



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Dramatic Interpretation of Monologue Poems

Curriculum Unit 94.02.05
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The objective of this curriculum unit is to develop and exploit a complementary relationship between poems and theatre. I intend specifically to consider monologue poems of late nineteenth and early twentieth century poets. The relationship in question will be realized by applying acting techniques and disciplines to interpret character, as presented in selected monologues. Both the actor and his or her audience will in turn enjoy enriched understanding and appreciation of the poems, their imagery, and their language. Acting skills will be strengthened as they are exercised in a new context — literature that is not written specifically for theatre.

Development of character is the key concept here. We shall seek to bring life and breath, depth and credibility to unique individuals, real or fictional, rather than limiting ourselves to acting out narratives or events as told in poems. We shall realize the individuality of monologue speakers or characters in poems written in the poet's voice (e.g., Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady") through dramatic presentation. This curriculum unit is intended for juniors and seniors enrolled in advanced acting classes at The Cooperative High School of the Arts and Humanities. Two prerequisites are: (1) possession of basic acting skills and experience, and (2) strong commitment both to the individual study of acting and to the concept of theatre as a collaborative art form. Prior formal classwork will have included Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Albee. Although each student may act alone, they will not act in isolation. Successful class work will require non judgmental, objective mutual criticism and support of each actor by his or her peers.

The resulting benefit of this unit of study will be twofold. First, the actor will, through study, exercise, and practice, become a better actor, more competent and more confident. Second, the actor will become better informed, acquainted with new writers, literary forms, and ideas, and - we hope - imbued with an appetite to learn yet more. The actor will emerge with a better sense of his or her own potential, together with an ability to analyze and portray character in whatever context it is introduced.

The poets I have chosen for this study are Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, and T.S. Eliot. They were prolific writers, widely appreciated in their own times. Their names remain familiar today, although their works are seldom seen in today's high school classrooms. Their study can be supported by an extensive body of critical and biographical writing.

The specific poems I have selected are these:

Tennyson: "Ulysses," "Tithonus"

Browning : "My Last Duchess," "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church"

Eliot: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

The poems chosen are monologues through which individual characters express and reveal themselves, and provide a firm foundation upon which the actor may build his or her own interpretation of that character. Many other poets, poems, and characters might have been selected, including other poems by the same authors, such as Tennyson's "St. Simeon Stylites," "Will Waterproof's Lyrical Monologue," "Locksley Hall," and "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After," and Browning's "Andrea del Sarto," "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," "Caliban upon Setebos," and "Bishop Blougram's Apology." These monologues are imbedded in a tradition extending one hundred years earlier of poems spoken by an unreliable speaker who is clearly not the poet. Examples of these poems could be Alexander Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard," and William Wordsworth's "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman," and "The Thorn."

My criteria were: [1] the character must be adequately fleshed out, such that the actor's task is to interpret an existing character, not invent one to fill a vacuum; [2] the character is not a stereotype or a well known historical or fictional figure for whom traditional interpretations exist ready to hand; and [3] the character is implied through his or her own words, not explicitly stated. Overall, of course, I wanted to introduce my students to new literature that I myself have enjoyed. Any well written character is psychologically and emotionally complex — otherwise the character would be dull, lifeless, and uninteresting to us, as would an equally one-dimensional human being. It is the goal of the actor to discover the complexities that make a character real and interesting, to discover sympathetic and unsympathetic qualities through study of the text and the subtext, and finally to present these qualities and complexities in performance. The words of the monologue will then become not words being read or recited, but words spoken from the depths of a whole being who is implicitly capable of speaking other words in other times or places.

These student-actors are not so much being taught as they are being offered the opportunity to learn for themselves. The selection process must be imposed upon the student, yet the student must explore and discover what the character contains in his or her own very personal and individual interpretation. Different actors will create different, yet equally valid interpretations of the same character. There is no "correct" interpretation, only more or less believable ones. There is no objective "truth" that can be imposed from the outside, only the inner truth of the actor's conviction that the "real" character has been met and understood. This freedom from prejudice is a property of acting technique and study, not a property that literature advertises about itself. The difference between developing Polonius' character and J. Alfred Prufrock's character is that Polonius is widely recognized as a character to be portrayed, with many precedents for interpretations of his character, while Prufrock is seldom if ever perceived in this way. A wealth of such characters exist, outside dramatic literature, yet ready to enrich our dramatic experience.

Classroom work will take two parallel paths:[1] to study monologues and soliloquies, our chosen literary source of characters and, [2] to study acting techniques. Technique is the craftsmanship, discipline, and method that the actor brings to any role. Technique is the kit of tools the actor uses to build character from the raw materials supplied by the author, in keeping with concepts imposed more or less explicitly by the author, the director, and interaction with other actors. In this class, the student-actor will develop his or her character with complete freedom to make mistakes and learn from them without embarrassment or penalty. The characters we have selected for study are seen here not in interaction or active contention with other characters, but principally in presenting or revealing themselves or exhorting others. The student thus liberated from developing his character as part of a larger production will enjoy a special autonomy: his

character is entirely his own creature, beholden to no one save the author and internal consistency. The student need compromise with no one, and his character need measure up to no standard other than credibility. His test will be to convince his fellow students that he is real, and both he and they will learn from his achievements.

In preparation for their individual studies of monologue poems, the student-actors will read and study together selected monologues and soliloquies in dramatic literature. We shall select several classics from Shakespeare, such as Hamlet's instructions to the actors, Polonius' advice to Laertes, and Henry V's Saint Crispian speech to his soldiers. These may be studied in the larger context of the whole play, and also in the light of a great body of criticism and commentary. A number of important female monologues will be studied; these include Andreyevna in Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" and Nina in "The Seagull," Nora in Ibsen's "A Doll House," Grandma's monologues in Albee's "The Sandbox," and the stepdaughter in Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author."

Acting Exercises Exercise is a goal-oriented activity, undertaken to enlarge and strengthen old capabilities and acquire new ones, not merely to practice, polish, or maintain current skills. These student actors will be exposed to fresh concepts, and will convert them through acting exercises to effective character development skills.

The actor explores the possibilities of character through a number of exercises, and with an open mind, prepared to accept unexpected developments. Although we do observe some formalities and conventions in teaching technique, yet every actor uses devices of his or her own making to augment the process, for actors, too, are unique. At this beginning stage, the actor is in much the same position as his audience will be, anticipating but also unsure what may emerge in the next moment, yet with this difference: the audience waits passively to have the character revealed, while the actor actively searches the character out.

Acting exercises are used in this way to help the actor discover how the character might feel or behave, not only in the context of the play — or, in this class, the monologue poem — but in any context. The actor takes in not only what is given about the character, but also whatever the character might take in through his or her own senses, memories, experiences, education, expectations, attitudes, and so forth. Little by little a character is built up which the actor can inhabit comfortably and with assurance, even responding appropriately to unexpected events. At the outset, some of this will be explicit in the text, providing both a point of departure and a framework with which all subsequent interpretation must remain consistent or traceable. The actor infers the whole iceberg from the visible tip. Thus different actors will infer different characters from the small piece or aspect of a person that appears in the text. There is seldom a moment when a human being is not wanting to do something. Wants create drama and tension, giving life to a character. Wants cause action and create conflict. Wants are the motivating energy of human life, all life, and a system of wants defines every dramatic character just as it defines every human being. The actor will best bring the character convincingly to life by knowing and living the character's wants, large and small, as his own. The development of character requires the actor to do something, not merely to describe or demonstrate something. The purpose for which the character is developed is so the actor can act, not just be. Active, actable wants are the basis of character upon which all the fine, finishing details are attached. The actor's power is increased when his or her want is directed to a specific person, and the vitality of that want is amplified when it depends on a specific response from that person.

These questions should be kept in mind, not only as the character is being developed but as it is being played (Table 1)

1. Who am I?
2. Where am I?
3. What do I want?
4. Why do I want it?
5. What is preventing me from getting it?
6. What am I willing to do to get what I want?
7. Whom do I want it from?
8. When do I need it?

For example, what does Browning's Duke ("My Last Duchess") want?

1. The Duke wants to talk about the picture of the Duchess.
2. The Duke wants to physically conceal the Duchess' portrait when he is not present, hence the curtain.
3. The Duke wants to impress the count's envoy with his wealth and taste.

The words of the text and nuances of the subtext are weighted and considered as they define the character's wants. The next great step is for the actor to accept and take on these wants as his or her own — to feel them, to act upon them, rejoicing as they succeed and suffering as they fail.

Having drawn a general picture from the text, it will be augmented and fleshed out in other kinds of exercises. The actor begins to build from specific details, and begins to ask specific questions about the character — questions the actor must answer for her or himself. Sidney Poitier puts it this way: "I must understand what are the driving forces in the man. In order to understand that, you must find out what are his political, social, economic, and religious milieu." [1]

Ideas about the role should not become too rigid. Although they are the basis for developing a character, the actor must remain open minded, and prepared to make adjustments and to continue to probe into subtleties of the characterization - in short, to grow.

Another aspect of realizing the character is to establish a general impression about his or her physical and vocal personality. Laurence Olivier approached the problem from this direction, feeling that the visual and physical characteristics are vital: "to create a character, I first visualize a painting: the manner, movement, gestures, [and] walk all follow." [2] How does the character move and walk? Briskly or slowly, with harsh or gentle movements, an erect or stooped bearing? Is the character soft spoken or loud? Does he or she speak rapidly or slowly, in short bursts or in smooth, even phrasing? What pitch, inflectional patterns, and articulation will make the character more meaningful? How does this impression relate to social and personal

factors such as these: (Table 2)

Class status: upper, middle, or lower

Occupation: what kind of work, attitude towards this, income, hours, location, prospects

Education: level of education, what schools, best and worst subjects, what proficiency Home: kind of dwelling and neighborhood

Single, married, divorced, widowed, orphan, with family or alone Religion: what religious affiliation or belief, how devout, ethical and philosophical views

Race, nationality, or ethnic background

Age, health, vigor, handicaps

Political interests or activities, beliefs

Hobbies, amusements, sports

Sex life, moral views and attitudes

Ambitions, goals, achievements, failures

Attitude toward life: resigned, rebellious, defeatist, etc.

Being in costume can help bring a character's movements and mannerisms to life. Handling props such as personal items, weapons, food and tableware, walking sticks and umbrellas, all help in the same ways.

Find sensory elements in the poem. Some may be explicitly stated, of course, and others may be implied, but every character must be someplace, and that someplace must have some qualities, no matter how commonplace or barren. Imagine the setting where the poem takes place. Where is Ulysses? What is the climate? Hot, cold, wet, dry? Where are these "barren crags?" How is he dressed? When he introduces his son Telemachus, how does he relate to him? Where was Telemachus when Ulysses began to speak? Is he literally there within earshot? Ulysses is a seaman — look for the smell of the sea about him, the spray of the water in his face, the sound of the waves. Take the poem apart line by line looking for sensory elements. Does Ulysses begin speaking at mid-day, or when? As the poem proceeds to dusk and night, is this Ulysses' metaphor of old age?

Some exercises, as above, can be effectively carried out alone: others depend on interaction with other actors or class members. Among these are picture exercises, place exercises, entrance exercises, character trait exercises, and character's off stage life improvisations.

Improvise the circumstances immediately before the first line of the poem; literally, where is Ulysses coming from? What is Ulysses doing before he begins speaking? What is the time of day? Is it hot, cold, indoors or outside? Always look for specifics, for detail. To whom is Ulysses speaking? Has he just been with his wife? How does he feel about his wife? Have another student play Penelope; what were they doing? Set up an improvisation on "A day in the life of Ulysses" with a single actor or two or more actors. Eating dinner with his family, what are his habits, his daily routines? What does he do alone?

Use place exercises in which students set up the location where the monologue takes place. Where is “this still hearth” by which Ulysses speaks? If it is a room, bring in objects or facsimiles that might be in that room or place. Each student can bring in some object and help set up the place — a painting, other art objects, things that make the place unique or make it commonplace, give it its own character. Have the students write a description of the place, make a drawing or a ground plan.

Picture exercises use photos or prints of period paintings that may relate to the poet, the character, the place, or in some other way to the poem, e.g., in simply giving a feeling for the times. Using a picture or image of the character, students physically recreate the picture as accurately and specifically as they can: how is the character’s head tilted? What is in the character’s hands? What is the character’s posture? Recreate facial expressions. Student observers compare the picture and the actor to make sure the actor is as true to the picture as possible. Freeze in a tableau. Recreate the dress of the character, and have students take Polaroid pictures of the actor’s recreation (this is always fun). The intent here is to create muscularly and in as great and accurate detail as possible the pose of the picture, not necessarily the mood. The pose will create its own feeling in the actor, and when the actor leaves the pose some of that feeling will come along, too, enabling the actor to walk in comfort and assurance in the character’s shoes. Many actors use portraits of royalty or others of high social status while developing classic roles . The several actors of a tableau may emerge from their positions into an improvisation which reinforces their entry into the identity of their characters.

Picture exercises are useful not only as regards specific characters that actors intend to portray, but also as simple skill building exercises. Any interesting picture can be used as a starting point. Pictures showing people engaged in some activity are often the most productive, such as “The Stonecutters,” by Courbet, or Manet’s “Gare Saint-Lazare.”

Literary Interpretation We should not forget that the poems we are using for character development are fully entitled to simple appreciation as poetry, as they have been since first publication. A significant amount of class time will be devoted to this end. Corresponding attention will also be paid to the reading and appreciation of dramatic literature simple as literature.

In literary, as opposed to dramatic, interpretation we remain observers outside the character. We seek to explain, understand, and illuminate, not to enter into and become the character. Indeed, we may well enjoy analyzing a character whom we might be reluctant to portray. We may find ourselves judging, even condemning. We may resort to comparisons with other works of the same author, biographical knowledge of the author, or knowledge of historical details affecting the author.

For example, we might begin our literary interpretation of Ulysses in the following way, and find meaningful comparisons with Tithonus. Tennyson follows very closely Dante’s account of Ulysses final journey in *The Inferno* . The fact that Ulysses is old is only incidental in Dante, but is a central theme in Tennyson’s Ulysses. Is Ulysses a wise old man or an old fool? What tone is set early in the poem? The language ‘mete,’ ‘dole,’ and a ‘savage’ race is hard, scornful. His view of Penelope, ‘match’d with an aged wife,’ is insensitive. Is Ulysses condescending when he speaks of his son, Telemachus? How can we compare Ulysses and Tithonus? Is Tithonus the very opposite of Ulysses? Is the cold marble palace of Aurora what the barren crags of Ithaca are to Ulysses? Tithonus has been given the gift of immortality. Though he is given immortality, the God failed to give him immortal youth. As he ages does his marriage to Aurora become an unbearable burden? Is he as unhappily matched with an eternally youthful wife as Ulysses is with his aged one? Does Tithonus really want to be relieved of his divine gift and become an ordinary mortal and die? And what of Ulysses and his final voyage? Is this a night voyage into Death.

Sample Lesson Plans The lesson plans that follow are examples of how individual classes are organized to introduce specific techniques of character development to students within the context of specific monologues. Some early classes will consist of several shorter exercises of different techniques applied together to the same character so that students see how each element contributes to the whole. Characters for these classes will be drawn from dramatic monologues and soliloquies already familiar or accessible to the students, including those listed later. Because these are all taken from existing plays, each such character will be seen in relation to the whole play as well as within the monologue. The way in which the monologue contributes to the play will also be studied. Later we will return to this topic as students consider how our selected monologue poems might have contributed to hypothetical plays.

Each of several techniques will be applied intensively in separate classes for each monologue, as shown in the sample lesson plans that follow. The development of each character will be a composite which includes elements of separate exercises applied to the same monologue.

Sample Lesson Plan: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".

Costume and object exercise

Objectives:

To explore the character through costume and objects. To rehearse the monologue while dressed in partial costume. To use objects to encourage character behavior.

Materials:

hats, ties, suit jackets, shirts, cravats, scarves, gloves, handkerchiefs, smoking jacket, robes, walking stick, umbrella, cigarette case, eyeglasses, address book, cards, books, tea service, wine glasses and decanter (student will have numerous other ideas as to clothing and objects to help them explore character, place, and period.)

Description:

Each student will individually examine the clothing and objects choosing items that spark student's imagination in regard to character and situation.

1. Student rehearses monologue while dressing in costume as the character, all the while looking for character behavior.
 - a) How does Prufrock select and tie his tie?
 - b) How does Prufrock adjust his hat? Use his handkerchief?
 - c) How does he put on his gloves? Take off his gloves? Carry his gloves?
2. Student will explore how the character walks, sits, and moves in costume. Class may impose conditions by asking:
 - a) How does he walk in the rain? Does he walk in the rain?
 - b) How does he walk or sit when he's tipsy? Is he ever tipsy?
 - c) How does he sit and handle his cigarette case? Drink his tea?
3. While in costume, student will develop a situation and place suggested by the monologue. Student will improvise "A day in the life of Prufrock", eventually involving classmates as specific

people in Prufrock's life. Classmates may select or bring in costume pieces to develop the imaginary characters in Prufrock's life.

4. Students will have ideas of other exercises while wearing costume pieces and working with objects. For example, some female students may wish to change some references in the monologue to transform Prufrock into a female character, bringing into class costume items and objects to develop their character.

Final Rehearsal:

Students who have selected Prufrock as one of their monologue projects will rehearse the monologue in front of the class, having established where Prufrock is, what he is doing, and with whom he is speaking. Chosen costume and objects will be used to develop a very specific character. Polaroid pictures may be taken at this time.

Sample Lesson Plan: "My Last Duchess".

Picture exercise

Objectives:

To stimulate the imagination and enhance students' ability to discover character traits through studying photographs, portraits, period paintings, sculpture, and architecture of the period. To stimulate students' observational skills and attention to detail.

Materials:

Books of art reproductions, specifically Italian Renaissance, and Pre-Raphaelite images of Renaissance subjects. R.J. Berman's *Browning's Duke* with its portrait of Lucrezia de'Medici and Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara. Photographs and paintings of Robert Browning.

Description:

Each student picks a portrait to examine, and individually begins to recreate the character in the portrait. This exploration is done by recreating muscularly the pose of the person in the portrait.

1. A student should hold the picture within view of the actor, so that the actor can continually

observe the picture while recreating it.

2. Once the actor feels satisfied with the recreation, the class will then look at the picture and the actor to see how well the recreation has been accomplished. Classmates may observe some specific differences and help the actor to make physical corrections.

3. Class will pick a painting with more than one person in the painting. A group of students will go through the same process as above, then freeze in a tableau.

4. Students will break from the tableau and improvise the situation that they believe the painting and the characters in the painting suggest.

5. Students will select a picture that suggests a character from the monologue list for plays. After recreating the picture, students will rehearse their monologues.

6. As the actors create other characters, they will improvise as those characters in the presence of the Duke. Perhaps the Duke gives a party and the guests include Hamlet, Liubov Andreyevna, Grandma, etc. How do these characters relate to each other?

Final rehearsal:

With costume pieces and objects, the students will rehearse their monologues. The final rehearsal should have as many performance values as possible.

Sample lesson plan: "Ulysses"

Improvisations to establish the life of the character

Objectives:

Attention is directed toward the character's life. The actor prepares for the first entrance on stage. The entrance should come from a past, into the present, with a future in view. The actor needs to focus concentration on specific imaginary circumstances before making the first entrance, keeping in mind three steps of preparation:

1. What did I just do?
2. What am I doing right now?
3. What is the first thing I want?

Materials:

Any objects, costume pieces, or sensory behavior that will help the actor to believe more fully in his or her character.

Description:

When making an entrance the actor needs to come in with the expectancy of the character's life, encountering what actually moves in on the actor. The problems the character meets with should compel the actor to fulfill the character's need through the character's action. For example:

1. (Offstage) The actor gives attention to an item of character clothing. Perhaps Ulysses examines his footwear after having stubbed his toe on a jagged rock.
2. Standing alone, the actor rubs his toe, remembering how it feels to have stubbed his toe. After concentrating on this specific sensory task, the actor picks up the character's primitive walking stick and makes the first entrance.
3. The actor/character comes on stage with particular focus on how he walks with a painful toe and the walking stick. He moves through the place paying close attention to the rocks and crags of his specific imaginary seacoast. Ulysses beckons to the men who have been working to set sail for the voyage Ulysses speaks of in the monologue poem.
4. Actors will set up a very specific place for an offstage character improvisation. In this place will be Ulysses, Penelope, and Telemachus having their Sunday dinner. Their servants will be there with food. It is very valuable to add food to improvisations, because it gives the actors something particularly enjoyable to do. Discovering how a character eats can unlock many doors for the actors.

Final Rehearsal:

Actor performs the monologue poem having chosen what costumes and objects are needed. The final rehearsals for each of the sample lesson plans may be somewhat alike, the difference being the individual character portrayals.

List of Monologues and Soliloquies from Shakespeare

Twelfth Night

Act II Scene I

Viola: "I left nothing with her; what means this lady?"

Henry the Fifth

Act V Scene III

Henry: King Henry's Saint Crispian speech.

The Tragedy of Richard the Third

Act I Scene I

Richard: "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this Sun of York."

Hamlet

Act II Scene I

Ophelia: "He took me by the wrist and held me hard,"

Hamlet

Act III Scene II

Hamlet: "Speak the speech, I pray you,"

Hamlet

Act I Scene II

Claudius: "Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death the memory be green,"

The Tragedy of Macbeth

Act 1 Scene V

Lady Macbeth: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be what thou art promised."

The Tragedy of Macbeth

Act I Scene III

Porter: "Here's a knocking indeed!"

Othello

Act V Scene II

Othello: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,"

Monologues Other than Shakespearean

Six Characters in Search of an Author by Luigi Pirandello

Act II (beginning)

Stepdaughter: "My little darling! You're frightened, aren't you?"

The Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekhov

Act II

Liubov Andreyevna: "Oh my sins! Look at the way I've always squandered money, continually."

The Conduct of Life by Maria Irene Fornes

Scene IV

Olimpia: "As soon as I finish doing this. You can't just ask me to do what you want me to do, and interrupt what I'm doing."

The Sandbox by Edward Albee

Grandma: "Honestly! What a way to treat an old woman."

A Doll House by Henrik Ibsen

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Act III

Nora: "Perhaps, but you neither think nor talk like the man I could love."

Fences by August Wilson

Act I Scene IV

Troy: "I walked on down to Mobile and hitched up with some of them fellows that was heading this way."

Act II Scene II

Rose: "I been standing with you! I been right here with you, Troy."

The Visit by Friedrich Duerrenmatt

Act II

Claire: "How strange it is, Anton! How clearly it comes back to me!

Medea by Euripides, translated by Frederic Prokosch (line 1005)

Medea: "Now, my friends, has come the hour of my triumph."

A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams

Blanche: "He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl."

Buried Child by Sam Shepard

Act III

Vince: "I was gonna run last night. I was gonna run and keep right on running."

Dancing at Lughnasa by Brian Friel

Act I

Michael: "When I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936 different kinds of memories offer themselves to me."

Endnotes

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