

Overall assessment

Yes. The principal characters in *Burke and Hare* have recognisable individual voices, and the core quartet are differentiated more strongly than might initially appear.

The clearest voices belong to:

- Hare;
- Burke;
- Margaret Hare;
- Helen McDougal;
- Dr Knox;
- Archibald Johnson;
- Alexander Monro.

Overall dialogue differentiation is approximately **8/10**.

The script's main strength is that Burke and Hare do not merely sound like two interchangeable Irish criminals. They share dialect, poverty and environment, but their language reveals different temperaments:

- **Hare plans, persuades and asserts control.**
- **Burke reacts, boasts and seeks recognition.**

Likewise, Margaret and Helen occupy the same criminal household but respond to it very differently.

William Hare

Hare has the strongest voice among the four West Port characters.

His dialogue is:

- confrontational;
- opportunistic;
- controlling;
- persuasive;
- mocking;
- quick to rationalise;
- increasingly cold.

The opening establishes that he is the instigator. Burke recognises the discrimination, but Hare challenges the foreman and throws the first punch. Burke's instinct is eventually to escape; Hare's is to turn back and taunt the men pursuing them.

Hare's defining verbal quality is his ability to convert desperation into a proposition. When the first body becomes available, he immediately sees commercial value:

"He might still be worth something."

"I've heard they pay for bodies."

Later, he transforms accidental profit into deliberate murder:

"Why live on scraps of hope when we have this?"

"And the dead don't talk."

He gives the criminal enterprise a philosophy. Burke frequently contributes to the violence, but Hare gives it direction.

His most persuasive speech is:

“Look at us. Look where we are. Piss and shit runs through the streets. Scraping by on morsels... You talk of gallows. I say we’re already dead.”

That is distinctly Hare. He does not simply say they need money. He turns poverty into moral permission.

He also repeatedly asserts ownership:

“This is our house. I make these decisions.”

“We decide together!”

“Give him over to me.”

Hare’s speech becomes more authoritarian as the story progresses. He begins as the bolder of two desperate men and develops into the self-appointed leader of the group.

Voice distinction: 9/10

William Burke

Burke has a related but distinctly different voice.

He is:

- impulsive;
- defensive;
- boastful;
- volatile;
- insecure;
- more openly brutal;
- less capable of planning ahead.

Where Hare builds arguments, Burke frequently reacts with short declarations:

“We need to go.”

“It’ll work.”

“We need the money!”

“I have it up here too!”

His insistence that he has intelligence “up here” is revealing. Hare’s authority makes Burke feel subordinate, and Burke uses dialogue to demand recognition.

This becomes particularly clear when Burke acts independently. Hare asks whether he thought the women were “shots for the doctor,” and Burke defends himself:

“They’re fair game.”

“We’re not always together when the chance comes!”

“I’ll show you just how capable I am.”

He is not merely motivated by money. He wants to prove that he can identify and control an opportunity without Hare.

Burke is also more likely to turn emotional discomfort into aggression. When Margaret questions Helen’s commitment, Burke repeats:

“Are you saying she’s feckin’ weak?”

The repetition signals wounded pride rather than considered thought.

His voice occasionally overlaps with Hare’s in their coarse banter, but their dramatic functions remain distinct:

- Hare devises.
- Burke proves.
- Hare controls the group.
- Burke resents being controlled.
- Hare rationalises violence.
- Burke plunges into it.

Voice distinction: 8.5/10

Burke and Hare together

Their shared dialect creates unity, but their conversational rhythms keep them separate.

In the opening:

Hare: “You have a problem with us?”

Burke: “We need to go.”

Later:

Hare: “This is our house. I make these decisions.”

Burke: “You take me for stupid?”

The first man pushes outward against authority; the second becomes increasingly consumed by status within their partnership.

Their eventual conflict therefore feels embedded in their dialogue from the beginning. Burke wants equality, while Hare assumes leadership.

The strongest aspect of their shared voice is that the partnership evolves:

1. Hare leads and Burke follows.
2. Burke begins acting independently.
3. Hare regards Burke as reckless.
4. Burke regards Hare as controlling.
5. Their language becomes competitive and accusatory.

That is good serial character development.

Margaret Hare

Margaret has a pragmatic, territorial and calculating voice.

She is less sentimental than Helen and often frames events in terms of:

- rent;
- food;
- ownership;
- risk;

- her share;
- maintaining the household.

When Donald dies, Hare searches the body. Margaret initially objects, but her position changes as soon as she recognises the financial reality:

“In my house I get a share!”

“A dead man brings nothing to the table.”

This is not the same as Hare’s ideological rationalisation. Margaret’s reasoning is domestic and transactional.

When the murder plan is proposed, she immediately asks where it will happen and establishes terms:

“Then whatever you earn, one pound goes to me before the rest is split.”

“It is my lodgings.”

She does not romanticise escape or justify murder through social philosophy. She negotiates her percentage.

Margaret also tends to manage the room:

“Don’t be doing anything stupid.”

“Help him before the police come, you fool!”

“You do not help with your yelping.”

She often functions as the practical organiser when the men become violent or chaotic.

Her voice is therefore a strong combination of:

- landlady;
- survivor;
- accomplice;
- household authority.

Voice distinction: 8/10

Helen McDougal

Helen is the most emotionally conflicted member of the core group.

Her dialogue is:

- questioning;
- morally uneasy;
- reactive;
- fiercely loyal to Burke;
- increasingly defensive;
- capable of sudden hardness.

Initially, she asks the questions the others avoid:

“Isn’t it illegal?”

“Is this madness?”

“And you’re just going to saunter up to the doctors and hand it over?”

She is the character most likely to test the logic and morality of a plan.

Her insistence on a priest is especially character-specific:

“It’s the least he deserves.”

Even while allowing the body to be sold, she wants a ritual that preserves some appearance of dignity.

She also defines herself through loyalty to Burke:

“Be careful what you say. He is still my man.”

That loyalty repeatedly conflicts with her moral fear. She can condemn Burke, attack him and defend him within the same sequence.

Helen is also more compassionate toward vulnerable victims than the others. With the child, she attempts songs, games and reassurance while Burke threatens him and Hare demands control:

“Shh laddie.”

“Can’t we just take him from here and leave him somewhere?”

Her voice becomes the clearest resistance to the group’s complete moral collapse.

However, she is not merely passive or gentle. The razor scene demonstrates that she can speak with controlled menace:

“You might be surprised what I am capable of.”

“I’m no shrinking violet.”

That gives her range and prevents her from becoming only “the reluctant woman.”

Voice distinction: 8.5/10

The four-person household

The core quartet are strongly differentiated by what each person talks about:

Character Verbal priority

Hare opportunity, control and justification

Burke pride, recognition and immediate action

Margaret money, ownership and practical risk

Helen morality, loyalty and fear of consequences

This is one of the script’s strongest achievements.

They share idiom and environment, but they do not share the same worldview.

Dr Robert Knox

Knox has a highly distinctive voice.

He is:

- grandiose;
- intellectual;
- theatrical;
- self-mythologising;
- evasive;

- professionally arrogant;
- morally compartmentalised.

He compares his career to Moses seeking the Promised Land and predicts:

“The name Dr Knox will be synonymous with anatomy a hundred years from now.”

His language is elevated because he sees himself as a historical figure, not merely a lecturer.

When Johnson questions the origin of the bodies, Knox responds through technical distancing:

“I am an anatomist. It is not for me to investigate every subject that comes my way.”

The phrasing allows him to sound principled while deliberately refusing moral responsibility.

He also uses business language with Burke and Hare:

“Then I propose a business partnership, gentlemen.”

“Doubling the number of subjects... would secure my position to the Board.”

Knox converts murder into supply, subjects and institutional advantage.

His lecture refrain:

“Shall we begin?”

also works as a recognisable verbal signature. It is theatrical, confident and chilling once the audience understands how the bodies arrive.

Voice distinction: 9/10

Archibald Johnson

Johnson speaks with investigative persistence and moral precision.

His voice is:

- formal;
- probing;
- sceptical;
- principled;
- increasingly direct.

His early exchanges with Knox establish the contrast:

Johnson: “Only the means.”

Knox: “You refute my objectives?”

Johnson repeatedly separates scientific purpose from moral method.

His questioning proceeds step by step:

“What about the appropriation of the bodies?”

“And you do not fall into that category?”

“But do you facilitate it?”

He sounds like a journalist building an argument rather than an accuser delivering a speech.

Johnson’s main limitation is that some of his language overlaps with other educated and morally concerned characters, particularly Inglis. Both speak formally about corruption and principle.

The distinction is that:

- Inglis interprets events spiritually.
- Johnson interprets them evidentially.
- Monro interprets them politically.
- Knox interprets them professionally.

Johnson could nevertheless benefit from a slightly sharper personal verbal trait—perhaps a recurring journalistic phrase, impatience with evasions or a habit of quoting witnesses.

Voice distinction: 7.5–8/10

Alexander Monro

Monro has a memorable, metaphorical and politically shrewd voice.

He is:

- jealous;
- sardonic;
- patient;
- indirect;
- socially polished;
- fond of analogies and stories.

Rather than openly joining Johnson's investigation, he tells the fishing story:

"Patience and determination are the foundations of any good catch."

"As silent as they are, even the fish will give themselves away."

"You just need to look harder."

This is distinctly Monro. He gives Johnson encouragement without accepting responsibility for the hunt.

He also uses wit and social contempt:

"Even if the company has been rather...trite."

"Sleeps well at night? Ha!"

Monro's dialogue reveals that his concern about Knox is partly moral but also professional and personal. His metaphors allow him to conceal that ambiguity.

Voice distinction: 8/10

Susan Knox

Susan has a quieter but clearly strategic voice.

She is more practical and politically alert than Knox's sisters. She speaks directly about:

- reputation;
- the university board;
- Monro;
- Knox's authority;
- protecting their future.

She tells Knox:

“You need to be stronger with them as you need to be at the university.”

“Be sure it remains that way.”

“Deny him that what he needs most.”

Then delivers:

“Bodies, my dear.”

Her dialogue is calm, intimate and ruthless. Knox speaks of destiny and scientific achievement; Susan speaks of how power is maintained.

Voice distinction: 7.5–8/10

David Paterson

Paterson’s voice is more cautious, transactional and deferential.

He is caught between worlds:

- formal and obedient with Knox;
- suspicious with strangers;
- practical when managing bodies;
- increasingly compromised.

When Hare approaches him at night, Paterson initially hides behind propriety:

“This is a most inconvenient time...”

But once he understands the opportunity, he gives the instruction:

“Be there in half an hour.”

His voice reveals a man who wants the protection of procedure while willingly participating in what procedure conceals.

He is distinct enough in function, though less memorable in syntax than Knox, Johnson or Monro.

Voice distinction: 7/10

Mary and Jessie Knox

The sisters share an upper-class social register, but there is some differentiation.

- **Mary** is more direct, socially conscious and willing to challenge Robert.
- **Jessie** is more excitable, conciliatory and romantic about society.

Jessie enthuses over Sir Walter Scott and the bazaar. Mary corrects her assumptions and later directly questions Knox about Burke and Hare.

Their distinction is present, although because they frequently appear together and share similar interests, a few exchanges can feel interchangeable.

Mary: 7/10

Jessie: 6.5–7/10

John Inglis

Inglis has a recognisably clerical and moral voice:

“Our Lord never intended we should be treated like specimens in a jar.”

“We live in dark times...”

“Men of principle in cahoots with heathens of greed.”

His language is shaped by faith, burial, dignity and spiritual corruption.

The risk is that his dialogue can occasionally sound written to express the theme rather than arising spontaneously from character. He is distinct, but sometimes more representative than personal.

Voice distinction: 7/10

Minor academics and officials

The principal weakness lies among some of the:

- medical students;
- Knox assistants;
- lecturers;
- policemen;
- ministers;
- university officials.

Several use a shared educated-period register:

“Indeed.”

“I do not doubt...”

“May I ask...”

“That is most kind.”

This creates a consistent historical world, but not always a distinctive individual voice.

That is less problematic in a four-episode drama than it would be in a smaller feature cast. Many of these characters are functional. Still, a targeted pass could separate them through:

- professional jargon;
- differing sentence length;
- regional speech;
- humour;
- nervousness;
- deference;
- personal ambition.

Voice scorecard

Character	Voice distinction
William Hare	9/10
Dr Robert Knox	9/10
William Burke	8.5/10

Character	Voice distinction
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Helen McDougal	8.5/10
Margaret Hare	8/10
Alexander Monro	8/10
Archibald Johnson	7.5–8/10
Susan Knox	7.5–8/10
David Paterson	7/10
John Inglis	7/10
Mary Knox	7/10
Jessie Knox	6.5–7/10
Minor academics/officials	6–6.5/10

Verdict

The important characters do have their own voices.

The strongest differentiation is found in the central criminal household:

- Hare turns hardship into strategy.
- Burke turns insecurity into violence.
- Margaret turns crime into household economics.
- Helen turns complicity into an ongoing moral and emotional struggle.

The medical storyline is similarly differentiated:

- Knox speaks as a man creating his own legend.
- Johnson speaks as a man assembling the truth.
- Monro speaks through metaphor and political calculation.
- Susan speaks through strategy and preservation.
- Paterson speaks through caution and transaction.

The characters do not sound like one author speaking through different names. The main work required would be among some of the recurring secondary academics and officials, and occasionally between Mary and Jessie Knox. The principal cast is already **recognisable, dramatically differentiated and capable of sustaining the four-episode format.**