

## CHAPTER 8

### TONE

Tone is the attitude of the speaker toward his subject, his audience, and himself, as it is implied in the text and inferred by the reader. In conversation, the speaker indicates mood and attitude through tone of voice, i.e. intonation, pitch, facial expression, emphasis, gestures and the like. In poetry, we must depend upon the word on the page.

The language level in a poem may vary from formal to informal, dignified to casual, eloquent to colloquial and so on. Similarly, emotional and intellectual attitudes expressed within a poem contribute to its tone. The tone suggests what our reaction should be. An emotional attitude sets the mood-light-hearted or solemn, affectionate or bitter, formal or intimate, scornful or sympathetic, straightforward or ironic, sincere, sarcastic, humorous, friendly or belligerent, somber, or playful. An intellectual attitude may be thoughtful or unconcerned, philosophical or superficial, skeptical or credulous. In poetry the poet relies on choice of diction and figurative language, and most importantly on **hyperbole**, **understatement**, **paradox** and **irony**. (Guth, 1981, p.695)

**Hyperbole** is **overstatement** or **exaggeration**, but exaggeration in the service of truth, saying more than the truth. You are merely adding emphasis to what you really mean. For example, if you have not eaten for 4 hours, you may say "I'm so hungry I could die". This is overstatement. So is "there were millions of people at the party". Depending on the skill of the poet, hyperbole can be convincing or unconvincing. It is sometimes used deliberately for a humorous effect.

As Robert Burns wrote in his famous poem:-

And I will luv thee still, my dear,  
Till a' the seas gang dry.

The lover, here is a poetic engineer, measuring the depth and the length of love by beauty and all time. He convincingly promises the impossible.

**Marvell's, "To His Coy Mistress"** employs hyperbole. When the speaker is flattening his mistress by describing the ideal, he magnifies the quality of his love through hyperbole:

A hundred years should go to praise  
Thine eyes, and on thy Forehead Gaze;  
Two hundred to adore each breast:  
But thirty thousand to the rest;  
An age at least to every part,  
And the last age should show your heart.  
For, lady, you deserve this state,  
Nor would I love at lower rate.

**Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)**

Source : (Clayes, & Gerrietts, 1975, p.317)

When he is forcing her to recognize the sombre facts of time and death, he does so through understatement.

The grave's a fine and private place,  
But none, I think, do there embrace.

**W.H. Auden's, "As I Walked Out One Evening:** shows another sample of hyperbole. Here the lover says that "Love has no ending," and so

"I'll love you, dear, I'll love you  
Till China and Africa meet,  
And the river jumps over the mountain  
And the salmon sing in the street."

Let's consider other poems.

W.H. Auden' s "As I Walked Out One Evening (1907-1973)

Source : (Miller, & Slote, 1962, pp.47-48)

Examples of analyzed poetry:

Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Source : (Perrin, 1963, p.297)

This sonnet is a set of hyperbolic negative comparisons, making fun of the poetic convention. The woman's eyes are 'nothing like the sun'; i.e. they don't shine at all. Her lips are not at all red; her breasts are so unlike snow that they are brownish-gray; her hair is not gold coloured, or even close to gold, but is black, the colour furthest from gold possible; there is no colour at all in her cheeks; not only is her breath not perfumed, it has a horrible smell; and her voice is very unpleasant. After this series of humorous overstatements, the final couplet points out the foolishness of hyperbolic compliments: even though the poet refuses to say his mistress is as marvelous as other poets say of their women, he still loves her and thinks she is beautiful. Hyperbole is no proof of sincerity.

## Cherry-Ripe

There is a garden in her face,  
Where roses and white lilies grow;  
A heavenly paradise is that place,  
Wherein all pleasant fruits do flow.  
There cherries grow which none may buy,  
Till "cherry-ripe" themselves do cry.

These cherries fairly do enclose  
Of orient pearl a double row,  
Which when her lovely laughter shows,  
They look like rosebuds filled with snow.  
Yet them nor peer nor prince can buy,  
Till "cherry-ripe" themselves do cry.

Her eyes like angels watch them still;  
Her brows like bended bows do stand,  
Threatening with piercing frowns to kill  
All that attempt with eye or hand  
Those sacred cherries to come nigh,  
Till "cherry-ripe" Themselves do cry.

Thomas Campion, (1567-1620)

Source : (Schwartz, & Roby, 1969, p.14)

This poem is an example of the Elizabethan poetic convention of praising a woman by hyperbolic comparisons. Certain features were beautiful; others were not. Thus, the convention was that gold coloured hair was beautiful; any other was not. Blue eyes were beautiful; any other colour was not; Skin must be white; dark skin was not beautiful. Eyes are compared to stars or suns; skin to snow or ivory; lips to roses or cherries; teeth to pearls. This poem is simply a series of such hyperbolic metaphors. The woman's face is as beautiful as paradise; her lips are like cherries, her teeth are pearls, her eyes are angels, her eyebrows are bows guarding her from men. Lost amidst all these hyperboles, the woman is not real, but just an excuse for an exercise in hyperbole.

## As I Walked Out One Evening

....I'll love you, dear, I'll love you  
Till China and Africa meet,  
And the river jumps over the mountain  
And the salmon sing in the street,

I'll love you till the ocean  
Is folded and hung up to dry  
And the seven stars go squawking  
Like geese about the sky.

The years shall run like rabbits,  
For in my arm I hold  
The Flower of the Ages,  
And the first love of the world.

**W.H. Auden (1970-1973)**

Source : (Miller, & Slote, 1962, p.47)

This poem contains seven hyperboles. Lines 1-8 use hyperbole to convince the woman that the speaker will love her for ever (all the events are impossible events and will never happen, just as the speaker's love will never end). In lines 9-12 the speaker hyperbolically says that the woman is the most beautiful woman in history and is loved by every man in the world.

## A Red, Red Rose

O, my love's like a red, red rose  
That's newly sprung in June.  
O, my love is like the melody  
That's sweetly played in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,  
So deep in love am I:  
And I will love thee still, my dear,  
Till a' the seas gang dry.

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,  
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;  
And I will love thee still, my dear,  
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee weel, my only love,  
And fare thee weel a while!  
And I will come again, my love,  
Though it were ten thousand mile.

**Robert Burns (1759-1796)**

Source : (Schwartz, & Roby, 1969, p.185)

The poem contains two metaphors in stanza 1 and then there are four hyperbolic statements: a) I will love you until the seas dry up (i.e. forever); b) I will love you until the sun melts the rocks (i.e. forever); c) I will love you all my life; d) I will return to you even if I must travel 10,000 miles to reach you.

By using hyperboles, the speaker hopes to convince the woman that he does love her.

## Understatement or Litotes or Meiosis

A kind of irony in which something is stated as being less significant or special than it really is. (Ruse, & Hopton, 1992, p.301)

Understatement is a form of irony frequently used. It is a way of saying less than the truth or less than one means. If it is raining heavily, one may say "It is a little damp". Understatement can also be used to convince. While understatement underplays the facts, overstatement exaggerates them. As when **Andrew Marvell's** speaker in "**To His Coy Mistress**" is forcing his mistress to recognize the sombre facts of time and death, he does so through understatement:

"The grave's a fine and private place,  
But none, I think, do there embrace,"

Another example of understatement:

"God loves his children not a little "

This means, of course, that God loves his children a very great deal

### Examples of analyzed poetry:

#### The Rose family

The rose is a rose,  
And was always a rose.  
But the theory now goes  
That the apple's a rose  
And the pear is, and so's  
The plum, I suppose.  
The dear only knows  
What will next prove a rose.  
But were always a rose

Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Source : (Perrine, 1963, p.93)

In complete contrast, this poem opens with a simple statement 'the rose is a rose', which has the effect of understatement, it is so simple. Lines 3-6 states the scientific fact that apple, pear, plum and rose all belong to the same botanical species. Lines 7-8 humorously suggest that only God ('the dear' is a humorous way of referring to God) can know what else belongs to this botanical family. In lines 9-10, the metaphor comparing the woman to a rose is slipped in so quietly and casually (notice the use of 'of course' and 'always') that it has the effect of understatement.

Hyperbole and understatement have different effects on different readers. Some reader may find "A Red, Red Rose' poem insincere because of the hyperboles: they will find 'the Rose Family' poem more convincing. Others will find 'the Rose Family' poem too casual and think that the speaker does not mean what he says; they will prefer A Red, Red Rose poem.

### **Give Me for Life**

Give me for life the honest name,  
Then take my due arrears of fame.  
I am grown deaf, and shall become.  
A trifle deafer in the tomb.

**Walter Savage Lander, (1775-1864)**

Source : (Daiches, 1950, p.352)

This poem is another example of understatement. The poet does not care what people say of him after he is dead, as long as they think well of him when he is alive (lines 1-2) because he is a little deaf now he is old and will be a little bit deafer ('trifle deafer') when he is dead. 'Trifle is an



understatement; he will be completely deaf when he is dead, of course, and this is why he does not care what is said of him after death.

### **Upon the Death of Sir Albert Morton's Wife**

He first deceased, she for a little tried  
To live without him, liked it not, and died

**Henry Wooton, (1568-1639)**

This poem is an epitaph on the death of a woman. It uses understatement to express the woman's great love for her husband: so great that she was unable to live without him. "Liked it not" is an understatement: she hated life without her husband so much that she preferred death. The use of understatement makes her love seem more convincing.

### **Paradox**

A paradox is a statement whose surface, literal meaning, seems to be illogical; it does not make sense. It strikes us as puzzling or contradictory and absurd. But as we think about it, upon closer examination we begin to see the point, an element of truths, since paradox is usually condensed, emphatic, and surprising, it is also memorable. The wisdom of proverbs often is expressed through paradox for this reason, and much good advice is stated in paradox. It is said that you have to spend money to make money-that the way to lose a friend is to lend him money-that it is best to make haste slowly. In many traditional love poems, the poet calls a loved person a "sweet foe" or a "beautiful tyrant." Though love is sweet, it also causes people much disappointment and suffering. Love is paradoxically

“bitterness.” Thus a paradox is an apparent contradiction that is however true. (Guth, 1981, p.685)

In Marvell's "am" rous birds of prey "in" **To His coy Mistress** "is another example of a paradox. Normally we think of amorous birds as gentle-doves, for example and not as birds of prey, such as hawks.

**Examples of analyzed poetry:**

### **My Life Closed Twice**

My life closed twice before its close;  
It yet remains to see  
If Immortality unveil  
A third event to me,  
So huge, so hopeless to conceive,  
As these that twice befell.  
Parting is all we know of heaven,  
And all we need of hell.

**Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)**

Source : (Clayes, & Gerrietts, 1975, p.136)

This poem is an example of paradox. Lines 2-6 have 2 meanings:  
a) I do not know whether there is life after death; b) I do not know if my going to heaven or hell will be as big and important an event as the 2 events that have already happened. The poem sets forth 3 paradoxes: a) that the speaker's life closed twice before it closed, this paradox can be resolved if 'closed' is interpreted as a metaphor for an event as emotionally demanding as dying. b) that death may be less important than the 2 events; resolved if less important is interpreted as less emotionally disturbing; Christian belief being that apparently painful events will not be painful in

can be 'hopeless' in heaven. c) that parting with a loved one can be both heaven and hell, resolved if we interpret one parting as the death of a loved one who will be met again in heaven and one parting as that of the speaker who sing the love of a man.

### **My Heart Leaps up**

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!  
The Child is father of the Man;  
And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.

**William Wordsworth, (1770-1850)**

Source : (Peterson, 1970, p.35)

The persona expresses his great love and reverence for nature in this poem. He is delighted to be in nature surrounded by its beauty. He has appreciated and enjoyed nature since his childhood and he will remain a lover of nature till he dies. He wished his whole life would be tied in with nature. The epigraph, the concluding lines of the poem, shows this notion.

The Child is father of the Man;  
And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.

"The Child is father of the Man; is a paradox. This statement sounds impossible. However, as we think about it we begin to see the point because the events and actions of childhood have a great effect on the

events and actions of manhood. The sum total of all the experience of his childhood; he learns from his early life and becomes a personality because of it. Wordsworth wishes to join his childhood with his powers as a poet;

“I wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by “natural piety,”

By “natural piety,” he means a passionate, almost religious response to the glories of nature, a worshipping of her powers.

### **To Lucasta, 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,  
The first foe in the field;  
And with a stronger faith embrace  
A sword, a house, a shield.  
Yet this inconstancy is such  
As you too shall adore;  
I could not love thee, Dear, so much,  
Loved I not Honor more.

**Richard Lovelace (1618-1657)**

Source: (Davis, et.al. 1977, p.520)

The lyric expresses the idea that it is glorious to die for one's country. 'Honour', that is, glory, fame, distinction in battle, is the greatest good of life, greater than love. Without honour, life is not worth living. This lyric mixes the language of love, war and religion, indicating the values of

the speaker. The woman is described as a 'nunnery', war is called a 'new mistress', his faith in war is stronger than his faith in the woman and he 'embraces' his armour instead of his mistress. The woman will learn to worship ('adore') war as he does when she realizes that his love would not be worth having if he did not love his country and his honour more than he loves her. 'Unkind' (line 1) has two meanings: a) cruel, and b) unnatural. Both are intended here. The speaker is seemingly cruel to leave his mistress, but in reality not so because he leaves her for a greater good – fighting for king and country. He is also seemingly unnatural – who would prefer fighting to being with the woman one loves? The speaker denies this line of reasoning by asserting that he would be unworthy unless he went to war. For this speaker, love of country is proved by fighting.

The speaker begins with a major paradox: he is not unkind even though he is leaving his mistress. There is also a minor paradox: the description of the loved woman as a nunnery, traditionally the place for women who have rejected the love of men. The second stanza provides further information about his reasons for leaving and makes the first statement even more paradoxical : he is leaving his mistress for another woman and will embrace sword, horse and shield with a greater love than ever he embraced her. In stanza 3 a final paradox is added: she should adore such strange behaviour ('inconsistency'). The major 2 lines are both a paradox and an explanation of the major paradox, which forces the reader to reconsider his own values. The speaker values love but values honour more. The working-out of the paradox is intellectually satisfying whether or not one agrees with the speaker.

## Irony

A contrast between appearance and reality. Irony is the presentation of two meanings at the same time. The speaker says one thing but means another, usually the opposite of the stated meaning. There are three types of special forms of irony (Chin, et al. 2002, p.R7): 1. **Verbal Irony** saying opposite of what is said. For example a man at a golf course meets his secretary, who had telephoned to say she was too sick to come to work. He says 'Glad to see you have recovered'. By irony, he is indicating that he knows his secretary lied to him about being sick 2. **Situational Irony** occurs when there is a difference between the intended result and the actual result of an action. For example, a bird build his nest in a tree which is to be cut down tomorrow. A ship, said to be unsinkable, sinks on its first voyage. When Coleridge's Ancient Mariner finds himself in the middle of the ocean with:

"Water, water, everywhere" but  
"Nor any drop to drink,"

we call this situation ironical. Here the persona helps us to understand how thirsty the sailors are. In each case the circumstances are not what would seem appropriate of what we would expect, we can find effective use of irony of situation in "**Richard Cory and Ozymandias**".

**Dramatic Irony** occurs when the spectators in the theater know more than a character they watch on the stage. For instance, the character on the stage may be very serious about something, but the audience may be smiling because they see the character's misunderstanding or mistake. Dramatic irony and situational irony are powerful devices for the poet, for, like symbol they enable him to suggest meanings without stating them-to communicate a great deal more than he says.

## Conclusion

Tone in poetry may be defined as the poet's or speaker's or persona's attitudes toward his subject, his audience, and himself. Tone is an important guide to meaning. It helps ideas come to life. Tone allows the poet's personality to emerge. The readers who fail to understand tone miss a large part of the poetry.

Identify paradox, hyperbole or understatement in the following. If the statement is paradoxical, explain it.

1. Was this the face that launched a thousand ships  
And burned the topless towers of Ilium?
2. O heavy lightness! Serious vanity!
3. "I am unable," yonder beggar cries,  
"To stand or move!" If he says true, he lies.
4. The grave's a fine and private place,  
But none, I think, do there embrace.
5. My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun.
6. If this be error, and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.
7. And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.
8. I must be cruel only to be kind.
9. Not all the waters in the sea can wash away that sin.