

Summer Independent Learning – English Literature: POETRY Tone and Mood

Tone and mood are the aspects of a text that some students find most challenging to write about. The activities on the following pages should confirm that you do already know something about these terms and will help to develop your understanding of them.

In real life, when we adopt different tones, they reveal different facets of our personality in different situations. In literary texts, writers use a variety of tones to help to convey the complexity of the voice(s) or situations as well as the mood in an individual work (whether it is a poem, play or any other form). The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines tone as:

- a characteristic sound made by a voice, instrument etc ...
- a sound having a definite pitch or character ...
- the quality or luminosity of colour, a shade, a tint ...
- a style of speech or writing regarded as reflecting a person's mood, attitude or personality
- a mood or attitude conveyed by an author's style.

Mood is defined as **'the atmosphere or pervading tone of a place, event, composition, etc; one inducing a certain state of mind or emotion'**. The words 'tone' and 'mood' are often used interchangeably. However, the definitions above show that the mood of a poem or the overriding feeling it invokes is created through a writer's use of tone. Therefore, tone encompasses sound, word choices and the many other features of language that contribute to the writer's style. When you are looking and listening for tone in a poem, pay close attention to the following aspects, which all make a contribution. The questions below will help you analyse each aspect.

Looking and Listening for Tone

Voice

- How does the speaker talk to you, the reader?
- Is the speaker speaking directly or are they recalling what someone else has said?
- Can you trust what you are hearing?
- Do you sympathise with the speaker?
- Do they make you feel uncomfortable?

Rhythm

- What can you say about the rhythm of the lines?
- What impact do they have?
- Are there frequent pauses or end-stopped lines that break up the lines?
- Does the poet use enjambement so that the lines, images or arguments flow coherently together?
- How else does the punctuation seem to contribute to the rhythm and tone of the piece?

Diction

- What can you say about the words used (eg are they simple, ordinary, unusual, old-fashioned, hard to understand, official sounding, conversational, child-like, contemporary)?
- How do the words combine together?
- What impact do they have?

Sound

- What can you say about the sounds of the words used?
- Listen to the consonants and vowels. Does the poet use assonance or alliteration in any way?
- Are there soft or hard sounds in the poem?
- Are there repetitions of sounds, words or phrases?
- Is the sound quickly over or are there moments when a sound lingers?
- Does the poem have a rhyme scheme? If so, what effect does this have on the tone?

Structure

- How are the words laid out on the page?
- Is the poem arranged in stanzas?
- Do these indicate changes in tone?

Content

- What does the poem seem to be about?
- Are there things you seem to be told?
- Does the poet use imagery?
- How does this contribute to tone?
- Does the poem leave you with questions?
- How does it make you feel?

Once you have identified the tone a poet is using, you are well on your way to developing a clearer understanding of the piece as a whole. Tone can be very obvious or very elusive. Sometimes it will take you several readings to be clear about what you have heard. Hearing the poem read aloud by different people and reading the poem aloud yourself will help you to recognise how tone works in a poem.

TASK ONE

If possible, listen to the first four poems below being read by their poets at www.poetryarchive.org. Refer to the word bank of tones in the below and to the 'Looking and listening for tone' questions (above) to help you describe the tone of each poem. (These tone words are only suggestions to help you. You can add other ideas of your own.)

desperate	bored	grieving	careworn	casual	sinister
sarcastic	triumphant	mysterious	confident	enigmatic	distracted
uncertain	resigned	puzzled	hopeful	proud	angry
smug	argumentative	passionate	defiant	nostalgic	satirical
bleak	happy	ironic	indifferent	optimistic	edgy
sad	conspiratorial				

TASK TWO

- 1 Read the following poem by Owen Sheers, and if possible, listen to him reading it on www.poetryarchive.org.
- 2 What do you notice about the different tones he uses to convey his father's feelings first when visiting the fort with his son and then on returning years later to scatter someone's ashes?
- 3 How would you describe these tones?

The Hill Fort (Y Gaer)

On a clear day he'd bring him here,
his young son, charging the hill
as wild as the long-maned ponies

who'd watch a moment
before dropping their heads to graze again.
When he finally got him still

he'd crouch so their eyes were level,
one hand at the small of his back
the other tracing the horizon,

pointing out all the places lived in
by the fathers and sons before them:
Tretower, Raglan, Bredwardine ...

And what he meant by this but never said, was
'Look, Look over this land and see how long
the line is before you – how in these generations

we're no more than scattered grains;
that from here in this view, 1, 19 or 90 years
are much the same;

that it isn't the number of steps
that will matter,
but the depth of their impression.'

And that's why he's come back again,
to tip these ashes onto the tongue of the wind
and watch them spindrift into the night.

Not just to make the circle complete,
to heal or mend,
but because he knows these walls,

sunk however low,
still hold him in as well as out:
protect as much as they defend.

Owen Sheers

TASK THREE

- i. Now read the following three contrasting poems, again listening to the poets reading them on www.poetryarchive.org, if possible
- ii. 'Haunts' also features a father (perhaps two fathers).
 - a Write a sentence to describe the tone of the poem.
 - b Write a short paragraph, comparing the tone of 'Haunts' with that of 'The Hill Fort (Y Gaer)'.
- iii. In 'George Square' Jackie Kay focuses on both a father and a mother.
 - a Write a sentence to describe the tone.
 - b Write a short paragraph, explaining how you think the poem's narrator feels about her parents and the march they are going to participate in. Comment on how the tone helps you to arrive at your views.
- iv. 'Earth Cries' is very different in subject matter and tone from the other three poems. Write a short paragraph to describe it. Make sure you explore the effectiveness of the poet's use of patterns and repetition in the poem as a whole

Haunts

Don't be afraid, old son, it's only me,
though not as I've appeared before,
on the battlements of your signature,
or margin of a book you can't throw out,
5 or darkened shop front where your face
first shocks itself into a mask of mine,
but here, alive, one Christmas long ago
when you were three, upstairs, asleep,
and haunting *me* because I conjured you
10 the way that child you were would cry out
waking in the dark, and when you spoke
in no child's voice but out of radio silence,
the hall clock ticking like a radar blip,
a bottle breaking faintly streets away,
15 you said, as I say now, *Don't be afraid.*
Michael Donaghy

George Square

My seventy seven year old father
Put his reading glasses on
To help my mother do the buttons
On the back of her dress.
5 'What a pair the two of us are!'
my mother said, 'Me with my sore wrist,
you with your bad eyes, your soft thumbs!'

And off they went, my two parents
To march against the war in Iraq,
10 Him with his plastic hips, her with her arthritis
To congregate at George Square where the banners
Waved at each other like old friends, flapping,
Where'd they'd met for so many marches over their years,
For peace on earth, for pity's sake, for peace, for peace.
Jackie Kay



Jean 'Binta' Breeze

earth cries

she doesn't cry for water
she runs rivers deep
she doesn't cry for food
she has suckled trees
5 she doesn't cry for clothing
she weaves all that she wears
she doesn't cry for shelter
she grows thatch everywhere
she doesn't cry for children
10 she's got more than she can bear
she doesn't cry for heaven
she knows it's always there
you don't know why she's crying
when she's got everything
15 how could you know she's crying
for just one humane being
Jean 'Binta' Breeze

TASK FOUR

Read Philip Larkin's poem, upper right, and, if possible, listen to him reading it at www.poetryarchive.org.

Now read this possible response to the different tones (underlined) that might be detected in the poem:

You can hear the optimistic landlady, who is keen to rent out Mr Bleaney's old room and tell her visitor about how well he fitted into her establishment. However, the cynical narrator first casts his eye around his new lodgings, conveying his irritation for the ingratiating landlady. Then, there is a change in tone as he finds himself almost resigned to a solitary, grim life and questions if Mr Bleaney felt this way too.

Do you agree with these points of view or do you have a different interpretation?

Now look again at the words in the poem. On a copy of the poem and using different colours, highlight the parts that indicate contrasting tones.

A) Why do you think Larkin has included the landlady's words?

- B) How do you think they contrast with the rest of the poem?
- C) How else does Larkin appear to use language to show what the narrator thinks of the landlady and of his new situation?
- D) What do you think the mood of the poem is? How does the language contribute to this?
- E) Look at the sample response above again. What essential elements are missing? Write your own commentary about the tone and mood of the poem, ensuring that you refer to evidence to support your ideas.
- F) Be prepared to share your commentary and discuss your ideas in your English Literature lesson.

Mr Bleaney

'This was Mr Bleaney's room. He stayed
The whole time he was at the Bodies, till
They moved him.' Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,
Fall to within five inches of the sill,
Whose window shows a strip of building land.
Tussocky, littered. 'Mr Bleaney took
My bit of garden properly in hand.'
Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook
Behind the door, no room for books or bags –
'I'll take it.' So it happens that I lie
Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags
On the same saucer-souvenir, and try
Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown
The jabbering set he egged her on to buy.
I know his habits – what time he came down,
His preference for sauce to gravy, why
He kept on plugging at the four aways –
Likewise their yearly frame: the Frinton folk
Who put him up for summer holidays,
And Christmas at his sister's house in Stoke.
But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed
Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,
And shivered, without shaking off the dread
That how we live measures our own nature,
And at his age having no more to show
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
He warranted no better, I don't know.

Philip Larkin

Handing in your work: Please bring your completed paragraphs from TASK THREE and TASK FOUR to your English Literature lesson. You may hand write or type up and print your ideas.