*THE IMPORTANCE OF TONE*

According to Carol Jago, the Director of the National Council of Teachers of English Commission on Literature and Co-Editor of *Literature and Composition*, “helping students tune their ears to a page of text is one of the most difficult tasks AP English Literature and Composition teachers face. At the simplest level, we can discuss tone as a word, such as knowing that the tone of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is dark and foreboding. But good readers and writers, such as those of you in this AP class, need to think about tone by paying attention to the particular choices a writer makes in terms of diction, detail, syntax, and imagery. Some of you may do this instinctively; that is, you may not think about it but know in your gut that the empathy you feel for the witch in *Wicked* is what draws you in, what connects you to her pain.

If you love literature and just can’t help yourself when you are immersed for hours in the “throws” of a good book, you will eventually feel the tone the author conveys; but in this class we must expand your knowledge to an analytic level. The study of imaginative literature is often borne of a great interest in reading and therefore should be, must be, massaged and formed. To understand the definition and importance of tone, read the following excerpt from Marilynne Robinson’s gorgeous, quiet novel, *Gilead* (2004):

I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where,

and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said,

Because I’m old, and you said, I don’t think you’re old. And you put your

hand in my hand and you said, You aren’t very old, as if that settled it. I

told you you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life

you’ve had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many

ways to live a good life.

It is impossible to feel nothing from the preceding passage, even if you have never experienced the impending death of a parent or grandparent. We feel the pain of the child’s efforts to cope with the truth as well as the parent’s calm, soothing message - “It’s ok. You’ll be ok.” So then, what is the tone of this passage and why is the tone so crucial in understanding fully what is happening here? Some of the most obvious details you might notice are that no quotation marks are used and no paragraphing to denote who is speaking. Readers do not need the extraneous markings to understand what is happening, though. **The syntax adds to tone**. The references to “Good Lord” and “good life” are also important because we get the sense of faith. **The diction adds to tone.**  The simple action of placing one hand in another is important in that it creates a gentleness and acceptance that is completely different from sobbing and pleading. **The imagery adds to tone.** The emphasis on age, rather than sickness, creates a sense of time in that all things must come to and end and we, as mortals, must accept the fact that we all die. **Details add to tone.**

Knowing the unique literary components of an excerpt, such as Robinson’s, does not help us understand tone unless we have a working vocabulary of words that describe tone. Adjectives that describe personality traits as well as attitudes are often used: apathetic, embarrassed, remorseful, and inviting are only a few of many that could be used to describe the tone in prose or poetry. (And by the way, determining tone in a nonfiction piece is equally important.) Think about some of the genres you have read and list other adjectives to describe tone. A few ideas might include romance, mystery, a sonnet, a Greek tragedy, or a memoir.

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The following excerpt is from Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1984), an autobiographical novelette comprised of short vignettes that seem like a collection of memories from her childhood.

**“Four Skinny Trees”**

**They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city. From our room we can hear them, but Nenny just sleeps and doesn’t appreciate these things.**

**Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep.**

**Let one forget his reason for being, they’d all drop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other. Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.**

**When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be.** (74-75)

Close reading will help you notice unusual features about Cisneros’ writing. First, she compares herself to the physicality of the trees; she’s skinny, angular, much like the tree that has a young, slender trunk with pointy branches that look like her elbows. The trees, like her, seem oddly out of place. Cisneros, like many of us, remembers not feeling comfortable in her skin when she was younger. The real heart of her story, however, is in paragraph two, where she describes the strength of these poor excuses called trees. Their roots are ferocious, and they grab the earth, and bite the sky. These are not words of a weakling but of a strong-willed child who will not give up or in to the troubles of life. She needs the trees as a reminder. If they can grow through concrete, she can too. Metaphorically, she knows that simply *being* is a feat in and of itself.

But what is the tone and why does it even matter? The overall tone seems somewhat reflective, yet proud. Cisneros thinks about the trees as friends somehow. She thinks of them as people like her. But she is also proud to be like them because she notices how they have stood the test of time and trial. She knows she can too. The tone she uses is important because she wants to convey to the reader that even though her life has been tough living on Mango Street, she is not defeated. The words she uses have a magical, lyrical feel to them, denoting a rhythm that can be described as natural and life bearing. The author seems to be in tune with the world around her, and she is willing to be part of that rhythm, to bend with the wind, so to speak, and not break. She is hopeful.

Remember, different interpretations will reveal a variety of tonal words based on how individuals understand the text. The more you see and “feel” the meaning, the more you will be able to comprehend not only the tone, but also understand how it adds to the piece you are reading.

The next excerpt is from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943) by Betty Smith, the story about Francie Nolan who grows up in New York City:

**After lunch, she went around to the library to turn in her books for the last time. The librarian stamped her card and shoved it back to her without, as was usual, looking up.**

**“Could you recommend a good book for a girl?” asked Francie.**

**“How old?”**

**“She is eleven.”**

**The librarian brought up a book from under the desk. Francie saw the title: *If I Were King*.**

**“I don’t really want to take it out,” said Francie, “and I’m not eleven years old.”**

**The librarian looked up at Francie for the first time.**

**“I’ve been coming here since I was a little girl,” said Francie, “and you never looked at me till now.”**

**“There are so many children,” said the librarian fretfully. “I can’t be looking at each one of them. Anything else?”**

**“I just want to say about that brown bowl…what it has meant to me…the flower always in it.”**

**The librarian looked at the brown bowl. There was a spray of pink wild aster in it. Francie had an idea that the librarian was seeing the brown bowl for the first time also.**

**“Oh that! The janitor puts the flowers in. Or somebody. Anything else?” she asked impatiently.**

**“I’m turning in my card.” Francie pushed the wrinkled dog-eared card covered with stamped dates across the desk. The librarian picked it up and was about to tear it in two, when Francie took it back from her.**

**“I guess I’ll keep it after all,” she said.**

**She went out and took a last long look at the shabby little library. She knew she would never see it again. Eyes changed after they looked at new things. If in the years to be she were to come back, her new eyes might make everything seem different from the way she saw it now. The way it was now was the way she wanted to remember it.**

**No, she’d never come back to the old neighborhood.** (486-487)

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With a partner, discuss the above excerpt (486-487), focusing on diction, syntax, details, and imagery. What words to describe tone would you use as a result of your close reading and discussion? Think about how to focus the tone by narrowing the descriptors. (The tone is reminiscent yet sad. The tone is angry but respectful.)

The final excerpt is from J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Holden Caulfield, age 16 and the main character of the novel, has been kicked out of an all-boys prep school in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. He has just spent the last 3 days in New York City trying to figure out what to do and finally, has sneaked into his own house to see his sister Phoebe, the only person who understands him.

**Then all of a sudden, she said, “Oh why did you *do* it?” She meant why did I get the ax again. It made me sort of sad, the way she said it.**

**“Oh, God, Phoebe, don’t ask me. I’m sick of everybody asking me that,” I said. “A million reasons why. It was one of the worst schools I ever went to. It was full of phonies. And mean guys. You never saw so many mean guys in your life. For instance, if you were having a bull session in somebody’s room, and somebody wanted to come in, nobody’d let them in if they were some dopey, pimply guy. Everybody was always *lock*ing their door when somebody wanted to come in. And they had this goddam secret fraternity that I was too yellow not to join. There was this one pimply, boring guy, Robert Ackley, that wanted to get in. He kept trying to join, and they wouldn’t let him. Just because he was boring and pimply. I don’t even feel like talking about it. It was a stinking school. Take my word.”**

**Old Phoebe didn’t say anything, but she was listening. I could tell by the back of her neck that was listening. She always listens when you tell her something. And the funny thing is she knows, half the time, what the hell you’re talking about. She really does.**

**I kept talking about old Pencey. I sort of felt like it.**

**“Even the couple of nice teachers on that faculty, they were phonies too,” I said. “There was this one old guy, Mr. Spencer. His wife was always giving you hot chocolate and all that stuff, and they were really pretty nice. But you should’ve seen him when the headmaster, old Thurmer, came in the history class and sat down in the back of the room. He was always coming in and sitting down in the back of the room for about a half an hour. He was supposed to be sitting back there and then he’d start interrupting what old Spencer was saying to crack a lot of corny jokes. Old Spencer’d practically kill himself chuckling and smiling and all, like as if Thurmer was a goddam prince or something.”**

**“Don’t swear so much.”**

**“It would’ve made you puke, I swear it would,” I said.** (167-168)

How would you describe the tone of the preceding excerpt? How does the wording, sentence structure, detail, and imagery work together to create the toneneeded to understand this piece? What did Salinger want you to feel about Holden Caulfield based on the tone of his description of the students and staff at Pencey Prep School?