

The Significance of Tone in Narratology and its Implications for Fiction Pedagogy

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Abstract

Tone stands as a paramount element within the realm of teaching fiction. To adequately instruct students on this subject, a comprehensive understanding of tone within narratology is a prerequisite. This article strives to elucidate the crucial significance of tone in narratology and offers pedagogical strategies for effectively conveying this intricate concept to students, given that tone is an indispensable facet in all literary works. Authors employ a myriad of elements, including diction, syntax, imagery, details, and figurative language, to craft the tone and its subtextual nuances. In narratology, tone serves as a crucial lens that aids to dissect the novel. This appropriated term has evolved to encapsulate the narrator's attitudes and emotions towards the subject matter, the narrative situation, or the intended audience. It is imperative to discern between the writer's tone and the narrator's tone.

Keywords: Diction; Dramatic Irony; Language; Syntax; Voice.

Introduction

Tone can be delineated as a literary amalgamation that encapsulates the attitudes exhibited toward the subject matter and the implied audience within a literary work. This encompassing concept of tone spans a spectrum, ranging from the formal and informal to the intimate, solemn, somber, playful, serious, ironic, and even condescending. Literary works are fundamentally characterized by a theme or a central question regarding a subject, and the approach taken to explore this theme constitutes the tone. The literary construct of tone draws an analogy to the tone of voice in spoken language. Language serves as the most prevalent medium for textual expression. It is imperative to acknowledge that language, being the medium for narrative texts, forms an integral part of the fictional uni-

verse crafted by narratives.

Within the alternate reality of a novel, language serves as the primary mode of communication among characters. This dual role of language in narratives has piqued the curiosity of scholars and narratologists throughout history. Plato, in his *Republic*, made a notable distinction between mimesis and diegesis, with mimesis referring to the discourse of characters and diegesis to the narrative discourse. Tone is an attitude that is communicated through various channels, including inflection, diction (word choice), sentence structure, the persona of the narrator, the distribution of knowledge among characters within the text, and the exchange of information between the narrative and the reader.

The Complexity of Tone

Tone is a term that appears self-evident in meaning until one makes an effort to articulate it. The written word, like a musical instrument, a canvas adorned with colors, or the voice of an animal trainer or a wayward child, effectively conveys tone. The writer's sentiments, mood, and spirit are conveyed through an array of devices employed in the text. These encompass structural organization, the artful commencement and conclusion, paragraphing, sentence length, structure, rhythm, word arrangement, levels of diction, the selection of imagery, figures of speech, nouns, and verbs. It transcends the sum of these constituent elements and materializes as an elusive, yet palpable essence that seems to manifest as if by enchantment.

"Tone in literature can be characterized as the author's or speaker's disposition towards the subject matter, the audience, or themselves. It constitutes the emotional hue or emotional significance of the literary work and serves as a profoundly significant component of its overall meaning" (695). In the realm of spoken language, tone is conspicuously conveyed through the nuances and inflections of the speaker's voice. However, recognizing tone in literature defies a straightforward formula. It emerges as the composite outcome of various elements within a narrative. What becomes evident is that, in literature, tone is a far more intricate phenomenon than in spoken language, chiefly because the author's voice may not be overtly discernible as a guiding influence.

In Chapter 1 of *Practical Criticism*, when discussing the four types of meaning, I. A. Richards propounds that tone represents "the expression of a literary speaker's 'attitude toward his listener.' It reflects... his perception of his position in relation to those he is addressing" (*Practical Criticism* 222).

Bakhtin extends this by elucidating that “tone” or “intention” operates in dual directions: one with regard to the listener as an ally or a witness, and the other with respect to the object of the utterance as a third, living participant who is either reproached or praised, denigrated, or exalted. As cited in *The Handbook of Literary Terms* (222) and *Mikhail Bakhtin’s Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, published in 1976. The contemporary use of the term aligns with the colloquial expression “tone of voice.”

In everyday discourse, one’s speech promptly discloses, through subtle cues, their conception of and attitude toward the topics under discussion, their personal rapport with the listener, and their assumptions concerning the social status, intellect, and sensitivity of the listener. In a narrative, the audience (the individual or individuals to whom the narrator narrates the story) is at times explicitly identified, but occasionally, it remains an implicit auditor, only unveiled through what the narrator covertly presumes as requiring justification or not requiring it, and through the narrator’s tone. It is at this juncture that we are prompted to consider feminist critics who emphasize that much of the literature authored by men is penned with an assumption of a male readership that aligns with the narrator’s viewpoints, interests, and values.

M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham posit, “The tone of a discourse can be described as critical or laudatory, formal or intimate, forthright or reserved, solemn or playful, haughty or reverent, wrathful or affectionate, earnest or ironic, patronizing or subservient, and so forth, encompassing innumerable possible shades of association and attitude towards both the subject and the listener” (222). Just as a musical instrument or a color on a canvas or the voice of an animal trainer or an unruly child effectively conveys tone, the written word accomplishes this task. The author’s sentiment, mood, and ethos are communicated through a plethora of techniques employed: organizational structure, introductions and conclusions, organization of paragraph, length and structure of sentence, syntactical cadences, word sequence, levels of diction, and the selection of imagery, figurative language, nouns, and verbs. It represents an entity greater than the sum of its constituent parts, an elusive, yet substantial essence that appears to be conjured almost magically.”

Inflection encompasses the multifaceted qualities attributed to spoken words. These qualities manifest when words are uttered with emphasis, whether for the purpose of elucidation, humor, or, at times, a touch of vexation. Words can be articulated with snide, sarcastic, ironic, affectionate, mocking, interrogative, scornful, curt, or irate inflections, each conveying

a distinct attitude. Notably, the tone of the word "honey" can be altered based on the inflection employed, as discussed earlier in this discourse. Remarkably, changing the vocal attitude imbues different nuances to the spoken word.

Since written texts are unable to convey directly vocal inflections, other methods must be employed. One approach involves the use of adverbs. For example, "'Honey,' he said caressingly," versus "'Honey,' she said exasperated." The inflection of the word "honey" varies depending on the context and attitude expressed through the voice. Moreover, inflection in written text can be implied through contextual factors. The word "honey" spoken at a romantic luncheon carries a different inflection than when used by one gang member to address another.

Diction, or the choice of words, stands as another avenue through which written texts establish tone. A narrator can employ diction to convey a particular attitude. Consider the following two lines:

"As always, he was unfailingly polite to the woman."

"As usual, he didn't fail to make use of the opportunity to impress the woman with his manners."

The first sentence suggests a straightforward, genuinely courteous man, while the second conveys sarcasm in its portrayal of an opportunist. The narrator's tone, in this instance, is shaped by the combination of word choice, specifically the selection of "as always" versus "as usual," and sentence structure. The first sentence presents a positive assertion, while the second employs negation to create a positive impression ("didn't fail to make use"), which implies snideness or sarcasm in the understated portrayal of the man's enthusiastic exploitation of the opportunity.

In narratology, tone can express admiration or disdain for the subject matter or a character. It may imply a sense of pity or antagonism, or conversely, the narrator may adopt a condescending or colloquial tone with the audience. Occasionally, the narrative tone takes on an ironic quality. As elucidated in *Elements of Fiction*, the narrative tone can manifest through direct commentary, characterization, or the selection of words, symbols, and other literary devices.

During the act of reading a novel, the reader's mental disposition similarly influences their response to events that are ostensibly rooted in the

past. Subsequently, the literary experience may not necessarily be less profound or intricate. Many novelists achieve a sense of detachment by involving a tone in the narrator's voice, which might be deemed offensive if the narrated events were real. This tone engenders in the reader the "literary equivalent of a dramatic catharsis," as described by Quinn. In literary criticism, this phenomenon is often referred to as "distancing," denoting the degree of detachment established in literary texts by the author's narrative voice and the corresponding detachment engendered in the reader's mind.

The ambiance of a narrative hinges primarily on three elements: tone, mood, and style. While these terms are occasionally used interchangeably, they each serve distinct purposes and are employed to different effects. Tone in fiction pertains to the attitude of the narrator or viewpoint character towards story events and other narrative elements.

In a narrative employing a first-person point of view, the tone is not limited to the narrator's attitude towards the subject matter; it can also encompass the narrator's disposition towards the reader. Examples of tone in a work of fiction can span the spectrum from strident, indifferent, sassy, authoritarian, nonchalant, to flippant. These attributes pertain to the viewpoint character's attitudes, thereby affecting the story's overall tone. The tone of a narrative can manifest through the viewpoint character's demeanor, reflecting fearlessness or trepidation, incredulity or detachment, indifference, cunning, or arrogance. The viewpoint character, also serving as the narrator, plays a pivotal role in constructing and altering the narrative's tone through their interactions with the story's central conflict, other characters, and their responses to the unfolding events.

Tone is a dynamic element that can be modulated by shifting the narrator's focus, their evolving reactions to the narrative developments, and the vocabulary employed in their thoughts, actions, and dialogues. Tone serves as a guiding force that regulates the viewpoint, character's attitude and intensifies the reader's connection with the events within a particular scene and the character. In the realm of fiction pedagogy, tone becomes an invaluable tool for unveiling a character's personality and motivations. A mixed or inconsistent tone can lead to reader detachment or confusion, undesirable outcomes when aiming to immerse the reader in the narrative's depths. Furthermore, tone may undergo changes over the course of a story, but it is crucial that each scene maintains a distinct tone and atmosphere. The viewpoint of character's attitude is instrumental in shaping this tone, extending its influence over the entire narrative.

Tone can also emanate from a story's characters or the setting. Some characters are endowed with attitudes that significantly contribute to the narrative's tone, as illustrated by the husband in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat." Similarly, the setting can evoke a gloomy ambiance that sets the tone and encapsulates the narrative's mood.

Notably, tone emerges as a result of the divergence in knowledge and awareness between the readers, the narrator, and the various characters. When readers possess more information than the characters, such dissonance is described as dramatic irony. However, this type of irony differs from situations where the readers are privy to the fact that narrators or characters express the opposite of their true intentions. Nevertheless, dramatic irony undoubtedly imbues the narrative with a distinct tone and attitude. An exemplary instance of irony can be found in Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. The opening paragraph of this story adeptly showcases irony in its multifaceted, playful, and authoritative tone, as it foretells the inescapable fate that awaits the characters. The story unravels irony by juxtaposing the narrator's knowing, controlling voice with the characters' obliviousness.

The variance in tone between the narrator and the narrated stems from differences in knowledge and disposition. Due to their foresight, the narrator appears to possess superior awareness compared to the characters, which may be attributed to fate or the characters' inadvertent actions. Simultaneously, the narrator's tone conveys their knowledge of fate, yet they only hint at the impending outcomes for the sake of the narrative. The brilliance of irony lies in its ability to lure readers slyly and irresistibly to the side of enlightenment. For instance, when the narrator opens the story with the line, "The grandmother did not want to go to Florida," it appears to convey a simple fact about the grandmother's desires. However, it also subtly conveys the notion that despite her desires, a different destiny awaits her. The subsequent sentence elucidates the grandmother's wishes but, in doing so, elevates readers' awareness that the narrator comprehends both her desires and the inevitable course of events, surpassing the grandmother's understanding.

The intricate interplay of tone serves as the defining force in the narrative, often superseding the conscious desires and intentions of the characters, ultimately dictating their destinies. The narrator assumes a role akin to an implacable force that propels the characters against their will. Readers, as privileged observers, patiently witness the subtle workings of fate, the unconscious, and ill fortune. Irony, in this context, arises as a discordance be-

tween what the narrator articulates and what it tacitly conveys it knows, mirroring the discordance within the story itself between the characters' perceived intentions and their inevitable outcomes.

In this particular narrative, a family comprising a mother, father, young son, daughter, and grandmother embarks on a journey to Florida. However, the grandmother ardently desires to travel to Tennessee and attempts to sway her son's decision by showing him a paragraph in an article: "Here this fellow that calls himself the misfit is loose from the Federal Pen and headed towards Florida..." (*The Short Story in English* 326). En route to Florida, their path intersects with a car carrying three men, which ultimately leads to a fateful encounter. The grandmother identifies one of the men as The Misfit, and as he draws close, she utters, "Why, you're one of my babies. You're one of my children." In response, The Misfit recoils as if bitten by a snake, and tragically, he shoots her three times in the chest before laying his gun down (*The Short Story in English* 327).

At the core of the narrative lies a profound exploration of the Misfit's connection to Christ and his belief that Jesus disrupted the natural order of things. Flannery O'Connor, with her remarkable talents, transforms the story into much more than a sensational account of violence. Her unique brand of black comedy serves to elucidate Ignazio Silone's assertion in his Preface to "He Did Hide Himself," wherein he notes that "In the Sacred history of man on earth, it is still alas Good Friday" (*The Short Story in English* 328). O'Connor's storytelling prowess delves into the depths of human nature and the disquieting aspects of faith, rendering the narrative a thought-provoking exploration of morality.

In further illustration, three stories employ tone as a pivotal element of their narrative. Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat" adopts a calculated, dispassionate tone to accentuate the story's underlying ironies. On the other hand, Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" leans heavily on an ironic tone to craft its narrative. W. S. Penn's "Indreams Begin Reality" deftly navigates the nuances of tone as the narrator grapples with comprehending the encounters of women.

"Sweat" delves into the tale of Delia Jones, a diligent woman whose fifteen-year marriage with Bertha has been marked by hardship and oppression. The narrative's initial tone instills a sense of sympathy for Delia as it recounts her early experiences: "Two months after the wedding, he had given her the first brutal beating. She had the memory of his numerous trips to Orlando with all of his wages when he had returned to her pen-

ness, even before the first year had passed" (399). The narrator proceeds to describe Delia's youth and physical attributes, drawing a poignant contrast with her husband. The tone highlights her resignation and conveys her realization that it is too late for love, leaving only the hope for a peaceful home amidst the harshness of her reality.

Reclining on her bed, awaiting the embrace of slumber, she began to recite aloud, "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, has to come under his belly. Sooner or later, Sykes, like every other person, will have to face the consequences of his actions." With this, she erected a spiritual barrier against her husband, rendering his emotional assaults impotent and ineffective (399).

The story's essence is predominantly conveyed through dialogue, shedding light on the tumultuous relationship between the husband and wife. The snake, in this context, assumes a symbolic role within the narrative. When Sykes brings the Vermin home, Delia is initially horrified, encountering its chalky white fangs hanging in the wire mesh like curved scimitars. However, she resists her impulse to flee, instead standing in the doorway, her anger intensifying with each passing moment as she gazes upon the creature that embodies her torment (402).

The threat of going to the white folks might have instilled fear in Sykes, or perhaps a tinge of remorse had surfaced within him. Fifteen years of suffering and oppression had led Delia to a point where she clung to the faintest glimmer of hope that might pave the way to surmounting the barriers of her inhibitions (403-404).

The title of the story, "Sweat," resonates with the narrative's tone, which underscores the life of the central female character, Delia Jones, the washerwoman. Her story is one marked by relentless toil and her fear of snakes: "Sykes, why do you fling that whip at me like that? You know it scares me – it looks just like a snake, and you know how terrified I am of snakes" (398).

Delia, with her head bowed in unwavering dedication to her work, bears the weight of her labor, and her frail, stooped shoulders sag further (399).

In literary analysis, tone alludes to the author's attitude, conveyed through the narrative voice, towards the subject of the story and the readers. This attitude is unveiled through the author's choice of words. Recognizing the tone is often the key to comprehending the story or grasping its underlying-

ing message. Analysis of tone can be facilitated by scrutinizing specific elements within a novel or short story. Students often find it helpful to remember the acronym “DIDLS” when analyzing literature for tone. DIDLS stands for diction, imagery, details, language, and syntax.

Diction pertains to the manner in which words are chosen and pronounced. It encompasses the selection of words, ranging from abstract to concrete, general to specific, and formal to informal. Abstract words are intangible and cannot be directly perceived by the senses, whereas concrete words are tangible and can be observed. For instance, the word “yellow” is concrete, while “pleasant” is abstract. Abstract words serve to convey information quickly and efficiently, making them suitable for crucial scenes as they immerse the reader within the narrative. General words, on the other hand, are broad and vague, like “car” or “cat.” They can apply to a wide range of specific instances, allowing the reader to form their own mental image. In contrast, words such as “Siamese” or “Ferrari” are more specific, restricting the reader to a particular interpretation.

Imagery, a literary device, is a form of descriptive language that provides insight into the thoughts and emotions of the author or character regarding the events taking place. For instance, when an author describes a character swimming in a pond of warm water as akin to a soothing warm bath, it conveys an inviting, relaxing, and comforting atmosphere. Conversely, describing the same swim as akin to simmering in a pot would suggest discomfort or foreboding.

In any story, it’s impractical for an author to include every conceivable detail about a character, setting, or event. Authors often employ selective description to convey a specific message. For example, describing a house with cheerful cherry blossoms in the front yard suggests a happy and contented home. Conversely, another writer may omit the mention of flowers and focus on peeling paint or dirty windows, indicative of a gloomy and desolate dwelling occupied by dispirited individuals.

The choice of words made by the author is influenced by the words’ connotations, the additional meanings and emotions evoked beyond their literal definitions. These word choices serve to reveal the author’s attitude toward the subject and convey it to the reader. For instance, an author referring to a dog as a “pooch” expresses affection, while another who employs the term “cur” may harbor animosity or fear towards dogs. Similarly, a writer who describes children as “brats” holds a different perspective on them compared to one who affectionately calls them “rug rats.”

The terms “twilight” and “dusk” both define the period between sunset and the onset of darkness, but they carry distinct connotations. “Dusk” leans toward the notion of impending darkness and may suggest the rapid approach of night, often associated with apprehension about the unknown. In contrast, “twilight” may indicate the arrival of dawn, symbolizing a new beginning, or the setting sun, signifying the conclusion of the day.

The sound of words can also play a role in an author’s word choice. Pleasing and harmonious-sounding words tend to suggest a story centered around amiable individuals, while harsh and discordant-sounding words may indicate a harsh or unpleasant subject matter. The choice between mellifluous and cacophonous words can significantly influence the reader’s perception of the narrative.

Sentence structure is another tool authors employ to convey tone, and it often follows patterns that readers can discern. The arrangement of words within a sentence directs the reader’s attention to particular elements. Typically, the most emphasized element appears at the end of the sentence, as in “John brought flowers.” Shifting the word order to “the flowers were brought by John” places greater emphasis on who was responsible for bringing the flowers. Authors sometimes use deviations from standard syntax to create specific effects. For instance, they might employ anastrophe, placing a noun before its adjectives, to lend added weight to the adjectives and make the sentence more dramatic. Consider the phrase “dark and full day,” encouraging the reader to pay extra attention to the precise nature of the day.

In essence, tone in writing parallels the tone of spoken language. It is often said that the manner of expression matters as much as the content. Every adjective, adverb, sentence structure, and element of imagery within the writing contributes to the overall tone. This tone may remain consistent throughout the writing or undergo swift changes to evoke different emotions and responses from the reader. Examples of tone in a short story can encompass a vast array of adjectives, each conjuring a unique atmosphere and emotional resonance.

Imagery in literature serves as a powerful tool to unveil the inner thoughts and emotions of both the author and the characters regarding the ongoing events. When an author portrays a character swimming in a pond of warm water, likening it to a warm bath, the description suggests an inviting, soothing, and tranquil pond. Conversely, if the same swim is described as

simmering in a pot, it conveys a sense of discomfort or impending danger.

In crafting a narrative, authors cannot possibly include every detail about characters, scenes, or events. They make deliberate choices in their descriptions to convey specific messages. For instance, one author might depict a house with blooming cherry flowers in the front yard, evoking an image of a cheerful and contented home. In contrast, another writer may omit the mention of flowers but focus on peeling paint and dirty windows, signaling a gloomy dwelling inhabited by despondent individuals.

The words selected by the author are laden with connotations, additional meanings, and emotions that go beyond their literal definitions, revealing the author's attitude toward the subject to the reader. For example, referring to a dog as a "pooch" conveys affection, while using the term "cur" may imply a negative or fearful sentiment towards dogs. Similarly, characterizing children as "brats" suggests a different attitude compared to calling them "rug rats" in an affectionate manner.

In summary, the tone in writing mirrors the tone of one's spoken voice. It is often said that it's not just what you say but how you say it that matters. Every adjective, adverb, sentence structure, and element of imagery employed by a writer contributes to the overall tone. This tone can evolve rapidly or remain consistent throughout the writing. Examples of tone in a short story encompass a wide range of adjectives, each evoking a distinct atmosphere and emotional response.

The terms "tone" and "mood" in literature are often used interchangeably. However, it is important to note that they are distinct elements in a literary work. Charles Dickens, in his novel "Great Expectations," exemplifies how both tone and mood are subtly conveyed without straightforward pronouncement. The author's attitude toward the character Pip and his changing fortunes evolves significantly as young Pip visits the graveyard of his parents.

The opening scene of the novel presents a mood that is ominous and eerie. Pip's vivid impression of the desolate churchyard, overgrown with nettles, reveals a sense of foreboding and melancholy. The setting is depicted as dangerous and threatening, with phrases like "bleak place overgrown with nettles," "dark flat wilderness," "low leaden line," and "distant savage lair." The characters are either terrified, as seen in the description of Pip as a "small bundle of shivers," or terrifying, as demonstrated by the "terrible voice" that threatens him. The tone in this opening scene reflects

a rather bleak attitude toward the marshes where Pip grows up. It suggests neither congeniality nor a happy childhood memory, but rather a solemn and foreboding atmosphere. The mood it creates is gloomy and mysterious, evoking a sense of sadness in the reader. While this tone and mood are predominant in the opening scene, one can discern multiple shifts in tone as the narrative unfolds.

Tone and irony play crucial roles in guiding the reader's perception of fictional works. Tone is a fundamental element to be considered in every story, as it is the way in which authors convey their attitudes toward readers and the subjects of their works. Irony is a major component of tone and can be classified into various forms, including verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony.

Verbal irony is expressed through word choice, where the intended meaning is usually opposite to what is actually said. Situational irony occurs when unexpected or contrary events take place, often involving unfortunate outcomes for good characters or situations where rewards are not guaranteed. It highlights the idea that circumstances beyond human comprehension seem to be in control.

Dramatic irony, on the other hand, is a situation in which characters possess an incomplete, inaccurate, or misguided understanding of events, while readers or other characters are privy to a more comprehensive understanding. In such cases, readers gain insights into the characters' situation, fostering a sense of anticipation and hope that the characters will eventually grasp the reality of their circumstances and make informed decisions.

In summary, tone and irony are essential tools in the narrative of fictional works, helping to shape the reader's perception and engagement with the story. These elements contribute to the richness and complexity of literary experiences.

Indeed, the tone in writing closely parallels the tone of one's voice in spoken communication. In writing, a piece of text can convey various tones such as querulous, formal, friendly, sarcastic, melancholy, bitter, angry, light, or polite. It is essential for a teacher to discern and articulate these diverse shades of tone when teaching literature in the classroom. The same descriptors that apply to a person's tone of voice are applicable to the tone of writing.

The tone of a piece of writing can be discerned through every choice the author makes. This includes decisions such as whether to use the first or third person, the selection of colloquial or formal words, the preference for abstract or concrete vocabulary, the use of short or long sentences, and the choice between exaggeration and understatement. Such choices are often between several possibilities rather than a binary selection.

A skilled teacher must be adept at differentiating between the various tones within a narrative by considering the deliberate choices made by the author and the alternatives that were rejected. This process requires an ear for language, as the writer's craftsmanship is intimately linked to the use of tone in the narrative. This skill can be fully appreciated by a trained reader or teacher whose auditory sense is finely attuned to nuances and subtleties. When the teacher can discern the multifaceted nature of tone, they can effectively convey and teach this aspect to students, enhancing their understanding and appreciation of literature.

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