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Unit- II: Poetry:1: Neutral Tones-Thomas Hardy

Topic- Neutral Tones (Study Notes)

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Unit- II. Poetry Section

1. Neutral Tones-Thomas Hardy (1840-1929)

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.

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 and became one of the most successful novelists of the Victorian era. His later novels works like *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* challenged Victorian sensibilities, and the often angry reaction to their publication led to him focusing on poetry in his later years. "Neutral Tones" wasn't published until over thirty years later, however, in a collection called *Wessex Poems and Other Verses* (1898), which comprises 51 poems set in the bleak atmosphere of southwestern England. Hardy's work both prose and poetry—is often considered part of a general trend of Victorian pessimism that saw writers confronting the religious and societal assumptions that had been cast into doubt by scientific advances.

"Neutral Tones" is comprised of four quatrains. Quatrains are one of the simplest and most recognizable stanza shapes, and accordingly there is something unobtrusive about the way the poem presents itself on the page. This is in keeping with the "neutrality" gestured to

in the title. The first three stanzas focus on the past meeting of two lovers; the final quatrain is a reflection on that meeting, a memory. It is obvious from the speaker's tone that they didn't have much between them as they stood near the wintry pond. The reader is left to make their own conclusions. "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 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).

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.

B) Major Themes of the Poem:

i) Loss: This poem is about the ending of a relationship, and the speaker's feelings as he reflects on this. The tone of the poem is melancholy and nostalgic, reflecting the speaker's feelings of defeat and loss. Hardy shows that although love can be wonderful, the possibility of loss is always there, and that love always entails the risk of pain. As readers, we know nothing about their previous relationship, but we get a strong sense of how much it meant to the speaker.

ii) Falling Out of Love: *Neutral Tones* depicts a relationship in which one partner has fallen out of love. This is represented by the leaves that had "fallen from an ash, and were gray." The setting of winter is appropriate, as it is a time where things in nature that once blossomed decay and die, in a similar way to the affections of the speaker's partner. The speaker describes how his partner became bored of him, and how her eyes looked at him "as eyes that rove/ over tedious riddles of years ago."

iii) Memories: The speaker of this poem is looking back and reflecting on the end of a relationship, which he still feels strongly about. This poem is about the persistence of memories that were particularly traumatic or emotional. Hardy opens the poem by telling us that this is the memory of the speaker: "We stood by a pond that winter day," then details the memories of this day from the perspective of the speaker. The speaker remembers details about the fateful day, such as his emotions, his surroundings, and the weather.

Form, structure, language and imagery of the poem-

A) Form: The poem *Neutral Tones* is written in quatrains. This straightforward grouping of sets of four lines is one of the simplest and most recognizable poetic forms.

B) Structure: The poem consists of four stanzas. The rhyme scheme follows the regular pattern **abba**. The pairs of rhymed lines contribute to the straightforward style of the poem, supporting the idea of a neutral telling of the tale. The rhythmic pattern of the poem is not consistent. This maybe echoes the uncomfortable feeling which existed between the two people involved and in the eventual breakdown of their relationship. The overall structure of the poem is circular rather than linear as it starts and ends in the same geographical place. One interpretation of this is that the speaker has not come to terms with what has happened and revisits the memory.

C) Language: Despite the title's claim, there is a clear pattern of negative words which runs through the poem ('lost', 'dearest', 'die', 'bitterness', 'ominous'). Some of the words and phrases used by Hardy are deliberately ambiguous. For instance, the words in the title can have more than one meaning. A neutral tone might refer to: a voice, or voices, saying something unbiased and without a particular point of view (this, at least, is the speaker's claim) pale and washed-out colors, particularly the natural features of the landscape which are described as either gray or white. The two words of the title have two distinct meanings and perhaps mirror the feelings of the two people described in the memory.

D) Imagery: The still water of a pond with no movement suggests how the relationship isn't going anywhere. It is no accident that the poet sets the poem in the season of winter when natural life is less readily visible. The natural features of the landscape in which the poem is

set have all been chosen carefully by Hardy to highlight the meaning of the poem and contribute to the tone.

***Multiple Choice Questions.**

Neutral Tones-Thomas Hardy

- 1) “chidden” means-----
 - a. **Scolded**
 - b. Happy
 - c. Lovely
 - d. Sad
- 2) What is the pond edged with?
 - a. **Grayish leaves**
 - b. Reeds
 - c. Trees
 - d. Sun
- 3) Which of the following neutral colors are NOT mentioned in the poem?
 - a. **Beige**
 - b. White
 - c. Gray
 - d. Grayish
- 4) Each stanza has four lines, this is called a-----
 - a. Rhyming couplet
 - b. Iambic Pentameter
 - c. Sestet
 - d. **Quatrain**
- 5) What does ‘tedious’ mean?
 - a. Difficult
 - b. Complexity
 - c. Gentle and calming
 - d. **Boring or tiresome**
- 6) Hardy is called the novelist of.....
 - a. **The Wessex Region**
 - b. The Lake Districts

- c. The Mining Countryside
 - d. The Scottish Highlands
- 7) Which of the following is a poetical collection of Hardy?
- a. Heartbreak House
 - b. The Skin Game
 - c. **Poems of the Past and the Present**
 - d. The Inn of Tranquility
- 8) Hardy was honored with.....
- a. Knighthood
 - b. The Nobel Prize
 - c. **Order of Merit**
 - d. Lake Side
- 9) From what perspective is 'Neutral Tones' written?
- a. **First Person**
 - b. Second Person
 - c. Third person
 - d. None of these
- 10) The poem begins and ends with the pond. Therefore, what word best describes the general structure of the poem?
- a. **Circular**
 - b. Linear
 - c. Triangular
 - d. Unrounded
- 11) We stood by a pond that ----- day.
- a. **Winter**
 - b. Summer
 - c. Spring
 - d. Autumn

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