

How are the complexities of a breakup portrayed in Neutral Tones and Disgrace?

The varying complexities of each poem serve to highlight the individual complexities of a breakup. Each poet employs a range of techniques to depict various ideas and emotions when a relationship ceases continuation. It is important to consider why each poet uses certain techniques – what effect this has on the reader – but also what they do not include (what can be implied), and how this contributes to the overall sense of loss as a relationship ends.

Hardy's use of metre is integral to the depiction of the end of a relationship. There is a sense of metrical ambiguity throughout: the poem alternates regularly between iambic pentameter and iambic tetrameter, with this inconsistency mirroring the inconsistency and now lack of their love and relationship. The iambic pentameter suggests the reader can expect a poem about love due to its resemblance to a heartbeat, but these expectations are subverted via the insertion of iambic tetrameter and various other metrical feet that fall short or slightly more than what is expected. The line "your eyes on me were as eyes that rove" contains an extra syllable (hypercatalexis) that is unstressed, creating a sense of falling reflective of the falling and unravelling of their relationship. Indeed, the very "rove" suggests that their love has no secure destination, it drifts meaninglessly until inevitably it must end, just as the metre seems to drift and weave inconsistently. By using iambic tetrameter, it suggests a loss of love as it is one metrical foot short of the iambic pentameter which connotes love; these catalectic lines reflect their inability to restore and save their relationship to what it was, just as the metre cannot be restored. The heartbeat is no longer heard (iambic pentameter) and thus they fall short of maintaining their love. This is also seen in the line "since then keen lessons that love deceives" whereby the inclusion of the word "deceives", deceives the metre itself as it adds an extra syllable, therefore you cannot trust the metre just as you cannot trust their love to survive. Hardy therefore uses metre in a complex way to reflect how complex and ambiguous love can be. It is important to consider how the use of metre relates to Hardy as a poet within Naturalism Victorian Literature. The Victorian form favoured narrative and length over the short, lyric poems that were popular in Romantic poetry. They emphasised imagery less, and instead focused on rhythm and metre – hence Hardy's clear use of metre. Themes were also much more realistic, identifying emotions such as isolation, despair and general pessimism, which Hardy highlights through his use of metre.

Duffy's choice of free verse may at first glance appear far less complex and less intricate, but it is key in reflecting the breakdown of a relationship. It could suggest that the speaker is unable to contain or organise their emotions in a logical and ordered way, hence no ordered or specific metre being used, also reflecting the individual nature to love – there is not a universal fit to how a relationship begins or ends for each person. The lack of rhyme scheme also means that each of the lines are not linked in that way,

creating a sense of detachment, which contrasts to Hardy's relatively consistent ABBA rhyme scheme which does create a linkage between each of the lines. Duffy shows that these lines cannot be linked together, just as in their relationship, each party no longer fits together, but are instead disjunct and unharmonious. Their relationship is in a sense empty and has completely disintegrated, hence there being no metre or rhyme scheme, so the poem is also empty in this sense. This disjunct sense also arises from the heterometric lines; these inconsistencies in line length reflect the inconsistencies in the relationship and the lack of love, hence its demise. Contextually, Duffy is writing in the postmodernism literary period and so writes in everyday, conversational language, making her poems appear deceptively simple, hence the use of free verse.

Hardy also reflects the drawn-out nature of their love through his use of enjambment. For example, in the line "the smile on your mouth was the deadest thing alive...", the superlative "deadest" and adjective "alive" are separated by a line break as the sentence is enjambed, creating a sense of disconnection; the two cannot be synonymous with each other much like these two parts of the sentence cannot be synonymous with each other, hence are separated. Similarly, "smile" and "alive" are separated showing that there is no longer any happiness between the couple and so the end of their relationship is inevitable, just as the end of the poem is unavoidable. The assonance used in the phrase "to and fro" draws out its length. This could be the speaker attempting to maintain and lengthen the life of their love, or it could be reflective of the fact that their love has extinguished and so is drawn out. This extinguishing of love can also be seen in *A Complaint* by William Wordsworth which portrays the love that the speaker used to have as a life-enriching force, this loss of love, in turn, feels like a wellspring of joy has suddenly dried up. In this way, the poem captures the despair felt by anyone who has lost the love of someone dear and cannot seem to stop thinking about what used to be. We could analyse *Neutral Tones* using formalism which compels the reader to judge the artistic merit of literature by examining its formal elements, like language and technical skill. Hardy excels in this case: his use of metre, rhyme, structure and other literary devices enhances the artistic side of his poetry and aids the reader with their interpretation of the poem. So, from a formalism point of view the poem is successful in its complexities. However, the different interpretations possible are in themselves reflective of the unique nature of a breakup.

Duffy also reflects the repetitive and monotonous nature of love and so the inevitability of its demise. The repetitive quatrain structure is reflective of their routine arguments that they are unable to change, hence the unchanging stanza structure. Thus, their relationship is built on routine, and no longer driven by the verve and spontaneity of love. Duffy's use of enjambment draws out each line to an uncomfortable length that leaves the reader breathless, mirroring the lack of 'breath' and vitality in the relationship, as each partner seems to suffocate. The length of each line is extended to

an unnatural length just like their relationship has become protracted and drawn out. The enjambment also suggests that their feelings of anguish and dismay are continual and cannot be prohibited or avoided and thus the end of the relationship must arrive for them to be able to breathe and live again and each line is broken up by a break, just as they as a couple are separated emotionally and romantically, hence the arrival of their breakup. Additionally, a dichotomy between the end-stopped lines and enjambed lines arises: the sentence “We has not been home in our hearts for months.” is end-stopped – the line cannot travel onwards just as they cannot travel back to their homes; the journey and trajectory of their love is over. The use of anadiplosis also portrays the repetitive nature of their love: “Woke//woke to the absence of grace...” relates the verb woke at the end and then beginning of each line. This creates a sense of bombardment within their relationship; there is no peace, rest or tranquility, hence the emphatic repetition of a harsh, actionable verb that awakens them to the reality of their relationship. The cyclical structure of the poem also reflects the continual cycle of arguments and disconnect between them.

Hardy makes use of pastoral imagery to reflect the absence of any love in their relationship. When he describes “a pond edged with grayish leaves” this subverts the readers expectations as water typically symbolises birth and new life but is juxtaposed here to the “greyish leaves” showing how they cannot escape the death of their relationship just as the water has been infiltrated by death, and the two now become one. Therefore, by using nature as a symbol of death it shows how their relationship has become inverted, moving away from one of love, to one of an inevitable end. Similarly, the use of colour imagery serves to highlight the bleakness of their relationship. By describing the sun as “white” it suggests it is blinding and cold, with no life left inside of it, despite the sun providing the earth with sustenance. Indeed, the title of the poem being “neutral tones” is suggestive of there being nothing left of their relationship; it does not glow with love as a brighter colour may suggest, but it also does not have any connotations of a fiery or intense passion, as a more vivid colour may suggest. Instead, their relationship is just existing in a sense, and not thriving or living. It is therefore fizzling out and so the end is inevitable as it no longer provides any benefits to the couple, as it is neutral, and nothing more. This is also seen by the cyclical structure employed and the isometric lines which reflect that nothing has changed within their relationship; it has become stagnant and amounts to nothing.

Duffy also subverts the readers expectations to reveal the inevitable end of a relationship. The sibilance used in “cherished italics suddenly sour on our tongues, obscenities spraying...” is suggestive of a sinisterness within their relationship. “Cherished italics” turn into “obscenities” subverting the readers expectations of a loving dialogue between a couple, instead becoming poisoned with hatred and resentment. The sibilance creates a cacophony of bombarding sounds and abuses the readers ear, just as their relationship has been abused by a lack of love. This is also

seen through the use of parataxis whereby the short and snappy sentences mirror the 'snap' and break within their union, disconnecting them from this point onwards as they no longer understand each other. By using domestic imagery, Duffy suggests that their relationship has been poisoned from the inside out: "the still-life of a meal, untouched, wine-bottle, empty, ashtray, full". By separating each adjective and noun it reflects the separation apparent between each partner. Thus, this domestic sphere acts as a microcosm for the greater sense of disconnection within their relationship as a whole.

In conclusion, both poets reflect the end of a relationship as inevitable (when it is lacking love as is the case in both poems), but in varying ways. In regards to complexity, Hardy's presentations may appear more complex due to the formulaic and specific use of metre, whilst Duffy chooses to use free verse. The use of metre is more complex in *Neutral Tones* but both poems choose to use metre or not for specific reasons and they are equally significant and revealing of a breakup. Complexity is not therefore directly proportional to what constitutes as a good poem as both poems are successful in portraying a breakup. It is also important to consider the time at which each poem was written: Hardy, being a Victorian realist, would favour metre and rhythm more so than imagery, and therefore in that sense his poetry is more complex. The differing characteristics of postmodernism and Victorian literature provide each poem with varying complexities, but both hold power and significance in their own rights.

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