

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry Collection: Relationships

Neutral Tones - *Thomas Hardy*

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NEUTRAL TONES

Thomas Hardy

Brief Summary

The speaker is recounting a 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

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.

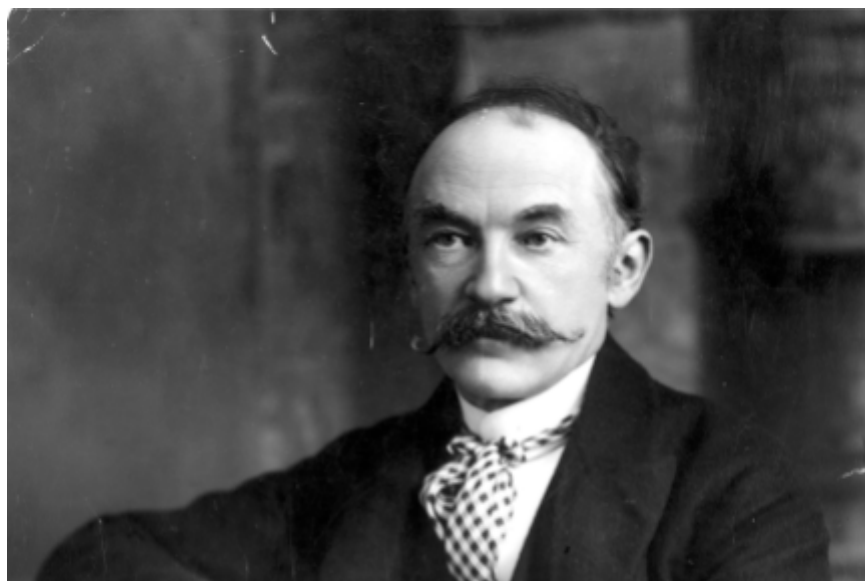
Language – Lack of colour // Religion // Death imagery // Pathetic fallacy.

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

Context

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Hardy was known as being insecure, depressed and sensitive as a result of two unhappy marriages. These experiences are well-reflected in the depressing tone of “Neutral Tones”.



<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-hardy>

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.



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 "wrings 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.

*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.*

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 lack of colour with the sun being "**white**" and the "**grey**" leaves emphasise the **pervading theme of loss** and death.



www.express.co.uk/life-style/garden/454935/How-to-look-after-your-garden-pond-in-winter

The **metaphor "starving sod"** is emphasised by the **sibilant alliteration** used which **personifies** the soil as miserable also.

The **verb "stood"** is in the **past tense**, which suggests that the relationship is over, and has a rather passive implication.

The ending

*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.*

The poem finishes as it began, beside the pond in winter. It is evident that the poem hasn't helped the speaker come to terms with the end of the relationship. Hardy's **repetition** of the **approximant**, "**w**", in "**wrings with wrong**" shows the difficulty the speaker is having expressing themselves.



The sun is mentioned again but this time **"God curst the sun"** implying that God is fundamentally against their relationship. The poem ends with a **melancholic and depressing sentiment**, which ties up the themes of the poem. It suggests the relationship was unsuccessful and the speaker's reflection of it has come to a conclusion.



<https://www.thrivetherapy.co.uk/blog/2019/2/19/why-do-we-keep-having-the-same-bad-relationship-with-different-people>

Structure/form

The poem starts and ends in the same location, this represents the **stagnant nature of the relationship**. This **cyclicity** juxtaposes with the fact that the relationship ended, but 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.

- The first stanza shows Romantic influences with 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 **ABBA rhyme scheme** implies that the speaker takes solace in regularity to deal with the difficult emotions expressed in the poem.

The pace of the poem is increased by Hardy's use of **enjambment** and then slowed down by **caesura** which creates a **claustrophobic, limiting atmosphere**. The stop start nature of the rhythm could reflect how the speaker is struggling to express his emotions and speak coherently.

Four tetrameter quatrains - tetrameter gives a faster pace than iambic tetrameter which contrasts with the stagnant atmosphere of the poem.

Language

Use of metaphors

Neutral Tones doesn't heavily feature **metaphorical language** which shows how Hardy intends to depict the harsh reality of the loss of a relationship. The **metaphors** 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.
- The **juxtaposition** between life and death shows the pain caused by 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.



→ 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.



https://www.wallpaperup.com/219636/nature_trees_dark_forests_fog_mist_gloomy.html

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”**.

Comparison

She Walks In Beauty & Neutral Tones

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both revolve around a character who isn’t named, from the perspective of a speaker connected to that person and who finds that the addressed character has a large impact on them. The speakers centre on a significant point in their lives. Used imagery to reflect the speaker’s feelings.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The two poets focus on different periods of a relationship - in SWIB, Bryon focuses on a new relationship / attraction whereas in NT, Hardy is reflecting on an ended relationship. NT is centred on the past whereas SWIB is centred on the current. Bryon houses a more celebratory tone, whereas NT has a more regretful and somber tone.

