

Tone: “The Long Deployment” & “The Mysterious Arrival of an Unusual Letter”

Lesson plan by Janet Burroway

Time: 60-120 minutes

One of the most difficult things to analyze in poetry is *tone*, one of those things you “know it when you see it,” but is hard to put into words. Tone is a mood, an emotional coloring, it may be described as a quality; it is: melancholy, or harsh, or sexy, or light-hearted, or enraged. It will inevitably be somehow there in the form of the poem. It may be partly created by subject matter and such concrete elements of atmosphere as place, weather, time of day, or time of year; but it is also a matter of the poet’s *diction*, that is, the *vocabulary*—word choice—of the poem, and the *syntax*—the order in which the words are placed.

OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:

1. Begin to talk about tone by naming the mood of two contrasting poems
2. Identify the subject & the images used to convey it.
3. Identify the concrete elements of atmosphere: place and time.
4. Identify the form & the diction used, how vocabulary & syntax work to create the tone.
5. Write a short prose or verse poem in which subject matter, place, time and vocabulary work together toward a single emotional coloring.

MATERIALS

- “The Long Deployment” poem (by Jehanne Durbrow) & motionpoem (by Nicole McDonald): motionpoems.org/episode/long-deployment/
- “The Mysterious Arrival of an Unusual Letter” poem (by Mark Strand) & motionpoem (by Scott Wenner): motionpoems.org/episode/mysterious-arrival/
- Pen/paper or other writing implements

ACTIVITIES

1. **The Poem** (30 mins): Have students read the two poems.
 - a. Point out that both are about the absence of someone who is missed. One is in the form of a short prose poem, the other is a villanelle—a complex form involving rhyme and repetition.
 - b. Have them pick a single word to describe the tone of each poem. Share these. (Argue them, if that seems fruitful.)
 - c. Have them describe ways in which the subject matter dictates the tone.
 - d. Have them describe ways in which the setting in time and place contribute. Does the chronology move forward in a straight narrative, or does it move back and forth in time?
 - e. Have them describe ways in which the form, word choice and/or syntax contribute.
2. **The Film** (30 mins): Watch the two films.
 - a. Would they describe the tone of the films in any different way than they described the poems themselves?
 - b. Why did one artist use a live actress and the other cartoon?
 - c. How do these choices contribute to, or change, the tone of the original?
3. Depending on class time, have students complete this exercise in class or at home:

WRITING PROMPT

Have each student choose an absence they have experienced. It may be the absence of a person by death or distance, of an animal, a place, an object—or it may be some thing or experience they were glad to be rid of. Tell them to “trust your instinct“ and go with the first thing that comes to mind. Have them ask themselves how that absence felt. Then have each of them write a short poem in which that feeling is conveyed in the tone. The *subject* is absence. But *tone* may be aided by the choice of prose poem or verse, by the setting in time or place, and by the choice of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Can the tone can be intensified by other word choices? Suggest that they might play with the syntax, disturb the order of the words and phrases. How does the placement of the words change or contribute to the tone?