Neutral Tones / When We Two Parted

The lasting pain of a broken relationship

Comparative argument

Both speakers remain shaped by an ended relationship. Hardy turns one remembered scene into a bleak lesson about love, whereas Byron makes secrecy and imagined reunion sustain grief across past, present and future.

Emotional coldness

Neutral Tones - Drained colour imagery (“white”): The sun fails to bring expected warmth; the landscape participates in emotional exhaustion.

When We Two Parted - Comparative adjective (“Colder thy kiss”): An intimate gesture signals increasing emotional distance instead of affection.

Connection: Both invert expected warmth, but Hardy spreads the feeling through a scene while Byron locates it in contact.

Love associated with death

Neutral Tones - Paradoxical superlative (“deadest thing”): A smile becomes the least living object in the memory, challenging its usual meaning.

When We Two Parted - Sound metaphor (“knell”): The former lover’s name is heard as a funeral bell, reopening private grief during public conversation.

Connection: Compare a remembered visual expression with an intrusive sound in the present.

Circular structures

Neutral Tones - Generalising statement (“love deceives”): The final return to the pond converts one event into a continuing pessimistic belief.

When We Two Parted - Repeated phrase (“silence and tears”): The imagined future reunion returns to the language of the original separation.

Connection: Both resist emotional closure; distinguish a lesson claimed about love from a repeated personal response.

Relevant context

Both are constructed lyric voices. Discuss social secrecy where Byron’s speaker reveals it, but avoid treating every accusation as verified fact or assuming the addressee is allowed to answer.

Plan your argument

Open with the comparative thesis and qualify the main difference.

Paragraph 1: Emotional coldness. Both invert expected warmth, but Hardy spreads the feeling through a scene while Byron locates it in contact.

Paragraph 2: Love associated with death. Compare a remembered visual expression with an intrusive sound in the present.

Paragraph 3: Circular structures. Both resist emotional closure; distinguish a lesson claimed about love from a repeated personal response.

Conclude by explaining how the endings change your understanding of the shared theme.

Try a question

Compare how poets present the lasting pain of a broken relationship in ‘Neutral Tones’ and in one other poem from your anthology.

Suggested comparison: When We Two Parted. You may choose a different poem from your prescribed cluster.

Check your understanding

How do visual and sound images keep pain alive?

What changes between the opening and ending?

How reliable or limited might each speaker’s conclusions be?

Original critical notes by Exam Stash. Use your own edition or anthology alongside these notes.