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The Dramatic Monologue: Form, Development and Manifestations - From Wordsworth to Browning

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Abstract

The dramatic monologue is a poetic form that started developing in the Romantic period and met its heyday only in the Victorian age. Like many other poetic genres, the dramatic monologue was invented within modernity itself, although it is "less startling an innovation than it appears, for it has definite antecedents in the drama" (Hobsbaum 227). In form, it is akin to the soliloquy in drama and the interior monologue in the novel. It is sometimes confused with verse drama or dramatic poetry, but slightly differs from these forms too. Firstly, it is not a narrative but a poetic form. Secondly, it is a monologue – where a 'single speaker' delivers a long talk. It involves inaudible audiences with whom the speaker seems to communicate, although their existence and activities are known to us only through the monologue of the speaker. The setting is a very important component of the dramatic monologue, and in the finest instances it is drawn from the medieval times. Both the interior monologue and the dramatic monologue involve psychological study of the speaker. "A speech without context, a narrative implied rather than retailed, a character without the framework of plot – all these represent, at first sight, an elliptic approach strangely modern when compared with the narrative of Wordsworth or the dramatic handling of situations we find in Shakespeare" (Hobsbaum 227). According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, "such poems reveal not the poet's own thoughts but the mind of the impersonated character, whose personality is revealed unwittingly; this distinguishes a dramatic monologue from a Lyric, while the implied presence of an auditor distinguishes it from Soliloquy" (Baldick 72).

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This paper attempts to understand the nature of the form, trace its development over a century (from Romantics to Victorians), and look at how it perfects in the hands of its acknowledged master, Robert Browning.

Keywords: Dramatic monologue, soliloquy, stream-of-consciousness, Victorian poetry

Introduction

Although the Romantic poems like "Tintern Abbey" by William Wordsworth seem to employ some features of the dramatic monologue, it is only in the Victorian age that we find perfect examples of the form. The three poets notable for developing the poetic form are Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold. It is interesting to note that "the term "dramatic monologue" was not in use during the period when the great Victorian dramatic monologues were being written. It did not come to be generally employed until the very end of the nineteenth century, and it was not firmly established until the beginning of the twentieth century" (Culler 366). The term got its usage only after a series of publications that employed different terms for the same form in its juvenile phases, although the term 'monologue' was unequivocally applied. "Robert Buchanan in the Athenaeum actually used the term "dramatic monologue." (Culler 366). After that, Stopord Brooke also used it in a chapter describing Tennyson's poems like "Locksley Hall", "Despair", "The First Quarrel" and "The Wreck" as examples of the form. "Three years later, the term was listed in the revised edition of Austin Dobson's *Handbook of English Literature* (1897) and thenceforth was the firm possession of academic critics" (Culler 366).

Salient features – soliloquy v/s dramatic monologue

It is clear that the three essential conditions for a poem to be a dramatic monologue are – firstly, the speaker must be someone other than the poet himself; secondly, he must reveal some intriguing aspect of his character through his talk (or speech); and lastly, it should feel 'dramatic'. However, all dramatic monologues do not conform to these ideal rubrics. They vary from one another. The monologues of Tennyson are different from those of Browning and Arnold. Browning's monologues are considered to be impeccable as compared to those by the other two poets. "A figure in dramatic monologue is weak, vail, brutal or all three. Characteristically – and, in this unlike most drama – the reader is prevented from sympathizing with the protagonist... poem takes place at a single moment of time, a clearly defined present" (Hobsbaum 228). In drama, the flaw in the protagonist makes him more like a common man and thus anything bad happening to him arouses the emotions of fear and pity in the audience. On the other hand, the protagonist-speaker of the dramatic monologue is so flawed and so different from most 'common' men that the audience is incapable of feeling pity for him. This feature can be studied deeply in Browning's poetic characters. The identification of the characters with the readers is a

distinguishing typicality of a tragedy (drama), while it is absent in the truest dramatic monologues. Also, we find that in dramatic monologues, the experience of the speaker seems narrower and less complex than that in the drama. Thus, the form appears less dramatic than its counterpart in the drama. Although the form seems to imitate the monologues inserted within a drama (for example, Shakespeare's plays), it lacks the "context" that is very much explicit in the drama, completely or partially. The context of the soliloquy, the monologue of a drama, is quite pronounced. Nonetheless, the monologue in both poetry and drama, helps in unveiling the psyche of the character. Let us look at *Macbeth*'s famous "dagger soliloquy" (a monologue) for proper understanding:

> Is this a dagger, which I see before me,
> The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee: –
> I have thee not, and yet I see thee still
> Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
> To feeling, as to sight? or art thou but
> A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
> Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
> I see thee yet, in form as palpable
> As this which now I draw.
> Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;
> And such an instrument I was to use... (2.1, lines 33-43).

Although the above monologue reveals the 'situational' psyche of the speaker who is Macbeth – his wild and unfaltering ambitions of seizing the crown from Duncan by accomplishing his assassination, the context is formed by the preceding events in the drama. The situational discourse is part of the larger and more complicated dramatic discourse. The dagger which he imagines here is presupposed by the readers because the context is lucid – Macbeth has planned to assassinate the king with the help of the dagger. All such preconditions act as tools for the proper understanding of the soliloquy. On the contrary, let us see one of T. S. Eliot's modern dramatic monologues that is, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherized upon a table;
> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels... (1-6).

In the culled out opening lines of the poem, one finds that a particular part of the day is chosen to develop the setting (or situation) and mood of the poem. It is 'evening'

(in the present moment) and the speaker of the poem is asking his 'mute' companion to join him for a stroll. Such settings fail to provide both the context of the situation and the answers to questions like – why does he want to wander at that particular time of the day, with whom and to where? Thus, devoid of any prior background, the reader has to fix his imagination to the 'present moment' alone set by the poem.

The three advocates – Tennyson, Browning, Arnold

Having analyzed the essential differences between the 'monologues within drama' and the 'dramatic monologues', this section of the paper attempts to discuss the three advocates of the technique namely, Tennyson, Browning and Arnold. Tennyson was probably the most popular poet among them. However, Browning mastered the form. Tennyson's poem "Ulysses" and "Tithonus" are counted as dramatic monologues. Both the poems are based on mythological themes and allow some prior knowledge about the stories used. "Tithonus" is the monologue of the mythological character, Tithonus, who was loved by the goddess Eos in his youth. He asked her for an eternity of a lifetime and "like wealthy men, who care not how they give" (Tennyson 17), she gifted him eternity. But now, that he is no more young yet undying, he mourns the gift. He feels like a living corpse. He is weakened by old age and is tired of living aimlessly day after day. The feeling is recorded in the following lines:

> The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
> The vapors weep their burthen to the ground,
> Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
> And after many a summer dies the swan.
> Me only cruel immortality
> Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms... ("Tithonus" 1-6).

The "thine" used here refers to the goddess who is the silent listener in this poem. Through the monologue, Tithonus expresses his misery and repents on his foolish wish. Since gods too cannot take their gifts back, Tithonus is helplessly left to suffer. He says, "Alas! for this gray shadow, once a man – / So glorious in his beauty and thy choice..." (11-12). He no longer possesses the old glory and young beauty that he once possessed in his youth. While Eos still is young and immortal, he himself is old and immortal – "Immortal age beside immortal youth" (Tennyson 22). The dramatic setting seems to be insufficiently developed, although the image of the dawn is evoked in the poem. Also, the dramatic monologue technique which merges with the elegiac tone of the poem fails to expose any strange psychological strains. It is more like an elegy-study than a psycho-analysis. However, the emotions like sorrow and repentance are unambiguously aroused in the poem.

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beech" is yet another example of the form. It opens similar to the above-discussed Tennyson's poem, with the description of nature around:

> The sea is calm to-night.
> The tide is full, the moon lies fair
> Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
> Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand, ("Dover Beach" 1-4).

In this poem too, there is the presence of a mute listener whom the speaker talks to. Probably, the speaker's beloved is accompanying him in the romantic setting of the poem. It is revealed in these lines: "Listen! you hear the grating roar/Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling…" (9-10). In the last stanza also, a similar suggestion regarding the presence of the beloved (or companion) is made – "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!" (29-30).

The tone of this monologue is melancholic and the dramatic situation is even less developed than that in Tennyson's poem. In fact, it seems more close to Wordsworth's poetic meditations in his poems like "Tintern Abbey". Through this monologue, Arnold's inner conflicts are revealed. He, on one hand, looks back in pride to the glorious past which is now lost, and on the other hand, he lingers to the growing terror of violence in the modern world. The last aspect is revealed when he writes in the last line of the poem, "Where ignorant armies clash by night." ("Dover Beach" 37) Thus, although the poem does lack some qualities of the dramatic monologue, it successfully reveals the true-self of the speaker. It is important to note that the speaker and the poet seem to be the same person in the poem. The poetic persona is neither different from the poet, nor does it reveal any queer psychological bent. Thus, the poem might be regarded as only a feebly developed dramatic monologue. However, let us also look at the opening lines of Wordsworth's poem and compare it with Arnold's poem –

> Five years have past; five summers, with the length
> Of five long winters! and again I hear
> These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
> With a soft inland murmur... ("Tintern Abbey" 1-4).

The tone of the poem is similar to that of Arnold's poem. Similarly, the poet and the speaker are the same. Here too, the so called dramatic effect is almost absent. Dorothy, the poet's sister who accompanied him to the spot, seems to be the silent listener in the poem with whom the poet-speaker is conversing. Thus, it holds many similarities with Arnold's discussed monologue, and is equally underdeveloped in its dramatic effects.

Robert Browning, the acknowledged master of the dramatic monologue, gives us the best examples of this poetic technique. His poems are seen as the 'touchstones'

for assessing the quality of any dramatic monologue. Among the famous ones are "Porphyria's Lover", "My Last Duchess" and "The Last Ride Together". All these poems present before us a lover who is psychologically disturbed or eccentric. He, who is the speaker of the monologue, himself reveals his complex psychology and confesses his sins. His speech gives the audience a rough idea of his true character.

The poem "My Last Duchess" begins with the description of the painting of the speaker's (the duke's) deceased duchess. The opening lines arouse suspense in the audience. The duke's tone and manner of talking contribute to the same, as he describes the details of the painting to the silent count: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive; I call / That piece a wonder, now..." (1-3).

The monologue is set in a magnificent house embellished with antique adornments which the duke boasts of. From his conversation, one derives that he is a pompous, selfish and greedy man. He got his wife killed out of no specific reason. The duchess's kindness and politeness to each and all, irrespective of class or rank infuriated the duke. His irritation with her natural disposition is reflected through his words: "Sir, 'twas not / Her husband's presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess' cheek..." (13-16).

He could not endure her cheerful behaviour with everyone alike, which is expressed in his words:

> A heart . . how shall I say? . . too soon made glad,
> Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
> She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
> Sir, 'twas all one! ("My Last Duchess" 22-25).

His overwhelming pride is also revealed through his talk. He takes pride in the rank he holds and the ancestry he inherits. He is also proud of his possession of a few valuable 'rarities' like the "Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse" ("My Last Duchess" 54-55). The 'nine hundred years' old heritage is all he identifies himself with. Thus, the monologue allows an insight into an essential aspect of his character. He is utterly egoistic and believes that a man of his rank must not stoop to a woman, let alone his wife. The following lines explain his superciliousness:

> …… She thanked men,—good; but thanked
> Somehow — I know not how — as if she ranked
> My gift of a nine hundred years old name
> With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
> This sort of trifling? ("My Last Duchess" 30-35).

In the next few lines, he addresses the negotiator who has offered a match for him. His greedy nature is exposed here as he talks about the dowry with utmost modesty –

We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your Master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed; ("My Last Duchess" 47-51).

The setting of the poem is dramatic, and the suspense that runs all along the speech also gives it a dramatic vibe. The presence of more than one character other than the speaker is also suggested in the last stanza of the poem. Also, one has considerate understanding of the duke's heart and mind. His monologue aptly exposes his crime which is no less than any sin. The awe-inspiring description of the paintings and other objects of embellishment render the poem a theatrical touch. Hence, the poem is one of the perfect examples of the dramatic monologue.

Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" is yet better example because its dramatic tone and setting are powerfully established in the opening quatrain itself. The description of the abnormally stormy weather creates an ominous atmosphere in the minds of the readers:

The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake ("Porphyria's Lover" 1-4).

The dramatic monologue is one of the representatives of Browning's poems that are garnished with sensual love and sex, illicit relations, intrigues and violence. The fusion of love, lust and violence is a characteristic feature of Browning's poems. In the last poem and also in the present one, the narrator-lover first falls in love with a woman and then out of jealousy and intolerance kills her. Thus, love and violence in Browning go hand in hand just like two sides of a coin.

Conclusion

This paper endeavoured to enumerate the essential characteristics of the poetic technique of the dramatic monologue and analyzed its manifold manifestations within the span of a century. The form chiefly developed between the Romantic and the Victorian ages in the hands of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning and Arnold. Selected poems of these poets have also been superficially scrutinized. The paper also looked at the aspects on which the soliloquy in drama differs from the dramatic monologue in poetry. The invention and development of the poetic genre within modernity have been outlined, citing some examples. In the Modern poetic tradition too, the form was profusely practised by poets like T. S. Eliot, and is in vogue internationally even in the contemporary times. However, Robert Browning remains the true father and master of the poetic form.

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