

# Comprehensive Examination Rationale

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Exam Areas:

1) Historical Period: Modernist Roots of Contemporary American Narrative Poetry  
Module: Contemporary American Narrative Poetry and Novels in Verse

2) Literary Genre: Dramatic Monologue in English  
Module: Dramatic Poetry and Verse Drama

## *Overview*

My reason for choosing the exam areas listed above is to deepen an already abiding scholarly and creative interest in what I see as the dominant modes of narrative poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries: the long poetic sequence, the extended narrative poem, the verse novella and verse novel, dramatic monologue, dramatic poetry, and verse plays. To this end, I've created the following exam areas: 1) Modernist Roots of Contemporary American Narrative Poetry, with a module on Contemporary American Narrative Poetry and Novels in Verse; and 2) Dramatic Monologue in English, with a module on Dramatic Poetry and Verse Drama.

Essential to the formation of these lists is the difficult question of literary genre, particularly the lyric, narrative, and dramatic genres of poetry, which I will discuss at greater length below. For now, *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* offers this cursory definition: "Traditionally, the lyric expressed personal emotion; the narrative propelled characters through a plot; [and] the dramatic presented an enactment" (304). While these definitions are perhaps too tidy for the purposes of this rationale, it's worthwhile to note my interest in exploring that sense of "enactment," of dramatic context, in the dramatic-monologue list; and of propulsion, of how characters move from point A to point B along a plot, and how those characters develop while they participate in this movement, in the narrative list. Also worth noting here is Ralph Cohen's observation in his essay "History and Genre" (1986) that "genres are open categories" (204). Like T.S. Eliot's idea that each truly original work of art, once created, slightly alters those that came before it (38), Cohen claims that each new "member" of a genre alters that genre to which it belongs by "adding, contradicting, or changing constituents" therein (204).

While both lists focus on poetry, they also include secondary critical and scholarly works: books and essays that will provide multiple critical frameworks through which to view the selected poetry. This critical work includes sources as diverse as Aristotle's *Poetics* (335 BC) and William Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1801), as well as Mikhail Bakhtin's study in narratology, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), and Ralph Cohen's abovementioned "History and Genre" (1986), an influential essay on genre theory. My aim in selecting these works is not to conform to any one theoretical ideology, but to elucidate the poems themselves.

Mostly, though, I hope that a comprehensive and systematic study of these areas will support my ambitions as a poet, teacher, and critic. In addition to the undergraduate and graduate literature courses I aim to teach on the narrative and dramatic genres of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry, I would also like to expand my understanding and fill in the gaps of my reading within these complementary fields so that I can continue my creative and scholarly work with dramatic monologue, dramatic poetry, and the sustained narrative poem, work I hope will one day culminate in a novella-in-verse or a novel-in-verse. I'm thinking here of Eliot's notion that, in order to create a truly new work, the artist must be steeped in the poetry of the past, that, in Eliot's words, "no poet, no artist of any art, has his [or her] complete meaning alone" (38).

### *Modernist Roots of Contemporary American Narrative Poetry*

Genre distinction is an inherently slippery enterprise. As Cohen observes, critics since Aristotle—who famously divided poetry into epic, tragic, comic, and dithyrambic—have suggested that “genres are any group of texts selected by readers to establish continuities that distinguish this group from others” (203). To Aristotle's four fundamental genres we could easily add lyric, verse narrative, prose narrative, narrative-lyric, dramatic-lyric, or any combination thereof. Furthermore, if we consider Goethe's *Dichtarten*—which include allegory, ballad, elegy, epigram, epistle, fable, ode, parody, satire, etc.—the combination of possible hybrids becomes staggering indeed.

The first exam area, *Modernist Roots of Contemporary American Narrative Poetry*, which satisfies the historical-period requirement, attempts to clarify, justify, and update the generic term “narrative” within the context of verse. As primary texts, this area includes most of the major canonical poetry of American Modernism, focusing on the long poetic sequence, e.g. Pound's *Cantos*, H.D.'s *Trilogy*, and Hart Crane's *The Bridge*. Beyond the more explicitly narrative work of the less-discussed E.A. Robinson and Robinson Jeffers, both of whom wrote novellas-in-verse, exposure to the long poetic sequences written during this period allowed the poets on the module list—Contemporary Americans like Louis Simpson, Rita Dove, and Vikram Seth—to explore longer forms in a less-fragmented mode of composition, incorporating what they learned from these masters about lyrical structure into their work with the extended narrative poem and novel-in-verse.

Like Cohen, and Derrida before him, I recognize both the futility and necessity of genre distinctions. While any single work can never possess all of the characteristics that will identify it as being part of a particular type or class of literature, it is negligent to deny that texts share certain essential traits. Grouping texts into genres offers an opportunity to better understand the nature of one text in relation to another in the same way that categorizing grosbeaks and juncos as “perching-birds” helps ornithologists understand shared behaviors among species. Andrew Hudgins' verse novel, *After the Lost War* (1988), for example, bears the subtitle “A Narrative,” whereas David Mason subtitles his book, *Ludlow* (2007), “A Verse-Novel.” Both book-length sequences are sustained narratives written in verse; both embellish the lives of historical characters who lived through particularly violent periods of US history; and both utilize long passages of blank verse to tell their stories. Should we classify these works as two separate types within the genre of narrative poetry? What is gained by these genre identifications? What kind of

cultural work do they accomplish? How can we resolve the discrepancy between the subtitles of these poems? Should these sustained verse-narratives be considered epics? Are they even poems at all? To address these and other questions, it's useful to consider poems such as *After the Lost War* and *Ludlow* in a generic context, to examine which characteristics of the narrative genre these poems contradict, embrace, and ignore.

### *Dramatic Monologue*

As Robert Langbaum observes in *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), one of the first and most exhaustive book-length studies of the genre, "no one has quite known what to do with the dramatic monologue except to classify it, to distinguish kinds of dramatic monologues from both the lyrical and the dramatic or narrative genres" (75). Langbaum goes on to lament the common mistake made by critics who insinuate that every lyric poem in which the speaker appears to be someone other than the poet is a dramatic monologue, a criteria so indeterminate that it would include almost all first-person narratives, poems as various as, for example, Theocritus' *Idylls* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the soliloquies of Shakespeare and the nightmarish prose poems of Russell Edson (75).

Still, these resemblances exist. The dramatic character of Polyphemus narrates a section of the *Idylls*; *The Canterbury Tales* are told by pilgrims on their way to the Shrine of Saint Thomas Becket; Shakespeare's characters confess their thoughts on stage; and many of Edson's prose poems are spoken by women. The problem then becomes how to distinguish dramatic monologue from other poetic genres such as lyric, or deciding whether or not such a distinction should even be made. My contention is that it must.

Dramatic monologue begins as a Victorian reaction to the Romantic lyric. As Herbert F. Tucker states in "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric" (1985), "Tennyson and Browning arrived independently at the first recognizably dramatic monologues" (228), which were "St. Simeon Stylites" (1833) and the paired "Madhouse Cells": "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" and "Porphyria's Lover" (1837). Unlike the Romantic lyrics written in personae, such as those that appear in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789), these three dramatic monologues are narrated by speakers so extreme in their asceticism or cruelty that the views expressed therein could never be mistaken as those of Tennyson or Browning.

The opposing views of Langbaum and Tucker on this subject are also illuminating. While Langbaum argues for the uniting of dramatic monologue with "the dramatic lyric and lyrical dramas of the romanticists," contending that the Romantic lyric and the dramatic monologue are both poetics of sympathy or "projectiveness" (79), Tucker's position is that the two are more indelibly fractured. Where Langbaum refers to dramatic monologue as a "form," for example, Tucker, in all three works that appear on this list, calls dramatic monologue a "genre." This difference in classification can at first seem insignificant. But consider Tucker's principle argument in "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric." The dramatic monologues of the Victorian era, Tucker claims, were designed to "preserve the self on the far side of, and as a result of, a contextual dismissal of attenuated Romantic lyricism and its merely soulful claims" (229). Here Tucker counteracts Langbaum's idea of projectiveness, that the Victorian dramatic

monologue is still a form of the soul confessing itself to itself, with the more subjective idea of “de-and re-constructed selves strung on the tension of their texts” (220). In other words, where Langbaum observes the projection of an a-temporal, autonomous, and pseudo-religious “soul,” Tucker sees the creation of a self, a character trapped within a historical context, subject not only to the demands of his or her own age, body, and psychology, but the pressures the text itself exerts upon that self.

Another important distinction between lyric and dramatic monologue is that lyric is designed to be read whereas dramatic monologue, like dramatic poetry in general, is designed to be exchanged. I’m not talking about performing a poem in front of an audience; of course any piece of writing can be read aloud. What I mean is that, because dramatic monologues come equipped with context or occasion, they can be acted. Many lyrics, however, would seem extremely strange indeed as utterances between individuals. Think, for example, how odd it would be if one individual approached another on the street, muttering, “So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens.” While it would certainly be unsettling if an equally odd character said to another, “Some lump, ah God, of *lapis lazuli*, / Big as a Jew’s head cut off at the nape,” at least the listener could infer that he or she were hearing the dying words of a corrupt bishop pleading with one of his illegitimate sons to one-up his old rival, Gandolf, in the opulent embellishment of his tomb.

As the *Princeton* reminds us, *lyric*—which originates from the Greek *lyra*, a musical instrument—was originally meant to be sung, chanted, or recited to musical accompaniment (713). In lyric poems, as opposed to narrative (or epic) and dramatic poetry, “the musical element is intrinsic to the work intellectually as well as aesthetically: it becomes the focal point for the poet’s perceptions as they are given a verbalized form to convey emotional and rational values” (*Princeton* 713). Lyric poetry, in other words, is designed to be sung, to be expressed melodically, whereas dramatic poetry is designed to be spoken, to be communicated among performers within a dramatic context. John Stuart Mill is useful here, especially his distinction between *eloquence*, which is heard, and *poetry*, which is overheard. Dramatic monologue seems to possess this aspect of the overheard inherently, as part of its genetic (or generic) makeup; these are poems *designed* to be overheard by the reader, as if the reader were eavesdropping on a conversation (e.g. “My Last Duchess”) or even granted access to the thoughts of the speaker (e.g. “Porphyria’s Lover”). In this sense, dramatic monologue is exactly what Mill claimed eloquence to be: “feeling pouring itself forth to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action” (1216). But the “other mind” of a dramatic monologue is a silent auditor, the character to whom the poem is addressed within a dramatic occasion, rather than an audience outside of this context, i.e. the reader. Dramatic monologue becomes the record of that “courting” and “endeavoring,” of the narrator’s attempts to influence the mind of his or her listener(s), and is therefore “overheard” by the reader who, in Langbaum’s terms, will either sympathize with or judge the narrator.

Through extensive reading of dramatic monologue in English, beginning with a selection of Shakespeare’s soliloquies and monologues (which is said to have influenced the creation of the genre by Tennyson and Robert Browning in the 1830’s) and Robert

Browning's epic poem in eleven voices *The Ring and the Book*, I hope to clarify how this ambiguous genre has consolidated prior traditions, and to trace how it has been remade and adapted in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. By revisiting the dramatic monologues of such 20<sup>th</sup> century masters as T. S. Eliot, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Louise Gluck, and Ai, I'll also define dramatic monologue in contrast to the dramatic poetry of poets like Thomas Hardy and Robert Frost, as well as a selection of verse plays from the Greek tragedians through Derek Walcott.