

Persona, Tone, and Voice

(Simplified from *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

Why we group these three (Persona, Tone, and Voice) together

Imagine you are listening to someone give a speech. You don't just hear their words, you also sense who they are while they speak: are they confident? Nervous? Honest? Sarcastic? This sense of "who is speaking to me" is something Aristotle noticed over 2,000 years ago, in his book about persuasion, the *Rhetoric*. He called it *ethos*: the personal character a speaker projects. Aristotle noticed something important: if an audience senses that a speaker is honest, intelligent, and means well, they trust that speaker's arguments more, even before checking if the arguments are actually good.

Now here's the connection to literature: critics treat a poem, story, or novel in a similar way. Even though nobody is literally speaking out loud, we still sense "someone" behind the words: a personality, an attitude, a way of seeing things. Three words help us describe this sense precisely: persona, tone, and voice. Let's take them one at a time.

Persona

The word "persona" comes from Latin. In ancient Greek and Roman theatre, actors wore masks, and the Latin word for that mask was *persona*. This is also where we get the English word "person," and the phrase "dramatis personae" (the list of characters in a play).

In literary criticism, "persona" refers to the speaker of a poem or story: the "I" who is telling us what's happening, or expressing a feeling. Here is the single most important thing to understand about persona: the speaker of a poem is often NOT the same person as the real author.

This sounds obvious once you say it, but students very often forget it. If a poem says "I am afraid of dying," it's tempting to think the poet is confessing their real, personal fear. Sometimes that's true! But often, the poet has invented a character to speak the poem, the way a novelist invents a character to narrate a novel.

Let's look at a range of examples, from "completely invented" to "very close to the real author":

I. Completely invented, very different from the author: In *Gulliver's Travels*, the character Gulliver tells his own story, in his own voice. Gulliver is naive, easily fooled, and often doesn't understand what the reader understands. Jonathan Swift, the real author, was none of these things. He was a sharp, witty satirist. Swift built Gulliver as a mask to wear, in order to make his satirical points more effective.

II. A character shaped for a role, but closer to the author: In Alexander Pope's poem *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, the "I" who speaks throughout is doing a lot of Pope's own real arguing and complaining, but it's still a carefully shaped, artistic version of "Pope," not simply Pope talking exactly as he would in conversation.

III. A narrator whose personality is a deliberate authorial creation: In Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*, the narrator is warm, funny, wise about human nature, and often pauses to chat directly with the reader. This voice is created by Fielding. It's not simply "Fielding talking."

IV. Very close to the poet's real self: In Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey," the speaker talks about his own memories, his sister, and his feelings about nature in a way that most readers take as close to Wordsworth's real, personal voice. Even here, the poet has shaped and organized his feelings artistically for the poem.

V. A completely different character from the author, used to create effect: In Browning's poem "My Last Duchess," the speaker is a Duke talking to a visitor about his previous wife, and as the poem goes on, we realize the Duke is chillingly possessive and may have had his wife killed. Robert Browning, the poet, is definitely not a murderous Duke. He invented this voice to explore a certain kind of mind.

Tip: Whenever you read a poem or a first-person narrative, ask yourself: How close is this speaker to the real author? Is this a mask, or close to a mirror? This single question will change how you interpret almost every poem you read.

Tone

If persona is who is speaking, tone is the attitude in how they speak, both toward their subject, and toward the person they're speaking to (the reader, or another character).

Think about how differently you'd say the sentence "That's great" if:

I. You genuinely mean it (happy tone)

II. You're being sarcastic because something went wrong (ironic tone)

III. You're bored and don't care (flat, dismissive tone)

Same words can have completely different meanings because of tone. Critic I. A. Richards, in a book called *Practical Criticism* (1929), pointed out that tone reflects a speaker's sense of how they stand in relation to their listener. Are they being formal or casual? Respectful or mocking? Gentle or harsh?

Here's a useful related idea: the *narratee*. This is the imagined person the narrator seems to be talking to. Sometimes the narratee is named directly in a text (for example, a story told as letters to a specific friend). Other times, we only guess who the narratee is supposed to be, based on what the narrator explains carefully (suggesting the narratee doesn't already know it) versus what the narrator assumes needs no explanation (suggesting the narratee shares the narrator's background or values). Feminist critics have pointed out, for example, that a lot of classic literature written by men seems to assume its narratee is also a man, sharing the narrator's assumptions about women, marriage, and society, without needing them explained.

Voice

Voice is a bigger, more encompassing idea than tone or even persona. Voice is our sense of the author's whole presence behind the entire work, even behind a narrator or a persona.

Here's an example to make this concrete. In *Tom Jones*, we already said Fielding created a witty, warm, chatty narrator. That's the persona. But standing behind even that invented narrator, we sense Fielding himself: his particular sense of humor, his moral values, his way of viewing human weakness with amusement rather than harsh judgment. This bigger, whole-book sense of "the author's presence" is what critics mean by voice.

Here's the surprising part: voice exists even in books that try to hide the author completely. Some writers, like Ernest Hemingway, in stories such as "The Killers", deliberately avoid commenting on their characters at all. They just show scenes, with almost no explanation. You might think this erases the author's presence entirely. But it doesn't, we still sense a controlling mind that chooses exactly which details to show us, and in what order, and this choice itself reveals something about the author. The same is true of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, books that try hard to feel "objective," but which still carry a distinct authorial fingerprint.

Critic Wayne Booth introduced a very useful term for this: the *implied author*. This means: the sense we get, as readers, of a complete, trustworthy person standing behind the text: someone with values, judgment, and a way of seeing the world even though this "implied author" is not the same as the real, biographical author (who might be very different in real life from how they seem in their books) not is it the same as any narrator or character inside the story.

Booth argued something important: our trust in this implied author is what lets us enjoy a novel at all. If we don't sense a coherent, trustworthy presence organizing the work, the novel just feels like "an elaborate verbal game", clever, maybe, but not meaningful.