

Unit #6: Playing with Persona

25-50 lines

Quiz Tuesday, March 17th

Poem Due Thursday, March 19th

Martin Espada, "Jorge the Church Janitor Finally Quits"

Robert Browning, "Porphyria's Lover"

Audre Lorde, "Hanging Fire"

Gwendolyn Brooks, "We Real Cool," "A Song in the Front Yard"

Margaret Atwood, "Siren Song"

Langston Hughes, "Madam's Past History," "Madam and the Rent Man," "Madam and Her Madam"

Denise Duhamel, "Snow White's Acne"

For this assignment, you will step into another character—a person who is similar or vastly different from you, and write from his or her perspective. You will use the first person (I) as you write the poem so that the poem is truly written in the voice of this character. As you write the poem, work to channel the particular the idiolect—the unique speech patterns—of your character. Be careful of your verb tense in this poem. Choose either past or present and stick with it throughout the duration of the poem. Present tense tends to work well when writing a persona poem.

Option #1 Internal/External Conflict

Many of the poems in this unit deal with characters in moments of conflict or transition. Write a poem from the perspective of a character in the midst of an internal or external conflict.

Option #2 Coming of Age

Using Audre Lorde's poem "Hanging Fire" or Gwendolyn as a model, write a poem from the perspective of a teenage boy or teenage girl. One option is to write the poem in the voice of yourself as a thirteen or fourteen year old. Try using a refrain like Lorde's line "and momma's in the bedroom with the door closed" to add to the emotional impact of your persona poem.

Option #2 Historical/Literary Character

Write from the perspective of a character from mythology, history, literature, film, or television. See "Siren Song" by Margaret Atwood.

Option #4 Collective Monologue

Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool" is one of the most popular poems in American poetry. Using her poem as a model, write from the perspective of a group of people. Some possible examples include a country (We the people of America), a state, a city, a group of students, a group of friends, a family, etc.

Option #5 Character Remix

Like Denise Duhamel, choose a character from a myth, fairytale, or other story that is well known and write from his or her perspective, either modernizing the story or telling a side of it that's never been told before.

Jorge the Church Janitor Finally Quits**Martin Espada**

No one asks
where I am from,
I must be
from the country of janitors,
I have always mopped this floor.
Honduras, you are a squatter's camp
outside the city
of their understanding.

No one can speak my name,
I host the fiesta
of the bathroom,
stirring the toilet
like a punchbowl.
The Spanish music of my name
is lost
when the guests complain
about toilet paper.

What they say
must be true:
I am smart
but I have a bad attitude.

No one knows
that I quit tonight,
maybe the mop
will push on without me,
sniffing along the floor
like a crazy squid
with stringy gray tentacles.
They will call it Jorge.

Hanging Fire
BY AUDRE LORDE

I am fourteen
 and my skin has betrayed me
 the boy I cannot live without
 still sucks his thumb
 in secret
 how come my knees are
 always so ashy
 what if I die
 before morning
 and momma's in the bedroom
 with the door closed.

I have to learn how to dance
 in time for the next party
 my room is too small for me
 suppose I die before graduation
 they will sing sad melodies
 but finally
 tell the truth about me
 There is nothing I want to do
 and too much
 that has to be done
 and momma's in the bedroom
 with the door closed.

Nobody even stops to think
 about my side of it
 I should have been on Math Team
 my marks were better than his
 why do I have to be
 the one
 wearing braces
 I have nothing to wear tomorrow
 will I live long enough
 to grow up
 and momma's in the bedroom
 with the door closed.

Audre Lorde, "Hanging Fire" from *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. Copyright © 1997 by Audre Lorde. Reprinted with the permission of Charlotte Sheedy Literary Agency and W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., www.nortonpoets.com.

Source: *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1997)

Porphyria's Lover**Robert Browning**

The rain set early in tonight,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened with heart fit to break.
When glided in Porphyria; straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;
Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sat down by my side
And called me. When no voice replied,
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
Murmuring how she loved me — she
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me forever.
But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could tonight's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain:
So, she was come through wind and rain.

Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshiped me: surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:
I propped her head up as before,
Only, this time my shoulder bore
Her head, which droops upon it still:
The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will,
That all it scorned at once is fled,
And I, its love, am gained instead!
Porphyria's love: she guessed not how
Her darling one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now,
And all night long we have not stirred,
And yet God has not said a word

We Real Cool**Gwendolyn Brooks**

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

From The Bean Eaters by Gwendolyn Brooks, published by Harpers. © 1960 by Gwendolyn Brooks. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

a song in the front yard

by Gwendolyn Brooks

I've stayed in the front yard all my life.
I want a peek at the back
Where it's rough and untended and hungry weed grows.
A girl gets sick of a rose.

I want to go in the back yard now
And maybe down the alley,
To where the charity children play.
I want a good time today.

They do some wonderful things.
They have some wonderful fun.
My mother sneers, but I say it's fine
How they don't have to go in at quarter to nine.
My mother, she tells me that Johnnie Mae
Will grow up to be a bad woman.
That George'll be taken to Jail soon or late
(On account of last winter he sold our back gate).

But I say it's fine. Honest, I do.
And I'd like to be a bad woman, too,
And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace
And strut down the streets with paint on my face.

Siren Song**Margaret Atwood**

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows
because anyone who had heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
you are unique

at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.

Now you know. Don't listen.

Madam and the Rent Man
 from *The Selected Poems of*
Langston Hughes

The rent man knocked.
 He said, Howdy-do?
 I said, What
 Can I do for you?
 He said, You know
 Your rent is due.

I said, Listen,
 Before I'd pay
 I'd go to Hades
 And rot away!

The sink is broke,
 The water don't run,
 And you ain't done a thing
 You promised to've done.

Back window's cracked,
 Kitchen floor squeaks,
 There's rats in the cellar,
 And the attic leaks.

He said, Madam,
 It's not up to me.
 I'm just the agent,
 Don't you see?

I said, Naturally,
 You pass the buck.
 If it's money you want
 You're out of luck.

He said, Madam,
 I ain't pleased!
 I said, Neither am I.

So we agrees!

Madam and Her Madam

from *The Selected Poems of*
Langston Hughes

I worked for a woman,
She wasn't mean--
But she had a twelve-room
House to clean.

Had to get breakfast,
Dinner, and Supper, too--
Then take care of her children
When I got through.

Wash, iron, and scrub,
Walk the dog around--
It was too much,
Nearly broke me down.

I said, Madam,
Can it be
You trying to make a
Pack-horse out of me?

She opened her mouth.
She cried, Oh, no!
You know, Alberta,
I love you so!

I said, Madam,
That may be true--
But I'll be dogged
If I love you!

Snow White's Acne

Denise Duhamel

At first she was sure it was just a bit of dried strawberry juice,
or a fleck of her mother's red nail polish that had flaked off
when she'd patted her daughter to sleep the night before.
But as she scrubbed, Snow felt a bump, something festering
under the surface, like a tapeworm curled up and living
in her left cheek.

Doc the Dwarf was no dermatologist
and besides Snow doesn't get to meet him in this version
because the mint leaves the tall doctor puts over her face
only make matters worse. Snow and the Queen hope
against hope for chicken pox, measles, something
that would be gone quickly and not plague Snow's whole
adolescence.

If only freckles were red, she cried, if only
concealer really worked. Soon came the pus, the yellow dots,
multiplying like pins in a pin cushion. Soon came
the greasy hair. The Queen gave her daughter a razor
for her legs and a stick of underarm deodorant.

Snow
doodled through her teenage years—'Snow + ?' in Magic
Markered hearts all over her notebooks. She was an average
student, a daydreamer who might have been a scholar
if she'd only applied herself. She liked sappy music
and romance novels. She liked pies and cake
instead of fruit.

The Queen remained the fairest in the land.
It was hard on Snow, having such a glamorous mom.
She rebelled by wearing torn shawls and baggy gowns.
Her mother would sometimes say, 'Snow darling,
why don't you pull back your hair? Show those pretty eyes?'
or 'Come on, I'll take you shopping.'

Snow preferred
staying in her safe room, looking out of her window
at the deer leaping across the lawn. Or she'd practice
her dance moves with invisible princes. And the Queen,
busy being Queen, didn't like to push it.