What Is Mood in Literature?

Mood in literature is another word for the atmosphere or ambience of a piece of writing, be it a short story, novel, poem, or essay. The mood is the feeling that the writer is trying to evoke in their readers—feelings like calm, anxiety, joy, or anger.

Short stories or poems often have only one or two moods, since there's not a lot of space for writers to juggle multiple different moods. Novels have the space to deal in multiple moods, but even with several distinct moods in a novel, there's usually an overarching feel to the book that readers can identify and remember afterward.

Why Is Creating Mood in Stories Important?

Knowing how to establish mood in your stories is vital to good writing. A story with a cohesive and well-thought-out mood will create an emotional response in your readers, which acts as a hook that draws them into your story. Once your readers experience real feelings during your story, they're more willing to pay attention to your message and remember your story long after they've finished and put it down.

On the other hand, if you haven't worked to create a good mood for your type of story, you run the risk of your story not building up enough of a mood—or even bouncing too quickly between several moods and leaving the readers with a kind of mood-whiplash. Stories on either end of this spectrum will struggle to be emotionally resonant for their readers.

3 Examples of Mood in Literature

The best way to improve your writing is to read good examples of literary works from great writers. Here are a few great mood examples:

1. "True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?"- Edgar Allan Poe, *"The Tell-Tale Heart"*

2. "The river, reflecting the clear blue of the sky, glistened and sparkled as it flowed noiselessly on." - Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*

3. "The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees.

The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.

The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,

And the highwayman came riding—Riding—riding—

The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door."

- Alfred Moyes, "*The Highwayman*"

What Is the Difference Between Mood and Tone?

Mood and tone can be easily confused for one another, but they're slightly different ideas. Mood refers to the emotions evoked in the readers, while the author's tone refers not to the readers but to the attitude of a narrator. In this way, a story can have very different tone and mood: for instance, stories with comedic moods often follow very frustrated narrators with irritated or angry tones.

4 Ways to Create a Believable Mood in a Story

There are many approaches you can take to set the mood in your stories. You don't have to use a series of complicated literary devices or terms—in fact, the best tools that writers use to create atmosphere are simple literary elements. The four most common elements are included in the following examples:

1. **Setting**. The setting is the physical location of the story, and it can heavily inform a story's mood. For instance, a story set during a sunny day will be predisposed to a happy or carefree mood, while a story set in a haunted house will be predisposed to a sense of tension or fear.
2. **Tone**. Tone and mood can be easily mistaken for another, but they're slightly different things. While mood has to do with the feelings evoked in the reader, tone has nothing to do with the reader and everything to do with the point-of-view character (either first person or third person) of the story. In short, tone is the narrator's attitude toward the events taking place. Tone can contribute to the mood of a story by helping evoke feelings in readers—for instance, a rude narrator may create a funny tone for a story.
3. **Word choice**. The choice of words for a story can help establish its mood. If a writer wants to create a jarring or frustrating mood, they can choose specific words that are harsh and staccato-sounding; if they want to create a dark mood, they can use words with negative connotations to conjure brooding feelings.
4. **Theme**. Mood isn't established only by the way a writer writes—it is also determined by the subject matter the author uses. For instance, a story that talks a lot about death may be trying to create a sad mood, while a story whose theme centers around birthdays may have a more positive and upbeat mood.

3 Tips for Creating Mood for Your Story

Here are a few tips to help you while you're creating mood for your stories.

1. **Use a holistic approach to mood**. Since mood is made up of a combination of setting, tone, word choice, and theme, it's important that you as a writer think about all four while you work. If you try to use only one of these tools, you're severely limiting your ability to create a believable and pervasive mood for your story. A good rule of thumb is to shoot for at least three of these tools to establish your mood.
2. **Brainstorm mood words**. If you're drawing a blank when it comes to how to create a particular mood, it can help to brainstorm a list of mood words. For instance, if you know you want your story to have a creepy mood, then try making a list of different words that feel creepy to you, like these: gloomy, creak, tiptoe, moonlight, skittering, shadow, rattling. Once you've got a good list, pick a few of your favorites and include them in the scene.
3. **Subvert expectations**. While it's easy to go with the "expected" mood for your stories (for instance, that a story about a wedding will have a lighthearted, celebratory mood), remember that it's not always the best choice. When you push yourself to subvert readers' expectations, you can come up with creative and exciting combinations—for example, a wedding story with a foreboding mood, or a ghost story with a funny mood. Innovating with mood can help you create memorable, lasting writing.