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The dramatic dialogue, as I define it here, is a short narrative that relies principally upon conversation to disclose a significant relationship between people. It is written in a version of the third-person-limited point of view, one that permits the author no overt disclosure of the state of mind of any of the characters. The writer is in the position of a sound cameraman who can also enter the cutting room to select significant passages and discard others.

So much for essential definition. The uses of the dramatic dialogue in a freshman course, as well as in other composition courses, are many. After trying it in a number of classes I have found, first of all, that it makes an excellent change of pace in the middle of a semester heavily weighted towards expository writing. It often brings forth creative aptitudes that have hitherto lain unsuspected behind those impassive freshman faces, row on row. A different and usually far more interesting side of the student appears in these compositions, and by mid-semester, the teacher as well as the student is glad of a change. The dialogue is also a problem in exposition as well as in narration, and as such is relevant to the larger objectives of the conventional writing course, as well as a refreshment.

More specifically, writing the dramatic dialogue can accomplish the following kinds of objectives:

1. Provide training in the technical problems of using quotations. The exercise usually uncovers vast areas of ignorance in handling the simplest dialogue. The remedial work that ensues is not only of intrinsic value but also can be of great help in readying the students for using quotations in term papers.

2. Lead the student to a vivid understanding of the importance of point of view in writing. The advantages as well as the disadvantages of this choice of viewpoint are impressed on the student as he struggles to stick to his last throughout two or three pages of narration and dialogue.

3. Develop the writer's ear for human speech--word choice, patterns of stress, pitch, volume. When the student is forced to try to express a sarcastic tone without the crutch of explanation, for example, he is made to come to grips with some reasonably subtle considerations. Students also discover the curious fact that what sounds realistic in written dialogue is not necessarily what is actually said by real people in real conversations.

4. Demonstrate the importance, in all kinds of writing, of showing rather than asserting or explaining.

The dramatic dialogue also tends to lead students to write about situations they have observed themselves or participated in rather than about the long ago or far away. Dialogues in which Napoleon converses with Marshal Ney on the eve of a battle tend to be foredoomed; dialogues about dormitory situations (example: two new roommates disagreeing about where to hang a picture and discovering that they loathe each other), family disputes, or experiences in a part-time job tend to have a fair chance of success.

For those who would like to try using the dramatic dialogue, here are some suggestions and caveats based on my experience:

It is important, first of all, to discuss with the class what is meant by disclosing a "significant relationship" between people. I tell them I am not looking for a short story, but for movement of some kind--the surfacing or the resolving of tension, for example. Two or three pages of dialogue and narration will usually do the job, but it is best not to set a minimum length. It is better to encourage the student to write two very short dialogues than to risk inducing him to pad a single one.

Do not fail to stress repeatedly that the writer must not explain inner states of mind. According to the immutable laws ascribed to Murphy, some people will ignore this instruction anyway, but careful preparation can cut down the number. It is best to get down to cases, using examples. Is it permissible, for instance, to write, "Stetson remarked despondently"? The answer is no, but it can lead to a discussion of how to show despondence in other ways. Is it permissible to write "Stetson skipped joyfully back to the car"? Again, no, but perhaps that sentence without the word joyfully is actually stronger. And if so--why?

Read one entire example aloud. I have found that Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" works very well, and has the additional merit of taking less than fifteen minutes of class time. During the reading, one can pause to ask the significance of various details in the dialogue or narration, and thus show how Hemingway conveyed emotional atmosphere and plot situation with a minimum of fuss. Stories by many other writers, of course, will make equally good examples.

It is important to rule out writing the dialogue in play form. If you do not do this, several students will try it. Their results may be interesting, but they will have missed valuable training in handling the mechanics of quotations and attribution, not to mention in how to interweave dialogue, narrative, and description.

Finally, unless the class is exceptional, it is essential to go over the simple rules for punctuating quotations. Coincidentally, one can discuss the various ways of including attribution, and when attribution can be omitted to avoid tedium. A sheet of models helps.

I conclude with two examples, both from freshmen who had earlier shown no particular spark. In the first, the writer errs momentarily and describes a speaker's intentions (underlined words). I have found that both the successes and the failures of this paper provide a good basis for discussion with a class preparing to try this assignment. The second paper, somewhat contrived in its symmetry, comes from the early seventies, when there was a military draft. Until quite recently, it seemed a little dated.

Example A

A car pulled up to the college.

"Here we are."

"Is that where you're going to live?" she asked, pointing to a tall tower

"Yes," her daughter answered.

The girl and her parents got out of the car.

"I hope you didn't forget anything."

"I probably did."

"You know little Jimmy said he'd miss you."

"Tell him I'll miss him too."

They took three suitcases and a portable stereo out of the car and walked to the tower. Upon entering, her mother said, "Well this looks nice," trying to be cheerful. "I'm sure you'll like it." They took the elevator to her floor. As they walked into a room a girl and two boys walked out laughing.

"Hi," said the girl, "I'm Jean White. I guess I'm your roommate."

The two boys grabbed her arms and pulled her away, just as she finished her sentence. She yelled "See ya later," and laughed.

"They don't allow boys in here. Do they?" her father gasped.

"Of course Daddy. I'm in college."

"But Ellen, you never told me that."

"I didn't think I had to."

"Your mother and I are going to worry ourselves sick now."

"Why?"

"Because we're concerned."

"You think I'll get pregnant or something?"

"Don't use gutter talk like that in front of your mother, Ellen! Things like that are not discussed. We love you and are concerned, so naturally we'll worry. But don't think about it. We want you to have a good time, and meet nice boys."

"Yes, father."

"Don't forget if you want to talk about anything bothering you, you can call anytime. Even at night, just call."

They exchanged goodbyes and left.

Example B

The front door slammed shut.

"It's about time you're home," grumbled the father. "Where in hell have you been?"

"Out," answered the son.

"Out where?" asked the father.

"Just out."

"Ah, kids these days. They have no respect for authority. Well, let me tell you something, goldilocks. Your days of loafing around are over."

"Oh, yeah."

"Oh, yeah. There's a letter for you on the table."

The son walked over to the table where the letter lay and hesitated before opening the envelope.

"What does it say?" asked the father.

"I have to report for induction the first of next month," replied the son.

"That's the best news I've heard all day," grinned the father. "The army will teach you some decency. Yeah, and you can kiss that long hair goodbye, too. I still can't figure out why you turned into such a freak... Well, that's beside the point. Are you going to sell that motorcycle of yours?"

"No," replied the son.

"It's of no use to your mother or me. It will just be collecting dust for two years."

"I'm not going."

"What do you mean you're not going?" screamed the father. "You have to go. It's the law. Do you know what a law is, idiot?"

"I'm not going."

"All right, don't go. But you're not staying here."

"I know."

"O.K., then, fine. Start packing. The sooner the better."

As the boy walked toward the front door, he turned and said, "I've been packed for a long, long time."

The front door slammed shut.