

BBC Bitesize - Poetry

Episode 7 – Comparing 'Neutral Tones' and 'Winter Swans'

ANNOUNCER: BBC Sounds: music, radio, podcasts.

TESTAMENT: Ey! Hello and welcome to the Bitesize poetry podcast. I'm Testament, a writer, rapper and poet, and in this series, I'll be comparing poems, looking at language, form, structure, theme and context – some of the things you'll need to know for your exam. Make sure you've got a pen to make notes 'cause I'm gonna be giving you some really good quotes to use. And if you haven't listened to the first three episodes in this series, you really should. Well, if you're good to go, let's go.

TESTAMENT: In this episode we're comparing 'Neutral Tones' by Victorian writer Thomas Hardy with 'Winter Swans' by Owen Sheers, a contemporary writer who lives in Wales. And you know what? We're gonna meet Owen Sheers right now himself. Yo, Owen, how are you?

OWEN: Hey, Testament. I'm really good and very happy to be here. Thanks for having me.

TESTAMENT: Pleasure. Remember, there's more about these poems on the Bitesize website. It might help you to have that open as you listen. We're going to take you through three key points that will help you compare these poems: the theme of complicated relationships; the colour imagery that they both use; and the endings, particularly with how it affects the tone or mood. Owen, easy question to kick us off. What happens in your poem, 'Winter Swans'?

OWEN: So, this poem takes place just after a couple have had an argument. It's been a really wet day and they take the opportunity of a break in the rain to go for a walk around the lake. But hopefully you can tell there's a lot of tension still between them. But while they're there they see these two swans who appear to act and move in unison, almost as one. And it's this moment of a connection with the natural world that starts to lead them down a path towards forgiveness.

TESTAMENT: In Hardy's poem the narrator thinks back to a time when they stood with someone and realised that the love they had for them was now gone. So we've got the memory of that sad moment, as well as, in the last stanza, how they feel about what has happened since then. Now, Thomas Hardy wrote 'Neutral Tones' in 1867 but it's still so relevant today. Some things don't change. You know, relationships are hard work.

OWEN: Absolutely. I think that's what's so extraordinary about this poem. Anyone who's been in a relationship and felt that sense of love or that connection ebb away I think can really find a connection in this poem.

TESTAMENT: So, for our first key point, this theme of complicated relationships, Owen, can you read from the beginning of your poem?

OWEN: "The clouds had given their all. Two days of rain and then a break in which we walked."

TESTAMENT: Let's talk about that first line: "The clouds had given their all." What are you doing with this line?

OWEN: There's a sense that the clouds are also the people in this poem. You know, that sense of giving their all, I hope it's doing many things at once. Firstly, it's suggesting that there's been a really fierce downpour – this isn't just a drizzle. And the ferocity of that weather, it gives you a sense later in the poem of perhaps just how bad this argument has been.

TESTAMENT: Mmmm.

OWEN: But also, "giving their all", I wanted to have a sense of exhaustion, of feeling drained. You know, are we at the end of something here?

TESTAMENT: So the clouds are a metaphor for the people and what they've been through and how they're feeling. This is pathetic fallacy, when the nature and the weather reflects the emotions in a poem. And it's a really good thing to write about. So, write down the quote: "The clouds had given their all." Now I'm gonna read two lines from 'Neutral Tones'. 'The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing, alive enough to have strength to die.' Wow. What a line. This is harsh, isn't it? We've got "smile" contrasted with "deadest"; "alive" contrasted with "die".

OWEN: It's a great line. It cuts straight to the heart, doesn't it? And you're right, it's about that putting together of those really contrasting ideas: "smile," "the deadest thing," but then just this idea that it was "alive enough to have strength to die." So it's a couple of lines that is full of the sense of endings, which of course is what this poem is about.

TESTAMENT: Our next key point is the imagery. And here it's colour, or perhaps lack of colour. In your poem, Owen, we've got these clouds from the first line: they're kind of grey and colourless to me. But there's also the great quote: you call the swans "icebergs of white feather." Tell us about that.

OWEN: I wanted to describe the swans in that way because they've got their heads under the water, so they're tipped up, you know, so they literally sort of look like icebergs. But it's that whiteness, that purity of the whiteness of swans. There's also the idea of icebergs, 'cause we all know icebergs have a lot more of themselves under the water and we just see the tip. So I kind of wanted that to be in the background as well, this idea that there's a lot going on under the surface here.

TESTAMENT: So the swans here are metaphors for what's going on with the couple here as well. And in Thomas Hardy's poem, 'Neutral Tones', we've got white and grey in the first stanza. When used

together this descriptive colour language really builds a picture of not just emotion, but a sense of hopelessness.

OWEN: Yeah, it feels really sort of bleached-out, doesn't it? It's interesting 'cause it shows how you use white can really change in a poem. So in the "Swans" you feel that brightness of the white, but if the sun is white, and not yellow or orange, then you can sort of tell it's kind of probably shining through lots of grey clouds. And then something else that's fascinating for me is, you know, those leaves. They've fallen from an ash. So that's an ash tree. But because of the name "ash", in our minds you immediately see something else that's grey.

TESTAMENT: Yeah.

OWEN: So Hardy's really sort of piling up these, well, these neutral colours, these neutral tones and this sense of greyness.

TESTAMENT: Let's get to our final key point: the endings of these poems. Remember that all the things a poem does with form and structure and language, they all combine to make an effect. And where a poet chooses to end, where they want to finish the poem, is always really important. Now, this is where these poems differ, because in your poem, Owen, there's actually a bit of hope. Can you read the final lines for us?

OWEN: "I noticed our hands, that had, somehow, swum the distance between us and folded, one over the other, like a pair of wings settling after flight."

TESTAMENT: That's such a beautiful moment of hope to end the poem on, Owen. So we've had this couple who've not really been getting on, they are "silent and apart" – that's a quote from earlier on in the poem – but then they see the swans, these symbols of love who mate for life, and somehow it brings the couple together, reminding them of what they have, their sense of stillness and togetherness, and their hands become wings?

OWEN: Yeah, that's right. I guess I wanted there to be lots of different kinds of coming together at the end of this poem. But it's also about the images in the poem coming together, because those hands are also the wings, and then there's this idea of wings sort of settling after flight; the possibility of flight, of separation, of leaving is over now.

TESTAMENT: That last line is a great quote: "Like a pair of wings settling after flight." But it's not ending so well for the couple in 'Neutral Tones', is it? Just looking at that last stanza, we've got so many great but pretty bleak quotes that show us that the love is over, it's dead. "Love deceives." Ouch. "Wrings with wrong." That's some great alliteration there. And "God curst son." What does that mean?

OWEN: It really emphasises the hopelessness at the end of this poem, because if even the sun is "curst" by God, something's gone pretty terribly wrong here.

TESTAMENT: So, before we go, let's go over some key points. Both poems are about the complications in long-term relationships, and both focus on a memory of a couple by the water in winter. In 'Winter Swans', though, you start us with a metaphor for the troubled couple.

OWEN: "The clouds had given their all."

TESTAMENT: And in 'Neutral Tones' by Thomas Hardy, what does the speaker see on their partner's face? A smile that is...?

OWEN: "Alive enough to have strength to die."

TESTAMENT: Ouch. That's right!

OWEN: Mmm.

TESTAMENT: And both poems use imagery to create different emotions, particularly colour imagery. In your poem we have...?

OWEN: "Icebergs of white feather."

TESTAMENT: This bright, shining image that gives the couple some hope. Wow. In 'Neutral Tones' we've got two colour words: white – used differently here – and grey. And also...?

OWEN: Ash.

TESTAMENT: Ash. So, finally, the ending. 'Neutral Tones' – oh, man, this-, this ending is bleak, but it's a really good quote: "God curst son." So powerful. But let's end with hope. The last line of your poem, 'Winter Swans', Owen. We've got hands that are like...?

OWEN: "Like a pair of wings settling after flight."

TESTAMENT: Right, well, thank you, Owen, for giving us hope. And thank you so much for listening to this Bitesize poetry podcast. Check out the rest of the episodes in the series, or, for the rest of the Bitesize podcasts, search Bitesize on BBC Sounds. Peace.