One Page Concept Review: Mood and Tone

What is it?

Mood is the dominant feeling inspired by a work. It is from the point of view of the reader, given the sum of what he or she has read. It is usually discussed in terms of setting. It always involves a larger chunk of text.

Tone is the writer or speaker's attitude toward the material and/or audience. It is from the point of view of the author, which means that it is created through literary devices (usually, but not limited to, diction and imagery). It is the emotional content that the writer is trying to communicate at a particular point in a text and, as such, is limited to specific points in the text.

Why should I care?

Mood can be important when discussing settings, but it is an imprecise tool for analysis. Its utility for anything other than that is fairly limited.

Tone, on the other hand, is often explicitly tested on the Q1 or Q2 essay, where one of the most common prompts is to ask how the author or speaker feels about something (63% of the time in the Q1 essay and 45% of the time in the Q2 essay). As such, it is obviously in your interests to nail this concept down.

How do I do it?

- **Limit discussion of mood to discussions of setting.** There really is very little utility of the concept other than this. An example of when this might be useful would be if you were contrasting two different settings and wanted to write about how the two places create very different impressions.
- **Tone is useless for Q3 essays.** Because you do not have the text in front of you, it is incoherent to discuss tone for these essays, as you are forced to paraphrase your evidence and cannot do the language level work necessary for a tone analysis. This means you are limited to discussing mood in these essays.
- **Tone is two-step process.** After you analyze the connotation of words, phrases, images, and figurative language at a particular point in the text, these connotations, in turn, create the mood. If you go back to my example from the diction/imagery vocabulary sheet, the words and images I analyzed in my example paragraph suggest a kind of inscrutability on the part of the fog and cat in the poem. This, then, creates the mysterious tone at that point in the text (which happened to be the entire poem, since it was so short). For a more sophisticated example (I deliberately made the paragraph on the vocabulary sheet very step-by-step), re-read my blog post about tone.
- **Be alert to the possibility of irony.** When reading a literary text for the first time, always ask yourself if you should be reading it straight or with some degree of irony. If you read an ironic text literally, not only are you missing the point, but you will reach the exact opposite conclusions that you were intended to reach. The red flags that the tone of a work may be ironic are 1) overstatement and exaggeration (hyperbole and hyperbolic diction); 2) understatement, understated diction choices, and understated reactions on the parts of the

narrator or characters; 3) situational ironies; and 4) ridiculous events or reactions that are treated as if they were ordinary events (absurdities that pass without comment).

- **Look for tone shifts.** Particularly in the Q1 poem and often in the Q2 selection, College Board likes to choose texts that have an obvious tone shift. If a tone shift exists, consider using this logical division in the text as a way to structure your essay.

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How do students screw this up?

Confusing Mood with Tone

- **If you're talking in generalities, you're describing mood.** Tone analysis is a very specific procedure that involves discussing how the connotation of words and images create a specific feeling at a particular point. If you're not doing this, don't pretend you're discussing tone.
- **Tone analysis always occurs at the language level of a text.** It is a sort of second step inference made from inferences you reach from analyzing the primary literary devices (again, usually diction and imagery).

Not Discussing Connotation in a Tone Analysis

- **If you're not discussing connotation, you're not discussing tone.** It should already be engrained in your head that any time you discuss diction or imagery, you are also discussing connotation too. Do not skip steps. Do not assume that the reader understands your point.
- **The words and images do not generate tone.** Rather, the connotation of the words and images do this. Even though it may be obvious in your mind why a particular word, phrase, or image lends a certain texture to the text, unless you take the time to discuss how those feelings are produced, you're being imprecise and unconvincing.

Not Knowing Tone Words

- **A poor vocabulary will bite you in the butt on the multiple-choice.** Tone questions are a favorite of College Board because they test both your ability to understand the author's point of view as well as your general literacy (through potentially unfamiliar vocabulary). Study the tone words sheet I gave you at the beginning of the year. Download it again from my web-site if you've lost it.
- **Almost the right tone word isn't good enough.** When your vocabulary is poor, you end up describing things in generalities, since you lack the words to discuss things precisely. Sadly, nothing ticks off points from your essay scores quite like imprecision.
- **That said, do not anguish over finding just the right tone word. It's okay to describe a tone, rather than to boil it down to a single word.** Sometimes this is even better, as it shows an awareness of the complexity of ideas. This is particularly relevant advice if the text is deliberately introducing some degree of ambiguity.

Not Connecting a Tone or Mood to an Argument

- **As always, analyzing a literary device is only useful when it develops your argument.** If your argument is that the text is establishing a particular tone or mood, then you've obviously accomplished your goal through that analysis. Otherwise, just pointing out the tone or mood is worthless-- unless it is used as evidence that your overall point is correct.