What do you find characteristic in Hardy's poems about war?

- **The Field of Waterloo**
- **The Going of The Battery**
- **Drummer Hodge**
- **The Man he Killed**
- **Channel Firing**
- **In Time of 'Breaking of Nations'**

'The Field of Waterloo'

This poem from 'The Dynasts' (published between 1904 and 1908) is characteristic in viewing a heroic victory for the English as a tragic loss from the point of view of the small creatures who will suffer death on the field of battle. The technique closely resembles cinematography and a series of detailed close-ups are presented. The rabbits are scared by the thud of the hoofs of the horses (using the dialect words 'cony' and 'scud' reveals Hardy's homely affection for them). The wheels of the guns crush the burrow of the mole, the lark's eggs are scattered and the hedgehog's family is uncovered by the sappers digging the mines.

In the third verse the observation becomes even more detailed and minute; the snail withdraws his head at the sound of the approaching wagon whose wheels crush him. Hardy anthropomorphises the worm who has retreated deep into the earth where he guesses he will be safe, ignorant that soon he will soon be soaked in the blood of the soldiers. In verse five the "worse-than-weather foe" whose heels and toes will crush the butterflies is clearly man but which side they are on is not given because it is irrelevant.

The final verse speaks of the loss of the green corn that is crushed and that will never bloom. The implication is that the young soldiers will lose their young lives and never come to full maturity, but in fact Hardy leaves the thought unspoken; his emphasis is on the particulars of the natural world that war destroys.

The triolet rhymes ABA, the B rhyme then carrying on to the first and third line of the next verse, creating a relentless inexorable forward momentum appropriate to the charge that the poem depicts.

'The Going of The Battery'

This fanciful and dramatic poem is in the form of monologue or lament of a wife who is losing her husband to the Boer War, but it is based on an actual scene which Hardy observed and by which he was deeply moved. On November 2, 1899, the 73rd battery of the Royal Field Artillery left Dorchester Barracks for the war in South Africa. Their progress, marching in the pouring rain to Dorchester Station where the guns had already been loaded onto the trains is vividly described. The drenching rain and flickering gas light are appropriate to the emotions of the women who have followed the march. The face upstretched for one last kiss is side-lit by the guttering gas light. All life seems drained from the men but the guns in silhouette are like "seeming-living things" whose huge throats are silent now but prophetic of the violence to come. Still through the eyes of the woman we see the train leaving "under the arch" and then the women sadly retrace their steps to the town. One woman is heard to say "Nevermore will they come" but the wife whose voice is the poem contradicts her. She believes that some "Hand" will guide their husbands and in the last line she is resigned, placing her faith in what the future will bring.

The strong dactylic stress in the poem, repetition of emphatic phrases and internal rhyme express the passion and anguish of the wife's emotions. Appropriately, this stress is partially lifted in the calmer last two lines when she expresses her resignation:

> "   Hold we to braver things,
> Wait we, in trust, what Time's fullness will show."

The commas in the last line slow down the rhythm and prepare us for the unexpected trust by one who may be seeing her husband for the last time in the fullness of God's plan. The word "fullness" expresses a generosity of purpose which the circumstances would seem to negate.

Just as 'The Field of Waterloo' depicts war from the unusual perspective of the small creatures, so too does this poem look at the fact from the sidelines, showing us the domestic upheaval caused by war. The guns loom enormous above the domestic scene. We see the nature of war because we see what war destroys, the details of life and love of real people. Never forget that Hardy views even the Last Judgement from the perspective of a mouse scavenging a crumb on the altar of a Dorset parish church. It is war's negation of the identity of individual lives and circumstances that Hardy makes us aware of; this is also the central statement made in 'Drummer Hodge'. A useful comparison would be with the heroic rhetoric of Lord Byron's poem 'The Eve of Waterloo' which is full of officers, fair women, brave men' and regimental *esprit de corp*.

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'Drummer Hodge'

Three six-lined verses in the plain and simple ballad rhythm of eight and six (syllables) make up this epitaph for a soldier, an unknown drummer boy from Dorset, who dies and is buried without ceremony on the South African plain. Hardy stresses the fact that he would not recognise the constellations in the night sky. The reader knows this is an irrelevance because he is dead but Hardy's poem is an attempt to provide Hodge with that relevance which his death has denied him. Here we meet the mentality that treats individual men as cannon fodder, who thinks of a Dorset boy as straw-sucking yokel 'Hodge' (Hardy's hatred of urban attitudes to the countryman is expressed in his essay 'The Dorsetshire Labourer'), who once he is dead simply throws him into a rough grave without ceremony. The callous words "just as found" sound as if they are taken from a report, the sort of thing one might write on a package damaged in the post.

By stressing the foreign place where he is buried, using South African words "veldt" "kopje", "the broad Karoo" and drawing our attention to the "foreign constellations" that will nightly rise over his body Hardy makes us aware of the significance of home and language in providing identity. He also suggests a universality that links the stars of Wessex with those of South Africa, the Northern breast with the Southern tree: the cosmic dance dwarfing human conflicts (cf. 'At A Lunar Eclipse').

His homely and avuncular affectionate words "Young Hodge the Drummer" provide us with the relationship with the boy which in death he has been denied and there is a feeling of enactment of the burial service as we know it "From dust we come and to dust we shall return" in the last verse, giving to the soldier the respect and honour of a proper burial.

"Yet portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge forever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow to some Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally."

There is nothing heroic here - Hodge remains "unknown" - but this verse returns him to the processes of nature and the last word is like " for ever and ever, Amen" at the end of a prayer.

(Note that this analysis shows summary understanding of the poem, close comment on vocabulary, tone and also rhythm. Make sure that you do all four.)

'The Man He Killed'

This very simple poem in a plain ballad form rhyming ABAB, all lines but the third six syllables long with an additional two syllable swell in the third, is as much a celebration of the fellowship of drinking as it is a statement about the stupidity of the antagonistic roles which men are cast into in war, men who might in any other circumstances buy each other a drink and enjoy each other's company. The narrator imagines that just as he joined up because he was out of work so the man he killed joined up too on an impulse or because he had sold his traps. As elsewhere in The Wessex novels (for example in the group gathered together in 'The Three Mariners' in 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' or the rustic worthies who work on Bathsheba Everdene's farm and sit drinking and talking in 'Warren's Malthouse' in 'Far From The Madding Crowd') Hardy celebrates simple country labour and the fellowship of drinking, as much as he attacks war. A book of short stories he entitled 'Life's Little Ironies' and this is one of them. The Minister For Defence might find it an amusing but naive poem!

'Channel Firing'

This comic poem is deadly serious. While it is ludicrous to imagine a conversation between Dorset rustics and their parson who have woken from "the sleep of death" in the belief that gunnery practice off the coast is the Day of Judgement and even more comical to hear God shouting at man like some demented schoolmaster, Hardy's satirical object is to berate the men who create wars. Incidentally, the land around Lulworth Cove on the Isle of Purbeck is still used by the Ministry of Defence for tank training (plus ca change!).

The details of the mouse on the altar dropping a crumb (presumably a crumb of communion wafer, i.e. Christ's body), the worms drawing back into their mounds and the Glebe cow drooling are also two-edged, mocking the transubstantiation, a God who creates man to rot in the earth and suggesting the wealth of the church . The phrase "For Christes sake" with its sixteenth century genitive spelling is a quotation from the English translation of the popular Dutch morality play, 'Everyman' in which God calls Everyman to make an account of his life (the only surviving morality play in English).

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The characterisation of God is also comic. He berates man for his violence and then threatens him with having to scour the floor of Hell. The malicious "Ha, ha. It will be warmer when I blow my trumpet" is a splendidly dramatic touch, but what he says in parenthesis is immensely serious. Suddenly the angry vengeful God is seen in a new light, not scolding but pitying the human lot, recognising that man, having put up with the pains of life needs the rest of death.

Parson Thirdly's wry comment that instead of preaching forty year he wishes he had stuck to pipes and beer is pretty much Hardy's view of the ineffectuality of the church in altering human behaviour. There is a similarly comic conversation which takes place in 'The Buck's Head', Troytown (in 'Far From The Madding Crowd') in which Parson Thirdly (named as a comic dig at the Trinity) appears. After much drinking and hilarious talk about the relative merits of church and chapel Jan Coggan praises the parson for sharing his seed potatoes in a year when the crop failed. Outside in the rain on the Spring cart lie the mortal remains of Fanny Robin and her dead baby, a reminder of the sort of harsh realities of life and death which emerge in this similarly dramatic satire.

At Time of 'Breaking of Nations'

> "Thou art my battle-axe and weapons of war: for with thee I will
> break in pieces the nations, and with thee I will destroy kingdoms." *Jeremiah 51; 20*

That the title refers to this quotation from the Old Testament and that although Hardy wrote the poem at the time of The First World War (in 1915), his first idea for it was in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War, both suggest that he is looking beyond the particular to the universal, to the inevitable persistence beyond any war of working the ground to grow food and young couples falling in love. The thin smoke of the grass is an image for persistent life and the shared whispered secret of the lovers echoes it: as so often in Hardy, the small and particular is given universal significance. The man and the horse harrowing clods follow a line "half asleep", a line that is echoed in the thin line of smoke from the bonfire of couch grass: both are images of persistent forward and upward movement.

"Dynasties" (a word historians use about families of kings over many years) fade into insignificance in the face of this very ordinary Dorset scene and the contrasting simple vocabulary describing the stumbling, nodding horse. There is a similar contrast of vocabulary between the formal "War's annals" and the dialect word "wight" and intimate word "whispering" to which it is connected through rhythm and alliteration.

Rhythm enacts this deceptively simple poem, the dactylic rhythm of the first and third lines gaining regular forward movement like that of the man and his horse in two anapaests in the second and fourth lines: "In a slow silent walk" and "Half asleep as they walk". The end-stopped line about the couch grass in verse two creates an emphasis on the strong first word of the third line "Yet", restoring an seemingly unstoppable dactylic rhythm in the appropriately worded "Yet this will go forward the same".

Hardy deliberately uses archaic words to suggest the timelessness of the cycles of nature: "Yonder", "wight" and "ere". The man's relationship with the earth is echoed in the relationship of the lovers.

CJW March, 1996

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