

Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing, Compact Edition, 5/e

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X. J. Kennedy
Dana Gioia

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Poetry and Personal Identity

All literature is, finally, autobiographical.

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

Only a naive reader assumes that all poems directly reflect the personal experience of their authors. That would be like believing that a TV sitcom actually describes the real family life of its cast. As you will recall if you read “The Person in the Poem” (page 444), poets often speak in voices other than their own. These voices may be borrowed or imaginary. Stevie Smith appropriates the voice of a dead swimmer in her poem “Not Waving but Drowning” (page 514), and Ted Hughes imagines a nonhuman voice in “Hawk Roosting” (page 447). Some poets also try to give their personal poems a universal feeling. Edna St. Vincent Millay’s emotion-charged sonnet “Well, I Have Lost You; and I Lost You Fairly” describes the end of a difficult love affair with a younger man, but she dramatizes the situation in such a way that it seems deliberately independent of any particular time and place. Even her lover remains shadowy and nameless. No one has ever been able to identify the characters in Shakespeare’s sonnets with actual people, but that fact does not diminish our pleasure in them as poems.

And yet there are times when poets try to speak openly in their own voices. What could be a more natural subject for a poet than examining his or her own life? The autobiographical elements in a poem may be indirect, as in Wilfred Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth” (page 799), which is clearly drawn from its author’s battle experience in World War I, although it never refers to his own participation, or they may form the central subject, as in Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus,” which discusses her suicide attempts. In either case, the poem’s autobiographical stance affects a reader’s response. Although we respond to a poem’s formal elements, we cannot also help reacting to what we know about its human origins. To read Plath’s chilling exploration of her death wish, while knowing that within a few months the poet would kill herself, we receive an extra jolt of emotion. In a good autobiographical poem, that shock of veracity adds to the poem’s power. In an unsuccessful poem, the autobiographical facts become a substitute for emotions not credibly conveyed by the words themselves.

One literary movement, **Confessional poetry**, has made such frank self-definition its main purpose. As the name implies, Confessional poetry renders personal experience

as candidly as possible, even sharing confidences that may violate social conventions or propriety. Confessional poets sometimes shock their readers with admissions of experiences so intimate and painful—adultery, family violence, suicide attempts—that most people would try to suppress them, or at least not proclaim them to the world.

Some confessional poets, such as Anne Sexton, W. D. Snodgrass, and Robert Lowell, underwent psychoanalysis, and at times their poems sound like patients telling their analysts every detail of their personal lives. For this reason, confessional poems run the danger of being more interesting to their authors than to their readers. But when a poet successfully frames his or her personal experience so that the reader can feel an extreme emotion from the inside, the result can be powerful. Here is a chilling poem that takes us within the troubled psyche of a poet who contemplates suicide.

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)

Lady Lazarus

(1962) 1965



I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it—

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

5

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?—

10

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

15

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

20

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

25

Them unwrap me hand and foot—
 The big strip tease.
 Gentleman, ladies, 30

 These are my hands,
 My knees.
 I may be skin and bone,

 Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
 The first time it happened I was ten. 35
 It was an accident.

 The second time I meant
 To last it out and not come back at all.
 I rocked shut

 As a seashell. 40
 They had to call and call
 And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

 Dying
 Is an art, like everything else.
 I do it exceptionally well. 45

 I do it so it feels like hell.
 I do it so it feels real.
 I guess you could say I've a call.

 It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
 It's easy enough to do it and stay put. 50
 It's the theatrical

 Comeback in broad day
 To the same place, the same face, the same brute
 Amused shout:

 "A miracle!" 55
 That knocks me out.
 There is a charge

 For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
 For the hearing of my heart—
 It really goes. 60

 And there is a charge, a very large charge,
 For the word or a touch
 Or a bit of blood

 Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
 So, so, Herr Doktor. 65
 So, Herr Enemy.

 I am your opus,^o
 I am your valuable,
 The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek. 70
 I turn and burn.
 Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
 You poke and stir.
 Flesh, bone, there is nothing there— 75

A cake of soap,
 A wedding ring,
 A gold filling,
 Herr God, Herr Lucifer,
 Beware 80
 Beware.

Out of the ash
 I rise with my red hair.
 And I eat men like air.

QUESTIONS

1. Although the poem is openly autobiographical, Plath uses certain symbols to represent herself (Lady Lazarus, a Jew murdered in a concentration camp, a cat with nine lives, and so on). What do these symbols tell us about Plath's attitude toward herself and the world around her?
2. In her biography of Plath, *Bitter Fame*, the poet Anne Stevenson says that this poem penetrates "the furthest reaches of disdain and rage . . . bereft of all 'normal' human feelings." What do you think Stevenson means? Does anything in the poem strike you as particularly chilling?
3. The speaker in "Lady Lazarus" says, "Dying / Is an art, like everything else" (lines 43–44). What sense do you make of this metaphor?
4. Does the ending of "Lady Lazarus" imply that the speaker assumes that she will outlive her suicide attempts? Set forth your final understanding of the poem.

Not all autobiographical poetry needs to shock the reader, as Plath overtly does in "Lady Lazarus." Poets can also try to share the special moments that illuminate their day-to-day lives, as Elizabeth Bishop does in "Filling Station," when she describes a roadside gas station whose shabby bric-a-brac she saw as symbols of love. But when poets attempt to place their own lives under scrutiny, they face certain difficulties. Honest, thorough self-examination isn't as easy as it might seem. It is one thing to examine oneself in the mirror; it is quite another to sketch accurately what one sees there. Even if we have the skill to describe ourselves in words (or in paint) so that a stranger would recognize the self-portrait, there is the challenge of honesty. Drawing or writing our own self-portrait, most of us yield, often unconsciously, to the temptation of making ourselves a little nobler or better-looking than we really are. The best self-portraits, like Rembrandt's unflattering self-examinations, are usually critical. No one enjoys watching someone else preen in front of a dressing mirror, unless the intention is satiric.

Autobiographical poetry requires a hunger for honest self-examination. Many poets find that, in order to understand themselves and who they are, they must scrutinize more than the self in isolation. Other forces may shape their identities: their ethnic background, their family, their race, their gender, their religion, their

economic status, and their age. Aware of these elements, many recent poets have written memorable personal poems. The Dominican-born poet Rhina Espaillat addresses these concerns in the following poem, which also examines the American experience from the viewpoint of individuals half inside and half outside mainstream society, a division intensified in this instance, as her title makes clear, by issues of language. Espaillat's poem also adds a new human dimension, the generation gap—familiar to anyone raised in an immigrant home—between those raised in “the old country” and those growing up (and feeling at home) in America.

Rhina Espaillat (b. 1932)

Bilingual/Bilingüe

1998

My father liked them separate, one there,
one here (allá y aquí), as if aware

that words might cut in two his daughter's heart
(el corazón) and lock the alien part

to what he was—his memory, his name
(su nombre)—with a key he could not claim.

5

“English outside this door, Spanish inside,”
he said, “y basta.” But who can divide

the world, the word (mundo y palabra) from
any child? I knew how to be dumb

10

and stubborn (testaruda); late, in bed,
I hoarded secret syllables I read

until my tongue (mi lengua) learned to run
where his stumbled. And still the heart was one.

I like to think he knew that, even when,
proud (orgullosa) of his daughter's pen,

15

he stood outside mis versos, half in fear
of words he loved but wanted not to hear.

QUESTIONS

1. Espaillat's poem is full of Spanish words and phrases. (Even the title is given in both languages.) What does the Spanish add to the poem? Could we remove the phrases without changing the poem?
2. How does the father want to divide his daughter's world, at least in terms of language? Does his request suggest any other divisions he hopes to enforce in her life?
3. How does the daughter respond to her father's request to leave English outside their home?
4. “And still the heart was one,” states the speaker of the poem. Should we take her statement at face value or do we sense a cost of her bilingual existence? Agree or disagree with the daughter's statement, but state the reasons for your opinion.

Culture, Race, and Ethnicity

One of the personal issues Rhina Espaillat faces in “Bilingual/Bilingüe” is her dual identity as Dominican and American. The daughter of immigrants, she was born in the Dominican Republic but came to America at the age of seven and grew up in New York. Consequently, self-definition for her has meant resolving the claims of two potentially contradictory cultures, as well as dealing, on a more immediate level, with the conflicting demands of family love and loyalty, on the one hand, and personal growth and fulfillment, on the other. As much as she loves her father and wishes to honor him, she cannot be held back from what she is and what she needs to become, and “I hoarded secret syllables I read / until my tongue (mi lengua) learned to run / where his stumbled.” Here Espaillat touches on the central issue facing the autobiographical poet—using *words* to embody experience. The tongue must “learn to run,” even if where it runs, for an immigrant poet, is away from the language of one’s parents. American poetry is rich in immigrant cultures, as shown in the work of both first-generation writers such as Francisco X. Alarcón and John Ciardi and foreign-born authors such as Joseph Brodsky (Russia), Nina Cassian (Romania), Claude McKay (Jamaica), Eamon Grennan (Ireland), Thom Gunn (England), Shirley Geok-lin Lim (Malaysia), Emanuel di Pasquale (Italy), José Emilio Pacheco (Mexico), Heriberto Padilla (Cuba), and Derek Walcott (St. Lucia). Some literary immigrants, such as the late Russian novelist and poet Vladimir Nabokov, make the difficult transition to writing in English. Others, such as Cassian and Pacheco, continue to write in their native languages. A few, such as Brodsky, write bilingually. Such texts often remind us of the multicultural nature of American poetry. Here is a poem by one literary immigrant that raises some important issues of personal identity.

Claude McKay (1890–1948)

America

1922

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
 And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,
 Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
 I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.
 Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
 Giving me strength erect against her hate,
 Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
 Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,
 I stand within her walls with not a shred
 Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
 Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
 And see her might and granite wonders there,
 Beneath the touch of Time’s unerring hand,
 Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

5

10

QUESTIONS

1. Is “America” written in a personal or public voice? What specific elements seem personal? What elements seem public?

2. McKay was a black immigrant from Jamaica, but he does not mention either his race or national origin in the poem. Is his personal background important to understanding “America”?
3. “America” is written in a traditional form. How does the poem’s form contribute to its impact?

Claude McKay’s “America” raises the question of how an author’s race and ethnic identity influence the poetry he or she writes. In the 1920s, for instance, there was an ongoing discussion among black poets as to whether their poetry should deal specifically with the African American experience. Did black poetry exist apart from the rest of American poetry or was it, as Robert Hayden would later suggest, “shaped over some three centuries by social, moral, and literary forces essentially American”? Should black authors primarily address a black audience or should they try to engage a broader literary public? Should black poetry focus on specifically black subjects, forms, and idioms or should it rely mainly on the traditions of English literature? Black poets divided into two camps. Claude McKay and Countee Cullen were among the writers who favored universal themes. (Cullen, for example, insisted he be called a “poet,” not a “Negro poet.”) Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer were among the “new” poets who felt that black poetry must reflect racial themes. They believed, as James Weldon Johnson had once said, that race was “perforce the thing that the American Negro Poet knows best.” Writers on both sides of the debate produced excellent poems, but their work has a very different character.

The debate between ethnicity and universality has echoed among American writers of every racial and religious minority. Today, we find the same issues being discussed by Arab, Asian, Hispanic, Italian, Jewish, and Native American authors. There is, ultimately, no one correct answer to the questions of identity, for individual artists need the freedom to pursue their own imaginative vision. But considering the issues of race and ethnicity does help a poet think through the artist’s sometimes conflicting responsibilities between group and personal identity. Even in poets who have pursued their individual vision, we often see how unmistakably they write from their racial, social, and cultural background. Sometimes a poet’s ethnic background becomes part of his or her private mythology. In the following poem, Samuel Menashe talks about how his physical body is the center of his Jewish identity.

Samuel Menashe (b. 1925)

The Shrine Whose Shape I Am

1961

The shrine whose shape I am
Has a fringe of fire
Flames skirt my skin

There is no Jerusalem but this
Breathed in flesh by shameless love
Built high upon the tides of blood
I believe the Prophets and Blake
And like David I bless myself
With all my might

I know many hills were holy once 10
 But now in the level lands to live
 Zion ground down must become marrow
 Thus in my bones I am the King's son
 And through death's domain I go
 Making my own procession 15

QUESTIONS

1. What does the poem tell you about the race and religion of the author? How is this information conveyed? Point to specific lines.
2. The ancient Jews located the center of Judaism at the Temple of Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. When Menashe declares "There is no Jerusalem but this," what does he mean? What is he specifically referring to?
3. What does this poem imply about the nature of ethnic identity?

Francisco X. Alarcón (b. 1954)

The X in My Name 1993

the poor
 signature
 of my illiterate
 and peasant
 self 5
 giving away
 all rights
 in a deceiving
 contract for life

QUESTION

What does the speaker imply the X in his name signifies?

Judith Ortiz Cofer (b. 1952)

Quinceañera 1987

My dolls have been put away like dead
 children in a chest I will carry
 with me when I marry.
 I reach under my skirt to feel
 a satin slip bought for this day. It is soft 5
 as the inside of my thighs. My hair
 has been nailed back with my mother's
 black hairpins to my skull. Her hands
 stretched my eyes open as she twisted
 braids into a tight circle at the nape 10

of my neck. I am to wash my own clothes
 and sheets from this day on, as if
 the fluids of my body were poison, as if
 the little trickle of blood I believe
 travels from my heart to the world were
 shameful. Is not the blood of saints and
 men in battle beautiful? Do Christ's hands
 not bleed into your eyes from His cross?
 At night I hear myself growing and wake
 to find my hands drifting of their own will
 to soothe the skin stretched tight
 over my bones.
 I am wound like the guts of a clock,
 waiting for each hour to release me.

QUINCEAÑERA. The title refers to a fifteen-year-old girl's coming-out party in Latin cultures.

QUESTIONS

1. What items and actions are associated with the speaker's new life? What items are put away?
2. What is the speaker waiting to release in the final two lines?
3. If the poem's title were changed to "Fifteen-Year-Old Girl," what would the poem lose in meaning?

Amy Uyematsu (b. 1947)

Deliberate 1992

So by sixteen we move in packs
 learn to strut and slide
 in deliberate lowdown rhythm
 talk in a syn/co/pa/ted beat
 because we want so bad
 to be cool, never to be mistaken
 for white, even when we leave
 these rowdier L.A. streets—
 remember how we paint our eyes
 like gangsters
 flash our legs in nylons
 sassy black high heels
 or two inch zippered boots
 stack them by the door at night
 next to Daddy's muddy gardening shoes.

QUESTIONS

1. Without reference to the author's name, what would you assume about the ethnic background of the poem's speaker, just from the text itself?

2. With reference to the author's ethnicity, what would seem to be suggested by the title (and its use in the third line)?
3. What is the significance of the image in the last two lines of the poem?

Yusef Komunyakaa (b. 1947)

Facing It

1988

My black face fades,
 hiding inside the black granite.
 I said I wouldn't,
 dammit: No tears.
 I'm stone. I'm flesh. 5

My clouded reflection eyes me
 like a bird of prey, the profile of night
 slanted against morning. I turn
 this way—the stone lets me go.
 I turn that way—I'm inside 10
 the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
 again, depending on the light
 to make a difference.

I go down the 58,022 names,
 half-expecting to find 15
 my own in letters like smoke.
 I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
 I see the booby trap's white flash.
 Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
 but when she walks away 20
 the names stay on the wall.
 Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
 wings cutting across my stare.
 The sky. A plane in the sky.
 A white vet's image floats 25
 closer to me, then his pale eyes
 look through mine. I'm a window.
 He's lost his right arm
 inside the stone. In the black mirror
 a woman's trying to erase names: 30
 No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

QUESTIONS

1. How does the title of "Facing It" relate to the poem? Does it have more than one meaning?
2. The narrator describes the people around him by their reflections on the polished granite rather than by looking at them directly. What does this indirect way of scrutinizing contribute to the poem?
3. This poem comes out of the life experience of a black Vietnam veteran. Is Komunyakaa's writing closer to McKay's "universal" method or to Toomer's "ethnic" style?

Shirley Geok-lin Lim (b. 1944)**Learning to love America**

1998

because it has no pure products

because the Pacific Ocean sweeps along the coastline
because the water of the ocean is cold
and because land is better than ocean

because I say we rather than they

5

because I live in California
I have eaten fresh artichokes
and jacarandas bloom in April and May

because my senses have caught up with my body
my breath with the air it swallows
my hunger with my mouth

10

because I walk barefoot in my house

because I have nursed my son at my breast
because he is a strong American boy
because I have seen his eyes redden when he is asked who he is
because he answers I don't know

15

because to have a son is to have a country
because my son will bury me here
because countries are in our blood and we bleed them

because it is late and too late to change my mind
because it is time.

20

LEARNING TO LOVE AMERICA. 1 *pure products*: an allusion to poem XVIII of *Spring and All* (1923) by William Carlos Williams, which begins: "The pure products of America / go crazy—."

QUESTION

Do the reasons given in the poem suggest that the speaker really does love America?

Gender

In her celebrated study *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (1990), Georgetown University linguist Deborah Tannen explored how men and women use language differently. Tannen compared many everyday conversations between husbands and wives to "cross-cultural communications," as if people from separate worlds lived under the same roof. While analyzing the divergent ways in which women and men converse, Tannen carefully emphasizes that neither linguistic style is superior, only that they are different.

While it would be simplistic to assume that all poems reveal the sex of their authors, many poems do become both richer and clearer when we examine their gender assumptions. Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" (page 438) is hardly a macho poem, but it does reflect the complicated mix of love, authority, and violent horseplay that exists in many father-son relationships. By contrast, Sylvia Plath's "Metaphors" (page 528), which describes her own pregnancy through a series of images, deals with an experience that, by biological definition, only a woman can know first-hand. Feminist criticism has shown us how gender influences literary texts in subtler ways. (See the chapter "Critical Approaches to Literature" for a discussion of feminist theory.) The central insight of feminist criticism seems inarguable—our sex does often influence how we speak, write, and interpret language. But that insight need not be intimidating. It can also invite us to bring our whole life experience, as women or men, to reading a poem. It reminds us that poetry, the act of using language with the greatest clarity and specificity, is a means to see the world through the eyes of the opposite sex. Sometimes the messages we get from this exchange aren't pleasant, but at least they may shock us into better understanding.

Anne Stevenson (b. 1933)

Sous-Entendu

1969

Don't think

that I don't know
that as you talk to me
the hand of your mind
is inconspicuously
taking off my stocking,
moving in resourceful blindness
up along my thigh.

5

Don't think
that I don't know
that you know
everything I say
is a garment.

10

SOUS-ENTENDU. The title is a French expression for "hidden meaning" or "implication." It describes something left unsaid but assumed to be understood.

QUESTIONS

1. What is left unsaid but assumed to be understood between the two people in this poem?
2. Could this poem have been written by a man? If so, under what circumstances? If not, why not?

EXERCISE

Rewrite either of the following poems from the perspective of the opposite sex. Then evaluate in what ways the new poem has changed the original's meaning and in what ways the original poem comes through more or less unaltered.

Donald Justice (1925–2004)**Men at Forty**

1967

Men at forty
 Learn to close softly
 The doors to rooms they will not be
 Coming back to.

At rest on a stair landing, 5
 They feel it
 Moving beneath them now like the deck of a ship,
 Though the swell is gentle.

And deep in mirrors
 They rediscover 10
 The face of the boy as he practices tying
 His father's tie there in secret

And the face of that father,
 Still warm with the mystery of lather.
 They are more fathers than sons themselves now. 15
 Something is filling them, something

That is like the twilight sound
 Of the crickets, immense,
 Filling the woods at the foot of the slope
 Behind their mortgaged houses. 20

**Adrienne Rich** (b. 1929)**Women**

1968

My three sisters are sitting
 on rocks of black obsidian.
 For the first time, in this light, I can see who they are.

My first sister is sewing her costume for the procession.
 She is going as the Transparent Lady 5
 and all her nerves will be visible.

My second sister is also sewing,
 at the seam over her heart which has never healed entirely,
 At last, she hopes, this tightness in her chest will ease.

My third sister is gazing 10
 at a dark-red crust spreading westward far out on the sea.
 Her stockings are torn but she is beautiful.

WRITING EFFECTIVELY

WRITERS ON WRITING

Rhina Espallat

Being a Bilingual Writer

1998

Recent interest in the phenomenon known as “Spanglish” has led me to reexamine my own experience as a writer who works chiefly in her second language, and especially to recall my father’s inflexible rule against the mixing of languages. In fact, no English was allowed in that midtown Manhattan apartment that became home after my arrival in New York in 1939. My father read the daily paper in English, taught himself to follow disturbing events in Europe through the medium of English-language radio, and even taught me to read the daily comic strips, in an effort to speed my learning of the language he knew I would need. But that necessary language was banished from family conversation: it was the medium of the outer world, beyond the door; inside, among ourselves, only Spanish was permitted, and it had to be pure, grammatical, unadulterated Spanish.

At the age of seven, however, nothing seems more important than communicating with classmates and neighborhood children. For my mother, too, the new language was a way out of isolation, a means to deal with the larger world and with those American women for whom she sewed. But my father, a political exile waiting for changes in our native country, had different priorities; he lived in the hope of return, and believed that the new home, the new speech, were temporary. His theory was simple: if it could be said at all, it could be said best in the language of those authors whose words were the core of his education. But his insistence on pure Spanish made it difficult, sometimes impossible, to bring home and share the jokes of friends, puns, pop lyrics, and other staples of seven-year-old conversation. Table talk sometimes ended with tears or sullen silence.

And yet, despite the friction it caused from time to time, my native language was also a source of comfort—the reading that I loved, intimacy within the family, and a peculiar auditory delight best described as echoes in the mind. I learned early to relish words as counters in a game that could turn suddenly serious without losing the quality of play, and to value their sound as a meaning behind their meaning.

Nostalgia, a confusion of identity, the fear that if the native language is lost the self will somehow be altered forever; all are part of the subtle flavor of immigrant life, as well as the awareness that one owes gratitude to strangers for acts of communication that used to be simple and once imposed no such debt.



RHINA ESPAILLAT

Memory, folklore, and food all become part of the receding landscape that language sets out to preserve. Guilt, too, adds to the mix, the suspicion that to love the second language too much is to betray those ancestors who spoke the first and could not communicate with us in the vocabulary of our education, our new thoughts. And finally, a sense of grievance and loss may spur hostility toward the new language and those who speak it, as if the common speech of the perceived majority could weld together a disparate population into a huge, monolithic, and threatening Other. That Other is then assigned traits and habits that preclude sympathy and mold “Us” into a unity whose cohesiveness gives comfort.

Luckily, there is another side to bilingualism: curiosity about the Other may be as natural and pervasive as group loyalty. If it weren’t, travel, foreign residence, and intermarriage would be less common than they are. For some bilingual writers, the Other—and the language he speaks—are appealing. Some acknowledge and celebrate the tendency of languages to borrow from each other and produce something different in the process.

From Afterword to *Where Horizons Go*

WRITING ABOUT THE POETRY OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

Poetic Voice and Personal Identity

Every writer strives to find his or her own voice—that distinct mix of subject matter and style that can make an author’s work as instantly recognizable as a friend’s voice over the phone. Poetic voice reflects matters of style—characteristic tone, word choice, figures of speech, and rhythms—as well as characteristic themes and subjects. A recognizable poetic voice usually emerges only when a writer finds the right way of presenting the right subjects.

Finding an authentic voice has long been a central issue among women and minority poets. In exploring their subjects, which often lie outside the existing traditions, these writers sometimes need to find innovative forms of expression.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, for instance, created a new female voice to write the love poems that made her famous. Although her approach to meter was traditional, Millay’s authoritative tone, self-assured manner, and sexual candor were revolutionary for her time.

Sometimes a single word announces a new sort of voice, as in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “Quinceañera.” The title is a Spanish noun for which there is no one-word English equivalent. That one word signals that we will be hearing a new voice.

When writing about voice in poetry, you will often find it illuminating to consider the author’s personal identity. You might consider whether the poem’s subject matter is directly or indirectly shaped by race, gender, age, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs. If so, how is the viewpoint reflected in the poem’s formal aspects (images, tone, metaphors, and so on)?

To examine these issues further, you may want to read “Gender Criticism” in the chapter “Critical Approaches to Literature.” Although that section discusses only one aspect of identity, the general principles it explores relate to the broader question of how an author’s life experience may influence the kinds of poetry he or she creates.

CHECKLIST**Writing About Voice and Personal Identity**

- ✓ Is the poem's subject matter shaped by an aspect of the poet's identity?
- ✓ Does the poem address issues related to race? Gender? Social class? Ethnicity? Sexual orientation? Age? Religious beliefs?
- ✓ Does personal identity reveal itself directly or indirectly in the poem's content?
- ✓ Does the poem's voice reflect the poet's personal identity?
- ✓ If so, how does the voice reflect identity? Consider the poem's diction, imagery, tone, metaphors, and sound.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

Analyze any poem from this chapter from the perspective of its author's race, gender, ethnicity, age, or religious beliefs. Take into account the poem's style—its approach to tone, word choice, figures of speech, and rhythm—as well as its content. You may find it helpful to look at some biographical information on the poem's author, including the short biographies that may be found in the chapter "Lives of the Poets," but focus your comments on the information provided by the poem itself.

MORE TOPICS FOR WRITING

1. Find another poem in the chapter "Poems for Further Reading" in which the poet, like Rhina Espaillat, considers his or her own family. In a paragraph or two, describe what the poem reveals about the author.
2. Write an explication of Adrienne Rich's "Women." What argument does the poem seem to be making?
3. Write a brief analysis (750 to 1,000 words) on how color imagery contributes to meaning in Yusef Komunyakaa's "Facing It."
4. Write an imitation of Shirley Geok-lin Lim's "Learning to love America," about coming to terms with a place—a state, city, or neighborhood—in which you have lived and felt like an outsider.
5. Write about the personal identity of men and boys as explored in Donald Justice's "Men at Forty."
6. Compare Philip Larkin's "Aubade" with another poem about old age and death, such as William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (page 692), or Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" (page 606).