

## Neutral Tones

neutral – without strong qualities; tones – colour; neutral tones - drained of colour

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.

chidden of - rebuked, censured severely by  
starving – freezing, dying; sod - earth  
ash – ash tree

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

rove – move as if considering, judging, appraising  
tedious – wearisome, annoying  
played – perhaps moved?

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....

thereby – by that, a grin passed over your mouth  
ominous – bringing misfortune; a-wing – flying past

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.

keen - painful  
wring – causes intense distress, pain  
the dead leaves of an ash tree are gray

This is an early poem written in 1867. The words ‘Neutral Tones’ in the title paint a picture drained of colour. And Hardy starts the poem with two people in the now-failed relationship, ‘We’, immediately followed by a whole verse that paints a picture of where they were standing, by a pond on a winter’s day. The second verse looks at the woman’s eyes and the boredom in them, and remembers the desultory words between the two people, the communication that is no longer a pleasure. The third looks at the dead smile on the woman’s mouth, the smile that is no longer alive and joyous. In the last verse, Hardy notes that whenever he experiences a painful reminder of deceiving love, he pictures the woman’s face, and the winter landscape by the pond.

The setting is a winter landscape and the poem describes the winter of their love. There are no colours, except for ‘white’, ‘gray’ and ‘grayish’; there is no warmth in the sun or in their relationship, no emotions except for tedium (‘tedious riddles’) and bitterness. The rhyme scheme is ABBA, a pattern that encloses, entraps, allows no way forward; the first and last lines of the quatrains rhyme and thus they imprison the verse. In fact, the whole poem is shaped like this, as the last verse repeats the description of the first verse by the pond, with the God-curst sun and the tree. The rhythm of the lines is inconsistent, halting and stumbling, going nowhere like the relationship. This is particularly the case in lines like: ‘They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.’

The poem is filled with words of depression and death: ‘dead’, ‘chidden’, ‘God-curst’, ‘starving’, ‘ominous’, ‘bitterness’, ‘lost’, ‘tedious’, ‘fallen’. Further evoking the painful experience of the end of a relationship, in the third verse, oxymorons provide strange yokings, pairings of words that should not be together, like ‘deadest thing / Alive’ and ‘a grin of bitterness’.

The sounds and rhythms add to the impression of depression and lack of vitality. Assonance and alliteration link words and sounds, and the sound is devoid of energy and vitality. In verse 4, the 'ee' sound links 'keen' (painful), 'deceives', 'me', 'tree', 'leaves' – in other words, the heartache of love is linked in Hardy's mind and in his poem to the winter setting. Alliteration links 'wrings' with 'wrong'. The rhythm of the poem lurches beyond the second line and stumbles to a cesura after 'Your face', staggers on again through heavily stressed monosyllables 'and the God-curst sun' to the next cesura. It drags itself through this listless list 'and a', 'and a', and finally peters out with the halting rhythms of 'And a pond edged with grayish leaves.' Many of the words in this last verse are monosyllables; several contain heavy sounds with weighty ds and gs: 'deceives', 'pond', 'edged', 'grayish'.

The tone of this poem seems both bitter and profoundly depressed. It's written in the first person, but feels strangely detached to me – perhaps because this is a relationship that no longer involves the persona. It is unclear whether the poet is simply stating a fact or whether he is blaming himself or the woman. Is the poem primarily about himself, or about the pain of love?

## Literary terms

Very often writers highlight important words. They do this with:

Alliteration – several words starting with the same letter or sound, for example, 'bleared and black and blind'.

Assonance – same vowel sound in different words, for example, 'abode', 'sloped'.

Cesura – a break or pause in the middle of a line of poetry.

Consonance – same consonants in words that contain different vowel sounds, for example, 'bode', 'boughed'.

Enjambement or run-on lines – when there is no punctuation at the end of a line of verse and it runs straight on to the next line.

Onomatopoeia – the effect when the sound of a word reflects its meaning, like 'plash'.

Personification – when something that is not human is referred to as if it is a person, for example, the Titanic, 'still couches she'. The effect is usually to exaggerate some aspect of the topic.

Repetition – repeated word or meaning.

Rhyme – very similar to assonance; same vowel sound and final consonant, for example, 'say', 'decay'. Masculine rhyme – when the final syllable is stress, as in 'say' and 'decay'. Feminine rhyme – when the final syllable is not stressed, as in 'growing', 'showing'.

Rhythm – the musical beat of the line, with stressed and unstressed syllables (the stressed syllables will be the important ones). The different rhythms have different names. Trochee (trochaic): strong light, strong light; iamb (iambic): light strong, light strong; dactyl: strong light light, strong light light; anapaest: light light strong, light light strong. If puzzled, try Wikipedia which is very clear on the subject.

Then there are technical words for the number of lines in a verse or stanza.

Quatrain – four lines in a verse

Sestet – six line

Octave – eight lines