

Tone

Tone results when an author blends poetic elements to suggest an attitude toward a particular subject. Tone is affected by no one single element but rather is a result or overall effect left on the reader by the work as a whole. As such, it is difficult to isolate only a single poetic element as creating tone. All may come into play including structure, diction, sound, etc. Think of tone as the voice of the poet regarding his main idea.

Consider this poem from William Carlos Williams “This Is Just to Say”

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

We begin reading this poem using the title as our first line, causing us to jump into it without delay, creating a sense of immediate urgency. The “note” left out to be obviously encountered seems to be part of an ongoing conflict between the speaker and the reader (directed audience of the note). There is definitely a playfulness to the tone, but also a sharpness and aggressiveness, however passive that aggression might be. The note is pointed and meant to sting.

There is often no single word that can be used to capture tone. Instead try combining or creating compound descriptors to explain the tone. Look to the list below as a help. Try combining tone words as seen below, and then ask yourself, what happens within this poem to create this impression.

cautious speculation	dramatic revelation	philosophical resignation
weary resignation	unqualified endorsement	apologetic approval
analytic objectivity	tolerant acceptance	grudging admiration
unalloyed suspicion	gentle mockery	lofty indifference
excited enthusiasm	indulgent tolerance	fascinated curiosity
cautious skepticism	disapproving dismissal	politically offensive
delightfully sentimental	morally admirable	carelessly irrelevant
deep despair	pretended indifference	casual indifference
calm assurance	apprehensive resolve	excited expectation
unqualified appreciation	fundamental dissatisfaction	apathetic acceptance
violent indignation	apologetic regret	self-righteous pomposity
awe-struck fascination	affectionate delight	momentary doubt
solemn apprehension	flippant sarcasm	skeptical suspicion
aloof disinterest	sentimental regret	disguised irony

