

## ‘Throwing a Tree’, New Forest

### I

The two executioners stalk along over the knolls,  
Bearing two axes with heavy heads shining and wide,  
And a long limp two-handed saw toothed for cutting great boles,      limp – flexible; boles - trunks  
And so they approach the proud tree that bears the death-mark on its side. \*

### II

Jackets doffed they swing axes and chop away just above ground,      doffed – taken off  
And the chips fly about and lie white on the moss and fallen leaves;      chips – small pieces of  
Till a broad deep gash in the bark is hewn all the way round, wood;      gash – wound; hewn - cut  
And one of them tries to hook upward a rope, which at last he achieves.

### III

The saw then begins, till the top of the tall giant shivers:  
The shivers are seen to grow greater with each cut than before:  
They edge out the saw, tug the rope; but the tree only quivers,  
And kneeling and sawing again, they step back to try pulling once more.

### IV

Then, lastly, the living mast sways, further sways: with a shout      mast – long upright pole  
Job and Ike rush aside. Reached the end of its long staying powers  
The tree crashes downward: it shakes all its neighbours throughout,  
And two hundred years' steady growth has been ended in less than two hours.

\* death-mark – a chalked or painted mark to show it is to be felled

To throw a tree is to fell a tree, bring it to the ground. From the very title of the poem, Hardy uses the technical words and details entailed in the expertise and skill involved in the craft of tree-felling. Thus the boles are the tree trunks, and the men carry heavy-headed axes and a two-handed saw to the task. They swing axes, they chop at the tree-trunk just above the ground, they hew (chop or cut with blows), they hook a rope upwards to pull on one of the high boughs, then they start sawing, edge the saw out, tug on the rope, and finally the tree crashes downwards. The details are very precise. The task is a very physical one: the tree fellers take their jackets off and embark on a series of actions requiring great strength: the verbs show this – ‘swing’, ‘chop’, ‘is hewn’, ‘tries to hook’, ‘edge’, ‘kneeling and sawing’, ‘step back’, ‘rush.’

But Hardy, although appreciative of the skill of the craftsmen Job and Ike, sees the felling of the tree as a killing; in the poem’s opening line he describes them as ‘The two executioners’. The felling is described in emotive terms. The tree’s trunks are ‘great’ and the tree itself is ‘the proud tree’. Hardy uses the word ‘the death-mark’ for the painted or chalked mark on the tree-trunk that

identifies it for felling. The mark the fellers make in the bark is a 'broad deep gash' with its connotations of pain and the 'tall giant shivers'. For all their efforts, 'the tree only quivers'. It is a 'living mast' and only eventually does it 'reach the end of its long staying powers' and in a run-on line 'crashes downward'. At which point there is a strong caesura marking the end of the great tree's life. The sh of 'crashes' is repeated in 'shakes all its neighbours', as the huge effect of the tree's falling is felt all around. And ironically (characteristic of Hardy's view of so much of life) 'two hundred years' steady growth has been ended in less than two hours.' The contrast between two hundred years' growth and the speed of its ending is stressed through the alliteration and repetition in 'two hundred' and 'two hours'; in the contrast between 'growth' and 'ended'.

The grandeur of the tree is emphasised; several words underline the violence of man's actions against nature. Much earlier, in *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy had written: 'He could scarcely bear to see trees cut down or lopped, from a fancy that it hurt them.'

## 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'.

Caesura – 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