

EXPLICATION OF "DREAM SONG 146" BY JOHN BERRYMAN

PERSONA MODE

The persona mode is a substitute voice for the poet, reflecting his emotions and deep personal desires. John Berryman's use of Henry as his persona is twice removed from the poet, as seen in his "Dream Song 146." In the poem, Berryman uses a first-person speaker as the primary voice and a third person voice, Henry, as the persona. Henry is seen through the voice of the first-person speaker. So, he is actually a "persona" of the first-person speaker. Thus, the "I" in the poem is both first and third person voices. When comparing public knowledge of the poet's personality, the relationship of the two voices to Berryman becomes apparent. The first-person speaker in the poem represents the poet's exterior, less emotional self. The third person, Henry, embodies the poet's interior, or emotional, self.

In actuality, Berryman appeared to avoid and rarely gave vent to his true emotions. In "Dream Song 146," the instrument of his emotional venting lies in the voice of Henry. However, just as Berryman distanced himself from his emotions, he remains even more distant from the bearer of his emotions. The first-person speaker of the poem stands between the poet and the persona. This "I" speaker sounds aloof, matter-of-fact, and withdrawn from any strong emotions, similar to Berryman himself. The first stanza shows him in the outside world while he resists his inner world, his feelings of death and the death of his friends. He remains in "the lovely motions of the air" and "the breeze." By attaching himself to "this" world, he ameliorates the horror that he, or the dead, might be in hell. He minimizes the impact of death—or the thought of death—by seeing the dead lying in "limp postures," which are non-threatening postures. Though he claims he sees the dead all around him, he uses the word "round" instead of "around." The word "round" gives the allusion of softness because roundness has no sharp edges or points. This word also forms a spherical image and subtly changes the more threatening, closed-in image of "around" to a nonthreatening image.

Although the speaker cushions the impact of death thoughts, remaining emotionally outside of them, he betrays the masked depth of his concern when he says the "limp postures/dramatiz(e) the dreadful word *instead*." In other words, the image of his dead friends chills him with the thought that it could be him *instead*. The sounds are harsh in this line, but his prior treatment of the subject deflects outward the "dramatizing" of the word "instead."

At this point, the speaker brings Henry into his thoughts of death and the dead. The speaker casts onto Henry the state of mind he prefers to experience. He tells us Henry is "lively" and "fit" for decadent and exotic fun. Characterizing Henry as "lively" and "fit" is a misrepresentation, which becomes evident in the first line of stanza two. The "I" speaker admits that Henry's heart is "elsewhere, down with them/ & down with Delmore specially, the new ghost." If he was truly "fit" at this time for a lively life, his heart couldn't be "elsewhere." To be "lively" and "fit" indicates a positive and up state. One's heart is either down and heavy or up and lively. Henry bears at once the speaker's guilt that he wishes to be outside of anguish—that is to say, to be lively and fit for debaucheries, etc.—and, at the same time, he bears the emotional burden of being "down with them"—the dead. So, by trying to stay unaffected, either by the anguish of grief or the guilt of avoiding it, the speaker transfers both to Henry. But, the cost of remaining unaffected, denies the speaker to experience emotions. For while the speaker is outside in the lovely air and breezes, he seems listless and lifeless; ironically, a state in sympathy with death.

Throughout the poem, he pushes away any association with emotions by changing the tone or tempo of Henry's presence. Henry, though, is deeply involved emotionally; he is "down with them," and "haunted" especially by Delmore's ghost. The heavy consonant sounds in the last three lines of stanza two betray this deep emotional state. Despite the speaker's attempt to displace his emotions onto Henry, his emotions intrude upon himself when he says in the last line, "and Join me o," thus, revealing his

connection to Henry. This stanza reveals Henry's state until the speaker's intrusion in this last line. Note again, the changing tone and sentiment of the last line. The rhyme of "o" with "woe" sounds almost silly, and the last line has a light-hearted, song quality about it. The seriousness of the preceding lines is broken, as if he suddenly discovers himself as Henry and must shake it off. We see here that the "I" speaker and Henry are but different sides of the same voice. The less attached first-person speaker unsuccessfully seals himself off from emotions and leaks through the persona. Neither the first-person speaker, nor the poet, can make the transition into the emotional state imbued to Henry nor stay completely free of it.

The last stanza also shows this inability to transcend to the third person. Henry emotionally cries out, "Down with them all!" The first-person speaker then breaks in again and appears to fuse himself with Henry's feelings, but he fails to make that connection. The first line of the last stanza is powerful, but once again, the speaker alters the tone by slipping into matter-of-fact type comments. Going too far inside, he steps outside again by proclaiming "their deaths were theirs." He prefers to "wait on for my own." By waiting for his own, he detaches himself from theirs. He further weakens the attachment by stating, "I have tried to be them, God knows I have tried." The word "try" is an avoidance word which allows immediate escape. Saying, "I will try," creates an automatic release of responsibility. It is difficult to criticize someone if they "try." That he "tried," God knows he "tried," produces a release from guilt and emotional investment.

Thus, the speaker thrusts onto Henry that part of him that needs to cry out, allowing him to remain aloof from it. And the poet is one more step removed from the persona than the speaker. The persona mode for Berryman gives an unusual distance to his emotional needs, essentially to free him from emotional involvement, though not entirely successful. The method is like telling a story about a friend through a friend. Berryman obviously feels a need to express his emotional state. Henry proves this. But, having created Henry for this release, Berryman still seems reluctant to deal with his emotions even at this distance. So, the first-person speaker intervenes like a mediating force. When Henry threatens to become too emotional, the "I" speaker stabilizes the poet again. Berryman's persona method is a split personality "I" speaker; or, a two-layer "I" speaker which expresses two parts of the poet, insulating him on two separate levels.