

WRITING ABOUT TONE AND STYLE

The task of writing about tone and style is to identify attitudes that you find in the work and then to explain how attitudes are made obvious by the author's style. How do words describing characters, scenes, thoughts, and actions indicate attitude? In Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" (Chapter 4), for example, do the descriptions of the dimly lit rooms evoke fear or tension, or do they seem exaggerated? Depending on the story, your devising and answering such questions will help you understand an author's control over tone.

Questions for Discovering Ideas

- Use a dictionary to discover the meaning of any words you do not immediately know. Are there any unusual words? Any especially difficult or uncommon ones? Do any of the words distract you as you read?
- How strongly do you respond to the story? What words bring out your interest, concern, indignation, fearfulness, anguish, amusement, or sense of affirmation?
- Does the diction seem unusual or noteworthy, such as words in dialect, polysyllabic words, or foreign words or phrases that the author assumes you know? Are there any especially connotative or emotive words? What do these words suggest concerning the author's apparent assumptions about readers?

^oFalcon: small car that had recently been introduced by the Ford Motor Company.

- Can you easily visualize and imagine the situations described by the words? If you find it easy, or hard, to what degree does your success or difficulty stem from the level of diction?
- For passages describing action, how vivid are the words? How do they help you picture the action? How do they hold your attention?
- For passages describing exterior or interior scenes, how specific are the words? How much detail does the writer provide? Should there be more or fewer words? How vivid are the descriptions? How successfully does the author locate scenes spatially? How many words are devoted to colors, shapes, sizes, and so on? What is the effect of such passages?
- For passages of dialogue, what does the level of speech indicate about the characters? How do a person's speeches help to establish her or his character? For what purposes does the author use formal or informal diction? How much slang (low or informal language) do you find? Why is it there? How does dialogue shape your responses to the characters and to the actions?
- What role does the narrator/speaker play in your attitudes toward the story material? Does the speaker seem intelligent/stupid, friendly/unfriendly, sane/insane, or idealistic/pragmatic?
- What verbal irony do you find in the story? How is the irony connected to philosophies of marriage, family, society, politics, religion, or morality? How do you think you are expected to respond to the irony?
- Did anything in the story make you laugh? What placement of words brought out the humor? Explain how the word arrangement caused your laughter.

Strategies for Organizing Ideas

Begin with a careful reading, noting particularly those elements of language that convey attitudes. How does the author establish the dominant moods of the story (e.g., the humor of "First Confession," the tension in "Hills Like White Elephants")? Some possibilities are the use or misuse of language, the exposé of a pretentious speaker, the use of exact and specific descriptions, the isolation of a major character, the failure of plans, and the continuance of naiveté in a disillusioned world.

Here are some of the things to discuss.

1. *How is the work's tone affected by situation, characters, action, and audience?* Does the speaker directly address any person or group? What attitude is expressed (love, respect, condescension, confidentiality, confidence, etc.)? What is the basic situation in the story? Do you find instances of verbal irony? What do these show (optimism or pessimism, for example)? How is the situation of the story controlled to shape your responses? That is, can actions, situations, or characters be seen as expressions of attitude, or as embodiments of certain favorable or unfavorable ideas or positions? What sort of person is the narrator or persona? Why does the narrator speak exactly as he or she does? How is the narrator's character manipu-

- lated to show apparent authorial attitude and to elicit reader response? Does the story promote respect, admiration, dislike, or other feelings about character or situation? How?
2. *What do diction and descriptions contribute to the tone?* Your concern here is not to analyze descriptions or diction for themselves alone, but to relate these matters to attitude. *For descriptions:* Do descriptions of natural scenery and conditions (snowstorms, cold, rain, ice, intense sunlight) complement or oppose the circumstances of the characters? Are there any systematic references to colors, sounds, or noises that collectively reflect an attitude? *For diction:* Do connotative meanings of words control response in any way? Does the diction require readers to have a large or technical vocabulary? Do speech patterns or the use of dialect evoke attitudes about speakers or their condition of life? Is the level of diction formal, middle, or informal? Do you find any substandard or slang expressions? What effect do these create? Are there unusual or particularly noteworthy expressions? If so, what attitudes do these show?
 3. *To what degree does the story contain humor?* Is the story funny? How funny, how intense? How is the humor achieved? How does the language bring out the incongruity of funny situations? Are the objects of laughter still respected or even loved even though the story's treatment of them causes amusement?
 4. *How does the expression of ideas shape the work's tone?* Are any ideas advocated, defended mildly, or attacked? How does the author clarify his or her attitude toward these ideas—directly, by statement, or indirectly, through understatement, overstatement, or a character's speeches? In what ways does the story assume agreement between author and readers? What common religious views can you find? What political views, moral and behavioral standards, and so on?

In concluding, first summarize your main points and then go on to definitions, explanations, or afterthoughts, together with ideas reinforcing earlier points. To what extent has your analysis increased or reinforced your appreciation of the author's technique? Does the passage take on added importance as a result of your study? Is there anything else in the work comparable to the content, words, or ideas you have discussed in the passage?

Numbering Your Passage for Easy Reference

To focus on specifics of style and tone, the assignment visualized here is to analyze a passage—either short or long—from a story. After you have selected a passage, include a copy at the beginning of your essay, as in the example. For your reader's convenience, number the sentences in the passage, and use these numbers when you refer to them. To focus your essay, either single out one aspect of style and tone, or discuss everything, depending on the length of the assignment. Be sure to consider relationships that you can discover between tone and *levels of diction, specific and general words, concrete and abstract words, denotation and connotation, irony, and humor.*

Illustrative Student Essay

Torres 1

Elizabeth Torres
 Professor Moorhouse
 English 24
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Frank O'Connor's Control of Tone and Style in "First Confession"^o

[1] Nora's turn came, and I heard the sound of something slamming, and then her voice as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and then another slam, and out she came. [2] God, the hypocrisy of women! [3] Her eyes were lowered, her head was bowed, and her hands were joined very low down on her stomach, and she walked up the aisle to the side altar looking like a saint. [4] You never saw such an exhibition of devotion, and I remembered the devilish malice with which she had tormented me all the way from our door, and wondered were all religious people like that, really. [5] It was my turn now. [6] With the fear of damnation in my soul I went in, and the confessional door closed of itself behind me. (308)

[1] This paragraph from O'Connor's "First Confession" appears midway in the story. It is transitional, coming between Jackie's "heartscalded" memories of family troubles and his happier memory of the confession itself. Though mainly narrative, the passage is punctuated by Jackie's recollections of disgust with his sister and fear of eternal punishment for his childhood "sins." It is the controlled contrast of these attitudes that creates the humor of the passage.* In all respects—brevity, word level, concreteness, and grammatical control—the passage is typical of the story's humor.†

[2] The actions and responses of the paragraph are described briefly and accurately. The first four sentences convey Jackie's exaggerated reactions to

^oThis story appears on pages 306–310.

*Central idea.

†Thesis sentence.

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Nora's confession. Sentence 1 describes his recollections of her voice in the confessional, and the tone of sentence 3 makes his judgment clear about the hypocrisy of her pious appearance when she leaves for the altar. Each of these descriptive sentences is followed by Jackie's angry reactions, at which readers smile, at least, if they do not laugh. This depth of feeling is transformed to "fear of damnation" at the beginning of sentence 6, which describes Jackie's own entry into the confessional, with the closing door suggesting that he is being shut off from the world and thrown into hell. In other words, the paragraph succinctly presents the sounds, reactions, sights, and confusion of the scene itself, all of which furnish readers with a brief and comic drama.

The humorous action of the passage is augmented by O'Connor's neutral level of diction, which enables readers to concentrate fully on Jackie's responses. Jackie is recalling an unpleasant childhood memory, and the neutral, middle diction enables readers both to sympathize with him and to be amused by him. His words are neither unusual nor difficult. What could be more ordinary, for example, than "butter," "slam," "out," "hands," "joined," "low," "people," and "closed"? Even Jackie's moral and religious words fall within the vocabulary of ordinary discussions about sin and punishment: "hypocrisy," "exhibition," "devilish," "malice," "tormented," and "damnation." In the passage, therefore, the diction accurately conveys Jackie's vision of the oppressive religious forces which he dislikes, and which he also exaggerates. Readers follow these words easily and with amusement.

Additionally, the words of the paragraph are appropriate to Jackie's boyhood anger because they are specific and concrete. When he tells about Nora going into the confessional, he says specifically that he "heard the sound of something slamming," followed by the sound of Nora's "voice," "another slam," and then her appearance as "she came" out of the confessional. Equally specific, and equally comic, is his description of Nora's appearance as she leaves. Readers can easily visualize her "bowed" head, her "lowered" eyes, and her prayerful hands, and are amused by the scene just as Jackie, as a child, was annoyed by it. In addition to these specific descriptions, sentences 2 and 4

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contain Jackie's angry responses, which also provoke amusement. Sentence 4 presents the greater number of connotative abstractions—first the “exhibition of devotion,” and second the “devilish malice with which she had tormented me.” But these define Jackie's childhood conclusions about his sister, not his adult ones, and their incongruity furnishes readers with a realistic basis for laughter.

[5]

A major element contributing to Jackie's remembrance of his boyhood attitudes is the control over grammar that O'Connor gives to him. At the time of the narrative Jackie is presumably no longer angry, even though as a child he felt misunderstood and unfairly treated. He therefore does not need to recall his story in angry outbursts, despite his exclamation about the “hypocrisy of women,” but rather he presents details with grammatical correctness. The very first sentence, for example, contains three parallel grammatical direct objects (“sound,” “voice,” “slam”), thereby using a minimal number of words while still detailing the major sounds of Nora's confession. The grammar of the third sentence illustrates the swiftness and sparseness of O'Connor's (and Jackie's) narrative style. The first three parallel clauses are each made up of four words (“her eyes were lowered,” “her head was bowed,” and “her hands were joined”). These clauses give Jackie the opportunity to introduce his sarcastic and amusing phrase “looking like a saint” at the end to express his disgust over his sister's “hypocrisy.” This control shapes the developing comedy of the paragraph.

[6]

In all respects, the passage shows the right use of words and exactly the right tone. Jackie's accurate descriptions are mixed with his expressions of childhood emotions—all important aspects of O'Connor's good humor. In retrospect, Jackie's anger and disgust were unnecessary, but they were important to him as a child—so much so that his exaggerations make him the center of the story's comedy. The words that O'Connor skillfully puts in Jackie's mouth (or on his page) enable readers to share this particular experience of a first confession but to do so while smiling. Jackie's bittersweet memories are successfully rendered and made comic through O'Connor's control over style and tone.

Torres 4

Work Cited

O'Connor, Frank. "First Confession." *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*. Ed. Edgar V. Roberts and Robert Zweig. 5th Compact ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2012. 306–10. Print.

Commentary on the Essay

Paragraph 1 demonstrates how a passage being studied may be related to the entire work of which it is a part. The central idea connects the story's comic tone to O'Connor's control over situation and diction. Throughout the essay, the connection of style and humor are emphasized. The thesis sentence presents four topics that the essay will develop. Any one of these topics, if necessary, could also be treated separately.

In the body of the essay, the writer stresses the way O'Connor creates the story's tone by the careful manipulation of words and expressions. Paragraph 2 indicates O'Connor's verbal economy in describing the actions and reactions of the passage. Paragraph 3 deals with the level of diction, noting that the words are appropriate both to the action and to Jackie's anger when recollecting it. In paragraph 4 the topic is O'Connor's use of specific and concrete diction, a quality that makes for easy visualization of the details. This paragraph also considers the small number of abstract and general words that appear in O'Connor's sentences 2 and 4.

Paragraph 5 connects O'Connor's grammatical control with the speaker's recollected boyhood anger. Examples of parallelism are three direct objects in sentence 1 and the first three clauses in sentence 3. Paragraph 6, the conclusion of the essay, summarizes the means by which O'Connor uses style to create the comedy of Jackie and his recollected feelings.