

'A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.'
(Samuel Beckett, Company)

Explore the creation of character in the dramatic monologue.

Robert Browning: 'The Laboratory'; 'My Last Duchess.'

Thomas Hardy: 'The Man He Killed'.

Carol Ann Duffy: 'Education for Leisure'.

Simon Armitage: 'Hitcher'.

Janet S. Lewison

In his recent book **Going Sane**, the writer and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips revisits Hamlet's famous 'madness' and argues:

'Hamlet's madness...is more poetic, more suggestive, more evocative, more flaunting of its verbal gifts and talents than mere sanity...Sanity tempers where madness excels. Both are 'pregnant', promising the new life that is new words, but they deliver quite differently. It is a difference of quality but not of kind. '

Phillips' ideas about **Hamlet** are particularly useful when we consider the relationship between the dramatic monologue and 'madness'. For if we borrow from Phillips' ideas about madness above, then we could say that it is the *verbal giftedness* of the speaker in the dramatic monologue that draws and holds the attention of the listeners both within and without the monologue. Articulacy is always an ambivalent virtue in the dramatic monologue, and the protagonists' words should never be trusted. The narrators' injection of 'new life' and 'new words' into a monologue serve to fascinate and ensnare their (captive) audience. This 'captivation' of the reader through the articulacy of the speaker serves to mimic at least in part, the original 'crime scene' from which the poem originates. This repetition makes the relationship between the speaker and the reader morally ambivalent. It raises interesting questions about the identity of the final victim of a monologue.

Although it is often argued that the first person method of narration can be a form of relentless self-persecution and guilt, the speakers in the dramatic monologues seem curiously devoid of remorse. Their 'confessions' are far more celebrations of their murderous impulses and desires than ever being signs of their burgeoning shame. It is this absence of moral responsibility that perversely attracts the curiosity of the audience. Criminality and 'otherness' call into question the value and appeal of lawfulness and acceptable boundaries of human behaviour. The dramatic monologue with its pronounced interrogation of the 'limit' raises important concerns about the ways in which we live our lives.

It is also possible to argue that the dramatic monologue allows the reader access to some 'dialogue of the mind' where the utterances of the speakers are as much an object of interest as the speakers themselves, and certainly of more importance poetically than the implied victims of each poem. It is this 'double-ness' between the speaker -as -subject and speaker-as-object of the dramatic monologue that excites and seduces the reader's attention. For as the reader discovers in the dramatic monologue, the stability and sanity of the narrator are progressively called into question, as we listen silently to their veiled yet confessional utterances. Narrators are 'outlawed' from their worlds, through the revelations that their words engender, yet it is precisely this 'outlaw' quality that fascinates. We realise that there is a very real tension between the speaker- as -subject of the poem and the speaker- as-object of the poem and that is this tension or conflict that is so arresting.

This arresting quality is further complicated by the question of audience or listener in the dramatic monologue. The dramatic monologue always 'positions' or 'frames' an individual or group of listeners within the poem, so that the poem appears to be a 'dialogue' between a narrator and listener(s). However this implied audience is always disempowered in some way and remains silent throughout the duration of the poem. The audience may reflect, but they may not speak in the dramatic monologue. At key points of the dramatic monologue the audience's view of 'reality' separates significantly from that of narrator and these moments reveal the alternative mental states enjoyed by the various protagonists.

Furthermore, the reader as another audience is also of necessity silent too. The listener(s) are therefore literally 'arrested' by the articulacy and ambivalence of the narrator in the monologue. The narrator 'performs' or 'enacts' the monologue before their ostensible audience but we realise that their only genuine audience is with themselves. *They*

spectate upon the spectacle of their own verbal genius. To put it another way, the dramatic monologue feigns a dialogue that never arrives.

I will begin this discussion of characterisation in the dramatic monologue with an examination of Browning's poem 'The Laboratory.' Beckett's provocative opening to his novel **Company** as quoted above is highly resonant when we enter into the world of 'this devil's-smithy', where all sensory perception seems appropriated for macabre ends:

**'Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,
May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely,
... Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste...'**

Browning's poem opens in an **illicit space**. 'A voice' is truly coming to us 'in the dark,' (Beckett) forcing us to imagine what such a speaker might be contemplating in so bewildering a place. The reader, like the masked laboratory assistant, is made immediately complicit with this secret, intoxicating world with its strange vocabulary that seems to prosper in murder's possibilities. We are like the speaker's assistant, caught up in a deadly dyad; we repeat the I/Thy relationship that the seductive speaker enjoys with her hired accomplice. We are watching a watcher watching murder being made possible through the lingering details of the 'new science.'

This **voyeuristic** aspect to the dramatic monologue is essential to its final power and ambivalence. For as the language of the poem conjures up a grotesque concoction of sensory 'otherness' with the emphasis on the 'mask' and the 'smokes' as well as the disturbingly sexual 'grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste,' we feel excited, and in this excitement we are implicated in the very act of murder. The female speaker is all the more 'carried away' by the machinery of the laboratory as it is a world that can provide an ordinarily 'disempowered' society woman with the means to change her destiny and those of others.

The poem transports the 'apprentice' murderer into a world where she evidently enjoys the thrills of power. For what could be more powerful and indeed more arousing than the thoughts of revenge on those that have hurt and silenced you in the past? As the 'apprentice' speaks and questions her way through her deadly lesson in the art of poisoning, we hear her voice becoming more and more 'present' in the poem. Her

presence increases of course as she contemplates the impending absences of others. She literally presences and reinvents herself through speech.

**'What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures,
To carry pure death in an earring, a casket,
A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!'**

The breathlessness of the poem's delivery hints at sexual arousal. It suggests autoerotism and even sexual climax by the time she arrives at her exclamation mark after the 'filigree basket!'. This re-appropriation of the accoutrements of a society lady, as tools of murder is emphasised through the **extensive listing** of items that can now carry death's message.

The narrator enjoys the very minutiae of the possible murder weapons. The banal fashion items that would ordinarily enshrine and suffocate a lady of society are now enjoyed for their fresh promise and uncanny 'newness'. The 'pregnant' (see Phillips) use of the comma after each item, exposes the mounting recognition of the speaker for her about-to-be purchased power to murder. The speaker **lingers** after the mention of each item in order to fully enjoy its implications. She, as a previously marginalised woman in a patriarchal society is now able to name each item again, rechristening each object in the light (or darkness) of her newly found mastery over life. The speaker's mastery over her lesson in poisons and toxins is mirrored through her ability to **re-christen** the stagnant signs of her previous, subjugated life.

The final stanza of the poem is worth quoting in full as it completes this **clandestine excursion** into one of murder's secret homes with a wonderfully disturbing final glimpse of the speaker and her accomplice:

**'Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill,
You may kiss me old man, on my mouth if you will!
But brush this dust off me, lest horror it brings
Ere I know it-next moment I dance at the King's!**

There is a frenzied, sexually abandoned quality to this last stanza. The energies of the poem have now reached **overflow**. The narrator demands some physical acknowledgement of her excitement. She surges with power and sexual potency. She feels liberated from her past. The monologue has given voice and expression to the speaker's deadly desires

for revenge and in this stanza; she craves immediate oral satisfaction and satiation for these impulses. In this emphasis upon the oral I am reminded of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' where references to 'sucking' and 'gorging' and 'kissing' proliferate:

**'She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth.
Her lips began to scorch,
That juice was wormwood to her tongue,
She loathed the feast:'**

Rossetti's poem expresses the ambivalence of female sexuality in an age of great sexual repression. Here, repetition engenders a palpable sense of 'overflow'. Sexual boundaries are being explored. Longing and loathing intersect and even 'mate' with each other, so that pleasure becomes retranslated as repulsion, the afterbirth of desire.

Browning's narrator in 'The Laboratory' craves oral release through an assignation with an 'old man' so that her sexual temptations can be thwarted whilst being simultaneously expressed. Browning plays with the positioning of the 'boundary' in terms of sexual transgression. The use of alliteration: 'gorge gold' communicates a very orgiastic and excessive experience—even suggesting that the greed of the accomplice might cause him to choke, and that this choking would be enjoyed! Sex and death conjoin. Death is made to seem luxuriously erotic. The juxtaposition of 'kiss me old man' with 'mouth' reveals the breathless transgression of the speaker. She is aroused by his undesirability or unsuitability, and this 'taboo' heightens her capacity for pleasure.

Bathos then immediately follows as the narrator tempers her sexual desires through a pragmatic recognition that she is flirting with death too nearly with the poisonous 'dust' still covering her clothing. She requests help and returns the poem's focus to the public world, the world of society and social status regained through the deadly secret that she carries. The poem ends on a note of re-entry. 'I dance at the King's!' The audience like the speaker re-enters the public world, the world of the patriarchal figure of the King. This return to **'government'** is highly ironical as of course the taint of the 'secret' private laboratory with all its **'ungoverned desires'** remains and will surely threaten to overthrow the rigid structures of such a very public patriarchal society?

Browning's 'My Last Duchess' is also concerned with the act of murder. This act however is not consigned to the secrecy of the laboratory's illicit

'female space' rather this act of murder is arrogantly admitted to in a very public space. Indeed the gesture that opens the poem encapsulates the whole problem and pleasure of the Duke's dramatic monologue:

**'That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive.'**

The Duke makes a seemingly casual gesture at the beginning of the poem: he is exhibiting a painting of his 'last Duchess' to a group of envoys sent to negotiate the dowry for the 'next' Duchess. The irony of the designation 'last Duchess' is all too evident when the reader (and the powerless envoys) realise that the last Duchess has in fact been murdered by the Duke and that such a fate may await the vulnerable 'next' Duchess.

The clear link between the setting of the poem; 'Ferrara' as a place of Art and the idea of the Duchess as a piece of art, an acquisition for the Duke's great collection is made fearfully apparent with the Duke's final gesture in the poem:

**'Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! '**

The slippage between the acquisition of the new Duchess and the other Artefacts acquired by the Duke pathologises his desire for expensive objects. He is the embodiment of cold patriarchal power. His very ostentatious public gesture of ownership at the beginning and end of the poem is in direct contrast to the furtive, illicit actions of the female protagonist in 'The Laboratory'. This poem explores male dominated space. The Duke fears no-one. He will not be governed or punished; he sees himself rightly as being outside the law. In fact he is the 'Law' and this is starkly emphasised by his infamous pronouncement to his captive audience:

**'...This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive....'**

The fastidious use of hiatus or pause through the employment of the two semi-colons and the full-stop communicates the homicidal megalomania of the Duke. It is almost as if he is mentally lingering over the details of the Duchess' slaughter once again. He seems to be pleasuring himself almost sexually with the memory of her murder and in this we see a similarity to 'The Laboratory' where murder is once again an erotic act.

The surety of the Duke's carefully confessed revelation contrasts markedly with the faltering voice of Hardy's protagonist in 'The Man he Killed' where uncomfortable epiphany brings about the destruction of the narrator's tentative verbal assurance: 'I shot him dead because - ' In Hardy's world the pauses designated by the ' - ' signify the uneasy development of conscience and the failure of language to support a public and private lie about the legitimacy of murder even in war. This 'faltering' voice so evidenced in Hardy's poem is of course nowhere evident in Browning's 'My Last Duchess.'

The wonderfully orchestrated build up to the disclosure of the murder of the Duchess reinforces Adam Phillips' point that 'the words of the mad are more prosperous than the words of the sane.' If we take 'prosperous' to mean be propitious as well as 'wealthy' then we can see how morally ambivalent Browning's poetry often is. The Duke survives his monologue and confession without punishment. He walks down his grand stairs freely and without a hint of remorse. His initial 'veiling' of his crime progressively unravels as he luxuriates in the power of his narration and articulacy. His narrative is a story of his own murderous, acquisitive triumph, re-enacted and enjoyed once more.

The destruction of the Duchess for her 'sins' of naivety and innocence is shocking to the reader as we can do nothing but spectate upon the Duke's boastful retelling of her murder. Likewise the implied audience within the poem are also disempowered and can do nothing but continue to perpetuate the serial murder of the Duke's wives by providing the Duke with yet another potential victim. The emissaries in the poem are also likely to be male and perhaps would see little wrong in continuing the degrading commodification of women within a patriarchal exchange system. This situation is of course in contrast with the female authority exhibited in 'The Laboratory' albeit in a marginal, hidden space.

Hamlet opens with the famous first line: '**Who's there?**' The dramatic monologue explores the many diverse replies that might be made in answer to this leading question about identity and madness. These replies

to **Hamlet** continue on from Browning's brilliant deployment of the dramatic monologue to their use in the work of Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy.

Armitage's poem 'Hitcher' rejects the exoticism of Browning's settings of 'Ferrara' and the 'Ancien Regime'. Instead he places his narrator in a world of consummate banality, where 'ansaphones' and 'sick-notes' form the basis of daily living. He opens the poem however, rather like Browning's Duke, with a seemingly casual gesture of self-presentation:

**'I'd been tired, under
the weather, but the ansaphone kept screaming:
One more sick-note, mister, and you're finished. Fired.
I thumbed a lift to where the car was parked.
A Vauxhall Astra. It was hired. '**

We are probably all too familiar with conversations about fatigue and recurring ill-health. We may wonder why the poet should think them worth mentioning at all. At any rate we are apparently in very 'routine' territory. Of course, because this is a dramatic monologue, the very reverse proves to be true. The ordinary has its '**shadow**' and this is made manifest through the clipped, staccato style of the narration which progressively communicates something malignant about the personality of the speaker to the reader. The ordinary becomes suffused with something **remiss**; not quite diagnosed or recognised but nonetheless remiss. Why should anyone we ask ourselves hitch a lift to a hired car? Why should there be such pride in the finality of the end stopped declaration: 'It was hired.'?

Just as in Browning's progressively 'dis-eased' worlds, the reader begins to seek out clues as to the origin or source of this dis-ease, so that our role as reader becomes synonymous with that of '**detective**'.

The opening stanza to Armitage's 'Hitcher' renders the everyday uncanny. We wonder at the 'sick-note' and retrospectively ponder the precise identity of this recurring illness. The ubiquitous 'Vauxhall Astra' assumes a particularly grim aspect after the brutal murder of stanza three. Everything is apparently ordinary, yet as we realise completely 'designed' and premeditated. This subversion of the vocabulary of 'dailiness' conspires to unsettle the reader. Who is the 'Hitcher'? And is the Hitcher just one person or perhaps two or even three? The title's significance remains uncertain and this lack of resolution mimics the

unsettling process of the poem itself. We cannot 'close' the poem down to just one meaning or source. Instead the poem remains 'open' in its significance.

**'I picked him up in Leeds.
He was following the sun to west from east
With just a toothbrush and the good earth for a bed...'**

Armitage's speaker cynically recreates the voice of the hitchhiker who seems the epitome of wandering free-spiritedness. The easeful voice of the impending victim contrast sharply with the staccato, clinical words of the speaker. There is also something sexually predatory about the choice of language. The speaker selects his prey carefully. Will the victim be missed at all by anyone? Is it the comparative freedom of the hitchhiker that irritates his killer?

**'I let him have it
on the top road out of Harrogate-once
with the head, then six times with the kooklok
in the face-and didn't even swerve.
I dropped it into third**

**And leant across
To let him out... '**

The apparently colloquial careless admission 'let him have it' that recalls the infamous phrase that executed Derek Bentley in 1953 for a murder he literally didn't commit, shocks the reader out of any complacency. We might wonder about the 'taste' of such a joke and what this might reveal about the need for the narrator to identify with other crimes, other murderous celebrities?

The numerical precision of the speaker when describing what would be a very bloody murder is very disturbing as well as darkly comical. It is a rather like a drunken boast on a Friday night: the speaker unnervingly fails to differentiate between his brutal execution of the victim and his accomplished, driving skills. This communicates a very real sense of the narrator's dangerous psychopathology.

His parody of politeness at the end (..let him out') cements this disturbance. Interestingly the 'gap' between stanza three and four mimics

the actions of the killer as he opens the door and bundles his probably dead victim into the road. The easy surety of the killer's performance, highlighted through this grotesque employment of enjambment, suggests that the killer has probably done this before. He is not just a killer; he is a serial killer. Any expectations that we might have had of the poem and its initial interest are destabilised and collapsed.

This destabilisation of our expectations is mirrored in the reading experience itself. For if we consider the process of reading then it is true to say that we often anticipate and even 'write' ahead of the actual words on a page. **Reading is often as much about confirmation as it is about anticipation.** The ability to read ahead, to anticipate and even solve a text before we arrive at the resolution of a text is one we often take completely for granted. Armitage like Browning before him enjoys shocking the reader out of complacency through his use of **defamiliarisation**. The ordinary in other words takes on a suddenly extraordinary aspect and this produces the poem's interest.

Carol Ann Duffy in 'Education for Leisure' again employs the banal for macabre ends. The very title with its oxymoronic implications cynically undermines any cosy, liberal ideas the reader might entertain about the value of education. The situation of the narrator identifies him/her with a context that we all know: stuck at home on a rainy day. It is even suggestive of Dr Seuss' famous story **The Cat in the Hat** with the bored, time-laden children gazing out of the wet window in search of adventure. However the opening paragraph ironically gives voice to mayhem and murder immediately:

**'Today I am going to kill something. Anything.
I have had enough of being ignored and today
I am going to play God. It is an ordinary day,
a sort of grey with boredom stirring in the streets.'**

The seemingly arbitrary decision to commit murder parodies the clichéd advice dealt to children that they should find something worthwhile to occupy themselves with when off school. The careless, throwaway tone of the narrator's voice sounds horribly close to home. The interfacing of the

everyday with something far more sinister is both comical and unsettling. Duffy's narrator gives voice to a common human experience: 'I have had enough of being ignored' which encourages collusion or complicity on the part of the reader, Duffy then systematically plays with this collusion through further 'familiar' references to childhood experience:

**'I squash a fly against the window with my thumb.
We did that at school. Shakespeare. It was in another language and
now the fly is in another language.
I breathe out talent on the glass and write my name.**

I am a genius...'

Idleness breeds cruelty. Loneliness can kill. The narrator indifferently(apparently) recalls studying Shakespeare's **King Lear**. The grim wit of the play upon 'another language' highlights the wasted energies and abilities of the speaker. Their studied 'ennui' is just that - an act. Their intelligence is clear to see, and they (we do not know the identity or sex of the narrator) parade their 'talent' on the damp window, spectating like the reader on their 'work.'

Once again Duffy positions her speaker in an uncomfortably intimate context that the reader recognises as being almost too intimate. The narrator's intimate domestic situation is brilliantly rendered 'uncanny' through the description of the speaker's uneasy relationship with the home's other live inhabitants. Like Armitage and Browning, Duffy enjoys insinuating the grotesque within the apparent safety of the ordinary.

**'I pour the goldfish down the bog. I pull the chain.
I see that it is good. The budgie is panicking...'**

The **Book of Genesis** is reversed: this is a massacre of the innocents. It is also wildly funny and superbly bathetic through the use of the word, 'bog' of course! The narrator's desire to inflict some control on their world has moved from the word to the deed. This shift is then continued through the poems movement from the private deprivation of the speaker to their attempt to connect with the outside world in some way:

' ...I walk the two miles into town
for signing on. They don't appreciate my autograph.

There is nothing left to kill. I dial the radio...'

Everything is escalating to dangerous levels by this point of the poem. Again like Browning we sense a palpable feeling of 'overflow' or excess in the psychopathology of the speaker. We wonder who the victim might turn out to be. We are still strangely absorbed by Duffy's tender details of intimacy and home.

' ... I get our bread-knife and go out.
The pavements glitter suddenly. I touch your arm.'

If the mad 'lack a sense of community' (Phillips) then the ending to this poem jolts the reader into a most **unnerving catharsis**. For the speaker quite literally seems to reach out beyond the page to prey upon the **mesmerised audience**. The reader is rendered the victim of the dramatic monologue in 'Education for Leisure' in a most **explicit manner**. However it is quite possible to argue that Duffy is merely making explicit that which was implicit in the dramatic monologue anyway: that the reader is essentially a 'victim' of the speaker's thrilling words and world and surrenders (out of enchantment) up any moral detachment from the narrator(s).

To return again to **Hamlet's** famous question: 'Who's there?' it would seem that in the dramatic monologue the protagonist gives voice to those aspects of identity that we most 'treasure about ourselves' as well as those aspects that horrify us too. We do hate those we love and we do love those we hate. It is the very ambivalent relationship that exists between spectator and spectacle, between narrator and audience, between you and me, between me and myself, that makes the dramatic monologue so utterly compelling:

'A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.'

Indeed we do.