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#### Section: Poet to Poet

##### Writing a dramatic monologue

##### How to create a powerful poem in a voice that is not your own

WHEN YOU WERE a child, didn't you sometimes envy the amazing skills of the ventriloquist? Wasn't there something irresistible, something empowering, about putting your own words into another person's mouth, making them say all kinds of things they might never have said themselves? Imagine causing someone--your little brother, maybe, or Cleopatra, or the grumpy waitress at your local cafeteria--to sound nicer or funnier or dumber than he or she really is. That, Gentle Reader, is power--and as a poet, you've got it at the tips of your fingers.

Simply by writing as "I" in a voice that is not your own, you can compose what's called a dramatic monologue--a classification defined in John Drury's *The Poetry Dictionary* simply as "a poem spoken by a character, rather than by the poet." Which character? Any character you like--historical, fictional, even someone who's alive and well.

He or she might be a hero of yours, or a rival--or perhaps a deceased loved one to whom you've related strongly all your life. Virtually everyone you've ever known, or wanted to know, is at your disposal. In fact, the only element that might limit your choice of speaker is your own common sense: You probably don't want to put words into the mouth of someone who might come back later and sue you. Or write a novel about you.

How is it done? How does a poet make certain that a dramatic monologue is clearly taken as just that--the voice of another--and that it's meant to be enjoyed by the reader on those terms? Here are a few guidelines that should help you along the way:

##### 1 Write the poem in a voice that clearly differs from your own.

Your speaker might be a historical figure, someone fascinating taken from your own life, a character in a book or from mythology, a pop-culture icon--even someone you've invented out of thin air. For the most effective results, be sure your choice is:

- Someone who is either much older or much younger than you.
- Someone of the opposite sex.

- Someone who lives in a time that is not our own.
- Any combination of the above.

For instance, if you are consumed by the idea of speaking in the voice of, say, Shakespeare's Ophelia, but your own age and temperament are similar to Ophelia's, try very hard to resist. The danger is that you'll wind up sounding exactly like yourself, which is not what you're after this time. Try taking the point of view of Ophelia's mother instead!

Stellar examples abound. The great 19th-century Romantic poet Robert Browning probably still reigns as the most skilled poetic ventriloquist of all. No dreamy meditator he; on the contrary, Browning was forever submerging himself in another voice, another persona, often to devastating effect. In "My Last Duchess"--a high school lit-class staple--his thoroughly nasty speaker (based on the very real 16th-century Duke of Ferrara, Alphonso II) becomes the aristocrat we love to hate as he sneeringly tells a visitor about his lovely--and recently deceased--young wife:

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt, Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together ...

Another approach was taken by Anne Sexton, in her deeply moving "The Moss of His Skiff" (from her collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*). She wrote it in the voice of a young girl of ancient Arabia, buried alive with her dead father--a poem that makes us shudder and want to offer comfort:

I held my breath and daddy was there, his thumbs, his fat skull, his teeth, his hair growing like a field or a shawl. I lay by the moss of his skin until it grew strange...

Please note that both of these poems use the first person--"I" And yet there's not a chance we'll confuse the poet Robert Browning with the obnoxious Duke of Ferrara, and we'd never in a million years mistake the poet Anne Sexton for an ancient Arabian teenager.

**2 Make sure that you step into the life of this other person**, and that you express yourself as if you actually were that person. The poet Sue De Kelper accomplishes this effect with convincing realism in this excerpt from her monologue "She Says She Is Afraid":

He beat me real bad this time. I'm pretty black and blue. They told me I can't come back to work till I heal some, which I get, cuz, I mean, who'd wanna see a face like this ...

Imagine how much the poem would lose had it been written in a more generic voice, even in the first person:

I'd been beaten black and blue. They told me not to come back to work until I start healing, because of my face ...

Absolutely no contest.

**3 Make sure the poem reveals character** --the attitudes, virtues, flaws and blind spots of the speaker, simply through what the speaker has to say, and how it's said. You'll want to make absolutely certain that the speaker has some character, of course--and that he or she is not presented to the reader simply as the perfect grandmother, perfect teacher, perfect lover, perfect kid. It's one thing to write something like this in the voice of the neighborhood tree surgeon:

Trimming trees is dangerous work; I could easily have an accident. At lunchtime it's best if I stay up in the tree to eat my sandwich.

Who cares about this boring, cautious guy? But it's another thing entirely to present him as Mitchell Metz does in the first few lines of his poem "Courtesy of Bert's Tree Service":

Twenty pounds of snarling Husqvarna can clumsy a man awful quick.

That last little kickback near took my own rope. Now I sit stupid in my saddle, eat a sandwich at the first crotch, two rods up this tulip.

Thanks to careful word choice, tone and the use of the senses (sight, sound, touch, even taste), we already know a great deal about this man: the pride he takes in his work, his basic good sense, his healthy, almost sardonic awareness of himself. No small accomplishment in six short lines.

**4 Think twice before using meter and end-rhyme.** I am a great fan of formal poetry and write metrically most of the time myself. But there are occasions when formal devices are best avoided, because they might work against the

authenticity of your character's voice and what he or she has to say, as in the following lines:

I was hungry for what lay outside of Paradise; Rather than perfection, an apple was the prize.

I would wager a big fat copy of the Norton Anthology that no woman, including Eve, would have expressed her feelings of profound rebellion this way. In contrast, here is the clenched-teeth version that the poet Diane Lockward wrote, concluding her fine free-verse dramatic monologue titled "Eve Argues Against Perfection" (from Lockward's collection titled Eve's Red Dress):

I ate that apple because I was hungry. I wanted what lay outside of Paradise, a world without the burden of perfection.

Now you call all sinful women my sisters.

I say, let them claim their own damn sins.

The apple may not be perfect, but it's mine.

To sum up: I encourage you to try writing a dramatic monologue for one simple reason: There's no other device in poetry quite so capable of transporting the reader to a place, a time and/or a psychological landscape that they have never visited before. It's a near-perfect vehicle for expressing your respect for your speaker, your admiration, your anger or your forgiveness.

However you choose to use the technique of speaking for someone else, you'll discover that it is ventriloquism of the highest order.

## RESOURCES

FOR FURTHER inspiration, and to see what other poets have done with dramatic monologue, I recommend the following poems:

- "In a Prominent Bar in Secaucus One Day" by X.J. Kennedy
- "Maybe Dat's Your Pwoblem Too" by Jim Hall
- "The River-Merchant's Wife: a Letter" by Ezra Pound
- "Siren Song" by Margaret Atwood
- "Tu Negrito" by Sara Cortez

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By Marilyn Taylor

Marilyn Taylor is a contributing editor to The Writer. She was the 2004 and 2005 poet laureate of Milwaukee and is the author of five poetry collections. She leads poetry workshops and coaches individual poets.

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