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A CAST OF CHARACTERS

Duke, Drunk, Pig, and Lily

In every poem there is a voice, a **speaker**—someone who says whatever it is. Usually the speaker is the poet. Often, however, it is not. In Emily Dickinson’s “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—” (p. 168), the speaker describing her own death can’t be the poet. The Victorian Englishman Robert Browning was not the Renaissance Italian duke who speaks in “My Last Duchess” (p. 166); nor, obviously, is Philip Levine the brave pig that speaks in “Animals Are Passing from Our Lives” (p. 186). These speakers are **dramatic characters**, or *personae* (singular: **persona**), and the poems in which they appear are **dramatic monologues**.

The poet’s freedom to invent or imagine, to create fictional characters and scenes, is of course as great as the novelist or playwright’s. The truth of *Othello* or *Jane Eyre* is not less for their being imaginative constructs. It is always our own experience of deception and jealousy, of hypocrisy and kinship, of pride or valor or love, that makes such works possible for us as writers and certifies them for us as readers when they are true.

Every poem is a dramatic monologue in a sense, an utterance with an “utterer,” a speaker, and an at least implicit circumstance in which the utterance is uttered. For readers who don’t know the poet personally, any poem involves the perception of a presented character, real or otherwise. Thus, even the poet writing or trying to write in his or her own voice, is always creating a self, in tone, stance, and theme. As in life we show different faces to different people or in different situations (at the beach, in church), so in writing, often without realizing it, we change or adjust the voice we use, presenting ourselves differently; we quite naturally adopt somewhat different *personae*. This process, when the issues are serious, may even amount to exploring one’s identity, ethnicity, gender, or heritage; that is, to self-discovery.

In this sense of voice or character, writing often leads to working through our own experiences in ways that may surprise us. Motives, re-examined, may seem more complicated; incidents that seemed straightforward may turn out to be ambiguous or revealing. This same complexity will appear in characters we invent or borrow from life. The heroic is truer when it is not seen as perfect. Cordelia's unswerving love is in some measure balanced by the unswerving pride of her refusal to speak, a pride similar to that of her demanding father, Lear. Villainy is often balanced in some way, by wit or vitality we must admire. There is something to be said even for Browning's awful Duke. Such figures of immense power and fine taste, greedy but also generous as patrons, whatever else we may think of them, made possible the art of the Renaissance. We are awed by more than his evil.

Perhaps drama arises out of this richness—or mixture—of character. In Rita Dove's "The House Slave" (p. 208), for instance, it is the speaker's relative privilege and comfort—after all, she is free to fall asleep again—that gives poignancy to her perspective. The poet has chosen this perspective because the point is not simply guilt of masters and suffering of slaves. The dramatic focus is more complex and the theme of wider relevance.

Since, as Elizabeth Bowen says, "Nothing can happen nowhere," the place of a poem often reveals character tellingly, as in Dickey's "Cherrylog Road" (p. 144); and the occasion of a poem certainly does, as in W. D. Snodgrass's "Leaving the Motel" (p. 170) or in Jane Flanders's "Shopping in Tuckahoe" (p. 149). We might of course be shown Flanders's speaker anywhere, at a party the Saturday night before or mowing her lawn, but the moment "in this parking lot," waiting for a daughter who is shopping for jeans, shows how she has drifted to the edge of her own life.

The poem, then, creates its own stage, scenery, and actor. And the speaker's range of diction, familiarity or formality, choice of images, and so on, help create the speaker's character for the reader, as when Flanders has the woman describe an adjacent weedy lot as "conducting its own / January clearance with giveaways galore— / millions of seeds, husks, vines, bare sepals / glinting like cruisewear in the cold sun." Because people are interesting, putting people into poems is an easy way of making poems interesting.

Consider this local "character" in a poem by X. J. Kennedy (b. 1929). The first and last stanzas describe her and recount the action, but she speaks for herself in the main portion of the poem.

In a Prominent Bar in Secaucus One Day

*To the tune of "The Old Orange Flute"
or the tune of "Sweet Betsy from Pike"*

In a prominent bar in Secaucus¹ one day
Rose a lady in skunk with a topheavy sway,
Raised a knobby red finger—all turned from their beer—
While with eyes bright as snowcrust she sang high and clear:

¹ *Secaucus*: town in the industrial marsh of New Jersey, near New York City

- “Now who of you’d think from an eyeload of me
That I once was a lady as proud as could be?
Oh I’d never sit down by a tumbledown drunk
If it wasn’t, my dears, for the high cost of junk. 5
- “All the gents used to swear that the white of my calf
Beat the down of the swan by a length and a half. 10
In the kerchief of linen I caught to my nose
Ah, there never fell snot, but a little gold rose.
- “I had seven gold teeth and a toothpick of gold,
My Virginia cheroot was a leaf of it rolled
And I’d light it each time with a thousand in cash— 15
Why the bums used to fight if I flicked them an ash.
- “Once the toast of the Biltmore°, the belle of the Taft°,
I would drink bottle beer at the Drake°, never draft,
And dine at the Astor° on Salisbury steak
With a clean tablecloth for each bite I did take. 20
- “In a car like the Roxy° I’d roll to the track,
A steel-guitar trio, a bar in the back,
And the wheels made no noise, they turned over so fast,
Still it took you ten minutes to see me go past.
- “When the horses bowed down to me that I might choose, 25
I bet on them all, for I hated to lose.
Now I’m saddled each night for my butter and eggs
And the broken threads race down the backs of my legs.
- “Let you hold in mind, girls, that your beauty must pass
Like a lovely white clover that rusts with its grass. 30
Keep your bottoms off barstools and marry you young
Or be left—an old barrel with many a bung.
- “For when time takes you out for a spin in his car
You’ll be hard-pressed to stop him from going too far
And be left by the roadside, for all your good deeds, 35
Two toadstools for tits and a face full of weeds.”
- All the house raised a cheer, but the man at the bar
Made a phonecall and up pulled a red patrol car
And she blew us a kiss as they copped her away
From that prominent bar in Secaucus, N.J. 40

17, 18, 19, *Biltmore, Taft, Drake, Astor*: once fashionable hotels in New York; 21 *Roxy*: a movie palace.

Part of the fun (and of the pathos) in this portrait comes of our recognizing that, however much truth is mingled with her exaggeration, she was never quite so much a lady as she believes. Her language tells us about her world: “All the *gents* used to swear that the white of my calf / *Beat* the down of a swan *by a length and a half*.” Her ideas of elegance fall painfully short: bottle beer in preference to draft

and, as an instance of fine dining, the humdrum Salisbury steak. In this way the poet communicates *around* what she is saying so that we perceive her as Kennedy wants us to, not as she perceives herself. We end up admiring her less for the reason she gives (that she was once a grand lady) than for her blarney and her bravery of spirit. Like Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, she is indomitably human.

The range of possible characters, of course, extends beyond persons you actually know or might encounter. A celebrity, or mythical or historical character such as Eve in this poem by Linda Pastan (b. 1932), may become freshly exciting if the poet discovers an aspect no one has thought of.

Mother Eve

Of course she never was a child herself,
waking as she did one morning
full grown and perfect,
with only Adam, another innocent,
to love her and instruct. 5
There was no learning, step by step,
to walk, no bruised elbows or knees—
no small transgressions.
There was only the round, white mound
of the moon rising, 10
which could neither be suckled
nor leaned against.
And perhaps the serpent spoke
in a woman's voice, mothering.
Oh, who can blame her? 15
When she held her own child
in her arms, what did she make
of that new animal? Did she love Cain
too little or too much, looking down
at her now flawed body as if her rib, 20
like Adam's, might be gone?
In the litany of naming that continued
for children instead of plants,
no daughter is mentioned.
But generations later there was Rachel°, 25
all mother herself, who knew
that bringing forth a child in pain
is only the start. It is losing them
(and Benjamin so young)
that is the punishment. 30

25 *Rachel*: One of the Jewish matriarchs; wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin. Genesis, esp. chapters 29–30, 35.

SYMBOLS

A **symbol** is something that stands for or represents something else, like the x in an algebraic equation or the stars and stripes in the flag. In literature a symbol stands for or represents something, usually thematic and intangible, beyond the literal.

Symbols may be fairly minor and local to a particular poem, like the reds and whites of loon and royal family in “First Death in Nova Scotia” or the short-lived flowers in “Leaving the Motel,” which symbolize the relationship. Symbols may also be general and open-ended, as the wheelbarrow in “The Red Wheelbarrow” perhaps symbolizes labor, fertility, or even the importance of seeing the world in a certain way. Some things, from frequent use, carry predictable symbolic associations. The rose, for instance, is a traditional symbol for beauty and transience, as in Robert Herrick’s “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” (“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may . . .”).

The poet will find symbols aplenty in the material at hand—cork-heeled shoes and gold combs in “Sir Patrick Spence” (p. 137), blacksnake and mouse in “Cherrylog Road” (p. 144), and the menace of cats to express the girl’s rage in “Kitten.” There is usually no need to invent or import symbols, which may ring false. Things already in the scene will do, and will naturally tend to become symbolic. The value of symbols lies in their resonance. Because a meaning is not stated, it can spread out like circles in water; or, like a beam of light, can illuminate anything that lies in its path, at whatever distance, thus applying to any number of situations or actions of a similar kind.

Some poems are deliberately, primarily symbolic, like this one by Robert Frost:

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveler, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth; 5

Then took the other, as just as fair,
 And having perhaps the better claim,
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
 Though as for that the passing there
 Had worn them really about the same, 10

And both that morning equally lay
 In leaves no step had trodden black.
 Oh, I kept the first for another day!
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
 I doubted if I should ever come back. 15

I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference. 20

The difference between two paths in a real wood, we understand, isn’t likely to be very important. Certainly it would not have the significance claimed: “And that

has made all the difference." Paths in a wood are pretty much alike, and it is usually possible to return another day and find little changed.

So we sense at once that "The Road Not Taken" is primarily symbolic. It is about the nature of choice, and "all the difference" implies that the poem concerns some life-choice. The difference comes, the speaker claims, from his having taken "the one less traveled by." The poem seems a simple and proud affirmation of non-conformity.

But Frost is rarely as simple as he seems. Despite the assertion "I took the one less traveled by," the two roads (as lines 6–12 make clear) were virtually indistinguishable: "just as fair," "perhaps the better claim," "really about the same," "equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black." It certainly wasn't a case of choosing between good and bad: "sorry I could not travel both." A reader may also wonder, since "way leads on to way" in life, how the speaker can know what lay down that other road, or know what difference (if any) his choice made. Why doesn't he, speaking in the present, not just assert the claim of the last two lines, rather than *predicting* that he will do so at a distant future time, "ages and ages hence"? Why that "sigh"? Above all, if the point is the pleasure and advantage of the road taken, why is the poem called "The Road *Not* Taken"? The symbolism is more complicated and interesting than a reader might at first perceive.

In such poems symbols arise naturally from literal, presented circumstances. A walk in a wood becomes a paradigm of the psychological process of choice, and perhaps of the way we rationalize experience after the fact. In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Grief" (p. 113) the "monumental statue" initially appears as a comparison in a simile. Or the symbol may be simply asserted, as in Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" (p. 79) or, here, in "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906). We may infer, *outside* the poem, that it is about the African-American experience, but the symbol, of a suffering group's masking its pain, is universal.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
 It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
 This debt we pay to human guile;
 With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
 And mouth with myriad subtleties. 5
 Why should the world be otherwise,
 In counting all our tears and sighs?
 Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries 10
 To thee from tortured souls arise.
 We sing, but oh the clay is vile
 Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
 But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask! 15

But can't help looking back. Lord, they're a pretty sight, 5
 Both of them, tangled up in each other, easy in their skin—
 It's their own front yard, after all, perfectly closed in
 By privet hedge and country. Maybe they were here all night.

I want to believe they'd do that, not thinking of me
 Or anyone but themselves, alone in the world 10
 Of the yard with its clipped grass and fresh-picked fruit trees.
 Whatever this letter says can wait. To hell with the mail.
 I slip through the gate, silent as I came, and leave them
 Alone. There's no one they need to hear from.



Animals Are Passing from Our Lives 1968

PHILIP LEVINE (b. 1928)

It's wonderful how I jog
 on four honed-down ivory toes
 my massive buttocks slipping
 like oiled parts with each light step.

I'm to market. I can smell 5
 the sour, grooved block, I can smell
 the blade that opens the hole
 and the pudgy white fingers

that shake out the intestines
 like a hankie. In my dreams 10
 the snouts drool on the marble,
 suffering children, suffering flies,

suffering the consumers
 who won't meet their steady eyes
 for fear they could see. The boy 15
 who drives me along believes

that any moment I'll fall
 on my side and drum my toes
 like a typewriter or squeal
 and shit like a new housewife 20

discovering television,
 or that I'll turn like a beast
 cleverly to hook his teeth
 with my teeth. No. Not this pig.



American Classic

1981

LOUIS SIMPSON (b. 1923)

It's a classic American scene—
a car stopped off the road
and a man trying to repair it.

The woman who stays in the car
in the classic American scene
stares back at the freeway traffic. 5

They look surprised, and ashamed
to be so helpless . . .
let down in the middle of the road!

To think that their car would do this! 10
They look like mountain people
whose son has gone against the law.

But every night they set out food
and the robber goes skulking back to the trees.
That's how it is with the car . . . 15

it's theirs, they're stuck with it.
Now they know what it's like to sit
and see the world go whizzing by.

In the fume of carbon monoxide and dust
they are not such good Americans 20
as they thought they were.

The feeling of being left out
through no fault of your own, is common.
That's why I say, an American classic.



In the Mirror

1995

TRICIA STUCKEY*

Come here,
he said
reaching an arm out
across the rusty-colored
red vinyl of the long bench seat. 5