

# Personification



## DEFINITION

What is personification? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Personification is a type of [figurative language](#) in which non-human things are described as having human attributes, as in the sentence, "The rain poured down on the wedding guests, indifferent to their plans." Describing the rain as "indifferent" is an example of personification, because rain can't be "indifferent," nor can it feel any other human emotion. However, *saying* that the rain feels indifferent poetically emphasizes the cruel timing of the rain. Personification can help writers to create more vivid descriptions, to make readers see the world in new ways, and to more powerfully capture the human experience of the world (since people really *do* often interpret the non-human entities of the world as having human traits).

Some additional key details about personification:

- Personification isn't exclusive to the use of human attributes to describe non-human things. If a writer describes a non-human thing as *performing a human action*, the writer is personifying that thing. The sentence, "The rain *mocked* the wedding guests' plans," qualifies as personification just as much as the sentence, "The rain was indifferent," does.
- The word "personification" has another, separate meaning from its function as a literary device. The word can also be used to indicate that someone embodies a certain quality or concept. For instance, some people think that the Queen of England is the *personification*—or the embodiment—of civility. However, this guide focuses only on personification as a literary device.

## Personification Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce personification: per-**sahn**-if-ick-ay-shun

## Personification Explained

Personification is a powerful and widely-used literary tool for several reasons. One reason is that it allows readers to develop a greater sense of relation to and identification with non-human entities. Attributing a human emotion to something inanimate—as in the sentence about "indifferent rain"—can make that thing easier to understand and more vivid in the reader's imagination, while at the same time presenting a significantly more *complex* description than is possible with the use of traditional adjectives like "wet" or "gray".

## Personifying a Non-Human Thing as a Complete Person

Personification typically involves bestowing a *single* human quality upon a non-human thing. For instance:

- The rain was indifferent to their plans.
- The waves winked in the sunlight.
- The wind played hide-and-go-seek among the trees.

However, sometimes personification involves referring to a non-human thing as a complete person with *many* human qualities. Consider the way in which old-fashioned ship captains referred to their vessels as "she," or the way in which Kanye West refers to his beloved city of Chicago as a girl named "Windy." (Scroll down to "Personification in Music" for an analysis of those lyrics.) Both cases count as personification—Kanye asks us to momentarily re-imagine something nonhuman (Chicago) as human, because that way we'll be able to understand that the city has a personality and a soul that make him feel connected to it just as he would feel connected to a romantic partner. Similarly, it was common for sea captains back in the day to casually refer to their ships as "she" in order to convey that they felt as much respect, gratitude, and responsibility for the ships as they would towards a woman they loved.

## Personification vs. Anthropomorphism

Personification is the attribution of human characteristics to a non-human entity for the purpose of creating *figurative language and imagery*. Anthropomorphism, by contrast, is the *literal* attribution of human characteristics to animals and other non-human things, often for the purpose of creating a specific type of character: a non-human being that behaves like a human. Winnie the Pooh, the Little Engine that Could, and Simba from the movie *The Lion King* are all examples of anthropomorphism. The human qualities assigned to these characters are not just figurative ways of describing them, as they are in personification. Rather, in anthropomorphism the non-human entities *actually do* human things like talking, falling in love, wiggling their eyebrows, and generally behaving like people behave.

Winnie the Pooh, the Little Engine that Could, and Simba from *The Lion King* are *not* examples of personification. When we use personification, we don't create characters, but instead simply *describe* non-human things as possessing human characteristics, like in the sentence, "The wind played hide-and-go-seek among the trees." In this case, the wind didn't actually grow arms, legs, and a mouth to count down from twenty. *That* would be anthropomorphism. Instead, the wind looks and behaves as wind normally does, but through the power of personification the reader can now imagine the wind's movement in a completely new way, because he or she can now compare that movement to the familiar but different movement of playing hide-and-go-seek.



## EXAMPLES

### Examples of Personification in Literature

Writers use personification to create startling or whimsical visual images, which help to make the world of a book or poem all the more vivid in a reader's imagination. Often, authors use personification to describe the hidden lives of objects as a way of calling the reader's attention to the underlying mood, conflicts, or themes of the novel—of which even the characters themselves may not be fully aware.

#### Personification in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

[\*To the Lighthouse\*](#) takes place in a summer house on the Isle of Skye, off the coast of Scotland. Part 1 of the book describes an eventful summer that the family spends in the house, while Part 2, "Time Passes," describes the passage of the seasons when the family is away from the house. In this example from Part 2, Chapter 2, Woolf describes the summer house in the family's absence:

Nothing stirred in the drawing-room or in the dining-room or on the staircase. Only through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (the house was ramshackle after all) crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing-room questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall? Then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if asking the red and yellow roses on the wall-paper whether they would fade, and questioning (gently, for there was time at their disposal) the torn letters in the waste-paper basket, the flowers, the books, all of which were now open to them and asking, Were they allies? Were they enemies? How long would they endure?

In this passage, Woolf personifies the wind by describing it as though it were a person who, "questioning and wondering," ventures through rooms and creeps around corners, inspecting the family's possessions and "toying with" them. Woolf could easily have written a more straightforward description of the house and the items within it. However, through the use of personification she allows the reader to *identify* with the wind, and in doing so to discover or "venture into" the empty house as the wind does here, "musingly" and curiously.

#### Personification in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

[\*The Old Man and the Sea\*](#) is the story of an unlucky fisherman named Santiago. Santiago has been unable to catch a fish for 84 days, but on the 85th day catches the biggest marlin he has ever seen. Then, on the 86th day, he catches a dolphin (a type of fish; not the ocean mammal) for dinner:

Just before it was dark, as they passed a great island of Sargasso weed that heaved and swung in the light sea as though the ocean were making love with something under a yellow blanket, his small line was taken by a dolphin.

Hemingway's personification of the ocean as "making love" both captures the rolling nature of the waves and also speaks to the fact that, after his change of luck, Santiago once again sees the ocean as a "partner" full of vitality and teeming with life.

#### Personification in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

In the following passage from Act 2, Scene 2 of [\*Romeo and Juliet\*](#), Romeo sneaks into Juliet's garden and catches a glimpse of her on her balcony:

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.  
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,  
Who is already sick and pale with grief,  
That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she.  
Be not her maid, since she is envious;  
Her vestal livery is but sick and green  
And none but fools do wear it; cast it off.

Romeo compares Juliet to the sun, and describes the moon as being envious of Juliet's beauty. Romeo's description of the moon as being female—in addition to its having feelings of envy, sickness, and grief—is an example of personification. When he pleads with Juliet, "Be not her maid," he's not only referring to the "jealous moon"—he's also making subtle reference to Diana, the goddess of the moon and virginity (whose devotees wore green). Thus, personifying the moon allows Romeo not only to express his wonder at Juliet's "celestial" beauty, but also to communicate his hope that Juliet isn't too chaste to get involved with him.

#### Personification in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

In Chapter 1 of [\*The Scarlet Letter\*](#), Hawthorne describes a wild rose bush that grows in front of Salem's gloomy wooden jail:

But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

In the context of the novel's setting in 17th century Boston, this rose bush, which grows wild in front of an establishment dedicated to enforcing harsh puritan values, symbolizes those elements of human nature that cannot be repressed, no matter how strict a community's moral code may be: desire, fertility, and a love of beauty. By personifying the rosebush as "offering" its blossoms to reflect

Nature's pity (Nature is also personified here as having a "heart"), Hawthorne turns the *passive* coincidence of the rosebush's location into an image of human nature *actively* resisting its constraints.

### Examples of Personification in Music

Musicians often use personification in their lyrics for the same type of poetic effect that the technique can have in a literary context. However, the musicians who wrote the following songs don't just give non-human entities human attributes, but actually describe the entities as complete people. This more comprehensive, figurative transformation of a thing—in the case of the following examples, a city or a drug—into a person allows the musicians to partially hide the true identity of what the song describes. In some cases, the musician may want to hide the meaning in order to play with language and with the listener's expectations. In others, the musician may do so in order to share an experience that isn't appropriate for a general audience.

#### Personification in Kanye West's "Homecoming"

"Homecoming" (*Graduation*, 2007) is Kanye's ode to his hometown of Chicago, where he moved at the age of three. Instead of praising Chicago directly, West personifies the city by singing about it as though it were a girl named "Windy"—a reference to Chicago's nickname, "The Windy City":

I met this girl when I was 3 years old  
 And what I loved most, she had so much soul  
 She said, "Excuse me, lil homie, I know you don't know me  
 But my name is Windy and I like to blow trees"..  
 And when I grew up, she showed me how to go downtown  
 In the nighttime her face lit up, so astoundin'  
 I told her in my heart is where she'll always be  
 She never messed with entertainers cause they always leave  
 She said, "It felt like they walked and drop on me"

Through the use of personification, Kanye creates an enjoyable experience of discovery for the listener, who may in fact believe that the song is about a real girl named Windy until he or she listens more closely to the lyrics. In this case, the use of personification adds a whole new dimension to the song.

#### Personification in The Beatles' "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds"

Though there is some debate as to the lyrics' true meaning, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" (*Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*, 1967) is widely perceived as a coded reference to LSD: a psychedelic drug that The Beatles experimented with around the time they wrote this song. Assuming that "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" *does* in fact refer to LSD, it's an excellent example of personification:

Picture yourself in a boat on a river  
 With tangerine trees and marmalade skies  
 Somebody calls you, you answer quite slowly

A girl with kaleidoscope eyes  
 Cellophane flowers of yellow and green  
 Towering over your head  
 Look for the girl with the sun in her eyes  
 And she's gone

Lucy in the sky with diamonds  
 Lucy in the sky with diamonds  
 Lucy in the sky with diamonds  
 Ahhh

Personification allows the Beatles to describe their LSD-induced hallucinations—which, they asserted openly, were important to their creative process—in a veiled way, so that only listeners who were clued into that particular drug culture could detect the reference.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use personification to create memorable images with language, allowing readers to experience works of literature more vividly. Depending on the text, however, a writer may have a more specific purpose for using personification. Consider *Bluets*, by Maggie Nelson, a book made up of short, numbered vignettes in which the author conducts a poetic form of "field research" on her love for the color blue. In the following lines, Nelson wonders if the color blue can help her combat feelings of loss after a recent break-up:

71. I have been trying, for some time now, to find dignity in my loneliness. I have been finding this hard to do.
72. It is easier, of course, to find dignity in one's solitude. Loneliness is solitude with a problem. Can blue solve the problem, or can it at least keep me company within it? —No, not exactly. It cannot love me that way; it has no arms. But sometimes I do feel its presence to be a sort of wink—*Here you are again*, it says, *and so am I*.

Here, Nelson uses the technique of literary personification to accomplish something she wishes she *could* do in real life: replace her love for her former partner with her love for the color blue. She acknowledges that a reciprocal love between herself and blue is impossible in reality—"blue" is incapable of "keeping [her] company" because "it has no arms," or isn't human. However, immediately after this acknowledgement she personifies blue, writing that she sometimes feels its presence as a "wink" of acknowledgement. Thus, Nelson uses literary personification to make blue acknowledge her in her writing, as in reality only another lover or person can.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Personification](#): A straightforward [explanation](#) with examples.

- **The Dictionary Definition of Personification:** A basic [definition](#) and history of the term. The word *personification* was first used in the mid 1700s.
- **Personification on Vimeo and Youtube:**
  - An entertaining [video collage](#) about the difference between anthropomorphism and personification.
  - A [recording](#) of the Beatles rehearsing "Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds."

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### Chicago Manual

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