

"To Arrive at the Vision of Gas Lamps as Angels"

Teaching Students to Write Dramatic Monologues

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THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE is a poetic form that can be quite powerful with kids as they explore who they are as young poets. Writing a poem from someone—or something—else's perspective can open new vistas of thought and expression, since it requires students to adopt a vantage point outside of their personal experience. Writing dramatic monologues from the perspective of another also requires the student poet to search for personal connections with their chosen subject, in order to make the poem compelling and engaging. I like to point out to my students how Sylvia Plath immediately pulls the reader into her "Mirror," with "I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions. / Whatever I see, I swallow immediately." We know a person can't physically become a mirror, yet we believe the persona Plath creates in her

poem because the statements she makes in the mirror's voice have the ring of authenticity.

Several years ago, I worked on several dramatic monologue projects with a class of seventh-grade students at Taft High School while I was a poet-in-residence with the Poetry Center of Chicago's Hands on Stanzas program. The students first wrote poetic monologues set in historical time periods. After they had gained some experience with the form, we paid a visit to two local Chicago senior assisted living communities where the students interviewed the residents. Once back in the classroom, the students transcribed these interviews and used the information and stories they'd gathered as grist for dramatic monologues they wrote from the perspectives of the people they'd interviewed. Both of these writing projects, described below, gave the students a more intimate connection with other lives and times while also helping them to develop their poetic voice.

I started our exploration of the dramatic monologue by having the students read Lisel Mueller's wonderful poem "Monet Refuses the Operation." I love the persona Mueller adopts in this poem, and how she

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suffuses her language with authenticity. The opening lines put the reader smack dab in the middle of a conversation between Monet and his doctor wherein the Impressionist artist is firmly explaining why he doesn't need corrective eye surgery, "I tell you it has taken me all my life, / to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels, / to soften and blur and finally banish / the edges you regret I don't see, / to learn that the line I called the horizon / does not exist and sky and water, / so long apart, are the same state of being." The students enjoyed reading the poem and afterwards, looking at reproductions of Monet's series of paintings of the pont neuf in Paris and the Houses of Parliament, and relating those images to lines in Mueller's poem. We talked about the difference between one's eyesight and artistic vision, how that relates to the artist's internal imperative to, as Pound said, "make it new."

The poem's voice is convincing and authentic, and it is these qualities, I told the students, that are crucial in crafting a successful dramatic monologue. Are you as a reader convinced of the authenticity of the poem's voice? You have to believe that the person who wrote the poem could be the person who actually experienced the things described in the poem. I asked students this question after they read the poem—"If you hadn't known that Mueller wrote this poem, might you have believed that Monet wrote it?" We talked about some qualities of a convincing voice: special, penetrating insight into a subject that the voice would reveal to the reader, perhaps a sense of urgency. We talked about how Mueller crafted a poem that the reader imagines could really have been what Monet said to his eye doctor.

We also talked about how "Monet Refuses the Operation" addresses burning questions that people have when they look at a painting by Monet, which is, "How did he create this? What were the synaptic leaps that sparked this fire of genius? What other circumstances, such as aspects of the artists' biography, might have contributed to this masterpiece?"

In addition to Mueller's dramatic monologue, we also read and discussed Bob Hicok's "Alzheimer's"

(from his collection *Plus Shipping*). We talked about the remarkable language that Hicok uses in that poem, how he poignantly depicts the grandmother in the poem and the relationship between her and the poem's speaker, in lines such as, "And dress her, / demonstrate how buttons work, / when she sometimes looks up/ and says my name, the sound arriving / like the trill of a bird so rare / it's rumored no longer to exist."

For the dramatic monologue assignment, students chose a moment in history that they wanted to go to. They wrote their own dramatic monologues set in those time periods—during the Iraq War and the Pullman Strike, and in Chicago during the great fire of 1871—and told from the vantage points of historical figures such as Laura Ingalls Wilder and Genghis Khan. Here are several poems that seventh grade students at Taft High School wrote, in response to that prompt (from "*Old and Yet New*": *Teens Writing Dramatic Monologues from the Perspectives of Elderly People*):

Beethoven

RACHEL

My life has come and gone like a bolt of
lightning
Yet it seemed to last so long
Melodies through my head
I hummed my tragic songs
I hear no evil in my ears
Yet I can almost hear the drops of my tears
I was bitter to those who ever cared
Children and such I often scared
How did this ever come to be?
This is not the life I wanted for me
I've done well all my life
What good is it without friends, family, or a
wife?
If I could have another chance would I
change?
Would I throw away all of my rage?
Now as I lay me down to sleep
I cannot help it but to weep
What I've accomplished I did not expect

I just hope I've gained your respect
 I've written music and it was nice
 All I can give you is this advice
 Do not let your work become your life
 For it becomes as painful as the cut of a knife
 Though I cannot hear what I say
 I promise you that you will thank me one day

Watching Seven Short Films by the Lumiere Brothers, Paris, 1904

LAIRD

I will forever remember the accounts of
 tonight.

It began at the theater in Paris. The seats
 were packed

full and buzzing with excitement. We'd been
 desperately awaiting

this presentation of motion pictures.

Suddenly the room darkened,

the white screen hanging in the theater filled
 with movement.

The screen was full of moving pictures

I watched with excitement as the film clips
 played on

Soon the fun ended and I returned to my
 home,

but I'll always remember the magical display
 of film at the theater.

Thomas Edison

JOHN

What is this light I see
 coming from this simple sphere?
 It awakens the room when there was no light.
 It gives energy to me, and everyone else.
 It could revolutionize the world,
 bringing light to all.

Look at what I have made.
 I have helped the world.

With that introduction to the dramatic monologue fresh in my students' minds, I took them on a field trip to Mather Lifeways, an assisted living community where a friend of mine, Beth Welch, worked. When we got there, Beth explained some principles that the students should remember when interacting with the Alzheimer's patients, such as how their memories of things that happened a long time ago might be vivid, whereas they might not remember anything that happened yesterday or today. The following year, I took the class on a field trip to another assisted living facility, Norwood Crossing. At both facilities the students interviewed the elderly residents for about an hour and a half, then transcribed what the residents had told them. Later we talked about how they could use what they had transcribed as grist for dramatic monologues. Here are several of those dramatic monologues written in response to those visits:

All About Me

ALEKSANDRA AND LAUREN

I was born I was raised
 I grew up with many tragedies
 But recovered with many smiles
 Many challenges came my way
 Sooner or later I had to face them
 In my teenage years I put that aside
 And in Fergus Falls I was known as a Lady's
 Man
 Living on a farm in my past years
 I milked cows and ladies thought that was
 sexy
 We had no air conditioning in my home
 So we decided to cool off in the refrigerator.
 I had become an adult
 Married at the age of 20
 I was no longer a teen
 Having three kids
 Made my mind grow
 And my hair fall out
 But when it came to now

I love them with all my heart
 Now here I am
 At the age of 72
 I have nothing left to do
 Except sit and wonder
 What's going to come my way?

Milly
MONIKA

When working in the office on a railroad
 I lived my life alone
 Born in Italy I lived there till I was 7
 All I remember is the sheep
 And the grapes, chestnuts, olives
 that my family grew. I only went to high
 school
 The best thing I have remembered was the
 church
 in my hometown. Then I came here to
 America
 I was raised on the west side of Chicago
 And lived the rest on east side
 Visited France, England and Austria
 Now, I'm here reading books of history
 and geography, learning what I can
 Not able to walk and not so young
 Here in this home alone. None
 of my family lives anymore. Here
 sitting in this chair talking to you. I'm no
 longer
 Working at the office by the railroad

Arthur Bagge
TAMAS

Being the president
 Of a broadcast
 Advertisement company
 Was the reason
 I got up
 In the morning

 Now the reason
 I get up
 In the morning

Is the happiness
 Of being alive

Poem
ALEKSANDRA

I am the daughter of an engineer
 Born on the South Side of Chicago
 Growing up and enjoying the family farm
 Spending days picking strawberries
 And digging out potatoes
 On the farm, across the street
 Lived a boy, I wished to meet
 He was my crush, my first true love
 The one I would remember for years to come
 Then I went off to college
 And left it all behind
 I got married and started a family all of mine
 My children grew and my life changed
 I came to live here (in this facility)
 And my adventures came to an end

Writing dramatic monologues can open imaginative vistas for young poets by allowing them to explore other voices, other time periods, other perspectives. As Bob Hicok suggests in the interview which follows, the concept of what a dramatic monologue is, and how it relates to the poet's voice, is quite nuanced and complex. Things get even more intriguing and complex when collaboration and historical subjects are introduced into the mix.

The success of the project at Taft High School was due in part to the efforts of Maria Asvos, Academic Director of Taft High School, and the classroom teacher with whom I worked. Asvos brought a wealth of knowledge and background to the project, suggested interesting ideas and approaches, and helped students to develop their ideas and staying on track.

In her review of the project, Asvos said that "this experience taught the students to think more clearly, to speak and write more effectively, and to listen and read with greater understanding," and that the mono-

logues the students wrote from their interviews at the assisted living facilities “brought forth an understanding of how language works—what pitfalls it conceals, and what its possibilities are.” She added that the project not only helped students to learn how language is used “to transmit information, to create and express social cohesion,” but it also taught them “to use the language of poetry and the imagination . . .” and gave the students a deeper understanding of “what is central to the complicated business of living. . . .” As such, the project, says Asvos, offered the opportunity “to approach the study of language as both an intellectual and a moral discipline.”

To get some feedback on the dramatic monologue project from another perspective, I contacted Dr. Matt Kaplan, professor of Intergenerational Programs and Aging at Pennsylvania State University. I was interested to hear what Dr. Kaplan’s observations would be, since he has been a national leader of intergenerational studies for several decades. While Kaplan found the poems the students wrote “very powerful” and said that “they serve as a reminder of the power of poetry to communicate and influence how people view themselves and the world around them,” he also asked important questions about how such an intergenerational project could be better structured.

Dr. Kaplan suggested some possible ways to develop the program, emphasizing how the best IG projects offer “mutual benefit and reciprocity in the exchanges, with a philosophy based upon the recognition of the interdependence of generations.” To this end, Kaplan suggests focusing future intergenerational dramatic monologue projects on issues/concerns that participants have in common, such as “dealing with loss, finding out who one is (inside), becoming (more than what we once were), the meaning of family, the meaning of community, the social imperative for contributing to the lives of others, etc.”

Introducing the writing of dramatic monologues into the classroom holds tremendous potential as a way to have students explore multiple perspectives; develop a poetic voice; and gain personal and intimate

insights into historical events and forces. Taking the above suggestions into consideration, the writing of dramatic monologues offers a way for students to make a direct connections to other lives and times, helping the students reach a deeper understanding of what history is, how it relates to us today, and the kind of future we can envision. 🍷

References

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Generations United: www.gu.org

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The Poetry Center of Chicago’s Hands on Stanzas program