

Neutral Tones

Overview:

In this depressing and far from neutral poem, the speaker thinks back to the important moment in which he recognised the (metaphorical) death of his relationship for the first time; the first three stanzas recreate that moment, including the conversation the pair had about which of them felt they had been more damaged by their relationship. In the final stanza, the speaker reflects on his deepened understanding of the pain of love, which is distilled in the image of his ex-lover's face and the scene.

Context:

- Thomas Hardy and his wife Emma had a tempestuous relationship and were estranged for twenty years before her death in 1912.
- Hardy suffered from Depression throughout much of his life.
- 'Neutral Tones' comes from Hardy's first published collection (*Wessex Poems, 1898* – though the poem itself was written in 1867). The poems immediately preceding and following 'Neutral Tones' (chronologically) within the collection explore betrayal, disappointment, death and the loss of love.

Structure:

- The poem is composed of four quatrains with an irregular, sometimes jerky metre (rhythm) and a fairly regular ABBA rhyme-scheme (note, though, the one half-rhyme of 'love' and 'rove' in lines 5 and 8).
- The poem begins and ends in the same place (in the first stanza, being there; in the final stanza, recalling it), emphasising the importance of this moment to the speaker's understanding of love.
- With the speaker, we move from seeing the scene to closely observing his partner's face and then back to an overview of the scene with greater understanding.

Key Images:

- Note the bleached, neutral colours ("grey", "greyish" and "white" – in contrast with the "bitterness" of the poem's tone), the highly unromantic body of water ("pond", rather than, for example, 'lake' or 'pool') and the links to death ("winter" is associated with death as the death of the year; "dead"; "deadeat" and "die").

Potential Comparisons

Loss of love: 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'



Changing Relationship: 'One Flesh'; 'A Complaint'

Resentment/ bitterness: 'My Father Would Not Show Us'