

# ASM TUITION ACADEMY

## NEUTRAL TONES

### Neutral Tones

By 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 grey.

Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove  
Over tedious riddles of years ago;  
And some words played between us to and for—  
On which lost the more by our love.

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing  
Alive enough to have the strength to die;  
And a grin of bitterness swept thereby  
Like an ominous bird a-wing...

Since then, keen lessons that love deceive,  
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.

### Summary of "Neutral Tones"

Thomas Hardy's "Neutral Tones" captures the memory of a meeting between the speaker and a former lover on a cold, bleak winter day. They stood beside a pond, with the landscape around them mirroring the lifelessness of their relationship. The sun was pale and harsh, and the dying leaves matched the dullness and lack of vitality in their connection. The speaker describes the lover's indifferent gaze and their hollow conversation. The relationship had already decayed, and the lover's smile, though once meaningful, is now described as dead. The speaker reflects on how this experience has tainted their view of love, leaving a permanent impression of sorrow and emotional disillusionment.

### Themes

1. **Love and Loss:** The poem is rooted in the theme of lost love, describing the fading and eventual death of affection between two people. Hardy portrays the end of a relationship with a tone of emotional distance, emphasizing the hurt that accompanies love's decay.
2. **Nature Reflecting Emotion:** Hardy uses the bleakness of the natural world (a pale sun, dead leaves, cold weather) to parallel the emotions in the relationship. The muted tones of the landscape reinforce the feelings of emptiness and disillusionment in the speaker's heart.

3. **Disillusionment and Betrayal:** The speaker hints at feelings of betrayal or deep disappointment, as love, once cherished, has become something cold and lifeless. The "keen lessons that love deceives" speaks to the painful reality of how love, once full of promise, can deceive and leave one bitter.
4. **Memory and Time:** The entire poem is a reflection on a past moment. The way the speaker remembers the scene, years after it occurred, suggests that this event left a lasting impact on their perception of love.

### Poetic Analysis

- **Form and Structure:** "*Neutral Tones*" is a four-quatrain poem, with each stanza consisting of four lines, following a regular ABBA rhyme scheme. This tight, controlled structure complements the speaker's detached tone, enhancing the sense of restraint and emotional numbness in the poem.
- **Tone and Mood:** The tone of the poem is melancholic and dispassionate. Hardy employs a detached and neutral voice to describe an emotionally charged moment. The mood is bleak, reinforced by the references to winter, dead leaves, and a "God-curst sun," all of which contribute to the sense of desolation.
- **Imagery and Symbolism:**
  - **The Pond:** The pond acts as a symbol of stasis and reflection. It is a quiet, stagnant place that mirrors the dead relationship and the stillness between the speaker and their former lover.
  - **Gray Leaves and Sun:** The grey, lifeless leaves and pale sun represent the drained vitality of their love, symbolizing the death of emotional warmth and connection.
  - **Eyes and Smile:** The lover's eyes and smile, once full of meaning, are now cold and dead, reflecting the complete emotional disconnection between the two.
- **Language and Diction:** Hardy's language is deliberately neutral, with words like "white," "Gray," and "neutral" reinforcing the lack of warmth or colour in both the setting and the relationship. He uses a lot of muted, colourless imagery to emphasize the emotional barrenness of the speaker's experience.
- **Metaphor and Simile:** Hardy uses metaphors and similes to convey the disillusionment. For example, the lover's smile is described as "the deadest thing," and her bitterness as "an ominous bird a-wing," conveying the finality and ominous nature of their emotional break.

### ANAYLSIS :

"*Neutral Tones*" is a subtle yet powerful reflection on the end of a relationship. The speaker's bitterness and disillusionment are reflected in the muted, cold imagery of the natural world. Hardy's use of restrained language, regular structure, and colourless imagery creates an atmosphere of detachment, mirroring the emotional numbness the speaker feels as they reflect on a love that has long since died. The poem explores universal themes of love, loss, and emotional disillusionment, with nature playing a significant role in echoing the internal feelings of the speaker.

# COMPARISON WITH WHEN WE TWO PARTED

Here's a comparative analysis of "*Neutral Tones*" by Thomas Hardy and "*When We Two Parted*" by Lord Byron, focusing on their themes, tone, structure, and use of imagery.

## Summary of "*When We Two Parted*"

Lord Byron's "*When We Two Parted*" reflects on the painful end of a romantic relationship. The speaker recalls the moment of separation, describing the coldness and sorrow that accompanied it. The relationship ended in secrecy, and the speaker feels a deep sense of betrayal and emotional pain, which lingers long after the parting. The speaker mourns the lost love and bitterly acknowledges that hearing of the lover now brings only sorrow.

## Thematic Comparison

### 1. Love and Loss:

- In both poems, love is presented as something that has decayed and turned into loss. Hardy's "*Neutral Tones*" explores the emotional distance and disillusionment that remains after love has faded, whereas Byron's "*When We Two Parted*" expresses a more intense and immediate sense of grief and betrayal.
- In "*Neutral Tones*", the speaker reflects on a moment that has already passed, with a tone of resignation. By contrast, in "*When We Two Parted*", the speaker's anguish is still raw, and the pain of parting feels fresh even as they look back.

### 2. Disillusionment and Betrayal:

- Both speakers feel betrayed by love. In Hardy's poem, the disillusionment is rooted in the emotional coldness and indifference of the former lover, whereas Byron's speaker feels betrayed on a personal level, possibly because of infidelity, secrecy, or false promises.
- Byron emphasizes the secrecy of the relationship ("in silence I grieve"), suggesting a hidden, possibly illicit, affair that has led to deeper feelings of sorrow and regret.

### 3. Memory and Time:

- In both poems, memory plays a crucial role. Hardy's speaker reflects on a specific moment that has left a permanent mark on their perception of love. Byron's speaker, too, reflects on a moment of parting, but the pain lingers, as they imagine that even in the future, their feelings of loss will not subside: "If I should meet thee after long years, / How should I greet thee?—With silence and tears."
- In both cases, the parting has long-lasting emotional consequences, but Hardy's speaker seems more resigned, while Byron's speaker anticipates continuing grief.

## Tone and Mood

### 1. Melancholy and Despair:

- Both poems carry a melancholic tone, though *"Neutral Tones"* is more detached and reflective, while *"When We Two Parted"* is more passionate and sorrowful.
  - Hardy's tone is neutral, with muted emotions reflecting disillusionment, whereas Byron's tone is more charged with personal anguish and regret. Byron's speaker feels that the relationship's end has caused ongoing suffering, while Hardy's speaker views love as something deceptive that has drained them of emotion.
- 2. Emotional Detachment vs. Passionate Sorrow:**
- In *"Neutral Tones"*, the speaker adopts a tone of emotional detachment, reflecting on love as a disappointing and lifeless experience. Hardy's use of "grey" and "white" colours reflects the cold, lifeless nature of the relationship.
  - In contrast, *"When We Two Parted"* has a more intense emotional quality. The speaker's grief is palpable in the repetition of phrases like "half broken-hearted" and "in silence and tears," highlighting the speaker's sorrow and sense of betrayal.

## Structure

- 1. Form:**
- *"Neutral Tones"* follows a simple and structured form of four quatrains (ABBA rhyme scheme). This rigid, controlled structure mirrors the emotional restraint of the speaker and enhances the theme of disillusionment.
  - *"When We Two Parted"* also consists of quatrains (with an ABAB rhyme scheme), but the shorter lines and rhythmic regularity create a more urgent and poignant sense of loss. The simplicity of Byron's form contrasts with the complex emotions at play.
- 2. Repetition:**
- Byron makes use of repetition effectively: phrases such as "in silence and tears" and "when we two parted" recur throughout the poem, emphasizing the ongoing nature of the speaker's pain.
  - Hardy, by contrast, does not rely on repetition. His quatrains move forward methodically, reflecting the speaker's resigned acceptance of love's failure rather than active grief.

## Imagery

- 1. Nature as a Reflection of Emotion:**
- In *"Neutral Tones"*, nature mirrors the bleak emotional state of the speaker. The pond, the "grey" leaves, the "God-curst sun," and the dead smile of the lover all reflect the lifelessness and coldness of the relationship. The neutral, colourless imagery underscores the speaker's numbness and disappointment.
  - In *"When We Two Parted"*, nature also mirrors the speaker's emotions, but more actively and viscerally. The "dew of the morning" symbolizes coldness, and "pale" suggests both the lover's fading affection and the speaker's growing emotional distance. Byron's use of coldness is more tied to the physical sensation of separation, unlike Hardy's detached, symbolic coldness.
- 2. Death and Finality:**
- Both poets use imagery related to death to convey the end of love. Hardy's reference to a "dearest thing" and "grey" leaves symbolizes the emotional

death of the relationship. The speaker in Hardy's poem seems to view love as something inherently doomed to decay.

- In Byron's poem, death imagery appears in the idea of the speaker's heart "half-broken," and in phrases like "knell" (a funeral bell), suggesting that the end of the relationship feels like a death to the speaker. However, Byron's speaker expresses a more personal and immediate sense of loss, while Hardy's speaker reflects on the inevitability of love's demise.

### **Conclusion**

While both "*Neutral Tones*" and "*When We Two Parted*" address the themes of love and loss, they approach them in distinct ways. Hardy's poem is characterized by emotional detachment, reflective melancholy, and muted imagery, portraying love as something that fades and leaves behind only disillusionment. Byron's poem, on the other hand, is charged with personal grief, a sense of betrayal, and intense sorrow, portraying a relationship that still haunts the speaker long after it ended. Both poets use nature to reflect their emotional states, but while Hardy's nature is cold and stagnant, Byron's is more active and symbolic of the speaker's ongoing pain.