

Writing a Persona Poem

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The following excerpt from John Hewitt's *30 Poems in 30 Days* captures the essence of the persona poem exercise:

A New Perspective

As we continue to explore different approaches to poetry, today we are going to look at the persona poem. Persona poems are poems written from a perspective other than your own. You use your imagination to enter the world of another character. You can write a persona poem from the perspective of a friend, an enemy, a relative, a pet, a celebrity, [a hairbrush,] a[n] historical figure, a character from literature, or you can make up a character of your own.

The basis of a persona poem is a change in point-of-view. You aren't just writing about another character, you are writing as if you were that other character—in the first person. You try to think like that character. You imagine that character's thoughts, actions, skills and limitations. You try to capture the world in which that character lives and you portray it as if you were that character.

This is a style of poetry that is heavily influenced by fiction. You leave behind your point of view and take on another. You try to bring a character to life and make that character interesting to your readers. It can be challenging, but also freeing. You are given the chance to change your style, tone and perspective, at least for the length of one poem.

Adding a fictional layer to your poetry allows you to address issues you can't comfortably express as yourself. Persona poems can be an excellent method for dealing with personal issues that are too close for you to write about from your own perspective. Persona poems also can be a great way to explore your feelings about a social or personal issue by looking at it from the other side. What would the person on the other side of the issue say to you?

→ Check out the following examples of great persona poems to emulate!

- Sylvia Plath's "Mirror"
- Margaret Atwood's "Siren Song"
- Anthony Twaithe's "Monologue in the Valley of the Kings"
- Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

→ SSTV each poem by identifying the following:

- Who's the **speaker**?
- What's the **story**?
- What's the speaker's **tone** (attitude toward the subject)?
- How do you know? Identify at least three major **vehicles** (literary devices) that communicate that tone.

Siren Song

by Margaret Atwood

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
3 that is irresistible:

the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
6 even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows
because anyone who has heard it
9 is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
12 out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
15 looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
18 this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
21 Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
24 you are unique

at last. Alas
it is a boring song
27 but it works every time.

Margaret Atwood, "Siren Song" from *Selected Poems 1965-1975*. Copyright © 1974, 1976 by Margaret Atwood. Reprinted with the permission of the author and Houghton Mifflin Company. Source: *Poetry* (February 1974).

A Note on Sirens by Micha F. Lindemans

In Greek mythology, the Sirens are creatures with the head of a female and the body of a bird. They lived on an island (Sirenum scopuli; three small rocky islands) and with the irresistible charm of their song they lured mariners to their destruction on the rocks surrounding their island (Virgil V, 846; Ovid XIV, 88).

Questions for Analysis of "Siren Song"

On the Surface (Speaker & Story):

1. Who is the speaker? How do you know (prove it)?
2. (story and purpose) To whom is she speaking? Where is she? What is she telling the other person/what is she talking about?
3. How does the poem offer closure? What happens?

Going Deep (Tone & Vehicles):

4. What is the speaker's tone? How does she feel about the story of her poem? (prove it!) What is her attitude?
5. What is the central tension of the poem? How do you know? How is it resolved?
6. Identify any tone shift and explain it—where does it occur, and what effect does it have?
7. What major literary device does Atwood employ in this poem? What effects does it have on the reader?
8. Discuss the structure of this poem. What significance and effects does it have?
9. Discuss the significance of the title.

My Last Duchess

by Robert Browning

- That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
- 5 Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said
'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,*
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
- 10 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
- 15 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff
- 20 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart - how shall I say? - too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
- 25 Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious* fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace - all and each
- 30 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, - good! but thanked
Somehow - I know not how - as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
- 35 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech - (which I have not) - to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark" - and if she let
- 40 Herself be lessoned* so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
- E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
- 45 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence*
- 50 Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
- 55 Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Monologue in the Valley of the Kings

Anthony Thwaite

I have hidden something in the inner chamber
And sealed the lid of the sarcophagus
And levered a granite boulder against the door
And the debris has covered it so perfectly

5 That though you walk over it daily you never suspect.

Every day you sweat down that shaft, seeing on the walls
The paintings that convince you I am at home, living there.
But that is a blind alley, a false entrance
Flanked by a room with a few bits of junk

10 Nicely displayed, conventionally chosen.

The throne is quaint but commonplace, the jewels inferior,
The decorated panels not of the best period,
Though enough is there to satisfy curators.*

* museum directors

But the inner chamber enshrines the true essence.

15 Do not be disappointed when I tell you
You will never find it: the authentic phoenix in gold
The muslin soaked in herbs from recipes
No one remembers, the intricate ornaments,
And above all the copious literatures inscribed

20 On ivory and papyrus, the distilled wisdom
Of priests, physicians, poets and gods,
Ensuring my immortality. Though even if you found them
You would look in vain for the key, since all are in cipher
And the key is in my skull.

25 The key is in my skull. If you found your way
Into this chamber, you would find this last:
My skull. But first you would have to search the others,
My kinsfolk neatly parceled, twenty-seven of them
Disintegrating in their various ways.

30 A woman from whose face the spices have pushed away
The delicate flaking skin: a man whose body
Seems dipped in clotted black tar, his head detached:
A hand broken through the cerements, protesting:
Mouths in rigid grins or soundless screams--

35 A catalogue of declensions.*

* a falling off or away; a deterioration

How, then, do I survive? Gagged in my winding cloths,
The four brown roses withered on my chest
Leaving a purple stain, how am I different
In transcending these little circumstances?

40 Supposing that with uncustomary skill
You penetrated the chamber, granite, seals,
Dragged out the treasure gloatingly, distinguished
My twenty-seven sorry relatives,

Labeled them, swept and measured everything

45 Except this one sarcophagus, leaving that
Until the very end: supposing then
You lifted me out carefully under the arc-lamps,
Noting the gold fingernails, the unearthly smell
Of preservation—would you not tremble

50 At the thought of who this might be? So you would steady
Your hands a moment, like a man taking aim, and lift
The mask.

But this hypothesis is absurd. I have told you already

You will never find it. Daily you walk about

55 Over the rubble, peer down the long shaft
That leads nowhere, make your notations, add
Another appendix to your laborious work.
When you die, decently cremated, made proper
By the Registrar of Births and Deaths, given by
Your two-inch obituary, I shall perhaps
Have a chance to talk with you. Until then, I hear
Your footsteps over my head as I lie and think
Of what I have hidden here, perfect and safe.

Questions for Analysis of “My Last Duchess”

On the Surface (Speaker & Story):

1. Who is the speaker?
How do you know (prove it)?
What kind of language does this speaker use? Give at least 3 examples/words that support your claim.
What does his language reveal about his background?
2. To whom is the speaker talking?
3. Why is he there? What is the purpose for his visit?
Where are they? What are they doing?
4. What does the speaker tell the other man?
 - a. What is he talking about?
 - b. What are his issues with his subject?
 - c. How does he resolve them?

Going Deep (Tone & Vehicles):

5. What is the speaker’s tone toward the subject of his monologue?
6. Discuss the speaker’s self esteem. Support your claims with at least four specific details from the text to prove them.
7. Why does the poet (Robert Browning) have the second person there with the speaker? What is his “role” in the scope of the entire poem—this character is a vehicle for what purpose?—a means to what ends?
8. Identify a structural shift near the end of the poem?
What creates the change?
What does the change say about the speaker’s character?

Questions for Analysis of “Monologue in the Valley of the Kings”

On the Surface (Speaker & Story):

1. Who is the speaker?
How do you know? Give at least three clues that support your claim.
2. What is he talking about (story)? In general? Specifically?
3. What can you deduce about time regarding the speaker and his subject?
How do you know (prove it)?
4. Who is the “you” in this poem?
5. What does the speaker conclude about the outcome of the literal story in the poem?

Going Deep (Tone, Theme & Vehicles):

6. What is the speaker’s tone toward the “you” to whom he speaks?
How do you know? Find at least two pieces of evidence (vehicles) from the text to support it.
7. What is his tone toward the treasures around him?
What does he imply about the other’s (“you”) attitude toward those treasures?
How do you know? Find at least two pieces of evidence (vehicles) from the text to support it.
8. What does the speaker treasure?
9. What is the speaker’s tone toward his relatives around him?
How do you know? Find at least two pieces of evidence (vehicles) from the text to support it.
10. What is the speaker’s tone toward his body in the sarcophagus?
How do you know? Find at least two pieces of evidence (vehicles) from the text to support it.
11. What is the treasure that he has “hidden . . . in the inner chamber” (1)?
State your claim and prove it through Thwaite’s use of metaphor, imagery, diction, symbol, structure, and title.
12. Where is the speaker being literal? figurative? How do they connect?