

## The Levelled Churchyard

"O passenger, pray list and catch  
Our sighs and piteous groans,  
Half stifled in this jumbled patch  
Of wrenched memorial stones!

passenger, pray list – passer-by, please listen and be aware of

wrenched – moved to the wrong place

"We late-lamented, resting here,  
Are mixed to human jam,  
And each to each exclaims in fear,  
'I know not which I am!'

"The wicked people have annexed  
The verses on the good;  
A roaring drunkard sports the text  
Teetotal Tommy should!

annexed – taken over

verses – lines written on the tombstone

sports - displays

teetotal – someone who doesn't drink

"Where we are huddled none can trace,  
And if our names remain,  
They pave some path or porch or place  
Where we have never lain!

trace - find

"There's not a modest maiden elf  
But dreads the final Trumpet,  
Lest half of her should rise herself,  
And half some local strumpet!

virtuous young woman

strumpet - prostitute

"From restorations of Thy fane,  
From smoothings of Thy sward,  
From zealous Churchmen's pick and plane  
Deliver us O Lord! Amen!"

fane – temple (church)

sward – grass (in the churchyard)

zealous – over-enthusiastic;

pick and plane – builders' tools

Hardy wrote this poem after he had recovered from a depressing bout of illness in 1880 and early 1881. He and Emma moved from London to Wimborne in Dorset, where Hardy recovered health rapidly. 'The Levelled Churchyard,' his first poem for some years, was prompted by his noticing that the churchyard of Wimborne Minster had been levelled and all the tombstones redistributed. Hardy met an architect friend from some years back who reminded him of a time in the 1860s when as fellow architects they had together supervised the removal of hundreds of jumbled coffins from Old St Pancras Churchyard. 'Do you remember,' said Hardy's friend, 'how we found the man with two heads at St Pancras?' Hardy's original manuscript and several of the early editions are expressed rather more robustly than our present version.

Where we are huddled none can trace,  
And if our names remain  
They pave some path or p—ing place  
Where we have never lain.

When Hardy did eventually change pissing for 'porch or' in his *Collected Poems*, he made the alteration in an errata slip which drew even more attention to his original word. (I am indebted to Robert Gittings' *Thomas Hardy's Later Years* for this information.)

This is another of Hardy's semi-macabre poems full of black humour, where the long dead, lying in their churchyard, are talking to one another. They speak, as you would expect, in old-fashioned language such as they themselves used long ago:

'O passenger, pray list and catch  
Our sighs and piteous groans ...'

They are the 'late-lamented', which is the clichéd phrase for the beloved dead. But instead of being treated with appropriate respect and gravity, they are in a 'jumbled patch' because the churchyard is not properly tended. Indeed, they 'are mixed to human jam.' Gruesome? Maybe. Shocking: certainly. Jam and the beloved dead surely don't belong together. In fact, they are in such a muddle that they are unclear about their identities: "I know not which I am." The 'jam'/'I am' rhyme underlines the mix-up. In the next verse, contrasts and opposites highlight the muddle:

'A roaring drunkard sports the text  
Teetotal Tommy should.'

'A roaring drunkard' and 'Teetotal Tommy' are polar opposites, yet the epigraph of the one has got affixed to where the other lies. The next source of confusion for the poor un-respected dead is that in some cases their tombstones have been removed altogether in order to making paving for a path or porch or place somewhere else. The alliterated ps in 'they pave some path or porch or place' make a sort of paved pathway of alliteration, just as the headstones of the dead do. The next way in which Hardy demonstrates the muddle that the jumbled-up churchyard has got the dead into is through inappropriate rhymes.

'Here's not a modest maiden elf  
But dreads the final trumpet,  
Lest half of her should rise herself,  
And half some sturdy strumpet!'

To rhyme the 'final trumpet' (the signal of the Last Judgement) with 'sturdy strumpet' is both entertaining and shocking. The 'modest maiden', her modesty underlined by the alliterating ms, suddenly finds herself on Judgement Day, half-transformed into a 'sturdy strumpet' with her alliterated sts to underline her unrepentant moral status. The witty rhyme here ensures that the 'strumpet' embraces the word 'trumpet', as if her cheerful immorality overthrows the morality of the Last Judgement.

The last verse contains another entertaining irony. Think of the old prayer, the litany: 'from x, y and z, 'Good Lord, deliver us'. Or the Lord's Prayer: 'deliver us from evil.' And in the last verse, what do we get? The dead pray that they may be delivered from over-enthusiastic churchmen rebuilding God's temple (fane), or church; from over-keen grass-mowing – 'smoothings of Thy sward.' May they also be delivered from churchmen using tombstones as building materials, hacked about with 'pick and plane' which are builders' tools. Could they be left in peace, and in one piece, please.

'From zealous Churchmen's pick and plane  
Deliver us O Lord. Amen!'

The point that this is a prayer, like the litany or the Lord's Prayer, is made abundantly clear by the 'Amen'.

But Hardy is not yet finished with his ironies. He chooses a rhythm structure for each verse that goes: 8 syllables, 6 syllables, 8 syllables, 6 syllables – in other words, iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter.

‘O Passenger, pray list and catch           (8 syllables: iambic tetrameter)  
Our sighs and piteous groans ...’   (6 syllables: iambic trimeter)

Now scan a hymn such as:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds   (8 syllables: iambic tetrameter)  
In a believer’s ear ...                   (6 syllables: iambic trimeter)

It’s exactly the same rhythm. Hardy has chosen a recognisable hymn structure for his poem. A hymn is a sung verse that worships God and respects men. And are the bodies and memorial tombstones of the dead respected in Hardy’s poem? Of course not. Point made. Hardy is engaged in upsetting our expectations at every level. How serious is the poem?

## 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