

PERSONA

1. Introduction

When we read a poem, one of the first questions we should ask is:

"Who is speaking?"

The answer is not always the poet.

Many beginning students assume that the "I" in a poem is always the poet. This is one of the most common mistakes in literary study. Literary criticism distinguishes carefully between the real author, the narrator, and the speaker.

The speaker of a poem is known as the persona. Understanding persona is one of the foundations of literary analysis because it influences tone, meaning, characterization, and interpretation.

2. Etymology

The word persona comes from Latin.

Originally it referred to the mask worn by actors in Greek and Roman theatre. Because actors changed masks to represent different characters, the word gradually came to mean: i. role, ii. character, iii. assumed identity. Later literary critics adopted the word to describe the voice that "speaks" in a literary work.

3. Definition

A persona is the speaker or narrative voice assumed by the author in a literary work. The persona is not necessarily the author. Instead, it is the fictional or artistic identity through which the author communicates with readers.

4. The Central Principle

Perhaps the most important rule in literary criticism is: **Author ≠ Persona**. Many poems use the first-person pronoun "I." That "I" may be the poet, an imaginary speaker, a historical figure, a mythological character, an old man, a child, a murderer, an angel, or a ghost. The poet creates a voice just as a dramatist creates characters.

5. Persona vs Author

Author

Real person
Lives outside the text
Has real biography
May have different beliefs
Historical individual

Persona

Fictional speaker
Exists inside the text
Exists only within the poem
Expresses ideas appropriate to the poem
Literary construct

6. Example

My Last Duchess by Robert Browning

The speaker is a Renaissance duke, showing a visitor a portrait of his dead wife. As he talks, he reveals, without meaning to, that he had her killed out of jealousy and controlling pride. Browning never states this; it emerges entirely through the duke's own self-satisfied, chilling voice.

Why it works as persona:

- i. The "I" is not Browning. It's a specific invented character with his own motives and blind spots.
- ii. The reader learns the truth despite the speaker, not because of him. This gap between what the speaker reveals and what he intends is the hallmark of dramatic monologue/persona poetry.

7. Why Writers Use Personas

A. To create dramatic realism

The poem sounds like real speech. Instead of hearing the poet, we hear a believable individual.

B. To present different viewpoints

A writer does not have to agree with the speaker. The persona may express prejudice, arrogance, madness, cruelty, innocence, etc. The author merely presents the voice.

C. To achieve objectivity

Rather than directly expressing personal emotions, the writer lets a fictional character speak. This often produces greater artistic distance.

D. To explore psychology

Different personas allow writers to investigate guilt, ambition, jealousy, despair, heroism, faith, etc. without claiming these emotions as their own.

8. Persona and Tone

Tone depends largely upon persona. The same event may sound serious, comic, sarcastic, tragic, or romantic depending upon who speaks. For example, a soldier, a child, a king each would describe war very differently.

9. Major Literary Examples

Work

Persona

Browning — My Last Duchess

Duke of Ferrara

Tennyson — Ulysses

Ulysses

Eliot — The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Prufrock

Poe — The Raven

Grieving narrator

Wordsworth — Tintern Abbey

Reflective speaker