

Channel Firing

That night your great guns, unawares,
Shook all our coffins as we lay,
And broke the chancel window-squares,
We thought it was the Judgement-day

your – the guns fired by the living

chancel – part of the church near the altar
Judgement-day see note below (1)

And sat upright. While drearishome
Arose the howl of wakened hounds:
The mouse let fall the altar-crumbs,
The worms drew back into the mounds,

drearishome – lonely and desolate
hounds - dogs

The glebe cow drooled. Till God called, "No;
It's gunnery practice out at sea
Just as before you went below;
The world is as it used to be:

glebe – church fields

before you were buried

"All nations striving strong to make
Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters
They do no more for Christ's sake
Than you who are helpless in such matters.

red war see note below (2) mad hatters see note below (3)

"That this is not the judgment-hour
For some of them's a blessed thing,
For if it were they'd have to scour
Hell's floor for so much threatening...

That this – the fact that this is not

scour - scrub

"Ha, ha. It will be warmer when
I blow the trumpet (if indeed
I ever do; for you are men,
And rest eternal sorely need)."

Ha ha see note below (4)

So down we lay again. 'I wonder,
Will the world ever saner be,'
Said one, 'than when He sent us under
In our indifferent century!'

He – God; than when we died and were buried
indifferent – inferior, a century when we didn't do things very well

And many a skeleton shook his head.
'Instead of preaching forty year,'
My neighbour Parson Thirdly said,
'I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer.'

preaching – giving sermons in church

Again the guns disturbed the hour,
Roaring their readiness to avenge,
As far inland as Stourton Tower,
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.

This poem was published on 1 May, 1914, three months before the beginning of the First World War on 4 August. In his second wife's book, *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy*, Hardy later called the poem prophetic in its sense of an approaching catastrophe.

The poem opens as if spoken by one of the dead buried either under the church floor or in the churchyard. Several of Hardy's poems are written from this unusual perspective, and are usually rather cheerful. However, although this poem appears quite jocular, its message is bleak.

All the corpses have been shaken by the reverberations from gunnery practice by the navy in the English Channel. (Dorset, Hardy's county, is on the south coast, so the sound of gunnery practice at sea would be heard inland.) Thinking the Day of Judgement (1) has suddenly arrived the skeletons sit bolt upright, morosely complaining that the living have interrupted their rest: 'your great guns, unawares...' Village dogs, awakened equally suddenly, are howling; the church mouse on the altar, eating crumbs from the Eucharistic bread, drops the crumbs and, gruesomely, the worms eating the dead draw back into the burial mounds. The cow grazing on the church field (glebe) dribbles. But God calls down to them all, 'As you were. It's just men having some gunnery practice. Everything's the same as ever, everyone's fighting wars and they're all completely mad. It's just as well for mankind that it's not Judgement Day or some of them would spend a long time in Hell after all this threatening of war. In fact, maybe I won't blow the trumpet for Judgement Day at all, as you men spend so much time exhausting yourselves in fighting that you need eternal rest.' So the skeletons all lie down again, wondering whether the world will ever get any saner. The skeleton of the vicar says it would have been better if he'd stuck to drinking and smoking instead of preaching sermons for 40 years. The guns continue to roar and can be heard as far inland as Stourton Tower, Camelot and Stonehenge, all places in Wessex, the name given in Hardy's novels and in ancient history to the south-western counties of England.

In the opening verse the noise of the guns shatters the peace of the dead and breaks the windows in the chancel (the part of the church near the altar, as opposed to the nave where the congregation sit). Surely breaking the altar windows and disrupting the dead reflects the sacrilegious nature of war, a gross offence to the dead and to the love of God. (Sacrilege is the violation of something sacred.) 'Unawares' suggests that the men firing the guns cause harm and destruction without realising what they are doing. As usual, Hardy presents men acting stupidly and ignorantly.

The last line of the first verse runs straight into the first line of the second and there comes to a complete and sudden caesura. Perhaps this humorously mimics the actions of the skeletons who jerk into an upright position, regardless of the confines of their coffins, just as the lines have swept on, regardless of the confines of the verse boundary. The noise of the guns provokes howls from dogs, astonishment from mice and caution from the worms.

God calls out to the corpses, 'No. It's not Judgement Day, it's men firing guns out at sea. The world hasn't changed at all since you were alive.'

All nations striving strong to make
Red war yet redder.

'Red war yet redder' is a reference to the sixth chapter of the book of Revelation (2) in which the speaker has a vision of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. (The Apocalypse is the final destruction of the world.) The second horse is bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from

the earth so that men should slay one another and he was given a great sword, presumably to promote the horrors of war. The alliterated 'striving strong' reinforces how hard people in all nations are trying to make war more destructive than ever before. Men are completely mad and have abandoned God's rule of love (there's a comparison here with *A Christmas Ghost Story*). God's tone is sardonic – cynical and mocking. He laughs, 'Ha, ha,' at men (3), saying it will be even warmer than in Hell when he finally blows the trumpet to signal the arrival of Judgement Day (if indeed he ever does, bearing in mind the amount of rest that exhausted mankind must need. I imagine God's tone here is so mocking because men have exhausted themselves in fighting wars.). The notion of blowing the trumpet comes from St Paul's first letter to people living in Corinth:

Behold, I tell you a mystery. ... We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised ... and we shall be changed.

The skeletons begin gloomily to discuss the insanity of mankind. 'I wonder / Will the world ever saner be.' 'And many a skeleton shook his head.'

The poem ends as it began with a burst of gunfire; the noise that shook the dead awake in the first verse disturbs them again in the last verse. The men are firing the guns, 'Roaring their readiness to avenge', and the noise, stressed by the alliterated rs and the heavily stressed first syllable against the iambic rhythm, is so great that it travels miles inland. J O Bailey points out that three past civilisations are recalled by the place-names: Stourton Tower was put up in 1766 to commemorate King Alfred's victory over the Danes in 879; Camelot is the legendary court of King Arthur and Stonehenge is the Neolithic site in Wiltshire perhaps built as a temple to sun and moon maybe two or three thousand years ago. Hardy takes us back through Wessex history with King Alfred, through Wessex legend with King Arthur, into Wessex prehistory with Stonehenge. Has nothing changed in all that time? Man is still fighting. The sound of the guns roars through the last raggedly arrhythmic last line with its extra syllable and repeated t's: 'And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.'

Certainly Hardy is making it abundantly clear that war is atrocious, that man learns nothing. The parson might as well have held his tongue; the rule of love is one that man is never going to learn. God laughs mockingly at man. Hardy must be putting his own thoughts and feelings into God's mouth; God's behaviour in the poem is not that of the true God. The tone of the poem is one of deep pessimism, of cynicism, of lost faith, of disillusion, even of hopelessness. Man is a desperate case: completely mad. The poem is also quite macabre, with its mention of worms and its graveyard setting.

As always, the Victorian Web has some thought-provoking questions to ask about this poem.
<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hardy>

Notes to explain some of the references. These notes will not necessarily help your understanding of the poem; they simply try to explain what Hardy was referring to.

Note 1 Judgement Day is the day on which, in some literal interpretations of the Bible, God will judge mankind. God will command the angel Gabriel to blow a great trumpet to signal the Last Judgment or the Day of Judgement. In the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, Chapter 20, it is described thus:

¹¹ And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

¹² And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is *the book* of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

Note 2 The four horsemen of the Apocalypse, that is, the agents of destruction – of war and disease - are described in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 6. This is the King James Bible translation.

And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.

2 And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

3 And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.

4 And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.

5 And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

7 And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see.

8 And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

Good News Bible translation of verse 4:

Another horse came out, a red one. Its rider was given the power to bring war on the earth, so that people should kill each other. He was given a large sword.

http://www.discoverrevelation.com/Rev_6.html is a website which explains some of the visionary language of the Book of Revelation.

‘The Lamb here is Jesus Christ, the only one worthy to open the seals. This noise of thunder indicates God revealing something to His people. Many times throughout the Bible, God's voice has been mistaken for thunder. Here one of the four beasts, or four living beings, says "Come and see". Of course, all of the four gospels say "Come and see". We are invited to look into the heavenly stage and see things never told upon the earth until now. We will see in the opening of this first seal, the triumph of Christ and His church.

This part begins what is called "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse". The four horsemen present the picture of man's inhumanity to man. They seem to be a divine prediction of the affairs of humankind that will cause much human suffering. This is not new, for those in control of the affairs of this world have a history of causing their fellow human beings much suffering, with false hopes of peace followed by wars, famines, and death.’

Note 3 Mad as Hatters. Wikipedia explains: "Mad as a hatter" is a colloquial phrase used in conversation to refer to a crazy person. In 18th and 19th century England mercury was used in the production of felt, which was used in the manufacturing of hats common of the time. People who worked in these hat factories were exposed daily to trace amounts of the metal, which accumulated

within their bodies over time, causing some workers to develop dementia caused by mercury poisoning. Thus the phrase "Mad as a Hatter" became popular as a way to refer to someone who was perceived as insane.

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable describes Robert Crab as the original mad hatter. He lived in the 17th-century, gave all his belongings to the poor and lived on dock leaves and grass.

Note 4 Ha Ha In the poem God says, 'Ha, ha. It will be warmer when / I blow the trumpet...' I wonder whether this is just a sardonic cackle from on high, or whether Hardy might have had in mind some verses from the Book of Job Chapter 39. In this, perhaps the earliest book in the Old Testament of the Bible, Job questions God's actions and this section is part of God's reply to Job. God speaks as the creator of, amongst other things, that glorious creature, the horse. Certainly the horse is all ready to be ridden into battle, with the trumpets blowing and the officers shouting all around him, which would be appropriate for God's weariness at man's continued fighting in the poem. This translation of Job Chapter 39 is taken from the King James Bible, which is the one Hardy would have known, but in the interests of making it understandable, the Good News Bible version is given below it.

19Hast thou given the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?

20Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? the glory of his nostrils *is* terrible.

21He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in *his* strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men.

22He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword.

23The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield.

24He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage: neither believeth he that *it is* the sound of the trumpet.

25He saith among the trumpets, **Ha, ha**; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.

Good News Bible translation

19 Was it you, Job, who made horses so strong and gave them their flowing manes? **20** Did you make them leap like locusts and frighten people with their snorting? **21** They eagerly paw the ground in the valley; they rush into battle with all their strength. **22** They do not know the meaning of fear, and no sword can turn them back. **23** The weapons which their riders carry rattle and flash in the sun. **24** Trembling with excitement, the horses race ahead; when the trumpet blows, they can't stand still. **25** At each blast of the trumpet they snort; they can smell a battle before they get near, and they hear the officers shouting commands.

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