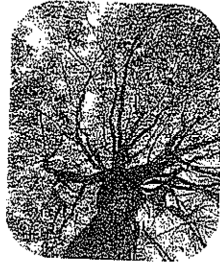

Chapter 6

Tone and Style: The Words That Convey Attitudes in Fiction

Tone refers to the methods by which writers and speakers reveal attitudes or feelings—toward the material, toward their readers, and toward the general situation they are describing or analyzing. It is an aspect of all spoken and written statements, whether serious analyses of political campaigns, earnest declarations of love, requests to pass a dinner dish, descriptions of social or athletic events, letters from students asking parents for money, or official government notices threatening penalties if fines and taxes are not paid. The attitudes expressed in each of these situations are usually readily apparent. When we speak about tone here, we refer to a variety of similar and dissimilar attitudes, but, in addition, and more importantly, we stress those modes of expression that create and shape those attitudes.

Although tone is a vast subject that can involve large matters of action and situation, in this chapter we will treat the interconnectedness of tone and style. **Style** refers to the ways in which writers assemble words to tell the story, to develop the argument, to dramatize the play, or to compose the poem. Sometimes style is distinguished from content, but actually style is best considered as the choice of words in the *service* of content. The written expression of an action or scene, in other words, cannot be separated from the action or scene itself, nor can it be separated from the impressions and attitudes it creates.

By reading a story carefully, we may deduce the author's attitude or attitudes toward the subject matter and toward readers. In "The Story of an Hour," for example (p. 293), Kate Chopin sympathetically portrays a young wife's secret wishes for freedom, just as Chopin also satirically reveals the unwitting smugness that often pervades men's relationships with women.

Words and subject matter may also indicate the writer's assessment of readers. When Hawthorne's woodland guide in "Young Goodman Brown" (Chapter 7) refers to "King Philip's War," for example, Hawthorne clearly assumes that his readers know that this war in seventeenth-century New England was notoriously cruel and inhumane. In this way he indicates respect for the knowledge of his readers, and he also assumes that they will assent to his interpretation. Authors always make such considerations about readers by implicitly complimenting them on their capacity to recognize and understand the ways in which materials are presented.

Diction: The Writer's Choice and Control of Words

Control over style and tone is highly individual, because all authors put words together uniquely to fit the specific circumstances of specific works. We may therefore speak of the *style* of Ernest Hemingway and the *style* of Alice Munro, even

though both writers adapt words to situations. An author may have a distinct style for narrative and descriptive passages, but a very different style for dialogue.

The essential aspect of style is **diction**, the writer's selection of words. First, words must be accurate and comprehensive, so that all actions, scenes, and ideas are perfectly understandable to readers. If a writer's work is effective—if it portrays an action graphically and clearly, explains ideas accurately, and indicates the conditions of human relationships among the major characters—we may confidently say that the words are right. Additionally, right words bear the burden of controlling the ways in which readers respond to the material. Thus, a passage of action should verbally create the action and the place or places in which things happen, and it should also cause readers to be interested and involved. Similarly, explanatory or reflective passages should be clear but should also spark the curiosity and satisfy the understanding of readers. In short, the writer should make all efforts to control the work's tone.

Formal, Neutral, and Informal Diction Create Unique Effects

As a guide to the types of words authors use to control tone, a major classification of diction can be made according to three degrees of formality or informality: **formal** or *high*, **neutral** or *middle*, and **informal** or *low*.

Formal or *high* diction bestows major importance to the characters and actions being described. It consists of standard and also "elegant" words (frequently polysyllabic), correct word order, and the absence of contractions. The sentence "It is I," for example, is formal, for this expression is more "elegant" and grammatically correct than most American speakers normally now prefer. An example of formal diction may be seen in the narrative sections of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown."

Neutral or *middle* diction is ordinary, everyday standard vocabulary, shunning longer words and using contractions when necessary. The sentence "It's me" is an example of what many American speakers naturally say in preference to the formal "It is I." Neutral words may be thought of as clear window glass, while words in the formal or high style are more decorative, like stained glass. Neutral diction is appropriate for stories about everyday, ordinary people going through situations they encounter or can imagine encountering in their lives. Generally, today's writers favor neutral diction as a means of putting their characters in a light that is normal and appropriate but also respectful. In Alice Munro's "The Found Boat" we see neutral, middle diction.

> Nobody said a word this time, they all bent and stripped themselves. Eva, naked first, started running across the field, and then all the others ran, all five of them running bare through the knee-high hot grass, running towards the river. Not caring now about being caught but in fact leaping and yelling to call attention to themselves, if there was anybody to hear or see. They felt as if they were going to jump off a cliff and fly. They felt that something was happening to them different from anything that had happened before, and it had to do with the boat, the water, the sunlight, the dark ruined station, and each other. They thought of each other now hardly as names or people, but as echoing shrieks, reflections, all bold and white and loud and scandalous, and as fast as arrows. They went running without a break into the cold water and when it came

almost to the tops of their legs they fell on it and swam. It stopped their noise. Silence, amazement, came over them in a rush. They dipped and floated and separated, sleek as mink. (304)

The words of this passage are ordinary and easy. They are centered directly on the subject and do not draw attention to themselves. In an almost ritualistic way, the paragraph describes young people running impulsively toward a river and diving in. This action can be seen as sexually symbolic, but Munro's diction focuses on the experience itself, and the words are neither analytical nor clinical. If her intention had been to create a searching psychological examination, she might have used formal or high words from the language of psychology (*libido, urge, sublimation,* and so on). Instead, she uses words that could have been in the vocabularies of the characters themselves, who would have used comparable words to express their sensations. Hence they feel "as if they were going to jump off a cliff and fly" and in their excitement they think "that something was happening to them different from anything that had happened before." These neutral, middle words enable us to focus on the excitement of the situation rather than on deeper psychological significance. Munro therefore does not instruct us so much as she causes us to be amused and happy about the young people playing on the field and in the water.

Informal or ***low*** diction may range from *colloquial*—the language of relaxed, common activities—to the level of *substandard* or *slang* expressions. A person speaking to a close friend uses diction that would not be appropriate in public and formal situations and even in some social situations. Informal or low diction is thus appropriate for some narrative dialogue, depending, of course, on individual speakers. It is also a natural choice for stories told in the first-person point of view as though the speaker is talking directly to sympathetic and relaxed close friends—"pals." The following sentence from Bambara's "The Lesson" (Chapter 8) illustrates informal, low diction:

And school suppose to let up in summer I heard, but she don't never let up.

Note the ungrammatical "don't never," a double negative often used in informal or low speech but frowned upon in writing. Note also that the *d* has been dropped in the participle "suppose," that the word "is" before "suppose" is omitted, and that "I heard" follows and does not precede the clause "And school suppose to let up in summer." The purpose of these substandard usages is clearly to establish the voice of the speaker, Sylvia, and to encourage us to listen attentively to her story.

Authors Use Specific-General and Concrete-Abstract Language to Guide Readers to Perceptions of Numbers and Qualities

Another aspect of language is its degree of exactness. **Specific** refers to words that bring to mind images from the real world. "My dog Teddie is barking" is specific. **General** statements refer to broad classes, such as "All people like pets" and "Dogs make good pets." There is an ascending order of generality from (1) very specific, to (2) less specific, to (3) general, as though the words themselves are climbing a ladder. Thus *peach* is a specific fruit. *Fruit* is specific but more general because it may also include apples, oranges, and all other fruits. *Dessert* is a still

more general word, which can include all sweets, including fruits and peaches, and also other confections, such as ice cream. *Food* is more general yet, for it is a comprehensive word that describes everything we eat.

While *specific–general* refers to categories, *concrete–abstract* refers to qualities or conditions. **Concrete** words describe qualities of immediate perception. If you say, "Ice cream is cold," the word *cold* is concrete because it describes a condition that you can feel, just as you can taste ice cream's *sweetness* and feel its *creamy* texture in your mouth. **Abstract** words refer to broader and less concrete qualities; they may therefore apply to many separate things. If we describe ice cream as *good*, our word is abstract because *good* is far removed from ice cream itself and conveys no descriptive information about it. A vast number of things may be *good*, just as they may be *bad*, *fine*, *"cool," excellent*, and so on.

Usually, narrative and descriptive writing features specific and concrete words that are intended to help us visualize actions, scenes, and objects, for with more specificity and concreteness there is less ambiguity. Because exactness and vividness are goals of most fiction, specific and concrete words are the fiction writer's basic tools, with general and abstract words being used sparingly.

The point, however, is not that abstract and general words have no place at all, but rather that *words should be appropriate in the context*. Good writers control style in the interests of tone as well as description. Observe, for example, Hemingway's diction in "Hills Like White Elephants" (pp. 295–98). This brief story takes place at a railway station in Spain, and it consists largely of conversation between the "American and the girl with him" as they are waiting for a train. The two speak idly about details of the day, the appearance of the nearby hills, and the drinks they are having as they wait. The language here is all quite specific, but at a certain point the specifics bring out an obvious issue of contention the two had been discussing before the story opens. About a third of the way through the story, the man speaks about an operation that is "not really an operation at all." It is clear that the operation he wants "Jig" (the woman's nickname) to have is an abortion. In the rest of the story, the dialogue takes a more negative turn. Even when he says that he doesn't want her to go through with it unless she wants it, she understands his words as an expression of the anger her refusal would cause. Her many questions about their relationship after such an operation indicate her worries not only about the procedure but also her increasing disappointment in the American. The height of the American's generalized view of abortion is his claim to have known "lots of people that have done it." Her response, at the same level of generalization, but with cutting irony, marks the height of their dispute: "So have I," said the girl. "And afterward they were all so happy." Through such passages, mixing appropriate specific details with general observations, Hemingway skillfully points readers toward great understanding of the life these two characters have shared together.

Authors Use Denotation and Connotation to Control Meaning and Suggestion

Another way to understand the connection of style and tone is to study the author's management of *denotation* and *connotation*. **Denotation** is a limiting term, referring to what a word means, and **connotation** is a broader word, referring to

what the word suggests. For example, if a person in a social situation behaves in ways that are *friendly, warm, polite,* or *cordial,* these words are different in tone because they have different connotations. Similarly, both *cat* and *kitten* are close to each other denotatively, but *kitten* connotes more playfulness and cuteness than *cat*. Consider the connotations of words describing physical appearance. It is one thing to call a person *thin,* for example, but another to use such words as *skinny, gaunt, scrawny,* and *skeletal,* and still something else to say *fit, trim, svelte, slim,* and *slender*.

Through the careful choice of words, not only for denotation but also for connotation, writers control tone even though they might be describing similar or even identical situations. Let us look briefly at Cynthia Ozick's opening paragraph of "The Shawl" (223, Chapter 4).

> Stella, cold, cold the coldness of hell. How they walked on the roads together, Rosa with Magda curled up between sore breasts, Magda wound up in the shawl. Sometimes Stella carried Magda. But she was jealous of Magda. A thin girl of fourteen, too small, with thin breasts of her own, Stella wanted to be wrapped in a shawl, hidden away, asleep, rocked by the march, a baby, a round infant in arms. Magda took Rosa's nipple, and Rosa never stopped walking, a walking cradle. There was not enough milk; sometimes Magda sucked air; then she screamed. Stella was ravenous. Her knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones.

This short but complex paragraph conveys a grisly close-up experience of horror during the enforced death marches of Nazi prisoners during the closing months of World War II. Many of the words here would be totally appropriate to the peaceful mothering and nurturing of an infant, but in the context of the paragraph these words dissolve into the bleakness and despair described in the passage. Stella, the thin fourteen-year-old girl who is forced to walk while carrying her infant sister, is "ravenous," a word suggesting her desperation for food, rather than "hungry," a word that connotes normal life in which meals are taken for granted. In addition, because of the march and her starved condition her knees have come to resemble "tumors on sticks" and her elbows are "chicken bones." Babies cry all the time, and the word *cry* would describe a baby under normal circumstances, but this paragraph conveys the unspeakably cruel treatment of innocent prisoners, and therefore Magda, Rosa's baby, "screamed." The brief discussion of these words shows how an author's skillful use of connotation shapes the tone of individual passages and, beyond that, of entire works.

Tone, Irony, and Style

The capacity to have more than one attitude toward someone or something is a uniquely human trait. We know that people are not perfect, but we love a number of them anyway. Therefore, we speak to them not only with love and praise but also with banter and criticism. On occasion, you may have given mildly insulting greeting cards to your loved ones, not to offend them but to amuse them. You share smiles and laughs at these negative words on your cards, but at the same time you remind your loved ones of your affection.

The word **irony**, specifically **verbal irony**, describes such contradictory statements, in which one thing is said and the opposite is meant. There are important types of verbal irony. In **understatement** the expression does not fully describe the importance of a situation, and therefore makes its point by implication. For example, in Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (Chapter 1) the condemned man, Farquhar, contemplates the device designed by the soldiers to hang him. After considering the method, Farquhar's response is described by the narrator: "The arrangement commended itself to his judgment as simple and effective" (84). These words would be appropriate for ordinary machinery, perhaps, but because the apparatus is soon to cause Farquhar's death, the understated observation is ironic.

By contrast, in **hyperbole** or **overstatement**, the words are far in excess of the situation, and readers or listeners therefore understand that the true meaning is considerably less than what is said. An example is the priest's exaggerated dialogue with Jackie in "First Confession" (this chapter). Though the priest makes exaggerated comments on Jackie's plans for slaughtering his grandmother, readers automatically know he means no such thing. The gulf between what is said and what is meant creates smiles and chuckles.

Often verbal irony is ambiguous, having double meaning or **double-entendre.** Midway through "Young Goodman Brown" (Chapter 7), for example, the woodland guide leaves Brown alone while stating, "[W]hen you feel like moving again, there is my staff to help you along" (333, paragraph 40). The word "staff" is ambiguous, for it refers to the staff that resembles a serpent (331, paragraph 13). The word therefore suggests that the devilish guide is leaving Brown not only with a real staff but also with the spirit of evil (unlike the divine "staff" of Psalm 23:4 that gives comfort). Ambiguity of course may be used in relation to any topic. Quite often double-entendre is used in statements about sexuality, and on such occasions it is intended for the amusement of listeners or readers.

Tone, Humor, and Style

A major aspect of tone is humor and laughter. Everyone likes to laugh, and shared laughter is part of good human relationships. As common and enjoyable as laughter is, however, not many people can adequately explain why some things are funny. Even when reasons for laughter are analyzed and explained, it always seems that they do not answer all our questions. Explanation, however, is a goal worthy of pursuit. It seems that a common element in laughter is that it depends on our seeing something familiar in a new light, or in encountering something surprisingly new or unique. It also seems that whenever we laugh—perhaps in the company of our friends or as a result of our reading or looking at films and television shows—we likely find that laughter is most often unplanned, personal, unique, and unpredictable.

A primary ingredient in humor is something to laugh at—a person, thing, situation, custom, habit of speech or dialect, or arrangement of words. But once we have this ingredient we must also have *disproportion* or *incongruity*; that is, something happens or is said that violates what we might normally expect. It is such jarring

juxtapositions that provide the comic newness prompting the occasion of laughter. In O'Connor's "First Confession" (this chapter) we might expect that Mrs. Ryan's discourse about enduring the agonizing pain of hellfire for all eternity might have made Jackie, the narrator, fearful. But is this what happens? Let us look:

> She lit a candle, took out a new half-crown [a valuable coin], and offered it to the first boy who would hold one finger—only one finger!—in the flame for five minutes by the school clock. Being always very ambitious I was tempted to volunteer, but I thought it might look greedy. Then she asked were we afraid of holding one finger—only one finger!—in a little candle flame for five minutes and not afraid of burning all over in roasting hot furnaces for all eternity. "All eternity! Just think of that! A whole lifetime goes by and it's nothing, not even a drop in the ocean of your sufferings." The woman was really interesting about hell, but my attention was all fixed on the half-crown. . . . (307)

Jackie's response shows that Mrs. Ryan's challenge has not even dented his boyhood problems, which have nothing to do with eternal punishment. For him, punishment is a matter of things happening day by day: the "flaking" administered by his father and also the family disruptions caused by his grandmother. Eternity, for him as a little boy, is not even a remote concern. It is comparable incongruities in Jackie's responses that characterize the comic method in O'Connor's story.

In addition, the language itself may be used for incongruity. A well-known example is the traditional stand-up comedian's statement, "One day I was walking in the local shopping mall, and I turned into a drugstore." Here the comedian causes laughter through the ambiguous meaning of "turned into," thus verbally changing an ordinary walk into a miraculously comic event. Another verbal incongruity is this one: "Barking loudly, I was awakened by my dog." Here the humor depends on the juggling of grammar: the modifier "barking loudly" is misplaced, and the resulting sentence seems to say incongruously that the speaker, and not the dog, is barking. A real-life speaker, who will be nameless here, once stated that he had trouble understanding the "*congregation* of verbs," not quite catching up to the word *conjugation*. Here the inadvertent pun creates the humor of the sentence. We laugh *at* the pun, and we also laugh *at* the speaker whose verbal mistake has produced the pun. The same speaker also described the grammatical parts of speech as "nouns, verbs, and *proverbs*." We conclude that he intended to say (maybe) either *pronouns* or *adverbs*, but somehow his understanding slipped and he created a comic incongruity. If we discover such verbal errors in a story, the author is controlling tone by directing humor against the speaker and his or her language, for the amusement of both readers and author alike.

It is such flashes of insight, or sudden revelations like these, that create the newness and spontaneity underlying humor. Indeed, the task of the writer is to develop ordinary materials to that point when spontaneity brings us to the explosiveness of laughter. This is not to say that works that you already know are not spontaneous or new. You can read O'Connor's "First Confession" and laugh, and read it again and laugh again, because even though you know what happens, the story shapes your acceptance of how Jackie maintains his natural innocence despite the fact that the older people around him, except for the priest, are pushing him to accept their own fears and anxieties. Jackie's experience is and always will be comic—and new—because it is so incongruous and so spontaneous.