

# Power of Tone and Emotional Effects on the Story World

## *Show Notes for Shakespeare & Dragons, Episode 2*



### Key Worldbuilding Concepts

**MOOD:** Another name for atmosphere. Mood refers to the feeling created in the reader by the work or by a passage in it. Many factors contribute to the mood including: Diction; Imagery; Events that take place, the plot; Setting, especially the natural setting; The speaker's or author's tone. Mood is described by adjectives such as tragic or comic; mysterious, brooding or sunny; joyful, pleasant, life-affirming or mournful, lugubrious; optimistic or pessimistic; suspenseful; magical; poignant; ambiguous; the list is endless—or by phrases such as “a mood of mystery, a mood of happiness, a mood of pathos,” and so on.

**TONE:** Refers to: 1) the attitude of the speaker or author toward the subject matter, the intended audience, or himself or herself; 2) the emotional coloring of the work that reveals this attitude. Tone is an important part of the meaning of a work. Tone is expressed in different ways: In speaking, by inflexions in the speaker's voice. Example: “I am going to get married today” can mean different things, depending on whether or not the tone is ecstatic (“Hooray!”), incredulous (I can't believe it!), despairing (“Horrors!” or resigned (“May as well face it.”).

Tone is relatively easy to detect in speaking. In writing, tone is expressed by:

- connotations of words used
- imagery
- metaphors and similes
- irony
- understatement and hyperbole
- rhythm
- sentence structure in prose

Tone is described by adjectives such as playful or solemn; humorous or solemn; light or dark, brooding; mocking or reverent; calm, bland, matter-of-fact or excited; sympathetic or critical; formal or informal; sarcastic; the list is endless. Example: The scenery in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* is described as dark and gloomy. Plus, the house is portrayed in the same manner.

(from [1] [http://tweedy.flanigan.us/school/High%20School/Language\\_Arts/litterms.html](http://tweedy.flanigan.us/school/High%20School/Language_Arts/litterms.html))

### Why consider tone in worldbuilding and storytelling?

Many world building topics begin and end with the geography of the world. I argue that tone is more of a priority.

In *Shakespeare and Dragons*, tone will trump all other decisions as the first decision one should make before jumping into the other issues of setting and geography, map-making, characters, conflicts and adventures, imagery, even theme; tone breathes life into all other aspects of the world, and it also provides an over-arching framework that guides the other elements of the design process.

## What is tone?

Tone is the attitude expressed by the author (or authors in the case of a collaborative interactive world) as expressed through the world's language, imagery, sounds, music, choice of setting, and dialogue, that creates an emotional effect on the players or readers, establishes the mood of the world's setting, and the pacing of the stories within that world. Tone words can be as numerous as the infinite range of emotions that a human being can experience.

Tone is usually stated as a single word, usually an adjective, such as romantic, satirical, slapstick or objective, or as a noun, such as: dread; melancholy; or, whimsy.

All of this to decide on a single word? Yes. This is, in my opinion, the first critical decision that you will make in building your world. Not where the continents are, not how many languages you will include, not the export or import goods of your fantasy country ruled over by Count Whats-his-name, but tone. One word. One emotional center of the Story World.

## Power of Tone in Worldbuilding and Storytelling

The appeal of a story operates on two levels. The intellectual level of thematic ideas makes us think about our lives, raises interesting questions for discussion, enlightens us to possibilities and potentials of human nature and existence, gives us new thought experiments to explore, or helps define reality and offer order and meaning for our lives. The emotional level, as communicated through tone, inspires us to feel, to connect to other human beings, to practice empathy, to commune with characters, to experience a catharsis of feelings. Why should we care about tone (which inspires the emotional landscape of the world and/or game) over theme (which delineates the intellectual and cerebral make-up of the game or world)? Because emotion is more primal, and it is at this level that people will first respond to your world.

Intellectual curiosities can be intriguing, but without feeling the invented world becomes a sterile equation, a thought experiment robbed of its primal emotive power. Tone is more fundamental than theme for a second reason: people will respond more readily to your ideas (themes and messages) when you have seduced their emotions. An idea becomes more appealing if married to a powerful feeling.

## Comic Book Tones Serve as Inspiration

### *Tim Bradstreet*

This image, created for Vertigo's *Hellblazer*, is the work of Tim Bradstreet. Bradstreet's solid black inks and shadows, and muted colors, as well as his realistic washes and subject matter, convey the grim and gritty, dark and often violent tones of the comic.



### *Josh Middleton*

Compare this with Josh Middleton's work from *Sky Between Branches*. Josh creates a brighter and color-saturated cell-shaded look that emphasizes the fantastic, whimsical and romantic tones of the

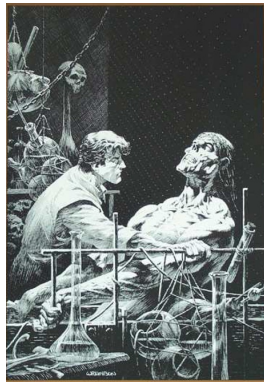
story. In Bradstreet's image, the subject appears to move slower; in Middleton's image, the subject screams with vibrant life. In both pictures, the energy of the subject is emphasized to clearly communicate the energy of the piece: cautious and deliberate versus soaring and excited.



## What is the tone of your Story World?

*Bernie Wrightson*

Do you want to establish macabre and gothic tones, such as those evoked in this image by Bernie Wrightson (illustrating *Frankenstein*)?



*Frank Frazetta*

Or will your world portray the grim, epic tones of a dark fantasy, like Frank Frazetta's *Death Dealer*?



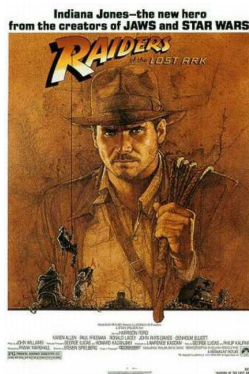
**Movies, and related media assets (such as posters), try to convey the film's tone to an audience as quickly as possible**

*Steven Spielberg (and friends)*

What emotional effects does this poster for *Empire of the Sun* create? What kind of a Story World could these feelings inspire?



The following two film worlds—both directed by Spielberg—cover similar subjects and time periods (Nazis as antagonists, World War II era), but their tones are in direct opposition to each other. *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: soaring, hopeful, adventurous, epic. The hero is visually identified as larger than life in contrast with the other figures, the center of the story, in control, powerful. The era is portrayed as full of action and adventure, accentuated by golds and earthy browns. Contrast this with...



...*Schindler's List*: cold, stark, hopeless, dreary. The subject of the movie still is accentuated in red, but only to point out her tragic situation and her impending danger. The world is black and white, devoid of any earthy colors, reinforcing the lifeless sterility of the character's existence. Hope is dimming, a faint red color with little chance of surviving in such a world. Survival is the best one can achieve, according to the tone of this image.



The Big Combo: noirish, mysterious, eerie. The tone here establishes a world where identity and motives are difficult to register. The characters in this story will struggle to understand or trust each other, to determine the true enemies, to distinguish right from wrong. Hero and villain may be one and the same. The interplay of light struggling to illuminate shadow serves as a metaphor for the hidden truth.



Psycho: what is the tone here? It may suggest that even in the real world, monsters are everywhere. And they're waiting for the heroines...



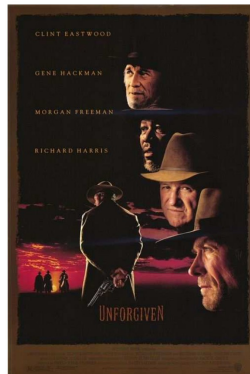
The tone can be romantic, in order to instill a sense of wonder or beauty...

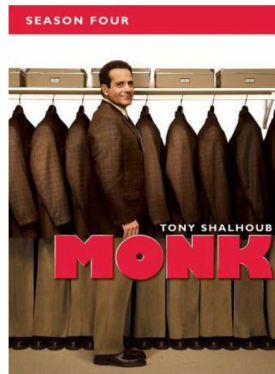


...Or to instill a prideful sense of nationalism and to induce unthinking heroism and flag-waving.



All of the following images establish tones that can be incorporated into potential Story Worlds





## Suggested Worldbuilding Activity

In thinking about the tone of your world, try to answer some or all of the following suggested questions:

1. What are the musical themes of this world and its characters? What would the soundtrack contain? What instruments would best illustrate the tone of the world? Create a soundtrack that inspires the emotions of the Story World.
2. What is the core feeling or emotion of the setting?
3. What is the worldview presented by the game master?
4. What is the ideal attitude of the players in response to the setting?
5. What kinds of major conflicts will the characters face? How difficult are the levels of major conflict? Are the conflicts beatable (as in high fantasy) or impossibly dire (as in Lovecraftian horror)?
6. Are there answers to the mysteries of the story, or are the deeper issues left open, ironic, or unsolvable?
7. Are the heroes able to win, only capable of surviving, or able to win but at a high price or through a great sacrifice?
8. In what camp will the conflicts be based: physical, emotional, political and social threats, psychological threats, spiritual threats? Will the adventure challenge the body, the intellect, or the emotional weaknesses of the character?
9. If this adventure was captured in a piece of artwork, what would it look like: color, texture, oils, watercolors, figures, subject...? If this world was captured as a movie, what would the first five minutes look like? Design a series of promotional movie posters that clearly illustrate the tone of the Story World.

10. What is the fundamental philosophy of life adopted by the game master/author? What is the overall purpose of the game master/author when it comes to creating an effect? What emotion or series of emotions does the game master/author want to evoke in the audience, players, reader as they experience the world and its conflicts? What literary devices, images, music, sound effects, props, will best serve these emotions?
11. Create a chapter of a design bible for the world that contains colors, textures, images, lyrics and collections of written imagery and poetry that capture the emotional content of the Story World.
12. Create a piece of artwork that clearly establishes the tone of the game. Compose an instrumental piece of music that establishes the tone. Write the beginning of a short story or novel (up to two pages) whose primary purpose is to establish the tone of the world. Write a diary entry from the point of view of a character inhabiting the world; capture this character's feelings in response to the world.
13. Use the tone list to come up with a one, two or three word description of the overall tone of the game.
  - [http://www1.fccj.edu/shughes/tone\\_words\\_to\\_know.htm](http://www1.fccj.edu/shughes/tone_words_to_know.htm)
  - [http://www.fosterenglish.com/seniorproject/index\\_files/page0059.htm](http://www.fosterenglish.com/seniorproject/index_files/page0059.htm)
  - common tones in fantasy worlds: realistic, romantic, nostalgic, epic (high adventure-explosive, heroic, superheroic, frenetic), sentimental, soaring, fanciful, sarcastic, satirical, dread, gothic, hopeless, anxiety, dread-horror
  - Tony Shaloub quote (about the theme song for Monk): "There's a certain thing Randy Newman [composer of the theme song for Monk] has, it's the dark and mournful sound, and there's this tongue-in-cheek, darkly humorous side. It completely fits the tone of the show."
14. When you have established your tone, post your ideas on the website to share with the rest of us!

## About this Document

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Shakespeare & Dragons was created by Paul Stark. Archive and cleaned-up show notes provided by Nils Jeppe of <http://enderra.com>