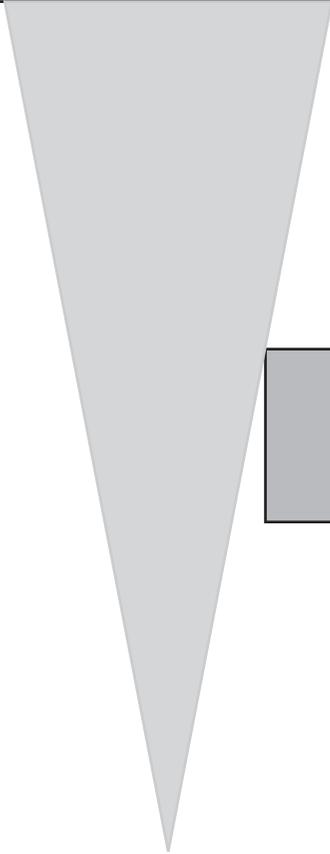




# Poetry



2

**Tone, voice, purpose and mood**



## Commentary Writing

Literature is an art form and as an art form it is emotive. That means it aims to arouse feeling or emotions, to take us away from the rationalism of science and mathematics, into the muddled world of human emotions and feelings, the world of relationships and loneliness, of beauty and ugliness, of joy and despair, of fun and folly, of love and lust and contempt and hope. As you came to understand the literal meaning of *Entirely* you must also have become increasingly aware of the emotions, or perhaps to put it less strongly, the feelings, explored by the poem. What you have not found is a clear statement of these feelings. MacNeice has not written outright: *I feel the world is a confusing place* or *I feel the world is so full of variety I will never understand it*. He is an artist, and, as an artist he transmits these feelings to us in such a way that we personally respond emotionally and intellectually to them, they become part of our enlarged understanding.

The Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) communicates feeling brilliantly. When you read the opening stanzas of his poem *Daffodils* you share his feelings, his joy and delight and wonder, at the unexpected sight of daffodils by a lake dancing in the breeze.

*I wander'd lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

*Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the Milky Way,  
They stretch'd in never-ending line  
Along the margin of the bay;  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.*

An important aspect of commentary writing is explaining how writers' achieve the communication of feeling that they do and we will return to that later. But for the moment just respond emotively yourself. Savour the feelings that Wordsworth transmits as an experience in itself, enjoy sharing his feelings, inevitably bringing to your reading the memory of when you have suddenly come face to face with something wonderful and exciting in the natural world. Many poets have written of similar experiences. The celebrated poem *Two Look at Two* by Robert Frost (1874-1963) explores the same sense of wonder and delight when two people come very close to two wild deer.

*Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.  
'This must be all.' It was all. Still they stood,  
A great wave from it going over them,  
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor  
Had made them certain earth returned their love.*



D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930) in *Snake* describes the privilege he feels when a snake comes to share his water trough.

*But must I confess how I liked him  
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water trough*

Wordsworth has strong feelings about cities as well as the countryside.

In his sonnet *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802* his feelings are made quite clear.

*Earth has not anything to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty:  
The City now doth like a garment wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.  
Never did sun more beautifully steep  
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;  
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
The river glideth at his own sweet will:  
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!*

Dull would he be of soul indeed who did not respond to the strength of Wordsworth's feelings as he describes the sleeping city. It is impossible to read the sonnet without being aware of the experience and knowledge we bring to our reading, our own experience of the calm of dawn in a big city we have travelled through in order, perhaps, to catch a train or a plane at an unusually early hour. Wordsworth's expression of his feelings stimulates our feelings as readers. We share his insights and his mood as we are given fresh awareness of our own experiences and memories of our own moods.

## Exploring the feelings

You have almost certainly by now begun to understand the emotions, the feelings embedded in the poem *Entirely*. These feelings need to be examined closely before we can fully understand the effect and achievement of the poem. Look again at the poem and paraphrase<sup>1</sup> the feelings implicit or explicit, that you find in the poem. The feelings may not be always easy to re-define but your interpretation of them will make you think carefully about their meaning. You might end up with an annotated version of the poem which looks like this:

1. Paraphrase: express the sense in other words





## Commentary Writing

*If we could get the hang of it entirely  
It would take too long; resigned frustration;  
All we know is the splash of words in passing realising the limitations of our life  
And falling twigs of song,  
And when we try to eavesdrop on the great experiences of  
Presences it is rarely secretive searching brings only  
That by a stroke of luck we can appropriate  
Even a phrase entirely. Limited satisfaction*

*If we could find our happiness entirely  
In somebody else's arms partial content  
We should not fear the spears of the spring nor the city's  
Yammering fire alarms fear for the future, discomfort  
But, as it is, the spears each year go through  
Our flesh and almost hourly pain  
Bell or siren banishes the blue  
Eyes of Love entirely. Reluctant acceptance of the inevitable*

*And if the world were black or white entirely  
And all the charts were plain but, if there was no challenge  
Instead of a mad weir of tigerish waters,  
A prism of delight and pain, instead of excitement, difficulties  
We might be surer where we wished to go uncertainty  
Or again we might be merely  
Bored but in brute reality there is no uninterested  
Road that is right entirely. acceptance*

Having got some clear idea of the specific feelings embedded in the poem, we need to examine how they relate to some specific literary concepts; tone, voice, purpose and mood.

### Tone

*Tone* is one of those elusive concepts that we feel intuitively and find it difficult to be precise about. You almost certainly use the word *tone* yourself in your daily exchanges with your friends. *Don't use that tone of voice with me* is a common expression, as is *Tone it down a bit*. *Tone* in these phrases means a particular style of communication, a style which describes an attitude, in both these cases a little negative. In contrast the use of the word *tone* in the phrase *Wow! Feel that muscle tone* shows a positive attitude.

How do we instinctively recognise a tone of voice when we hear it? We are responding to inflexions of stress, to the pitch of the voice, to the choice of words, and to the speed of delivery, all of which are telling us how we are expected to respond. The same words can be made to convey quite different meanings. *You look great* can be said in many different tones, including admiringly, jealously, playfully and ironically and can mean quite different things according to the intention of the speaker and the reception of the hearer. Irony (See Jargon Box: Irony) is one particular tone which can be quite easily misinterpreted as we have all of us probably discovered to our embarrassment.





Tone in literature is close to the tone in spoken language; it shows the *attitude* of the writer, to the subject matter, the thoughts and the feelings of the passage, and sometimes to the reader. Tone in writing is much more liable to be misinterpreted than tone in speech, because written expression is not as flexible or varied as speech. You can't write loudly or softly, you can't pause or rush on, you can't emphasise one phrase at the expense of another.

Asking what is MacNeice's attitude to his subject matter and to his readers in *Entirely* is the same as asking *What is the tone of the poem?* What kind of answers would you expect to give to the question? When you say to your friend *Don't use that tone of voice with me* you are suggesting that he or she is being unpleasant in some way, aggressive, perhaps or sarcastic or condescending. If you are discussing the muscle tone of some athlete you might use words like *firm, unyielding, dense, compact, sexy, powerful*. Tone in literature can be described in the same way: it can be sarcastic or condescending, firm or sexy, or combinations of these and many other adjectives.

What would you say is the tone of *Entirely*? It certainly isn't sarcastic, condescending or firm but in places you could argue that it is at least a little sexy. I would suggest *thoughtful, contemplative, accepting*.

Here is the first stanza of a poem by John Donne (1572-1631) which has a particular well defined tone: *light-hearted, almost joyful, resentment*.

### The Sun Rising

*Busy old fool, unruly sun,  
Why dost thou thus,  
Through windows and through curtains call on us?  
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run  
Saucy, pedantic wretch, go chide  
Late school-boys, and sour prentices,  
Go Tell Court-huntsmen, that the king will ride,  
Call country ants to harvest offices;  
Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,  
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.*

In both *Entirely* and *The Sun Rising* the tone is consistent throughout the poem. Tone may be consistent within a passage or it may change and vary so beware of looking for one simple description.

### Jargon Box: Irony

*Irony* is a tricky little subject, difficult to define and sometimes difficult to identify, but it is certainly something you should be aware of. Like many abstract concepts the more of it you meet, the more you understand the complexities of it.

Here is a simple starting definition: *Irony is when something is said or written which is not what is meant*. When your friend tells you it is your lucky day because you have the privilege of lending him some money, that is irony. Your day is not lucky and you are not privileged. Irony demands, in the words of the reader response theorists, that readers bring new meaning to a text by bringing their own knowledge and experience to it. If there is a gap between what on the surface is written

