

TONE



THE MOOD OR MANNER OF EXPRESSION IN A POEM, WHICH CONVEYS AN ATTITUDE TOWARD THE POEM'S SUBJECT. IT MAY BE PLAYFUL, REVERENT, SARCASTIC, SOLEMN, OR ANY OTHER POSSIBLE ATTITUDE. SOMETIMES A POEM PRESENTS A SINGLE TONE, BUT MORE OFTEN POEMS MIX TONES OF VOICE, ALTERING THE MOOD AS THE LINES PROGRESS AND THE POEM REACHES ITS RESOLUTION.

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- Tone is a result of a poem's diction: the words the poet chooses and the particular order of those words expresses a *tone of voice*. Reading a poem aloud, with sensitivity to the diction, is often the best way to interpret a poem's tone of voice.
- Specimen: "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke.

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- Comparing tones of voice: “To a Locomotive in Winter” by Walt Whitman & “I like to see it lap the miles” by Emily Dickinson
- Journal Topic: What differences in tone do you hear between Whitman’s and Dickinson’s poems? Point out whatever in each poem contributes to those differences.

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- Final comparison: “To Lucasta” by Richard Lovelace & “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen
- Both poems about war, Lovelace focusing on cause and Owen focusing on effect, the tone of each poem contributes to its theme. How would you describe the theme of each poem?

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Checklist: Tone

- Who is speaking in the poem?
- Is the narrator's voice close to the poet's or is it the voice of a fictional or historical person?
- How does the speaker address the listener?
- Does the poem directly reveal an emotion or an attitude?
- Does it indirectly reveal any attitudes or emotions?
- Does your reaction to what is happening in the poem differ widely from that of the speaker? If so, what does that difference suggest? Is the poem in some way ironic?
- What adjectives would best describe the poem's tone?

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Related Terms:

- *Persona* = Latin for “mask.” A fictitious character created by an author to be the speaker of a poem.
- *Irony* = a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant:
 - *Verbal irony* is a mode of expression in which the speaker says the opposite of what is really meant.
 - *Dramatic irony* presents a situation in which the larger implications of a speaker’s words are unrealized by that speaker but seen by the poet and the reader/audience.
 - *Cosmic irony* presents a contrast between the speaker’s position or aspiration and the treatment he or she receives at the hands of fate.