

## Unit 10

### Tone

Tone is the total emotional and intellectual effect of a passage of writing. It involves connotation, diction, and rhythm. Tone determines what a reader's attitude towards the subject being discussed will be.

A writer's attitude towards what he discusses is not necessarily the same with the response he wants to produce in his reader. An advertising man, for instance, may be completely indifferent to his subject, or he may have completely different views from those he is expected to communicate. Since it is his job to convince the reader to feel a certain way towards his subject, he deliberately writes in a way that he thinks is most likely to evoke that feeling.

More importantly, an understanding of tone and its contributory elements can enrich a reader's enjoyment of imaginative literature. Three special sorts of language--metaphors, symbols, and allusions have an influence on tone.

#### Metaphors

The function of a metaphor is to suggest an analogy. If a writer wishes to make something clearer and more vivid, he draws a concrete image which brings to mind one or more qualities possessed by the situation or object or person or abstract idea which needs illustration. For example, in describing the scene at a busy corner at various hours of the day and night, a writer may fall back on a cliché by speaking of "the tides of humanity." As the tides of the sea have some of the same characteristics which the writer finds in the people who pass by the corner, the writer makes his point by an implied analogy between the sea and the crowd. The

strength of the analogy lies in the readiness **and** vividness with which the reader recognizes the qualities that the two objects share--their bonds of similarity.

Metaphor-making is one of the oldest and deepest-seated habits of the human mind. From the beginning of time, human beings have searched for some underlying pattern or order in the universe. They have tried to **find** or imagine **all** sorts of connecting links between objects and phenomena that were **superficially** dissimilar. Metaphors are the linguistic embodiment of these links. Furthermore, metaphors have always helped man make the abstract comprehensible in terms of ordinary experience **and**, of explaining the seemingly mysterious in everyday language.

Countless words in the English language, though no longer recognized as such, were originally metaphors. The very use of language, therefore, inevitably involves words that originated as metaphors, even though their metaphorical significance is no longer realized. But it is hardly possible to write or speak without using metaphorical expressions that still have certain power to suggest a comparison. We talk of walking on *air*, *seeing stars*, *tasting bitter defeat*, *smelling a rat*, and *tightening our belts* without ever meaning that we really perform any of these actions. We are using each expression figuratively, or metaphorically, to refer to some other action or attitude that it suggests. Metaphors evoke mental images; and mental images often have powerful **emotional** qualities. Thus, the selection of metaphors has a great deal to do with the total emotional context--the mood--of any passage of writing.

Ordinarily, metaphors should fulfill two requirements: they should harmonize with the writer's intention and with the subject and atmosphere he wants to portray, and within a brief passage they should harmonize with each other. The connotative function of the metaphor is to reinforce the tone established by the writer's choice of language in general. If the writer

hopes to establish rapport with his reader on the basis of man-to-man talk, his metaphors will be drawn from common, everyday experience, just as his diction is designed to reflect the normal speech of the reader to whom he is addressing himself. But if he wishes to elevate his reader's feelings, his metaphors will themselves have that elevated quality. Unless each individual metaphor harmonizes with the tone of the whole, the reader will be distracted by the irrelevant elements which are unexpectedly forced into his experience.

Metaphorical language which seems inappropriate to the general tone of the passage may suggest that the writer simply does not have a clear idea of his purpose or of the way to achieve it. There is also another possibility that the writer may deliberately use incongruous metaphors for some purpose. Poets and prose writers often use an unexpected and superficially inappropriate metaphor for the sake of contrast. Many modern poets, following the example of older ones like John Donne, add extra meaning to their work by introducing language, and especially metaphors, whose connotation pulls in a direction opposite to that which the poem as a whole is moving. This stress or "tension" allows the writer to utter ironic commentary on his material and forces the reader to entertain two simultaneous attitudes toward the poem's ideas: that which is encouraged by the general surface tone and direction and the quite different one that is suggested by the seemingly inappropriate or contradictory metaphor.

In one of his dispatches from the Spanish Civil War, Ernest Hemingway said: "Up toward Tortosa things looked quite deadly already from the way the planes were acting. But down here on the delta the artillery were still only warming up, like baseball pitchers lobbing them over in the bull pen." The use of baseball pitchers seem incongruous in the grim context of war, and that is why Hemingway used them. The mention of

baseball pitchers in connection with artillery underscores the vast, tragic difference between the motives of gunners and those of pitchers. In a word, Hemingway influenced his reader's attitude toward war by his use of contrasting metaphors from peacetime.

Thus, a careful consideration of the appropriateness of metaphor can throw light on a writer's attitude toward his subject and **the** attitude that he expects us to have. In a similar manner we can find significance in the consistency, or lack of consistency, of the metaphors in a passage. The extended or repeated use of concrete language evokes in the reader's mind a series of pictures. When we read at **normal** speed, the picture that occurs in our mind is not instantly blotted out as soon as we have left the word that has **called** it forth. In stead, it lingers for an instant; and if another image is suggested before the first one has faded, the result will be a sort of double exposure. Unless the two images are of the same type, they will clash, and the total effect will be one of confusion.

### Exercise 1

Examine each quotation for these points: (1) the vividness and freshness with which the metaphor illuminates the idea; (2) the appropriateness of the metaphor to the subject discussed; (3) the clues the metaphor offers to the attitude of the writer, or to the attitude he wishes the reader to have.

1. Her smile was silent as the smile on corpses three hours old.

2.           A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed  
              Against the sweet earth's flowing breast;  
              A tree that looks at God **all** day,

And tree that may in summer wear  
A nest of robins in her hair;  
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;  
Who intimately lives with rain.\*

3. I saw eternity the other night \*  
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,  
All calm, as it was bright.

4. It is no matter what you teach your children first, any more than what leg you shall put in your breeches first. You may stand disputing which is best to put in first, but in the mean time your breech is bare. While you are considering which of two things you should teach your child first, another boy has learnt them both.

5. What I like in a good author is not what he says, but what he whispers.

## Symbols

A metaphor involving a rose may serve one or more of a number of purposes. It may emphasize the idea of color: "Her cheek like the rose is, but fresher, I ween." It may emphasize the idea of odor:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, II. ii.

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\* Joyce Kilmer, "Trees." From *Trees and Other Poems*. Copyright 1914 by Doubleday & Co., Inc.

Or it may emphasize the idea of softness:

There is sweet music here that softer falls  
Than petals from blown roses on the grass.

Tennyson's *The Lotos-Eaters*

The special quality of the rose which is recalled by the comparison depends upon what quality is being emphasized by the context.

'Now consider other passages in which the rose is mentioned:

Loveliest of lovely things are they,  
On earth, that soonest pass away.  
The rose that lives its little hour  
Is prized beyond the sculptured flower.

Bryant's *A Scene on the Bank of the Hudson*

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying.  
And this same flower that smiles today  
Tomorrow will be dying.

Herrick's *To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time*

In these instances the rose is not used for the sake of specific comparison. Instead, it "stands for" or symbolizes something: namely, physical beauty (with a frequent suggestion of impermanence). Just as connotations can be either general or personal, so, in literary use, symbols can be either traditional or private. We all have our own personal collections of mental objects which have especially powerful associations for us, because of the nature of our individual experience; and many

writers have used particular objects in their own experience and adopted them as recurrent symbols of some broad idea or attitude.

Much more common in literature, as in nonliterary writing, are symbols whose associative meaning is shared by the great majority of readers. They are important in communication, above all in imaginative prose and poetry, because writers often allow them to bear the central meaning of the passage rather than to act as accessories and commentaries, as is the case with other metaphors. Symbolism, skillfully used, is very effective for two reasons. The first is that symbols call forth an emotional reaction by way of sensuous imagery; the second is that, because most symbols have figured in literature for centuries, they have a literary association which evokes in the well-read man or woman a host of reminiscences of passages in older literature, with all that they themselves connote. The use of a river as a symbol of the eternal flux of life, of the absence of anything really permanent and substantial in our human existence, goes all the way back to Plato, and countless writers of prose and poetry have used it since. Which aspect of the symbol is emphasized depends on the context where it occurs.

Some symbols have more than one significance. *Blood*, for example, has only one denotation ("the red fluid that circulates in the bodies of many animals"), but many symbolic references. It may represent the essence of life ("lifeblood"). It may be a metaphor for family descent ("blood is thicker than water"), or for noble lineage ("blue blood in one's vein"), or, it may be used to identify race or nationality ("he has Norwegian blood"). It may also symbolize individual murder ("his blood is on your hand") or wholesale slaughter ("a blood bath").

In a simple word or two, symbols which mean much more than they seem to say on the surface, sum up the most important ideas in life. Here is a small sample of common ones:

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| gold       | The symbol of wealth, of great value, of material (as opposed to spiritual) possessions; also of happiness, hope, youth. |
| moon       | Peace, serenity, chastity, romantic love; also (sometimes paradoxically), inaccessibility, loneliness, changefulness.    |
| star       | Remoteness, purity, permanence.  |
| crossroads | A choice between two or more courses of action--usually a <b>critical decision</b> .                                     |
| ice        | Coldness, and therefore often death. Also hardness, and therefore the word can imply a personal attitude.                |

The use of symbols like these adds much to the emotional tone of any piece of writing. Sometimes they reinforce an impression which is produced by other means. At other times they are used for ironic contrast, as when a novelist who has just described a sordid occurrence in the Paris slums suddenly shifts the reader's vision to the stars shining tranquilly in the skies, and thus intensifies, by contrast, the evil quality of what he has just been talking about.

While the general import of a symbol is usually fixed, its precise connotation varies with the tone of the passage in which it occurs. Thus symbolism and tone--the part and the whole--interact one upon the other. Take for example three symbols of death--the words *sleep*, *grave*, and worm. Each word implies a different sort of attitude toward the fact of death. *Sleep* is almost wholly favorable in its attitude; it connotes relief from physical and mental pain, welcome oblivion. Grave has less of the warmth, the comfort, that *sleep* suggests. It implies, above all, silence, lack of emotion, coldness. *Worm* is the least pleasant of the symbols, with its grisly suggestion of the physical disintegration of the body after death. In the following passages note that the precise feeling we are expected to



adopt toward death is determined, not alone by the selection of one symbol rather than the other, but by the context, which subtly modifies the connotation of the symbol.

From too much love of living,  
From hope and fear set free,  
We thank with brief thanksgiving  
Whatever gods may be  
That no lives live for ever;  
That dead men rise never;  
That even the weariest river  
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Then star nor sun shall waken,  
Nor any change of light:  
Nor sound of waters shaken,  
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,  
Nor days nor things diurnal;  
Only the sleep eternal  
In an eternal night.

*The Garden Of Proserpine*

In this poem, Swinburne plainly regards death as a form of sleep which is welcomed because at least it will blot out all the disappointed hopes, the frustrations and uncertainties, of life.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, into thin air;

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-clapp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a *rack* behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

*rack = cloud fragment*

*The Tempest, IV. i.*

**In** these lines, Shakespeare views death not as a release from life, but as a natural culmination of an existence which is itself insubstantial and illusory. Death and life are two parts of a perfectly harmonious whole.

## Exercise 2

Here is a group of passages in which the idea of death' is represented by one or another of the symbols we have mentioned--sleep , *grave* , and worms . Decide just what attitude each writer wishes us to adopt toward death.

1. Is not short pain well borne, that brings long ease,  
And lays the soul to sleep in quiet grave?  
Sleep after toil, port after stormy seas,  
Base after war, death after life does greatly please.
2. Sleep is a death; oh, make me try,  
By sleeping, what it is to die,

And as gently lay my head  
On my grave, as now my bed.

3. Romeo [to Mercutio, who is badly wounded]:

Courage, man, **the** hurt cannot be much.

Mercutio: No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so **wide** as a church-door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man.

### Exercise 3

What is the usual meaning of the following symbols?

|          |             |
|----------|-------------|
| red      | green       |
| yellow   | white       |
| black    | pink        |
| bread    | wine        |
| lion     | eagle       |
| crown    | sword       |
| sunrise  | noon        |
| twilight | autumn      |
| seed     | harvest     |
| tear     | <b>dust</b> |

### Allusions

An allusion is a reference to specific places, persons, literary passages, or historical events that, like metaphorical symbols, have come to “stand for” a certain idea. When a person reads, how much he understands

what he is reading is proportional to the readiness with which he recognizes allusions and their connotation when he encounters them. The more familiar he is with history and literature, the better prepared he is to receive the full message which the writer intends for him. The best way to cultivate such familiarity is to read as much as possible and then to remember. Allusions, like metaphors and **symbols**, are not meant to be analyzed. They are meant to be apprehended automatically. A truly accomplished reader who is acquainted with literature and history will spontaneously react as the writer intends him to.

There are three major sources of allusions: mythology, literature (including the Bible), and history.

Mythology has played an important part in the imaginations of writers and readers down the ages. The gods and goddesses of Olympus, the heroes of ancient legend, were as familiar to the people who created the literature of the western world as are popular movie stars to us. Their names--Hercules, Cupid, Venus, Jupiter, Apollo--had the power to evoke rich emotions which sprang from recollection of the wondrous stories in which these figures appeared. One practical way to learn more about the myths **and** legends of ancient Greece and Rome is to read the poems of the Roman poet Ovid, of which there are many translations. Another source is Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* . Also, you should read widely in English poetry so that the mythological figures and the stories in which they occur will gradually become familiar to you.

A knowledge of older writing is essential to a full comprehension of present day writing. Literary allusions help influence the precise effects of any piece of writing. In the case of references to characters in literature, we must know what part they play in the poem or drama or novel in which they appear, and how their creator wished his readers to , in his the new situation. If, in his description of a man, a writer refers to

Shylock, we know that this character must be nasty and mean as this is an allusion to the Jew Shylock, the cruel money-lender who asked for a pound of flesh from Antonio in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Quotations embedded in the text are a type of allusion. The pleasure and profit of our reading are increased when we recognize such phrases and recall their full meaning in their original context.

The third major source from which writers draw their allusions is history. One of the uses of historical allusions is to suggest a parallel between a current situation and a historical one, for the sake of proving a point. The expression "to meet one's Waterloo" which means "to be finally and crushingly defeated in a contest (especially after a period of success)", alludes to a historical event, the total defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo, a village in central Belgium, on June 18, 1815.

#### Exercise 4

1. What are the meanings and effects of the mythical allusions in the following quotation?

Frailty, thy name is woman--  
A little month, or e;er those shoes were old  
With which she followed my poor father's body,  
Like Niobe, all tears--why she, even she--  
O God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,  
Would have mourned longer--married with mine uncle,  
My father's brother, but no more Like my father  
Than I to Hercules . . . . .

2. What is the symbolic or connotative meaning of the following names which are taken from mythology or ancient literature?

Narcissus, Aphrodite, Penelope, Mercury, **Lethe**, Elysium, Diana

3. Explain the allusions in the following samples of present-day conversation and writing.

--A new broom sweep clean, they say, and as vice-president of that outfit, he'll have plenty of sweeping to do. It'll be like cleaning out the Augean stables.

--I met my Waterloo when I walked into that final exam without even being half ready.