HAMLET: Mood and Tone Assignment

**Tone** is the emotional quality of the words that the author has chosen. It is also the author’s attitude and point of view toward a subject; it reflects the feelings of the writer, and can affect the emotional response of the reader to the piece. While we have all heard, “Don’t use that tone of voice with me!” a writer does not have the advantage of the sound of his voice to reveal the tone of the piece. As we read the words on the page, the author hopes that the words he or she has chosen and the way he or she has arranged those words will help us hear a voice in our heads, supplying the emotional appeal. Tone can be formal or informal, humorous or serious, personal or impersonal, subjective or objective, casual or passionate, cynical or sentimental, simple or elaborate, and more.

When learning to recognize tone, it is also important to understand **mood**, a general feeling that is created by the tone. In literature, writers carefully choose their words, wanting the reader to feel love and hate, joy and sadness. Mood is *usually* described in expressions of feeling and emotions, such as fear, surprise, anger, hatred, contentment, or jealousy, to name a few. Shakespeare immediately creates a mood of mystery and fear from the very first moment the ghost appears on stage in Act One.

**In short, tone is how the author says something, and mood is how it affects you, the reader.** For example, an author writes “Justin turned slowly, whispering under his breath, “I am going to kill you.” By just reading this sentence, did you guess that the next sentence is: “With a sweep of his arms, he held her close, and for the first time, they shared a passionate, warm kiss”? By the choice of the author’s words, and how they are arranged, he has created a tone which is suspenseful, passionate, and sentimental. The mood changes once we find out the real situation: the mood is one of anticipation, passion, and romance.

**Directions:** For the following excerpts from Act Two, underline the words that contribute to the mood, such as adjectives, adverbs, or other strong sensory words that catch you. Then use your Tone/Mood List to identify the tone that Shakespeare is using, and how it affects you (mood).

Next write your analysis of the excerpt, or how the mood and tone work or don’t work in the excerpt. Here’s a simplified example (although I expect you to elaborate much more, as there are multiple interpretations)

Ex. “Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast / With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts— / O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power / So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust / The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.” (Hamlet’s ghost; Act One, Scene 5)

**Tone:** serious, sarcastic, cynical, bitter

**Mood:** darkness, depression, anger, rage, betrayal, shame

**Analysis:** Shakespeare uses the words “wit” and “gifts,” which usually have a generally positive connotation, and instead, labels them as “witchcraft,” “traitorous,” and “wicked.” This combination of words reveals his surprise and anger at his betrayal.
1. “What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form
and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel, in apprehension
how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me, what
is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me, (no,) nor women neither, though by
your smiling you seem to say so.” (Scene 2; 327-334)

2. “…Yet I, / A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak / Like John-a dreams, unpregnant of
my cause, / And can say nothing—no, not for a king / Upon whose property and most
dear life / A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward? / Who calls me “villain”?/breaks my pate across? / Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face? / Tweaks me by
the nose? Gives me the lie i’ th’ throat / as deep as to the lungs? / Who does me this? /
Ha! ‘Swounds, I shall take it!” (Scene 2)

3. “He took me by the wrist and held me hard. / Then he goes to the length of all his arm,
/ And, with his other hand thus o’er his brow, / He falls to such perusal of my face / As
he would draw it. Long stayed he so. / At last, with a little shaking of mine arm, / And
thrice his head thus waving up and down, / He raised a sigh so piteous and profound /
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being.” (Scene 1)

4. Polonius: I will be brief. Your noble son is mad. / “Mad” call I it, for, to define true
madness, / What is ‘t but to be nothing else but mad? / But let that go.
Queen: More matter with less art.
Polonius: Madam, I swear I use no art at all. / That he’s mad, ‘tis true; ‘tis true ‘tis pity,
/ And pity ‘tis ‘tis true—a foolish figure, / But farewell it, for I will use no art. / Mad let
us grant him then, and now remains / That we find out the cause of this effect, / Or,
rather say, the cause of this defect, / For this effect defective comes by cause. / Thus it
remains, and the remainder thus. / Perpend.” (Scene 2)