Shades of Gray: A Diachronic Reading of Thomas Hardy’s “Neutral Tones”

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History has given names to many ages in the life of the world; ours is the age of words.

—E. J. Phelps, 1889

Richard Chenevix Trench, drawing on Coleridge and Emerson in On the Study of Words, suggested to his Victorian audience that “we are not to look for the poetry which a people may possess only in its poems, or in its poetical customs, traditions, and beliefs. Many a single word also is itself a concentrated poem, having stores of poetical thought and imagery laid up in it.” The lack of this sort of diachronic awareness in existing dictionaries was the impetus behind the creation of the New English Dictionary (later the Oxford English Dictionary), which appeared between 1884 and 1928 with the aim of satisfying Trench’s view of the dictionary as “an historical monument.” Contemporary critic Dennis Taylor describes the 1860s, a period which saw an extensive amount of groundwork being done on the New English Dictionary as “the signal decade of the new philology in England.” As a result, Taylor argues, it is not surprising “that the two poets regarded as the Victorian period’s greatest ‘later’ poets began writing serious poetry in the 1860s. Hardy and Hopkins were singularly placed to profit by the excitement and bewilderment of the new language consciousness. One way of explaining their achievement is that they made poetry out of the implications of current philological research” (p. 103).

The focus of this study is the first man named by Taylor, Thomas Hardy. Hardy’s profound fascination with philology is well documented in Taylor’s Hardy’s Literary Language and Victorian Philology, particularly in his chapter entitled “Hardy and the New Philology” (pp. 96-172). Hardy was an avid follower of developments in this field, frequently in contact with OED editor James Murray from the latter’s editorial appointment in 1876 onward (Taylor, p. 115). Hardy’s first volume of poetry, Wessex Poems, first appeared in 1898, and one poem in particular reflects Hardy’s keen understanding of and interest in the philology of the day. That poem, the often-anthologized
"Neutral Tones," was composed in 1867 and is described by critic F. B. Pinion as "the most remarkable imaginative poem . . .; it is in a class apart." More importantly, however, it "is a grandma's pantry of linguistic or better, philological, delights." Synchronically read, "Neutral Tones" is decidedly straightforward. It describes what Richard Carpenter calls "a personal [moment] . . . indefinite in its time and place" (p. 172), as the speaker recalls standing with his former love at the side of a pond in the middle of winter, surrounded by a dead landscape that serves as a metaphor for their withered relationship. Though they exchange both looks and words, in the end, they must both accept that they no longer care for each other. The speaker claims that it is only now that time has passed and other "keen lessons" (l. 13) have been learned that he can look back upon this scene with some sense of perspective. In short, this is a poem very much in the Hardy model, bemoaning the loss of love—but there is more to it than that. Taylor's suggestion that this is, in fact "a poem about 'keen lessons' and riddles" (p. 275) is central to any diachronic reading of the poem, and certainly goes a long way toward pointing to a very self-conscious manipulation of language on Hardy's part. I would argue, however, that Hardy is not simply amusing himself by playing with words. There is also an interrogation of the very act of communication, and a reinforcement, never far from the surface in Hardy's work, of the notion of human passivity in the face of divine manipulation.

Any diachronic examination of Hardy's poetry must begin with the title itself. "Neutral Tones" are identified by Joanna Cullen Brown as "important, recurrent symbols in Hardy's poetry" and, understood in their most basic sense, are simply part of a series of dull colors, neither strong nor positive, like the gray leaves that the narrator describes so dispassionately. Indeed, there is nothing to suggest that this is not a valid reading of the title, but it is certainly not the only possibility. The notion of "taking neither side in a dispute, disagreement, or difference of opinions" ("Neutral," def. 2a) is an important one, particularly if it is combined with the idea of political inactivity (defs. 1a and b). This poem is a snapshot of a moment remembered, but this memory is certainly not dominated by action. Indeed, the only things that move within this poem are the woman's eyes, the words that "played between us to and fro" (l. 7), and the smile that is only strong enough to die (l. 9). It is worth adding a related definition, that of a thing "comprised under, or belonging to, neither of two specified or implied categories; occupying a middle position with regard to two extremes" (def. 3a), for this poem is marked very strongly by its utter lack of passion. There is no apparent anger here, and no obvious despair, in spite of the seemingly inevitable nature of the parting.

An additional definition for "neutral" must be read in conjunction with the title's second word. "Neutral" can be ascribed to sounds which are "indistinct, indefinite, obscure" (def. 3d), as we might describe the exchange
of words between the two members of the couple. The OED lists only one example of this usage, from Sayce's *Comparative Philology* in 1874. Taylor does not mention this work as having been on Hardy's shelf, and indeed, the poem's earlier date of composition seems to irrevocably problematize this hypothesis, were it not for the fact that the word "tone" has so much to do with the quality of sound. For Arthur Henry Hallam, "tone" is "the sign of the feeling" so expertly captured by Dante, Petrarch, and contemporary poets of sensation like his friend Tennyson—and a sign based almost entirely on sound:

> These mighty masters produce two-thirds of their effect by sound. Not that they sacrifice sense to sound, but that sound conveys their meaning where words would not. There are innumerable shades of fine emotion in the human heart, especially when the senses are keen and vigilant, which are too subtle and too rapid to admit of corresponding phrases. The understanding takes no definite note of them; how then can they leave signatures in language? Yet they exist... and in music they find a medium through which they pass from heart to heart.**

Hallam's essay first appeared in 1831, in Moxon's *Englishman's Magazine* (Mote, p. 182), and vanished from view not long after. It seems highly unlikely that Hardy ever read this particular piece of work, and yet something of that understanding is arguably present here. The OED, in a fairly lengthy and somewhat uncertain discussion of the origin of "tone," concludes that it is derived from the idea of "stretching, quality of sound,... tension,... exertion of physical or mental energy," and one might convincingly argue that this is indeed a poem about tension. The failed relationship described in the poem's sixteen lines has been pulled taut, leaving no release for the resulting strain except in indifference (or neutrality), feigned or otherwise. The title, then, is emblematic of the paradox of love that the poem describes—a vigorous pulling apart in a poem that is utterly devoid of action.

This last reading of the poem's title is based primarily on the idea of sound. Indeed, if we understand "tone" in this way, then the idea of "neutral" as representing indistinct sound becomes plausible. We might read this sound as obscured by the distance produced by tension,** or as deliberately obscured by a desire not to allow that tension, and its resulting emotion, to be released. But tone, according to Hallam, is also the artistic equivalent of Titian's tinting (p. 195). Tone is "the sign of the feeling"—expressed feeling which is decidedly lacking here—and that sign impresses itself not just on the ear, but on the eye. The most obvious definition of "neutral tone" is ultimately related to the visual, and it is hardly coincidental that such tones are directly referred to twice in the opening stanza, in the white sun (l. 2) and the gray leaves (l. 4), while winter itself is a season of neutral tones. Moreover, the OED points out that the interplay of light and shadow (def. 10a) plays a
part in assessing tone, and Margaret Faurot echoes this in her argument that “there is no light and shadow; no relief here. . . . Though passion, a state of being that is significantly associated with intense color, is arguably present, the poem’s prevailing tone is as gray as the leaves that litter the ground” (pp. 126-127). Visual neutrality, in other words, is the defining characteristic of the poem’s overall tone.

These two possible readings of “tone” and the effect of each reading on the title as a whole still leave out what is often understood as the word’s primary meaning. The OED provides a basic definition of the word as “a particular style in discourse or writing, which expresses the person’s sentiment or reveals his character; spec. in literary criticism, an author’s attitude to his subject matter or audience; the distinctive mood created by this” (def. 5d). The note refers the reader to definition 9 (see below), which, if nothing else, indicates how entangled all of these meanings are, but more than this, introduces the question of perspective. In broad literary terms, then, tone is understood as the attitude of the writer toward the subject or toward the reader, but we have here the added complication of the first-person, internal narrator, who may or may not be speaking for the author. Thus, we have as the primary issue not the attitude of the author toward his audience, but the attitude of the author toward his fictional persona, and the attitude of both author and speaker toward the woman to whom the poem is ostensibly addressed. Read in this way, “Neutral Tones” becomes an indirect commentary on the very act of speaking and of representing oneself to others.

In the poem’s opening line, we are presented with two deceptively simple words which can be read in a multitude of ways. The first of these is “stood,” which, as a verb, seems to have always had what we consider its primary significance—to be “holding oneself upright” (def. 1d). The word, however, has a number of connotations and secondary meanings. “To remain motionless on one’s feet; to cease walking or moving on” (def. 4a) seems fairly obvious, but this lack of motion can be connected back to the poem’s title. Whether Hardy was ultimately referring to sight, sound, poetic judgment, the state of society, or an amalgamation of some or all of these things, there is a definite implication of dispassionate inertia. This is, after all, a dead landscape. However, “stand” has another, equally significant set of meanings. The idea of “taking[ing] up an offensive or defensive position against an enemy; to present a firm front; to await an onset . . . without budging” (def. 10) was (and still is) in common parlance, as was its more abstract counterpart, “to be . . . committed, indebted, pledged” (def. 15d). Each of the poem’s protagonists has assumed an unalterable position—that love has gone. There is a sense of isolation in these lonely stands, and one might add a final definition here. In its transitive sense, the word also means to endure (def. 52). Indeed, this is a poem about enduring a moment so powerful (and paradoxically, so “neutral”) that every detail is
burned into the brain forever, suggesting that the dead landscape masks the profound determination inherent in this final meeting. That the landscape is dead is arguably alluded to in the “neutral” of the title, but is made even clearer through its “winter” state. The figurative and allusive application of the word, particularly “in reference to old age, or to a time or state of affliction or distress” (def. 1c) is certainly noteworthy. This usage was common when Hardy was composing the poem, and it would be nearly impossible not to apply an emotionally charged element to the scene, as Hardy once again demonstrates the tensions (or tone) that underlie this semblance of neutrality. This might also be tied to the notion of age—it is a relationship that has run its natural course. Indeed, Brian Green suggests that Hardy is simply using “the conventional association of winter landscape . . . with grief or awareness of death,” which, if we accept this reading, might be linked to the “ash” that appears in the final line of the stanza. Moreover, the idea of “winter,” one of the four seasons, suggests a cyclical—and inevitable—pattern. The end of love is inescapable, for winter always comes.

The white sun of the second line provides the first explicit intimation of visual neutrality. The sun might be viewed as an object of worship (def. 1c) or “as a type of brightness or clearness” (def. 1d), both of which appear in Tennyson. James Hazen, in fact, characterizes the sun as the poem’s dominant image as it “stands as the symbol of love. As the sun gives light and life to the natural scene, love gives (or has given) light and life to the figures of the human scene. But in the poem love between these human figures is dead or dying, and this dead or dying love is represented by the winter sun, weak and ‘white’ and bereft of its life-sustaining power.” Ultimately, then, it is the sun’s whiteness that defines it, and “white,” of course, may be applied to that which is quintessentially neutral; that is, colourless, uncoloured, as glass or other transparent substance” (def. 2c), and serving as an ironic reminder of the ultimate impenetrability of the scene. Similarly, though “white” is rarely used in this context, it may also be equated with that which is “propitious, favourable; auspicious, fortunate, happy” (def. 8), which would also serve as an ironic counterpoint to the seriousness of the scene being played out below the sun. All of these possible readings, however, are problematized by the rest of the line, since the narrator suggests that the white sun resembles something “chidden of God” (l. 2)—an explicit reference to divine interference. There is also the problem that, read diachronically, “of” is related to “off” (away) and thus indicates both possession and distance, as in “of God”—is the sun (and all that it represents) possessed by or pushed off by God? This “play on prepositions,” as Doherty and Taylor point out, is historically significant. The origin of prepositions was a topic of some concern to Enlightenment [sic] and Romantic philosophers of
language. The problem was how to account for the semantic neutrality of prepositions in terms of a theory of language which held that all words originally expressed meaning directly. . . . The poem is loaded with the kind of philological information which the linguistic philosophers of the Romantic movement were discovering as they investigated vernacular languages and literatures. (pp. 288-289)

Even in this apparently insignificant word, then, Hardy forces the reader to dig below the surface, as one's reading of this single preposition can, in fact, dramatically alter the "tone" of the poem.

The unsurprisingly gray "leaves" of the third line present another interpretive dilemma. Whether Hardy would have known about the claim of some scholars that the origin of "leaves" is traceable to the Lithuanian lapped (meaning to peel or strip off) is debatable, although such an awareness would suggest the challenge of stripping away the meaning surely contained in such a moment. However, even without this dimension, the more pedestrian definitions for "leaf" are worth examining. If we take the word in its most literal context, we can certainly make a claim for the leaves being a metaphorical representation of the couple's love—once alive and clinging to the tree, the leaves have now withered and died, with no possible fate remaining other than to rot or be trampled underfoot. Nevertheless, as Hardy was so conscious of the possible permutations of language, we cannot entirely discount the word's other primary meaning, "one of the folds of a folded sheet of paper . . . which compose a book or manuscript, a folio; hence, the matter printed or written thereon" (def. 7a). Given that this is in fact a poem which has been professedly written down and addressed to a particular reader, it is difficult to ignore this definition. Read in this way, the line calls attention to the very act of writing, and, by extension, to the act of self-presentation and self-justification. The tones that we are presented with in this narrative are ultimately defined by the speaker, and such a reading serves as a powerful reminder of that fact.

"Starving," read in conventional terms, suggests the unnourished earth, which is not implausible, since we are dealing with a relationship that has been starved of love. However, given the winter context, the reading may be located in "that causes one to starve with cold" (def. 4b). Indeed, Kenneth Marsden postulates in no uncertain terms that "starving = freezing," though he suggests that "starving" in this context is actually a form of Dorset dialect. It is worth noting, however, that "starving" also has two obsolete meanings that Hardy would probably have been aware of—both of which are related to death. The first definition, "of death . . . languishing" (def. 1) was apparently last in print during the late sixteenth century, and the second, "causing death, killing" (def. 2) during the early seventeenth, so the OED's readers clearly did not see either of these as Hardy's primary meanings. This association with
death cannot, however, be discounted, particularly given that we are dealing with dead leaves, and an emotional climate starved of passion. In this tableau, nearly all signs of life have been suppressed. Moreover, the root can be traced back to multiple sources, including the Old Norse starf (toil, effort) and the Old High German sterban, to die. Interestingly, the OED speculates that the Teutonic root, in its most primitive sense, may in fact mean “to be rigid,” which might connect these two apparently disparate roots. Such a reading can be supported within the context of the poem, as the immovability of the two protagonists has already been through the “stand” taken in line 1. Indeed, “sod” is often considered part of a more rustic idiom (not inconceivable given Hardy’s interest in Wessex dialect), and taken in this context, the word refers to “the spot of ground on which one stands” (def. 4a). Though this does not ultimately change much, it resonates well with the “We stood” of the poem’s first line, and emphasizes the notion of staking one’s position.

In the final line of the first stanza, Hardy makes an explicit return to the visual notion of neutrality. The tree from which the leaves have fallen is described as an ash—a word with no remarkable origin, but one with a number of possible connotations, many of which are arguably being exploited here. The bark of this tree is of a silvery-gray color, and indeed, the color of ashes themselves is gray, a decidedly “neutral tone” which corresponds with Hardy’s description of the fallen leaves. That ashes are the substance remaining after burning is significant; that they are “that which remains of a human body after cremating of (by transf.) total decomposition; hence poet. for ‘mortal remains, buried corpse’” (def. 4a) is even more so. The narrator’s concern with death is an important part of the third stanza, but he does not seem to be referring to literal death here. Rather, the allusion appears to be to the notion of spiritual death, or of an ideal so pure that it might be said to appear spiritual—the ideal of love, which has clearly died. The question of man’s mortality, like the “dust of the ground . . . used to express man’s mortal constitution” (def. 5) is not absent, since this is one moment in a finite series, and the loss of one love hardly guarantees the arrival of another, but appears to be ultimately subordinated to this more metaphysical reading. It is also worth remembering that “ashes” can also be applied to “the employment of ashes among Eastern nations in token of mourning, used in many phrases symbolizing the expression of grief or repentance” (def. 7). J. O. Bailey suggests, in fact, that “the ash tree (with its suggestion of ashes in the name) was an ancient symbol of happiness. But its once-green leaves have decayed into the ‘neutral’ grayish” (p. 56),7 as happiness is replaced by sorrow. The poem is, of course, couched in neutrality, but one could certainly argue that it conceals a fierce sense of grief beneath the surface.

For Dennis Taylor, “the poem’s opening image has an oddly empty clarity about it, like a wide open unseeing eye” (p. 276), and the dual “eyes” that
open the second stanza draw us back into the sensory realm. The meaning of
the root does not appear to have ever been interpreted in any way other than
"to see," so a diachronic reading yields nothing new, particularly given that
this is a poem, after all, that is very much about seeing. The choice of "rove"
as the verb describing the action of the woman's eyes is an interesting one.
Though of "doubtful origin" (the OED suggests, rather half-heartedly, that it
may be based on the Midland form of rave, to stray), it has several significant
meanings that would have been obsolete even as Hardy was writing, but which
he might well have been aware of. This is not, of course, to suggest that what
we would construe as its primary meaning, "to wander about with no fixed
destination; to move hither and thither, at random or in a leisurely fashion;
to stray, roam, ramble" (def. 5), is not possible, particularly given the sense
that nothing is resolved through this gaze. However, several more obsolete
definitions might also be said to have validity. "To shoot with arrows at a mark
selected at pleasure or at random" (def. 1a) resonates well with the "keen"
of the final stanza, and further emphasizes the pain caused by this broken
union.28 The idea of shooting "away from a mark; hence, to wander from the
point; to diverge, or digress" (def. 2) is also attractive in that it suggests a
deliberate refusal to discover what there might be to find in the other—the
act of looking without really seeing, because the woman to whom the poem
is addressed does not want to see.29

Matters become even more complicated in the line that follows. "Ted-
dious" (l. 6) has no particularly interesting root, and the word's meaning seems
not to have been altered over the course of time. It is the noun that "tedious"
describes, "riddles" (l. 6), that is problematic. The word's primary root, from
the Germanic, is raedan, meaning to read, and this poem is in many ways about
the act of reading or the failure to read. Combined with the more familiar
definitions of riddle as "a question or statement intentionally worded in a
dark or puzzling manner, and propounded in order that it might be guessed
or answered" (def. 1a) or "something which puzzles or perplexes; a difficult or
insoluble problem, a mystery" (def. 2), we have a line (indeed, a stanza) that
interrogates the act of interpretation. The tediousness of this task of inter-
pretation, one might argue, is rooted in its sheer impossibility. The eyes rove
over the riddles, but cannot solve them, and as "of years ago" suggests, there
is no foreseeable end to this task. The loss of love will never be understood. I
suggested earlier that "neutral" might be read in terms of inactivity, and such
a reading is supported here, for there is no sense of any conscious effort being
made to solve these "tedious riddles." If any mood can be said to dominate in
such a "neutral" poem, it is one of resignation and defeat. Communication is
presented merely as an exercise, and not as a means to an end. If the "riddle"
is "do you read me?" the speaker is never given an answer, since it is only the
exterior reader who really attempts to do the reading.
The question of communication is one that dominates the second stanza, as the speaker tells the woman to whom he is addressing these recollections that “some words played between us to and fro / On which lost the more by our love” (ll. 7-8). Line 7 seems almost paradoxical in that the words are not described as being spoken or articulated in any way, but rather as purposelessly flying back and forth. Without examining the etymology, we already have a sense in this emotionless moment of a prefigured destiny which cannot be altered by the inadequacy of language. It would seem as though all of the conventional platitudes are being expressed, not because they are sincere, but because they are expected, and this notion is reinforced by the root of “word” itself. The OED suggests that, in addition to its conventional definition as a catalogue of similes—“things said, or something said; speech, talk, discourse, utterance” (def. 1)—the Indo-European ancestor may be at least partly derived from the Sanskrit wacum, which means command or law. One can certainly make the point that this is linked with the idea of the expected utterance. Hardy is also drawing the reader’s attention, once again, to the act of speaking itself, and to its very inadequacy. We do not need the adjective “tedious” to realize that these words are devoid of emotion and utterly meaningless. The sense of “word” as a promise or undertaking (def. 8), as in to give one’s word, should not be forgotten either, given the context of the poem as a whole. This meeting by the pond, which is presumably the final encounter between these two former lovers, brings an end to their relationship. It is, therefore, the moment when all past promises have been irrevocably broken, and so there is a certain irony in the idea of “words” being exchanged. Language is false. Language, like love, can deceive. Indeed, it may not be pushing the argument too far to speculate that there is a certain expression of Hardy’s agnosticism being made here, in that the “word,” so often applied to the divine communication of the Scriptures, has proven to be so utterly meaningless.

As previously noted, these words are not simply exchanged back and forth as one might expect in a dialogue. Read diachronically, the verb “play” is a confusing beast, with no single agreed-upon root. The OED, before listing its definitions, notes that “all the uses of ‘play’ are seen to arise naturally from a primary notion ‘to exercise, bestir, or busily occupy oneself;’ the line of development having been here determined by the recreative or divertive purpose of the exercise” and there is arguably a sense that the words being described by the poet are in fact a form of occupation, as they distract the speakers from the real reason for their meeting. Though not actively communicating, they seem to be doing so, and this supplies the illusion of action in a poem about human passivity. Nevertheless, the primary meaning here does seem to be one of moving “briskly or lightly, especially with alternating or irregular motion, as lightning, flame, leaves in the wind, etc.” (def. 3a). This sense of random or purposeless movement gives added emphasis to the
notion that these words are meaningless, and perhaps controlled by a force not linked directly to them. There is no exchange of ideas and feelings—only a scattered miscellany with no discernible pattern. Finally, the verb “play” can also be applied to drama, that is, “to act a drama, or a part in a drama; to perform” (def. 36a). This is no emotive drama, but there is certainly a sense that this scene is being performed. If all of this has been preordained, as the poem implies, then this moment by the pond is just the final scene in a play whose script was written long before the actors ever took the stage. Moreover, the lines gesture toward the act of listening (but not hearing) to the “to and fro” motion of empty words which do nothing to redeem this doomed relationship.

Up until this point, the encounter is described in disturbingly impersonal terms. In the third stanza, the speaker looks at the woman’s face for the first time. However, the gaze only reveals further images of death and indifference—more “neutral tones.” “Smile” (l. 9) can be defined as “a slight and more or less involuntary movement of the countenance expressive of pleasure, amusement, affection, etc., or of amused contempt, disdain, incredulity, or similar emotion” (def. 1a). That the movement is involuntary emphasizes the notion of the protagonists as mere players being manipulated by a greater hand, but the range of possible emotions expressed by the smile is perhaps even more noteworthy. We have in this list an intriguing blend of love and hatred, emblematic of the neutrality that pervades the poem, although “dead-est” is a shocking way to describe the smile of one who was formerly beloved, even in this dead tableau of “neutral tones.” The first definition for “dead” offered by the OED is of something “that has ceased to live; deprived of life; in that state in which the vital functions and powers have come to an end, and are incapable of being restored” (def. 1). The speaker actually gives this definition added emphasis—the smile is not simply dead, but “the deadest thing” (l. 9). The idea of lifelessness is certainly an important component of the poem, as there is no sense of passion, or of any strong emotion; indeed, the principal players might be characterized as automatons, propelled into this moment by a guiding force and not of their own volition, but mechanically playing their parts. The “smile,” however, is characterized as “alive enough to have strength to die” (l. 10), making it possible to ascribe a meaning that does not involve physical death to the “deadest” of line 9. The OED lists two particularly relevant examples: “in hyperbolical phrases expressing extreme fatigue or indisposition” (def. 2c), or “of pain: dull and continuous, as opposed to sharp and sudden pain” (def. 2d). The former might be immediately discounted for being “hyperbolical,” but an ironic reading might be indicated. Without hyperbole, attention is drawn to the possible emotional strain of such a moment, suggesting that its very neutrality masks the turmoil beneath the surface. Finally, a more obsolete reading defines “dead” as being “without
colour or brightness” (def. 13). Generally applied to the countenance, this reading gives added emphasis to the visual notion of “neutral” and a once vital love that is now recalled only in terms of its colorless details.

In “thing,” we have an impression of a human characteristic being made inhuman. To describe the smile of one’s former love as a “thing” (“deadest thing,” no less) verges on the misanthropic, though the word had a very different sense in a number of its older incarnations, most notable in Old English. Broadly, its root can be defined as pertaining to an assembly called for judicial purposes; in other words, to pass judgment on the actions of a person or persons. Indeed, this sense appears to have survived into the Tudor period, as the OED notes a reading as late as 1548 meaning “a matter brought before a court of law; a legal process; a charge brought, a suit or cause pleaded before a court” (def. 2a). Applied to the poem in this manner, such a reading hearkens back to the question of indifference or neutrality. The smile, the “thing” which should judge, is utterly devoid of judgment because it is dead. The poet draws attention to the unnaturalness of this state of affairs, but also to the forces which govern them. No human judgment can be passed, because the moment has been orchestrated by something beyond the realm of human understanding.

We are confronted, in line 10, by the grammatical conundrum elucidated earlier—that the smile that has already been described as “deadest” is now portrayed as possessing enough “strength to die.” The very situation of the poem, as we have already seen, is a passive one. There is no sense of activity and certainly no sense that either party has exerted anything in the way of strength—each has chosen the path of least resistance. Ultimately, a straight reading of “strength” seems only to carry us as far as “vigour, intensity (of feeling, conviction, etc.) . . . emphasis, positiveness (of refusal)” (def. 1k). There will be no reconciliation between the two figures described here. We might, if we wished to be extremely clever, suggest an obsolete definition—“the power, phonetic value (of a letter of the alphabet)” (def. 7), particularly given that “strength” is used to describe the mouth and thus the spoken word, but this is probably pushing things too far. The only other obsolete reading worth mentioning is connected to the art of war: “one’s strong position: the place within which one is most secure” (def. 10c). Such a reading would emphasize the idea of neutrality being comfortable, though it would not, ultimately, add a great deal to our understanding of the poem.

The root of “grin” corresponds to a threatening gnashing or grinding of the teeth, and if Hardy was aware of this diachronic dimension, it seems to belie, if only for an instant, the notion of neutrality. Of course, we should not forget the possibility of “a forced and unnatural smile” (def. 1b), which also resonates well within the text and, more to the point, preserves the idea of neutrality, since the emotion signaled by the grin is not actually felt. This
is not, however, a mere grin, but “a grin of bitterness” (l. 11), and the root of bitter, or bitan, originally meant “biting, cutting, sharp.” Though the OED is careful to point out that, during the relevant historical period, this was only applied to the sensation of taste, the notion of cutting is an interesting one, given the presence of “keen” and “edged” in the final stanza. Read in this sense, the pain of the parting is emphasized, if only briefly, as it “swept thereby.” Of course, this interpretation need not leave more conventional definitions behind, and “bitter,” in and of itself, covers a range of possible meanings, from being “unpalatable to the mind; unpleasant and hard to ‘swallow’ or admit” (def. 1b) to “expressing or betokening intense grief, misery, or affectation of spirit” (def. 4) to “characterized by intense animosity or virulence of feeling or action; virulent” (def. 6a). The dominant emotion varies, but in each case we have an intensely felt reaction against this moment by the pond, which reveals itself only for an instant. Two more definitions for “bitter” are also applicable in this context—the first, like the root, is applied to words which are “stinging, cutting, harsh, keenly or cruelly reproachful, virulent” (def. 7). Such a reading seems more probable when we remember that this is a poem very much concerned with the act of communication, and it is certainly possible to assume a great deal of implied speech in that brief moment. Similarly, “bitter” can also be applied to the wind and cold (def. 8). The cold of the “starving sod” and the air around the couple mirror the emotional frigidity of the moment. Though intense emotion may be lurking beneath the surface, there seems to be no possibility of warmth.

From this brief flash of emotion we pass to the simile: “Like an ominous bird a-wing” (l. 12). In “ominous” we have the suggestion that this moment is not as transitory as it seems—that the bitterness that sweeps across the woman’s face is emblematic of further trouble that is yet to come. Perhaps this is simply an early warning of the narrator’s later “lessons that love deceives” (l. 13), implying that this may be the first such moment, but will not be the last. However, “omen” also suggests the otherworldly, and, in this poem, that realm is represented by the forces that the speaker clearly believes have conspired against him. Indeed, read in this way, it is possible to suggest that the “grin of bitterness” represents the inevitable but ineffectual human reaction against that measure of supernatural control. It is also worth noting that the word takes one of its roots from ausmen, meaning to hear, which once again draws our attention to the act of communication. Doherty and Taylor encourage us to “consider the ‘riddles’ of line six and the ‘ominous birds’ of line twelve, omens being messages which are ambiguous until correctly interpreted” (p. 287), a reading which suggests that the full implications of this moment have not yet been absorbed. This interpretation is certainly plausible, given that the “keen lessons” that the narrator later describes have not yet been learned, and that the true interest of this poem lies in the final stanza, where the images
associated not only with the moment but with language itself are examined for the last time, leaving the reader, perhaps, with more questions than answers. Preparatory to the poem's conclusion, the "ominous bird" is described as being "a-wing"—both a modified version of "alive" and, arguably, an allusion to Horne Tooke's argument about abbreviations, those rapid communicators of thought that he calls "winged."

The third stanza of "Neutral Tones" trails off into an ellipsis, leaving no sense of resolution. The final stanza brings the narrator closer to the moment of the poem's composition, as he reflects upon all that has happened "since then" (l. 13). We are not told how much time has passed—only that the speaker has experienced "keen lessons that love deceives" (l. 13). "Keen" is another word of somewhat doubtful origin, but its prevailing sense from the point of view of the development of English is the notion of being "sharp." Indeed, the word is often applied to cutting instruments "having a very sharp edge or point; able to cut or pierce with ease" (def. 3a), and Faurot certainly favors this definition when she suggests that "the several images of cutting into the circle are pronounced: the smile on the mouth, not a smile on the face but an intrusive line against the circle of the face; the ominous bird on a cutting wing that the smile turns into; keen lessons that distort the face—cut it—and the pond edge with leaves recalling the deadest smile on the bitter face" (p. 127). Similarly, the idea of something that operates on the senses in a strong and often painful way (which is echoed in a number of the OED's definitions for the word) has relevance here. It is particularly interesting to note that this reading can be applied specifically to the cold (as "piercing, intense" [def. 4b]), and perhaps even more importantly, to language which is "sharp, severe, incisive, cutting" (def. 5b). There is, however, an older, now obsolete meaning to the word, drawn from both Old Norse and Old English, meaning "wise, learned, clever" (def. 1a). This is certainly applicable to the poem as a whole, with its examination of the act of interpretation and of discerning meaning. Indeed, given that "keen" can also be applied to the human senses (def. 7a), in a poem that privileges the acts of seeing and hearing, such a reading takes on added importance. If "keen" is in fact meant to signal increased intellectual knowledge, its application to the word "lessons" is crucial, since one of the archaic meanings of the latter word is "the action of reading" (def. 1a). Though long obsolete even when Hardy was writing (the only example provided is from Wyclif, in 1382), this definition seems very much indicated. Since that day by the pond, the speaker has worked toward an interpretation of love, but has only learned the rather grim lesson "that love deceives / And wrings with wrong" (ll. 13-14).

To properly define "love" is a task beyond the capabilities of both lexicographers and metaphysicians, and I will not make the attempt, particularly since Hardy does appear to be using the word in a fairly conventional sense.
However, that love “deceives” personifies it as a malevolent agent bent on destroying human happiness—a point that is emphasized in the line that follows. In “wrings with wrong” we have not only a strong use of alliteration, but a powerful image of the action of twisting, writhing, and wrestling (def. 2a) until consciousness becomes literally saturated with the wrong that corrupts love. Read more figuratively, “wrings” can also be translated as “to cause anguish or distress to (a person, his heart, etc.); to vex, distress, rack” (def. 5a), and such an interpretation would arguably provide the only explicit statement of emotion in the entire poem. Further definitions include “to wrest or twist (a writing, words, etc.); to strain the purport or meaning of; to deflect, pervert” (def. 9b), and one might not unreasonably suggest that language is configured here as fundamentally malleable, subject to any number of factors which make it thoroughly unreliable. “Wrong” seems to require little explication, as Hardy may well be using it in the expected sense, “that which is morally unjust, unfair, amiss, or improper; the opposite of right or justice; the negation of equity, goodness, or rectitude” (def. 1a)—the opposite of what is “right.” It is worth noting, however, as Trench does, that “‘wrong’ is the perfect participle of ‘to wring,’ that which has been ‘wrung’ or wrested from the right” (On the Study of Words, p. 312), and such a reading once again draws our attention, through language, to the chasm between past and present, and the gap between what is spoken and what is meant.

All of this serves as preparation for the rekindling of that image of two solitudes by the water’s edge. Everything that the narrator has learned in the intervening period has merely “shaped” (l. 14) that final recollection. The origins of ”shape” are obscure and much debated in etymological circles, but one of its primary meanings is linked to divine creation—“to create; in later use, to form, fashion (said of God or Nature)” (def. 1a)—which certainly emphasizes the presence of a higher power which has, in the narrator’s view, “shaped” the now-recalled moment. Such a reading, however, also suggests imaginative fashioning on the narrator’s part, perhaps leading the reader to wonder if every detail of this scene is being remembered accurately, or if later pain and bitterness have infused the memory with a significance that it would not otherwise have had. Taylor, in fact, suggests that “as the event is repeated in the mind which seeks to understand it, the event changes slightly. Indeed, the very language by which the event is described changes as one uses it. To illustrate this point, an ‘identical’ scene is described differently in the first and last stanzas, as if to say that even as we find words to describe our recollection, the past is always changing for us” (p. 286). The key, once again, is in this interrogation of the veracity of communication, which is suggested in part by the slightly altered vocabulary of the final stanza.

In the poem’s final lines, the speaker recalls “Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree/And a pond edged with grayish leaves” (ll. 15-16), which
Edmund Gosse cites as an example of “the habit of taking poetical negatives of small scenes . . . which had not existed in English verse since the time of Crabbe.”\(^7\) “Curst,” an apparently deliberate archaic form, is essentially the opposite of “blessed” and much stronger than the earlier “chidden,” emphasizing the malevolent interference of God in the lives of mortal beings in very concrete terms. James Hazen suggests, in fact, “that this shift of adjectives reflects a deepening sense of outrage as the speaker works through and recalls his experience in the course of the poem” (p. 334), and that the implications of that phrase do not end there:

“Neutral Tones” also includes that leap from the natural to the supernatural plane so characteristic of Hardy’s writing. The sun in this poem, for example, is not merely said to be “white” with a wintry paleness but “white” because “chidden of God.” . . . Later in the poem, Hardy extends this further and refers to the “God-curst” sun. . . . [W]hen we begin to acknowledge the weight of the phrases about God, we begin to see that love in this poem has not merely died a “natural” death but has been cursed and destroyed or at least blighted and paled by God. (p. 334)

This figurative relationship certainly seems indicated, but the speaker’s sense of outrage is not maintained. The poem ends with a flat description of this absolutely neutral tableau, with the woman herself being quickly passed over. The tree appears simply to serve the poetic function of representing the solitary man, forever frozen by the edge of the pond.\(^8\) In the poem’s last line, Hardy combines the scene’s lack of color, or neutrality, with the sense of failed communication epitomized in the scattered leaves. He also links this final statement with the more familiar reading of “keen,” by characterizing the pond as being “edged with grayish leaves” (l. 16). This suggestion of sharpness recalls the pain of love’s duplicitous nature, while the poet’s use of the older adjectival ending for “grayish” is surely another reminder to look to the language of the past. In the end, however, while the speaker is able to hint at his pain through these poetic images, he can never go beyond the “neutral tones” of the poem as a whole.

In 1925, reviewer R.W. King characterized “Neutral Tones” as having a “simple, almost colloquially plain-spoken diction” and “a kind of acrid clarity in both thought and style,”\(^9\) but few readers today would praise Hardy for clarity. “Neutral Tones” is obviously a complex poem on its own merits, and one might argue that to engage in this kind of diachronic analysis is merely to complicate matters unnecessarily, particularly given that the OED, as we know it today, had not been published at the time of this poem’s composition. Even if Hardy had revised “Neutral Tones” just before its appearance
in Wessex Poems in 1898, he would only have had access to the first three volumes of the dictionary. However, thanks to the work of scholars like Dennis Taylor, we know that Hardy was acutely aware of the poetic possibilities inherent in the new philology. There is, granted, no way of establishing with any degree of certainty what Hardy did or did not know, but the potential readings suggested here surely work too well within the context of the poem to be considered coincidental. In the end, however, the best argument for his awareness of these multiple meanings may be the argument of omission. Hardy is quoted 1,129 times in the original OED (Taylor, p. 124). However, though Wessex Poems is a cited text, not a single word from “Neutral Tones” appears. None of the dictionary’s readers, it would seem, could be sure how Hardy was using his words. Ultimately, given that there are very few words in the poem which permit a straightforward reading when examined diachronically, it is difficult not to conclude that Hardy was indeed encouraging his readers to look beyond the “neutral tones” of the poem’s surface and into its more colorful depths.

Notes

I am extremely grateful to an extraordinarily helpful group of listeners at "Old Lamps, New-Lit: The Future of Victorian Poetry" (a conference held at the University of Western Ontario in March 2003), and even more indebted to Donald S. Hair—King of the Critical Readers.

1 Richard Chenevix Trench, On the Study of Words: Lectures Addressed (Originally) to the Pupils at the Diocesan Training-School, Winchester, 18th ed. (London, 1882).

2 Richard Chenevix Trench, "On Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries, Being the Substance of Two Papers Read Before the Philological Society, Nov. 5, and Nov. 19, 1857," Transactions of the Philological Society 1857 (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1968), p. 2. No one had expected the process of publication to take so long. As an anonymous reviewer in The Periodical ruefully admitted, the sheer magnitude of the project had still not become evident even after the publication of the first volume: "In his Presidential Address of 16 May 1884, Dr. Murray suggested that . . . it might be possible . . . to produce two parts in the year, and thus finish the whole in 11 years from next March.' This calculation did not allow for the constant accession of fresh material and the higher standard of completeness which the progress of the work itself steadily imposed" (“The Oxford English Dictionary Completed 1884-1928,” The Periodical 13, no. 143 [February 15, 1928]:5).

3 Dennis Taylor, Hardy’s Literary Language and Victorian Philology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 97. Though clearly not compiling an exhaustive list, Taylor singles out Darwin’s The Origin of Species (1859), Essays and Reviews (1860), Spencer’s First Principles (1862), and the essays of Leslie Stephens which first appeared during the period—all of which, Taylor claims, "particularly influenced Hardy" (p. 97). He goes on, later in the essay, to cite works by Trench, Coleridge, Müller, and Whitney, which were instrumental in bringing philology itself to the public’s attention (pp. 99-100). See pp. 101-103, for a complete list of the philological texts that Hardy might have known or at least been familiar with, as well as other important works of the period.
4 Although Murray did not take over as editor until 1876, after "Neutral Tones" was composed, the relationship between the two men is indicative of Hardy's lifelong interest in language. K. M. Elisabeth Murray remembers, at the tender age of three and a half, seeing her grandfather marching in a procession at Cambridge at which he would be awarded an honorary degree, and although no one pointed him out to her, the man at his side was Hardy (Caught in the Web of Words: James A. H. Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977]).

5 Wessex Poems should not, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered a consistently brilliant volume of poetry. As Richard Carpenter puts it, "such a howler as 'The Levelled Churchyard'... certainly does not belong, either in conception or execution, in the same world with 'Neutral Tones' or 'The Darkling Thrush,' much less in the same volume. But, whether we like it or not, there it is" (Thomas Hardy [New York: Twayne, 1964], p. 154). An anonymous assessment of the work, which appeared in the Saturday Review on January 7, 1899, concludes of the poems at the beginning of the volume that "the feelings do not ring quite sincere; they are not strongly felt; they are, in truth, the outpourings in verse common to all the weak, undeveloped natures of intelligent young men, and it is the custom to lock them away, or burn them. Only two of them, 'The Heiress and the Architect,' and 'Neutral Tones,' show any forecast of Mr Hardy's mature strength" (Graham Clarke, ed., Thomas Hardy: Critical Assessments, vol. 1, The Contemporary Response [Mountfield, Robertsbridge, England: Helm Information, 1993], p. 303).

6 Hardy, who spans two distinct literary movements, often defies classification. As a novelist, he is clearly Victorian, but anthologists of his poems have had more difficulty in placing him. The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 5th ed. (New York: Norton, 1987), for example, uses Hardy to lead off its final section, "The Twentieth Century" (pp. 2205-20). Nevertheless, his approach to philology is clearly rooted in the Victorian period.

7 J. O. Bailey (The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary [Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1970]) suggests that the poem may actually have been written later and antedated by Hardy, in order to disguise the fact that Tryphena Sparks had had a child by him in a relationship that eventually ended in much the same way as described in this poem and in "At Rushy-Pond" (p. 509). However, since Bailey provides no concrete evidence with which to support such a claim (which is based on that of Lois Deacon and Terry Coleman, Providence and Mr. Hardy [London: Hutchison, 1966]), we will assume that 1867 is the correct date of composition.


9 Paul C. Doherty and E. Dennis Taylor, "Syntax in Harry's 'Neutral Tones,'" VP 12 (1974): 285-291. Not all critics would agree that Hardy achieves his greatest success in this poem through his diachronic use of language. Richard Carpenter, for example, comments that "the weak parts of the poem are those in which he overdoes the emotion and tries for an effect without absorbing it in the images; there is a flat second stanza, with the cliché of her eyes seeming like eyes that 'rove over tedious riddles of years ago,' as well as the strained simile of her 'grin of bitterness' being like 'an ominous bird a-wing.' The first line of the final stanza is surprisingly trite, with its 'keen lessons that love deceives'" (p. 167). As we shall see, these lines are all vital components within a diachronic reading of the poem.

10 The Norton Anthology, which frequently glosses potentially problematic words for its student readers, does not define a single word in this particular poem.
11 All citations are from The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy, ed. Samuel Hynes, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

12 Joanna Cullen Brown, A Journey into Thomas Hardy's Poetry (London: Allen, 1989), p. 48. Brown uses several words drawn from different poems to support this claim, including “numb,” “bleak,” “chill,” “wan,” and “ashes,” in order to make a point (drawing on Patricia Ingham) that Hardy configures time as something that removes the qualities of warmth, color, and life.

13 It is unclear why Hardy chose to use the Americanized “gray” spelling, since this is not the OED’s preference. The dictionary nevertheless devotes a great deal of time to the question, concluding that “grey” was in more frequent use in 1893, when Murray made his inquiries, in spite of the fact that Johnson and others (including The Times) preferred the other spelling. Ultimately, the conclusion reached was that “grey” was the U.K. standard, and “gray” the dominant spelling in the United States. It is possible that the change was made by an American editor (like Samuel Hynes), but given that this same spelling appears in other editions, highly unlikely.


15 For Margaret Faurot, this sense of emptiness is echoed in the poem’s versification, as “each four-line stanza consists of three tetrameter lines closed by a trimeter line. Feet are so evenly divided between anapestic and iambic that it is difficult to say which is the variation. In the trimeter lines closing the third and fourth stanzas, the opening anapest invites spondaic emphasis. The regularly irregular meter and the proliferating anadiplosis that have more of litany than of conjunction about them mimic the human voice wearily and obsessively rehearsing a death that has no more meaning" (Hardy’s Topographical Lexicon and the Canon of Intent: A Reading of the Poetry [New York: Peter Lang, 1990], p. 128). Hardy’s use of prosody is of course a study in itself, but Faurot’s reading is worth noting here because of its affinity with the interpretation that I am proposing.


17 This definition represents my conflated understanding of the word’s Greek and Latin meanings, which are both quite similar.

18 Though it is rather unlikely that Hardy would have been conversant with it, a definition now fallen from general usage applies the word “tone” to the distance between planets (def. 4b), which gives added emphasis to the notion of a vast chasm separating the poem’s protagonists.

19 Our modern understanding of this concept has perhaps been modified by Bakhtin’s view of “tone” or “intonation” as “oriented in two directions: with respect to the listener as ally or witness and with respect to the object of the utterance as the third, living participant whom the intonation scolds or caresses, denigrates or magnifies” (qtd. in M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 6th ed. [Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt, 1993], p. 156). This additional level of complexity, however, would clearly not have been part of Hardy’s reading of the term.


22 I am reminded here of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's claim that "these poems—as those novels—crowd the sardonic laughter of the gods too thickly. There is irony enough in life, God wot: but here is a man possessed with it" (Graham Clarke, ed., Thomas Hardy: Critical Assessments, vol. 2, The Writer and the Poet [Mountfield, Robertsbridge, England: Helm Information, 1993], pp. 201-202).

23 In a footnote, Dennis Taylor suggests that Hardy copied "chidden" from The Golden Treasury, no. xviit, "Beauty sat bathing" (pp. 201-202).

24 In his compilation of Hardy's Selected Poetry, though Samuel Hynes is ostensibly drawing on his three-volume edition of Hardy, he inexplicably changes "of" to the far less ambiguous "by."

25 Hardy's original word choice was "withered" (Hynes, 1:13)—a word with a less rich (though still quite interesting on its own merits) syntactic history. It is, of course, entirely possible that the change was made primarily to achieve the alliteration at the end of the line.


27 Bailey's comments on the sharply rendered images are meant, at least in part, to support his claim that they imply "Hardy's actual experience" (p. 56), which I would argue is irrelevant.

28 There is, admittedly, one definition among many that suggests the act of aiming (3a), but given that the OED only provides two examples of this usage (both from 1590) and that this definition is quite literally surrounded by a number of others, all of which suggest a measure of randomness, it can probably be discounted as a possibility.

29 There are always other possibilities, of course, and when this essay was presented as a conference paper (March 13, 2003, University of Western Ontario), one listener made the intriguing suggestion that "rove" should be considered as linked with "reeve" as Gerard Manley Hopkins uses it in "The Wreck of the Deutschland" (Part the Second, stanza 12, line 8)—to rope or gather together (see the editorial annotations of W. H. Gardner, The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990], p. 331). Such a reading would suggest that the woman, as well as the man, is attempting to make sense of all that has occurred and of the "tedious riddles" which seem inescapable.

30 The syntax of line 8 is very strange, as one would expect it to read simply "On which lost the more our love." Instead of suggesting that the meaningless words are in part responsible for lost love, the reverse is apparently true. The words themselves are made meaningless by the love that can no longer be expressed. The expression of emotion, or the lack thereof, then, is capable of shaping language. However, it is worth noting, as Hynes does, that Hardy went through two earlier versions of line 8 before deciding upon the line that appears in the poem. In the first version, the narrator asks "Which was most wrecked by our love?" and William W. Morgan suggests that this first attempt indicates Hardy's intended meaning: "Some words passed between them on the subject of which of the two had suffered more as a result of their love" ("Syntax in Hardy's Neutral Tones," Lines Seven and Eight, VP 11 [1973]: 168). In other words, lines 7 and 8 should properly be read as "And some words played between us to and fro / On which lost the more by our love?" Doherty and Taylor, however, point out that this interpretation "seems to be inconsistent with the main direction of the poem... The question of which of the lovers lost the more by their love is somewhat obtrusive and irrelevant to the retrospective situation of the poem" (pp. 285-286), and faced with a
choice between a reading that fits the poem but is ungrammatical, versus one which is grammatical but discordant, they propose an alternative. By rejecting the conventional notion that "on" governs a propositional phrase, and proposing that it is instead "a particle, separated from its verb 'played'... by two phrases, 'between us' and 'to and fro'" (p. 286), Doherty and Taylor suggest "And some words (were) played on between us to and fro / Which (words) lost the more by our love" (p. 286). The appeal of this reading, though not conclusive by any means, is that the emphasis is placed back on the abstract art of communication. The focus is not on the specific words that passed between the lovers, but the action of those words, which seem controlled by a force not linked directly to them. Moreover, the implied "were played" gestures toward the aural, and the act of listening (but not hearing)—the "to and fro" motion of empty words which do nothing to redeem this doomed relationship. As Taylor later notes, "one syntactic reading plays on another... 'As a result of which, our love lost the more'; 'on the subject of which of us lost the more because of our love.' The second meaning, obvious once seen, is at first difficult to 'read' in this poem which explores riddles and readings" (p. 341).

31 It is theoretically possible to extend this reading and include the idea of "amusement or recreation" (def. 10a), which would provide an ironic counterpoint to the seriousness (or, more properly, the neutrality) of this scene, but this seems less likely.

32 "By" can also be read as "close to, alongside," which problematizes "thereby," allowing it to be read both as "by there" and "thus."

33 This is the figurative reading. There is, of course, a more literal definition related to the organ of taste, but that does not seem indicated here.

34 Doherty and Taylor refer to this as "two typographic stages of the petrified dative, the older 'a-wing' and the later 'alive'" (p. 287), and thus another comparison of the older form of English with its current state.


36 Though he does not go so far as to adopt the archaic reading, Trench, in speaking to his readers about the words that they use on a daily basis while being thoroughly unfamiliar with them, uses "lessons" as his first example: "You speak of the 'lessons' of the day; but what is 'lessons' here for most of us save a lazy synonym for the morning and evening chapters appointed to be read in church? But realize what the church intended in calling these chapters by this name; namely, that they should be the daily instruction of her children; listen to them yourselves as such; lead your scholars to regard them as such, and in this uses of 'lessons' what a lesson for every one of us there may be!" (p. 333)


38 One might perhaps suggest that the tree and the pond represent the male and the female respectively, forever at a distance. Read in such terms, the leaves, which we might imagine represent an attempt to communicate, will always fall just short—note that they are never mentioned as actually reaching the water. Hazen proposes an alternate reading, seeing the pond as "a variation on a familiar life-symbol" (p. 332), representing the cold, quiet, and stagnant life of the speaker and mirroring these qualities in its reflective depths. Similarly, the tableau's lone tree suggests, for Hazen, the "speaker's feelings of emasculation and sterility. The pond is an image of life choked..."
and stagnant with negative emotions ... while the tree is an image of life bereft of all feeling” (p. 333).

39 R. W. King, “The Lyrical Poems of Thomas Hardy,” The London Mercury (December 1925); repr. in Thomas Hardy: Critical Assessments, 2:207.
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