

Chapter ten

Tone

Tone, in literature, may be defined as the writer's or speaker's attitude toward his subject, his audience, or himself. It is the emotional coloring, or the emotional meaning, of the work and is an extremely important part of the full meaning. In spoken language it is indicated by the inflections of the speaker's voice. If, for instance, a friend tells you, "I'm going to get married today," the facts of the statement are entirely clear. But the emotional meaning of the statement may vary widely according to the tone of voice with which it is uttered. The tone may be ecstatic ("Hooray! I'm going to get married today!"); it may be incredulous ("I can't believe it! I'm going to get married today"); it may be despairing ("Horrors! I'm going to get married today"); it may be resigned ("Might as well face it. I'm going to get married today"). Obviously, a correct interpretation of the tone will be an important part of understanding the full meaning. It may even have rather important consequences. If someone calls you a fool, your interpretation of the tone may determine whether you roll up your sleeves for a fight or walk off with your arm around his shoulder. If a woman says "No" to a proposal of marriage, the man's interpretation of her tone may determine whether he asks her again and wins her or starts going with someone else.

In poetry tone is likewise important. We have not really understood a poem unless we have accurately sensed whether the attitude it manifests is playful or solemn, mocking or reverent, calm or excited. But the correct determination of tone in literature is a much more delicate mat-

ter than it is with spoken language, for we do not have the speaker's voice to guide us. We must learn to recognize tone by other means. Almost all the elements of poetry help to indicate its tone: connotation, imagery, and metaphor; irony and understatement; rhythm, sentence construction, and formal pattern. There is therefore no simple formula for recognizing tone. It is an end product of all the elements in a poem. The best we can do is illustrate.

Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (No. 98) seems a simple poem, but it has always afforded trouble to beginning readers. A very good student, asked to interpret it, once wrote this: "The poem means that we are forever passing up pleasures to go onward to what we wrongly consider our obligations. We would like to watch the snow fall on the peaceful countryside, but we always have to rush home to supper and other engagements. Frost feels that the average person considers life too short to stop and take time to appreciate true pleasures." This student did a good job in recognizing the central conflict of the poem. He went astray in recognizing its tone. Let's examine why.

In the first place, the fact that the speaker in the poem *does* stop to watch the snow fall in the woods immediately establishes him as a human being with more sensitivity and feeling for beauty than most. He is not one of the people of Wordsworth's sonnet (No. 26) who, "getting and spending," have laid waste their powers and lost the capacity to be stirred by nature. Frost's speaker is contrasted with his horse, who, as a creature of habit and an animal without esthetic perception, cannot understand the speaker's reason for stopping. There is also a suggestion of contrast with the "owner" of the woods, who, if he saw the speaker stopping, might be as puzzled as the horse. (Who most truly "profits" from the woods—its absentee owner or the person who can enjoy its beauty?) The speaker goes on because he has "promises to keep." But the word "promises," though it may here have a wry ironic undertone of regret, has a favorable connotation: people almost universally agree that promises ought to be kept. If the poet had used a different term, say, "things to do," or "business to attend to," or "financial affairs to take care of," or "money to make," the connotations would have been quite different. As it is, the tone of the poem tells us that the poet is sympathetic to the speaker, is endorsing rather than censuring his action. Perhaps we may go even further. In the concluding two lines, because of their climactic position, because they are repeated, and because "sleep" in poetry is often used figuratively to refer to death, there is a suggestion of symbolic interpretation: "and many years to live

before I die." If we accept this interpretation, it poses a parallel between giving oneself up to contemplation of the woods and dying. The poet's total implication would seem to be that beauty is a distinctively human value that deserves its place in a full life but that to devote one's life to its pursuit, at the expense of other obligations and duties, is tantamount to one's death as a responsible being. The poet therefore accepts the choice the speaker makes, though not without a touch of regret.

Differences in tone, and their importance, can perhaps be studied best in poems with similar content. Consider, for instance, the following pair.

106. THE VILLAIN

While joy gave clouds the light of stars,
That beamed where'er they looked;
And calves and lambs had tottering knees,
Excited, while they sucked; 5
While every bird enjoyed his song,
Without one thought of harm or wrong—
I turned my head and saw the wind,
Not far from where I stood,
Dragging the corn by her golden hair,
Into a dark and lonely wood. 10

W. H. Davies (1871–1940)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *corn* (9) in British usage.
2. From what realm of literary experience is the title taken? How is this allusion strengthened by the image in lines 9–10, and what implication does it have for the way this image should be taken—that is, for its relation to reality?

107. APPARENTLY WITH NO SURPRISE

Apparently with no surprise
To any happy flower,
The frost beheads it at its play
In accidental power.

The blond assassin passes on,
The sun proceeds unmoved
To measure off another day
For an approving God.

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

QUESTIONS

1. What is the “blond assassin”?
2. What ironies are involved in this poem?

Both of these poems are concerned with nature; both use contrast as their basic organizing principle—a contrast between innocence and evil, joy and tragedy. But in tone the two poems are sharply different. The first is light and fanciful; its tone is one of delight or delighted surprise. The second, though superficially fanciful, is basically grim, almost savage; its tone is one of horror. Let's examine the difference.

In “The Villain” the images of the first six lines all suggest joy and innocence. The last four introduce the sinister. The poet, on turning his head, sees a villain dragging a beautiful maiden toward a dark wood to commit there some unmentionable deed, or so his metaphor tells us. But our response is one not of horror but of delight, for we realize that the poet does not mean us to take his metaphor seriously. He has actually seen only the wind blowing through the wheat and bending its golden tops gracefully toward a shady wood. The beauty of the scene has delighted him, and he has been further delighted by the fanciful metaphor which he has found to express it. The reader shares his delight both in the scene and in the metaphor.

The second poem makes the same contrast of joyful innocence (the “happy flower . . . at its play”) with the sinister (“the blond assassin”). **The chief difference would seem to be that the villain is this time the frost rather than the wind. But this time the poet, though her metaphor is no less fanciful, is earnest in what she is saying. For the frost actually *does* kill the flower. What makes the horror of the killing even worse is that nothing else in nature is disturbed over it or seems even to notice it. The sun “proceeds unmoved / To measure off another day.” Nothing in nature stops or pauses. The flower itself is not surprised. And even God—the God who we have all been told is benevolent and concerned over the least sparrow's fall—seems to approve of what has happened, for He shows no displeasure, and it was He who created the frost as well**

as the flower. Further irony lies in the fact that the "assassin" (the word's connotations are of terror and violence) is not dark but "blond," or white (the connotations here are of innocence and beauty). The destructive agent, in other words, is among the most exquisite creations of God's handiwork. The poet, then, is shocked at what has happened, and is even more shocked that nothing else in nature is shocked. What has happened seems inconsistent with a rule of benevolence in the universe. In her ironic reference to an "approving God," therefore, the poet is raising a dreadful question: are the forces that created and govern the universe actually benevolent? And if we think that the poet is unduly disturbed over the death of a flower, we may consider that what is true for the flower is true throughout nature. Death—even early or accidental death, in terrible juxtaposition with beauty—is its constant condition; the fate that befalls the flower befalls us all.

These two poems, then, though superficially similar, are basically as different as night and day. And the difference is primarily one of tone.

Accurate determination of tone, therefore, is extremely important, whether in the reading of poetry or the interpretation of a woman's "No." For the experienced reader it will be instinctive and automatic. For the beginning reader it will require study. But beyond the general suggestions for reading that already have been made, no specific instructions can be given. Recognition of tone requires an increasing familiarity with the meanings and connotations of words, alertness to the presence of irony and other figures, and, above all, careful reading. Poetry cannot be read as one would skim a newspaper or a mystery novel looking merely for facts.

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108. THE COMING OF WISDOM WITH TIME

Though leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
Now I may wither into the truth,

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

QUESTION

Is the poet exulting over a gain or lamenting over a loss?

109. SINCE THERE'S NO HELP

Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part;
Nay, I have done, you get no more of me,
And I am glad, yea, glad with all my heart
That thus so cleanly I myself can free;
Shake hands forever, cancel all our vows, 5
And when we meet at any time again,
Be it not seen in either of our brows
That we one jot of former love retain.
Now, at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,
When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies, 10
When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
And Innocence is closing up his eyes,
Now, if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,
From death to life thou mightst him yet recover.

Michael Drayton (1563–1631)

QUESTIONS

1. What difference in tone do you find between the first eight lines and the last six? In which is the speaker more sincere? What differences in rhythm and language help to establish the difference in tone?
2. How many figures are there in the allegorical scene in lines 9–12? What do the pronouns “his” and “him” in lines 10–14 refer to? What is dying? Why? How might the person addressed still restore it from death to life?
3. Define the dramatic situation as precisely as possible, taking into consideration both the man's attitude and the woman's.

110. THE TELEPHONE

“When I was just as far as I could walk
From here today,
There was an hour
All still
When leaning with my head against a flower 5
I heard you talk.
Don't say I didn't, for I heard you say—
You spoke from that flower on the window sill—
Do you remember what it was you said?”
“First tell me what it was you thought you heard.” 10

“Having found the flower and driven a bee away,
I leaned my head,
And holding by the stalk,
I listened and I thought I caught the word—
What was it? Did you call me by my name?
Or did you say—
Someone said ‘Come’—I heard it as I bowed.”

15

“I may have thought as much, but not aloud.”

“Well, so I came.”

Robert Frost (1874–1963)

QUESTIONS

1. When and where does the above dialogue take place? What is the relationship between the two speakers?
2. How does the title relate to the poem?
3. Characterize the first speaker. Why does he interrupt his narrative to say, “Don’t say I didn’t” (7)? Why does he not tell her what he heard her say (7–9, 14–16)? Why does he shift to what “*Someone*” said (17)?
4. Characterize the second speaker.
5. What is the poem about? What is its tone?

111. LOVE IN BROOKLYN

“I love you, Horowitz,” he said, and blew his nose.
She splashed her drink. “The hell you say,” she said.
Then, thinking hard, she lit a cigarette:
“Not *love*. You don’t *love* me. You like my legs,
and how I make your letters nice and all.
You drunk your drink too fast. You don’t love *me*.”

5

“You wanna bet?” he asked. “You wanna bet?
I loved you from the day they moved you up
from Payroll, last July. I watched you, right?
You sat there on that typing chair you have
and swung round like a kid. It made me shake.
Like once, in World War II, I saw a tank
slide through some trees at dawn like it was god.
That’s how you make me feel. I don’t know why.”

10

She turned towards him, then sat back and grinned,
and on the bar stool swung full circle round.

15

"You think I'm like a tank, you mean?" she asked.
"Some fellers tell me nicer things than that."
But then she saw his face and touched his arm
and softly said "I'm only kidding you."

20

He ordered drinks, the same again, and paid.
A fat man, wordless, staring at the floor.
She took his hand in hers and pressed it hard.
And his plump fingers trembled in her lap.

John Wakeman (b. 1928)

QUESTIONS

1. When and where does the above dialogue take place? What is the relationship between the two speakers?
2. Characterize the first speaker. How does he feel toward the other?
3. Characterize the second speaker. How does she feel toward him? Do her feelings change? If so, how?
4. Contrast this poem in tone with "The Telephone."

112. ONE DIGNITY DELAYS FOR ALL

One dignity delays for all,
One mitred afternoon.
None can avoid this purple,
None avoid this crown.

Coach it insures, and footmen,
Chamber and state and throng;
Bells, also, in the village,
As we ride grand along.

5

What dignified attendants,
What service when we pause!
How loyally at parting
Their hundred hats they raise!

10

How pomp surpassing ermine
When simple you and I
Present our meek escutcheon
And claim the rank to die!

15

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *mitred* (2), *state* (6), *escutcheon* (15).
2. What is the “dignity” that delays for all? What is its nature? What is being described in stanzas 2 and 3?
3. What figures of speech are combined in “our meek escutcheon” (15)? What metaphorically does it represent?

113. 'Twas WARM AT FIRST LIKE US

'Twas warm at first like us,
Until there crept upon
A chill, like frost upon a glass,
Till all the scene be gone.

The forehead copied stone, 5
The fingers grew too cold
To ache, and like a skater's brook
The busy eyes congealed.

It straightened—that was all,
It crowded cold to cold, 10
It multiplied indifference
As pride were all it could.

And even when with cords
'Twas lowered like a weight,
It made no signal, nor demurred, 15
But dropped like adamant.

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *adamant* (16).
2. What is “It” in the opening line? What is being described in the poem, and between what points in time?
3. How would you describe the tone of this poem? How does it contrast with that of the preceding?

114. CROSSING THE BAR

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep, 5
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell, 10
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell
When I embark;

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face 15
When I have crossed the bar.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *bourne* (13).
2. What two sets of figures does Tennyson use for approaching death? What is the precise moment of death in each set?
3. In troubled weather the wind and waves above the sandbar across a harbor's mouth make a moaning sound. What metaphorical meaning has the "moaning of the bar" here (3)? For what kind of death is the poet wishing? Why does he want "no sadness of farewell" (11)?
4. What is "that which drew from out the boundless deep" (7)? What is "the boundless deep"? To what is it opposed in the poem? Why is "Pilot" (15) capitalized?

115. THE OXEN

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
"Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where 5
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave 10
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel

"In the lonely barton^o by yonder coomb^o farm; valley
 Our childhood used to know,"
 I should go with him in the gloom, 15
 Hoping it might be so.

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

QUESTIONS

1. Is the simple superstition referred to in the poem here opposed to, or identified with, religious faith? With what implications for the meaning of the poem?
2. What are "these years" (10) and how do they contrast with the years of the poet's boyhood? What event in intellectual history between 1840 and 1915 (the date of composition of this poem) was most responsible for the change?
3. Both "Crossing the Bar" and "The Oxen" in their last lines use a form of the verb *hope*. By full discussion of tone, establish the precise meaning of hope in each poem. What degree of expectation does it imply? How should the word be handled in reading Tennyson's poem aloud?

116. THE APPARITION

When by thy scorn, O murderess, I am dead,
 And that thou thinkst thee free
 From all sollicitation from me,
 Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,
 And thee, feigned vestal, in worse arms shall see; 5
 Then thy sick taper^o will begin to wink, candle
 And he, whose thou art then, being tired before,
 Will, if thou stir, or pinch to wake him, think
 Thou call'st for more,
 And in false sleep will from thee shrink. 10
 And then, poor aspen wretch, neglected, thou,
 Bathed in a cold quicksilver sweat, wilt lie
 A verier^o ghost than I. truer
 What I will say, I will not tell thee now,
 Lest that preserve thee; and since my love is spent, 15
 I had rather thou shouldst painfully repent,
 Than by my threatenings rest still innocent.

John Donne (1572–1631)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *feigned* (5), *aspen* (11), *quicksilver* (13). Are the latter two words used literally or figuratively? Explain.
2. What has been the past relationship between the speaker and the woman

- addressed? How does a “solicitation” differ from a proposal? Why does he call her a “murderess”? What threat does he make against her?
3. In line 15 the speaker proclaims that his love for the woman “is spent.” Does the tone of the poem support this contention? Discuss.
 4. In line 5 why does the speaker use the word “vestal” instead of “virgin”? Does he believe her not to be a virgin? Of what is he accusing her? (In ancient Rome the vestal virgins tended the perpetual fire in the temple of Vesta. They entered this service between the ages of six and ten, and served for a term of thirty years, during which they were bound to virginity.)
 5. The implied metaphor in line 1—that a woman who will not satisfy her lover’s desires is “killing” him—was a cliché of Renaissance poetry. What original twist does Donne give it to make it fresh and new?
 6. In the scene imagined by the speaker of his ghost’s visit to the woman’s bed, he finds her “in worse arms”—worse than whose? In what respect? By what will this other man have been “tired before”? Of what will he think she is calling for “more”? What is the speaker implying about himself and the woman in these lines?
 7. Why (according to the speaker) will the woman *really* be trying to wake up her bedmate? Why, when she fails, will she be a “verier” ghost than the speaker?
 8. What will the ghost say to her that he will not now reveal lest his telling it “preserve” her? Can we know? Does *he* know? Why does he make this undefined threat?
 9. For what does the speaker say he wants the woman to “painfully repent”? Of what crime or sin would she remain “innocent” if he revealed now what his ghost would say? What is the speaker’s real objective?

117. THE FLEA

Mark but this flea, and mark in this
 How little that which thou deny’st me is;
 It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
 And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
 Thou know’st that this cannot be said 5
 A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;
 Yet this enjoys before it woo,
 And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
 And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare, 10
 Where we almost, yea more than married are,
 This flea is you and I, and this
 Our marriage bed and marriage temple is;
 Though parents grudge, and you, we are met
 And cloistered in these living walls of jet. 15
 Though use^o make you apt to kill me, habit
 Let not to that, self-murder added be,

And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purple^d thy nail in blood of innocence? crimsoned 20
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself, nor me, the weaker now.
'Tis true. Then learn how false fears be: 25
Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

John Donne (1572-1631)

QUESTIONS

1. In many respects this poem is like a miniature play: it has two characters, dramatic conflict, dialogue (though we hear only one speaker), and stage-action. The action is indicated by stage directions embodied in the dialogue. What has happened just *preceding* the first line of the poem? What happens *between* the first and second stanzas? What happens *between* the second and third? How does the female character behave and what does she say *during* the third stanza?
2. What has been the past relationship of the speaker and the woman? What has she denied him (2)? How has she habitually "killed" him (16)? Why has she done so? How does it happen that he is still alive? What is his objective in the poem?
3. According to a traditional Renaissance belief, the bloods of the participating parties in sexual intercourse were "mingled." What is the speaker's argument in stanza 1? Reduce it to paraphrase. How logical is it?
4. What do "parents grudge, and you" in stanza 2? What are the "living walls of jet"? What three things will the woman kill by crushing the flea? What three sins will she commit?
5. Why and how does the woman "triumph" in stanza 3? What is the speaker's response? How logical is his concluding argument?
6. What action, if any, would you infer, follows the conclusion of the poem?
7. "The Apparition" and "The Flea" may both be classified as "seduction poems." How do they differ in tone?

118. ENGRAVED ON THE COLLAR OF A DOG WHICH I GAVE TO HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS

I am his Highness' dog at Kew;
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

QUESTIONS

1. What adjective—or noun—best fits the attitude expressed on the dog's collar?
2. Is the dog in any way symbolic? Explain.

119. LOVE

There's the wonderful love of a beautiful maid,
And the love of a staunch true man,
And the love of a baby that's unafraid—
All have existed since time began.
But the most wonderful love, the Love of all loves,
Even greater than the love for Mother,
Is the infinite, tenderest, passionate love
Of one dead drunk for another.

Anonymous

QUESTION

The radical shift in tone makes "Love" come off. If such a shift were unintentional in a poem, what would our view be?

EXERCISES

1. Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (No. 51), Housman's "Loveliest of Trees" (No. 53), and Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" (No. 59) all treat a traditional poetic theme known as the *carpe diem* ("seize the day") theme. They differ sharply, however, in tone. Characterize the tone of each, and point out the differences in poetic management that account for the difference in tone.
2. Describe and account for the differences in tone between the poems in the following pairs:
 - a. "A bird came down the walk" (No. 5) and "A narrow fellow in the grass" (No. 33).
 - b. "The Lamb" (No. 196) and "The Tiger" (No. 197).
 - c. "The Unknown Citizen" (No. 80) and "Departmental" (No. 81).
 - d. "Some keep the Sabbath going to church" (No. 180) and "Design" (No. 100).
 - e. "It sifts from leaden sieves" (No. 42) and "The Snow Man" (No. 243).
 - f. "I taste a liquor never brewed" (No. 201) and "All day I hear" (No. 153).
 - g. "The Dead" (No. 62) and "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (No. 151).
 - h. "There is a garden in her face" (No. 46) and "The Silken Tent" (No. 47).