

LESSON PLAN #11: Abigail and Mercy

[1] **Curriculum framework(s):** 8.32 Identify and analyze the point(s) of view in a literary work. 8.33 Analyze patterns of imagery or symbolism and connect them to themes and/or tone and mood.

[2] **Goal of the lesson:** To illustrate the different tone and point of view Abigail uses in her letters to Mercy Otis Warren, perhaps indicating what scholars note was Abigail's insecurity towards Mercy.

[3] **Expected student outcomes:** Students will be able to illustrate how an author's tone can change, depending on the audience.

[4] **Assessment of expected student outcomes:** Completion of the Tone handout and in-class discussion.

[5] **Instructional procedures:** 45 minutes

Vocabulary: debar; propensity; intimation; illicit; beset; machinations; calumny; dissimulate; complacency.

N.B. "Lovelace" is an allusion to Samuel Richardson's popular novel, *Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady*. Lovelace is a reprobate and seduces Clarissa, the young protagonist, and causes her tragic death. Therefore, Abigail uses Lovelace to describe a cad (Hogan interview).

Activities: Students will have read the letters the previous night and completed an Epistolary Analysis for them.

These letters are particularly engaging, since Abigail's writing style becomes much more flowery and much more self-deprecating. Many scholars of Mrs. Adams have remarked upon this tendency in Abigail's letters to Mercy, largely because Mercy, the older woman, was known for her accomplishments as a writer. Nonetheless, Abigail's direct style, traditionally found in her letters, has received laurels for its simple, yet elegant form of prose.

After leading students in a brief discussion about these letters, have them discuss in small groups (or with partners) the specifics of Mercy's writing, and complete the handout on "Tone"; have them share their findings according to class discussion rules.

Homework: Read the next letters in the unit and complete an Epistolary Analysis.

[6] **Material and resources:**

- 1) Tone handout
- 2) Three letters from Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, dated 16 July 1773, 27 April 1776, and 28 February 1780 (attached).
- 3) Use previous letters (selected at teacher discretion) to illustrate the significant change in Abigail's tone when she writes to Mercy.

TONE!

Tone is the speaker's or narrator's attitude conveyed in writing. In her letters to Mercy Otis Warren, Abigail possesses a unique tone. Compare her letters to other correspondents with those to Mrs. Warren. Begin by comparing and contrasting the Epistolary Analysis for your letters.

	In Letters to Mrs. Warren	In Letters to Others
Word Choice		
Allusions and Quotations of Poetry		
Apologies/self-deprecation		
Style and Language		

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Based on the above chart, what can you infer about the differences between Mrs. Adams as a correspondent to Mercy and as a correspondent to her other family/friends.
- 2) Why do you think there is a distinction in tone in her letters?
- 3) When would we have cause in the 21st century to use distinctions in tone? Why? Look at both oral and written communication.
- 4) What can tone illustrate about how we feel towards our audience?
- 5) How does Abigail feel towards her different audiences?
- 6) Do you believe tone can convey a sense of power? Explain.
- 7) How can tone be used to our benefit or to our disadvantage?

Student Name _____ Date _____

Epistolary Analysis

Date of letter(s)	Location of letter writer
Sender	Recipient

Topic of letter(s)	
Theme(s) of the letter(s)	
Significant quotes	
Historical details in the letter(s)	

Allusions, metaphors, similes and other figures of speech (give examples)	
Tone	
Images	
Diction	
Evidence of sarcasm or satire	
Vocabulary words	

Letter from Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 16 July 1773

Boston July 16 1773

Madam

The kind reception I met with at your House, and the Hospitality with which you entertained me, demands my gratefull acknowledgment. By requesting a correspondence you have kindly given me an opportunity to thank you for the happy Hours I enjoyed whilst at your House. Thus imbolden'd I venture to stretch my pinions, and tho like the timorous Bird I fail in the attempt and tumble to the ground yet sure the Effort is laudable, nor will I suffer my pride, (which is greatly increased since my more intimate acquaintance with you) to debar me the pleasure, and improvement I promise myself from this correspondence tho I suffer by the comparison.

I Had a very Hot and unplesent ride the afternoon I left your House. I arrived at my own habitation on Monday, and found my family well. Since my return we have had several fine showers which have, I hope extended, as far as Eel river, and watered with their blessings every sod and plant belonging to my much valued Friends. Air, Sun, and Water, the common blessings of Heaven; we receive as our just due, and too seldom acknowledg our obligations to the Father of the rain; and the Gracious dispencer of every good and perfect gift, yet if but for a very little while these blessings are withheld, or spairingly dealt out to us, we then soon discover how weak, how little and how blind, we are.

When I was at Plymouth Madam you may remember I mentiond Mrs. Seymore upon Education, and upon your expressing a desire to see it, I promised to send it you. I now take the earlyest opportunity to comply with your request. Not from an opinion that you stand in need of such an assistant, but that you may give me your Sentiments upon this Book, and tell me whether it corresponds with the plan you have prescribed to yourself and in which you have so happily succeeded. I am sensible I have an important trust committed to me; and tho I feel my-self very uneaquel to it, tis still incumbent upon me to discharge it in the best manner I am capable of. I was really so well pleased with your little offspring, that I must beg the favour of you to communicate to me the happy Art of "rearing the tender thought, teaching the young Idea how to shoot, and pouring fresh instruction o'er the Mind." May the Natural Benevolence of your Heart, prompt you to assist a young and almost inexperienced Mother in this Arduous Business, that the tender twigs alloted to my care, may be so cultivated as to do honour to their parents and prove blessing[s] to the riseing generation. When I saw the happy fruits of your attention in your well ordered family, I felt a Sort of Emulation glowing in my Bosom, to imitate the

*"Parent who vast pleasure find's
In forming of her childrens minds
In midst of whom with vast delight
She passes many a winters Night
Mingles in every play to find
What Bias Nature gave the mind
Resolving thence to take her aim*

*To guide them to the realms of fame
And wisely make those realms the way
To those of everlasting day.*

*Each Boisterous passion to controul
And early Humanize the Soul
In simple tales beside the fire
The noblest Notions to inspire.
Her offspring conscious of her care
Transported hang around her chair.”*

*I must beg your pardon for thus detaining you. I have so long neglected my pen that I am conscious I shall make but a poor figure. To your Friendship and candour I commit this, and would only add my regards to Coll. Warren from his and your obliged Friend & Humble Servant,
Abigail Adams*

“Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren.” 16 July 1773. *Adams Family Correspondence: Volume 1, December 1761-May 1776*. Ed. Lyman Henry Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1963.

Letter from Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 27 April 1776

Braintree April 27 1776

I set myself down to comply with my Friends request, who I think seem's rather low spirited.

I did write last week, but not meeting with an early conveyance I thought the Letter of But little importance and tos'd it away. I acknowledg my Thanks due to my Friend for the entertainment she so kindly afforded me in the Characters drawn in her Last Letter, and if coveting my Neighbours Goods was not prohibited by the Sacred Law, I should be most certainly tempted to envy her the happy talant she possesses above the rest of her Sex, by adorning with her pen even trivial occurances, as well as dignifying the most important. Cannot you communicate some of those Graces to your Friend and suffer her to pass them upon the World for her own that she may feel a little more upon an Equality with you? —Tis true I often receive large packages from P[hiladelphi]a. They contain as I said before more News papers than Letters, tho they are not forgotton. It would be hard indeed if absence had not some alleviations.

I dare say he writes to no one unless to Portia oftner than to your Friend, because I know there is no one besides in whom he has an equal confidence. His Letters to me have been generally short, but he pleads in Excuse the critical state of affairs and the Multiplicity of avocations and says further that he has been very Busy, and writ near ten Sheets of paper, about some affairs which he does not chuse to Mention for fear of accident.

He is very sausy to me in return for a List of Female Grievances which I transmitted to him. I think I will get you to join me in a petition to Congress. I thought it

was very probably our wise Statesmen would erect a New Government and form a new code of Laws. I ventured to speak a word in behalf of our Sex, who are rather hardly dealt with by the Laws of England which gives such unlimited power to the Husband to use his wife Ill.

I requested that our Legislators would consider our case and as all Men of Delicacy and Sentiment are averse to Exercising the power they possess, yet as there is a natural propensity in the Humane Nature to domination, I thought the most generous plan was to put it out of the power of the Arbitrary and tyrannick to injure us with impunity by Establishing some Laws in our favour upon just and Liberal principals.

I believe I even threatned fomenting a Rebellion in case we were not considered, and assured him we would not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we had neither a voice, nor representation.

In return he tells me he cannot but Laugh at my Extrordnary Code of Laws. That he had heard their Struggle had loosned the bands of Government, that children and apprentices were dissabedient, that Schools and Colledges were grown turbulant, that Indians slighted their Guardians, and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But my Letter was the first intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a complement, he adds, but that I am so sausy he wont blot it out.

So I have help'd the Sex abundantly, but I will tell him I have only been making trial of the Disintresstedness of his Virtue, and when weigh'd in the balance have found it wanting.

It would be bad policy to grant us greater power say they since under all the disadvantages we Labour we have the assendancy over their Hearts

And charm by accepting, by submitting sway.

I wonder Apollo and the Muses could not have indulged me with poetical Genius. I have always been a votary to her charms but never could assend Parnassus myself.

I am very sorry to hear of the indisposition of your Friend. I am affraid it will hasten his return, and I do not think he can be spaired.

*“Though certain pains attend the cares of State
A Good Man owes his Country to be great
Should act abroad the high distinguishd part
or shew at least the purpose of his heart.”*

Good Night my Friend. You will be so good as to remember me to our worthy Friend Mrs. W—e when you see her and write soon to your

Portia

Letter from Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 28 February 1780

Febry. 28 1780

How does my Dear Mrs. Warren through a long and tedious Winter? in which I have never been honoured with a single line from her hand. Possibly she may think me underserving of her favours; I will not presume to lay claim to them upon the score of merit, but surely she should have charitably considered my lonely State, and Brightned the Gloomy hour with the Benign Rays of her Friendship dispenced through her elegant pen.

A Succession of tormenting whitlows has prevented me from inquiring after the Health of my much valued Friend. Those difficulties being now removed I have the pleasure of making that inquiry? and of communicating to her the agreeable intelligence I received last week, by a vessel arrived at Newburyport from Corruna in Spain, of the safe arrival of Mr. Adams at that Port, in Eighteen days after he left Boston. I have not as yet, received any Letters, nor any certain account why they made that port, it is rumour that the vessel sprung a leak.

I suppose he will proceed by land to France tho a journey of 700 miles, from whence I hope soon to be favoured with the certainty of his arrival.

By Capt. Sampson there came two Letters, one from Mr. Lee [and] one from a Mr. Gellee, to Mr. Adams. By Mr. Lee's I find that affairs go on in the old course at Passy. "The Counsel there is composed of the same Honorable Members, says Mr. Lee, as when you left it, with the reinforcement of Samll. Wharton, Samll. Petrie and the Alexanders, a match is concluded between one of the daughters and Jonathan Williams this August and natural family compact will I hope promote the publick as well as private Interests."

There is a party in France of worthless ambitious intrigueing Americans, who are diposed to ruin the reputation of every Man whose Views do not coinside with their selfish Schemes. Of this you will be satisfied when I tell you that Mr. Gellee writes thus,

"After your departure reports were circulated here that you were gone to England and that during your Station here, you had entertained an Illicit correspondence with the British Ministry. It was even published here that Mr. Samll. Adams had headed a conspiracy and contrived to surrender Boston to the English. In vain did I endeavour to shew them the absurdity of the former opinion, by your embarking in the same ship with the Chevalier, but you know the people in this country are in general very Ignorant of American affairs which give designing Men an opportunity to shew their Malignity."

How happy my dear Madam would America have been, had it been her Lot, to have contended only with foreign Enemies, but the rancour of her internal foes have renderd the task of the patriot peculiarly difficult and Dangerous.

I sometimes contemplate the situation of my absent Friend, honoured as he is at present with the confidence of his Country, as the most critical and hazardous Embassy to his reputation, his honour, and I know not but I may add life, that could possibly have been entrusted to him. I view him beset with the machinations of envy, the Snares of Treachery, the malice of Dissimulation and the Clandestine Stabs of Calumny.

Can the Innocence of the dove or the wisdom of a more subtle animal screne him from all these foes? Can the strictest integrity and the most unwearied exertions for the

benefit and happiness of Mankind secure to him more, than the approbation of his own Heart.

All other applause without that would be of small Estimation, yet one would wish not to be considered as a selfish, designing, Banefull foe, when they have worn out their lives in the service of their country.

Those who Envy him, his situation see not with my Eyes, nor feel with my Heart. Perhaps I feel and fear too much.

I have heard this winter of a Letter from a Lady to her son containing Strictures upon Lord Chesterfields Letters. I have not been favoured with a sight of it, tho I have wished for it. A collection of his Lordships Letters came into my Hands this winter which I read, and tho they contain only a part of what he has written, I found enough to satisfy me, that his Lordship with all his Elegance and graces, was a Hypocritical, polished Libertine, a mere Lovelace, but with this difference, that Lovelace was the most generous Man of the two, since he had justice sufficient to acknowledge the merrit he was distroying, and died penitently warning others, whilst his Lordship not content himself with practiseing, but is in an advanced age, inculcateing the most immoral, pernicious and Libertine principals into the mind of a youth whose natural Guardian he was, and at the same time calling upon him to wear the outward Garb of virtue knowing that if that was cast aside, he would not be so well able to succeed in his persuits.

I could prove to his Lordship were he living that there was one woman in the world who could act consequentially more than 24 hours, since I shall dispise to the end of my days that part of his character. Yet I am not so blinded by his abuse upon our sex, as not to allow his Lordship the merrit of an Elegant pen, a knowledge of Mankind and a compiler of many Excellent maxims and rules for the conduct of youth, but they are so poisoned with a mixture of Libertinism that I believe they will do much more injury than benifit to Mankind. I wish my dear Madam you would favor me with a copy of the Letter said to be in your power.

How does that patient sufferer Mrs. Lothrope? She is one of those who is to be made perfect through sufferings, nor will the prediction be unaccomplished in her, my affectionate regard to her, and a tender commiseration for her sufferings.

I spent a most agreeable Evening with you not long since in imagination. I hope to realize it in the approaching Spring.

My respectfull regards to Generall Warren, complements to my young Friends from their and your affectionate Friend,

Portia

My Daughter presents her duty and reflects with pleasure upon the winter she so agreeably spent with you. She remembers Master George with affection, the other young Gentlemen with complacency.