

Key Concepts

The feelings or attitude of a narrator, speaker, or character concerning another character or a situation is referred to as tone.

The AP exam tests your ability to "hear" the tone expressed in the passage's or poem's words. When reading literature, we can't actually hear the tone of a narrator, speaker, or character. To identify the tone, pay attention to the kinds of words used to describe characters or situations. Even punctuation like exclamation points and dashes can indicate the speaker or narrator's attitude.

- In Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator compares an old man's eye to "the eye of a vulture, the eye of one of those terrible birds that watch and wait while an animal dies, and then fall upon the dead body and pull it to pieces to eat it." His words convey his fear, so the tone can be described as frightened or uneasy.
- The last stanza of Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art" expresses her **ironic** tone toward loss:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I **shan't** have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

Punctuating the first line's beginning with a dash could indicate the speaker's ironic hesitancy to consider the loss of someone she loved, even though she tries to convince herself that it's not hard to master the art of losing. Placing "*Write it!*" in parentheses, with its use of italics and exclamation point, also creates an ironic tone, as the speaker, repeating the word "like," has to force herself to admit loss can look like "disaster," something that she ironically suggests is not a very hard thing to master.

A character's, narrator's, or speaker's background shapes the tone he expresses about the events and characters in the story or poem.

Look for indications of social position, family background, childhood, and past experiences that may indicate the source of the attitude a character, narrator, or speaker expresses in the text.

- In *Wuthering Heights*, Mr. Earnshaw, a prosperous gentleman, brings home an orphan boy he found on the streets of Liverpool. His wife refers to the boy as "it" and "that gypsy brat." Her disdainful attitude is the result of prejudices developed during her privileged upbringing.
- At the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick reveals the source of his tolerant, privileged attitude when he reveals an important detail about his background:

Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is **parcelled out** unequally at birth.

Nick makes the reader aware of his father's influence on his tolerant attitude toward people—although his tone will change as he witnesses the people and events of the summer of 1922.

The narrator's or speaker's tone toward events or characters influences how readers interpret the events or characters.

The descriptions a narrator or speaker uses and the details he or she provides shape the reader's perception of the story or poem.

- In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick is a perceptive narrator who reacts thoughtfully and sensitively to the characters and events in the novel. He describes how people like Tom and Daisy "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made." Just as his understanding attitude toward Gatsby's romantic quest makes the reader sympathize with Gatsby's tragic outcome, Nick's tone of disapproval influences the reader's view of Tom and Daisy and their actions.
- In *The Sound and the Fury*, Jason Compson's use of "hell" and "damn" throughout the section of the novel he narrates indicates his hateful meanness toward everything in his world, influencing the reader to disdain his bitter attitude.

The sentence structure and arrangement of phrases and clauses can convey a narrator's or speaker's tone.

Questions that ask about syntax require you to look at the effect of these structures on the narrator's or speaker's tone.

- In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T. S. Eliot, the speaker sighs, "I grow old...I grow old...." The short, repetitive sentences and the use of ellipses (D6879) convey the speaker's tone of regret and sorrow.
- Rather than using complete sentences, John Keats' speaker in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" begins the poem with phrases of **direct address**, approaching the urn with a formal, respectful attitude:

Thou still **unravish'd** bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

- The rest of the poem's first stanza uses questions to express a tone of wonder:

What **leaf-fring'd legend haunts** about thy shape

Of **deities** or mortals, or of both,

In **Tempe or the dales of Arcady**?

What men or gods are these? What maidens **loth**?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What **pipes and timbrels**? What wild ecstasy?

What to Look for

As you read prose excerpts and poems, look for the following details and determine what they reveal about the narrator's or speaker's tone.

- Words, phrases, or sentences that reveal what the narrator or speaker feels about something or someone
- Information about the narrator's background that may account for the narrator's attitude
- Very short or long sentences, fragments, run-on sentences, and punctuation that enhance the narrator's tone
- Details provided by the narrator that affect how you feel about an event or character

Practice Activity

Directions: As you read the excerpt below from *Middlemarch* by George Eliot, highlight the following details and annotate what they reveal about the speaker's attitude or tone.

- Word choice and details that reveal the narrator's attitude toward Dorothea and other characters
- Unusual syntax, such as fragments and run-on sentences, used to indicate the narrator's tone
- Punctuation, such as question marks, ellipses, and exclamation points that convey a tone

Note: You will need to read between the lines to infer what the details suggest about the narrator's tone.

From *Middlemarch*

And how should Dorothea not marry?—a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to refuse all offers. A young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick laborer and prayed **fervidly** as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles—who had strange whims of **fasting** like a **Papist**, and of sitting up at night to read old **theological** books! Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with **political economy** and the keeping of saddle-horses: a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship. Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbors did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them.

The rural opinion about the new young ladies, even among the cottagers, was generally in favor of Celia, as being so amiable and innocent-looking, while Miss Brooke's large eyes seemed, like her religion, too unusual and striking. Poor Dorothea! next to her, the innocent-looking Celia was knowing and worldly-wise; so much subtler is a human mind than the outside tissues which make a sort of **blazonry** or clock-face for it.

Yet those who approached Dorothea, though prejudiced against her by this alarming **hearsay**, found that she had a charm unaccountably **reconcilable** with it. Most men thought her bewitching when she was on horseback. She loved the fresh air and the various aspects of the country, and when her eyes and cheeks glowed with mingled pleasure she looked very little like a **devotee**. Riding was an indulgence which she allowed herself in spite of conscientious **qualms**; she felt that she enjoyed it in a sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it.

She was open, **ardent**, and not in the least self-admiring; indeed, it was pretty to see how her imagination adorned her sister Celia with attractions altogether superior to her own, and if any gentleman appeared to come to the Grange from some other motive than that of seeing Mr. Brooke, she concluded that he must be in love with Celia: Sir James Chettam, for example, whom she constantly considered from Celia's point of view, inwardly debating whether it would be good for Celia to accept him. That he should be regarded as a **suitor** to herself would have seemed to her a ridiculous irrelevance. Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage. She felt sure that she would have accepted the **judicious** Hooker, if she had been born in time to save him from that wretched mistake he made in matrimony; or John Milton when his blindness had come on; or any of the other great men whose odd habits it would have been glorious **piety** to endure; but an amiable handsome **baronet**, who said "Exactly" to her remarks even when she expressed uncertainty,—how could he affect her as a lover? The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it.

(1871)

Sample Annotations

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-Short questions = narrator is surprised Dorothea isn't married; however, the narrator's tone is sarcastic because the next sentence claims she loved extremes and "regulating life" in such a way that men might not want to marry her, so it's really not surprising she's not married.

-Details = men are more concerned with their horses than helping others, so the tone is sarcastic to convey disapproval.

-Details = narrator's tone is disapproving of what society considers sanity: each person doing what all others do.

-Exclamation point and comments = narrator conveys his tone of pity for Dorothea because people judge her based on outward appearance.

-Narrator = humorous tone; while Dorothea feels her enjoyment when riding her horse is slightly improper, she always looks forward to repenting it.

-Word choice = narrator conveys a tone of admiration and approval of Dorothea.

-Narrator's comments = Dorothea prefers honorable men, which indicates the narrator's attitude of respect for her.

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-Word choice and details = humorous tone; the narrator finds Dorothea's view of marriage comical.