

CHAPTER 8

Style, Tone, and Irony



Rose Lincoln/Harvard Staff
Photographer.

We writers may see, observe, care and feel, but language is the medium by which that all comes across. Language is the transom of thought and feeling.

— ZZ PACKER

STYLE

Style is a concept that everyone understands on some level because in its broadest sense it refers to the particular way in which anything is made or done. Style is everywhere around us. The world is saturated with styles in cars, clothing, buildings, teaching, dancing, music, politics — in anything that reflects a distinctive manner of expression or design. Consider, for example, how a tune sung by the Beatles differs from the same tune performed by a string orchestra. There's no mistaking the two styles.

Authors also have different characteristic styles. Style refers to the distinctive manner in which a writer arranges words to achieve particular effects. That arrangement includes individual word choices and matters such as the length of sentences, their structure and tone, and the use of irony.

Diction refers to a writer's choice of words. Because different words evoke different associations in a reader's mind, the writer's choice of words is crucial in controlling a reader's response. The diction must be appropriate for the characters and the situations in which the author places them. In T. C. Boyle's story "The Hit Man," the protagonist repeatedly "wastes" people around him, from his classmate, to his father, to a waitress who serves him peas. The word wastes is slang for "murders," and it is a particular type of slang. To understand it, we probably have to have some familiarity with the

popular culture lore of a hired assassin, and we would probably have access to it through movies or TV shows. Although it refers to murder, the word is humorous in the context of the story, especially since it is repeated so often, and so factually. If Boyle had chosen the flatter word *murders* or a specific description of how the murder took place (*shoots, strangles, etc.*), the effect would be different.

Sentence structure is another element of a writer's style. Hemingway's terse, economical sentences are frequently noted and readily perceived. Here are the concluding sentences of Hemingway's "[Soldier's Home](#)," in which Krebs decides to leave home:

He had tried so to keep his life from being complicated. Still, none of it had touched him. He had felt sorry for his mother and she had made him lie. He would go to Kansas City and get a job and she would feel all right about it. There would be one more scene maybe before he got away. He would not go down to his father's office. He would miss that one. He wanted his life to go smoothly. It had just gotten going that way. Well, that was all over now, anyway. He would go over to the schoolyard and watch Helen play indoor baseball.

Hemingway expresses Krebs's thought the way Krebs thinks. The style avoids any "complicated" sentence structures. Seven of the eleven sentences begin with the word *He*. There are no abstractions or qualifications. We feel as if we are listening not only to *what*

Krebs thinks but to *how* he thinks. The style reflects his firm determination to make, one step at a time, a clean, unobstructed break from his family and the entangling complications they would impose on him.

Contrast this straightforward style with the first paragraph of James Baldwin's story "[Sonny's Blues](#)":

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside.

The cadence of Baldwin's sentences, the rhythmic repetitions, are striking here. It is like a relay race with each sentence passing a baton to the next one: "I read it" joins the first two sentences and is repeated within the second. That phrase slides into "I stared at it" in the third sentence, which is urged ahead by the repetition of the word *spelling* within that sentence. The final sentence begins again with "I stared at it" and leads us to the final image: the narrator looks outward at the subway window and it becomes a mirror, leading him back to his own face and a feeling of being trapped. This image sets up contrasts that recur throughout the story: of darkness and light, interiors and exteriors, others and selves. We are

lulled by these repetitions, drawn into the mystery of the narrator's words, which flow without giving us the same factual details that typify Hemingway's work. The word *it* is in each of these four initial sentences, but we haven't yet been told what it is. We trust that the flowing river of Baldwin's sentences will eventually carry us there.

Hemingway's and Baldwin's uses of language are very different, yet each style successfully fuses what is said with how it is said. We could write summaries of both passages, but our summaries, owing to their styles, would not have the same effect as the originals. And that makes all the difference.