

## 31: Tone in Poetry

### Understanding tone by comparing two texts written from the same source material

*Suitable for KS4-KS5*

#### Summary

Using Sylvia Plath's poem 'The Bee Meeting' and the extract from her diary published in the book *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (available in Faber paperback), students explore two different versions of the same event, analysing the striking difference in tone between the two pieces. This can be extended to a discussion of audience, purpose and form.

#### What's the point?

Particular poems can be especially effective for teaching a particular aspect of poetry. Even if one is meant to be studying, say, Keats or Armitage, or a specified anthology, there is a great deal to be gained from moving beyond that set text to look at poems by other authors, or from other books, which help students to understand a particular poetic element. They can then apply what they have learnt to their set poems. Plath's 'The Bee Meeting' is an exceptionally good poem for teaching about tone, as it can be set in contrast with Plath's diary entry about the same event, which is written in a distinctively different tone.

Tone is not always easy to teach and perhaps too often we expect students simply to 'pick up' differences in tone in different texts, even though they may not be very clear about what tone *is*, or, at a more precise level, the way in which writers make decisions about tone and set about *creating* it. These two texts illustrate clearly how a poet is able to transform material, deliberately crafting it to convey a very particular tone.

#### In the classroom

Read the poem with students; discuss in detail in groups and as a whole class. Encourage them to discuss the tone of the poem and how it is created. When the poem has been understood, read the diary entry to them. They should quickly identify the strong difference in tone and the way in which Plath has chosen and adapted material from the diary entry to create a particular tone and other effects in the poem. Apportion different stanzas of the poem to each group and ask them to explore Plath's choices in detail, identifying how she has transformed the original for particular effects. The discussion should also cover the differences in audience and purpose between the two pieces.

The comparison between the two pieces can also be used to explore how prose and verse differ, and to examine the form which Plath chose for the poem. To what extent does the form of the poem contribute to the tone of it, for example? This work can be extended, for instance, by asking students to write about an event in their lives in two different tones and/or different forms. They could also explore two different poems on the same topic, identifying different tones – or it can be applied to prose by comparing two different prose pieces which use different tones on the same subject. Similarly, the different forms of each piece can be explored.

