

The Convergence of the Twain (Lines on the loss of the 'Titanic')

I

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

vanity – emptiness, worthlessness
stilly couches she – she lies quietly

II

Steel chambers, late the pyres
Of her salamandrine fires,
Cold currents thrud, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

chambers – parts of the engine; late – recently; pyre – fire for
in legend, salamanders could live in fire burning a body
thrud – thread; lyres; harps

III

Over the mirrors meant
To glass the opulent
The sea-worm crawls - grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

opulent – very very rich
indifferent - uncaring

IV

Jewels in joy designed
To ravish the sensuous mind
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

bleared – dim and watery

V

Dim moon-eyed fishes near
Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: 'What does this vaingloriousness down here?' . . .

empty/pointless glory and sumptuousness

VI

Well: while was fashioning
This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

fashioning – being made
cleaving wing – swiftly dividing the waves

VII

Prepared a sinister mate
For her - so gaily great -
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

dissociate - separate

VIII

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

smart – elegant, fashionable
stature – size and importance

IX

Alien they seemed to be:
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

alien – incompatible, foreign

X

Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

bent – shaped by an outside force, or motivated
anon – soon; august – grand, also prepared by omen

XI

Till the Spinner of the Years spinner of the years - fate
Said 'Now!' And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres. *

* consummation comes – it is finished, but also sexual overtones

At nearly midnight on 14 April 1912 on her maiden voyage, the Titanic, the supposedly unsinkable luxury liner, struck an iceberg and sank with the loss of over 1500 lives. There were 2223 people on board; it was the largest passenger steamship in the world. Hardy's manuscript dates his poem 24 April 1912. It was published in the souvenir programme of the Matinee in aid of the Titanic Disaster Fund given at Covent Garden, London, on 14 May 1912.

After the disaster there was widespread criticism of the ship's excessive luxury, of the different survival rates between first-class passengers, many of whom were rescued (199 out of 329), and steerage passengers, many of whom weren't (only 174 out of 710 were saved). There was also criticism of the arrogance of the alleged claim that the vessel was unsinkable, and of the ship's name which was seen as inviting disaster, the Titans being powerful gods of Greek legend. Tim Armstrong in 1992 wrote, 'The poem can be read as an ambiguous meditation on catastrophe and the forces behind history.'

What would you expect to find in a poem written in response to a tragedy on this scale? Perhaps a poem that appeals to the readers' emotions upon the occasion, or sympathy with the victims' families and their grief. Or sympathy with the victims themselves, the sense of tragedy and loss at lives so undeservedly cut short. Or a reconstruction of the panic, chaos and suffering during and after the catastrophe. Maybe the poem would raise questions about the nature of life and its

tragedies: why do such things happen? Maybe the poem would reflect a sense of blame, either of God for allowing this to happen, or blame that there were not enough lifeboats to cater for all the passengers. Generally, you would probably expect to feel and share emotions aroused on the subject. What Hardy gives us is the absence of everything we might expect.

‘The Convergence of the Twain’ means the meeting of the two. The words are deliberately old fashioned. And the title leads us to expect some sort of pairing. But Hardy makes us wait until verse VII when ‘a sinister mate’ is introduced as the other half of ‘she’, the ‘gaily great’ Titanic.

In verse I, we encounter the Titanic (unnamed) ‘stilly couche(d)’ on the sea bed. Immediately, one sees that the shape of the verse bears a striking resemblance to that of a liner. And we meet the liner, ‘In a solitude of the sea / Deep from human vanity / And the Pride of Life that planned her ...’. Hardy forces us to recognise the present wreck on the seabed and the contrast with all the pride and vainglorious claims for the vessel, the ‘human vanity / And the Pride of Life that planned her.’ ‘Human vanity’ has biblical connotations: the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes opens, ‘Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?’ And in Chapter 2, ‘I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought (worked or made), and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.’ The ‘vanity’ in question is not a tendency to look at yourself in the mirror, but the ultimate worthlessness and emptiness of worldly things, since you cannot take them with you when you die. ‘Pride of Life’ also has biblical associations, this time with the first letter of St John in the New Testament. ‘For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away.’ So the human tendency to glory proudly in material achievements is apt to come to nothing, as the wreck of the Titanic on the seabed illustrates.

The second verse details some of the staggering engineering achievements in the engine-room of the Titanic: ‘Steel chambers, late the pyres / Of her salamandrine fires...’. The chambers are spaces in the mechanism, and ‘late’ means recently. Pyres are huge fires that generate great heat; they are used at funerals in places like India for burning the body. Funeral pyres, generally on boats set afloat for the purpose, were also part of the Viking culture. So ‘pyre’ indicates legendary fire and heat in the engine-room, but also anticipates the death, the sinking of the Titanic. The salamander is a species of lizard; according to legend it could live in fire. So the words Hardy has chosen underline the majestic status of the vessel; it was almost making its way into legend in its splendour and ability to withstand all hazards. But the word ‘late’ in the first line undermines all this glory; until recently, this glory was to be seen, but now ‘Cold currents thrid (thread – run through), and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.’ These lyres played by the sea’s currents sound like a marine version of the Aeolian harp or lyre played by breezes (see ‘The Darkling Thrush’. Earlier, Coleridge had written, in ‘The Aeolian Harp’:

‘and that simplest Lute,
Plac'd length-ways in the clasping casement, hark !
How by the desultory breeze caress'd...’).

This was a Romantic notion, but there is nothing Romantic about the wreck of the Titanic with cold currents playing through the steel chambers. The hissing s’s of the fiery ‘steel’ and ‘salamandrine fires’ of the engines that powered the Titanic have given way to the hard c’s of the ‘cold currents’, the hard t’s of ‘currents’, ‘turn’ and ‘tidal’, and the sea’s tidal rhythms with the repeated ‘th’ in ‘thrid’ and ‘rhythmic’. The sea has replaced all the glory with its own slow (the pace in the last line

slows right down) powers and rhythms. And indeed the verse's rhythms change completely. The Titanic in all her glory thrusts through the seas:

Steel chambers, late the pyres

Of her salamandrine fires,

with the stress on the first two syllables, 'steel' and 'cham', and the 'pyres' / 'fires' rhyming syllables also stressed to underline the ship's power. But this is overtaken by the quite different and ultimately much more powerful rhythm of the sea.

Cold currents thrud, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

The sea's rhythms are slower, more insistent and frequent; after the first two stressed syllables, they settle to an inexorable iambic rhythm. The contrast in this verse is between the two elements, fire and water; the fire that powers man's machines and the ocean's water. Later this contrast will be intensified into a fatal convergence between the power of man's machine and the force of the frozen water, the iceberg.

The third and fourth verses set the details of the luxury liner against their present dimmed, lightless place at the bottom of the sea. So the sea-worm (and worms eat decaying corpses as well as crawling over mirrors) crawls over mirrors that were intended to reflect the wealthy ('opulent') and jewels that were intended to enrapture the senses 'lie lightless'. Again Hardy slows the pace in the long lines that describe the action of the sea. This is largely a matter of stresses:

The sea-worm crawls – grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

Not only are the vowels mostly long ('sea, crawls, slimed) but the number of heavy stresses slows the pace. The last line of verse IV runs:

(Jewels) Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

The sparkling ls of the jewels are repeated in 'lie lightless', emphasizing their change and, depressingly, in 'bleared and black and blind' with their insistently and heavily alliterated 'bl' sounds. The ms and ns with which Hardy conveys the dim underwater world in words like 'worm', 'slimed', 'dumb', 'blind' in verses III and IV, are continued in verse V in 'dim moon-faced fishes near'. The fish ask 'What does this vaingloriousness down here' and the word 'vaingloriousness' (empty/pointless glory and sumptuousness) echoes the 'human vanity' and 'Pride of Life' of the first verse, the pride that thought to build the unsinkable Titanic.

With the fishes' query, the big question is posed: what is the Titanic doing at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean? So, in Verse VI, Hardy begins the explanation. 'Well: ...'

Hardy stresses that, at the same time as the Titanic was 'fashioning' (being made), The Immanent Will, that is, the force behind the universe, 'that stirs and urges everything' - at which point verse VI runs on into verse VII, as if The Immanent Will is an unstoppable force. Verse VII begins with the verb, showing the action that The Immanent Will propels into being: 'Prepared a sinister mate / For her ... / A Shape of Ice.' Now, at last, we know what is meeting or converging with The Titanic: 'A Shape of Ice'. Although it is 'for the time far and dissociate (separate)' we know that the two will experience a disastrous encounter. And verse VII prepares us for this inevitable meeting in two ways. Not only does verse VI run on into verse VII, but the first line of verse VII runs on into the second: 'Prepared a sinister mate / For her...' The force, or power, of the Immanent Will drives across verse and line boundaries; it is more than the equal of the ship's engine power, fashioned simply by the overweening pride of man. And the 'ay' vowel sound in 'mate' is repeated in 'gaily great' and in 'Shape' and 'dissociate' as if to remind us that, even if the

‘sinister’ iceberg is far away for the moment, it lies in wait for the ‘gaily great’ ship for which it is a ‘mate’, an integral part.

The sixth verse starts with ‘while’ – at the same time – and the eighth with – ‘as’, repeating that same time. At the same time as the smart ship grew in size, grace and colour, so too did the Iceberg. The iceberg shares both the ship’s verb, ‘grew’, and its alliterating s’s: ‘smart ship ... stature’, ‘shadowy silent sdistance ... sIceberg.’ And chillingly, ‘grew’ rhymes with ‘too’.

In verse IX, although the ship and the iceberg seemed to be ‘alien’, that is, incompatible or foreign to one another, the limited view of mortals failed to see that their later history would be an intimate welding. Hardy uses words with sexual connotations, such as ‘mate’ and ‘intimate’ and juxtaposes ‘intimate’ to the technological word ‘welding’. Human understanding also failed to see any sign that the ship and the iceberg were ‘bent / By paths coincident’ – in other words, they were shaped (the meaning here of ‘bent’) by an outside force (The Immanent Will, the Spinner of the Years) to coincide. They were twin halves, like male and female (the iceberg is presumably male since the ship is ‘she’) of one ‘august event...’ August means grand, but the root of the word suggests a meaning of prepared by augury and brought to fruition. Both verse IX and X end with a comma, driving forward to the moment in verse XI when the Spinner of the Years (the Fates who spin and cut the web of life) said ‘Now!’ There is a huge cesura as the life of the vessel and so many of her passengers comes to an end. ‘And consummation comes’, again the strangely unexpected word denoting a sexual union between the incompatible mates. The shock waves from this catastrophe jar two hemispheres, the whole world.

Hardy moves the verbs, the words that drive the action. In the first four verses, the stanzas open with verbless descriptions of the glory of the ship, leading to the verb which is the action on the seabed. The glorious ship is now a wreck, with no movement; what movement there is belongs to the sea. So we get, in the last lines of each verse: ‘stilly couches she’; ‘cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.’; ‘the sea-worm crawls’ and ‘lie lightless’. (Verse IV does have ‘designed’ and ‘to ravish’ in its first two lines, but they are not finite verbs, but participle and infinitive.) In verse V it is the ‘dim moon-faced fishes’ that ask the big question (with verb): ‘And query: “What does this vaingloriousness down here?”’ In the second part of the poem, where the Immanent Will starts to ‘stir and urge everything’, the verbs move position. Each time the ship’s building has a verb, so does the iceberg prepared by the Immanent Will. Finally, by verse X, they share the same verb, ‘bent / On paths coincident.’ The final verse is full of action, full of verbs bringing catastrophe.

The Spinner of the Years

Said ‘Now!’ And each one hears,

And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

What are the aspects of the poem that seem to be most striking? There is the contrast between the ship and the iceberg. The ship is gaily great, contrasted to the ‘shape of ice’ that awaits it; the ship is splendidly fashioned by man, whereas nature extinguishes all its light, sparkle, fiery power with darkness and dullness. Man was fashioning the ship while the Immanent Will was preparing the iceberg. While man is making the ship in the first five verses, each verse ends in an orderly, controlled full stop. Whereas once the Immanent Will starts to prepare the iceberg, it drives across verse endings and line endings.

Hardy seems to have reversed the expected chronological order of events, of before and after. After comes first (the wreck at the bottom of the sea), followed, in the second part of the poem, by the preparation of the ship and the formation of the iceberg. The poem ends with the 'now' of the collision.

The shaping metaphor of the poem is the strange one of consummation between the ship and the iceberg. And the baby, as it were, the product, is death and tragedy and wreck. The ship is 'she' on her maiden voyage, and the iceberg is a 'mate'. But they are 'alien', not a match for one another. The 'consummation' 'jars': it is not a relationship but more like a rape? As if fate is invading humanity's hopes and pleasure with violent and sudden force.

So, is the poem a condemnation of human vanity which thinks it is in control of events? Or a condemnation of over-reaching pride in technology and engineering, 'the Pride of life that planned her'? Is it a condemnation of the extravagance and ostentation referred to in verses 3 and 4? Does it question the nature of the force that controls the universe, rather similar to that in 'Hap'.

The poem is characteristic of Hardy in that it takes an ironic view of the fate of the Titanic, with the fish asking the question everybody was asking after the disaster. It is also ironic that the iceberg was being shaped at the same time as the Titanic was being built. It is also fairly typical in that it takes a pessimistic view of the events that shaped the disaster. There is no sense of the tragedy, the loss and waste, that there is in Hardy's war poems. And the poem is perhaps uncharacteristic of Hardy in that it is very impersonal and detached; there is a conspicuous lack of feeling.

Some critics' views follow. W H Pritchard thinks that the poem is 'an embarrassment, the kind of thing Hardy shouldn't have tried to bring off.' Matt Simpson notes that the poem is 'intended as consolatory' (does he mean that it doesn't console?). John Lucan writes: 'how good an occasional poet Hardy could be.' Hardy 'exposes the vulgar materialism of the Edwardian era.' Other critics' views, not specifically on *The Convergence of the Twain*, but on his poetry in general, read: 'Hardy was a dramatist in his poems' (Peter Porter); I think this is true of the *Convergence of the Twain*. And the same critic writes: 'His view of life is bleak.'

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 stressed, 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