

**J.M.S. COLLEGE, MUNGER**  
**(A Constituent Unit under Munger University, Munger)**  
**Department of English**  
**B.A. Part-I, English (Hons.)- Paper II**

**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.

## **Introduction:**

"Neutral Tones" is a bleak and pessimistic poem that depicts the end of a love affair and the psychological aftereffects. Thomas Hardy wrote the poem in 1867, though it was not published until 1898 in the collection *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*. The poem's tone reflects the general skepticism that runs throughout Hardy's work.

## **Themes of "Neutral Tones":**

### **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 be 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.

## **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.

### Analysis of Literary Devices Used in “Neutral Tones”

**Literary devices** are tools used by writers to convey their emotions, ideas, and themes to make texts more appealing to the reader. Thomas Hardy has also used some literary devices in this poem to enhance the intended impact of the poem. The analysis of some of the literary devices used in this poem has been given below.

1. **Assonance:** Assonance is the **repetition** of vowel sounds in the same line. For example, the sound of /i/ in ‘Over tedious riddles of years ago’.
2. **Alliteration:** Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line in quick succession such as the sound of /w/ in ‘And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me’ and the sound of /f/ ‘They had fallen from an ash, and were gray’, and the sound of /l/ in ‘And a few leaves lay on the starving sod’.
3. **Consonance:** Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line such as the sound of /d/ in ‘Over tedious riddles of years ago’ and the sound of /n/ in ‘They had fallen from an ash’.
4. **Enjambment:** It is defined as a thought in a **verse** that does not come to an end at a **line break**; rather, it rolls over to the next line. For example,

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

5. **Imagery:** Imagery is used to make readers perceive things involving their five senses. For example, “We stood by a pond that winter day”, “The smile on your mouth was the dearest thing”, and “Your face, and the God-cursed sun, and a tree.”
6. **Oxymoron:** It is a **figure of speech** in which apparently contradictory terms appear in conjunctions. For example, in the opening line of the third **stanza** it is stated as, “The smile on your mouth was the dearest thing.” Here, the smile presents the duality of human nature.
7. **Personification:** Personification is to give human qualities to inanimate objects. For example, love is personified in the last stanza, ‘Since then, keen lessons that love deceives’.
8. **Symbolism:** Symbolism is a use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities, by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal meanings. The winter symbolizes sadness and melancholy.

**Acknowledgement (Sources taken help of):**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50364/neutral-tones>

<https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/thomas-hardy/neutral-tones>

<https://literarydevices.net/neutral-tones/>

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