



Tone as Reflected in the Looking Glass of Sound and Context

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The Rationale

I teach poetry for this "giant" of an Eighth Grade student who became so angry one day, he punched the classroom door, broke the glass, and then sat down and wrote the most heart-wrenching love poem inside his drawing of a tear. I teach poetry for the girl who "hates me and doesn't care what I think" but whose power of word choice as she relates what life's like on the streets, is so gripping, it's painful and almost beyond belief. I teach poetry for the student who refuses to write a single line or wouldn't consider participating in a classroom oral presentation, but who stood during our poetry slam and got a roaring outburst of approval. I teach poetry for the chance to hear students say, "That's cool. I like the way it sounds" or "I know how that feels."

I also teach poetry because *I have to*. *I have to* introduce poetic device and figurative language, poetic form, rhythm, rhyme, and meter and therein lies my dilemma. How do I safeguard my students' inherent willingness to express their ideas about love and crisis in moments of intensity, passion, and challenge, against the exposure to the dry and sometimes rigid and technical mechanics of poetry? How do I safeguard against turning poetry into a kind of a scavenger hunt or parlor game of "find the metaphor, count the beats, or follow the form," and risk having them "zone out."

As a teacher, I begin our formal discussion of poetry, designated by the district for introduction during the third marking period, and I often hear moans and groans. Why, I ask myself? In honesty, my students might say they are afraid of poetry because they don't know how to read it or because they have this sense that poetry holds some cryptic message, a kind of tarot card, psychic reading, fortune cookie mystery that eludes them and frustration sets in immediately. It's not always written in complete thoughts so they have to figure out what the author intended to say. Not always an easy task for them. They don't want to play detective. They just want to talk about themselves. They want to write poetry to express their feelings about what's happening in their lives. They like poetry when it's easy. They don't want rules or form or analysis. They want to be in charge of something in their lives.

One thing my students have in abundance is emotional experiences, often ones that rob the innocence of their youth. Their lives are filled with sarcasm and irony. Why would they want to spend time analyzing poetry when their very survival is sometimes in question? Yet, *I have to* teach poetry. If I am to give them all that they need to understand poetry, then, all of the standard, codified elements must be introduced and

incorporated but their experiences must be honored. Again, my basic dilemma. It will be imperative that I choose poems wisely; ones in which emotional sound sense is brought to light through discussion and discovery; ones in which prosody is strong, evident, and understandable; and ones that might even break the rules so my kids can identify with them.

The students I instruct live in a world without much structure, without rules, and without reflection. They live in the here and now. They often feel cornered by such constraints and the off button is immediately pressed. They are not very patient. Inner city life is scary and uncertain. The thing they *do* have in abundance in their lives is sound, from the loud and harsh, to the dead of silence, and not much of the gentle and soothing. Talking, they lack not this ability! Nor do they lack the rhythm and beat of music. Sound plays an integral part in their lives. It exists in the fabric of their beings.

This is also true in poetry. Sound is the thread that makes up the cloth of poetry. The role that the sounds of words play in the finished product is undeniable. Yet my students are often unaware of this sound sense because these lyrical properties are not completely visible, understandable, or audible to them. Poets use sound devices to create visual images and emotional responses and it is the sound these devices express which reinforce or clarify those images and responses. My students use this sound sense naturally but do not pay much attention to these features and it is here that the actual awareness of the sound mechanics and emotional effects of those sounds of poetry and the lives of my students intersect. Sound foregrounds poetry and is the doorway to our sense of understanding. These elements are already highlighted in our curriculum as we study narration. It is this awareness of sound and image as tone that must be highlighted as we study poetry to encourage its appreciation. I will use these ingredients as my main consideration for an objective within this unit.

Introduction

There are two basic pedagogical strands that rise to the surface and which should underpin our study of poetry: basic reading comprehension skills where connotation and denotation could sometimes swallow my students, and prosody skills where the rhythm, stress, meter, and the acoustic effects of intonation should be heard, recognized, explored, and bring joy, not irritation. These are huge undertakings especially considering the students in my classes. Because my students are typical adolescents, they are unwilling to spend time with the "heady" and intellectual exercise of answering the theoretical question, "What is poetry?" I need to proffer a different framework and different kind of question. It would be difficult for them to suppose and imagine what something is, without anything concrete in their hands. They need a scaffolding question which helps bridge this gap. "What does poetry sound like and how are these sounds expressed?" is much more concrete and bridges this gap while lending itself to personal discovery. They need to come to this knowledge independently. They need to recognize it. They need to own it.

My unit will be based on discovery rather than direct instruction where they are told the definitions of poetic features, and then asked to "find" these features within a poem itself. These sound elements need to become second nature to my classes. At the outset, I plan to simply ask small groups of students what poetry does and what its sounds are. My supposition and expectation is that their answers will fall into the tone and tension categories. Students will most likely say something like, "It's a sad poem about the break-up of a couple." This will reflect the emotion (sadness) or tone of the poem as well as the conflict (break-up) or tension involved.

Giving them a sample poem to discuss will increase their list of how poetry sounds especially if the poem has obvious acoustic features or even rhyme. They might actually be able to recite some nursery rhymes learned in the lower grades or literary poetic features from memory as a way of introduction. Knowing that they might already recognize some elements of tone will be crucial to their understanding.

Literary feature or, in this case, poetic device is a staple in our basic reading curriculum yet there is little asked of students involving their role or use other than casually noting them or recognizing one of them on a district test. There is little in the way of in depth analysis or understanding. Throughout the school year, as a safeguard against this, I will need to emphasize and remind students of these aspects by including the introduction of them in mini lessons and the practice with them in writing assignments. These elements add richness, meaning, and sound to the language of poetry as well as literature. The disconnection between knowledge and application, between knowing the definition of these features and recognizing and understanding how they are used within literary text must be eliminated. They need to experience these elements for themselves. They need to see, hear, and speak them often. They also need to apply and practice them as they write.

So What Makes Poetry, Poetry?

Certainly, some might say that poetry has an economical, textual structure, with a capitalized first word in each line, and an aligned left margin. There are lines of poetry and sometimes stanzas much like the lyrics in a song. Most people recognize these standard aspects of the definition. Of course, e. e. cummings would push back on the capitalization, Gary Synder, on the alignment. Still, this is the structure of traditional poetry. But unlike traditional verse, modern poetry does not always follow standard rules of grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. There is still a semantic sense that is infused and considered, but form and structure vary greatly. Nonetheless, these definitions are the rigid, mechanical understandings of poetry and do not really explain what poetry is or what it does. All of these features are *part* of poetry but what brings poetry to life is its sound sense or voice. Frost says, "The vital thing...in prose or verse, is the ACTION of the voice --- sound-posturing, gesture. Get the stuff of life into the technique of your writing." ¹

Initially, poetry was largely an oral tradition in which word meaning interplayed with sound to cause tension and an emotional interest. Poetry was born of a basic human yearning to communicate not just the meaning of words, but also the feel or sense of them. This precise, semantic blending of words with a lyrical voice created a cadence, a beat, a musical instrument of words for all to hear. These feelings and ideas were then put to paper. There was a commitment of intent. But poets didn't just write to write. They needed to write. It was often an intense, emotional need that drove their selection of words. They were chosen deliberately and with passion. And throughout the ages, poets have tried their hand at defining exactly what the process meant once completed.

"Wordsworth defined poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings;' Emily Dickinson said, 'If I read a book and it makes my body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know that is poetry;' and Dylan Thomas defined poetry this way: 'Poetry is what makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle, what makes me want to do this or that or nothing.'" ² The fact is, poetry is elusive. Winston Churchill once wrote of Russia, "It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." ³ This, too, defines poetry. It is like a riddle, mysterious and full of questions; it is like a snowflake; no two are the same; and like a breeze,

impossible to catch.

Tone: The Sounds That Are Poetry

If I invited my students to answer the question, "what are the sounds in a given piece of poetry?" most would immediately begin the search for the actual, acoustic sounds or noises that nouns make in the lines of poetry. The bird sang, wind whistled, and the horn blew would be the typical responses and they would be correct. These are the sounds that birds, wind, and horns make. They are literal and concrete. But sound in poetry digs far deeper. What are the poem's own sounds? What sounds do its words make? Sound in a poem is that which the mind hears as we read the words in context. We not only need to recognize and identify the tangible, physical sounds embedded in the words in each line, but also the sounds of initial syllables, sounds of repetition, sounds of rhyme, sound devices, and sounds of accent. These make up the sense of the poem. Throw into this mix the subtleties of duration, syntax, punctuation, arrangement of internal pauses as well as the human voice that reads the words and poetry can be heard or, should I say, heard on a more intense level.

But poetry encapsulates not only sound but context as well. According to Robert Frost, the sound of our words is always shaped by context in *dramatic situations*. "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic...Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic...All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice some how entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination." ⁴ Together, these create an ambience, a feeling, or mood. This mood is called *tone*. Tone hinges on the questions of sound and meaning and how they blend together.

Tone is the author's attitude or expression of feeling toward the subject of his poem. According to Yale Professor Dr. Langdon Hammer what is important is not only what the author is saying about something, but how he feels about saying it, and saying it to us (tone creates a relationship to the reader). It could be any of a myriad of feelings: sarcastic, nostalgic, playful, dark, bitter, funny, fearful, loving, resentful, or respectful to name a few. But all these descriptions hold more than just attitude or feeling. They beg understanding of the context. Tone is the hub of a poem. Everything else permeates from it according to Frost. And all else is blanketed by it. Its intent is to influence the reader to see, hear, feel, taste, touch, smell or think in a certain way. It is the voice providing the emotional coloring, the meaning, and the cadence of the poem.

But once written, voice intonation is lacking in a poem. It is removed from the equation and, thus, part of the meaning is lost. It is activated by listening, which is interpretation, and takes the form of internally voicing the poem, or reading it aloud. This repetition of reading is required to actually "hear" the intention of the poet. The reader must learn to hear the anger, doubt, reverence, disgust, or saddest that tone provides. He must learn to place the emphasis on certain words. He must learn to make the facial expressions and provide the pause where the poet wants them. He must find the drama then play it out in his own mind or speak it as the poet intended. He does this, in part, by recognizing the visual images created by the words of the poet. And he does this by recognizing the sound images that are written as well. Tone is achieved through language carefully selected. Taken in isolation, words hold meaning, but they gain more meaning within context. The patterning of words, especially those that embrace sound, blossoms when placed together in a line of poetry. It is not merely sound but rather how it is used in the poem that makes an impact. Consider the line, "the whistling wind wound wildly through the trees." This pattern and placement of words, and as an extension, its sound, becomes infinitely more powerful when strung together in this way. Here, sound reinforces the context, the milieu. Individually, the words express sound but together they also have strength, authority, and a visual presence. They are richer and we understand more. Of course, overuse or misuse of sound devices will cause

an artificiality that distracts from the pleasure and meaning of the poem. The question then becomes, "How do we capture the complete appreciation of sound and content together?"

When we first read a poem, should we immediately focus on the visual image or the verbal sound? Do we need to separate or break them down, and, if so, do we lose any meaning in doing this? Is it the collective whole that we seek or is it enough to focus on just one aspect? The poet is often in charge of the answer to these questions through the use of specific language and patterning but in the end they must be considered as mirror images of each other, or as Alexander Pope put it "Sound must seem an echo to the sense." ⁵ As a teacher I have noticed that my inexperienced students focus on the content, the meaning, or the message. Again, "It's a sad poem about the break-up of a loving couple." End of story. This is where they lose interest if they do not immediately understand the intent of the poet. Recognizing sound elements such as onomatopoeia, accent, internal pauses, and alliteration are often hard to do and needs to come with practice, scaffolding, and guidance. This recognition comes from repetition and patience. They need this scaffolding to arrive at the statement, "OK, that makes sense, but make me hear it. Read it aloud to me so that I get that feeling too..." How do we read the words so they make sense? The thing that must be pointed out to my students is that they already communicate using these sounds features all the time. Shifting their focus and making them aware of this will need to be emphasized. Helping them recognize accent, internal pausing and punctuation is more a matter of degree and requires repeated exposure and a trained ear. So in order to understand the visual imagery and verbal sound that make up tone and, thus, the meaning of the poem itself, we must consider content, language, imagery, form, and syntax. These elements form the construct which we will use to develop a deeper appreciation of poetry.

The Unit's Purpose and Objectives

There are two basic objectives integrated into my unit. The first is *to identify the author's use of structure, organizational patterning, and vocabulary as it applies to basic comprehension as well as understanding sound in poetry* . To achieve this goal, my students will begin our study of poetic verse writing a literary device poem. Subsequent poems will incorporate recognition, analysis, and practice as a measure of identification. My students have engaged in a cursory examine of poetry up to this point. It is my hope to extend this strategy and increase their virtuosity through the use of analysis. My second objective will be *to analyze the author's poetic craft in extended, significant, and specific ways especially as it applies to tone*. This can be treated as a natural extension of sound by focusing on Tone. My students intrinsically understand the underpinnings of sound as expressed in their comments about poetry. They know the feel and mood of a poem but need to understand why they know this. We will investigate an author's specific, characteristic ways of speaking and writing as it this relates to tone. This will be another bridge from defining to recognizing to using sound as they write.

How to Look at Poetry (or the *Dreaded Analysis*)

Perhaps we, as teachers, need to drop the scary part of English class -words like application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation or, at least, try to administer it with a "spoon full of sugar." These terms elicit a range of emotions from fear and exasperation to boredom and retreat, all of which do nothing to help students understand poetry. This is what the title of this section attempts to accomplish--- explain analysis in user-friendly terms. Further, to protect my students from feeling overwhelmed by the inaccessibility that sometimes haunts the study of poetry yet provide them with a framework by which they come to appreciate the literal as well as figurative language, I will model the following ways to look at poetry or (*analysis structure*) with my class. In order to develop and extend their comprehension, experience with poetics tools must be explored. I also feel that, by modeling this exercise with them, they will realize that conscious thought about, more than meaning, must be considered. That, by focusing in on *tone*, the essence of the piece illuminates and clarifies itself. Because tone and drama of the poem is derived from an understanding of meaning and sound of it, we will examine the content, language, imagery, and form, along side, the sound devices, to discover the scope of the poem's story and actually enjoy the genre more significantly.

The *How We Look at Poetry Questions (Complete Analysis Sheets* can be found in appendix) will be presented to each student as we begin to unravel the sound and tapestry of specific poems. It is worth mentioning that definitions are provided in parenthesis on these analysis sheets for any element I believe might baffle or confuse my students and might, therefore, need explanation. In this way, students do not have to search the dictionary for the meaning which could add another layer of frustration for some of them. Some explanations are added for teacher use.

It is also important to note that the break down demonstrated in this analysis is but one way to consider each piece. Each poem does not have to endure this intensive scrutiny but will certainly give the students an understanding of what *could* be examined when looking at poetry piece in total. When students can then speak intelligently about a poem, they begin to realize how powerful they sound and how much more thoroughly they understand the verse.

The Sound in Poetic Devices -Starting with Instant Success

There is nothing quite like producing an awesome poem right out of the gate. This tried and true exercise will provide just that for my students. Laying the ground work to also include the illumination of poetry as sound will incentivize my students to investigate poetry as an intriguing genre, something they would balk at otherwise. The exercise will show them that they already understand what the poetic elements of sound look like and are completely comfortable using them when they write. This introductory lesson will ask my students to review the basic definitions and tenets of the poetic devices listed below, making sure that they have an understanding of these elements. As they have been exposed to some of these features in varying degrees in lower grades and have hopefully been exposed to them from the start of the school year, this shouldn't impose too much of a time restriction or the boring " *om*" I call the English class syndrome. By providing them with a graphic organizer which lists the elements and having them work with a partner to define them is one idea that can be used to acclimate them to this exercise. Another approach could be a quick jeopardy-style

answer and question mini lesson. Nothing too complicated should be expected as this would only act as a turn off.

Next, I will have the class choose any person, place, thing, idea, or emotion that appeals to them. Then, writing single lines of poetry about their chosen word, employing, in each line, one element from the list of literary devices, my students will actually come to understand why word selection and sound device are so very important in verse. Each line will incorporate and represent a different poetic device and will, hopefully, show my students the richness of word variety in poetry using these devices. Perhaps, they will even recognize how sound is an integral part of most lines, woven into them as a result of knowledge of poetic device, and used effectively to express intent. This instant immersion will produce poems that students can be proud of, thus providing them with incentive to continue exploring. These samples of student work are proof of the effectiveness of this exercise. What will be new for my students is the auditory discussion of sound that follows.

New York City

Simile:	<i>New York City is like a jungle.</i>	
Metaphor:	<i>No, it is a jungle.</i>	
Personification:	<i>It's always jumping with excitement.</i>	
Hyperbole:	<i>Because of the noise, half the city is deaf.</i>	
Alliteration:	<i>Still, the city cares about its crazy customers.</i>	5
Imagery:	<i>Brands, lights, cabs, style: it's all there.</i>	
Tone:	<i>This city is great- always something to do.</i>	
Onomatopoeia:	<i>"B E E P" "B E E E E P" get out of the way!</i>	
Irony:	<i>When I arrived in New York, I was ready for chaos- Instead I found rhythm</i>	10

Carmelo

The next step in the process will be to examine a student work, in this case, Carmelo's poem. They will engage in an introductory discussion and analysis of its acoustical elements within poem. To provide this direction, I would ask the following questions: what is their initial impression; do they like it; why or why not; what are the actual, literal sounds that we hear; what is the result of these physical noises; is there any type of pattern or rhythm that gives us a sense of beat; where is the alliteration and onomatopoeia and how is it expressed? I would guide them to consider his single syllable word selection in line six and ask how that line adds to the sound and meaning of the poem. Finally, I would ask how his example of irony adds to the acoustical meaning. Student input in terms of answers as well as questions will highlight our discussions. I would be delighted if a written response at the end of our discussion took on the following form:

In this poem, sound is everywhere. In the opening line we hear New York compared to a jungle which, of course, provides a cacophony of sounds with no apparent patterning. Visitors often note this very fact as they walk the streets of the City. Next, we learn of the City's movement and excitement. There is this clamor which causes half the city to be deaf, a physical reaction to intense and repeated sound. Moving on, we see the repeated use of the initial letter "c" providing alliteration. Line six is comprised of single syllable words giving us a sense of quickness so present in New York. There is obvious sound in line nine not only in the word meaning but also in the actual sound of the words "beep" "beep." Finally, we hear the irony of the

comparison of New York to a jungle as the writer expected to find jungle's chaos but instead found the City's rhythm. If a student could so effectively incorporate all these devices into one poem and then be guided to recognize them, it would certainly motivate him to continue his investigation into poetry as a serious and enjoyable genre, one that he now has confidence in as a writer. If this introductory analysis can be evoked then a more comprehensive analysis can be used with other poems, all with supportive questioning outlined below in the *How We Look at Poetry Questions*.

This second example is my shining one. This is the student who never put pen to paper for me. Never. He sat quietly all year and then produced this poem. Patience!

Money

Simile:	<i>Money's as green as grass</i>	
Metaphor:	<i>Money is dead Presidents</i>	
Personification:	<i>My money runs in my pocket</i>	
Hyperbole:	<i>Money tracked me down</i>	5
Alliteration:	<i>Messin' with money is like messin' with the monster</i>	
Imagery:	<i>My money: big, green, and long</i>	
Tone:	<i>My money is my life 'til death due us part</i>	
Onomatopoeia:	<i>Cha-Ching</i>	
Irony:	<i>Too much money ha can get you kill</i>	10

Davon

What does one say except that he gets it!

Understanding Tone through Speaker's Voice and Story

Langston Hughes - "Mother to Son"

I would not feel comfortable just presenting my students a poem in which the implications of speaker's voice are expected to be highlighted, especially in the poem "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes. My students need some background information from which to base their discussions so a biography of author will be provided. It should be noted that Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library holds the Hughes' letter and manuscript collection, newspaper clippings and photographs, as well as personal items, and artworks. This may serve as an idea for a class field trip at some point.

A copy of the poem can be found at the website: <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/mother-to-son>. An audio version can be heard at the website: www.tnellen.com/cybereng/matoson.html. It is one piece or, at least, one poet I think my classes might recognize immediately. That is why I made the decision to use it - because it is so tangible, visual, and immediately understandable. Again, I use a temporary platform to build upon. Using a Socratic inquiry, I will ask my students a series of questions about the poet and the poem, questions such as "Who is Langston Hughes, when did he lived, what do you know about his life, who is talking, is it really his mother speaking?" This type of inquiry should instantly engage the students. After they have listed all that they know using any background knowledge they already have, I will give them further information

about the poet, the history and politics of the time, and about the poem itself. It is only after we look at some aspects of the historical, philosophical, social, and emotional context of the poet that we begin to gain some understanding of what Hughes possibly envisioned in terms of tone.

Some might argue that providing them this background information will implant a preconceived bias about the meaning of the poem. My response would be to remind critics that our students have little in the way of background information and, without it, an informed understanding can not be elicited. I believe that my students are intelligent and can discern for themselves the meaning of each piece with appropriate information. Knowledge built on knowledge, brick upon brick. I maintain that this background information gives them incentive and security from which to make an informed analysis of the piece. You don't throw a child into the ocean and expect him to swim ashore, or give him a 15 speed bike and expect him to just ride off. You must first give him Swimmies and training wheels then gradually remove these supports. This scaffolding strategy is the basic premise for my unit. The biographic portion of this exercise should last approximately 30 minutes and will be vital in providing my students with the background knowledge they need.

After reading the poem silently several times, the following questions about *Speaker* and *Context* will be discussed. Generally, the first questions might be, "What does the piece say to you; what is it about?" This poem concerns itself with the words and advice of a mother to her son as she struggled through life. It could be Langston's mother, a school teacher whose husband divorced her when Langston was young. Our biography tells us of the rather fragmented, difficult life he led as a child and young adult, moving from one household to another yet still being brought up with a lasting racial pride. But it could also represent the universal Black mother telling of the black experience during slavery and beyond. Both of these speakers are viable answers at this point. We might arrive at the discussion about speaker and context using following questions.

Speaker: How does the speaker, speak? Is the speaker the poet or a specific fictional character? Is the speaker an *omniscient narrator* (speaker who knows everything, may reveal the motivations, thoughts and feelings while the reader information) or casual observer? Who does s/he sound like? How is the speaker involved in the poem? Does the speaker refer to himself/ herself in the first person ("I" did this or saw that)? Is there more than one speaker? How does this change the meaning? Is the speaker from a specific country/state/region or from an identifiable time period in history? How or does knowing the historical context of the poem or the area from which the speaker is from change your understanding of the speaker's attitude?

Context : When was the poem written? What were the historical, political, philosophical, and social issues of that time (what was happening in the world)? Did any of these events or issues appear in the poem or influence the poem? Do any of these ideas change your understanding of the poem's theme?

The speaker in this poem is comparing her life to climbing a staircase, but not just any staircase, a crystal staircase. A crystal staircase, of course, implies wealth, luxury, and ease of living, but "Life for me ain't been no crystal staircase." Her staircase was different. None of the symbolism of wealth and easy living applies to her. This metaphoric reference to a staircase is extended throughout the entire poem. Initially, she is speaking about her own life, using the first person "I" to let us know we are hearing about a personal experience. Still, students must be reminded that it could be a singular speaker or the universal black mother. The one thing

we know for sure is that she is poor and has had a hard life.

*Had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor-
Bare.*

My students might still be torn about the speaker. Is it about the collective Negro life during the Civil War or specifically about Hughes' own mother who was alive during this period? We know that his mother was forced to leave Langston to be raised by his grandmother while she traveled looking for employment, so we know of her own personal ups and down. We know about the tacks and splinters and torn up boards with no carpeting. Her pain is seen in the torn boards and bare floors while it is felt in the tacks and splinter. These images convey the meaning and tone of the difficult life of a proud mother. There is a voice of pain and hardship, yet no complaint. She is resolute. In her voice we hear a simple comment on life. It is hard.

*But all the time
I've been a-climin' on
And reachin landin's
And turnin' corners
And sometimes goin'in the dark
Where there ain't been no light."*

It is here where my students maybe convinced that the speaker is a universal black mother because the language shifts somewhat more substantially and a black dialect with its distinct, perhaps, southern speech pattern appears. We now know that, in fact, we are not hearing a real story, but rather, a play, with the background on the characters provided by the biography. "I've been a climin' on" reflects a tone and speech pattern of an uneducated mother. Since Hughes' mother was a school teacher, they might assume that she would use a more traditional and formal dialect. It is also in these lines that another shift of focus is addressed. The conflict is heard in the words "climin', reachin', turnin', goin', in the dark, and ain't been no light." To explore the conflict, the following questions could be used.

Conflict or Tension: What is the conflict (a problem) or point of tension in the poem? Is there an external (fighting with a person/people, with nature, with society) or internal conflict (the arguments a person might have with himself/herself – i.e. should I do this, why did I do that)? Is the conflict physical, spiritual (sacred or religious), moral (ethical), philosophical (truth seeking), or social? How are tension and poetic elements intertwined or connected? Is it resolved?

She struggles to climb this staircase, sometimes through the twists and turns of life, sometimes where there ain't no light of day. It is an individual struggle but we don't get the sense that failure was an option. It is a physical struggle but it might also be a social struggle if we buy into the idea that she is the universal mother of black slaves. The one thing that is certain is that she will not give up. The tone is undeniable. We understand this, as a shift from the explanation of her struggle to the direct advice to her son, occurs.

So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now-
For I'se still goin', honey

The tone becomes motherly and supportive as she explains to her son not to falter, not to rest even when it becomes hard, for she is continuing as well. She, herself, is still climbing. She is leading by example. He must never give up no matter what hardships occur. He must not fall. We see here that diction and dialect have a heavy hand as the poem moves through it lines. We understand the strong, female Negro influence as she almost invites him to join her in the last two lines and we come full circle with the repetition of the line, "And Life for me ain't been no crystal staircase." These ideas about tone can be elicited using the following questions.

Tone: How is the *tone* (the writer's attitude toward the topic) of the poem, developed through language, used to create imagery (images, similes, metaphors, description)? How does *diction* (pronunciation) or *dialect* (the language peculiar to the members of a group or region which is distinguished by pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary i.e. *a southern drawl*) influence the understanding of the tone? Does the tone change as the poem progresses? Is it consistent at the beginning and ending of the poem?

It is here that my students will be asked to consider what a dramatic presentation might look like. Perhaps setting up a rocking chair in the classroom and asking for volunteer readers to highlight exactly how sound and context combine to form the tone of the poem might be considered. A secondary or additional assignment

might be to write a written response similar to the one discussed here or even to try their hand at writing a poem in response to his mother's words.

Understanding Tone through Language

Paul Laurence Dunbar - " We Wear the Mask"

I chose the poem, "We Wear the Mask ," by Paul Laurence Dunbar

<http://www.potw.org/archive/potw8.html> because an immediate connection can be made to one of our core novels, *Getting Away with Murder*, by Chris Crowe. Dunbar was also one of Langston Hughes's influences as he began to write poetry. This novel is a non-fiction account of Emmett Till, a black boy from Chicago who was sent to visit his family in the South and who ended up dead because of adolescent behavior not afforded to blacks during the fifties. When my students first hear the story of the atrocities endured by Emmett, who was the same age as most of my students, they are appalled and outraged. Again, as we read this poem, I will give my students some background information on the author and about the struggles and important historical events that led to changes in civil rights including the obvious court cases of Plessy versus Ferguson and Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka. Learning that Dunbar was the son of slaves, born soon after the civil war, and that he became the first black class president and poet in an all white school, will set the stage for understanding the poem and the connection to our novel. Dunbar's story will provide a foundation for the emotional tension of Blacks that lasted until Emmett Till was born and beyond and should help them continue their conversation about the hardship of being Black in America.

The poem ostensibly concerns itself with the oppressed, collective black slave who does whatever is necessary to avoid provocation. Will my students make the connection to Hughes's poem? I believe they would. Initially, because we read of Dunbar's exposure to racial prejudice and his race-based literary employment rejections, we will discover that he writes with a voice that can express the ideas of hidden depression and despair. It is through this knowledge that we will also come to understand that this poem is both a paradox, providing inconsistent throughout the poem, and an extended metaphor. Nowhere in the poem is color, slavery, civil war, racism, or prejudice mentioned yet we will come to appreciate that the poem is precisely about these things and it actually wears a mask to hide them. The metaphoric mask is established in line one and continues throughout the poem. We need to ask ourselves, "How does the language and rhythm contribute to the meaning, emotional force, and overall tone of the poem?" We need to investigate word choice, meaning, and rhythm to listen to the sound in this poem.

Word Choice : Would you characterize the poet's word choice as formal or conversational? If the poet uses a specific dialect for the speaker, can you explain why? How does the time period affect the word choice? Can you tell from the language, when a poem was written?

The language in this poem is different from that in "Mother to Son." It is more formal, more factual, and more informative. Diction and dialect do not have a substantive role in the lines although, because it speaks to the ideas of slavery and prejudice, we might suspect it should. Hopefully my students will see that the speaker, the universal we of slavery, is trying to hide "behind a mask" and hence, can not speak as he would normally.

He is speaking formally on purpose. Because we know the time period from which Dunbar is writing, we arrive at the conclusion that the universal slave or a descendent of one is speaking. But how do we know this?

Meaning: What are a particular word's *connotations* (the emotions, values, or images associated with it) and a specific word's *denotations* (its literal meaning) Are certain words repeated? Are they abstract or concrete, literal or metaphorical (symbolic)? What words does Dunbar choose to express the ideas of torture, shame, and duplicity? How do we know how we must read them, where to place the emphasis, and what emotions lie beneath?

From the beginning, there is a forced tightness to the poem. We instantly feel the tension between wearing a mask and having to smile. We are told that he needs to hide his cheeks so we do not see or hear his tears and he needs to shade his eyes, a typical stance of a Negro slave who is too fearful to even glance at his master. It represents the act of ultimate submission. We see the treachery and the duplicity in the line, *With torn and bleeding hearts we smile*. In the second stanza there is a slight crack in the tone when he asks why, "Why should the world know about our tears?" What gives the world this right to know? There is an implication that "Who's going to care, anyway?" There is anger mixed with sarcasm but he retreats and goes back behind the mask at the end of the stanza. *Nay, let them only see us, while We wear the mask*. Finally, it is in the last stanza that we hear his pleas to Christ from the angry, tortured souls. Here, though, the mask has added another layer, that of singing. He sings to hide his pain and humiliation and he continues to drag on the long mile. In order to hear the tones of treachery, anger, humiliation, and torture, we will read the poem aloud looking for ways to allow for these tones to emerge and perhaps even memorizing it. We will need to ask what these emotions sound like. How do we express treachery, anger, humiliation, and torture? This might lead us to consider the questions of rhythm and rhyme that are woven into the poem and that add to the overall tone and formality of the poem. It is here that sound and meaning come into focus as tone.

Rhythm : How many *syllables* are in each line? Does it follow a pattern? What syllables are *stressed* and unstressed? How does *alliteration* (the repetition of the same sound at the beginning of a word), *assonance* the repetition of vowel sounds, or *consonance* (the repetition of consonants), enhance the rhythm, movement, and musicality of the poem? What words do these sounds emphasize? Does the poem have its identifiable *rhythm* ? For example, does it have meter? Is the meter *iambic* ? (a foot consisting of an unaccented and accented syllable).

Rhythm is sometimes hard to hear. Rereading this poem aloud several times should certainly highlight the sound of rhythm and rhyme that is expressed so visually and audibly in this first stanza of the poem

*We wear the mask that grins and **lies***
It hides our cheeks and shades our **eyes** -
This debt we pay to human **guile**
With torn and bleeding hearts we **smile** ,
And mouth with myriads subtleties.

Here, we will see in the first four lines, eight syllables with four pairs of unstressed followed by stressed feet (iambic tetrameter). It's very regular iambic tetrameter with strong beats. My students should then be guided to recognizing the pairs of rhyming lines which we can then identify as couplets. If we continue in this vein, they might be able to recognize that each word in the first two lines is but a single syllable. There might be a tendency to read it in an almost sing-song fashion, yet I am sure no one will describe the meaning as one holding a nursery rhyme-like theme or anything remotely upbeat. This is where context and acoustics are intertwined and cannot and should not be separated. Putting a laser on meter and rhyme, my top group might notice the word "myriad" in the last line and question its syllabication and pronunciation. In order to make it fit the meter patterning, myriad is slurred thus changing it from a three syllable word myr-i-ad to a two syllable word myr-iad. This patterning will need guidance for clarification and understanding. Repetition is another acoustic element within this poem. The beginning alliterated consonant **w** is sprinkled throughout the stanzas as well as the long **i** sound. Dunbar's syntactical choices make the poem an easy read, using end-stopped lines, active voice, and overall consistency in tense and sentence structure. Hopefully, through the use of our analyzing questions as a scaffold, my students will be able to say, "oh, yeah. I see it."

It might also be noted that the substance of this poem reminds us of the Negro spiritual, a song similar to gospel music, so often heard during the age of slavery in our country. These songs told the story pain or work or hope. It might be of some use to listen to a song such as *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*" found at the website http://www.songbirdofswing.com/the_songs/Swing_Low/. to hear the tone, the soul, the anguish, the pride and ultimate hope of the Negro slave.

Taken in another light, this mask can take on a completely different meaning if considered as a universal mask anyone might wear. My students would be equally open to accepting this explanation as it might be a more "real," tangible, and plausible explanation in their lives. Kids who are bullied often wear a mask, a husband who loses his job and is afraid to tell his wife, a teenage girl who becomes pregnant and hides it from her boyfriend or family, a child who is abused; all of these people wear masks, have hearts that bleed, tears that are hidden, sighs that are suppressed, and cries that speak to torture but must be suppressed. The insights my students will be brought to notice contextually in this poem are also shrouded with sound and will be exposed through the use of parts of our analysis sheets.

Our last experience with this poem will be an attempt at practicing *the found poem*. A found poem requires that we begin with any poem; in this case, *We Wear the Mask*. Next we eliminate lines one, three, five, seven, etc. What we are left with are lines two, four, six, eight, etc. We must now go back and replaced the removed line with thoughts of our own trying to continue with the same meter. Once this part is complete, we must go back and eliminate lines two, four, six, eight, etc. and replace them as well. In other words my students start from someone's poem, turn it into a shared poem, and finally take ownership of the entire poem. Again, we use a scaffolding mechanism as our strategy to develop a significant poem using an accomplished poet's poem and turning it into one we can be proud to call our own.

Understanding Tone through Imagery

Gary Soto - "Oranges"

" Oranges ," by Gary Soto, found at the website.

http://www.edhelper.com/poetry/Oranges_by_Gary_Soto.htm is straightforward, unthreatening, and accessible to all levels of my student groups. The poem is written by a Hispanic author who rose from the Mexican barrios, who is a contemporary poet, and with whom, I believe, my students will identify. The following website contains an extended biography on Soto <http://www.notablebiographies.com/news/Sh-Z/Soto-Gary.html>. which can be drawn upon for a great deal of background information.

The speaker in this poem is reminiscing about his first love at the age of twelve. They will note that the poem is written in the first person and that it probably was not written in 2011 as a candy bar certainly does not cost \$.10. Knowing this might explain the fact that the saleslady accepted his orange as partial payment, something that would not happen today. But some of the sweetest parts of the poem come from the images Soto describes. We need to ask ourselves, "How does the imagery (the visual pictures created by the poet) construct or add to the poem's theme, tone, and purpose?"

Visual and Sensory: Are the images literal (actual pictures you can see in your head) or figurative (images that represent other thoughts or ideas), abstract (intangible), or concrete (physical)? What sensory experiences (sights, sounds, feelings, smells, and tastes) are evoked? Are certain images repeated? Are they repeated as a chorus or is the repetition in the form of beginning sounds called alliteration? Is there present the use of onomatopoeia where the formation or use of certain words imitate the sound associated with those words and thus elicit meaning? How are these images dependent on other elements? If so, how and which ones? Frost referred to this sound process as "the imaginative ear." Do any of these images demand that we hear sound?

The poem's language and tone is very informal, youthful, and almost playful yet we feel it and understand Soto's intent. It is consistent from start to finish. The acoustic description, Frost's "imagining ear," ⁶ demands that we *hear* the ice cracking, the dog barking, and the *tiny* bell ringing. "Write with the ear to the speaking voice, as if the ear came first and the voice took dictation." ⁷ We not only hear these sounds but feel them and know exactly what Soto means and why he used them. We are *shown* the yellow glow of the porch light and her winter rouge as we walk with the pair down the tree-lined streets and past the used car lot. Soto's simple

images are known to all of us. In the drugstore we envision the tiered candies and the narrator fingering the nickel. Through the use of imagery, we all get the lump in our throats when he realizes that she has chosen a dime candy. We feel and hear ourselves swallow hard. The language is simple and it is through this simplicity that all else evaporates and we are left with a feeling of dread. We feel the tension of the image mount as he places the candy and the orange on the counter knowing full well disaster lays in the balance and we are elated when the saleslady forgives with an understanding look. When the crisis is over, we move outside to see the fog hanging like old coats between the trees as they walk hand in hand down the street. We understand the emotion here. There is nothing that can ruin this feeling and nowhere where they'd rather be. It is puppy love personified.

Metaphor : Does the poet use *metaphors* , (comparison without like or as) to make associations and express images or abstract ideas? Is there an *extended metaphor* (a comparison that is expressed throughout the poem)? What is the effect of the metaphors on the tone and theme of the poem? Are there word choices that can be heard?

Symbolism : Are certain objects or actions developed in the imagery symbolic of an abstract idea? Do these *symbols* reoccur? Do they help to create an *allegory* (a symbol or fable that provides a secondary meaning)?

The final image is a metaphoric comparison of the orange to fire. But it is more than that. The orange also symbolizes his first adolescent love, his first fire in the belly, his first unidentified passions of love. We come to understand the innocence and sweetness that first love brings. The colors of heat are sprinkled throughout the poem, first with the orange, then the yellow light, to the rouge on her face, and finally to the lines,

I peeled my orange
that was so bright against
the gray of December
That, from a distance,
Someone might have thought
I was making a fire in my hands.

In the end, we are left with a warm glow that the world is truly a wonderful place to be when the sweetness of the candy of love is tasted by these two young people. It is my hope that my students will now be inspired to attempt some poetry writing for themselves.

Appendix

Connecticut Mastery Test Strands

A3 - Select and use relevant information from the text in order to summarize events and/or ideas in the text

B1 - Identify or infer the author's use of structure/organizational patterns.

C2 - Select, synthesize, and/or use relevant information within the text to write a personal response to the text.

D1 - Analyze and evaluate the author's craft including use of literary devices and textual elements

D2 - Select, synthesize, and/or use relevant information within the text to extend or evaluate the text.

How We Look at Poetry Questions (*Hand Holding Our Way to Understanding*)

Content: What does the piece say to you? How do the *tone* of the speaker and the *content* of the work change your understanding of the poem? This is where you decide who and how the speaker speaks.

1) *Speaker* : How does the speaker, speak? Is the speaker the poet or a specific fictional character? Is the speaker an *omniscient narrator* (speaker who knows everything, may reveal the motivations, thoughts and feelings of the characters, and gives the reader information) or casual observer? Who does s/he sound like? How is the speaker involved in the poem? Does the speaker refer to himself/ herself in the first person ("I" did this or saw that)? Is there more than one speaker? How does this change the meaning? Is the speaker from a specific country/state/region or from an identifiable time period in history? How or does knowing the historical context of the poem or the area from which the speaker is from change your understanding of the speaker's attitude?

2) *Conflict or Tension* : What is the conflict (a problem) or point of tension in the poem? Is there an external (fighting with a person/people, with nature, with society) or internal conflict (the arguments a person might have with himself/herself - i.e. should I do this, why did I do that)? Is the conflict physical, spiritual (sacred or religious), moral (ethical), philosophical (truth seeking), or social? How are tension and poetic elements intertwined or connected? Is it resolved?

3) *Context* : When was the poem written? What were the historical, political, philosophical, and social issues of that time (what was happening in the world)? Did any of these events or issues appear in the poem or influence the poem? Do any of these ideas change your understanding of the poem's theme? Extra credit: Did poets during that time period follow a particular style? Is the poem consistent with the literary conventions of that era? How is it inconsistent? The answers to these questions would come from the intermingling of the background information you supply each student as you began the study of a particular poem, their independent research, and their interpretation and inference with regard to each poem. This critical thinking exercise will initially need great support from you as they come to understand how these connections are to be made.

4) *Tone* : How is the *tone* (the writer's attitude toward the topic and his way of communicating that attitude) of the poem, developed through language, used to create imagery (images, similes, metaphors, description)? How does *diction* (pronunciation) or *dialect* (the language peculiar to the members of a group or region which is distinguished by pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary i.e. a *southern drawl*) influence the understanding of the tone? Does the tone change as the poem progresses? Is it consistent at the beginning and ending of the poem?

(These understandings would need to be grounded with a discussion of tone found in section *The Sounds That Are Poetry*)

Language : How do the language and rhythm contribute to the meaning, purpose or emotional force?

1) *Word Choice* : Would you characterize the poet's word choice as formal or conversational? If the poet uses a specific dialect for the speaker, can you explain why? Does the time period when the poem is written affect the word choice? Today, poets use recognizably current, concrete, vivid, bold, or reserved word choices, but in past centuries poets explained and described situations or ideas using different writing styles, some being descriptive, some analytical, and some reflective based on the purpose and audience of the poem. Can you tell from the language, when a poem was written?

2) *Meaning* : What are a particular word's *connotations* (the emotions, values, or images associated with it) and a specific word's *denotations* (its literal meaning). Are certain words repeated? Are they abstract or concrete, literal or metaphorical (symbolic)?

3) *Rhythm* : How many *syllables* are in each line? Does it follow a pattern? What syllables are *stressed* and unstressed? How does *alliteration* (the repetition of the same sound at the beginning of a word), *assonance* the repetition of vowel sounds, or *consonance* (the repetition of consonants), enhance the rhythm, movement, and musicality of the poem? What words do these sounds emphasize? Does the poem have its identifiable *rhythm* ? For example, does it have meter? Is the meter *iambic* ? (a foot consisting of an unaccented and accented syllable). [The following information may be too much for middle school students but is provided for teacher background knowledge: *spondees* (a foot consisting of two accented syllables), *trochees* (a foot consisting of two syllables –a stressed followed by an unstressed as in velvet), *dactyls* (a foot consisting of an accented syllable and two unaccented syllables)]

Imagery : How does the imagery (the visual pictures created by the poet) construct or add to the poem's theme, tone, and purpose?

1) *Visuals and Sensory*: Are the images literal (actual pictures you can see in your head) or *figurative* (images that represent other thoughts or ideas), abstract (intangible), or concrete (physical)? What sensory experiences (sights, sounds, feelings, smells, and tastes) are evoked? Are certain images repeated? Are they repeated as a chorus or is the repetition in the form of beginning sounds called alliteration? Is there present the use of onomatopoeia where the formation or use of certain words imitate the sound associated with those words and thus elicit meaning? How are these images dependent on other elements? If so, how and which ones? Frost referred to this sound process as "the imagining ear." Do any of these images demand that we hear sound?

2) *Metaphor* : Does the poet use *metaphors*, (comparison without like or as) to make associations and express images or abstract ideas? Is there an *extended metaphor* (a comparison that is expressed throughout the poem)? What is the effect of the metaphors on the tone and theme of the poem? Are the word choices ones that can be heard?

3) *Symbolism* : Are certain objects or actions developed in the imagery symbolic of an abstract idea? Do these *symbols* reoccur? Do they help to create an *allegory* (a symbol or fable that provides a secondary meaning)?

Form : How does the form of the poem correspond to theme, tone, and main idea of the work?

1) *Structure, Pattern, and Scheme* : Does the poem follow a formal poetic structure such as a *sonnet* (a lyric poem consisting of fourteen lines), *haiku* (The first line *usually* contains five (5) syllables, the second line seven (7) syllables, and the third line contains five, doesn't rhyme, "paints" a mental image), *ode* (usually a lyric poem of moderate length, with a serious subject, an elevated or formal style, and an elaborate stanza pattern), *blues poem* (combination of African American oral tradition and the musical tradition of the blues music takes on themes such as struggle, despair, and sex), *diamante* (a seven line poem, shaped like a diamond, beginning with a single noun, adding two adjectives, three participles (- *ing* words), four nouns, three participles, two adjectives, and an opposite noun), *quatrain* (four-line stanza with a rhyming pattern where lines two and four must rhyme), *found poem* (poetry that takes existing texts and refashion and reorder them into a new poem), etc.? Does the poem follow the form? If not, how does it deviate from that form? Why was the specific structure chosen? How does the structure further the idea of sound?

2) *Stanza and Lines* : Are stanzas and lines consistently the same length? Do they follow a particular pattern? Are there any stanzas,

lines, or words that diverge from the pattern?

3) *Rhyme Scheme* : Rhyme provides a different sound feature. It is often caught immediately because of its cadenced and sometimes musical nature. Does the poem follow an identifiable *rhyme scheme* (the repetition of similar sounds) corresponding to a specific poetic form? What kind of rhyme is used *internal* (rhyme within lines), *end rhyme* (words rhyme at end of lines), *true rhyme* (two or more words begin with different consonant sounds, then have identical stressed vowel sounds), or *slant* rhyme (not all of its vowel or consonant sounds match those of the rhyming word)? Is it consistent or scattered throughout? If not, where does the rhyme change or appear and why? What is the overall purpose or effect of the rhyme scheme?

Syntax : How do the poet's syntactical choices (the structure of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences) change or expand the ideas in the poem?

1) *Enjambment* : How are lines broken? Are they broken before a grammatical or logical completion of a thought to create an *enjambment* ? Or are they *end-stopped* , breaking after the completion of a sentence or other grammatical pauses? How does the use of enjambment create a duality of meaning in the lines?

2) *Verbs* : Are verbs active (the subject of the sentence performs the action expressed in the verb; *John threw the ball*) or passive (the subject is acted upon; he or she receives the action expressed by the verb; *the ball was thrown by John*)? What tense does the poet use? Is it consistent? How does tense consistency (inconsistency) affect the passage of time within the poem?

3) *Sentence Structure* : Does the poet use complete sentences, fragments, or a combination of both? Is there a pattern? How does the poet's sentence choice contribute to the understanding of the poem? Within the sentence, is the word order natural or grammatically irregular?

4) *Punctuation* : How is punctuation used or not used? Is it consistent with grammatical conventions? What effect does the punctuation create on how the poem is read? How does it affect the speed? Where are the pauses? Does the poet use italics, bold fonts, dashes, or any other uncommon fonts or punctuation devices? If so, why?

End Notes

¹ Robert Frost , "The Imagining Ear." Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays, 688.

² Mark Flanagan, "What is Poetry, Grasping at theIndefinable"

³ The Phrase Finder

⁴ Frost friends, "The Poetics of Robert Frost – Example"

⁵ Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism."

⁶ "Poetry and the Imagining Ear" ⁶

⁷ Ibid.

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