel the plot, the speaker is always in control of the words, allowing for a possible unreliable narrator/speaker, (as is found in soliloquies of the drama genre).



HISTORY

Though many of the conventions of the dramatic monologue form are observable as early as 1828 in Felicia Hemans' poetic collection *Records of Women*, the title "dramatic monologue" was not applied until 1857 when it was coined by a poet named George Thornbury; however, this term did not gain recognition until the end of the century, (Chapman 80). Instead, during the Victorian era these poems were called "'dramatic lyrics', 'dramatic romances', 'lyrical monologues' or 'monodramas'" (Chapman 80), particularly observable in the title of Robert Browning's collection *Dramatic Lyrics*, which was released in 1842.

The dramatic monologue is popularly believed to have “developed its recognizable features during the early Victorian period of the 1830s” (Chapman 81), throughout the writings of nineteenth century poets such as Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The emergence of the poetic conventions associated with this genre are historically regarded by scholars to emerge in Alfred Tennyson’s poem, “St Simeon Stylites”(which written in 1833, but not published until 1842), and then with Robert Browning’s poems, “Johannes Agricola in Meditation” and “Porphyria’s Lover,”(both published in 1836) (Byron 80-81).

ESSAY PREPARATION

- 1. THE INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER:** Who is the speaker in the monologue? Is the speaker reliable or unreliable? Does the speaker have a persona? (*a public personality)
- 2. THE LISTENER:** Is there an explicit listener or is the listener implied? Explain.
- 3. SENSE OF IMMEDIANCY:** The monologue captures a moment in time. What has motivated the speaker to communicate at this point? Why does the speaker find it necessary to voice his or her feelings at this time?

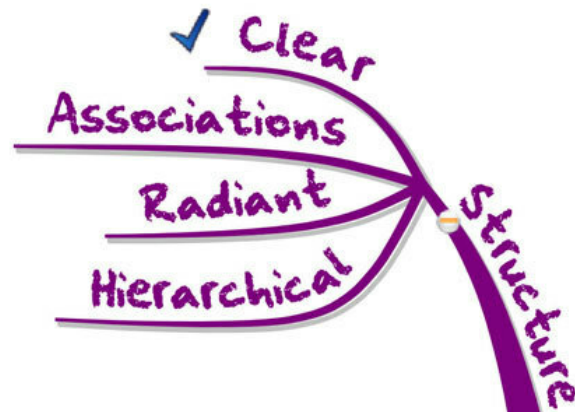
4. SINGLE NARRATIVE SCENE: Describe the scene. What are the circumstances (time, setting) in which it is spoken?

5. INTROSPECTION: This poem is a character study. How does the speaker appear to the listener? As the poem unfolds, what does the speaker betray or reveal about his/her own character? (Thesis Statement)

6. How does the poet use devices to expose the character's personality? State three devices.

(Directional Statement) You may wish to consider the author's use of such literary techniques as tone, diction, syntax, figurative language, imagery.

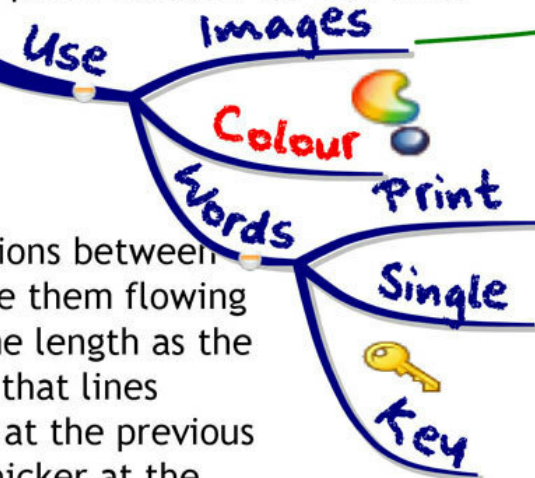
5. The structure that should develop will be a 'radiant hierarchy', with ideas radiating out from your central theme and main branches.



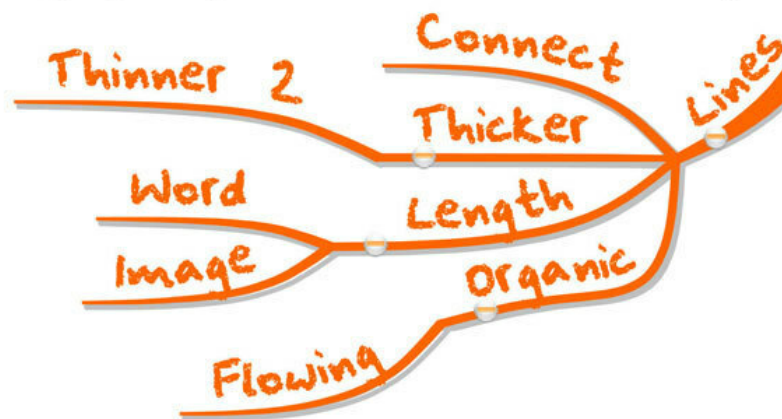
1. Start at the centre of a blank, landscape page, ideally with a colourful image to represent your subject.



2. Use words and pictures throughout your map. Wherever possible use single KEY words, printed along a line. Each word or picture sits on its own line.



3. The lines make the associations between ideas as clear as possible. Make them flowing and organic, each line the same length as the word or image. Always ensure that lines connect to the end of the line at the previous level. Typically lines will be thicker at the centre and thinner further out.



4. Experiment with different ways of linking and emphasising different aspects. Use highlighters, codes and arrows as necessary.



THESIS AND DIRECTION IN ONE SENTENCE

Although the persona of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" is that of a polite, self-effacing man, wronged by his unappreciative wife, his arrogance and chauvinism is ultimately perceived through the poet's use of smartly-placed symbols, superior tone, and tight structure.

THESIS AND DIRECTION IN TWO SENTENCES

While the speaker in the poem "To A Sad Daughter" describes his daughter as sad, he inadvertently reveals his own sadness. His melancholy disposition is revealed through Ondaatje's expert use of similes, visual imagery, and literary allusions.

THESIS AND DIRECTION IN TWO SENTENCES

Through the use of an implicit listener, the speaker reveals himself as a working-class man, forced by unforeseen circumstances, to acts of desperation. This collapse of his morality is revealed through the poet's use of topical symbols, strong comparisons, and clever repetition.

There are six main characteristics of effective language

Effective language is (1) concrete and specific, not vague and abstract; (2) concise, not verbose; (3) familiar, not obscure; (4) precise and clear, not inaccurate or ambiguous; (5) constructive, not destructive; and (6) appropriately formal.

Six Principles of Word Choice: (1) Choose understandable words. (2) Use specific, precise words. (3) Choose strong words. (4) Emphasize positive words. (5) Avoid overused words. (6) Avoid obsolete words.

Beware of overwriting (if a word sounds impressive, be sure it is being used correctly)