

Undertone

Definition of Undertone

Undertone is an [attitude](#) that lies under the ostensible tone of a literary work. In simple words, it is an implied meaning that usually points towards the underlying [theme](#) of a work. It is because mostly writers do not express it directly as their attitude or theme; rather, they do it by using images or symbols. Therefore, sometimes it becomes difficult to identify undertones.

Examples of Undertone in Literature

Example #1: *Cherry Orchard* (by Anton Chekhov)

In Anton Chekhov's "Cherry Orchard," there are several undertones, including time, contrasting regions, morality, and love. Although it is a tragic-[comedy](#), it is full of love triangles, unrequited love, physical love, spiritual love, platonic love, maternal love, and master and servant love. Also, there is a very prominent undertone of mortality. For instance, the memory of her dead husband and son haunts, Lubov. The departing family depicts its beloved home as "at the end of its life."

Example #2: *The Lord of the Rings* (by J.R.R. Tolkien)

The undertone in *The Lord of the Rings* is fundamentally Catholic and religious, unconsciously at first, and consciously in revision, because by design, it is about Catholic and Christian truths. For instance, the protagonists in the novel pursue absolutes, rejecting willingness to relativize or compromise. There is an absoluteness of right and wrong in Middle-earth. We do not see any [moral](#) clue of relativism that separates different races, people, and creators of free lands. The protagonists also

embrace suffering as an essential element of their salvation. They must sacrifice to get freedom from tyranny of evil.

Example #3: *Hamlet* (by William Shakespeare)

The deceptive undertone in “Hamlet” is a fear of being deceived. After two consistent appearances of the Ghost, Horatio joins Bernardo, Marcellus, and Francisco on an evening watch on the third night. Horatio mocks their stories about the appearances of the Ghost by saying, “Tush tush, ’twill not appear.”

He is a sensible and intelligent person who wants to see things himself before accepting them. Therefore, at the appearance of the Ghost, he immediately changes his [point of view](#). He informs Prince Hamlet of the Ghost’s resemblance to King Hamlet and warns him of its origin. Thus, Hamlet fears that this Ghost might be just a deception and appears to push Hamlet to go for a wicked action.

Example #4: *The Great Gatsby* (by F. Scott Fitzgerald)

“...I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands.

‘Beauty and the beast... Loneliness... Old Grocery Horse... Brook’n Bridge’

Then I was lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station, staring at the morning ‘Tribune’ and waiting for the four o’clock train.”

With Nick Caraway, Fitzgerald has portrayed an undertone of homosexuality. This scene is the period of four hours between Nick’s departure from the party and waiting for the train. Nick sees Mackee as a feminine man, feels attraction towards him, and follows him to his bed room while Mackee sleeps.

Example #5: *The Tyger* (by William Blake)

In his poem, “The Tyger,” Blake has used religious undertones. In his days,

has questioned absolute supremacy of God and dabbled into the religious arena through this poem, by employing the image of a tiger.

Blake is not afraid to challenge the religious assumptions. In the first two lines, he praises this animal a work of art, which is strikingly beautiful, “Tyger Tyger, burning bright ...” But the tiger also symbolizes horror. That is in the third and the fourth lines he questions, “What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” which means what kind of God could design a beautiful yet terrifying and horrible beast, a Tyger.

Function

Undertone adds depth to a literary work. Not only does it enhance writing, but it also develops interest of the readers to get an insight into the mind of a writer. Failing to convince their readers of their themes, writers and poets substitute direct [persuasion](#) with skeptical undertone of teaching. Just like tone, it could be cheery, fearful, threatening, or optimistic, etc. Besides that, it gives the readers an understanding of the characters, their emotions, and conflicts in a literary piece.