

14 | THEME AND TONE

Poetry is full of surprises. Poems express anger or outrage just as effectively as love or sadness, and good poems can be written about going to a rock concert or having lunch or mowing the lawn, as well as about making love or smelling flowers. Even poems on “predictable” subjects can surprise us with unpredicted attitudes or sudden twists. Knowing that a poem is about some particular subject or topic—love, for example, or death—may give us a general idea of what to expect, but it never tells us exactly what we will find in a particular poem. Labeling a poem a “love poem” or a “death poem” is a convenient way to speak of its topic. But poems that may be loosely called “love poems” or “death poems” may have little else in common, may express utterly different attitudes or ideas, and may concentrate on very different aspects of the subject. Letting a poem speak to us means more than merely figuring out its topic; it means listening to *how* the poem says what it says. *What* a poem says about its topic is its **theme**. *How* a poem makes that statement involves its **tone**—the poem’s attitude or feelings toward its topic. No two poems on the same subject affect us in exactly the same way; their themes and tones vary, and even similar themes may be expressed in various ways, creating different tones and effects.

TONE

Tone, a term borrowed from acoustics and music, refers to the qualities of the language a speaker uses in social situations or in a poem, and it also refers to a speaker’s intended effect. Tone is closely related to style and diction; it is an effect of the speaker’s expressions, *as if* showing a real person’s feelings, manner, and attitude or relationship to a listener and to the particular subject or situation. Thus, the speaker may use angry or mocking words, may address the listener intimately or distantly, may sincerely confess or coolly observe, may paint a grand picture or narrate a legend.

The following poem describes a romantic encounter of sorts, but its tone may surprise you. As you read the poem, work first to identify its **speaker**, **situation**, and **setting**. Then try both to capture its tone in a single word or two and to figure out which features of the poem most help to create that tone.

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Leaving the Motel

Outside, the last kids holler
 Near the pool: they'll stay the night.
 Pick up the towels; fold your collar
 Out of sight.
 5 Check: is the second bed
 Unrumpled, as agreed?
 Landlords have to think ahead
 In case of need,
 Too. Keep things straight: don't take
 10 The matches, the wrong keyrings—
 We've nowhere we could keep a keepsake—
 Ashtrays, combs, things
 That sooner or later others
 Would accidentally find.
 15 Check: take nothing of one another's
 And leave behind
 Your license number only,
 Which they won't care to trace;
 We've paid. Still, should such things get lonely,
 20 Leave in their vase
 An aspirin to preserve
 Our lilacs, the wayside flowers
 We've gathered and must leave to serve
 A few more hours;
 25 That's all. We can't tell when
 We'll come back, can't press claims,
 We would no doubt have other rooms then,
 Or other names.

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The title and details of *LEAVING THE MOTEL* indicate the situation and setting: Two secret lovers are at the end of an afternoon sexual encounter in a motel room (perhaps one is speaking for both of them), reminding themselves not to leave or take with them any clues for “others” (line 13)—their spouses?—to find.

Whereas many poems on the topic of love confirm an enduring attachment or express desire or suggest erotic experience, this poem focuses on the effort to erase a stolen encounter. The two lovers have no names; indeed, they have registered under false ones. They have already paid for this temporary shelter, can't stay the night like other guests or build a home with children of their own, and are running through a checklist of their agreements and duties (“Check,” “Keep things straight,” “Check” [5, 9, 15]). Other than the “wayside” lilacs (22), the objects mentioned are trivial, from matches and keyrings to license numbers. The matter-of-fact but hurried tone suggests that they wish to hide any deep feelings (hinted at in the last two