

Essay 1: Dramatic Monologues
ENWR 106: College Writing II
Instructor: Bender

Your essay should focus on ONE of the following poems:

Paul Durcan, “The Arnolfini Marriage”; “Lord Ribblesdale”
Ai, “The Mother’s Tale”; “The Good Shepherd: Atlanta, 1981”; “The Death of Francisco Pizarro”

In these poems, the speakers often, intentionally or unintentionally, expose themselves as astonishingly cruel, or psychologically disturbed, or hypocritical, or weak, or at the very least, misguided. Yet the narrators may also elicit from us—against all odds—pity, or even sympathy. How do the poets manage this? How do the speakers reveal their interior conflicts, tensions, and anxieties? How do the contradictions within the poems reveal the complex humanity of these characters?

Write an essay in which you use at least some of the above ideas to develop a thesis about one of the poems by Ai or Durcan. Although your essay will focus on closely reading just one poem, it is likely that you will want to refer to other dramatic monologues you have read. For example, a poem on “The Mother’s Tale” might be likely to mention the ways in which Ai seems to take a different approach to the mother-son exchange in the famous poem by Langston Hughes. And since Browning’s dramatic monologues have had such a powerful influence on later poets, it is possible that you’ll want to refer to one or more of his poems. These comparisons may be particularly useful to think about as moments of introduction or transition or conclusion.

Some questions to ask while developing your thesis:

- How do the speakers try to shock or discomfort the reader?
- Do the speakers reveal things about themselves gradually, or all at once? In either case, what is the effect of the pace of revelations?
- Does the poem use techniques from Browning’s poems? Or does it consciously depart from his style/tone/method?
- As in Browning, irony is central to both poets’ monologues. How does the use of irony support your particular thesis?
- Take special note of ambiguous imagery, double meanings, metaphors, etc....
- In Durcan, what is the point of his use of anachronism?
- Whom is the speaker addressing? Are we eavesdropping, or is this a formal speech to an obvious “reader”? Why might this make a difference?

***Keep in mind that it is always more interesting to offer an argument that is not obvious or expected.**

***No research is required for this paper. Your only sources will be the poems we have read so far, and the “Critical Statements” on the next page.**

Critical Statements for Essay #1

In writing your essay, you may choose to incorporate elements from one or more of the quotations below. However, these critical responses should not be the catalyst for your essay; that should come from the text itself. Instead, use these statements if you think they will help

you further your argument. Alternatively, your argument may cause you to disagree with one of these statements—in which case you may also find them useful.

On Ai:

1. Although these poems may look at first like stories, or dreams, they are more essentially portraits of human souls: Gothic, expressionist portraits, with emphatic, haunted strokes...” - **Robert Pinsky** [Note that here, Pinsky is using the metaphor of the poet as painter (painting in *strokes*)].
2. In their substance, her [Ai’s] poems are often obsessed with the violence in the world to the exclusion of other areas of human experience. They give us the voices of victims, the voices of their victimizers or the voices of observers trapped in the carnage. It’s unlikely that one would encounter a dramatic monologue by this poet fashioned from, say, the night thoughts of Alexander Graham Bell on the eve of his momentous discovery. Ai – her real name is Florence Anthony – has a strong imagination made all the stronger by her sectarianism, her radical reductiveness and one-sidedness when it comes to her subject matter. As far as the poem is concerned, she seems to say, the world is what it is – and what it is is traumatic and terrifying. - **From the NY Times review of Ai’s book *Dread* (review by VIJAY SESHADRI), May 4, 2003.**
3. Like Browning, she [Ai] is almost perversely fascinated by the problems of evil.... Ai invariably captures her speakers in physical and psychological crisis, and she permits them neither eloquence nor redemption. Her characters offer a kind of stammering, desperate testimony, last-ditch efforts at self-justification before acknowledging their damnation. As the title of her new collection implies, Ai is ultimately a religious poet, but the deity she envisions is wrathful and she seems to identify with such a figure: these are poems in which violence and destruction become eerily voluptuous. -**From the NY Times review of Ai’s *Sin* (review by DAVID WOJAHN), June 8, 1986.**

On Durcan:

1. [On the poems about paintings] ...The poet usually inhabits one of the figures in a painting, frequently a minor figure or detail, and from this locus of identity speaks some peculiar revelation, most often at a blindingly oblique angle to what would normally be seen in (and as) the painting itself. -**Eamon Grennan, “Prime Durcan” in *Facing the Music: Irish Poetry in the Twentieth Century*. Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1999.**
2. Durcan's poems contain an essentially empathetic morality. He slips from character to character (a bishop, a milkman, a refugee, a single mother, a roofer), and succeeds in demonstrating how near the foreign can be, and how comic or common the concerns. -**From *The Guardian’s* review of Durcan’s *The Art of Life* (review by Nick Laird), March 2005.**

[A homework assignment that preceded the essay is below. It’s difficult for students to get used to reading like this, and so this poem exercise is basically an in-class close reading assignment; I circulate while they are writing notes and then paragraphs on each other’s poems, and I try to gather together small groups to model close reading as I walk around. Students are often impressed when they realize that meanings they didn’t even intend can be found in their own texts.]

English 106, Fall 2006 Dramatic Monologue Unit: Poem Assignment

Prof. A. Bender

Before you write your dramatic monologue poem (more on that below), do the reading for class (in a folder on BB), which includes 5 more dramatic monologues.

By now, your repertoire includes:

Ai, "The Mother's Tale"; "The Good Shepherd: Atlanta, 1981"; "The Death of Francisco Pizarro"
Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess"; "Porphyria's Lover"

Paul Durcan, "Interior with a Sleeping Maid and her Mistress"; "The Arnolfini Marriage"; "Lord Ribblesdale"

Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son"

Gabriel Spera, "My Ex-Husband"

In the poem you will write for class on Friday, your purpose is to write as if you are the person who speaks the lines of the poem (Lord Ribblesdale, the Duke, the Arnolfinis). Imagine being that person: what tone will the speaker take? What issues or events will the speaker address, and to whom? What is the speaker most concerned about? Does he or she have something to hide, or something to reveal? Or, perhaps, both? What word choices will help reveal the character of the speaker?

Your poem should voice the persona of one of the figures in the paintings posted on BB (as in Durcan's poems). The paintings include Manet's "A Bar at the Folies-Bergère," Bruegel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," Jacob Lawrence's Panel #3 from "The Migration Series," and two paintings by John Currin: "Heartless" and "Lovers in the Country." If there is another painting you would like to use as your inspiration, please email me a link to it, and I'll put it up there too. Include at least one metaphor or simile, and think about the various meanings it will add to the poem. Think about the images you use, your word choice, the way you break up lines and stanzas. Please DO NOT use a strict rhyme scheme throughout the poem. You may choose to use rhyme occasionally, but I want your focus to be on using words and images for their precise meanings (and possibly double-meanings!). Your reading of the painting itself should guide your writing. Can you find a slightly unexpected way to approach the painting, as Durcan does?

Print out a copy of "your" painting and bring it to class with you. In class, you will exchange your poem (and its painting) with another student. Then, you will write an in-class "close reading" of your classmate's poem.

Bring TWO copies of your poem to class. I expect we will have time for two exchanges, so you'll be able to close-read and write about two of your classmates' poems.