Doppelganger

Doppelganger Definition

Doppelganger, a German word meaning "look-alike," or "double walker," originally referred to a ghost, or shadow of a person; but in modern times it simply refers to a person that is a look-alike of another person.

Types of Doppelganger

In literature, a doppelganger is usually shaped as a twin, shadow, or a mirror-image of a protagonist. It refers to a character who physically resembles the protagonist, and may have the same name as well. Several types of doppelganger can be spotted in world literature. It may take the form of an evil twin, not known to the actual person, who confuses people related to that original person.

It may also be figured as one person existing in two different places at the same time. Sometimes, a doppelganger is a person's past or future self. In some cases, it may simply be a person's look-alike.

Doppelganger in Folklore

In traditional folklore, doppelganger is a malicious and evil character, having no shadow or reflection. It troubles and harms its counterpart by putting bad thoughts and ideas in his or her head. In some cultures, seeing one's doppelganger is bad luck, and is often a sign of serious illness or approaching death.

Examples of Doppelganger in Literature

Let us see some doppelganger examples and their role in literature:

Example #1: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)

The ghost of Hamlet's father in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is an example of doppelganger. The idea of getting revenge is put in Hamlet's mind by the apparition of his father, who tells him that he was murdered. The use of a doppelganger helps Shakespeare to set up the plot of his play, which revolves around the [theme](#) of revenge.

Example #2: *William Wilson* (By Edgar Allan Poe)

William Wilson, a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, follows the theme of doppelganger. William, the protagonist, meets another boy in school, who had the same name and looked surprisingly like him. He dressed like him, and even walked like him. The only difference between them was that William's doppelganger could only talk in a whisper.

The doppelganger haunts William all his life. Worn out by interference from his double in his affairs, William stabs him, only to discover – looking in the mirror –that he has stabbed himself. He hears the [voice](#) of his rival as if it was his own:

> "In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself."

Example #3: *The Secret Sharer* (By Joseph Conrad)

Joseph Conrad uses a doppelganger theme in his short story *The Secret Sharer*. In the story, Laggatt, the ex-skipper of a ship, acts as a doppelganger of the Captain. The Captain discovers Laggatt swimming in the sea naked, helps him come aboard, and gives him his clothes to wear.

The men have both similarities and dissimilarities. Laggatt, who is full of calmness and self-confidence, helps the Captain to get rid of his uncertainty and undue apprehensions. In fact, Laggatt is other self of the Captain, whom he has failed to discover until then.

Example #4: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (By Robert Louis Stevenson)

Robert Louis Stevenson explores the theme of doppelganger in his novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Hyde is an evil double of the honorable Dr. Jekyll. Jekyll creates Hyde by scientific experiments, to prove his statement:

"... man is not truly one, but truly two."

He means that the human soul is a mixture of evil and good, and Hyde is the manifestation of the evil that existed in Dr. Jekyll. As a respectable Victorian gentleman, Jekyll can never fulfill the evil desires existing in him. Therefore, he separates his "evil-self," giving him a separate identity.

Function of Doppelganger

A survey of doppelganger examples leads one to conclude that this literary device serves a variety of purposes in literature. It may be used to show the "other self" of a character, which he or she has not discovered yet. This "other self" could be the darker side of the character that troubles, or the brighter side that motivates. Hence, the use of doppelganger helps writers to portray complex characters.

Moreover, doppelganger gives rise to a [conflict](#) in a story. The doppelganger acts in a way that promises dire consequences for the main character, who puts in efforts to undo the actions of his double. Sometimes, the conflict is an inner one, where a character tries to understand himself by understanding his doppelganger.