

The Persona Poem

Age Group:, undergraduate, graduate, community audience

Materials: American Massif by Nicholas Regiacorte, writing materials

Medium: in person or virtual

Time: 45 - 65 minutes

Lesson Overview: through reading, discussion and exploration, this lesson offers an opportunity for students to examine the possibilities of the persona poem.

The Lesson

Lecture: The Persona Poem

Definition: a poem in which the poet speaks through an assumed voice.

Also known as a dramatic monologue, this form shares many characteristics with a theatrical monologue: an audience is implied; there is no dialogue; and the poet takes on the voice of a character, a fictional identity, or a persona. Because a dramatic monologue is by definition one person's speech, it is offered without overt analysis or commentary, placing emphasis on subjective qualities that are left to the audience to interpret. - Courtesy of The Academy of American Poets

History: Though the technique is evident in many ancient Greek dramas, the dramatic monologue as a poetic form achieved its first era of distinction in the work of Victorian poet [Robert Browning](#). - Courtesy of The Academy of American Poets

Examples: [“Lady Lazarus” Sylvia Plath](#), [“Pig Song Margaret Atwood”](#), [“\(The Mothman Watches a TV Movie and Resolves to Steal the Declaration of Independence\)” Robert Lynn Wood”](#)

Discussion & Reading

Read “American Mastodon” 3 pg and discuss the following questions

- Who/What is the speaker of the poem?
- What are the central concerns/considerations of the poem?
- How does the persona-speaker of the poem amplify the content
 - Or rather: imagine this poem with a “traditional-human” speaker...what would be missed?

Activity #1

In small groups come up with a list of person(s)/places/things. These can be broad and expansive, think animals, everyday items such as a toothbrush etc.

Discussion & Reading

Read “American Mastodon” 64 pg and discuss the following questions

- Compare and contrast this poem with the first one read
- How does the poem make the speaker’s being/body (being a mastodon) central and vital to the poem?
- What are the central concerns/considerations of the poem.

Activity #2

Select one of the central concerns mentioned from poem 1 or 2 and select one of the person/place/things from activity one and write a persona poem about the central concern in the voice of the poem of the person/place/things.

End Discussion

- What person/place/thing did you choose and why?
- How did you leverage the voice to amplify and give a unique voice to the concern?
- What other person/place/thing from your list stood out? Which one would be the most challenging to take the voice of?

Creative Assignment: American Massif

Whether it be embodying the voice of the mastodon, addressing friends from afar, or even directly addressing the reader, the speaker in *American Massif* is a varied lyric voice of witness.

This creative assignment will allow students to consider how various lenses and viewpoints can shape a poem and open up the language for new ruminations.

Prewriting

1. Select a specific location. This should be somewhere you are familiar with. Remember to be specific. Instead of “a lake” think “the bench at Lake Michigan where you can see the lighthouse, and the sun set.
2. Select 3-5 nouns (person, animals, or things) you would find in this location. Think: objects, people, animals. Consider what you would find at this location at different times of day. Consider looking up photos of this location for extra inspiration.
3. Select your favorite 3 nouns and label them “A,” “B,” “C” respectively.

Writing

Part 1.

The goal for this exercise is to create a poem using different stanza formations and different viewpoints/speakers to examine the landscape.

1. Write a quatrain (4 line stanza) in the voice of A describing the landscape.... What do they see? What do they hear? What kinds of diction would this noun use?
2. Write 2 couplets (2, 2-line stanzas) in the voice of B describing the landscape.
3. Write a prose block of at least 4 lines in the voice of “you” (as in the writer) describing the landscape. Use your natural diction here. How would you describe this place to a friend?
4. Write a stanza with no more than 3 words in each line (with as many lines as needed) in the voice of C describing the landscape.
5. Write a free verse stanza in the voice of A meeting/describing B.
6. Write 2 tercets (3 line stanzas) in the voice of B meeting/describing A.
7. Write a quatrain in your own voice describing C.

8. Write a free verse stanza in the voice of C describing you in the landscape.

Part 2

Write a 1 page reflection on the writing process. Consider the using the following prompts as a guide:

- What landscape did you choose?
 - Why do you think this one came to mind
- What nouns did you choose?
 - What were the advantages of working in the voice of these nouns?
 - What were the challenges of working in the voices of these nouns?
- Talk about your experience working in the different stanza forms
 - How did the different restrictions shape your work
 - Think: what was the experience of writing the short line stanza like vs. the free verse stanza
- What was your favorite stanza to write?
- What was your least favorite stanza to write?
- What tools from this writing assignment do you want to continue to work with in your writing moving forward?

Assignment Rubric:

Presence of all required materials: _____ / 35

Poetry Effort & Polish: _____ / 35

Reflection Content: _____ / 20

Reflection on Writing & Editing Process _____ / 10

Evaluation of Relative Draft Quality _____ / 10

Overall Grammar & Mechanics: _____ / 10

Total: _____ / 100

Critical Writing Assignment

American Massif is a collection concerned with the idea of evolution, extinction, and one could argue the poems allude to the anthropocene. Using one of the three “American Megalodon” poems, create a 500-850*** word essay with a thesis on one of these three topics.

1. Read your selected poem multiple times.
2. Map the poem: write down a brief storyline of the poem. Create a bullet point list of the narrative movements of the poem.
 - a. If there are moments of confusion: re-read, consider the possibilities, and/or chat with a peer.
3. Re-read the poem and make note of moments that are about the three topics (think: moments you’d reference in a paper).
4. Create a working thesis: select one or more of the themes (evolution, extinction, anthropocene) and create an argument about the poem and these themes.
 - a. Consider: how is the poem in conversation with these topics? What is the poem “saying” about these topics, and how do they go about saying it? etc.
5. Outline your paper: consider what information about the poem a reader needs to know before jumping into your argument, select what pieces of the poem/text the paper is going to reference etc.
6. Revisit your thesis and poem map: is this still the strongest thesis for your paper? Could it be altered? Are there additional pieces of the poem you would like to reference?
7. Write the essay!

Assignment Rubric:

Presence of a strong, clear thesis:	_____ / 15
Provision of relevant evidence:	_____ / 25
Analysis & defense of evidence:	_____ / 35
Structure:	_____ / 15
Grammar & Mechanics:	_____ / 10
Total:	_____ / 100

***Instructor Note: consider altering the length of the essay as needed. Consider the additional requirement of outside texts and research depending on the context of your course.