



# Neutral Tones by Thomas Hardy KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



**Context** – *Neutral Tones* was written by Thomas Hardy in 1867. It formed part of his *Wessex Poems* in 1898.

**Thomas Hardy** – Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was an English novelist and poet. He is known as one of the prevalent authors of Victorian realist works however his novels and poetry were also clearly influenced by Romanticism. Hardy did not release his first poetry collection until 1898 (*Neutral Tones* was in this collection), initially becoming famous from his novels such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). Many of his works are set in his native south-west England or the semi-fictional region of Wessex.



**Victorian Realism** – Literary realism began in the mid-nineteenth century in French and Russian literature, through authors such as Stendhal and Pushkin, soon extending across the rest of Europe. Literary realism attempts to depict things the way that they are. Realist authors tend to depict everyday or banal activities and experiences, as opposed to using romanticised or far-fetched descriptions. Realism in Victorian England became popular as it provided readers an opportunity to engage with real experiences, such as the plight of the poor.



**Personal Tragedy in Hardy's Life** – In 1870, Hardy met and fell in love with Emma Gifford, who he married in 1874. However, Emma died in 1912, which had an extremely traumatic effect on Hardy. After her death, Hardy made trips to Cornwall to revisit the places linked to their courtship. He later married his secretary, Florence Emily Dugdale, (39 years his junior), however he remained preoccupied with the death of Emma. When he died, his heart was buried next to Emma's body.



**Romanticism** – Romanticism was an artistic, literary, musical, cultural and intellectual movement that originated in Europe in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In most areas it peaked in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Romanticism is characterised by its emphasis on emotions, as well as glorifying nature and past events. It was partially in response to the scientific rationalisation of nature of the era. Amongst the most famous romantic poets were William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron.



## Language/Structural Devices

**Imagery** – As one would expect from a poem from the romantic tradition, *Neutral Tones* provides vivid imagery of the natural setting in which the relationship ends. Hardy uses colour imagery in describing the sun and the leaves, ('white' and 'gray') using them to mimic the dull sense of melancholy that is felt at the end of the relationship. The season of winter is also chosen, to show the lifelessness of the relationship.

**Alliteration and Assonance**– Hardy uses alliteration and assonance in a number of places in the poem, in order to both emphasise ideas and feelings, and also to replicate particular sounds and patterns. For example, soft 'l' and 'o' sounds are repeated throughout the second stanza, to show the sense of tiredness, laziness and awkwardness within the relationship as it draws towards its end.

**Quote:** "We stood by a pond that winter day,  
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God"

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

**Figurative Language**– Figurative language is prevalent throughout the poem, both explicitly and subliminally. For example, personification is used at different points to describe the sun and the soil – mirroring the cold feelings between the speaker and recipient. The most explicit simile (lines 11 and 12) compares love to a menacing bird that is flying away. This adds to the sense of pessimism in the poem.

**Personal Pronouns** – The use of personal pronouns is interesting in that it separates the subject and the former lover. Aside from the initial 'we', collective pronouns are used sparingly, whereas 'you/your' and 'me' are used throughout the poem. This subliminally cements the idea that the speaker and the former lover should be treated as separate entities – their time as a couple has come to an end.

**Quote:** "And a grin of bitterness swept thereby  
Like an ominous bird a-wing...."

**Quote:** "Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove  
Over tedious riddles of years ago;"

**Form/Structure** – *Neutral Tones* is written in quatrains. This straightforward grouping of sets of four lines is one of the simplest and most recognisable poetic forms. As the poem is written in iams of four, these are tetrameter quatrains. The rhyme scheme that runs throughout the poem is ABBA throughout.

**Narrative Structure** – Each stanza deals with distinct ideas. Stanza 1 sets the scene of the drab winter lake. Stanza 2 focuses more on the relationship, and how it died. Stanza 3 describes the lack of love between the two now that the relationship is ending. Stanza 4 is one of total despair, outlining the pessimistic view of love.

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

**Quote:** "Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,  
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me"

**Themes** – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

**Sadness** – *Neutral Tones* is a love poem, but it focuses on the sadness of the end of a relationship rather than the joy of being in love. This is a poem about disappointed love, and is likely to be at least partially auto-biographical, as Hardy struggled with several challenging relationships during his life.



**Neutrality** – The writer's tone is neutral and unemotional, reflecting the lovers' tones as they held their discussion. One of the ways that Hardy achieves this neutrality is through giving details describing the setting in short, plain simple phrases that depict a setting with the colours drawn out – the 'white' sun, the 'starving' sod.



## Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	We stood by a pond that winter day,	The poem opens by a pond in winter – the season that is the <u>coldest and most lifeless</u> of all (reflective of the relationship being dead). The colour of the sun suggests that it has <u>lost its vitality</u> , just like the relationship. <u>Personification</u> is used to suggest that nature is pained at this time e.g. 'the starving sod.' 'Ash' has dual meaning – name of the tree that the 'few leaves' have fallen from, but also suggestive of <u>remnants</u> of the 'fire' of the relationship. 'Gray' has connotations with <u>neutrality and drabness</u> , thus completing the image of the bleak landscape.
	2	And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,	
	3	And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;	
	4	They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.	
2	5	Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove	The second stanza appears to <u>focus more on the relationship</u> between the speaker and recipient – the first line suggests that this was not a <u>faithful relationship</u> . 'Tedious' suggests that the playful 'riddles' are no longer fun, but tiresome. The <u>alliteration</u> of the 'l' sound and assonance of 'o' throughout the stanza <u>create a lazy, weary tone</u> , reflective of the fact that the subjects no longer bother to make an effort with one another. The last line gives another clear reference that <u>love has been lost</u> .
	6	Over tedious riddles of years ago;	
	7	And some words played between us to and fro	
	8	On which lost the more by our love.	
3	9	The smile on your mouth was the <u>deadest thing</u>	The <u>superlative adjective 'deadest'</u> suggests the smile is not genuine/ has lost its charm – there is no feeling behind it. <u>Juxtaposition of opposing terms</u> – alive/dead, grin/bitterness – is <u>awkward</u> and adds to the <u>uncomfortable feeling</u> in the poem. The use of 'deadest' and 'die' creates the idea that the relationship cannot be revived. The <u>simile</u> in line 4 seems to represent the speaker's shattered trust. Lines 3 and 4 become somewhat more opinionated, moving towards <u>bitterness</u> – there seems to be more of a sense of dislike. Overall, the <u>third stanza</u> continues the relentless description of the lack of love between them.
	10	Alive enough to have strength to die;	
	11	And a grin of bitterness swept thereby	
	12	Like an ominous bird a-wing....	
4	13	Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,	In the final stanza, the sense of <u>total despair</u> becomes complete, with the speaker now outright lamenting love itself. The <u>alliteration</u> in 'wings with wrong' adds a mnemonic value to the inner pain that the speaker is feeling. The mention of God again adds a <u>sense of fate</u> – <u>love was supposed to fail</u> . 'Curst' reflects the tone turning from sadness to anger. The poem ends where it started: by the 'neutral tones' of the lake, mirroring the speaker's emotions.
	14	And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me	
	15	Your face, and the God curst sun, and a tree,	
	16	And a pond edged with grayish leaves.	

## Poems for Comparison

When We Two Parted	Mother, Any Distance...	The Poet's Influences
<i>Neutral Tones</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem as they both detail <u>sadness at the end of a relationship</u> .	<i>Neutral Tones</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in the approach to the theme of <u>growing apart</u> .	<p>"Many of Hardy's most moving poems were written immediately following his wife Emma's death in 1912. They recall not just their early days of happiness, but their long years spent mired in domestic misery. Hardy could also respond powerfully to public events. For example he wrote about the sinking of the Titanic in <i>The Convergence of the Twain</i> and the human cost of the Boer War in <i>Drummer Hodge</i>. At his death in 1928 Hardy's ashes were interred at Westminster Abbey, but his heart was removed for burial alongside Emma in Stinsford, Dorset." <a href="http://www.bbc.co.uk">www.bbc.co.uk</a></p> 