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Manipulating Tone

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ABSTRACT: Tone, or the emotional weight of a poem, is difficult for younger high school students to apprehend, in part because they've had little practice, and in part because they have a very limited affective vocabulary. One way to work successfully with tone is to ask students to create it for themselves by modeling—but in opposition—the work of a poet, in this case, Edgar Less Masters.

STANDARDS:

RL.11-12.3: Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama.

W.11-12.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

PROCEDURE: After reading and discussing several of the brief poetic portraits in the Spoon River Anthology, present your students with the following document:

These characteristics typify the poetry of Edgar Lee Masters in his Spoon River Anthology:

- Tends toward highly compressed narrative (Much is left unsaid.)
- Tends to convey a tone of cynicism and irony
- Tends to use simple language and grammatical sentences
- Tends to use allusion, primarily to classical or historical references
- Tends to interrelate his characters
- Creates a microcosm of small-town Midwestern church-going Americans
- Reveals the double lives that many people live
- Creates characters with one impassioned tale to tell.

This exercise consists of reversing the tone of Masters' original. Leave lines 3 and 4 as they are, and rewrite the other lines so that "Elmer Karr" makes exactly the opposite statement about what happened to him on his return to Spoon River. First, read or re-read "Tom Merritt."

Elmer Karr

What but the love of God could have softened
And made forgiving the people of Spoon River
Toward me who wronged the bed of Thomas Merritt
And murdered him besides?
Oh, loving hearts that took me in again
When I returned home from fourteen years in prison!
Oh, helping hands that in the church received me,
And heard with tears my penitent confession,
Who took the sacrament of bread and wine!
Repent, ye living ones, and rest with Jesus!

[Write your version of “Elmer Karr” here:]

Toward me who wronged the bed of Thomas Merritt
And murdered him besides?

MATERIALS: The Spoon River Anthology by Edgar Lee Masters