

Speaker and Tone in Poetry

One of the first clues poetry detectives need to evaluate is who their source is. Who is "telling" the poem? One of the most important clues in a poem is who is speaking. Just like in fiction, point of view can alter how we think about a poem. But a poem's point of view is called *persona or speaker or voice*. Perhaps the most important rule to remember in poetry is that the speaker or the voice in the poem isn't always the poet. Sometimes it might be, but it might also *not* be. The poem speaks through the speaker--and the poet creates the speaker/persona/voice he or she thinks will get the message across. Look back at the questions good poetry detectives ask of a poem. One of them is "Who is speaking?"

Sometimes speaker is obvious, but sometimes it is not. For instance, in "Stopping by Woods" is the speaker male or female? Do we know? Does it matter? How old do you think the speaker is? Does that make a difference? This next poem is going to be our guinea pig poem. When we're discussing a clue or a skill poetry detectives need, we'll practice on this poem by Emily Dickinson:

A Narrow Fellow in the Grass

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides--
You may have met Him--did you not
His notice sudden is--
The Grass divides as with a Comb--
A spotted shaft is seen--
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on--
He likes a Boggy Acre
A floor too cool for Corn--
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot--
I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone--
Several of Nature's people
I know, and they know me--
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality--
But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone--

Okay, here's the poem. Who do you think the speaker is? A boy? A girl? An older man? An older woman? How do you know? What words provide these clues?

The speaker in Emily Dickinson's poem "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" is an older man. Did you get the right answer? What words told you the answer? Remember that poetry is a mystery and picking out things like speaker requires good reading. You should have gotten at least four word clues and decided who the speaker was. This poem is kind of fun because it is a mystery--it's a riddle. Do you know what the narrow fellow is?

The second skill or clue that good poetry detectives catch is tone. How do real detectives know when someone is lying? (Did you ever notice your parents usually knew when you were lying?) It has to do with tone. That's the second part of this objective, and it's a little harder to describe than speaker. Tone isn't the personality of the speaker, but the momentary mood of the poet as expressed in a poem. Dr. Steve Walker explains it this way:

- When I was a little kid and Mom wanted me in for dinner, she'd start out calling, "Stevie." Gradually she'd graduate to "Steve," then, as her voice got louder, "Steven." But it wasn't until she said, "Steven C. Walker, you get in here" that I'd come. I could tell she meant it by the tone of her voice--I heard Mom's voice tightening and intensifying and increasing in volume. But had she faxed the messages I still would have gotten the message from the changing forms of my name. That's tone.

Words and choices indicate tone in a poem, and those words and choices can be sometimes happy, sometimes sad, melancholy, joyful, regretful, or peaceful.

For instance, look again at "Stopping by Woods." What would you say the tone of this poem is? Read the poem out loud again. How does the speaker feel about the woods? His horse? Snow in the woods creates what kind of image? What kinds of soothing words does the poet use? What kinds of negative words does the poet use? Even though it is "the darkest evening of the year," if you tie it together with the fact that it is snowing, you get the impression of the winter solstice, the longest night and shortest day of the year. One of the reasons I think of this is because my parents go into mourning on June 22 every year when days start to get shorter--and they always mark the winter solstice by noticing how much longer the days get starting on the 24th of December.

Contrast the tone of "Stopping by Woods" with another poem by Robert Frost. Read "Desert Places." Ask yourself some of the same questions we asked of ourselves with "Stopping by Woods." Where does this poem take place? When does this poem take place?

Were you surprised to find out that both poems have to do with snow and a deserted spot? What's the tone of "Desert Places"? Do you feel as warm as you did with "Stopping by Woods"? What words make the difference? What words are repeated often? How does the repetition of those words create a different tone? What other words make a really big difference in the poem?

I don't know about you, but I feel much colder when I read "Desert Places." The repetition of the variants of "alone" and "lonely" make me feel a kind of desperation--and loneliness. The poem also uses words like "smothered" and "stubble showing last" to create a negative feeling while "Woods" uses "filling up with snow" and "sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake" to create a more peaceful feeling.

Identifying tone and speaker are skills of good poetry detectives. While poetry detectives catch clues about poetry, they also talk about what the poetry does for them. What do these poems reveal about kinds of loneliness and what it means to be alone versus lonely?

Homecoming

I went back in the alley
And I opened up my doors
All her clothes was gone
She wasn't home no more
I pulled back the covers
I made down the bed
A *Whole* lot of room
Was the only thing I had
--Langston Hughes

All good poetry detectives practice with the skills they have at their command. Today's objectives are also the first skills poetry detectives need. We've talked about knowing what poetry isn't, how to read poetry, and detecting tone and voice. So, let's practice. Here's a fun poem to practice on first. Remember to read it out loud at least once, and maybe three different times.

Portrait

This is a picture of you
On the finite movement
Of your eyes as they travel
At this moment across
The page, your fingers
Maintaining the stability
Of the sheet. Focus on the particular
Fall of your hair, the scent
Of your hands, the placement of your
Feet now as they acknowledge
Their name.
Simultaneously with these words, be aware
Of your tongue against
Your teeth, the aura

Of heat at your neckline
And wrists, the sense
Of your breath inside its own hollows.
Imagine yourself
Ten feet away and look back
At your body positioned
Here with this book. Picture
The perspective, the attitude
Of your shoulders and hips,
The bend of your head as you
Read of yourself.
Watch how you turn back as you
Remember the sounds surrounding you now,
As you recall the odors
Of wood fibers in this place
Or the lack of them.
And take note of this part
Of your portrait--the actual
Mechanism by which you are perceiving
The picture, the fixed
Expression on your face as you
Arrange these words at this moment
Into their proper circles, as you
Straighten out the aspects
Of the page, the linguistics of the sight
And color of light on the paper.
This is the printed
Form of you watching
Yourself now as you consider
Your person. This portrait is
Finished when you raise
Your eyes.

--Pattiann Rogers

Neat, huh? Who's the speaker here? Do we really know--or is it, in some way, the poem itself? The poem itself seems to be speaking. Who is the poem speaking to? Did you notice that you did what the poem said you would do? I read this poem for the first time about seven years ago. Now when I read the poem again, I can still feel some of those same things I felt seven years ago.

What kind of tone does this poem have? Would you say excited? Or is it more calm? Or maybe even matter of fact? How can you tell?

See if you can use your detecting skills to detect tone and speaker in the other poems this lesson asks you to pay particular attention to. Asking yourself some of the same kinds of questions I have asked during the lesson will help you.