

**Liam P.**

Berkeley, California

Untitled

Oil paint on canvas, audio

This piece is about sadness and helplessness. The paintings are inspired by painter Albert Pinkham Ryder, a landscape painter of the late 1800s. He used dark color schemes and dull tones to express ideas of existentialism and the unknown. This use of landscape is something that really intrigued me, and was something I wanted to explore for myself. Through these paintings I wanted to express feelings of depression and feeling lost in the world. I wanted them to be gentle to look at, using soft shapes and blurred lines to show the comfortability of this sadness. With the sound element I tried to capture the same emotions as the paintings; a kind of satisfying melancholia. I find it interesting to try to express the same emotions through very different mediums.

# The Importance of Tone



Liam P.

The Oxbow School OS45

Tone and color palette are incredibly important in art because they're what make up what the viewer is seeing. Color often dictates the direction and feeling of a painting, and influences the

perceived tone. In this essay I want to explore the role of tone and color palette in art, and how it evokes emotions in the viewer. More specifically, I want to explore the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder, a Tonalist painter of the late 1800s, and how he uses tone in his paintings to express certain emotions and ideas.

Can you imagine living your life in black and white? Like literally seeing black and white. Seeing only tones, experiencing the world through various greys. You look to the sky and see only grey. Tones upon tones. Your arms and legs. Grey.

Sometimes I feel like this is how I'm living my life. I'm living in the normal world, but all of the color has been drained out. What's left for me is the shapes, nothing of real substance or vibrance. Darkness and lightness are there, the tones remain, but hold no specific significance. There is color out there somewhere, but not where I am, not in my mind. It feels almost like a black and white fog, a sort of curtain that's been drawn over me. A big strong lens has been placed in front of me; an unmovable lens. It's blanketing me, weighing me down, but almost in a comforting way. Black and white is certainly simpler than color. Less variation, more monotony.

Sometimes it feels like when you close your eyes during the day. Some light still comes through, and some general shapes remain in your vision. It's all blurred out, things become fuzzy and abstract. It's hard to make out shapes and what they mean. Things start to appear under your closed eyes, beneath your eyelids. But they have no meaning, they make no sense at all.

I feel like I can remember when I experienced things in color. The vibrance and excitement of these memories is still with me, but it feels more and more subdued, like it's slipping away. Color provides for more context, more depth. It gives more detail, more explanation for what's going on and what it means. Black and white can certainly have meaning, but it often feels more flat. I don't use these terms black and white and color literally, like in terms of photography. Color

to me signifies excitement, it signifies life. And a lack of color is then a lack of these defining attributes, to a certain degree.

People often say that dogs only see in black and white. This confuses me, and I don't even know if it's true. How could one living in such a tonal world, devoid of color, contain such excitement and lust for life?

In a world where I feel color does not have much of a presence, tone has become important to me. Of course I feel that these two things (tone and color) are intertwined, and give each other meaning in certain ways. Colors are the different visuals that your eyes are perceiving, like red, blue, etc. Tone describes the shade and value of these colors, how dark they are, essentially the mood of the colors. Without color, and then the absence of it, tone would likely have less significance.

### **I. Tone/Evoking Emotion**

The use of tone is what really intrigues me about Ryder's work. When I first looked at his paintings, it gave me a feeling that I rarely get from art. A sense of bewilderment, and kind of like a deeper wonderment. It's something that's hard to explain in words, which is almost a good thing, I think. It's likely what an artist wants to happen when someone looks at what they've made. You respond to the work through emotion, which is a kind of language that doesn't exactly translate to spoken and written words. Often when I look at art, like in a museum, I have to stare at it and search for a meaning. It's here in this museum, and it's hung so nicely, so it must be good. When the art doesn't speak to you directly to make you feel and wonder, I think it's not doing what it should. In my mind, you shouldn't have to analyze and work through what the meaning might be: it should tell you right away.

Looking at Ryder's work, I feel that it's speaking to me. It sounds kind of cheesy, but I think it's true. His work speaks to me through emotion, almost in a kind of supernatural way. I think that he achieves this through the tone of his work. Looking at his paintings, you can pretty quickly see a trend in the color palette and theme of his work. He rarely uses bright colors, and sticks to using greens and blues and sickly yellows. They're very subdued. None of them feel like they are set in the daytime, which is interesting, because they're almost all landscapes and seascapes. This kind of dark and twilight-like way of lighting the scenes makes it feel very eerie, like they're something you'd see in a dream. His paintings feel to me like closing your eyes during the daytime: things are blurred out and fuzzy and not making sense, but in a metaphorical sense.

The feelings and thoughts I got from looking at these paintings surprised me. They have almost a calming effect, yet make you feel slightly uncomfortable. It's like they're putting you on edge, but in a satisfying way. This is a feeling that I definitely have in my daily life. The sensation of being anxious and feeling like something isn't quite right, yet it feels like home, like it's the way it's supposed to be. It's kind of a hard thing to explain. It's definitely a dark feeling. Like a shadow looming over you. Seeing art that reflected these emotions of darkness and anxiety was interesting, and something I hadn't experienced before. I hadn't seen art before that really felt like a representation of the thoughts that I have. I imagine not everyone feels these same emotions when looking at Ryder's paintings, but that's the wonderful thing about art. What you see in a painting is your perception, it's personal. And Ryder too believed in this idea, saying "*No two visions are alike, and those who reach the heights have all toiled up steep mountains by a different route. To each has been revealed a different panorama.*" The emotions and tones that you put into an artwork are yours, they're specific to you. This is true to whether you're making a piece of art or viewing one.

## **II. Tonalism**

I wanted to look more into Ryder's style of painting, and what it meant. Ryder was part of a movement known as Tonalism, a lesser known artistic movement that happened in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The movement was short lived, and faded from popularity fairly quickly to be replaced by more abstract styles of modernism. I found that Tonalist painters were a lot about using simple colors and shapes to convey a deeper meaning. The work often uses dark and dull colors, to reflect the dark and moody ideas behind the paintings. Tonalist painters believed that by using these dark palettes and simple shapes and lines, they could show the deeper "cosmic harmonies" that are present in nature and the forms of nature. I find this idea very intriguing, that some deeper, true explanations could lie in the simple shapes and colors of nature. But I do find it to be true. By using these grim colors and tones and stark shapes, they were able to convey ideas and thoughts about the human experience, like depression, loneliness, existentialism. Things that reach beyond a simple landscape.

## **III. Namesake**

I didn't just stumble across Albert Pinkham Ryder, I've known about him for a long time. Both me and my older brother share the middle name Ryder, which my mom chose after this painter. I've known this for as long as I can really remember, yet for some reason I never had the thought to look into this person, to even look at his art. I realized this while at Oxbow, and felt the sudden urge to figure it out. Who was the person? Why was he cool enough to name two of your children after him? I guess that's the thing about middle names, it's not something you often think about, it's seen as not as important compared to your first and last name. It's a strange thing to be named

after someone, I imagine it's even stranger to have your first name be after someone. There's always a chance that this person you are named after is not someone you admire or respect, but the choice of being connected to them has been taken out of your hands. On one hand, it's just a name, something that's made up and has no meaning. But on the other hand, whether we like it or not, these made up things have significance and carry history and stories. So I was relieved to discover that I really liked Ryder's paintings when I eventually found them, after not knowing my entire life. It would certainly have been strange to hate his work, but still have this very apparent connection to him. But I honestly really felt I could relate to his paintings. To me, they represent a lot of feelings that I have, and express a lot of the emotions that I wish I could express in my artwork. It felt special to me to have discovered this thing at this stage in my life that I could relate to, and feel excited about. It feels like I have discovered a new part of my identity, in a very literal sense.

#### **IV. Meaning and Interpretation**

I had found my own meaning in his artwork, but I was very interested in what he felt when making these paintings. Like many artists and thinkers, Ryder used his art as a way to grapple with and figure out ideas of humanity and human nature, and also the human experience. Like other tonalist painters, he expressed this questioning of life through the form and shape of the natural world, trying to find deeper meaning in the basic things and subtleties of life. A theme that appears frequently in his paintings is helplessness, and how there's a lot that's out of one's control. He shows this in many paintings with a rudderless boat, that is just drifting by, without direction or control. It's meant to show that our life is like that boat, a catalyst for our human experience, that we are merely drifting through. Ryder seemed to be very interested in mystery, and the things he

didn't understand. Through his paintings he was trying to find something that couldn't be found in reality. I found a great quote by him that goes, "*Have you ever seen an inch worm crawl up a leaf or a twig, and then clinging to the very end, revolve in the air, feeling for something to reach something? That's like me. I am trying to find something out there beyond the place on which I have a footing.*" These very existentialist and questioning ideas certainly provide some explanation for his dark and grim work.

Tonalism is certainly not a very cheery approach to painting, that can be easily deduced just from the depressing and dull colors that are used. I find it very interesting that Ryder conveys these depressing emotions and ideas without using necessarily disturbing or graphic imagery, but just by showing things that are of our world. This feels somehow more jarring than if he were to show more graphic and destructive imagery. I found that Ryder drew inspiration from many poets before him, such as Keats and Poe, and was in fact a poet himself. From these writers he drew a theme of drama and foreboding, as well as an idea of fate. This is apparent in his many dramatic scenes, several depicting religious scenes. One that sticks out to me is "Jonah". It shows a god-like figure shining down on a churning sea, with dark figures seemingly drowning below. It's very epic, and feels like a freeze frame of some kind of fateful, dramatic moment.

## V. Technique

A crucial aspect of the tone and feeling of a painting is the method in which it was painted. Upon researching Ryder's methods and ways of painting, I found that he didn't approach it in a very traditional way. As I quickly started to notice, a number of his paintings are noticeably cracked, and are seemingly deteriorating. This happens to all paintings, but it's also due to the layering technique that Ryder used. He put layers upon layers of paint on each canvas, sometimes working on single paintings for decades. But between layers, he wouldn't allow the paint to dry, adding more paint on top of the still wet paint. Over time, the paint dries, shrinking and forming these cracks. Many patrons of Ryder felt frustrated when they found their paintings to be cracking and oozing paint. Some speculated that Ryder knew very little about correct painting techniques, that he was doing it wrong. Personally, I believe the cracks and imperfections add even more to the tone of his works. They further demonstrate the idea of being helpless, that nothing is really in our control. They show that things are ever changing, that paintings are not fixed physical objects, they have a life of their own.

Studying his paintings, I've found that his dedication to working on one same painting for many years is what really expresses the tone of the work. All those hours, hours of thinking, pondering, questioning the placement of every stroke. All those layers, working together over time. This progress through time is what really gives his work that eerie and luminous, kind of supernatural feel. His paintings really shine, and pop at you, without using bright colors. It's something that's hard to explain, or feel, without seeing.

I really admire Ryder's disregard for the "traditional" approach to painting. I feel that art shouldn't have guidelines, or certain ways you're supposed to paint. I find it satisfying that people were mad at his paintings. In my research, I found that when Ryder first started painting

landscapes, he would try to capture every detail, and get caught up in all the little things. He eventually got mad and threw his brushes aside, using his palette knife to glob paint onto the canvas. This approach lends itself to his sloppy and fuzzy, yet very intentional, look. To me this is what sets his work apart from other painters, specifically landscape painters.

Tone and color are capable of capturing so much, they can tell so many stories. They can express the beauty and wonders of our world, but also the deep sadness and pain. It's truly a beautiful balance, and it's not easy to capture both joy and suffering at the same time. No physical object can truly express such deep and complex emotions, but I believe that Ryder comes very close.

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