

# Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama, 10/e

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**0-321-42849-8** Bookstore ISBN

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Longman Publishers  
1185 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10036  
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# 14

## Listening to a Voice

*Irony is that little pinch of salt  
which alone makes the dish palatable.*

—JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

### Tone

In old Western movies, when one hombre taunts another, it is customary for the second to drawl, “Smile when you say that, pardner” or “Mister, I don’t like your tone of voice.” Sometimes in reading a poem, although we can neither see a face nor hear a voice, we can infer the poet’s attitude from other evidence.

Like tone of voice, **tone** in literature often conveys an attitude toward the person addressed. Like the manner of a person, the manner of a poem may be friendly or belligerent toward its reader, condescending or respectful. Again like tone of voice, the tone of a poem may tell us how the speaker feels about himself or herself: cocksure or humble, sad or glad. But usually when we ask, “What is the tone of a poem?” we mean, “What attitude does the poet take toward a theme or a subject?” Is the poet being affectionate, hostile, earnest, playful, sarcastic, or what? We may never be able to know, of course, the poet’s personal feelings. All we need know is how to feel when we read the poem.

Strictly speaking, tone isn’t an attitude; it is whatever in the poem makes an attitude clear to us: the choice of certain words instead of others, the picking out of certain details. In A. E. Housman’s “Loveliest of trees,” for example, the poet communicates his admiration for a cherry tree’s beauty by singling out for attention its white blossoms; had he wanted to show his dislike for the tree, he might have concentrated on its broken branches, birdlime, or snails. To perceive the tone of a poem rightly, we need to read the poem carefully, paying attention to whatever suggestions we find in it.

### Theodore Roethke (1908–1963)\*

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#### My Papa’s Waltz

1948

The whiskey on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans  
 Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
 My mother's countenance  
 Could not unfrown itself. 5

The hand that held my wrist  
 Was battered on one knuckle;  
 At every step you missed  
 My right ear scraped a buckle. 10

You beat time on my head  
 With a palm caked hard by dirt,  
 Then waltzed me off to bed  
 Still clinging to your shirt. 15

What is the tone of this poem? Most readers find the speaker's attitude toward his father critical, but nonetheless affectionate. They take this recollection of childhood to be an odd but happy one. Other readers, however, concentrate on other details, such as the father's rough manners and drunkenness. One reader has written that "Roethke expresses his resentment for his father, a drunken brute with dirty hands and whiskey breath who carelessly hurt the child's ear and manhandled him." Although this reader accurately noticed some of the events in the poem and perceived that there was something desperate in the son's hanging onto the father "like death," he simplifies the tone of the poem and so misses its humorous side.

While "My Papa's Waltz" contains the dark elements of manhandling and drunkenness, the tone remains grotesquely comic. The rollicking rhythms of the poem underscore Roethke's complex humor—half loving and half censuring of the unwashed, intoxicated father. The humor is further reinforced by playful rimes such as *dizzy* and *easy*, *knuckle* and *buckle*, as well as the joyful suggestions of the words *waltz*, *waltzing*, and *romped*. The scene itself is comic, with kitchen pans falling due to the father's roughhousing while the mother looks on unamused. However much the speaker satirizes the overly rambunctious father, he does not have the boy identify with the soberly disapproving mother. Not all comedy is comfortable and reassuring. Certainly, this small boy's family life has its frightening side, but the last line suggests the boy is *still clinging* to his father with persistent if also complicated love.

Such a poem, though it includes lifelike details that aren't pretty, has a tone relatively easy to recognize. So does **satiric poetry**, a kind of comic poetry that generally conveys a message. Usually its tone is one of detached amusement, withering contempt, and implied superiority. In a satiric poem, the poet ridicules some person or persons (or perhaps some kind of human behavior), examining the victim by the light of certain principles and implying that the reader, too, ought to feel contempt for the victim.

## Countee Cullen (1903–1946)

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### For a Lady I Know 1925

She even thinks that up in heaven  
 Her class lies late and snores,  
 While poor black cherubs rise at seven  
 To do celestial chores.

## QUESTIONS

1. What is Cullen's message?
2. How would you characterize the tone of this poem? Wrathful? Amused?

In some poems the poet's attitude may be plain enough; while in other poems attitudes may be so mingled that it is hard to describe them tersely without doing injustice to the poem. Does Andrew Marvell in "To His Coy Mistress" (page xxxx) take a serious or playful attitude toward the fact that he and his lady are destined to be food for worms? No one-word answer will suffice. And what of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (page xxxx)? In his attitude toward his redemption-seeking hero who wades with trousers rolled, Eliot is seriously funny. Such a mingled tone may be seen in the following poem by the wife of a governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the earliest American poet of note. Anne Bradstreet's first book, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650), had been published in England without her consent. She wrote these lines to preface a second edition:

### Anne Bradstreet (1612?–1672)

#### The Author to Her Book

1678

Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,  
 Who after birth did'st by my side remain,  
 Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,  
 Who thee abroad exposed to public view;  
 Made thee in rags, halting, to the press to trudge, 5  
 Where errors were not lessened, all may judge.  
 At thy return my blushing was not small,  
 My rambling brat (in print) should mother call;  
 I cast thee by as one unfit for light,  
 Thy visage was so irksome in my sight; 10  
 Yet being mine own, at length affection would  
 Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:  
 I washed thy face, but more defects I saw,  
 And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.  
 I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet, 15  
 Yet still thou run'st more hobbling than is meet;  
 In better dress to trim thee was my mind,  
 But nought save homespun cloth in the house I find.  
 In this array, 'mongst vulgars may'st thou roam;  
 In critics' hands beware thou dost not come; 20  
 And take thy way where yet thou are not known.  
 If for thy Father asked, say thou had'st none;  
 And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,  
 Which caused her thus to send thee out of door.

In the author's comparison of her book to an illegitimate ragamuffin, we may be struck by the details of scrubbing and dressing a child: details that might well occur

to a mother who had scrubbed and dressed many. As she might feel toward such a child, so she feels toward her book. She starts by deploring it but, as the poem goes on, cannot deny it her affection. Humor enters (as in the pun in line 15). She must dress the creature in *homespun cloth*, something both crude and serviceable. By the end of her poem, Bradstreet seems to regard her book-child with tenderness, amusement, and a certain indulgent awareness of its faults. To read this poem is to sense its mingling of several attitudes. A poet can be merry and in earnest at the same time.

## Walt Whitman (1819–1892)\*

### To a Locomotive in Winter

1881

Thee for my recitative,  
 Thee in the driving storm even as now, the snow, the winter-day  
 declining,  
 Thee in thy panoply,<sup>o</sup> thy measur'd dual throbbing and thy beat *suit of armor*  
 convulsive,  
 Thy black cylindric body, golden brass and silvery steel,  
 Thy ponderous side-bars, parallel and connecting rods, gyrating, 5  
 shuttling at thy sides,  
 Thy metrical, now swelling pant and roar, now tapering  
 in the distance,  
 Thy great protruding head-light fix'd in front,  
 Thy long, pale, floating vapor-pennants, tinged with delicate purple,  
 The dense and murky clouds out-belching from thy smoke-stack,  
 Thy knitted frame, thy springs and valves, the tremulous twinkle of thy 10  
 wheels,  
 Thy train of cars behind, obedient, merrily following,  
 Through gale or calm, now swift, now slack, yet steadily careering;  
 Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the  
 continent,  
 For once come serve the Muse and merge in verse, even as here I see  
 thee,  
 With storm and buffeting gusts of wind and falling snow, 15  
 By day thy warning ringing bell to sound its notes,  
 By night thy silent signal lamps to swing.  
 Fierce-throated beauty!  
 Roll through my chant with all thy lawless music, thy swinging lamps  
 at night,  
 Thy madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an earthquake, 20  
 rousing all,  
 Law of thyself complete, thine own track firmly holding,  
 (No sweetness debonair of tearful harp or glib piano thine,)  
 Thy trills of shrieks by rocks and hills return'd,  
 Launch'd o'er the prairies wide, across the lakes,  
 To the free skies unpent and glad and strong. 25

**Emily Dickinson** (1830–1886)\***I like to see it lap the Miles**(About 1862)<sup>1</sup>

I like to see it lap the Miles –  
 And lick the Valleys up –  
 And stop to feed itself at Tanks –  
 And then – prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains –  
 And supercilious peer  
 In Shanties – by the sides of Roads –  
 And then a Quarry pare

5

To fit its Ribs  
 And crawl between  
 Complaining all the while  
 In horrid – hooting stanza –  
 Then chase itself down Hill –

10

And neigh like Boanerges –  
 Then – punctual as a Star  
 Stop – docile and omnipotent  
 At its own stable door–

15

**QUESTIONS**

1. What differences in tone do you find between Whitman's and Dickinson's poems? Point out in each poem whatever contributes to these differences.
2. *Boanerges* in Dickinson's last stanza means "sons of thunder," a name given by Jesus to the disciples John and James (see Mark 3:17). How far should the reader work out the particulars of this comparison? Does it make the tone of the poem serious?
3. In Whitman's opening line, what is a *recitative*? What other specialized terms from the vocabulary of music and poetry does each poem contain? How do they help underscore Whitman's theme?
4. Poets and songwriters probably have regarded the locomotive with more affection than they have shown most other machines. Why do you suppose this is so? Can you think of any other poems or songs as examples?
5. What do these two poems tell you about locomotives that you would not be likely to find in a technical book on railroading?
6. Are the subjects of the two poems identical? Discuss.

<sup>1</sup>Parentheses around a date that follows a poem title indicate the poem's date of composition, when it was composed much earlier than its first publication date.

## Benjamin Alire Sáenz (b. 1954)

### To the Desert

1995

I came to you one rainless August night.  
 You taught me how to live without the rain.  
 You are thirst and thirst is all I know.  
 You are sand, wind, sun, and burning sky,  
 The hottest blue. You blow a breeze and brand 5  
 Your breath into my mouth. You reach—then *bend*  
*Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.*  
 You wrap your name tight around my ribs  
 And keep me warm. I was born for you.  
 Above, below, by you, by you surrounded. 10  
 I wake to you at dawn. Never break your  
 Knot. Reach, rise, blow, *Sálvame, mi dios,*  
*Trágame, mi tierra. Salva, traga,* Break me,  
 I am bread. I will be the water for your thirst.

TO THE DESERT. 6–7 *bend . . . make me new*: quoted from John Donne’s “Batter my heart” (page xxx).  
 12–13 *Sálvame, mi dios . . . traga*: Spanish for “Save me, my god, / Take me, my land. Save me, take me.”  
 (*Trágame* literally means “swallow me.”)

### QUESTIONS

1. How does the speaker feel about the land being described? What words in the poem suggest or convey those feelings?
2. What effect does the speaker’s sudden switch into Spanish create? What is the tone of the Spanish?
3. Of what kind of language do the last few lines of the poem remind you?

## Weldon Kees (1914–1955)

### For My Daughter

1940

Looking into my daughter’s eyes I read  
 Beneath the innocence of morning flesh  
 Concealed, hintings of death she does not heed.  
 Coldest of winds have blown this hair, and mesh  
 Of seaweed snarled these miniatures of hands; 5  
 The night’s slow poison, tolerant and bland,  
 Has moved her blood. Parched years that I have seen  
 That may be hers appear: foul, lingering  
 Death in certain war, the slim legs green.  
 Or, fed on hate, she relishes the sting 10  
 Of others’ agony; perhaps the cruel  
 Bride of a syphilitic or a fool.  
 These speculations sour in the sun.  
 I have no daughter. I desire none.

## QUESTIONS

1. How does the last line of this sonnet affect the meaning of the poem?
2. “For My Daughter” was first published in 1940. What considerations might a potential American parent have felt at that time? Are these historical concerns mirrored in the poem?
3. Donald Justice has said that “Kees is one of the bitterest poets in history.” Is bitterness the only attitude the speaker reveals in this poem?

## The Person in the Poem

The tone of a poem, we said, is like tone of voice in that both communicate feelings. Still, this comparison raises a question: when we read a poem, whose “voice” speaks to us?

“The poet’s” is one possible answer; and in the case of many a poem that answer may be right. Reading Anne Bradstreet’s “The Author to Her Book,” we can be reasonably sure that the poet speaks of her very own book, and of her own experiences. In order to read a poem, we seldom need to read a poet’s biography; but in truth there are certain poems whose full effect depends upon our knowing at least a fact or two of the poet’s life. Here is one such poem.

### Natasha Trethewey (b. 1966)

#### White Lies

2000

The lies I could tell,  
 when I was growing up  
 light-bright, near-white,  
 high-yellow, red-boned  
 in a black place, 5  
 were just white lies.

I could easily tell the white folks  
 that we lived uptown,  
 not in that pink and green  
 shanty-fied shotgun section 10  
 along the tracks. I could act  
 like my homemade dresses  
 came straight out the window  
 of Maison Blanche. I could even  
 keep quiet, quiet as kept, 15  
 like the time a white girl said  
 (squeezing my hand), *Now*  
*we have three of us in this class.*

But I paid for it every time  
 Mama found out. 20  
 She laid her hands on me,  
 then washed out my mouth

with Ivory soap. *This*  
*is to purify*, she said,  
*and cleanse your lying tongue.*  
 Believing her, I swallowed suds  
 thinking they'd work  
 from the inside out.

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Through its pattern of vivid color imagery, Trethewey's poem tells of a black child light enough to "pass for white" in a society that was still extremely race-sensitive. But knowing the author's family background gives us a deeper insight into the levels of meaning in the poem. Trethewey was born in Mississippi in 1966, at a time when her parents' interracial marriage was a criminal act in that state. On her birth certificate, her mother's race was given as "colored"; in the box intended to record the race of her father—who was white and had been born in Nova Scotia—appeared the word "Canadian" (although her parents divorced before she began grade school, she remained extremely close to both of them). Trethewey has said of her birth certificate: "Something is left out of the official record that way. The irony isn't lost on me. Even in documenting myself as a person there is a little fiction." "White Lies" succeeds admirably on its own, but these biographical details allow us to read it as an even more complex meditation on issues of racial definition and personal identity in America.

Most of us can tell the difference between a person we meet in life and a person we meet in a work of art—unlike the moviegoer in the Philippines who, watching a villain in an exciting film, pulled out a revolver and peppered the screen. And yet, in reading poems, we are liable to temptation.

When the poet says "I," we may want to assume that he or she is making a personal statement. But reflect: do all poems have to be personal? Here is a brief poem inscribed on the tombstone of an infant in Burial Hill cemetery, Plymouth, Massachusetts:

Since I have been so quickly done for,  
 I wonder what I was begun for.

We do not know who wrote those lines, but it is clear that the poet was not a short-lived infant writing from personal experience. In other poems, the speaker is obviously a **persona**, or fictitious character: not the poet, but the poet's creation. As a grown man, William Blake, a skilled professional engraver, wrote a poem in the voice of a boy, an illiterate chimney sweeper. (The poem appears later in this chapter.)

Let's consider a poem spoken not by a poet, but by a persona—in this case a mysterious one. Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Luke Havergal" is a dramatic monologue, but the identity of the speaker is never clearly stated. Upon first reading the poem in Robinson's *The Children of the Night* (1897), President Theodore Roosevelt was so moved that he wrote a review of the book that made the author famous. Roosevelt, however, admitted that he found the musically seductive poem difficult. "I am not sure I understand 'Luke Havergal,'" he wrote, "but I am entirely sure I like it." Possibly what most puzzled our twenty-sixth president was who was speaking in the poem. How much does Robinson let us know about the voice and the person it addresses?


**Edwin Arlington Robinson** (1869–1935)\*

**Luke Havergal**

1897

Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal,  
 There where the vines cling crimson on the wall,  
 And in the twilight wait for what will come.  
 The leaves will whisper there of her, and some,  
 Like flying words, will strike you as they fall; 5  
 But go, and if you listen she will call.  
 Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal—  
 Luke Havergal.

No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies  
 To rift the fiery night that's in your eyes; 10  
 But there, where western glooms are gathering,  
 The dark will end the dark, if anything:  
 God slays Himself with every leaf that flies,  
 And hell is more than half of paradise.  
 No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies— 15  
 In eastern skies.

Out of a grave I come to tell you this,  
 Out of a grave I come to quench the kiss  
 That flames upon your forehead with a glow  
 That blinds you to the way that you must go. 20  
 Yes, there is yet one way to where she is,  
 Bitter, but one that faith may never miss.  
 Out of a grave I come to tell you this—  
 To tell you this.

There is the western gate, Luke Havergal, 25  
 There are the crimson leaves upon the wall.  
 Go, for the winds are tearing them away,—  
 Nor think to riddle the dead words they say,  
 Nor any more to feel them as they fall;  
 But go, and if you trust her she will call. 30  
 There is the western gate, Luke Havergal—  
 Luke Havergal.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Who is the speaker of the poem? What specific details does the author reveal about the speaker?
2. What does the speaker ask Luke Havergal to do?
3. What do you understand “the western gate” to be?
4. Would you advise Luke Havergal to follow the speaker's advice? Why or why not?

No literary law decrees that the speaker in a poem even has to be human. Good poems have been uttered by clouds, pebbles, clocks, and cats. Here is a poem spoken

by a hawk, a dramatic monologue that expresses the animal's thoughts and attitudes in a way consciously designed to emphasize how different its worldview is from a human perspective.

## Ted Hughes (1930–1998)

### Hawk Roosting

1960

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.  
Inaction, no falsifying dream  
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:  
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees! 5  
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray  
Are of advantage to me;  
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.  
It took the whole of Creation 10  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly—  
I kill where I please because it is all mine. 15  
There is no sophistry in my body:  
My manners are tearing off heads—

The allotment of death.  
For the one path of my flight is direct  
Through the bones of the living.  
No arguments assert my right: 20

The sun is behind me.  
Nothing has changed since I began.  
My eye has permitted no change.  
I am going to keep things like this.

## QUESTIONS

1. Find three observations the hawk makes about its world that a human would probably not make. What do these remarks tell us about the bird's character?
2. In what ways does Ted Hughes create an unrealistic portrayal of the hawk's true mental powers? What statements in the poem would an actual hawk be unlikely to make? Do these passages add anything to the poem's impact? What would be lost if they were omitted?

Here is a poem in which the speaker is something even more remote from humanity, something we ordinarily assume to have no thoughts or attitudes at all, but whose monologue offers an even more pointed contrast with human values.

**Suji Kwock Kim** (b. 1968)**Monologue for an Onion**

2003

I don't mean to make you cry.

I mean nothing, but this has not kept you  
From peeling away my body, layer by layer,

The tears clouding your eyes as the table fills  
With husks, cut flesh, all the debris of pursuit. 5  
Poor deluded human: you seek my heart.

Hunt all you want. Beneath each skin of mine  
Lies another skin: I am pure onion—pure union  
Of outside and in, surface and secret core.

Look at you, chopping and weeping. Idiot. 10  
Is this the way you go through life, your mind  
A stopless knife, driven by your fantasy of truth,

Of lasting union—slashing away skin after skin  
From things, ruin and tears your only signs  
Of progress? Enough is enough. 15

You must not grieve that the world is glimpsed  
Through veils. How else can it be seen?  
How will you rip away the veil of the eye, the veil

That you are, you who want to grasp the heart  
Of things, hungry to know where meaning 20  
Lies. Taste what you hold in your hands: onion-juice,

Yellow peels, my stinging shreds. You are the one  
In pieces. Whatever you meant to love, in meaning to  
You changed yourself: you are not who you are,

Your soul cut moment to moment by a blade 25  
Of fresh desire, the ground sown with abandoned skins.  
And at your inmost circle, what? A core that is

Not one. Poor fool, you are divided at the heart,  
Lost in its maze of chambers, blood, and love,  
A heart that will one day beat you to death. 30

**QUESTIONS**

1. How would you characterize the speaker's tone in this poem? What attitudes and judgments lie behind that tone?
2. "I mean nothing" (line 2) might be seen as a play on two senses of *mean*—"intend" and "signify." Is the statement true in both senses?
3. Suppose someone said to you, "The whole point of the poem is that vegetables have rights and feelings too, and humanity is being rebuked for its arrogance and insensitivity toward other species." How would you argue against that view?

4. The speaker is obviously one tough onion, cutting humanity little or no slack. To what degree do you think the speaker represents the author's views—totally, somewhat, or not at all? Explain your response.

In a famous definition, William Wordsworth calls poetry “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . recollected in tranquillity.” But in the case of the following poem, Wordsworth's feelings weren't all his; they didn't just overflow spontaneously; and the process of tranquil recollection had to go on for years.

## William Wordsworth (1770–1850)\*



### I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud 1807

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
 That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
 When all at once I saw a crowd,  
 A host, of golden daffodils,  
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees, 5  
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine  
 And twinkle on the milky way,  
 They stretched in never-ending line  
 Along the margin of a bay: 10  
 Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
 Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they  
 Out-did the sparkling waves in glee;  
 A poet could not but be gay, 15  
 In such a jocund company;  
 I gazed—and gazed—but little thought  
 What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
 In vacant or in pensive mood, 20  
 They flash upon that inward eye  
 Which is the bliss of solitude;  
 And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
 And dances with the daffodils.

Between the first printing of the poem in 1807 and the version of 1815 given here, Wordsworth made several deliberate improvements. He changed *dancing* to *golden* in line 4, *Along* to *Beside* in line 5, *Ten thousand* to *Fluttering and* in line 6, *laughing* to *jocund* in line 16, and he added a whole stanza (the second). In fact, the writing of the poem was unspontaneous enough for Wordsworth, at a loss for lines 21–22, to take them from his wife Mary. It is likely that the experience of daffodil-watching was not entirely his to begin with but was derived in part from the recollections his sister Dorothy Wordsworth had set down in her journal of April 15, 1802, two years before he first drafted his poem.

## Dorothy Wordsworth (1771–1855)

### Journal Entry

1802

When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last, under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful. They grew among the mossy stones about and about them; some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness; and the rest tossed and reeled and danced, and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that flew upon them over the Lake; they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing. This wind blew directly over the Lake to them. There was here and there a little knot, and a few stragglers a few yards higher up; but they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity, unity, and life of that one busy highway.

Notice that Wordsworth's poem echoes a few of his sister's observations. Weaving poetry out of their mutual memories, Wordsworth has offered the experience as if altogether his own, made himself lonely, and left Dorothy out. The point is not that Wordsworth is a liar or a plagiarist but that, like any other good poet, he has transformed ordinary life into art. A process of interpreting, shaping, and ordering had to intervene between the experience of looking at daffodils and the finished poem.

We need not deny that a poet's experience can contribute to a poem nor that the emotion in the poem can indeed be the poet's. Still, to write a good poem one has to do more than live and feel. It seems a pity that, as Randall Jarrell has said, a cardinal may write verses worse than his youngest choirboy's. But writing poetry takes skill and imagination—qualities that extensive travel and wide experience do not necessarily give. For much of her life, Emily Dickinson seldom strayed from her family's house and grounds in Amherst, Massachusetts; yet her rimed life studies of a snake, a bee, and a hummingbird contain more poetry than we find in any firsthand description (so far) of the surface of the moon.

## James Stephens (1882–1950)\*

### A Glass of Beer

1918

The lanky hank of a she in the inn over there  
 Nearly killed me for asking the loan of a glass of beer;  
 May the devil grip the whey-faced slut by the hair,  
 And beat bad manners out of her skin for a year.

That parboiled ape, with the toughest jaw you will see  
 On virtue's path, and a voice that would rasp the dead,  
 Came roaring and raging the minute she looked at me,  
 And threw me out of the house on the back of my head!

If I asked her master he'd give me a cask a day;  
 But she, with the beer at hand, not a gill<sup>o</sup> would arrange!  
 May she marry a ghost and bear him a kitten, and may  
 The High King of Glory permit her to get the mange.

*quarter-pint* 10

5

**QUESTIONS**

1. Who do you take to be the speaker? Is it the poet? The speaker may be angry, but what is the tone of this poem?
2. Would you agree with a commentator who said, "To berate anyone in truly memorable language is practically a lost art in America"? How well does the speaker (an Irishman) succeed? Which of his epithets and curses strike you as particularly imaginative?

**Anne Sexton** (1928–1974)\***Her Kind**

1960

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
haunting the black air, braver at night;  
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
over the plain houses, light by light:  
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind. 5  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
I have been her kind.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,  
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,  
closets, silks, innumerable goods; 10  
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:  
whining, rearranging the disaligned.  
A woman like that is misunderstood.  
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart, driver, 15  
waved my nude arms at villages going by,  
learning the last bright routes, survivor  
where your flames still bite my thigh  
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.  
A woman like that is not ashamed to die. 20  
I have been her kind.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Who is the speaker of this poem? What do we know about her?
2. What does the speaker mean by ending each stanza with the statement, "I have been her kind?"
3. Who are the figures with whom the speaker identifies? What do these figures tell us about the speaker's state of mind?

**EXPERIMENT: Reading with and without Biography**

Read the following poem by William Carlos Williams and state what you understand from it. Then consider the circumstances in which it probably came to be written. (Some information is offered in the first topic for writing on page xxx.) Does the meaning of the poem change? To what extent does an appreciation of the poem need the support of biography?

**William Carlos Williams** (1883–1963)\***The Red Wheelbarrow**

1923

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.

5

**Irony**

To see a distinction between the poet and the words of a fictitious character—between Robert Browning and “My Last Duchess”—is to be aware of **irony**: a manner of speaking that implies a discrepancy. If the mask says one thing and we sense that the writer is in fact saying something else, the writer has adopted an **ironic point of view**. No finer illustration exists in English than Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” an essay in which Swift speaks as an earnest, humorless citizen who sets forth his reasonable plan to aid the Irish poor. The plan is so monstrous no sane reader can assent to it: the poor are to sell their children as meat for the tables of their landlords. From behind his false face, Swift is actually recommending not cannibalism but love and Christian charity.

A poem is often made complicated and more interesting by another kind of irony. **Verbal irony** occurs whenever words say one thing but mean something else, usually the opposite. The word *love* means *hate* here: “I just *love* to stay home and do my hair on a Saturday night!” If the verbal irony is conspicuously bitter, heavy-handed, and mocking, it is **sarcasm**: “Oh, he’s the biggest spender in the world, all right!” (The sarcasm, if that statement were spoken, would be underscored by the speaker’s tone of voice.) A famous instance of sarcasm is Mark Antony’s line in his oration over the body of slain Julius Caesar: “Brutus is an honorable man.” Antony repeats this line until the enraged populace begins shouting exactly what he means to call Brutus and the other conspirators: traitors, villains, murderers. We had best be alert for irony on the printed page, for if we miss it, our interpretations of a poem may go wild.

**Robert Creeley** (1926–2005)**Oh No**

1959

If you wander far enough  
you will come to it  
and when you get there  
they will give you a place to sit

for yourself only, in a nice chair,  
 and all your friends will be there  
 with smiles on their faces  
 and they will likewise all have places.

5

This poem is rich in verbal irony. The title helps point out that between the speaker's words and attitude lie deep differences. In line 2, what is *it*? Old age? The wandering suggests a conventional metaphor: the journey of life. Is *it* literally a rest home for "senior citizens," or perhaps some naïve popular concept of heaven (such as we meet in comic strips: harps, angels with hoops for halos) in which the saved all sit around in a ring, smugly congratulating one another? We can't be sure, but the speaker's attitude toward this final sitting-place is definite. It is a place for the selfish, as we infer from the phrase *for yourself only*. And *smiles on their faces* may hint that the smiles are unchanging and forced. There is a difference between saying "They had smiles on their faces" and "They smiled": the latter suggests that the smiles came from within. The word *nice* is to be regarded with distrust. If we see through this speaker, as Creeley implies we can do, we realize that, while pretending to be sweet-talking us into a seat, actually he is revealing the horror of a little hell. And the title is the poet's reaction to it (or the speaker's unironic, straightforward one): "Oh no! Not *that!*"

**Dramatic irony**, like verbal irony, contains an element of contrast, but it usually refers to a situation in a play wherein a character whose knowledge is limited says, does, or encounters something of greater significance than he or she knows. We, the spectators, realize the meaning of this speech or action, for the playwright has afforded us superior knowledge. In Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, when Oedipus vows to punish whomever has brought down a plague upon the city of Thebes, we know—as he does not—that the man he would punish is himself. (Referring to such a situation that precedes the downfall of a hero in a tragedy, some critics speak of **tragic irony** instead of dramatic irony.) Superior knowledge can be enjoyed not only by spectators in a theater but by readers of poetry as well. In *Paradise Lost*, we know in advance that Adam will fall into temptation, and we recognize his overconfidence when he neglects a warning. The situation of Oedipus also contains **cosmic irony**, or **irony of fate**: some Fate with a grim sense of humor seems cruelly to trick a human being. Cosmic irony clearly exists in poems in which fate or the Fates are personified and seen as hostile, as in Thomas Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain" (page xxxx); and it may be said to occur also in Robinson's "Richard Cory" (page xxx). Obviously it is a twist of fate for the most envied man in town to kill himself.

To sum up: the effect of irony depends on the reader's noticing some incongruity or discrepancy between two things. In *verbal irony*, there is a contrast between the speaker's words and meaning; in an *ironic point of view*, between the writer's attitude and what is spoken by a fictitious character; in *dramatic irony*, between the limited knowledge of a character and the fuller knowledge of the reader or spectator; in *cosmic irony*, between a character's aspiration and the treatment he or she receives at the hands of Fate. Although, in the work of an inept poet, irony can be crude and obvious sarcasm, it is invaluable to a poet of more complicated mind, who imagines more than one perspective.

**W. H. Auden** (1907–1973)\***The Unknown Citizen**

1940

*(To JS/07/M/378**This Marble Monument**Is Erected by the State)*

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be  
 One against whom there was no official complaint,  
 And all the reports on his conduct agree  
 That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,  
 For in everything he did he served the Greater Community. 5  
 Except for the War till the day he retired  
 He worked in a factory and never got fired,  
 But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.  
 Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,  
 For his Union reports that he paid his dues, 10  
 (Our report on his Union shows it was sound)  
 And our Social Psychology workers found  
 That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.  
 The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day  
 And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way. 15  
 Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,  
 And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.  
 Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare  
 He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan  
 And had everything necessary to the Modern Man, 20  
 A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.  
 Our researchers into Public Opinion are content  
 That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;  
 When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went.  
 He was married and added five children to the population, 25  
 Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his  
 generation,  
 And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.  
 Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:  
 Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Read the three-line epitaph at the beginning of the poem as carefully as you read what follows. How does the epitaph help establish the voice by which the rest of the poem is spoken?
2. Who is speaking?
3. What ironic discrepancies do you find between the speaker's attitude toward the subject and that of the poet himself? By what is the poet's attitude made clear?

4. In the phrase “The Unknown Soldier” (of which “The Unknown Citizen” reminds us), what does the word *unknown* mean? What does it mean in the title of Auden’s poem?
5. What tendencies in our civilization does Auden satirize?
6. How would you expect the speaker to define a Modern Man, if a CD player, a radio, a car, and a refrigerator are “everything” a Modern Man needs?

## Sharon Olds (b. 1942)\*

### Rites of Passage

1983

As the guests arrive at my son’s party  
 they gather in the living room—  
 short men, men in first grade  
 with smooth jaws and chins.  
 Hands in pockets, they stand around 5  
 jostling, jockeying for place, small fights  
 breaking out and calming. One says to another  
*How old are you? Six. I’m seven. So?*  
 They eye each other, seeing themselves  
 tiny in the other’s pupils. They clear their 10  
 throats a lot, a room of small bankers,  
 they fold their arms and frown. *I could beat you*  
*up*, a seven says to a six,  
 the dark cake, round and heavy as a  
 turret, behind them on the table. My son, 15  
 freckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks,  
 chest narrow as the balsa keel of a  
 model boat, long hands  
 cool and thin as the day they guided him  
 out of me, speaks up as a host 20  
 for the sake of the group.  
*We could easily kill a two-year-old*,  
 he says in his clear voice. The other  
 men agree, they clear their throats  
 like Generals, they relax and get down to 25  
 playing war, celebrating my son’s life.

## QUESTIONS

1. What is ironic about the way the speaker describes the first-grade boys at her son’s birthday party?
2. What other irony does the author underscore in the last two lines?
3. Does this mother sentimentalize her own son by seeing him as better than the other little boys?

## John Betjeman (1906–1984)

### In Westminster Abbey

1940

Let me take this other glove off  
 As the *vox humana* swells,  
 And the beauteous fields of Eden  
 Bask beneath the Abbey bells.  
 Here, where England's statesmen lie, 5  
 Listen to a lady's cry.

Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans.  
 Spare their women for Thy Sake,  
 And if that is not too easy  
 We will pardon Thy Mistake. 10  
 But, gracious Lord, whate'er shall be,  
 Don't let anyone bomb me.

Keep our Empire undismembered,  
 Guide our Forces by Thy Hand,  
 Gallant blacks from far Jamaica, 15  
 Honduras and Togoland;  
 Protect them Lord in all their fights,  
 And, even more, protect the whites.

Think of what our Nation stands for:  
 Books from Boots' and country lanes, 20  
 Free speech, free passes, class distinction,  
 Democracy and proper drains.  
 Lord, put beneath Thy special care  
 One-eighty-nine Cadogan Square.

Although dear Lord I am a sinner, 25  
 I have done no major crime;  
 Now I'll come to Evening Service  
 Whensoever I have the time.  
 So, Lord, reserve for me a crown,  
 And do not let my shares° go down. 30

I will labor for Thy Kingdom,  
 Help our lads to win the war,  
 Send white feathers to the cowards,  
 Join the Women's Army Corps,  
 Then wash the Steps around Thy Throne 35  
 In the Eternal Safety Zone.

Now I feel a little better,  
 What a treat to hear Thy Word,  
 Where the bones of leading statesmen  
 Have so often been interred. 40  
 And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait  
 Because I have a luncheon date.

IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY. First printed during World War II. 2 *vox humana*: an organ stop that makes tones similar to those of the human voice. 20 *Boots*: a chain of pharmacies whose branches had lending libraries.

### QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker? What do we know about her lifestyle? About her prejudices?
2. Point out some of the places in which she contradicts herself.
3. How would you describe the speaker's attitude toward religion?
4. Through the medium of irony, what positive points do you believe Betjeman makes?

### Sarah N. Cleghorn (1876–1959)

---

#### The Golf Links

1917

The golf links lie so near the mill  
 That almost every day  
 The laboring children can look out  
 And see the men at play.

### QUESTIONS

1. Is this brief poem satiric? Does it contain any verbal irony or is the poet making a matter-of-fact statement in words that mean just what they say?
2. What other kind of irony is present in the poem?
3. Sarah N. Cleghorn's poem dates from before the enactment of legislation against child labor. Is it still a good poem, or is it hopelessly dated?
4. How would you state its theme?
5. Would you call this poem lyric, narrative, or didactic?

### Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950)\*

---

#### Second Fig

1920

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:  
 Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!

### QUESTIONS

1. What is ironic about this poem?
2. Do you think the author is making fun of the speaker's attitude or agreeing with it?

**Joseph Stroud** (b. 1943)**Missing**

1998

I keep looking for my face to appear on a milk carton  
 a photo of little me, missing since '52 or '53, who left home  
 without saying goodbye, left his brothers playing baseball,  
 left his parents glancing up from breakfast, wondering at this  
 solitary son who sets out every morning, and returns slightly  
 more lost, each time less of the child he left home with.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Is the first line of this poem sarcastic? Why or why not?
2. What do you make of the poem's last word? Would there be any difference in meaning if that word were "as"?

**EXERCISE: Detecting Irony**

Point out the kinds of irony that occur in the following poem.

**Thomas Hardy** (1840–1928)\***The Workbox**

1914

"See, here's the workbox, little wife,  
 That I made of polished oak."  
 He was a joiner,<sup>o</sup> of village life;  
 She came of borough folk.

*carpenter*

He holds the present up to her  
 As with a smile she nears  
 And answers to the profferer,  
 "'Twill last all my sewing years!"

5

"I warrant it will. And longer too.  
 'Tis a scantling that I got  
 Off poor John Wayward's coffin, who  
 Died of they knew not what.

10

"The shingled pattern that seems to cease  
 Against your box's rim  
 Continues right on in the piece  
 That's underground with him.

15

"And while I worked it made me think  
 Of timber's varied doom:  
 One inch where people eat and drink,  
 The next inch in a tomb.

20

“But why do you look so white, my dear,  
 And turn aside your face?  
 You knew not that good lad, I fear,  
 Though he came from your native place?”

“How could I know that good young man, 25  
 Though he came from my native town,  
 When he must have left far earlier than  
 I was a woman grown?”

“Ah, no. I should have understood!  
 It shocked you that I gave 30  
 To you one end of a piece of wood  
 Whose other is in a grave?”

“Don’t, dear, despise my intellect,  
 Mere accidental things  
 Of that sort never have effect 35  
 On my imaginings.”

Yet still her lips were limp and wan,  
 Her face still held aside,  
 As if she had known not only John,  
 But known of what he died. 40

## For Review and Further Study

**William Blake** (1757–1827)\*



**The Chimney Sweeper** 1789



When my mother died I was very young,  
 And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
 Could scarcely cry “’weep! ’weep! ’weep! ’weep!”  
 So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.

There’s little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,  
 That curled like a lamb’s back, was shaved: so I said 5  
 “Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head’s bare  
 You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.”

And so he was quiet, and that very night,  
 As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight! 10  
 That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,  
 Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
 And he opened the coffins and set them all free;  
 Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run, 15  
 And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,  
 They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind;  
 And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,  
 He'd have God for his father, and never want<sup>o</sup> joy.

lack 20

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,  
 And got with our bags and our brushes to work.  
 Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;  
 So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.

## QUESTIONS

1. What does Blake's poem reveal about conditions of life in the London of his day?
2. What does this poem have in common with "The Golf Links" (page xxx)?
3. Sum up your impressions of the speaker's character. What does he say and do that displays it to us?
4. What pun do you find in line 3? Is its effect comic or serious?
5. In Tom Dacre's dream (lines 11–20), what wishes come true? Do you understand them to be the wishes of the chimney sweepers, of the poet, or of both?
6. In the last line, what is ironic in the speaker's assurance that the dutiful *need not fear harm*? What irony is there in his urging all to *do their duty*? (Who have failed in their duty to *him*?)
7. What is the tone of Blake's poem? Angry? Hopeful? Sorrowful? Compassionate? (Don't feel obliged to sum it up in a single word.)

## David Lehman (b. 1948)

### Rejection Slip

1990

"Oh, how glad I am that she  
 Whom I wanted so badly to want me  
 Has rejected me! How pleased I am, too,  
 That my Fulbright to India fell through!

The job with the big salary and the perks  
 Went to a toad of my acquaintance, a loathsome jerk  
 Instead of to me! I deserved it! Yet rather than resent  
 My fate, I praise it: heaven sent

5

It is! For it has given me pain, prophetic pain,  
 Creative pain that giveth and that taketh away again!  
 Pain the premonition of death, mother of beauty,  
 Refinement of all pleasure, relief from duty!

10

Pain that you swallow and nurture until it grows  
 Hard like a diamond or blooms like a rose!  
 Pain that redoubles desire! Pain that sharpens the sense!  
 Of thee I sing, to thee affirm my allegiance!"

15

The audience watched in grim anticipation  
 Which turned into evil fascination  
 And then a standing ovation, which mesmerized the nation,  
 As he flew like a moth into the flames of his elation.

20

REJECTION SLIP. 4 *Fulbright*: U.S. government-funded exchange program that provides grants and scholarships for teaching and study abroad, named for J. William Fulbright (1905–1995), U.S. senator from Arkansas.

## QUESTIONS

1. Do the last four lines, which make clear that everything that came before is a speech in front of an audience, change the way you read and understand the previous four stanzas? Explain.
2. How do you interpret the final line?
3. Is there satire in this poem? If so, exactly who or what is being satirized, and why?

## William Stafford (1914–1993)\*

### At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border

1977

This is the field where the battle did not happen,  
 where the unknown soldier did not die.  
 This is the field where grass joined hands,  
 where no monument stands,  
 and the only heroic thing is the sky.

5

Birds fly here without any sound,  
 unfolding their wings across the open.  
 No people killed—or were killed—on this ground  
 hallowed by neglect and an air so tame  
 that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

10

## QUESTIONS

1. What nonevent does this poem celebrate? What is the speaker's attitude toward it?
2. The speaker describes an empty field. What is odd about the way in which he describes it?
3. What words does the speaker appear to use ironically?

## H. L. Hix (b. 1960)

### I Love the World, As Does Any Dancer

2000

I love the world, as does any dancer,  
 with the tips of my toes. I love the world  
 more than I love my wife, for it contains  
 more crannies and crevasses, it tenders

more textures to my twenty digits' touch. 5  
 Lush grass underfoot after April rain,  
 a pile of petals fallen from a rose,  
 sun-seared sidewalk in summer, sand, fresh-turned  
 garden dirt, and, yes, her hummocked ankle  
 rubbed by the ball of my foot as she sleeps. 10

### QUESTIONS

1. This poem describes parts of the world by the way they feel to the speaker's feet. How does that unusual perspective affect the tone of the poem?
2. If you revised the poem to be about the sense of sight rather than touch (for example, "I love the world, as does any painter/with my eyes . . ."), would that shift change the poem's personality?

### EXERCISE: Telling Tone

Here are two radically different poems on a similar subject. Try stating the theme of each poem in your own words. How is tone (the speaker's attitude) different in the two poems?

#### Richard Lovelace (1618–1658)

To Lucasta 1649

*On Going to the Wars*

Tell me not, Sweet, I am unkind  
 That from the nunnery  
 Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind,  
 To war and arms I fly.

True, a new mistress now I chase, 5  
 The first foe in the field;  
 And with a stronger faith embrace  
 A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such  
 As you too shall adore; 10  
 I could not love thee, Dear, so much,  
 Loved I not Honor more.

#### Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)\*



Dulce et Decorum Est 1920

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots 5  
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
 Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,  
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time; 10  
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .  
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, 15  
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin; 20  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest 25  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
 Pro patria mori.

DULCE ET DECORUM EST. 8 *Five-Nines*: German howitzers often used to shoot poison gas shells 17 *you too*: Some manuscript versions of this poem carry the dedication “To Jessie Pope” (a writer of patriotic verse) or “To a certain Poetess.” 27–28 *Dulce et . . . mori*: a quotation from the Latin poet Horace, “It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.”

## WRITING EFFECTIVELY

### WRITERS ON WRITING

#### Wilfred Owen

##### War Poetry

(1917?)

Wilfred Owen was only twenty-one years old when World War I broke out in 1914. Twice wounded in battle, he was rapidly promoted and eventually became a company commander. The shocking violence of modern war summoned up his poetic genius, and in a two-year period he grew from a negligible minor poet into the most important English-language poet of World War I. Owen, however, did not live to see his talent recognized. He was killed one week before the end of the war; he was twenty-five years old. Owen published only four poems during his lifetime. Shortly before his death he drafted a few lines of prose for the preface of a book of poems. (For a short biography of Owen, consult the chapter “Lives of the Poets.”)



WILFRED OWEN

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

From *Collected Poems*

## WRITING ABOUT VOICE

### Listening to Tone

If tone is a speaker's attitude toward his or her material, then to understand the tone of a poem, we need mostly just to listen—as we might listen to a real conversation. The key is to hear not only *what* is being said but also *how* it is being said. Does the speaker sound noticeably surprised, angry, nostalgic, tender, or expectant?

To pin down a poem's tone, begin with an obvious but often overlooked question: who is speaking? Inexperienced readers of poetry often suppose that every poem is spoken by its author, and in fact the speaker often is a heightened version of someone very much like the poet. At other times, though, a poem is spoken by someone far removed in place, time, and situation from the poet—for example, a fictional character, a historical figure, or a celebrity.

- *Look for the ways—large and small—in which the speaker reveals aspects of his or her character.* Attitudes or emotions may be revealed directly or indirectly. D. H. Lawrence ends his poem “Piano” by saying, “I weep like a child for the past,” making his nostalgic and tender tone explicit. More often, emotions must be intuited. When the speaker of Sharon Olds’s “Rites of Passage” describes how the young boys at a birthday party “clear their throats / like Generals,” the reader senses she is bemused by the boys’ attempts to out-macho each other. The details a poet chooses to convey can reveal much about a speaker’s stance toward his or her subject matter.
- *Consider also how the speaker addresses the listener.* In John Betjeman’s “In Westminster Abbey,” for example, the speaker addresses God with astonishing egocentricity and snooty nonchalance.
- *You might also look for an obvious difference between the speaker’s attitude and your own honest reaction toward what is happening in the poem.* If the gap between the two responses is wide (as it is likely to be in Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess”), the poem may be taken as ironic.

In coming to a conclusion about a poem’s tone, it helps to remember that many poets strive toward understatement, writing matter-of-factly about matters of intense sorrow, horror, or joy. In poems, as in conversation, understatement can be a powerful tool, more convincing—and often more moving—than hyperbole. For an example of understatement (and irony) in action, see Sarah N. Cleghorn’s “The Golf Links.”

**CHECKLIST****Analyzing Tone**

- ✓ Who is speaking the poem?
- ✓ Is the narrator's voice close to the poet's or is it the voice of a fictional or nonfictional character?
- ✓ How does the speaker address the listener?
- ✓ Does the poem directly reveal an emotion or attitude? Can you specifically identify an emotion such as anger, fear, joy, uncertainty?
- ✓ Does it indirectly reveal any attitudes or emotions?
- ✓ What sort of attitudes toward the subject matter do the poem's details suggest?
- ✓ 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?
- ✓ Is the poem passionate, or understated, or does it possess a degree of intensity somewhere in between?
- ✓ What adjectives would best describe the poem's tone?

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT ON TONE**

Choose a poem from this chapter, and analyze its speaker's attitude toward the poem's main subject. Examine the author's choice of specific words and images to create the particular tone used to convey the speaker's attitudes. (Possible subjects include Wilfred Owen's attitude toward war in "Dulce et Decorum Est," the tone and imagery of Weldon Kees's "For My Daughter," Ted Hughes's view of the workings of nature in "Hawk Roosting," or Anne Bradstreet's attitude toward her own poetry in "The Author to Her Book.")

Here is an example of an essay written for this assignment by Kim Larsen, a student of Karen Locke's at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon.

## SAMPLE STUDENT PAPER

Larsen 1

Kim Larsen  
 Professor Locke  
 English 110  
 21 November 2007

Title gives a sense of the paper's focus

Word Choice, Tone, and Point of View in Roethke's  
 "My Papa's Waltz"

Name of author and work

Some readers may find Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" a reminiscence of a happy childhood scene. I believe, however, that the poem depicts a more painful and complicated series of emotions. By examining the choice of words that Roethke uses to convey the tone of his scene, I will demonstrate that beneath the seemingly comic situation of the poem is a darker story. The true point of view of "My Papa's Waltz" is that of a resentful adult reliving his fear of a domineering parent.

Thesis sentence

Topic sentence on titles significance

The first clue that the dance may not have been a mutually enjoyable experience is in the title itself. The author did not title the poem "Our Waltz" or "Waltzing with My Papa," either of which would set an initial tone for readers to expect a shared, loving sentiment. It does not even have a neutral title, such as "The Waltz." The title specifically implies that the waltz was exclusively the father's. Since a waltz normally involves two people, it can be reasoned that the father dances his waltz without regard for his young partner.

Topic sentence on word choice

Paragraph focuses on first stanza

Examining each stanza of the poem offers numerous examples where the choice of words sustains the tone implied in the title. The first line, "The whiskey on your breath," conjures up an olfactory image that most would find unpleasant. The small boy finds it so overpowering he is made "dizzy." This stanza contains the only simile in the poem, "I hung on like death" (3), which creates a ghastly and stark visual image. There are innumerable choices of similes to portray hanging on: a vine, an infant, an animal cub, all of which would have illustrated a lighthearted romp. The choice of "death"

Textual evidence

Larsen 2

was purposefully used to convey an intended image. The first stanza ends by stating the "waltzing was not easy." The definitions of easy, as found in Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, include "free from pain, annoyance or anxiety," and "not difficult to endure or undergo" ("Easy"). Obviously the speaker did not find those qualities in the waltz.

Further evidence of this harsh and oppressive scene is brought to mind by reckless disregard for "the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf" (5-6), which the reader can almost hear crashing on the floor in loud cacophony, and the "mother's countenance," which "[c]ould not unfrown itself" (8). If this was only a silly, playful romp between father and son, even a stern, fastidious mother might be expected to at least make an unsuccessful attempt to suppress a grin. Instead, the reader gets a visual image of a silent, unhappy woman, afraid, probably due to past experience, to interfere in the domestic destruction around her. Once more, this detail suggests a domineering father who controls the family.

The third stanza relates the father's "battered" hand holding the boy's wrist. The tactile image of holding a wrist suggests dragging or forcing an unwilling person, not holding hands as would be expected with a mutual dance partner. Further disregard for the son's feelings is displayed by the lines "At every step you missed / My right ear scraped a buckle" (11-12). In each missed step, probably due to his drunkenness, the father causes the boy physical pain.

The tone continues in the final stanza as the speaker recalls "You beat time on my head / With a palm caked hard by dirt" (13-14). The visual and tactile image of a dirt-hardened hand beating on a child's head as if it were a drum is distinctly unpleasant. The last lines "Then waltzed me off to bed / Still clinging to your shirt" (15-16) are the most ambiguous in the poem. It can be reasoned, as X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia do,

Key term defined

Paragraph focuses on word choice in second stanza

Textual evidence

Third stanza

Final stanza

Larsen 3

Quotation from  
secondary  
source

that the lines suggest "the boy is still clinging to his father with persistent if also complicated love" (xxx). On the other hand, if one notices the earlier dark images, the conclusion could describe a boy clinging out of fear, the physical fear of being dropped by one who is drunk and the emotional fear of not being loved and nurtured as a child needs to be by his father.

Transitional  
Phrase

It can also be argued that the poem's rollicking rhythm contributes to a sense of fun, and in truth, the poem can be read in that fashion. On the other hand, it can be read in such a way as to deemphasize the rhythm, as the author himself does in his recording of "My Papa's Waltz" (Roethke, Reads). The joyful, rollicking rhythm can be seen as ironic. By reminding readers of a waltzing tempo, it is highlighting the discrepancy of what a waltz should be and the bleak, frightening picture painted in the words.

Topic sentence  
on ironic effect  
of meter

Conclusion

While "My Papa's Waltz" can be read as a roughhouse comedy, by examining Roethke's title and choice of words closely to interpret the meaning of their images and sounds, it is also plausible to hear an entirely different tone. I believe "My Papa's Waltz" employs the voice of an embittered adult remembering a harsh scene in which both he and his mother were powerless in the presence of a drunk and domineering father.

Restatement of  
thesis,  
synthesizing all  
that has been  
said in the  
essay's body.

#### Works Cited

- "Easy." Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. 11th ed. 2003.
- Kennedy, X. J., and Dana Gioia, eds. Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. 10th ed. New York: Longman, 2007. xxx.
- Roethke, Theodore. "My Papa's Waltz." Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. Ed. X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. 10th ed. New York: Longman, 2007. xxx.
- . Theodore Roethke Reads His Poetry. Audiocassette. Caedmon, 1972.

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**MORE TOPICS FOR WRITING**

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1. INFORMATION FOR EXPERIMENT: *Reading with and without Biography*

Write a paragraph summing up your initial reactions to William Carlos Williams's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow."

Now write a second paragraph with the benefit of this snippet of biographical information: inspiration for this poem apparently came to Dr. Williams as he was gazing from the window of a house where one of his patients, a small girl, lay suspended between life and death. How does this information affect your reading of the poem? (This account, from the director of the public library in Williams's native Rutherford, New Jersey, is given by Geri M. Rhodes in "The Paterson Metaphor in William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*," master's essay, Tufts University, 1965.)

2. Describe the tone of W. H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen," quoting as necessary to back up your argument. How does the poem's tone contribute to its meaning?
3. Write an analysis of Thomas Hardy's "The Workbox," focusing on what the poem leaves unsaid.
4. In an essay of 250 to 500 words, compare and contrast the tone of two poems on a similar subject. You might examine how Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson treat the subject of locomotives, or how Richard Lovelace and Wilfred Owen write about war. (For advice on writing about poetry by the method of comparison and contrast, see the chapter "Writing About a Poem.")
5. Write a poem of your own in which the speaker's attitude toward the subject is revealed not by what the poem says but by the tone in which it is said. William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper," W. H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen," and Sharon Olds's "Rites of Passage" provide some good models.
6. Look closely at any poem in this chapter. Going through it line by line, make a list of the sensory details the poem provides. Now write briefly about how those details combine to create a particular tone. Some good choices are H. L. Hix's "I Love the World, As Does Any Dancer," William Stafford's "At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border," and Sharon Olds's "Rites of Passage."