

Understanding the Text

12 | SPEAKER: WHOSE VOICE DO WE HEAR?

Poems are personal. The thoughts and feelings they express belong to a specific person, and however general or universal their sentiments seem to be, poems come to us as the expression of an individual human voice. That voice is often a voice of the poet, but not always. Poets sometimes create characters just as writers of fiction or drama do. And the speaker of a poem may express ideas or feelings very different from the poet's own and in a distinct voice.

Usually there is much more to a poem than the characterization of the speaker, but often it is necessary first to identify the speaker and determine his or her character before we can appreciate what else goes on in the poem. And sometimes, in looking for the speaker of the poem, we discover the gist of the entire poem.

NARRATIVE POEMS AND THEIR SPEAKERS

In the following narrative poem, the poet relies mainly on one speaker with a highly distinctive voice. This speaker acts as a narrator. Generally speaking in the third-person plural, on behalf of a group, however, the speaker sometimes quotes the remarks of individual members of the group (lines 1–2, 16–20), who are thus also speakers in the poem, even if they are never individually identified. As you read the poem, notice how your impressions of Hard Rock and of the group are shaped by both the narrator's words and those of the speakers he quotes.

ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane

Hard Rock was "known not to take no shit
From nobody," and he had the scars to prove it:
Split purple lips, lumped ears, welts above
His yellow eyes, and one long scar that cut
5 Across his temple and plowed through a thick
Canopy of kinky hair.

The WORD was that Hard Rock wasn't a mean nigger
Anymore, that the doctors had bored a hole in his head,
Cut out part of his brain, and shot electricity
10 Through the rest. When they brought Hard Rock back,
Handcuffed and chained, he was turned loose,

Like a freshly gelded stallion, to try his new status.
 And we all waited and watched, like indians at a corral,
 To see if the WORD was true.

- 15 As we waited we wrapped ourselves in the cloak
 Of his exploits: "Man, the last time, it took eight
 Screws to put him in the Hole."¹ "Yeah, remember when he
 Smacked the captain with his dinner tray?" "He set
 The record for time in the Hole—67 straight days!"
 20 "Ol Hard Rock! man, that's one crazy nigger."
 And then the jewel of a myth that Hard Rock had once bit
 A screw on the thumb and poisoned him with syphilitic spit.

- The testing came, to see if Hard Rock was really tame.
 A hillbilly called him a black son of a bitch
 25 And didn't lose his teeth, a screw who knew Hard Rock
 From before shook him down and barked in his face.
 And Hard Rock did nothing. Just grinned and looked silly,
 His eyes empty like knot holes in a fence.

- And even after we discovered that it took Hard Rock
 30 Exactly 3 minutes to tell you his "rst name,
 We told ourselves that he had just wised up,
 Was being cool; but we could not fool ourselves for long,
 And we turned away, our eyes on the ground. Crushed.
 He had been our Destroyer, the doer of things
 35 We dreamed of doing but could not bring ourselves to do,
 The fears of years, like a biting whip,
 Had cut grooves too deeply across our backs.

1968

As we might expect, we learn a good deal in this poem about its title character: The "rst stanza lets us know that he is a black prison inmate and vividly describes his hair and his various "scars" (line 2) as evidence of his "erce, indomitable character, his refusal ever to back down or let anyone treat him badly. In the third stanza we hear about some of his more famous past "exploits" (16). But by the time we get to the third stanza we've been warned that this Hard Rock might already be a thing of the past. And the fourth stanza and the "rst part of the "fth and "nal one con"rm that fear, presenting a man radically transformed and reduced by the lobotomy and electroshock therapy described in stanza two. The poem thus becomes, in part, the tragic tale of Hard Rock's fast, hard fall. And it would be worthwhile to think further about just what other aspects of the poem help to make that fall seem so fast, so hard, so poignant.

One might be the fact that Hard Rock is literally never allowed to speak for himself in the poem. Everything we learn about him comes to us from the narrator and the other speakers whom that narrator quotes—all Hard Rock's fellow inmates. And it is this group, this "we," and its perceptions of Hard Rock even more than the man himself that arguably emerge as H% & R14/ R\$(*' , . 's major focus. The poem begins, after all, with what "was 'known'"—and, as the quotation marks

1. Solitary con"nemen. Screws: guards.

here stress, said—about Hard Rock by these men (1). It ends with a stanza devoted almost exclusively to their collective reaction to his transformation. How else might the poem work to train our focus on its speakers? How, ultimately, does it characterize them, through how they speak and what they say? What exactly does Hard Rock and Hard Rock’s fall mean to these men, and why?

Not all narrative poems are as much about their speakers as “Hard Rock Returns” is. Robert Frost’s “O* (, O* (—,” for instance, features as its main speaker a third-person omniscient narrator, one who isn’t a character in the gruesome story he tells and about whom we learn nothing speci" c. ““Out, Out—” thereby keeps our attention utterly riveted on the characters and the action themselves. Yet this poem’s effect ultimately depends on this very fact and thus, like all narrative poems, on its particular narrator and mode of narration, on all its speakers’ words. To fully experience and better understand such poems, we can always draw upon the very same concepts and questions about narrators and characters that we draw upon when reading " ction (see chs. 3 and 4).

SPEAKERS IN THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

Like all dramatic monologues, the following poem has no narrator. Rather, it consists entirely of the words a single, " ctional speaker speaks to a " ctional auditor in a speci" c time, place, and dramatic situation, much as would a character in a play. As you read the poem, pay attention to the details that alert you to the time, place, and situation and that help to characterize the speaker, the auditor, and their relationship.

A. E. STALLINGS

Hades² Welcomes His Bride

Come now, child, adjust your eyes, for sight
 Is here a lesser sense. Here you must learn
 Directions through your " ngertips and feet
 And map them in your mind. I think some shapes
 5 Will gradually appear. The pale things twisting
 Overhead are mostly roots, although some worms
 Arrive here clinging to their dead. Turn here.
 Ah. And in this hall will sit our thrones,
 And here you shall be queen, my dear, the queen
 10 Of all men ever to be born. No smile?
 Well, some solemnity be" ts a queen.
 These thrones I have commissioned to be made
 Are unlike any you imagined; they glow
 Of deep-black diamonds and lead, subtler
 15 And in better taste than gold, as will suit
 Your timid beauty and pale throat. Come now,
 Down these winding stairs, the air more still

2. Greek god of the underworld (also called Hades) and of death; he married Persephone after abducting her from her mother, Demeter, goddess of corn, grain, and the earth’s harvest.

And dry and easier to breathe. Here is a room
 For your diversions. Here I've set a loom
 20 And silk unraveled from the "nest shrouds
 And dyed the richest, rarest shades of black.
 Such pictures you shall weave! Such tapestries!
 For you I chose those three thin shadows³ there,
 And they shall be your friends and loyal maids,
 25 And do not fear from them such gossiping
 As servants usually are wont. They have
 Not mouth nor eyes and cannot thus speak ill
 Of you. Come, come. This is the greatest room;
 I had it specially made after great thought
 30 So you would feel at home. I had the ceiling
 Painted to recall some evening sky—
 But without the garish stars and lurid moon.
 What? That stark shape crouching in the corner?
 Sweet, that is to be our bed. Our bed.
 35 Ah! Your hand is trembling! I fear
 There is, as yet, too much pulse in it.

1993

So, what do you think of the speaker, his bride (and auditor), and their bower of wormy wedded bliss? Stallings's title alerts us that the former is Hades. If we know our Greek mythology (or simply read the handy footnote), we go into the poem knowing, too, that his bride is also his kidnap victim, Persephone (whose name, interestingly enough, never appears here). Yet Hades, who is the bad guy, puts a unique new spin on this old, familiar story by presenting it from the perspective of Hades—or, in Stallings's words, from "the bad guy's point of view"—so as to also make him seem anything but the straightforwardly ghoulish devil or brutish villain we might expect. Hades, after all, speaks formally, respectfully, even tenderly to his bride and "queen" from the beginning (line 9), inviting her into a new home to which he recognizes she must "adjust" (1) and offering advice about how to do so (1–5). As he leads her through its rooms and points out its various features, it becomes clear (long before he explicitly says so, in lines 29–30) that he has taken pains to create an environment as tasteful, grand, and hospitable, even homey, as he knows how. He is also sensitive to his bride's reactions, noticing that she isn't smiling (10); that she seems startled by what turns out to be the bed she will share with him; that after he twice utters the words "our bed. Our bed," she "is trembling" (34–35). The fact that he repeats those words also implies that he's eagerly anticipating his wedding night. As the details accumulate, the horrors of this home and of the life and marriage to which this bride is doomed become as palpably apparent to readers as they are to her. Yet Hades's character remains ambiguous: Is he being knowingly malevolent, grandiose, even abusive by arranging and presenting things as he does and by rationalizing his bride's reactions? Is he enjoying scaring the pants off his bride, as it were? Or might he instead be, as one reviewer contends, "engag[ing] in the same self-deception as" any ordinary "mortal lover" might, so genuinely bent on

3. Especially in the sense of "phantoms"; also suggesting shades, another word both for "ghost" and for Hades.

his bride sharing his delight and so inured to his own literally hellish milieu that he can't or won't see the truth?

Your answers and your interpretation of the speaker here, as in all dramatic monologues, depend entirely on the speaker's own words—on what he says and when and how he says it. The details accumulate into a fairly full, if—in this case—delightfully ambiguous, wonderfully creepy portrait, even though we do not have either a narrator's description or another speaker to give us perspective (as in Knight's "Hard Rock Returns"). As in other dramatic monologues, we do get some hint of another perspective via the reactions of the auditor, but we can only deduce what those reactions might be from what the speaker himself says.

In reading a dramatic monologue aloud, we would want our voice to suggest the feelings, motives, and attitudes the speaker's words imply. Like an actor, we would need to adopt the appropriate tone of voice and emphasis. Conversely, reading a dramatic monologue aloud, trying out various ways of delivering the lines, can help us figure out which interpretation of the speaker's character ultimately seems most faithful to the poem as a whole.

THE LYRIC AND ITS SPEAKER

With narrative poems and dramatic monologues, we are usually in no danger of mistaking the speaker for the poet. Lyrics may present more of a challenge. When there is a pointed discrepancy between the speaker of a lyric and what we know of the poet—when the speaker is a woman, for example, and the poet is a man—we know we have a fictional speaker to contend with and that the point (or at least one point) of the poem is to observe the characterization carefully.

Sometimes even in lyrics poets "borrow" a character from history and ask readers to factor in historical facts and contexts. In the following poem, for example, the Canadian poet Margaret Atwood draws heavily on facts and traditions about a nineteenth-century émigré from Scotland to Canada. The poem is a lyric spoken in the first person, but its speaker is a fictional character based on a real woman.

The poem comes from a volume called *The Journals of Susanna Moodie: Poems* by Margaret Atwood (1970). A frontier pioneer, Moodie (1803–84) herself wrote two books about Canada, *Roughing It in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings*, and Atwood found their observations rather stark and disorganized. She wrote her Susanna Moodie poems to refocus the "character" and to reconstruct Moodie's actual geographical exploration and self-discovery. To fully understand these thoughts and meditations, then, we need to know something of the history behind them. Yet even without such knowledge, we can appreciate the poem's powerful evocation of its speaker's situation and feelings.

MARGARET ATWOOD

Death of a Young Son by Drowning

He, who navigated with success
the dangerous river of his own birth
once more set forth

on a voyage of discovery
 5 into the land I floated on
 but could not touch to claim.

 His feet slid on the bank,
 the currents took him;
 he swirled with ice and trees in the swollen water

 10 and plunged into distant regions,
 his head a bathysphere;⁴
 through his eyes' thin glass bubbles

 he looked out, reckless adventurer
 on a landscape stranger than Uranus
 15 we have all been to and some remember.

 There was an accident; the air locked,
 he was hung in the river like a heart.
 They retrieved the swamped body,

 cairn of my plans and future charts,
 20 with poles and hooks
 from among the nudging logs.

 It was spring, the sun kept shining, the new grass
 leapt to solidity;
 my hands glistened with details.

 25 After the long trip I was tired of waves.
 My foot hit rock. The dreamed sails
 collapsed, ragged.

 I planted him in this country
 like a flag.

1970

Even when poets present themselves as if they were speaking directly to us in their own voices, their poems present only a partial portrait, something considerably less than the full personality and character of the poet. Though there is not an obviously created character—someone with distinct characteristics that are different from those of the poet—strategies of characterization are used to present the person speaking in one way and not another. As a result, you should still differentiate between the speaker and the poet.

4. Manned spherical chamber for deep-sea observation.