

At the War Office, London

(*Affixing the Lists of Killed and Wounded: December 1899*)

I

Last year I called this world of gaingivings gaingivings – misgivings, doubts
The darkest thinkable, and questioned sadly
If my own land could heave its pulse less gladly, could be any more miserable
So charged it seemed with circumstance whence springs charged – filled; springs – which are the origin of
The tragedy of things.

II

Yet at that censured time no heart was rent rent – torn apart
Or feature blanched of parent, wife, or daughter feature blanched - face pale with shock
By hourly posted sheets of scheduled slaughter; hourly blazoned sheets – lists posted up every hour
Death waited Nature's wont; Peace smiled unshent death came naturally; unshent – without disgrace, unspoiled
From Ind to Occident. Ind to Occident – from India, ie, the east, to the west, all over the world

Hardy wrote this poem in December 1899, shortly after the start of the Second Boer War in October of that year. It is written in the first person, 'I', and gives Hardy's personal response to the war, describing the agony of those left at home as they receive news from the front.

The first verse focuses on 'last year' which Hardy then considered a very gloomy year, 'the darkest thinkable'. The second verse focuses on the present, when parents, wives and daughters wait every hour for a sheet of paper telling them that their son, husband or father has been slaughtered in the war. Hardy makes his feelings about the war explicit when he uses the phrase 'scheduled (systematically organised) slaughter'. The poem is structured on a contrast: the first verse describes last year, the darkest thinkable; the second, the present moment, which by contrast, is very much worse.

Hardy often builds his poems on a contrast. Looking ahead to 'Weathers', he contrasts early summer and winter; in 'Beeny Cliff' he contrasts the happy past with the painful present. In this poem the movement is from 'the tragedy of things' 'the darkest thinkable' in the past of last year in the first verse, to 'scheduled slaughter' in the present of the second verse. He therefore firmly establishes the tragic tone in the first verse. In four and a half short lines, he stresses the despondency he experienced the year before by repeating words and phrases associated with wretchedness: 'world of gaingivings'; 'darkest thinkable'; 'sadly'; 'could heave its pulse less gladly'; 'tragedy of things'. He specifically draws some of the despairing words to our attention with assonance: 'last', 'darkest', 'charged'. He conveys doubt both by words like 'questioned sadly / If ... could ...' and also through the feminine rhymes of 'sadly' and 'less gladly'. The unstressed 'ly' in 'sadly' and 'gladly' gives the words an element of uncertainty. The rhyme scheme of the verse overall is ABBAA - in other words, the first and last two rhymes enclose the middle rhymes, as if there is no way forward; the verse is stuck in its tragedy. And the verse as a whole contains only one fleeting comma. It moves relentlessly forward over the ends of the lines towards the last line, 'the tragedy of things'. The rhyme scheme suggests that the verse / the situation is trapped in its anguish. But it moves towards the greater tragedy that awaits in the second verse.

The second verse plunges deeper into despair, the despair of the present. Hardy looks back to that time 'at that censured time' (the time that I criticised as being the darkest thinkable') and realises it was as nothing compared to the present. The verse is built as a list of the agony that was not taking place last year. Last year hearts were not torn apart, faces did not go pale with the shock of tragic news from the front. Last year death came naturally and peace was not disgraced by war. The horrors of war are seen in terms of their effect on the loving families at home, in words like 'heart was rent' (torn apart), 'feature blanched' (faces going white with sorrow and shock), 'death'. The first three lines are run on lines, increasing the sense of speed with which, every hour, sheets arrive bearing the news to the soldiers' families that the worst has happened. There is a contrast between the 'scheduled slaughter' of the war and death which occurs naturally, 'Death waited Nature's wont.' Hardy's anger and sorrow at the 'scheduled slaughter' which has replaced the natural way of death 'waited Nature's wont' are emphasised by the alliteration. It seems to me that his anger is directed at the government that has made the decision to go to war.

Hardy gives capitals to Death, Nature, Peace, Ind (the East) and Occident (the West) as if they were universal aspects of life and of geography. Now governments have gone to war in defiance of the natural order and have thus brought tragedy to families throughout the land. The families are nameless and therefore represent all families, 'parent, wife or daughter'. The heartlessness of the government and the unfeeling officialdom of the 'sheets' listing the names of the dead are juxtaposed to and contrasted with the anguished pale features of the families receiving the news. Again we have the rhyme scheme that boxes in the feminine rhymes in the middle of the stanza as if there is no way forward.

Literary terms

Very often writers highlight important words. They do this with:

Alliteration – several words starting with the same letter or sound, for example, 'bleared and black and blind'.

Assonance – same vowel sound in different words, for example, 'abode', 'sloped'.

Cesura – a break or pause in the middle of a line of poetry.

Consonance – same consonants in words that contain different vowel sounds, for example, 'bode', 'boughed'.

Enjambement or run-on lines – when there is no punctuation at the end of a line of verse and it runs straight on to the next line.

Onomatopoeia – the effect when the sound of a word reflects its meaning, like 'plash'.

Personification – when something that is not human is referred to as if it is a person, for example, the Titanic, 'still couches she'. The effect is usually to exaggerate some aspect of the topic.

Repetition – repeated word or meaning.

Rhyme – very similar to assonance; same vowel sound and final consonant, for example, 'say', 'decay'. Masculine rhyme – when the final syllable is stress, as in 'say' and 'decay'. Feminine rhyme – when the final syllable is not stressed, as in 'growing', 'showing'.

Rhythm – the musical beat of the line, with stressed and unstressed syllables (the stressed syllables will be the important ones). The different rhythms have different names. Trochee (trochaic): strong light, strong light; iamb (iambic): light strong, light strong; dactyl: strong light light, strong light light; anapaest: light light strong, light light strong. If puzzled, try Wikipedia which is very clear on the subject.

Then there are technical words for the number of lines in a verse or stanza.

Quatrain – four lines in a verse

Sestet – six line

Octave – eight lines