

Biography: Dramatic Monologue

A **dramatic monologue** is a speech, sometimes to a silent listener, in which a character indicates a setting and dramatic conflict. In the monologue, this character reveals his or her inmost feelings, sometimes without knowing it. See *handout*.

Directions: Your task is to write a dramatic monologue to be spoken by your approved person. Your goal is to create a poem that successfully reveals your character and a situation presented via a dramatic monologue.

You will both write and perform the dramatic monologue.

Your dramatic monologue should follow all the conventions of dramatic monologues as a literary form. Be sure to read and listen to several examples provided in class so that you truly understand the psychological nature of the form. Your monologue should be from 50-65 lines in length and must have a specific situation and setting in which you reveal your person. Typed, of course.

Checklist:

- ✓ My dramatic monologue presents a single speaker who addresses a silent listener.
- ✓ My poem makes clear who the speaker and listener are, and makes clear the relationship between the speaker and listener.
- ✓ My poem is between 50-65 lines in length.
- ✓ My poem concerns an important event in the speaker's life.
- ✓ The central conflict in the poem is either internal, external, or both.
- ✓ The poem contains details and specifics that clearly reveal the character of the speaker.
- ✓ The poem contains details that suggest in what situation the monologue is spoken; this situation may be a moment of action, tension, or conflict
- ✓ The poem reveals something important about the speaker (his or her genuine feelings, goals, priorities, etc.)

Hints for the presentation:

- ✓ I do not have to memorize my dramatic monologue.
- ✓ I have practiced my monologue a great number of times.
- ✓ I raise or lower my voice as needed to emphasize words and phrases.
- ✓ I change the tone of my voice.
- ✓ I pause, slow down, or speed up my rate of recitation as needed for effect.
- ✓ I use hand gestures and facial expressions.

Be prepared to hand in at the beginning of class:

1. Completed Dramatic Monologue chart
2. Typed poem (have separate copy for your performance)
3. Evidence of process writing

Dramatic Monologue Chart

Person	
Dramatic Monologue Title	
Setting	
Speaker	
Listener	
Conflict	
Revelations	

The Dramatic Monologue

Narrowly defined, a **dramatic poem** is a play in verse. But today the **dramatic monologue** is usually included in this category because it is sometimes much like a condensed play. Perfected by Robert Browning, the **dramatic monologue**, as a complete form, is represented by such poems as “My Last Duchess,” “The Bishop Orders His Tomb,” and “Andrea del Sarto.” According to M. H. Abrams, the dramatic monologue has the following characteristics:

1. A single person, who is *not* the poet himself, utters the entire poem in a specific situation at a critical moment: the Duke is negotiating with an emissary for a second wife; the Bishop lies dying; Andrea once more attempts wistfully to believe his wife’s lies.
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 monologue is so organized that its focus is on the temperament and character that the dramatic speaker unintentionally reveals in the course of what he says.

The monologue, then, is like a **compressed play** in that it requires a **dramatic situation** and **persona** (an invented speaker) who is usually not the poet. It differs from a **play** in that only one character speaks and from a **soliloquy** in that the speaker in the monologue usually addresses a specific audience.

Distinguishing between the Dramatic Monologue and Other Dramatic Poems

Even Browning, in monologues such as “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” and “Caliban upon Setebos,” omits the second attribute, the presence of a silent auditor, but attributes one and three are essential distinctions between the **dramatic monologue** and the **dramatic lyric**.

Thus, John Donne’s “The Canonization” and “The Flea,” although very close to the monologue, lack one essential feature: the focus of interest is on the speaker’s elaborately ingenious argument, rather than on the character he inadvertently reveals in the course of arguing.

And although Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” is spoken by one person to a silent auditor (his sister) in a specific situation at a significant moment in his life, it is not properly a dramatic monologue, both because we are invited to identify the speaker with the poet himself, and because the organizing principle is not the revelation of the speaker’s distinctive temperament but the evolution of his observation, thought, memory, and feelings.

Critical Essay: The Dramatic Monologue

Select one of the following thesis statements to support, based upon your reading and analysis of several dramatic monologues.

1. The effectiveness of the dramatic monologue is dependent upon its “reality,” its concentration on a single, vivid, human character, and its complexity.
2. In the dramatic monologue the reader is able to see the character as he sees himself, as we see him, and by implication, as others, usually the listeners, see him.
3. In the dramatic monologue we do not see the character undergoing change for he little knows himself. The character reveals what he reveals largely to the reader who alone knows him fully.
4. The dramatic monologues which imply a listener are psychologically more complex than the merely interior monologues.
5. The dramatic monologue, at once objective and subjective, public and private in its methods, permits the poet to make ethical pronouncements through someone else’s voice.

Dramatic Monologues Recommended for Further Study

Robert Browning:

“My Last Duchess”
“Andrea del Sarto”
“The Laboratory”
“Porphyria’s Lover”
“Fra Filippo Lippi”
“Rabbi Ben Ezra”
“The Bishop Orders His Tomb”
“Soliloquy on the Spanish Cloister”

Alfred, Lord Tennyson:

“Ulysses”
“St. Simeon Stylites”
“Tithonus”

Matthew Arnold

“Dover Beach”

Algernon Swinburne:

“Itylus”
“Hymn to Proserpine”
“Faustine”
“Itylus”

T. S. Eliot:

“Journey of the Magi”
“Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”
“Gerontion”
“Portrait of a Lady”

Modern Monologues from The Poetry Archive

A Statistician to His Love by Peter Goldsworthy
Art Class by Elizabeth Bartlett
Crusoe in England by Elizabeth Bishop
Enemies by Elizabeth Bartlett
From his Childhood by Alan Brownjohn
Parliament Hill Fields by Sylvia Plath
Monologue in the Valley of the Kings by Anthony Thwaite
Poem Before Birth by Louis MacNeice
Siren Song by Margaret Atwood
next to of course god america by e e cummings