

A Christmas Ghost-Story

South of the Line, inland from far Durban,
A mouldering soldier lies – your countryman.
Awry and doubled up are his gray bones,
And on the breeze his puzzled phantom moans
Nightly to clear Canopus: ‘I would know
By whom and when the All-Earth-gladdening Law
Of Peace, brought in by that Man Crucified,
Was ruled to be inept, and set aside?
And what of logic or of truth appears
In tacking “Anno Domini” to the years?
Near twenty-hundred liveried thus* have hied,
But tarries yet the Cause for which He died.’

Durban is a city in north-east South Africa
mouldering – decaying, disintegrating
awry and doubled up- distorted

Canopus – a very bright star in the southern hemisphere

that Man Crucified – Jesus Christ
inept – usually means clumsy; here, it means irrelevant
tacking – adding

Anno Domini – in the year of Our Lord (Jesus)
hied - hurried

tarries – delays, is still waiting; the Cause - peace

* ‘Near twenty-hundred liveried thus’ means nearly twenty-hundred (two thousand) years with the livery (uniform) AD (in the year of Our Lord) attached to them have passed since Jesus Christ died to bring us peace, but we’re still waiting for peace (because governments are so intent on waging war).

This poem was published on 23rd December 1899, shortly after the outbreak of the Second Boer War in October of that year. Hardy’s poems were often published on the dates to which they were linked: ‘The Oxen’ (24 December 1915), ‘The Darkling Thrush’ (29 December 1900). This poem, an impassioned plea for peace, was published two days before the birthday of the Prince of Peace, Christmas Day.

The poem’s opening couplet stresses how far away those soldiers lie dead who have given their lives in South Africa.

South of the Line, inland from far Durban,
A mouldering soldier lies – your countryman.

The decaying body of the reader’s countryman lies thousands of miles away in a foreign land, south of the equator (‘the Line’), ‘inland from far Durban.’ Hardy addresses the reader directly: the soldier is ‘your countryman’. You cannot read this poem and remain uninvolved. He rhymes ‘your countryman’ with ‘far Durban’ – a fellow-man has died far, far away. Another unavoidable aspect of these hard-hitting opening lines is death. The dead-ness is intensified through the repeated vowel sounds: ‘mouldering soldier’ and the sound continues into the rhymes of lines 3 and 4, ‘bones’ and ‘moans’. Maybe ‘moans’ suggests the pain of his death, which is certainly insisted upon in ‘awry and doubled up’. These are words to do with a body being twisted and distorted, through pain, or maybe because the corpse was chucked hastily, any old how, into a grave after battle. The assonance hammers home the point: our countrymen are dying, far from home, at Christmas time. There are also repeated ls bringing a slow, melancholy sound: ‘the line, inland’, ‘mouldering soldier’, doubled up’.

It is clear from the final sentence of a letter Hardy wrote to the *Daily Chronicle* (see below) that ‘your countryman’ refers to all the soldiers killed in the war, be they British or Boer. This is not a specifically English poem; it is a poem about the horrors of war. Hardy wrote to the *Daily Chronicle*, the paper that on Christmas Day had published a criticism of his stance on the war made

evident in the poem. *“Thus I venture to think that the phantom of a slain soldier, neither British nor Boer, but a composite, typical phantom, may consistently be made to regret on or about Christmas Eve (when even the beasts of the field kneel, according to a tradition of my childhood) the battles of his life and war in general, although he may have shouted in the admirable ardour and pride of his fleshtime, as he is said to have done: ‘Let us make a name for ourselves!’”* —

In fact, before Hardy revised them, the opening lines of the poem read
South of the Line, inland from far Durban,
There lies — be he or not your countryman —
A fellow-mortal.

This makes the point very clearly that he is writing about all the soldiers slaughtered in the war.

In the poem, the soldier’s body lies distorted and twisted in death, ‘awry and doubled up’, and his puzzled ghost asks the question: who dismissed the ‘All-Earth-Gladdening law of Peace’ as irrelevant? As in ‘At the War Office, London’, this is surely an indictment of the government that decided these young men should go to war. Why do people add AD (Anno Domini – in the year of Our Lord) to the years that have passed since Christ’s birth when the cause he died for, peace, is still waiting? Christ died to bring peace; the soldier died because peace is disregarded.

The poem is written in rhyming couplets and these words, highlighted by the rhyme, add to one’s understanding. For example, in ‘far Durban’/‘countryman’, soldiers die far away; ‘bones’/ ‘moans’ focuses on the pain of the soldiers’ death and the pain of the continuing question: why are we at war? ‘Know/law’ asks why the government makes these laws that send us to war? All that was achieved by ‘that Man Crucified’ is ‘set aside’.

At the poem’s heart lies the question, why is there war, not ‘all-earth-gladdening’ peace?

Many of the concerns and topics in this poem are those found in ‘Drummer Hodge’, and in ‘At the War Office, London’. The dead, the families affected by the soldiers’ deaths, are anonymous. They represent everyman, every soldier, every family. The vast distance and foreignness of South Africa to the soldiers fighting there is emphasised – the puzzled phantom moans to ‘clear Canopus’, a bright star in the skies of the southern hemisphere. The poems are strongly anti-war, unlike some of the war poems that Hardy’s contemporaries were writing at the time. ‘Drummer Hodge’ is written in the third person, ‘At the War Office, London’, in the first person. ‘A Christmas Ghost-Story’ is a mixture of the two: Hardy puts first-person words into the mouth of the dead soldier. In this poem he also directly introduces Christ, Christianity and Christmas, making the point that war is ungodly and unchristian. Hardy rhymes ‘that Man Crucified’ with ‘set aside’ – the cause that Jesus brought and died for is dismissed, which adds to the feeling of the sacrilege of waging war.

There is an excellent website at St Andrews University, The Thomas Hardy Association Poem of the Month

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~ttha/poetry/potm>

This prints one of Hardy’s poems each month and readers contribute their comments. The conversation between all the readers makes for fascinating and enlightening reading and the one on ‘A Christmas Ghost Story’ is particularly good.

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