

# AQA English GCSE

## Poetry: Love and Relationships

Neutral Tones - *Thomas Hardy*

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## NEUTRAL TONES

Thomas Hardy

### Brief Summary

The speaker is recounting meeting with a former lover at the side of a pond. It was winter when they met so the atmosphere is cold and deathlike showing that they no longer love each other.

### Synopsis

- The speaker introduces them as standing by a pond in winter
- He recalls their relationship breaking down
- The lack of love between them is described
- Nature is again described as deathly

### Context

#### Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Hardy was known as being insecure, depressed and sensitive as a result of two unhappy marriages. This lack of happiness is well-reflected in the depressing tone of "Neutral Tones".

Hardy was known to have experienced a disappointing life so it is difficult to tell whether in this poem, he is talking about a specific event or these are the general feelings he has towards relationships and women.

This was one of the last poems he wrote before deciding to stop writing poetry. The dismal tone of the poem is similar to that of his books in which the characters often experience great difficulty.

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### Summary

**Context** – Hardy was unlucky in relationships throughout his life which explains the depressing tone of his writing.

**Structure** - Cyclic structure = stagnant relationship // Regular rhyme scheme provides some comfort.

**Language** – Lack of colour // Religion // Death imagery // Pathetic fallacy.

**Key Points** – Metaphors are hyperbolic // There is a lack of love between the characters.



## Neutral Tones

Hardy uses **pathetic fallacy** in his reference to “winter” to establish sadness and coldness from the start. The verb “stood” is both past tense, which suggests that the relationship is over, and has a rather passive implication. This is known as **pathetic fallacy** when the writer mirrors the character’s feelings in the environment they create.

Hardy uses **sibilance** in “starving sod” to convey despair.

Hardy uses **monochromatic colours** to suggest a one sided and dreary relationship.

The **temporal deixis** present in “years ago” shows the loss of love over time. **Enjambment** of these two lines reflect the physical nature of ‘rove // Over’ to give the poem some texture and suggests the poet is being honest about his experience in the relationship.

The lack of love is emphasised by Hardy’s use of **alliterative consonants** in “lost” and “love”.

This line is an example of **antithesis**, and this suggests that the couple were prone to conflict and contrasted each other in a destructive way.

This links to “chidden of God”, demonstrating the cyclic nature of the poem, and the fact that God is fundamentally against their relationship.

We stood by a pond that winter day,  
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,  
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;  
– They had fallen from an ash, and were grey.

Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove

Over tedious riddles of years ago;

And some words played between us to and fro

On which lost the more by our love.

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing

Alive enough to have strength to die;

And a grin of bitterness swept thereby

Like an ominous bird a-wing...

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,

And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me

Your face, and the God curst sun, and a tree,

And a pond edged with greyish leaves.

There is a lack of colour throughout the poem which represents the lack of life between the characters. However, the colour white has connotations of purity and angelic associations, which **juxtaposes** the phrase “chidden of God” which means the place has been rebuked by God.

The idea of falling leaves is linked to autumn which implies that their relationship is entering winter and all warmth is leaving it.

Eyes are symbolic as a window to the soul however, the past tense of “were” shows the deep level of understanding is no longer there.

Hardy **personifies** “words” to highlight their lack of communication.

The juxtaposition between life and death shows the pain caused by love.

The emotion of bitterness is **personified**, which suggests that nature is intentionally positioned against the couple’s relationship - the speaker may be trying to justify their separation.

Hardy’s **repetition of the approximant, “w”,** in “wings with wrong” shows the difficulty the speaker is having expressing themselves.

The poem ends with a melancholic and depressing sentiment, which ties up the themes of the poem effectively to suggest that the relationship was unsuccessful and the speaker’s reflection of it has come to a conclusion.



## Perspective

“Neutral tones” is written in the **first person** so only the speaker’s view of the relationship is heard. It appears that the speaker is more upset by the loss of love between them than their former lover is. The speaker appears to be overwhelmed by sadness as there is no positivity at all in the poem.

## The opening

The first line introduces the fact that it is winter, creating the gloomy atmosphere which persists throughout the poem.



“that winter day”

We stood by a pond that winter day,  
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,  
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;  
– They had fallen from an ash, and were grey.

## Structure/form

- The first stanza shows Romantic influences in its heavy focus on the natural world. In this stanza, Hardy creates a **gloomy atmosphere**.
- In the second stanza, Hardy begins to provide insight into the relationship. He implies that he wasted time in this relationship and is embittered by it.
- The third stanza is similar to the second showing that the speaker is unwaveringly resentful. Stanza four returns to the natural setting.

The poem starts and ends, “**by a pond**”, in the same location, which represents the **stagnant nature of the relationship**. This cyclicity juxtaposes with the fact that the relationship has ended. But it also mirrors the pain that he continues to feel even though it is years later. It could also be inferred that the speaker is trying to move forwards but is unable to, with this poem being an attempt of reflecting on what went wrong.

### Rhyme scheme

The **ABBA rhyme scheme** implies that the speaker takes solace in regularity to deal with the difficult emotions expressed in the poem.

### Rhythm

The **quatrains** (stanzas of four lines) are in **tetrameter** which gives a faster pace than iambic tetrameter. This contrasts with the stagnant atmosphere of the poem.

The pace of the poem is increased by Hardy’s use of **enjambment** and then slowed down by **caesura**. This creates a **claustrophobic, limiting atmosphere**.



## Language

### Metaphors

“Neutral Tones” doesn’t heavily feature **metaphorical language**, this shows how Hardy intends to depict the harsh reality of the loss of a relationship. There are some **metaphors** present in the poem which are generally used to increase the significance of the sad statements Hardy is trying to make.

The speaker’s lover’s smile is described as **“Alive enough to have strength to die”**. This **metaphor** is **hyperbolic** so exaggerates the animosity between the characters. Hardy also describes how their words **“played”** between each other implying that their relationship was trivial and pointless.

### Death imagery

Hardy refers to death frequently in order to create an **ominous mood**. His former lover’s smile is described as **“the deadest thing”** this morbid reference subverts the connotations of a smile to show how something that should be happy (a relationship) has become something torturous. This impression is then developed by then describing her smile as **“Alive enough to have strength to die”** which has truly horrific connotations.

### Pathetic fallacy

Descriptions of the weather and the character’s surroundings are used in order to express the desperation experienced by the speaker. The poem begins with a description of the events occurring on a **“winter day”** which implies there is a lack of light and colour in the environment and the relationship. The **metaphor “starving sod”** is emphasised by the **sibilant alliteration** used which **personifies** the soil as miserable also.

### Negativity

Hardy’s use of language demonstrates the speaker’s negativity. He uses the **oxymoron “grin of bitterness”** to show that the speaker is viewing the world through a negative lens. The speaker’s pessimism is shown further through Hardy’s use of **colour imagery**. The **adjective “greyish”** links to the title **“neutral tones”** implying that the character’s are apathetic towards each other. This lack of colour is mirrored in the statement **“the sun was white”**.

### Religion

The idea of suffering is alluded to by the phrase **“chidden by God”** which implies that God has chided the sun and introduces the idea of punishment. God is presented in a similarly sinister manner through the **sibilance** in **“God-curst sun”**.

## Comparisons

### When we two parted

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both speakers use morbid references to express their sadness. Byron does so through his use of <b>auditory imagery</b> in <b>“A knell to mine ear”</b> and the lack of in <b>“In silence I grieve”</b>. Hardy similarly uses the <b>metaphors “The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing”</b> and <b>“Alive enough to have strength to die”</b>.</li> <li>The speaker’s sadness is further shown through the poet’s use of <b>phonetics</b>. Byron uses <b>sibilance</b> in <b>“share in its shame”</b> and <b>“silence and tears”</b> whilst Hardy uses the same technique in <b>“bitterness swept the air”</b> and <b>“keen lessons that love deceives”</b>.</li> </ul>
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In “Neutral tones”, the speaker’s dejection is reflected in his negative description of his surroundings. Natural imagery usually has positive connotations however, here this is subverted in the <b>syndetic listing</b> in <b>“Your face, and the God curst sun, and a tree, // And a pond edged with greyish leaves.”</b>. Opposingly, in “When we two parted”, the speaker reflects on his internalised feelings in <b>“In silence I grieve”</b>.</li> </ul>
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### Eden rock

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both Hardy and Causley’s use of <b>light imagery</b> provides religious connotations. Hardy describes a <b>“white”</b> sun which appeared <b>“chidden of God”</b>, this creates a similar ethereal environment to that created by Causley in the <b>simile</b> <b>“The sky whitens as if lit by three suns”</b>.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In “Eden rock”, Causley attributes this heaven like imagery positive connotations through the passive connotations of the <b>enjambment</b> used in <b>“Leisurely, // They beckon to me”</b>. Conversely, in “Neutral tones”, the light is used to create a cold, unforgiving atmosphere through its combination with the ominous, grey imagery in <b>“They had fallen from an ash, and were grey.”</b> and <b>“a pond edged with greyish leaves”</b>.</li> </ul>

### Winter swans

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Colour imagery</b> or the lack thereof is used in both poems to show a lack of warmth between the characters. In “Neutral tones”, Hardy depicts <b>“a pond edged with greyish leaves”</b> and a <b>“white”</b> sun. Likewise, Sheers describes the <b>“dark water”</b> punctuated with <b>“icebergs of white feather”</b>.</li> <li>Both poets create a sense of stagnancy in their work. Steers does so by describing the <b>“stilling water”</b> and the characters <b>“slow-stepping”</b> whilst they <b>“skirted the lake”</b>. Similarly, Hardy uses <b>temporal deixis</b> in <b>“tedious riddles of years ago”</b> as well as <b>“wings with wrong”</b>.</li> <li>The regular rhyme schemes in both poems show the speaker’s continual suffering.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In “Neutral tones”, Hardy shows that the relationship is clearly finished through his use of death imagery in the metaphor <b>“The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing”</b>. It could be interpreted however, in “Winter swans” that there is still life remaining in the relationship through Sheer’s use of <b>reported speech</b> in <b>“They mate for life’ you said”</b>.</li> </ul>

