Neutral Tones

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

Poets often create descriptions of setting that match the situation and enhance the mood of characters- this is called **sympathetic background**.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was initially more famous for his novels, such as Tess of the d’Urbervilles, than for his poetry. Hardy uses sympathetic background in many of his novels as well as in poems such as ‘Neutral Tones’: when tragedy strikes characters, the weather is often miserable, as if in sympathy with a character’s mood.

Why is sympathetic fallacy an effective device to use in poetry? What effect would it have on the reader?
The theme of love

In your opinion, which line most clearly sums up Hardy’s feelings about love?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s2Cl64zYzA

Either:

Write a short paragraph to explain your choice using relevant quotation and considering the effect on the reader.

Or

Explode the line into your book, particularly focusing on the use of language and the effect on the reader.
What is the poem about?

The narrator remembers a day when he and his lover stood by a pond. It’s an unpleasant memory – it’s clear that their relationship was failing and about to come to an end.

He describes his lover’s behaviour – he seems to believe that she found him boring and had fallen out of love with him.

Whenever he’s been hurt by love since, he remembers that day by the pond.
Feelings and Attitudes

The narrator feels bitter about the breakdown of his relationship – he resents the lack of real emotion behind his lover’s smile and the way she seemed bored of him.

Other negative experiences of love since the relationship described in the poem have only confirmed his pessimistic view of love. The bleak mood and colourless setting show that there’s a lack of hope everywhere, even in nature.
Personal Response

1. Do you think the narrator blames his lover for the end of their relationship? Why/Why not?

2. How is time used in the poem?

3. What do you think the title of the poem refers to?
Key Themes

Death, Nature, Memory...

‘Winter Swans’ and ‘The Farmer’s Bride’ also use imagery of nature to reflect troubled relationships. The power of memory is significant in ‘Eden Rock’, but there it is a positive rather than a negative force.
Poem dictionary

Chidden – scolded
Sod – grass covered earth
Rove – wander
Thereby – by
A-wing – flying
Wrings – squeezes or twists forcefully
Curst - cursed
We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though hidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
— They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

Lack of physical movement contributes to lifeless atmosphere

Weather reflects their feelings — they’re emotionally cold towards each other.

Imagines that God has scolded the sun. This adds to the bleak mood of the poem, and hints that the narrator sees everything in a negative way.

The sun is drained of warmth and colour — reflects how the love has drained from their relationships

Alliteration emphasises how the leaves are still and unmoving.

The leaves are from an ash tree but this also links to ash from a fire — their relationship has burnt out.

Alliteration and personification emphasises this impression of suffering — the lifeless ground reflects their dying relationship
In love poems, eyes are traditionally shown to be a positive feature, but they’re shown negatively here.

Enjambment mimics how her eyes move over his face. The words “rove” and “Over” look and sound similar, which reflects the boredom she feels.

Game imagery – love should be fun and playful, but theirs became “tedious” and they “lost”.

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.
Oxymoron – a smile shouldn’t be dead. This emphasises her complete lack of feeling towards him.

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**…

Imagery of a bird flying away suggests the end of the relationship.

Ellipsis represents the time when the relationship came to an end., in the time that passes between stanzas 3 and 4.

She chose to let her smile die – maybe she chose to let the love between them die too.
“keen” means sharp or strong – these lessons have been painful.

He makes a pessimistic generalisation that all love is deceptive.

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 greyish leaves.

Alliteration emphasises his pain and anguish.

Poem begins and ends by the pond – this shows how the memory of that day still affects him.

The “t” in “curst” is a harsher sound than “chidden” in the first stanza – this hints that the narrator has become more bitter over time.

Other experiences of deceitful love remind him of this incident by the pond – perhaps it was the first time he experienced it.