

More Help with Tone (Jung assignment)

Rather than model the prompt for the Rust Tree poems literally, I am going to use a single poem and compare and contrast elements imbedded within it. This has the advantage of not making you read a cycle of multiple poems, while retaining the advantage of showing you how to write about tone. The text I will be using is Arthur Rimbaud's 1870 poem, "A Sleeper in the Valley" (translated from the French by Wyatt Mason):

A green hole where a river sings;
Silver tatters tangling in the grass;
Sun shining down from a proud mountain:
A little valley bubbling with light.

A young soldier sleeps, lips apart, head bare,
Neck bathing in cool blue watercress,
Reclined in the grass beneath the clouds,
Pale in his green bed showered with light.

He sleeps with his feet in the gladiolas.
Smiling like a sick child, he naps:
Nature, cradle him in warmth: he's cold.

Sweet scents don't tickle his nose;
He sleeps in the sun, a hand on his motionless chest,
Two red holes on his right side.

Le dormeur du val

C'est un trou de verdure où chante une rivière,
Accrochant follement aux herbes des haillons
D'argent; où le soleil, de la montagne fière,
Luit: c'est un petit val qui mousse de rayons.

Un soldat jeune, bouche ouverte, tête nue,
Et la nuque baignant dans le frais cresson bleu,
Dort; il est étendu dans l'herbe, sous la nue,
Pâle dans son lit vert où la lumière pleut.

Les pieds dans les glaïeuls, il dort. Souriant comme
Sourirait un enfant malade, il fait un somme:
Nature, berce-le chaudement: il a froid.

Les parfums ne font pas frissonner sa narine;
Il dort dans le soleil, la main sur sa poitrine,

Tranquille. Il a deux trous rouges au côté droit.

Because the English translation loses the rhyme of the original, I would make the effort to listen to the French original, even if you do not speak the language. This is easily accomplished as Rimbaud's poetry remains immensely popular, and there are multiple readings available. I would suggest Gilles-Claude Thériault's recitation on the video on my web-site, which pairs the poem with Gabriel Fauré's lovely *Élégie* in its original format for cello and piano.

The assignment lets you choose whether you want to compare or contrast. I will model each in turn.

Let's start with the more obvious contrast, as the effect of the poem depends on Rimbaud setting the reader up to intentionally misread-- the first three stanzas developing an idyllic tone that is completely at odds with what Rimbaud is describing, viz. a dead soldier who has been shot to death. I said more credit would be given for an actual thesis (as opposed to a collection of random insights), and here it's easy, as Rimbaud uses the development of the poem to set up an expectation that he has no intention of fulfilling. In this, I've chosen a thesis that addresses something that directly creates meaning; in the Jung assignment, a pattern thesis may be more appropriate (i.e., looking at how repetitions in the text indirectly establish meaning).

Rimbaud intentionally uses bucolic language and imagery to describe the young soldier and his environs in "A Sleeper in the Valley", setting up an ironic reversal of expectation in the final stanza when the poet reveals the truth about his protagonist.

This is done most obviously through the description of the landscape in which the soldier finds himself. There is, for example, the personification of nature as "[singing]" (1) and "[cradling] him in warmth" (11), in both instances implying a nurturance that extends even when the landscape lacks explicit motive force. The sun is shining (3); the mountain is "proud" (3); the "valley [bubbles] with light" (4): in each of these descriptions there is an implied benevolence in the world that surrounds and engulfs the sleeping soldier. When it has personality, it is kindly, and when it is not anthropomorphized, it nonetheless embodies all that is picturesque and delightful. Thus, the valley cares for the soldier as a worried mother would care, attested by the bathing of the soldier's neck in "cool blue watercress" (6) and the aforementioned cradling in the warmth of the sun (11), for the soldier is compared to a "sick child" in need of ministrations-- his sleep a "nap" (10), connoting both infancy and innocence. The landscape, in other words, is tender and giving, establishing the contented, idyllic tone, of the first three stanzas.

All of this changes in the final stanza, however, when Rimbaud reveals why the soldier is no longer in need of such lavish care. His "motionless chest" (13) lacks movement not from repose, but from respiration's surcease. Similarly, though nature remains kindly, its "sweet scents don't tickle his nose" (12) because-- sweet or foul-- no scents will ever tickle the soldier's nose again. In

both cases, the understated way Rimbaud gradually reveals that the soldier has died helps to create the ironic tone of the last few lines, for rather than shift to words or images that connote sorrow, the speaker continues in the same vein as the opening stanzas; only now the cheerful diction and imagery (the sun still shines; the sleeper remains at rest; and the landscape is just as friendly) is wildly at odds with how the reader is conditioned to imagine a bloody corpse abandoned on the ground (perhaps even the field of battle); even the gory bullet wounds are aestheticized into the more benignant “two red holes on his right side” (14). Given its context, the tone, then, is not only a subversion of expectation in the last stanza, but it retroactively establishes a discrepancy between content and description in the first stanzas as well, since the reader understands them differently when supplied with the more accurate information.

This shift, from earnest pastoral to retroactive irony, is a rhetorical juggling act in which Rimbaud convinces the reader that the poem is about one thing (a beatific sleeper in an idealized landscape), when it is really about another thing altogether (the bleeding remains of a soldier), accomplished by establishing a tone that becomes increasingly problematic. By refusing to address his actual subject in the expected manner, then, Rimbaud creates a tension that forces the reader to confront her own prejudices-- seeing, as the poet does, how even a rotting corpse can be an object of aesthetic appreciation.

Notice I'm not just writing a "What's the tone?" essay, which is not only incredibly boring to read, but only moderately helpful in understanding the poem. Instead I have devised an argument (of my own choosing) in which identifying the tone plays a part. Nobody is going to give you a cookie for identifying the tone, finding a metaphor, discussing the connotation of an image, etc.; if it's not part of an integrated argument, you're just wasting everyone's time.

Having written the contrast version, I will now model the continuities version using the same poem. Were I writing about this poem in an actual college course, I would combine the (slightly re-worked) body paragraphs of both versions, add a transition paragraph between the two portions, and re-tool the introduction and conclusion (addressing the tension between continuity and contrast in the poem) to create an actual college-length paper. What you see as an essay (i.e., what you can produce in a forty minute draft) is probably not going to be developed enough for most university coursework. If you're really serious about college, you need to start asking yourself, "What would the more developed version of this look like, and how could I structure it?"

Though Rimbaud's "A Sleeper in the Valley" sets up a tonal contrast between the pastoral setting and the object of description, there are, in fact, more continuities than discontinuities than a cursory reading would suggest. More specifically, the pattern of imagery in the poem foreshadows the eventual twist in the final stanza.

One strategy in this is the repeated use of ambiguous diction in setting descriptions to complicate the tone. For instance, while the image in the opening line ("A green hole where a river sings") is ostensibly idyllic, the figurative use of

“hole” (*trou*) for valley suggests something more troubling, a lack or deficit. This continues with the charmingly rustic “silver tatters” (2) of the singing river undermined by the connotation of “tatters” as ragged or decayed. The beautiful “gladiolas” (9) in which the sleeper’s feet reside, too, are less obviously positive when one recalls how often they are used in floral arrangements for funerals. In all of these, the seemingly idealized location of the speaker’s rest is described in terms that add a note of worry or alarm suggests its ultimate trajectory, for the tone takes on cynical undertones that the reader initially guesses are meant to slightly ironize the pastoral tradition of picturesque landscapes-- to suggest, perhaps, that the natural world is not quite as perfect as the poetic tradition often proposes.

Of course, Rimbaud is up to something altogether more subversive, for the titular speaker does not so much act in this environment as constitute a part of it. There is, obviously, the “sleep” of the soldier, which even in a first reading suggests a passivity that contrasts with the more active Nature-- explicitly personified by Rimbaud when it cradles the soldier as a child (11) and otherwise depicted as singing (1), tangling (2), shining (3), bubbling (4), and showering with light (8). The purported protagonist of the poem’s drama, in other words, becomes the object of action rather than its initiator, since he merely sleeps (5, 9, 13), naps (10), and lies motionless (13). The tension (even before the revelation in the final stanza) lies in the way that the expected roles are reversed, for the soldier’s surroundings possess a motive force that the soldier altogether lacks, even when the reader assumes that he is alive on first reading. On one level, this is obviously the point, as the soldier might as well be a stone situated in the valley, surrounded by the vitality of more visible manifestations of life’s proceedings, but in an initial reading the reader is likely to view soldier and landscape as acting in concert (given that she has no reason to suspect the use of “sleeper” in the title is euphemistic), intuiting both the possibility of action from the soldier and understanding his sleep as volitional. Thus, Rimbaud seemingly imbues the natural environment with the characteristics of a deuteragonist, when, in fact, the soldier now constitutes a part of the landscape, rather than residing within it; to put it another way: they are one character, not two.

That this is the case is foreshadowed not only by the way in which the landscape is described, but in the way the poet depicts the soldier. His “lips apart” (5) in sleep could denote snoring, but it also implies a lack of control in that he is no longer consciously regulating his breath. The following line describes the soldier’s neck as “bathing in cool blue watercress”-- the lovely “cool blue” of the watercress distracting from the obvious: watercress grows wild only in standing water, so the soldier’s head lies in the river. Again, this suggests a deficit in self-regulation, since the sleep would have to be deep indeed for it to occur while partially submerged. The soldier is “pale” (8); he is “cold” (11); his chest is “motionless” (13). In isolation, this imagery implies little, but as a pattern, it connotes sickness or death-- an explicit connection made when Rimbaud

compares the soldier to a “sick child” (10). The tone, then, if not exactly sinister in these contexts, is certainly ambiguous and ambivalent.

Consequently, the attentive reader should be alerted to at least the *possibility* that not all is as it originally seems in the poem, revealed through the complexity of tone that the patterns of image and diction create. In the second reading, of course, Rimbaud’s craft is more apparent, for rather than writing a drama, he is merely describing a scene-- situating the bleeding corpse as just another object of aesthetic appreciation within the larger landscape.