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## GAZE AND POWER RELATIONS: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THOMAS HARDY'S "NEUTRAL TONES"

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## ПОГЛЕДЪТ И ВЛАСТОВИТЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ – СЕМИОТИЧЕН АНАЛИЗ НА СТИХОТВОРЕНИЕТО „НЕУТРАЛНИ ТОНОВЕ“ ОТ ТОМАС ХАРДИ

In this paper, I analyze Thomas Hardy's "Neutral Tones" (1876), which has traditionally been interpreted through historical and personal lenses related to the poet's voice and the nineteenth-century context. Diverging from these perspectives, my semiotic reading focuses on the aesthetics of the language, revealing hidden aspects and deeper layers of meaning within the text. This study explores literary devices such as metaphor (Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida), prosopopoeia, and ekphrasis, also exploring the theoretical concepts of male/female gazes (Laura Mulvey) and power relations (Michel Foucault). The findings suggest that the speaker's identity is not confined to a male persona, and that power relations and the interplay of gazes shape the dynamics between the characters.

**Keywords:** *Thomas Hardy; metaphor; gaze; power relations; semiotic analysis.*

В статията анализирам стихотворението „Неутрални тонове“ (1876) на Томас Харди. Произведението традиционно е интерпретирано чрез исторически и лични аспекти, свързани с гласа на поета и контекста на XIX век. Отклонявайки се от тези перспективи, моето семиотично четене се фокусира върху естетиката на езика, разкривайки скрити аспекти и по-дълбоки нива на смисъл в текста. Това изследване взема под внимание литературни похвати като метафора (Фридрих Ницше и Жак Дерида), просопопея и екфразис, като същевременно се съобразява и с теоретичните концепции за мъжкия/женския поглед (Лора Мълви) и властовите отношения (Мишел Фуко). Резултатите показват, че идентичността на говорещия не се ограничава до мъжката персона и че властовите отношения и взаимодействието между погледите оформят динамиката между персонажите.

**Ключови думи:** *Томас Харди; метафора; поглед; властови отношения; семиотичен анализ.*

### Introduction

Hardy's "Neutral Tones" was composed in 1876, and published in the collection *Wessex Poems and Other Verses* in the middle of December 1898 by *Harper & Brothers* in London (Dalziel 1997). The collection was first published by the end of the nineteenth century and at the dawn of the twentieth century. Some critics have therefore focused on the language in terms of this time reference. Doherty, et al. (1974), for example, state:

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 literature. The context of the poem embodies the shift of interest in language from mentalism, grammar, and linguistic universals. (1974: 289)

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In other words, Hardy has employed both archaic and modern vocabularies in “Neutral Tones” under the influence of the period when it was written. The poem is composed of four stanzas, each one consisting of four lines. The first lines present a female speaker who sketches an ekphrastic image of nature through a recollection of a winter day. Later, the description of the atmosphere shifts to the male character’s facial displays. Eventually, the speaker concludes the narration with the sense of having a bitter experience of a love story, ending by re-describing the setting and comparing it to the male persona in terms of being neutral in colors, sounds, and emotions.

Readers of the poem have compared the poem’s language to Wordsworth’s poetic style: Wells (2014), for instance, compares Hardy to Wordsworth in terms of their appreciation of nature and depicting experiences through it, with the difference that Hardy presents his speaker under the influence of memories. Thus, the character here seems to be lost, cold, and passive (189). Wells also points out that much as his other verses, Hardy’s “Neutral Tones” focuses on the separation of two lovers (194). Like Wells, Miller (2007) claims that Hardy’s poetic style in the poem is somehow derived from Wordsworth’s poetry in terms of creating meaning through life experiences (101). She states that the poet shows his characters living their moments of life in memory rather than as direct incidents; she calls this “the self-unseeing” (98). She suggests that although a “third perspective” that Hardy has added to his work seems abstract and neutral, he depicts the real experiences of the individuals, and both factors, distance and time, play the role of authority in the poem (102).

Other critics have read the poem in terms of gender references; that is to say, the narrative voice appears to them as a male speaker and some have analyzed it biographically. For instance, Senior (2006) claims that Hardy’s “Neutral Tones” is often considered as “personal moments” and narrates a memory of a male speaker expressing his emotions to a woman in a setting that appears neutral in color and sound. In other words, Hardy depicts the speaker as biographically shaped through both “look and words”, leading to the failure of a romantic narrative (p. 214). Similarly, Hazen (1971) points to biographical references in the verse that have been investigated by scholars – Hardy was in love with his relative, Tryphan Sparks – but then the date of the poem shows the vagueness of the real story behind it (335).

The language of the verse has also been considered worth analyzing; for example, O’Neill (1989) remarks that Hardy’s use of metonymy in “Neutral Tones” shows the substitution of the speaker’s direct attitudes towards the objects in the setting. For instance, the color of the dead leaves and the color of the “white sun” reinforce the sense of passion and sentiment in the verse (133).

I argue that the speaker’s identity can be interpreted differently, including the possibility of a female persona. Furthermore, other aspects and themes are depicted in the poem, such as gaze, time, and love. These concepts are presented through metaphorical implications—mostly colors and sounds—that seem neutral, silent, and colorless.

## Theoretical Considerations

### Semiotic approach to the poem

This study employs a qualitative approach and follows semiotic analysis, which centers on the study of “signs” in language. Semiotics is a field pioneered by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who examines the relationship between words (signifiers) and their meanings (signified) (Britannica.com 2020). In literature, semiotic analysis focuses on the underlying codes, symbols, and hidden meanings within language rather than on the author’s biography or overarching themes. Accordingly, this paper emphasizes examining the codes, metaphors, and deeper meanings embedded in the language. The primary aim is to unravel how linguistic codes reveal the logic behind specific terms, showing how lines in the text connect to profound philosophical concepts, including issues of perspective and power dynamics.

### Foucauldian reading

One of the instrumental motifs in Hardy’s poem is the gaze – the way characters look at themselves and others, and how they are perceived by others. The expression ‘to gaze’ literally means to stare at something or someone, and it also connotes a broader issue related to social conventions. In Michel Foucault’s discussion of power relations, developed in the “Panopticism” section of his book, *Discipline and*



*Punish*, the notion of ‘gaze’ indicates the meaning of (observation) or (watching). In short, the observer imposes power over the one who is being watched. The term ‘panopticism’ – or ‘panopticon’ – is derived from the English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832), who explains the panopticon as prison in the form of a circular building in which a tower is centered to make all prison cells easily surveillable. The striking point is that the prisoners cannot see inside the tower, thus they tend to internalize the oppressive gaze as an attitude of self-inspection. Foucault explains that the panopticon may not necessarily be limited to a prison, a school, or a hospital, but in fact, it can be a construction of the entire society, which controls people by reinforcing certain ideologies that have been constructed by social conventions (Foucault 1977: 195 – 206). That is to say, through being known and observed, the individuals are imprisoned in the abstract jail of social rules and are under the control of the eyes that are watching them.

Foucault explains that power is not something we can possess, rather, it can be regarded as a form of self-discipline that shapes society with the absence of violence or force (Foucault 1977: 220). Like Foucault, Mulvey considers the self-disciplinary gaze as an essential concept involved in constructing power relations, with the difference that she focuses on gender relations. In her *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, she illustrates how women are seen as the object of the male gaze in cinema and photography, and she investigates the issues from both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical perspectives (Mulvey 1975: 14 – 16). This problem is found in literature, where female authors and readers impose patriarchal reading on literary texts because of the impact of the social norms they have absorbed, in which the way they perceive themselves and the world is controlled by patriarchal language. The social conventions that manufacture ‘power relations’ and also their results are linguistically constructed through metaphors that are considered real and are hidden behind what appears to be reality. Through semiotic analysis, the visual relationships between Hardy’s characters can be seen to show the construction of power relations among them. In “Neutral Tones” besides both male and female gazes, a third gaze is offered, in which the reader visualizes the colors and tones of the location: the speaker describes the lover’s eyes through the expressions: “your eyes on me were as eyes that rove/ over tedious riddles of years ago,” this shows the power of the act of looking that is transferred back and forth between the speaker and the listener.

### **Nietzsche, Derrida, and the concept of metaphor**

Hardy’s characters convey their personal experiences through metaphors, which can be interpreted both for their figurative impact and their literal sense—using language to draw comparisons between two objects or concepts based on appearance or specific traits and qualities. However, as Nietzsche argues, metaphors are the basic language that all our social conventions, ideologies, and “truths” rely on:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. (Kaufmann 1980: 46 – 47)

Nietzsche employs the metaphor of worn coins to illustrate the concept of truth in language, suggesting that, over time, language—like coins—loses its original, “literal” value as it is used repeatedly by everyone. Consequently, language loses a fixed or intrinsic meaning, leaving only “arbitrary” connections between words and their intended meanings, as Saussure calls them, between signs – words offering meanings: there are no ultimate truths, but only metaphors – the elements of language which build all the cultural rules and norms. Nietzsche further argues that all deceptions and lies are formed through language; societies present and interact through metaphors for the sake of surviving and enduring life (44 – 45).

In his essay “White Mythology,” Derrida examines ‘metaphors’ and asks a similar question:

What is metaphysics? A white mythology which assembles and reflects Western culture: the white man takes his own mythology (that is, Indo-European mythology), his logos – that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason. It’s not so easy to get away with this. (Derrida 1974: 11)

Derrida explains that Western philosophers have sought to find the meaning behind ‘truth’ and this seems to be impossible because there is no truth to be found – it is mythological– and he uses the phrase “wear and tear” to describe words that are worn out and torn up because they have been used and turned into series of metaphors without consideration to the meanings behind them. Derrida asserts that language is absolutely metaphorical; words are spoken and written, and the fact that there is nothing behind them is habitually ignored. And there is no concrete truth. Derrida then comments on philosophical texts and calls them ‘white mythology’ because Western scholars have attempted to provide “reason” and “truth”, but they all seem to be based on metaphors of metaphysics (1974 6 – 12).

Throughout Hardy’s text, the narrative voice describes the place with black and white colors because they signify not simply real ‘white sun’ or ‘black leaves’, but connote deeper meanings.

### Critical Analysis

Above all else, the title – “Neutral Tones” – suggests various possibilities: on the literal level, the term “tones” indicates the shade of a color or the quality of voice, and something that is “neutral” is usually detached or inactive. Hence, the phrase may signify a voice that lacks any specific pitch, in other words, without a particular level of highness or lowness which would be associated with a female or male speaker. Figuratively, this title serves as a reference to Hardy’s work, which portrays emotions and sentiments that are both neutral and passive.

The verse begins with a speaker who seems to describe the scene in terms of silence and the tediousness of the context:

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

The opening words suggest two figures standing near a “pond” on a winter day – implying that it is cold. The ekphrastic scene of the sun being “white” suggests possible meanings such as being colorless, pale, gray, or snowy because it seems to be cursed by God. O’Neill (1989) claims that the white color of the sun indicates that the natural elements such as the sun, trees, and leaves are victimized by the same “force” that punishes the lovers (133). O’Neill also comments on the color of the leaves – their color suggests the fire and what remained has turned into “ash”. Moreover, the colors of the surroundings suggest a sense of “judgment” on the couple’s emotions more than their natural circumstances (134). However, semiotically, I propose that the color of the sun serves as a metaphor for the fading value of love. The American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay “Nature,” explains that metaphors work by analogy; human beings are in struggle to find the truth through associating things with each other and they always relate them to themselves:

...man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects. He is placed in the center of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man. (2007: 14)

In other words, human beings relate things to themselves to find the truth through a series of metaphors and also to find the essence of the value. From this perspective, the color of the leaves and the sun show that they lack their values. In other words, the sun appears to be colorless and white instead of being bright. Similarly, the colors of the stale leaves refer to valueless plants. This series of metaphors represents a love relationship stripped of value, rendered futile by the loss of its originality. This idea is further reinforced by the image of leaves falling onto the “starving” sod, symbolizing a barren earth left lifeless by drought.

In a figurative sense, the image of the leaves appears to depict a later stage of autumn, in other words, the death of the year. In these terms, the atmosphere is related to the death of the sentiments and the love story between the couple – this is reflected in a series of metaphors of nature. The expressions: “they had fallen from an ash,” refer to the trees; on the one hand, this suggests an ash tree. On the other





hand, it might evoke the image of burnt trees where flames have turned their leaves into ashes. Wells (2014) suggests that this representation of the dead or rotten leaves indicates the end and the failure of a love relationship (191). The plants are described with the color “gray” which is the same color as the “sun” as it’s pale or silver. Hence, the sky (“sun”), the earth (“sod”), and the (“leaves”) are all depicted as grayish – the result of mixing both colors, black and white.

These evocations are suggested figuratively by the colors of the ashes. Moreover, they may symbolize good and evil; the white color shows a sense of innocence or purity, while black represents the concept of vice or wickedness. From this angle, the description of the setting depicts both concepts of shade and sound, as the leaves are described as gray. This blend of colors functions as a metaphor for two different levels of emotions, leading to the equation of neutral sensibility. A neutral sound – silence – is also offered to the reader to visualize the leaves falling from the trees tenderly like ashes. A similar association between colors and sound is illustrated by the Russian art philosopher and painter, Wassily Kandinsky, who explains how looking at colors can create the sounds of music, and how listening to music makes the listener imagine the colors through interpretations (Guerman 2005: 53). From this perspective, readers may compare those colors: white, black, and gray, to the silence of the characters standing there by the puddle. Although there is neither motion nor spoken words, the sound of leaves falling appears to represent language, and at the same time, this association between neutral sound and colors in the landscape also constructs a visual image.

In the following lines, the speaker shifts from describing the mood of the location to the male persona:

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

This stanza focuses on the concept of the gaze that is depicted through the expression: “your eyes on me,” and illustrates the power relation between the characters through observation. This is the same kind of relation that is described by Mulvey in her study of the gaze between both genders and in Foucault’s explanation of how individuals are controlled through eyes watching them (1977: 195 – 206). From these perspectives, the female speaker is somehow controlled by the male gaze and she is imprisoned by mysterious questions in the eyes of the male character. The “tedious riddles of years ago” can be understood in various ways, but in this context, the term: “riddles” suggests the attempt to look into the man’s eyes to seek answers to questions from “years ago”, but have not been answered due to a lack of communication. The language used here creates an atmosphere of illusion, mystery, and a dreamlike or imaginary quality—like a foggy scene—obscuring any clear sense of the underlying questions.

This mystery is constructed over time “years ago” which has a vital role in the poem. The Italian physicist, Carlo Rovelli, in his *The Order of Time* (2017), states: “time is an illusion in which our naive perception of its flow doesn’t correspond to physical reality” (70). Furthermore, he explains that the universe obeys “quantum mechanics”, otherwise, the actions are just a series – they undergo through what we design as past, present, and future (Jaffe, 2018). In other words, understanding the concept of time may be complex. Many believe that time travels, and there is a universal consensus that time is somehow ‘constant’. However, the passing of time now seems to be an illusion, because Einstein’s theory of special relativity claims that “time slows down or speeds up depending on how fast you move relative to something else” (Howell 2017). From this perspective, Hardy’s character appears to be lost in the fantasy of time and she cannot find the puzzling question in the eyes of the male persona. Hence, time also plays a key role in finding the truth, but the aura fades away over time. For this reason, “years” is merely a signifier that is spelled out by the narrative voice without any concrete signified, so although she has been endeavoring to find the pursuit of truth she has always failed.

The speaker then shifts the description from the character’s eyes to “some words” that are unknown in terms of being written or spoken; language passes back and forth between the narrative voice and her partner, but those words also seem to be ‘neutral’. That is to say, they are just signifiers with ex-

pected meanings, and over time, they have lost their reality and their existence. Therefore, the words appear to be merely metaphors with intrinsic missing value. They exemplify language, which, as Nietzsche explains, is simply a collection of metaphors with no ultimate truth behind them. Concisely, the phrase “wear and tear” is used by Derrida to explain how truths are metaphors which are the only embodiments of language where the original meanings have been worn away, and there is no point in reaching behind them and finding the truth (6 – 7).

In the same way, the “words” between the female speaker and the male character seem to be purely metaphors with their original meanings worn out and torn up, playing “to and fro” or back and forth between them. Put differently, they move in two opposite directions as the characters fall apart. Therefore, their separation seems to be the result of a loss of authenticity or “aura,” their seeking for reality and honesty has failed, so “[his] eyes on [her] were as eyes that rove/ over tedious riddles of years ago”. Eventually, the chain of metaphors has eliminated truth.

Readers of the verse may propose various interpretations of the colors and sounds because they are hidden within Hardy’s ekphrastic poem, and so the pond, the sun, the leaves, and the man’s eyes offer “tedious riddles” to the reader through a third gaze – the reader’s gaze. Eventually, there is silence, either because the silence of words has destroyed their emotions or because their lack of love has destroyed the language. The end of this relationship launches with the “eyes” and shifts to the “words” and then eventually, it discards them, and each possibility goes differently; on the one hand, both characters have become so close that they don’t need either their sight or language; on the other hand, they may experience significant physical and relational separation that they cannot have the connection in any way. The poem now describes the male character’s passive facial gestures:

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 ...

The smile on the man’s lips appears to be the “deadest thing”; this seems to be compared to the dead leaves, and it appears to have neutral sentiments, the same as the neutral colors of the surroundings. The figure of prosopopoeia emerges in the line as the narrative voice describes the absent man, and she appears to talk to this persona who seems to be away. The “grin of bitterness” is the facial expression of the absent man, which illustrates his emotions. Although it is not clear whether the character is absent or he is present, his image is visualized in the text through various gazes – both male and female, and the reader’s gaze. The satirical point is made in the description of his smile being “alive enough to have the strength to die,” the “grin” refers to a smile that has “swept by” – either cleaned the “bitterness” or passed by and is now hidden. This may imply that the male character is perceived as guilty or ashamed as if he has wronged the speaker, and that his smile is merely a facade. The term “grin,” is therefore compared to an “ominous bird” – suggesting a bad *omen*; The smile appears sufficiently sinister to bring about misfortune. The final lines of the verse are narrated by the speaker, who re-describes both the male persona and the elements of nature:

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

Here, she appears to conclude with a definition of “love” as a force that after imparting its “lessons,” ultimately betrays everyone. The lover’s face is likened to a “sun” that has been cursed by God; the “tree” is lifeless and has turned to ashes; and, the man bears a dead smile. Additionally, the “pond” serves as a metaphor for the male character’s eyes, which are surrounded by “grayish leaves” that evoke the color of ashes. This imagery suggests that the eyes are encircled by the darkness associated with evil, symbolized by the black color. Miller (2007) states that in the expression: “since then, keen lessons that love deceives,” Hardy’s character shows his perspective and creates an experience through a memory (101 – 102). Hazen (1971) also comments on this line, suggesting that the image of nature has a crucial meaning that is related to the emotions of the speaker – they give a bitter sense to their love that is ended (333).



I propose instead that this line conveys the idea of affection as a construct shaped by social conventions and ideology, functioning merely as a metaphor that evolves over time. The female speaker's quest to discover the meaning of love in the male character's eyes is ultimately unattainable and futile; it represents an illusion because it lacks a foundation in reality.

### Conclusion

In this essay, I read Hardy's ekphrastic poem "Neutral Tones" semiotically. My study showed that the text presents a female speaker describing a wordless conversation with a male character, both standing by a pond on a cold and pale winter day. The description of the setting and the male persona are compared in terms of being neutral, but the sentiments and emotions of the figures are represented through the gaze and a collection of metaphors that are constructed by social conventions. Power relations formed by the 'eyes' of the figures and the third gaze of the reader play a vital role in this poem; the reader's act of looking at the speaker and the speaker's eyes on the male character shows how gender issues are constructed within the sign system. The characters ultimately meet their destruction through the natural elements, which are neutral in color, sound, and emotion. These elements serve as metaphors, under which the truth has disappeared.

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