

Persona

Understanding and recognizing the distance between the persona or speaker within a poem and the poet who constructs that speaker is often one of the more difficult distinctions that a beginning student to analysis makes.

The problem is, of course one of distance. How far from the subject of the poem can its creator truly be? Is it even possible for a poet to be separate in a complete way from the persona? The struggle is of course problematic because the young student often finds difficulty themselves in creating distance in their own writing and their own poetry. So, how are we to understand this idea of distance?

Biography

One way to come to terms with what a poet may be trying to do in framing a speaker is to attempt to learn some of the biography of the poet. Certainly Sylvia Plath is a good representative of an individual close to the speakers in her poems. We hear her struggle and feel her pain as she she and we struggle through “Daddy.” It is a confessional poem which reveals even as it takes liberty. Plath’s father and her relationship with her husband seem to have directly influenced the poem, but the details within are not her life’s details, they are metaphoric and striking and jarring as they are, we as readers should not take them as autobiographical.

So, what is the reader to do? It’s a bit unrealistic to imagine that you would have the time or immediate resources to review biographies and histories of poets before reading their works. However, a good approach might simply be to remember that there is always some distance between the poet and the persona. That distance may be very narrow or extremely wide. Never assume the poet is one and the same with the speaker, but also never leave the fact that the poet is nearby.

Consider these visual models:

