

EXERCISE 14

CHAPTER 14: MOOD & SYMBOLISM

Exercise 14: Lighting for Mood

Several factors play a role in conveying mood: how bright or dark the overall scheme is, the colour of the light, its direction, quality and relative familiarity. It's worth spending some time experimenting and setting up exactly the right kind of lighting to convey the specific mood you are looking for. Creative lighting is about far more than just making your characters and environments visible – it's also about how you want your audience to react to them.

There are some cases where the mood of an image is its most important aspect, and others where mood has a more subservient role. In neither case can the mood be ignored because it is important even when not the key to the image. To demonstrate just how big a role lighting plays in creating mood, let's look at how the same subject appears under four different lighting schemes.

2.1 Under very flat, diffuse lighting you can see the character clearly. However, there is little in the way of emotional impact here – this kind of lighting is often used when the subject itself is paramount (such as a product shot or a portrait). You can see the subject clearly without being distracted by any other factors.



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2.2 If the character is then lit to simulate a typical sunny outdoor situation, more life is immediately added to the image and a sense of context is created. In terms of mood there is also an improvement, but since this is a fairly ordinary and everyday situation this is not dramatic.



2.3 If the character is then placed in very low-key cool lighting things change considerably. There is now a distinct air of menace and mystery, and the character conveys a completely different feeling. Once the lighting departs from the ordinary and the everyday it conveys far greater meaning in terms of mood. Atmosphere, rather than functionality, becomes its main purpose.



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2.4 In the final example, the warm and high contrast lighting coming from below immediately creates something mysterious and spooky, yet appealing. This is not the kind of lighting usually seen in everyday life, and this very unfamiliarity helps to create the atmosphere. The unusual is much more likely to create an emotional impact.



By comparing these four examples, you can get a small taste of just how much difference lighting can make to the mood conveyed by a simple character. The further you stray from the ordinary, the greater the emotional impact is likely to be.