Neutral Tones

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

The speaker begins by referencing a memory about a particular winter's day. The speaker and the addressee of the poem—a former lover—were standing by a pond beneath a sun that seemed bleached white, as though it had been scolded by God. A few gray leaves were scattered on the parched ground, fallen from an ash tree.

The speaker comments that the lover/ex-lover's eyes looked bored as they gazed upon the speaker, as if looking at a tired riddle from long ago. The two had a short conversation about who had lost more because of the relationship (though line 8 could also be read as meaning that this specific conversation itself actively diminished the amount of love between the two people).

The speaker then mentions the ex-lover's smile on that particular day, describing it as almost dead but with just enough life left to allow it to finally die in this moment. It was a bitter smile, which the speaker compares to a fearsome bird taking flight.

Since that day, the speaker has learned that love is deceitful and causes harm. This life lesson stirs the memory of that winter's day—the other person's face, the sun, the pond, the trees, and the fallen leaves.

THEMES

LOVE AND LOSS

"Neutral Tones" is a melancholic poem that looks at the dying moments of a relationship between the speaker and his (or her) lover. Defeated in tone, the poem shows the way in which love contains the possibility of loss. It also demonstrates how this loss can completely alter a person's perception of the world and the person they once loved. Through the example of the speaker and the speaker's lover, the poem shows how embracing love always involves risking painful loss and estrangement, and it even suggests that all love might inherently deceptive.

The speaker captures a very specific moment in the poem: the death of the love between two people. Though the reader doesn't know anything about the history of the relationship (including the gender of the speaker or the lover), the speaker creates a vivid, detailed depiction of exactly what the couple's loss looks like. In a sense, the reader is an uncomfortable voyeur in the poem. The speaker is talking directly to his or her lover/ex-lover, as shown by the use of the second-person "you" throughout, forcing the reader into the uncomfortable role of being an eavesdropper. This discomfort foisted on the reader is a deliberate effect: rather than the reader simply reading the description of the painful loss of a relationship, the reader must "experience" that lingering pain by being forced to listen to the speaker address the speaker's ex-lover. It's the difference between your friend telling you about a painful break-up they had, and you being stuck next to your friend and their significant other during the breakup!

The poem further emphasizes its bleak outlook of love by subverting images and interactions that might typically accompany a scene in which two people are very much in love. The lovers are taking—or have taken—a walk by a pond. This might once have been a pleasant activity, but now it is overshadowed by symbols of decay (e.g. the greying leaves).

This loss and decay doesn't stop with the lovers themselves. Rather, the entire world seems to be altered by the death of their relationship. The sun, which is usually a symbol of life and happiness, is whitened as though it has been scolded by God. This change emphasizes the sense that something has gone irrevocably wrong. Likewise, the words between the lovers seem only to speak of loss, and the ex-lover's smile contains no joy. Instead it is "ominous" and full of "bitterness." The poem

thus highlights the way in which loss of love can completely alter an individual's perception of the world—once happy things become representations of their own loss.

Finally, the poem indicates that this change is permanent; there is no way to escape from such loss. Ultimately, the speaker thus suggests that love is always deceptive, because it pretends to be positive while hiding the fact that it can alter reality in negative ways. Once the poem has established an atmosphere of complete pain and heartbreak, the speaker returns to the images of the first stanza. This emphasizes that even as the end of the relationship causes a return to reality, it also traps the speaker within all this pain. That is, this is a journey that has led the speaker back to the beginning, with only the lesson that "love deceives" to show for it. Love deceives, argues the poem, because it masks the risk of loss that comes with any relationship.

"Neutral Tones" is therefore a sorrowful poem that does not seek to idealize love or even to claim that the speaker's relationship was ever good in the first place. It brings the reader into the sense of pointlessness and fatigue that can accompany a break-up, and argues against convenient answers to or remedies for heartache.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

MEMORY AND EMOTION

"Neutral Tones" is an expression of emotional trauma, and it argues that some emotional events leave a mark on the memory that cannot be erased. In the poem, pain dulls over time to become a kind of melancholic boredom, in which the memory of the event is an unwelcome constant in the mind of the speaker. Some events in life, the poem argues, can never be completely overcome.

The poem establishes itself as a memory from the outset, first revisiting the initial event—the conversation at the pond in winter—and then showing the way that its emotional trauma has continued to influence the speaker's mindset. The poem takes place in the past tense, instantly setting the poem up as a description of somewhat distant events. Within this memory, almost all of the particulars are linked to the senses. The speaker remembers the whiteness of the sun, the dryness of the earth, the particular arc of the addressee's smile—all of these contribute to a stark and vivid picture that makes the memory seem as real in the poem's present as it was at the time when the event occurred. These vibrant, if sorrowful, descriptions demonstrate how the past remains alive, even though its presence is a negative force in the speaker's mind.

The ellipsis that ends stanza 3 suggest that a shift is coming, a move away from the painful memory that has been discussed so far. However, the poem immediately undermines this attempt at emotional distance. Right after the ellipsis, the speaker returns to the same sensory memories described in the previous stanzas, this time in condensed form. The poem portrays the memory, then, as somehow inescapable. It seems that it has consolidated over time, in much the same way that the fourth stanza encapsulates the three previous ones all at once. This is likely because of the force of the emotion involved, which, though the speaker paints the memory in "neutral tones," has continued to shape the speaker's life. The poem therefore argues that there is a kind of natural limit to the extent to which people can control their emotional memory. Presumably, the speaker would rather not feel this way—but the cyclical, suppressed set-up of the poem shows that sometimes there is no choice, no escape.

"Neutral Tones" does not offer a hopeful ending. Instead, it demonstrates the trauma of strong negative emotion and its effects on an individual's psychology. In four short stanzas, the speaker draws out the way in which memory is not only something that people have, but also something that *happens* to them. There is a resigned lack of agency in the speaker's "neutral tones" that implies a powerlessness with no easy solution, a devastating memory that will always hold a place in the speaker's mind and, therefore, life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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.

The poem begins with "We," a plural personal pronoun. This instantly makes the reader question who, exactly, is contained within this group—that is, whom the speaker is addressing. The first line also establishes the past tense as the dominant tense of the poem, suggesting that what is to follow is a memory (shared by whomever this "we" consists of).

Though the language is simple almost the point of banality in the first line, the mention of "that" particular day draws the reader in. That is, though the setting seems unremarkable, something about that specific day has remained significant in the speaker's psyche. The simplicity of the language is also part of the "neutral tones" of the title, suggesting a psychological conflict between the emotional moment that transpires and the apparent indifference of the natural world.

The subsequent lines further reflect the idea of "neutral tones"

by suggesting a distinct lack of color. The sun is not warm and yellow, but white, suggesting that it (and by implication, the love affair) has had its life drained away. The whiteness of the sun gives the speaker the sense that the sun has been told off by God; it's as if the sun is not allowed to shine because of some wrongdoing.

Two interesting points arise here. Firstly, Hardy lived during an age of increasing religious pessimism and did himself make the move from Evangelicalism to atheism over the course of his life. With a sense of meaninglessness running through the poem that possibly pertains to this loss of faith, the presence of God here might be a signal of some kind of universal malign intent—a sense of love being doomed to failure. The second point of note is the question of why the sun could incur the wrath of God in the first place. If the sun is usually taken as a symbol of life, warmth, and moral goodness, perhaps it is guilty of providing false hope for love in a world that cannot sustain it. The impotence of the sun is also perhaps suggestive of the "fire" of love going out between the speaker and the person whom the speaker is addressing.

In lines 3 and 4, the deadness of the natural environment hints at the death of the relationship that following stanzas will recount. It's worth noting that the ash tree is particularly useful for firewood, again hinting at a metaphorical "fire" that has been snuffed out. The pun between "ash" and "gray"—as in, the ash left after a fire—supports this subtly.

There is also something paradoxical about the natural imagery used in the poem. On the one hand, it does reflect the deadness of the relationship as mentioned above. On the other, it is also *anti*-symbolic—nature is just being nature and doesn't have any response to the lovers' scenario. This indifference mirrors the growing indifference between the two people in the poem.

LINES 5-6

Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove
Over tedious riddles of years ago;

In lines 5 and 6, the speaker describes the face of his (or her) lover/ex-lover on "that winter day." It's worth remembering that these lines, and the rest of the poem, are directly addressed by the speaker to this particular person, which puts the reader in the position of being a kind of eavesdropper. The reader is not just hearing about a loss of love; by being put into the role of an eavesdropper the reader directly experiences it.

These two lines are also, notably, a simile that describes the nature of the addressee's eyes on that particular day. Eyes are traditionally thought of as the "window" to the soul, revealing an individual's emotional state. Of course, the eyes play an integral role in love and the act of falling in love as well—deep, lingering stares between individuals suggest intimacy and passion. Here, though, as with the poem's use of nature imagery, the traditional association is subverted, hinting at the way the loss that comes with love has affected the speaker's psychology. The ex-lovers' eyes show no love, only tedium. That is, they are *bored* by what they see. Whereas the ex-lover ostensibly once saw mystery in the speaker—a longing to know that individual—they now only see *old* riddles; the two people are becoming strangers to another once again.

An interesting side note is that Hardy originally wrote line 6 as:

> "Over tedious riddles solved years ago;"

That Hardy revised "solved" to "of" before publishing the poem emphasizes the bleakness of the situation—these riddles were never solvable in the first place. Implicit in the poem, then, is an anxiety surrounding whether two people can ever really know each another.

LINES 7-8

And some words played between us to and fro
On which lost the more by our love.

Lines 7 and 8 develop the sense of emotional distance between the speaker and the speaker's lover/ex-lover. The speaker recalls that the words that passed between them on this fateful day were no longer meaningful. This is highlighted by the poet's choice of phrasing—"*some* words." Some is an indeterminate, imprecise amount, highlighting the vacuousness of what was said. That the words "played" between the two people further implies a lack of seriousness, perhaps suggesting that they were toying with—or even torturing—each other. The emptiness of the words reinforces the idea that what was said was unimportant—it was the tone of the exchange that was telling of the end.

All but one word in these two lines is monosyllabic, which is perhaps also indicative of the awkwardness and difficulty of the act of making conversation for these two people. Similarly, the meter is inconsistent, almost purposefully clumsy, perhaps deliberately resisting any neat and comforting pattern in order to make the memory read as uncomfortably as it feels in the speaker's mind.

Line 8 is notoriously difficult to interpret, though there are three clear possibilities for making sense of it. The first is that the conversation between the two people further diminished their love—that is, they lost "more" of their love on this particular day. Alternatively, the conversation itself might revolve around the topic of which of the two individuals lost "the more"—the greater portion—because of their love. That is, which of them has been more damaged by this relationship. Thirdly, it could be argued that this is a deliberate breakdown in syntactical sense that mirrors the meaninglessness or hopelessness of the conversation itself.

LINES 9-10

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing
Alive enough to have strength to die;

In lines 9 and 10 the speaker is still focused on the visual memory of that particular day, suggesting the deep impression it left on the speaker's senses. As the "words" in lines 7 and 8 are shown to have been meaningless, the speaker now observes the addressee's mouth as being divorced from the speech it produces. What's more, a smile becomes something sinister, a harbinger of deadness rather than joy.

The speaker presents the reader, and the addressee of the poem, with something of a paradox. First, the speaker describes the ex-lover's smile as being the most dead thing in line 9. But in line 10, the speaker says that the ex-lover's mouth still has a sliver of strength left in it—a strength that, paradoxically, is what allows it to die. Were it any weaker, the smile would already be dead. In these two lines the speaker seems to suggest that the smile, stuck on the precipice between life and death, and perhaps representing a concealment of the ex-lover's true feelings, thus captures the profound deadness of their relationship.

LINES 11-12

And a grin of bitterness swept thereby
Like an ominous bird a-wing....

Lines 11 and 12 continue where the previous two left off, with a focus on the addressee's face—specifically, the ex-lover's mouth/lips. The smile takes on a more sinister quality, becoming a "grin of bitterness." The oxymoronic nature of this phrase is suggestive of the speaker's state of mind: the speaker is so deeply affected by the collapse of this relationship that the speaker perceives the ex-lover as being actively malevolent.

If the reader speaks line 11 aloud, they will find that the /s/ sound of bitterness elides into the /s/ at the beginning of "swept," essentially rendering the second /s/ sound inaudible. As if by some morose magic, this creates a second phrase—"bitterness wept"—that co-exists with the first. The notion of weeping, of course, reinforces the sorrow of the memory—but the way that "wept" is hidden also indicates the holding back or suppression of emotion, perhaps in keeping with the poem's insistence on "neutral tones."

Line 12 picks up on the "swept" verb by likening the facial movement to that of a bird taking flight. In particular, this imagined bird is an omen of something bad yet to come. The fact of the poem's existence suggests that the omen speaks of the inescapability of this particular memory and its painful associations, an idea supported by the following stanza. (It's also worth noting that references to a dead landscape, an inescapable bird-omen, and a transformative soul-deadening experience all echo Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.)

Finally, the ellipsis at the end of line 12 creates a sense of suspense in the poem. The reader might mistakenly expect a change in tone to follow—but instead the ellipsis deliberately sets up a final stanza that, rather than shifting the desolate tone, only serves to further reinforce the bleakness of what has come before, enhancing the sense of the speaker's despair as being inescapable.

LINES 13-16

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.

The final stanza of "Neutral Tones" is the first moment in the poem in which the time and space of the memory are disrupted. With the words "Since then," the reader is introduced into a glimpse of the speaker's present-day state of mind. As with the ellipses that end the previous stanza, the "Since then" seems to imply that the speaker is about to describe some new perspective that he (or she) has gained from this broken relationship. But this expectation is thwarted—the speaker's viewpoint and despair are little different from what has come in the prior three stanzas, which suggests that this despair is inescapable.

If the preceding three stanzas have been about the false promises of love—or, more accurately, the way the hopefulness of love conceals the emotional risk that comes with it—then line 13 suggests that the speaker's life after this break up has been a series of proofs that have only *further confirmed* love's deception.

The alliteration of "wrings" with "wrong" in line 14 links the action of love—"wringing"—with the consequences: "wrongness" and hurt. There is also a double meaning at play with "wrings." It could relate to the act of wringing something out to remove liquid from it, as in "wringing" out a cloth. Perhaps this is suggestive of the way in which the world described by the poem has been drained of color, and is instead drawn in "neutral tones" and grayness. Or, more dramatically, "wring" could relate to the killing of animals. "Wringing" a creature's neck is a way of ending its life—and this develops the sense of deadness that courses throughout the poem.

The next action attributed to love—after deception and "wringing with wrong"—is the shaping of memory. After the suspenseful enjambment at the end of line 14, the speaker states that these "keen lessons" have shaped the ex-lover's face in the speaker's mind. That is, the strength of feeling that the speaker had for the ex-lover, and the pain of the breakup, actively reforms the memory in the speaker's mind—perhaps relentlessly so. This speaks to the idea that memories are not just something that people *have*, but also something that *happen* to people. Put another way: the strength of the memory removes the speaker's agency—the speaker is controlled by the trauma of this inescapable memory, such that the speaker's experience of both the past and present are changed in ways that the speaker cannot control.

The speaker then uses polysyndeton—the repetition of "ands"—to show the memory coming back to the fore once

more, if it ever left. One by one, its elements are put in place again, like different parts of a stage set. First, the lover/ex-lover's face, then the "God curst" sun, the tree, the pond, and the leaves. The final stanza references all of the images from the memory described in stanza 1. Just as the speaker seems trapped by this traumatic memory, and the speaker's vision of the world is colored (or rendered color-less) by the trauma, the poem also is circular, endlessly repeating the speaker's traumatic emotional memory.

SYMBOLS

THE NATURAL WORLD

The poem is bookended by descriptions of nature in the first and final stanza—in fact, both stanzas are contain many of the same natural elements. Rather than being a source of wonder, the natural world in this poem is sterile and almost lifeless. Arguably, the "neutral tones" of the title applies to nature itself—the sun is bleached white, the leaves are gray. On the one hand, then, the natural world represented here takes on the emotional quality of the speaker's dying/dead relationship with the addressee of the poem.

Conversely, the "neutrality" of the natural world could also be an expression of indifference, perceived through the eyes of the speaker. They feel the emotional weight and significance of the relationship's end, made worse by the sense that whatever happens between them is of no real consequence to the world more generally. There is the preemptive sense of an existential crisis—and, indeed, as a poem written during a fresh rise of religious skepticism, perhaps the indifference of the natural world reflects a more general sense of meaninglessness.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "winter"
- **Line 2:** "sun"
- **Line 3:** "leaves," "sod"
- **Line 4:** "ash"
- **Line 12:** "bird"
- **Line 15:** "sun," "tree"
- **Line 16:** "pond," "leaves"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used on a few occasions in the poem and generally functions as a way of adding emphasis and grouping words together by their general content. Much of this occurs in lines 3 and 4, where the alliterative words draw the reader's focus to the deadness of the environment. For example, the /s/ sounds of "starving sod" direct attention to the fact that the ground itself seems barren, devoid of life.

Similarly, the /r/ sounds of "rove" and "riddles" link the actions of the eyes with what they perceive—somebody who was once familiar who now seems lost, remote and mysterious. In stanza 4, "wrings" and "wrong" are paired by their alliteration, in this case both being part of the same action.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "leaves lay," "starving sod"
- **Line 4:** "an ash, and"
- **Line 5:** "rove"
- **Line 6:** "riddles"
- **Line 14:** "wrings with wrong"

CAESURA

Moments of caesura occur in lines 2, 4, 13, 14, and 15.

Line 2's caesura creates a space around the whiteness of the sun and the subsequent idea that it looks like it has incurred the wrath of God.

Line 4 is more of a pause, accentuating the "fallenness" of the ash tree's leaves.

The caesurae in the final stanza create an anxious sense of broken rhythm, matching the despondent tone of the poem's literal content. This slows the poem down as the imagery returns back to the start, as if piecing the memory back together again bit by bit.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "",
- **Line 4:** "",
- **Line 13:** "",
- **Line 14:** "",
- **Line 15:** ",," "",

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs between lines 5 and 6, 7 and 8, 9 and 10, 11 and 12, and 14 and 15.

The enjambment in stanzas 2 and 3 contributes to a sense that the reader is deep inside the memory of "that winter day." The enjambment in these two stanzas also follows a pattern: it occurs in the first and third line of each stanza, and alternates with first a semi-colon and then either a period or ellipses. Further, the lines linked by enjambment each provides the addressee, and by extension the reader, with another aspect of the speaker's traumatic memory. Lines 5 and 6 deal with the addressee's eyes; 7 and 8 with the hollow tone of conversation; 9 and 10 with the addressee's smile, which is then morphed into a bitter grin in 11 and 12. The enjambment therefore allows for the sequential replay of the memory, giving the sense

that the reader is experiencing it in the same order that the speaker does.

The enjambment is also used to create tension in the middle stanzas. Because of enjambment, lines 5, 7, and 9 feel unresolved and incomplete, beckoning the following line forward and generally setting up the puncturing of any potential glimpse of optimism in the poem. For example, line 7 doesn't sound so negative until the enjambment allows line 8 to hammer home the poem's pessimism.

Likewise, the enjambment between line 14 and 15 is used to conjure suspense. At the end of line 14, the reader knows in real time that love has shaped *something* for the speaker—but is momentarily left in the dark (or in the white of the page) as to what that is. The following lines make clear that this shape is the same memory that has come before.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "rove"
- **Line 7:** "fro"
- **Line 9:** "thing"
- **Line 11:** "thereby"
- **Line 14:** "me"

PARADOX

Paradox occurs once in the poem, in the sentence that runs from line 9 to line 10. Here, the lover/ex-lover's smile is "the deadest thing," yet is also "alive enough"—it has enough strength left—that it may still die. The complex but elegant syntax allows for the paradox to occur in thrilling real time, taking the smile through death, life, strength, and death again in the space of two lines.

In general, a smile can be taken as a representation of positive emotion and thereby as one of the fundamental aspects of what it means to be alive. The paradox allows for this smile's suggestive power to be subverted, so that it comes to represent death rather than life—specifically the death of the bond between the two people who populate the poem (or the speaker's memory at least).

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing / Alive enough to have strength to die; "

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton occurs primarily in the final stanza's numerous "ands." However, these pick up on the general presence of "and" throughout the poem.

In the last stanza, which in essence refocuses the memory that has been portrayed in the preceding three stanzas, the "ands" allow the speaker to unfurl the misery of that memory piece by piece, reintroducing each visual element. This recaps the sensory impressions that have been described earlier, underlining their forceful role in the speaker's memory.

The unstressed sound of "and" also adds accentual weight to the face, sun, tree, and pond by momentarily delaying their reintroduction. This is a deliberate choice by the poet; he could, for example, have written:

> Your face, the God curst sun, a tree,
> And a pond edge with grayish leaves.

The polysyndeton thus plays an important role in the conclusion of the poem, emphasizing the inescapability of the speaker's sorrow.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 3:** "And"
- **Line 4:** "and"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "and," "and"
- **Line 16:** "And"

SIBILANCE

There is a degree of sibilance running throughout the poem, but its effects are most noticeable in two distinct places. In line 11, the /s/ sounds, which are also associated with the /s/ sound from "smile" in line 9, allow for "bitterness swept" to have the same auditory content as "bitterness wept." The sibilance therefore creates a subtle double meaning that adds to the emotional despondency of the speaker.

The final stanza turns up the volume of the sibilance, particularly in line 13. The abundance of /s/ sounds has a snake-like quality, perhaps gently coloring "love" as a slippery creature in line with the idea that it is deceitful. Likewise, this could also be gently suggestive of the snake in the garden of Eden, hinting at a loss of innocence which is then reinforced by the sibilance and religious connotations of "God curst sun."

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "ss s"
- **Line 13:** "S," "ss," "s," "c," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s"
- **Line 15:** "st s"

SIMILE

Simile occurs in two instances in "Neutral Tones."

In line 2, the speaker likens the whiteness of the sun to the effects of being scolded by God, implying that the sun has

committed some kind of wrong that deserved God's anger. It's not immediately clear what that might be, but it's worth seeing this phrase in the context of line 15. Here, the speaker essentially says the same thing, but with a construction that is more insistent that the sun *has* been cursed by God—not that it just looks like it has. Though stanza 4 is in a sense a return to the scene of stanza 1, it is made different by the speaker's statement that, since "that winter day," the speaker has learned multiple times that love deceives. The simile thus takes place in an equally despondent but slightly more innocent time than the poem's present, in which the cursedness of the sun is intensified. The simile, then, functions as a kind of set-up, in which the speaker moves from an experience of sadness to the certainty of sadness, made clear by the sun shifting from seeming "as though" it was cursed by God in line 2 to being definitively "God curst" in line 15.

The second simile occurs in line 12. Here, the visual impression of the lover/ex-lover's "grin of bitterness" is likened to an "ominous bird" taking flight. There is a psychological fraying of the speaker's nerves here, with the bird-like shape of the mouth taking on a specifically malevolent aspect. Also at play is the subversion of the usual symbolism associated with birds and flight, chiefly freedom. In this line, the bird is a sign of the speaker being entrapped by his or her traumatic memory—unable to escape the presence of an ominous bird flying above.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And the sun was white, as though chidden of God"
- **Line 12:** "Like an ominous bird a-wing...."

VOCABULARY

Chidden (Line 2) - Chidden is the past participle of the verb "chide," which means to scold or rebuke.

Sod (Line 3) - Sod is grass and the soil immediately beneath it, also known as turf.

Ash (Line 4) - The ash is a common tree throughout Europe.

Rove (Line 5) - Rove means to travel or wander; in this context means that the eyes are moving constantly.

Wrings (Line 14) - Wring can mean to remove the liquid from something by twisting and squeezing it (as one might do with a wet towel, for instance), or squeezing something more generally. Here, it resonates with the poem's title, subtly suggesting that color has been wrung from this world, leaving it in "neutral tones." Wring can also have violent connotations—to wring someone's neck, for instance—adding to the poem's negative vision of love.

Curst (Line 15) - Curst is an archaic form of "cursed."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Neutral Tones" is comprised of four quatrains. Quatrains are one of the simplest and most recognizable stanza shapes, and accordingly there is something unobtrusive about the way the poem presents itself on the page. This is in keeping with the "neutrality" gestured to in the title.

However, that's not to say that the poem's *content* is neutral—in fact, it is melancholic and defeated—but rather that the form in which the poem plays out embodies a kind of indifference. This indifference of form matches the world that the speaker finds him or herself in—a world dominated by the emotional trauma of a broken-off, while also amplifying the speaker's sense of the surrounding environment as enacting a sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness that feeds into the speaker's attitude of defeat.

METER

"Neutral Tones" is written in meter, but the meter is somewhat awkward and inconsistent. In general, the stanzas of the poem tend to follow a pattern in which the first three lines of each stanza feel like tetrameters: they tend to have four stressed syllables. Take line 1:

> We stood by a pond that winter day

The pattern in the stanza concludes with a final line that feels more like trimeter, with three stresses. Take line 4:

> They had fallen from an ash and were gray

But this pattern is irregular throughout the poem, and the meter itself is also inconsistent—some feet are iambic but many are anapests. The first line of the poem, for example, reads iamb, anapest, iamb, iamb:

> We stood | by a pond | that wint- | -er day

It's an awkward line with a second-foot substitution, but it feels as though it might settle into an iambic pattern. The second line upsets this already precarious sense of rhythm:

> And the sun | was white, | as though chid- | -den of God

In this line, three out of four feet are anapests. The first and second lines, then, are essentially the opposite of one another.

Stanza 2 again repeats the pattern, though only through the

first foot of line 6; there are still three anapests in line 6, yet in slightly different locations than they were in line 2:

> Your eyes | on me were | as eyes | that rove
> Over te | dious rid | dles of years | ago;

The inconsistency of the poem's meter has two important effects. Firstly, it creates a sense of difficulty that is appropriate to the subject matter of the end of a relationship. Secondly, by setting up two competing meters, the rhythm of the poem mirrors the painful duality of the two people as they break up, becoming separate entities once again.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "Neutral Tones" is regular, following an ABBA pattern in each of its four stanzas. This rhyme pattern is known as enclosed rhyme, because of the way the outer two rhymes form a pair surrounding the inner two. The rhyme scheme seems fairly innocuous on first glance, contributing to a sense of the poem's "neutrality" of form that masks the depth of the speaker's emotional pain.

But there is an echo of another famous example of enclosed rhyming quatrains that could be considered part of the atmosphere of this poem. The ABBA rhyme scheme is common to the Petrarchan sonnet (and sonnets more generally). As the Petrarchan sonnet is closely associated with love poetry, while "Neutral Tones" focuses on a break-up and the bitterness and deception of love more generally, perhaps there is an ironic "bitterness" in the choice of rhyme scheme in "Neutral Tones."

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is generally taken to be Thomas Hardy himself, with the addressee perhaps being a woman called Tryphena Sparks with whom Hardy had a relationship. However, this isn't explicitly stated in the poem and shouldn't be taken as a given.

The evidence within the poem suggests that the speaker is someone who has suffered heartbreak, and all of the words in the poem belong to the speaker. It's clear that the speaker has suffered emotional trauma and sees no glimmer of optimism on the horizon.

Just as important as the speaker's identity is the addressee's. In fact, the reader isn't really invited into the poem at all—it's spoken by the speaker directly to his (or her) lover/ex-lover. The speaker addresses this lover with the second person pronoun, and together the two of them form the "we" of the first line. There is thus an uncomfortable intimacy between the speaker, the addressee, and the reader, with the reader seeming to be a kind of eavesdropper on the speaker's words to the ex-lover.

SETTING

The setting in "Neutral Tones" is twofold. First, the scene described takes place in the past. The way stanza 4 returns to the content of stanza 1 makes it clear that the reader is bearing witness to the speaker's memory, and that overall the truest way of describing the setting is to say that the poem is situated within the speaker's troubled psyche.

But the literal setting of the memory also is important, so it's fair to describe the setting as a winter's day—in fact, a very specific winter's day (as shown by the use of "that" in line 1) on which this emotional traumatic break-up occurred. Even within the context of this winter scene, colored in "neutral tones" by the white sun and the graying leaves, the reader still experiences the moment through the speaker's sensory memory—it is certainly possible to wonder if the speaker's memory of the bleakness of the day is influenced by the trauma of the breakup.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 and became one of the most successful novelists of the Victorian era. His later novels—works like *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*—challenged Victorian sensibilities, and the often angry reaction to their publication led to him focusing on poetry in his later years (though Hardy wrote "Neutral Tones" before this shift, in the 1860s). "Neutral Tones" wasn't published until over thirty years later, however, in a collection called *Wessex Poems and Other Verses* (1898), which comprises 51 poems set in the bleak atmosphere of southwestern England.

Hardy's collection was met with a mixed reaction—his attempts to formally innovate and refresh what he felt were the stuck mannerisms of Victorian poetry were not universally praised. That said, he was among the most celebrated writers of the era; when he died in 1928, he was buried in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Hardy's work—both prose and poetry—is often considered part of a general trend of Victorian pessimism that saw writers confronting the religious and societal assumptions that had been cast into doubt by scientific advances. A good example of a poem that captures this particular mood is Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Victorian period in which Hardy wrote can be simultaneously described as a time of great advancement and great loss. Because of the scientific developments engendered by people like Charles Darwin (and his less recognized rival

Alfred Russel Wallace), the geologist Charles Lyle, and the paleontologist Richard Owen, Victorian writers (and people more generally) were faced with stark evidence that at best cast doubt on the literal interpretation of the Bible and at worst disproved God altogether.

Hardy in particular felt this loss keenly, but was unflinching in facing up to it in his work. His later novels in particular caused great scandal because they took aim at what he saw as the hypocrisies prevalent in the Victorian era, and also seemed to embody something of Darwin's notion that only the strong survive.

The historical period more generally was one of technological innovation and expansion, with the British Empire spreading and tightening its hold on the entire globe.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Wessex Poems and Other Verses — Full text of the collection in which "Neutral Tones" first appeared. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3167/3167-h/3167-h.htm)
- Thomas Hardy Resources — Various resources related to Thomas Hardy provided by the Hardy society, including analysis of various poems. (https://www.hardysociety.org/resources/)
- Thomas Hardy Documentary — A BBC documentary about Hardy's life and works. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Jgx6ez9LYM)
- Thomas Hardy and His Letters — An interesting article about Hardy's communications via letter. (https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/the-many-sided-thomas-hardy/)
- Victorian Pessimism — The British podcast "In Our Time' discusses the general atmosphere of pessimism in which Hardy was writing. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007d9k6)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- A Wife In London
- The Darkling Thrush
- The Man He Killed

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