

# Neutral Tones

Thomas Hardy

## OVERALL SUMMARY

'Neutral Tones' **combines romanticism** and **Victorian realism** to present the speaker's pessimistic attitude regarding the memory of the loss of a former lover that they must carry with them for years to come. They recount the features of their lost love with bitterness and **cynicism** (pessimism). The emotions and ideas of the speaker are reflected within their natural surroundings.

## STANZA SUMMARY

- The speaker recounts standing near a pond with their partner, describing the scenery as colourless and lifeless, signifying a tainted memory.
- Exchanges between the speaker and their partner are described in a somewhat trivial manner, meaning that the speaker seems to deem them significantly less important than how they seemed at the time.
- The speaker goes on to describe certain features of their lost love in a harsh, bitter manner, e.g., **"your smile was the deadest thing..."**. And makes a comparison of this to an **"ominous bird a-wing"**, continuing to depict their emotions and past relationship dynamic via nature.
- In a cyclical way, the speaker revisits the setting depicted during the first stanza, describing it in a more condensed way. This final stanza essentially summarises the overarching messages of the whole poem, proving that the speaker is stuck in their head and trapped in this time period.

## CONTEXT

- Thomas Hardy, despite writing not long after the Romantic era, was known for his **rejection of Romantic ideals**, instead focusing more on **Victorian realism**. This involved the acknowledgement of **life's pitfalls** and adversities, a prominent theme in many of his novels.
- Hardy separated from his first wife, perhaps fuelling his **cynical attitude towards relationships** and making 'Neutral Tones' in particular a lot more personal.

# NEUTRAL TONES

Thomas Hardy

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 gray.

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 grayish leaves.

# Key Themes & Analysis

## BITTERNESS TOWARDS THE LOSS OF LOVE

- There is a juxtaposition created between the **harsh objectification** of the features of the speaker's lost lover and the **personification of nature's aspects and processes**.
- The line "The smile on your mouth was the dearest thing / Alive enough to have strength to die;" **brutally dehumanises** this lost love interest, reducing their 'smile', something that is inherently not an object, to a mere "thing", drained of life.
- This **lifelessness** is reflected in the description of the "gray" leaves on a "starving sod", and ties into the idea that "love [an abstract concept] deceives". In this way, the lost love is made to fade into the coming and going of nature's processes.
- An **underlying bitterness** of the speaker towards their ex-lover is made evident by the appearance of consonance within the poem. Sibilance within the line "Over tedious riddles years ago;". Hints at a somewhat **malicious** tone as the speaker recalls their relationship.
- The phrase "wrings with wrong" alludes to a state of turmoil, repetition of the 'r' sound imitating multiple, determined attempts to wring out an object, ridding it of unwanted fluids.
- This metaphor encompasses the **crux of Hardy's poem**, as the speaker drains themselves trying to rid themselves of the memory of this now-forgotten figure.
- As a poet, Thomas Hardy exhibited typical features of **Victorian Realism**, involving the rejection of **overtly romantic ideals** and, consequently, **a fatalist attitude** towards the human experience.
- It is because of this that he is so determined to somewhat overpower these features of 'humanity' with **forces of nature by intertwining them with natural processes** frequently mentioned throughout the poem, such as death ("dearest", "die").
- **An influence of romanticism** within his poetry enhances his focus on the beauty of nature, but this is juxtaposed with an overarching tone of hopelessness.

## BITTERNESS TOWARDS THE LOSS OF LOVE

- This insinuates that, regardless of the **inevitable continuation of life** following its **traumatic emotional hurdles**, the permanence of such memories will render it a forever-mundane existence, wherein the speaker's emotions are reflected in the everyday, no matter how much time passes.
- These four seasons could also be represented by the presence of four stanzas, and their **cyclical nature by a regular, ABBA rhyme scheme**.
- Additionally, a cold winter setting mirrors the bitterness with which the memory of the speaker's past love is **tainted** (ruined).
- The connection between emotion and nature here demonstrates a use of romantic techniques that juxtaposes his **nihilistic (belief that life is meaningless) attitude**.
- ***"And a grin of bitterness swept thereby / Like an ominous bird a-wing."*** – The adjective ***"swept"*** **sheds light on the fleeting nature** of the speaker's distant memory of their love, whilst a simile likens this to the behaviour of a bird in flight.
- Once again, imagery involving nature here depicts the speaker's view of a **blur of memories**, comparable to the seamless changes and constant movement within the natural world surrounding that which humans have created.
- Colour is an extremely important tool used throughout to highlight the way in which the **speaker's memories have affected their view of the world around them**. Not only do blatant colours like ***"white"*** and ***"grayish"*** evoke a **monotonous, wearisome environment**, but the adjective ***"ash"*** when denoting a species of tree from which a leaf has ***"fallen"*** induces a **semantic field of grief and lack of life**.
- Additionally, it is very much suggestive of a continuation of the colour ***"gray"***.
- The **condensation** of the scene described within the first stanza during the final stanza, for example, the sun that was ***"white...as though chidden of God"*** now ***"the God-curst sun"*** is suggestive of a **consolidation of the speaker's memories**, as though they, like the natural surroundings of the speaker, have been **drained of life** due to the sheer number of times they have been **frequented**.
- A link can be made between the newly formed opinion of the object of the speaker's bitterness compared to their previous **infatuation** (obsession) with them.
- In the last stanza of the poem, the verb ***"deceives"*** and the noun ***"leaves"*** imperfectly **rhyme** with the personal pronoun ***"me"*** and the noun ***"tree"***, the word ***"tree"*** linking **pragmatically** to the word ***"leaves"***.
- Although the rhyme scheme remains the same, ABBA, these similarities imply that the line between the speaker's emotions, memories and surroundings have become **significantly blurred**, emphasised by the inclusion of the personal pronoun **"me"**.
- It is intriguing that the noun ***"leaves"*** has a **homonym** (words that have the same spelling but different meanings) in the verb **"leaves"**, suggestive of a departure of the speaker from their romantic situation as well as a detachment from the life and colour in their memories.

# Form

## ABBA RHYME SCHEME

- The regular rhyming of the syllables at the ends of the first and last lines of each stanza as well as the rhyming of the end syllables of the middle two lines represents the **ongoing cycle of nature – the idea that life doesn't stop**.

## REGULAR QUATRAINS

- A quatrain is a stanza consisting of four lines, particularly those with an alternating rhyme scheme.
- 'Neutral Tones' consists of quatrains which could represent the ongoing number of emotions, being love or hatred, within relationships.
- It emphasises the **inevitability of life continuing** on despite these emotional hurdles, the regularity of the stanzas also emphasising the regularity of such emotions across individuals.

## CYCLICAL STRUCTURE

- The mention of the **"pond"** amongst **"grayish"**, **"winter"** scenery within the first and last lines of the poem not only underlines the title, 'Neutral Tones', but is indicative of the **cyclical passing of the four seasons and the processes of nature**

# Structure

## END-STOPPING

- The end-stopping shown by a semi-colon at the end of the second line of every stanza and a full stop at the end of stanzas one, two and four, **develops the idea of continuation and regularity, but also introduces a tense and blunt undertone**
- The end-stopping visible following lines 3, 6 and 10 of the poem are **reminiscent of the abrupt seizure of an intense relationship**, shedding light on the bitter attitude that said lines intend to portray
- The speaker almost feels like their life is stagnant and dull since this tragic ending to their relationship.

# Comparisons

When We Two Parted	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
<b>Similar</b>	<p><b>Loss of Love</b></p> <p>Both poets reflect solemnly upon a past love interest</p> <p><b>Memory</b></p> <p>A key feature of both poems is the power that the speakers' memories have over their present lives, both reflecting upon the time spent with a lost love, feeling trapped by their tainted memories as life continues around them.</p>	<p><b>Regular rhyme scheme</b></p> <p>In 'Neutral Tones', the continuous ABBA rhyme scheme signifies the consistent movement of nature, such as the passing of the four seasons, whilst the regular rhyme scheme in 'When We Two Parted', the regular ABABCD CD rhyme scheme also gives the impression of life moving forwards, despite the sorrow of the speakers.</p>	<p><b>Cyclical</b></p> <p>The cyclical structure of both poems emphasises the never-ending burden of the memories of a past love.</p> <p><b>Melding of past and present</b></p> <p>In both poems, there is slight ambiguity regarding the separation between the past and the present, both poets using this as a means of emphasising the long-lasting effects of the despair of the speakers.</p>	<p>Both poems are littered with elements of romanticism to enhance the expression of emotion displayed by each poem's speaker.</p>
<b>Different</b>	<p>'Neutral Tones' focuses on the power that the speaker's memories have on how they view the world through nature, whereas Byron places a lot more emphasis on the constant presence of the speaker's lost love as a supernatural, ghostly figure.</p>	<p>The rhythmic choices of each poet vary, Byron choosing to use accentual-syllabic rhythm which does not occur in 'Neutral Tones', reflecting the monochromatic, lifeless scenery surrounding the speaker.</p>		<p>Hardy, although influenced by Romanticism in this instance, was prone to focusing on realism, highlighting the harsh realities of life. Byron, however, was writing during the peak of the romantic era (as opposed to Hardy writing not long after it) so he was heavily influenced by its features.</p>

Winter Swans	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<p><b>Loss of love</b></p> <p>Both poems refer to the loss of love and the pain this causes</p> <p><b>Nature</b></p> <p>Both poets rely hugely on the natural world to express the emotions they intend to portray.</p>	<p><b>Rhythmically, both poems are completely irregular</b></p> <p>Both Hardy and Sheers neglecting to adhere to a certain rhythm. In both senses, this underlines the complication that comes with relationships, and the fact that not everything will go smoothly.</p>	Structurally, these poems differ greatly.	As both poets wrote in very different time periods, Sheers as a modern-day poet and Hardy writing in the late 1800s, the historical context behind their poems differs greatly.
Different	<p><b>WS:</b> The speaker experiences a renewal of love with their partner by the end of the poem.</p> <p><b>NT:</b> The speaker's attitude towards love remains cynical and hopeless; there is no chance of a reunion between the speaker and the lover of whom they speak.</p>	'Winter Swans' has no rhyme scheme, whilst Neutral Tones adheres to a regular ABBA rhyme scheme throughout.	'Winter Swans' is full of enjambement, completely contrasting Hardy's repeated application of end-stopping.	As a modern-day poet, Owen Sheers is less restricted by popular writing styles of the time and Hardy, writing not long after the romantic era, was surrounded by a huge flux in Romantic features in poetry, arguably influencing his work. Secondly, whilst Hardy's poem is very personal, referring to a real love of his, Sheers writes of a fictional relationship.