

In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'

I

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

harrowing – a harrow is a farming tool for breaking up clods of earth

II

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

couch-grass – a weed

dynasties – members of a family ruling a country

III

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

wight – young man

annals – records of events

ere – before

This poem was written in 1915 and published in the *Saturday Review*, in January 1916 (the middle of the First World War).

The title of the poem is a quotation from the Old Testament of the Bible. In it, the prophet Jeremiah writes (Chapter 51, verse 20) 'Thou (he means God) art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms.'

A much more modern translation reads:

'You were my mace, a weapon of war. With you I crushed the nations, struck kingdoms down, with you crushed horse and rider, chariot and charioteer, with you crushed man and woman, old man and young, youth and maid, with you crushed shepherd and flock, ploughman and team, governors and nobles.'

Hardy's title for the poem thus means, in war time. But the verses from Jeremiah show that although all sorts of people, including country people such as the shepherd and his flock, the ploughman and his team of horses, are crushed and killed during war, their way of life continues while the great events of history are forgotten.

Years earlier, Hardy copied into his notebook a passage from Charles Reade:

'The ... history of Waterloo field is to be ploughed and sowed and reaped and mowed: yet once in a way these acts of husbandry were diversified with a great battle, where hosts decided the fate of empires. After that agriculture resumed its sullen sway.'

This is a famous and much-anthologised poem. In it, Hardy depicts the everyday, unexciting happenings that people take for granted: the man and his sleepy old horse harrowing the fields ready to sow seed; the burning of weeds, the young couple in love whispering to each other as they

walk past. Yet these, he writes, are the events that will continue to take place when the apparently important matters, the wars and families of kings, have been forgotten.

The first verse is entirely devoted to unimportant country sights and actions, dismissed by the opening word as 'Only' ... The second stanza, too, begins, 'Only Whereas the first verse described the slow silent work of the man and his old horse, the second stanza describes agricultural routine for two lines and then sets it against the important events of history with 'Yet ...' Again, in the third stanza, the archetypal characters of a girl and her lover are juxtaposed with, and implicitly contrasted with, the important events of history: war. The historical records of a year of war 'War's annals' will fade away before the love stories of men and women in succeeding generations die.

The first stanza is simply set out in ballad form, or in a 'folk measure' (Tim Armstrong). Perhaps the ballad form emphasises the simplicity and timelessness of these unimportant everyday countryside actions. A man and his horse are engaged in harrowing clods, breaking up large clods of earth to make a fine tilth. The long vowels and peaceful 'l' sounds make for a tranquil, unexciting scene. The stanza has no punctuation to interrupt it; this, like other farming duties, is carried out year after year, for long hours each day. 'Only' starts a succession of long vowels on the 'o' sound: 'only', 'old', 'old'; then there are the frequent peaceful 'l' sounds in 'only', 'clods', 'slow', 'silent', 'old', 'asleep'. Often these ls are coupled with 's' sounds, 'slow' 'silent' 'asleep'. The whole effect is quiet, uneventful, nothing special. The figures are anonymous, 'a man', 'an old horse.' The horse isn't even a smart thoroughbred, just an old farm horse that 'stumbles and nods/Half asleep.' The stanza doesn't have a finite verb, it's as if the main clause got left out, and you're left with a subordinate (ie less important) clause: 'only a man... with an old horse ...' And the participles and other verbs are hardly very world-changing: 'harrowing', 'stumbles', 'nods', 'stalk'. They're easy to overlook.

In stanza two, the dismissive opening 'Only ...' is repeated. The smoke from the weeds ('heaps of couch-grass') isn't even conspicuous, it's only 'thin', and it's 'without flame'. The first two lines of the stanza don't even have a verb. This time a reflection, a comment, is introduced in the 3rd and 4th line of the stanza. The first two lines have been brought to a halt with a semi-colon to introduce the word 'Yet'. Burning couch-grass is only an unimportant farming activity, 'Yet... this will go onward..., though dynasties (ruling families) pass' into oblivion. The long slow vowel of 'o' is sustained through the first three lines of the stanza: 'only', 'old', 'old'. The rhyme of 'couch-grass' with 'pass' highlights the point that insignificant heaps of couch-grass smoking thinly will continue after the important dynasties have passed. The verb tense in 'will go onward' is future – it will continue. The 'dynasties pass' in the present tense.

In the third stanza, Hardy describes a young woman and her lover whispering to each other. Their story of love will continue when the documents of a year of war have long faded into oblivion. The sounds in the 'maid and her wight' are sounds that can be picked up from much earlier in the poem. The long 'a' vowel of maid was introduced earlier in the poem, with flame and same'. The ds from the first stanza 'clods', 'nods', are continued through the second in 'dynasties' and into the third with 'maid' leading us to the d of 'die'. The long 'i' sounds that started in the first stanza with 'silent', continue into the third stanza take us to the same destination, 'wight', 'by', 'night', 'die'. 'Die', the important last monosyllable of the poem, insists that it is the story of the lovers and the tedious everyday farm jobs that will endure. The lovers' story long outlasts the world-shattering

and oh-so-important events of History. Wight is a deliberately archaic word that Hardy uses here, as is 'Ere' meaning before - almost suggesting that they are archetypal characters from a ballad, from as long ago as there are ballads to chronicle their existence. There is a brief rivalry in the 'w' of 'wight' and 'whispering' with 'war' but the lovers' is the story that lasts. The maid and her wight come whispering by in the present continuous tense (like the man 'harrowing clods'). Again, war's annals will be over and done with (in the future) before 'their story die' conditional present tense continues.

We have in this apparently simple poem three rural vignettes (little pictures) juxtaposed in the second and third stanzas with mention of momentous events, 'Dynasties', 'War's annals'. Their importance is emphasised by their conspicuously Latin derivation and capital letters, all the more noticeable in their appearance within such short simple lines, ballad form, straightforward uneducated occupations. Yet in the first and second stanzas, where the rural occupations are introduced dismissively with 'Only', the second part of each stanza makes a clear assertion: 'this will go onward the same' and 'War's annals will cloud (pass) into night'. Perhaps even the apparently simple innocuous ballad form, so appropriate for the farming jobs, is not to be dismissed too easily. The almost inaudible conversation of the 'maid and her wight' (suggested by the slight sibilance of the s in whispering) is nothing beside the deafening noise of the war. But it is the love-story that will endure.

Tom Paulin writes of this poem: the ballad states 'there will always be love and war.'
Conspicuously educated, Latinate words like 'dynasties' and 'annals' suggest that there is a version of history that deals with Great Events. There are also the lives of ordinary people who will never appear in the history books, yet who will be there when the Great Historical Events are over and forgotten.

Tom Paulin adds that the Roman numerals I, II and III are 'quietly and unobtrusively monumental' that is to say, important.

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