



TO*NE* *and* TEXTURE:

EXPLORING BLACK & WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY IN LIGHTROOM

By Gene McCullagh



“Our lives at times seem
a study in contrast...
everything seen in
absolutes of
black & white.
Too often we are not
aware that it is the
shades of grey that add
depth & meaning to the
starkness of those extremes.”

—Ansel Adams

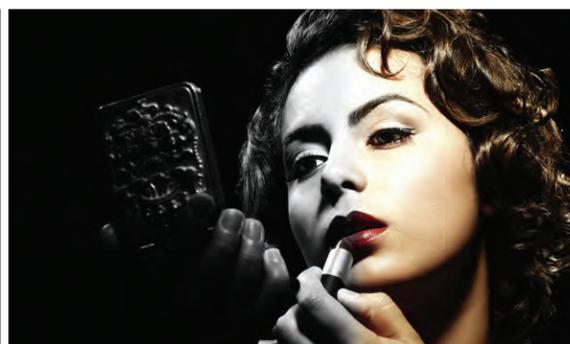


As photographers we see the world in a different way. We look for the angles, judge distances, make lens selections, and chase the light, all in pursuit of making a great image. As humans we relate to color. We see in color. It evokes different emotions and can enhance an image. But there's another way to see the world around us.

Unlike our camera's sensor, our eyes have two different light receptors: rods and cones. Cones allow us to see color. Our camera's sensor mimics the cones in our eyes and responds to red, green, and blue wavelengths of light. We have about 6 to 7 million cones in our eye. Rods, on the other hand, are much more sensitive to light and do not register color at all. We have about 120 million rods. Rods are extremely sensitive. At low light levels, cones will “shut down,” leaving us to see the world in black and white. It's this overwhelming ability to perceive tonal values without color that makes black-and-white photography understandable to us, and it can open up a whole new realm of photographic exploration.

Lightroom provides a broad set of tools to allow us to bring our vision of light, shadow, tone, and texture to life. Black and white is really a misnomer. It's the shades of gray (the tonal values) that add the depth and meaning to a black-and-white image. Sometimes it's the best choice for a subject. We can manipulate tonal values to create different moods. You might be surprised to find that you have a wealth of black-and-white candidates already in your catalog. Let's dive in and see what we find!

Images: iStockphoto Layout Design: Taffy Clifford



SEEING IN BLACK *and* WHITE

Color is powerful and our brains “fill in” the color information when it’s not there. For example, when you look at trees and grass in the moonlight you’re probably not seeing green. Depending on the amount of moonlight, you may be unable to perceive green because your cones have already shut down. But your brain knows trees and grass are green so you see it anyway. The challenge for us is to learn how to see in black and white. Learn to observe the contrast and tones available in a scene. Look for lighting that brings out texture. While the “golden hours” are still good times, black and white frees us to shoot in otherwise harsh lighting. Well-defined shadows and highlights make for interesting black-and-white shots.

Turn your new vision to your existing catalog of images. You may find images that are just mediocre in color but can become stunning in black and white. Black and white is an abstract medium. You get to decide what tones represent what colors. That flexibility opens up the possibilities, so don’t get stuck seeing green as a middle gray or blue as a light gray. You can interpret the scene according to your vision.

BASIC BLACK *and* WHITE CONVERSION

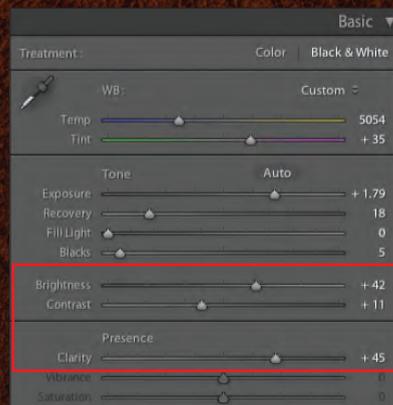
I’m a big advocate of creating virtual copies in Lightroom. They don’t take up any space (except for a few bytes in the catalog) and they afford you the benefit of leaving your master image the way you like it while exploring other possibilities. So I recommend you press Command-’ (PC: Ctrl-’) to create a virtual copy of any image you’re taking down an alternate artistic path.

With your virtual copy selected, press V to convert the image to black and white. Yes, it’s that easy! Oh, but don’t think you’re done. Now we have the basic “canvas” that awaits our unique vision. Unfortunately, this is where many people stop. They convert the image, take a look at it, and are unimpressed. Back to color. But we know that color images require us to develop them with adjustments, enhancements, and so on. So do black-and-white images. We just use a different approach.

So why does the basic conversion look so...blah? In a word—contrast. As with color, the histogram is your friend when processing black-and-white images. We can immediately see that this image has no data in the blacks and very little in the right third of the histogram. As a result, the image seems to be behind a gray haze. Nothing in particular stands out. The image lacks “punch” (see top right).

In the Develop module, you can click-and-drag in the Histogram panel and manipulate it directly. When you hover over the histogram, your cursor changes to a bar with left- and right-pointing arrows. The area where you’re hovering becomes highlighted and corresponds to one of the four basic Tone adjustment sliders (Recovery, Exposure, Fill Light, and Blacks). I like to start in the Histogram panel and fine-tune in the Basic panel. A small adjustment to the histogram data puts more punch in the image (see middle right).

Now we have some data in the blacks and whites and generally more contrast throughout the image. You can add some additional contrast punch with the Brightness, Contrast, and Clarity sliders (see bottom right).





USING THE B&W PANEL

Now we can start mixing our tones in relation to the colors from the original image. Remember, you decide what tone goes with what color. There are no hard and fast rules and you can reinterpret colors differently from image to image. From your color work, you're probably familiar with the HSL and Color sections of the HSL/Color/B&W panel. When you choose the B&W section, you'll see the Black & White Mix sliders.



By moving these sliders you can adjust the tonal value of the original colors in the image. Don't worry—you don't have to remember what colors are where. In the upper-left corner is the now-familiar target icon indicating that this panel has a Target Adjustment tool, or TAT. Click on this and you'll get a cursor that looks like the icon with arrows pointing up and down alongside a small cross. Click-and-drag on the image to adjust the underlying color's tonal range. Lightroom knows what sliders to move while you get to just paint and create! As you drag the tool up and down you can see the corresponding color sliders adjust. The main color is highlighted but other neighboring colors may also adjust depending on the mix.

FINE-TUNE WITH THE ADJUSTMENT BRUSH *and* A VIGNETTE

To further refine the image, use the Adjustment Brush (K). Set your Flow below 50 so you can slowly paint in the adjustment. You can adjust Exposure or Brightness for example, and you can effectively dodge and burn with the added benefit of adjusting the sliders after the brushstrokes have been applied. Here, I've indicated a few of the areas where I've brushed in a lower exposure (yellow) and a higher exposure (blue), bringing more pop to the image. To begin using another brush (say for different exposures), click New and begin painting.



Finally, bring the viewer's eye into the frame by adding a vignette via the Effects panel. You can also add some grain for additional texture and a bit of nostalgia, if you like.

With a little work we've transformed a rather ordinary shot into a black-and-white image that evokes a far different feeling. Of course, that's a very subjective statement but art is a very subjective thing. This was a basic walk-through of black-and-white processing. With more time and finer adjustments, there's no telling where you can take an image.



THE DESATURATION ALTERNATIVE

As great as the Black & White Mix sliders are, there's a problem with it on some images. These adjustments tend to create noise and sometimes a splotchy conversion of tonal ranges. There is, however, another method that can lead to better results and provide some additional benefits, should you want to reintroduce some color into the image again. Instead of converting the image to black and white, go to the Saturation sliders in the HSL panel and drag them all the way to the left.

Once you do, I recommend creating a user preset so you can quickly desaturate all of the color from an image. To do this, go to the Presets panel and click the Create New Preset icon (+), name your preset, and click Create. Now, instead of using the Black & White Mix sliders to adjust the tones, use the Luminance panel in the HSL section. You get the same array of colors and the Target Adjustment tool is still available, but the conversion will look better on some images. Here's an example with the same settings for the colors in both the B&W panel applied to a converted image, and in the Luminance panel applied to a desaturated version of the image.

Look at the corresponding shadow areas (at either end of the red arrows) and you can see the difference. The black-and-white conversion algorithms (on left) don't do as good of a job, especially in shadows; however, keep your goal in mind. If your image doesn't have a lot of noise build-up and you'll be adding grain, then this won't be as important. Either way, it's good to have an alternative. It just goes to show you how powerful and flexible a tool Lightroom can be.

BEYOND LIGHTROOM

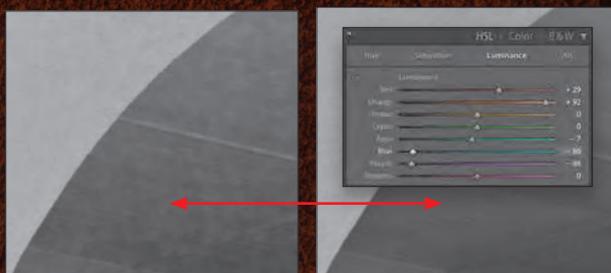
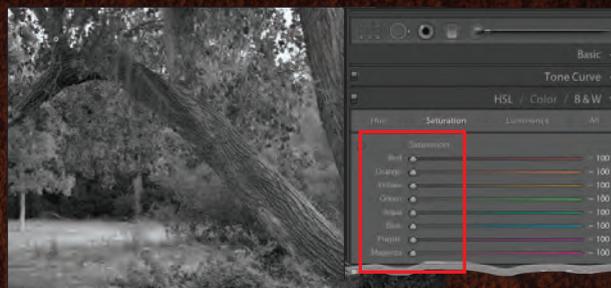
Even though Lightroom can help you release your inner Ansel Adams, it may not be enough for you. If you decide that you want to dive deeper into the world of tones and textures, you can explore additional tools. For example, you can round trip your image to Photoshop and take advantage of its powerful arsenal of adjustment layers, masks, filters, and so on.

Another excellent alternative is Nik Software's Silver Efex Pro 2. This is a powerhouse of a plug-in that will work with both Photoshop and Lightroom. It has a well-designed interface (very reminiscent of Lightroom). There are a number of presets that install with the plug-in. Best of all, Silver Efex Pro 2 uses Nik's U Point technology. U Point is like masking on steroids. You can really dig into the tonality of an image with this plug-in. I haven't seen anything that comes close. Seriously, you can get lost in this plug-in experimenting away and exploring the tonal universe.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I've only scratched the surface of black-and-white imagery here. I hope it's enough to spark your curiosity and encourage you to give this expressive medium a try. Start with your existing catalog and look for images that have more to say to you with their shadows, highlights, and textures than they do with their colors. Lightroom is all you need to get started!

As with color images, shooting in RAW will yield superior results, especially when manipulating tonal ranges. The more



Silver Efex Pro 2

data you have the better. If you've tried your hand at HDR photography, you may be surprised at the results you can achieve with black-and-white HDR images. Take a look at the dramatic changes of mood you can achieve by diffusing the highlights or the shadows. Try some selective-color images. You can even try hand-painting some images with pastel colors for an antique look. The possibilities are truly endless.

Photography is an abstraction of reality and black and white is a further abstraction. This medium gives us the freedom to explore the interplay of light and shadow—to help us tell a story or convey an emotion. The next time you head out with your camera, look around you for things that you might otherwise pass by. See the contrast beyond the color. Don't be afraid of the harsh light of midday. Try these newfound skills on landscapes, people, architecture, street scenes, still lifes, whatever you can think of. Learn to see the beauty of black and white. ■