

Persona

Definition of Persona

The term persona has been derived from the Latin word *persona*, which means “the mask of an actor,” and is therefore etymologically linked to the *dramatis personae*, which refers to the list of characters and cast in a play or a [drama](#). It is also known as a “theatrical mask.” It can be defined in a literary work as a [voice](#) or an assumed role of a [character](#), which represents the thoughts of a writer, or a specific person the writer wants to present as his mouthpiece.

Most of the time, the *dramatis personae* are identified with the writer, though sometimes a persona can be a character or an unknown narrator. Examples of persona are found, not only in dramas, but in poems and novels too.

Examples of Persona in Literature

Example #1: *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (By T. S. Eliot)

“Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious [argument](#)
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not [ask](#), “What is it?”
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.”

These are the initial fifteen lines of the poem *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The [speaker](#) is a persona of T. S. Eliot that he wants to present to the world, though the poet himself is not suffering from the same mental [conflict](#).

Example #2: *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: Fra Pandolf’s hands ...

“Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said
‘Fra Pandolf’ by design, for never read ...

“At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!”

This poem is a dramatic [monologue](#) (uses persona). The poet mainly communicates about the shocking appearance of the “duke” character. In this [stanza](#), the persona is discussing the painting as the monologue opens. Through simple technique the poet describes the superficiality of the duke’s character, though it seems to be the voice of the poet put into the mouth of the duke.

Example #3: *The Old Man and Sea* (By Ernest Hemingway)

“He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf
Stream and he had gone
eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days
a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the
boy’s parents had told him that the old man was now definitely

“The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat.”

The first paragraph of this book sounds as if Hemingway himself is Santiago. Through the [characterization](#) of Santiago, Hemingway is expressing his belief in the struggle against unconquerable natural forces of the world. However, it is up to the persona (Santiago) to determine whether he wants to change his luck or not.

Example #4: *Heart of Darkness* (By Joseph Conrad)

“Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration ... and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there ... Well, I haven’t been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour’s off ... well, we won’t talk about that...”

Marlow is probably one of the most famous persona examples in novels. In this novel, Marlow is used as Conrad’s mouthpiece. In this extract, Conrad is telling us through Marlow about his own visit to the Congo, his experiences of sailing to distant places, and his boyhood ambition of sailing. Hence, Marlow is used as a persona in this novel.

Function of Persona

The speaker of a dramatic monologue is also known as a persona. Such a monologue is presented without commentary or analysis. However, emphasis is laid on [subjective](#) qualities, and finally left up to the [audience](#) to interpret it. In literature, authors use persona to express ideas, beliefs, and voices they are not able to express freely, due to some restrictions, or because they cannot put into words otherwise. Persona is also sometimes a role assumed by a person or a character, in public or in society.