

# Tone Notes

Dear Miss Manners: What are the **proper presents** to give bridesmaids and my fiancé's ushers? Is something so untraditional as a good book – different books for each, of course, according to their tastes – all right instead of things like bracelets and cufflinks they may never use?



GENTLE READER: Are you trying to give these people something they might enjoy, or are you trying to do the proper thing by them? Books, at best, are only read, but useless, monogrammed silver objects that cannot be returned serve to remind one of the occasion of their presentation every time one sees them tarnishing away, unused. Cuff links and bracelets are all right, since everyone has too many of them, but silver golf tees or toothpaste tube squeezers are ideal.

--Judith Martin, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*

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**What is Miss Manners' attitude toward typical bridesmaids/ushers' presents?**

**What is her attitude toward the gentle reader?**

**Does she answer the question?**

# Tone

- The attitude a writer (not speaker) takes toward the reader, a subject, or a character.
- **Tone** is conveyed through the writer's:
  - **DICTION** (choice of words)
  - **SYNTAX** – arrangement of words
  - Purposeful arrangement of **DETAILS** and **IMAGES**

# Sylvia Plath, “Cut: For Susan O’Neill Roe”

What a thrill –  
My thumb instead of an onion.  
The top quite gone  
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,  
A flap like a hat,  
dead white.  
Then a red plush.

**What is the poet’s  
attitude toward the cut?**

**What images and  
diction create the tone?**

# Author's attitude toward cut = IRONIC

What a **thrill** –  
My **thumb instead of an onion**.  
The top quite gone  
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,  
A **flap like a hat**,  
Dead white.  
Then a red plush.

While she calls the  
CUT a “THRILL” she  
really means it’s  
horrific

Plath actually increases the  
sense of horror by trivializing  
the cut --comparing her  
thumb to an onion and the  
partially severed top to “a flap  
like a hat”.

**What attitude toward the cut and, by implication, toward life itself, does Plath's use of colors and diction reveal?**

**Of skin,  
A flap like a hat,  
Dead white.  
Then a red plush.**

White is associated with death (pallor of corpses) – it generalizes the cut and forces the reader to consider death itself

“red plush” = indicates  
luxurious lushness,  
almost seductive

Attitude revealed here is a dual one – fear of death and attraction to it

# Mother to Son

by Langston Hughes

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Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor --  
Bare.  
But all the time  
I've been a-climbin' on,  
And reachin' landin's,  
And turnin' corners,  
And sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.  
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've still goin', honey,  
I've still climbin',  
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.



# Understanding the Poem

- Extended Metaphor:
  - Life to stairs
    - “tacks”, “splinters”, “boards torn up”, and “no carpet” = obstacles
    - “reachin’ landin’s” and turnin’ corners” = successes

# Poem's Subject Matter

- Perseverance
- Obstacles could be alluding to:
  - Poverty
  - Prejudice
  - Illness
  - Loss of loved ones
- Why does she leave it vague?

# Diction

“Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.”

- Diction = “crystal”
  - Connotations of crystal are luxury, beauty
- Dialect = “ain’t” and “I’sse still going”
  - Adds authenticity to an uneducated mother working hard to support herself and her son

# Details

- Detail = why does the author choose to make the comparison between the mother's life and a staircase?
  - Stairs are common
  - Strong parallel between climbing the staircase and fighting to get ahead in life
- Detail = why repeat "Don't you"?
  - Negative phrasing to motivate son to do something

# Tone – Must Distinguish between...

Speaker = mother



Writer =  
Hughes



Hughes is particularly known for his insightful, colorful portrayals of black life in America from the twenties through the sixties. His life and work were enormously important in shaping the artistic contributions of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

# Tone

- What is the tone of the author towards the mother character?
  - respectful
- What is the tone of the author towards the subject matter?
  - empathetic



**Henri Matisse**, *Pianist and Checker Players*, 1924