Channel Firing

POEM TEXT

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

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

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:

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

"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....

"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)."

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!"

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."

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

SUMMARY

One night, you were firing powerful cannons, which, not realizing they were so loud, caused our coffins to vibrate. The vibration also caused the windows behind the altar in the church to break. We woke up, thinking it was the apocalypse.

So we sat up. Meanwhile, the dogs that had been startled awake started howling mournfully. A mouse in the church was frightened and dropped a crumb it had picked up at the altar. Worms slithered back into the dirt.

The parish cow drooled. Then God told us, "It's not the apocalypse. They're just practicing firing their cannons out on the ocean. Things are the same as when you were alive. The world hasn't changed its attitude towards war.

"Countries are still trying to make war—which was already devastating—even bloodier and deadlier. Crazy leaders do nothing to promote Christian ideals of peace. Despite having power, they do as little as you common dead people, who are totally powerless.

"In fact, it's a good thing for national leaders that it's not the apocalypse. If it were, I'd have to send them to Hell, where they'd be doomed to clean the floor—all for the disturbances they've caused on Earth.

"Hahaha. Things will get hotter on Earth when I do sound the trumpet of Judgment Day—that is, if I ever sound the trumpet. I know you humans could surely use eternal rest, after all you've been through."

So we dead people lay down again. "I wonder if the world will ever be less crazy," one of us said, "than it was when God sent us to our deaths in the cruel century we lived in."

Many skeletons shook their heads in sadness. "Instead of being a priest for forty years," said the man buried next to me, Parson Thirdly, "I wish I'd just smoked and drank."

Once again the night was filled with the sounds of the guns, which seemed to announce that they were ready to get revenge. Their sound reached far beyond the coast into the mainland—to the war memorial Stourton Tower; to the mythical Camelot; and to the ancient stone structure Stonehenge, with the stars above it.

THEMES

THE SENSELESSNESS AND FUTILITY OF WAR

"Channel Firing" is a bleak, satirical critique of war and particularly of arms races—the rush for nations to build increasingly devastating weapons of war. In the poem, the advancement of modern technology has simply allowed countries to "make / Red war yet redder" (i.e., to make warfare bloodier) at a much faster rate. The speaker doesn't look on these advances with patriotic pride, nor as forces with any potential to make the world a better place. Instead, the speaker sees countries as making the same mistakes they've made throughout history. War is utterly misguided "madness," the poem argues, that can do no more to improve the world than can the dead in their coffins.

The first line of the poem says it all: "That night your great guns, unawares." The phrase "great guns" suggests the mightiness of the military weapons, which are so powerful that they shake the dead wake. The dead sit up in their coffins thinking it's "Judgment-day"—when God will determine who goes to Heaven—but it's actually just "gunnery practice." God's dismissal of the guns implies that, for all their bluster and noise, they have nothing to do with what's right and wrong. In fact, God says that it's a good thing it isn't "Judgment hour"—because if it were, a lot of the people firing those guns would be sent to Hell.

Furthermore, the personification of "great guns" as "unawares" treats the guns as beings that aren't conscious of what they're doing. The guns are just another tool of senseless war, where there's no guarantee that they will be used for good. The word "unawares" also implies that those firing these guns don't understand the reach their actions will have, which, in turn, underscores how foolish these weapons are in the first place. That is, humanity has created greater and greater weapons of destruction without fully grasping the consequences.

It's almost as if countries and militaries are possessed by a kind of madness. This isn't a temporary madness, either, but rather is presented as a longstanding historical fact. God describes national leaders as "Mad as hatters." This is because they continue making war rather than working for a better world. And although technology has grown more powerful, this madness has been around for humanity's entire history. "The world is as it used to be," says God—meaning that the firing guns are just part of society chugging along as it always has.

Developing this idea, the poem takes a wide view of human history in its second half. The poem looks both to humanity's future and distant past in order to emphasize how pervasive war has been throughout the ages. One of the dead people woken by the gunfire wonders if "the world" will ever be "saner"—less driven to the madness of war—than it was when this person died in an entirely different "century." The poem thus implies that humanity has always been irrational and self-destructive. And judging by this gunnery practice, there's little hope for the future.

The last two lines suggest how embedded war is in humanity's history. The sound of the guns extends "As far inland as Stourton Tower, / And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge." Stourton Tower was built in the 1700s, Camelot was the mythical capital of King Arthur's court in the Middle Ages, and Stonehenge is a prehistoric monument. That is, the sound of war pervades not just space, but also *history*. Each of these place, real or fictional, represent distinct elements of English history. Yet instead of feeling pride in such history—the kind of pride that soldiers and military leaders feel—the speaker can only hear the terrible guns that "disturbed the hour."

Thus, the poem looks further and further back in time, hearing the guns' "readiness to avenge" echoing through all these time periods. Human history is suffused with the madness of war, and that madness won't end anytime soon.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

RELIGIOUS DOUBT

The poem's satirical depiction of God suggests that the speaker has a complicated relationship with religion. Although the speaker uses God as an interlocutor (i.e., a second speaker) to help make sense of the human world, the speaker also holds God at a distance, depicting him ironically. Perhaps God is nothing more than a helpful fiction, the poem suggests, one that people can use to help make sense of life. Or, perhaps the speaker is trying to make sense of how God could create such a violent world. However one interprets the poem, it's clear the speaker casts doubt on the promises of religion. How can a society call itself Christian, the poem implicitly asks, while also developing weapons that lead to such horror and destruction?

The poem's satirical, skeptical attitude towards God comes across in God's quoted speech. Rather than mimicking how God sounds in, say, the King James Bible, the poem gives God a rather glib tone: "Ha, ha. It will be warmer when / I blow the trumpet." This reference to "blow[ing] the trumpet" is an allusion to the apocalypse. By having God laugh at human suffering and the apocalypse, the poem suggests that God doesn't take these things too seriously. He has a pretty cynical attitude towards the world he created. It also hints that God may not be as powerful as religion makes him out to be. His cynicism seems to stem from the fact that he can't do anything to stop humans from waging war.

Having God speak in a poem is always a bold choice. It draws attention to the artificiality of the poem—after all, God doesn't usually speak to people in their everyday lives. In fact, the poem's depiction of God seems to be hinting that he is a fictional entity. When God references "blow[ing] the trumpet," he immediately follows it up with the qualification: "if indeed / I ever do." In other words, God's not sure that he'll ever put an end to worldly suffering.

This uncertainty suggests that God's not sure what his plan for the world is. Yet it *also* pushes the reader to wonder if there might not be a God at all. In other words, this moment can be read as a cheeky nod to God's own fictional nature. That is, the character called "God" in this poem acknowledges that he might not even be real. In that case, there will be no reckoning on Judgment day, and the world will continue on its violent path forever.

All this leads to a sense that Christianity's hopes and ethics may be futile, both on a national and an individual level. It doesn't cause countries to stop fighting, and it doesn't help people cope with war. In reference to national leaders, God says, "They do no more for Christés sake / Than you who are helpless in such matters." In other words, the leaders of supposedly Christian nations do little to actually advance the morals of Christianity. In fact, if it were Judgment day, those leaders would have to "scour / Hell's floor for so much threatening." So much for Christianity's ability to bring out the good in people, the poem seems to say.

As for regular people, Parson Thirdly (a dead clergyman) puts it like this: "Instead of preaching forty year [...] I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer." Even in this direct conversation with God, the Parson regrets devoting his life to religion. He wishes he'd spend his life enjoying himself instead. Either way, he'd have ended up here—lying in the ground, terrified by gunfire. Thus, the poem has a bleak outlook on the possibilities of Christianity, expressing little hope that God is real—or that, if he is, he has any power to save humanity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-5
- Line 7
- Lines 9-32

THE HELPLESSNESS OF INDIVIDUALS

As the poem depicts the fright of both animals and the human dead, the poem captures the helplessness of individuals in the face of war. In contrast to wealthy nations that build "great guns," the dead and the churchyard animals are meek, humble creatures. They live in a quaint old graveyard; technology doesn't benefit them. Their fright reflects the fate of all individuals in the modern world, which, according to the poem at least, is to be ignored by the powerful and condemned to suffer.

The reactions of the animals in the churchyard offer a stark contrast to the powerful "great guns" that disturb them. The speaker describes the reactions of meek and gentle animals: "The mouse let fall the altar-crumb / The worms drew back into the mounds." These images suggest that as the powerful prepare for war, the humble suffer. Similarly, the guns also wake the dead; they "Shook all our coffins as we lay." In a word, everyone is terrified.

God acknowledges the unfortunate situation of the meek, putting a fine point on it: "you who are helpless in such matters." In other words, not only do acts of war terrify ordinary people, but there's also nothing they can do; war will go on no matter what. God goes on to say, "you are men, / And rest eternal sorely need." The world is tiring, draining, it wears ordinary people down. However, the only thing that would give people rest is if God brought about Judgment Day, ending the world as we know it. Yet—as noted in the previous theme—there seems to be little hope of him doing that. Barring such action, the helplessness of individuals may be a permanent plight.

So, the poem ends on a rather bleak note for individuals: with no help forthcoming from the powerful or even God, they are left to the terrible, unpredictable violence of modern war.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-9
- Line 16
- Lines 22-24
- Lines 25-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

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

The first sentence of "Channel Firing" spans the entire first stanza and flows into the second. It sets up the poem's main juxtaposition and its satirical tone. As warships practice firing their massive cannons out at sea, the noise travels inland to a country church. The noise is so loud that it shatters the church windows and literally wakes the dead, who sit bolt upright, thinking it is "Judgment-day"—i.e, the Apocalypse.

This dramatic irony (the dead's misunderstanding about the noise) kicks off the poem by juxtaposing the violent reality of the world with Christian expectations. That is, whereas the Christian dead think God has finally decided to intervene in

worldly affairs, in reality things are the same as always. Nations are preparing for war.

The first line of the poem says a great deal about the world the dead wake up to: "That night your great guns, unawares." This "your" is striking. Because this poem is spoken by dead people, this "your" refers to the living. Specifically, it singles out the people who are responsible for testing these "great guns" out at sea: national and military leaders. More generally, however, it seems to rope in anyone who's reading the poem. That is, the "your" can be read as directly addressing the reader. This feeling that the poem may or may not be addressing the reader forces the reader to think about where they stand in relation to the issues the poem raises. Each person that reads the poem is forced to consider how they feel about war, technology, and religion.

The phrase "great guns" captures how modern countries feel about technology. Advances in weaponry is seen as positive. The guns (the giant artillery cannons on warships) are "great" not only in the sense that they are powerful, but that they are supposedly glorious. Yet the speaker immediately qualifies this phrase with the word "unawares." The adjective personifies the guns, suggesting that they—like people—can be unaware of the consequences of their own actions. The guns (and by extension those who fire them) don't realize that they've awoken the dead. So, while these guns may be "great," they're also kind of like brutes who make a lot of clumsy noise.

The first stanza establishes the form the poem will follow throughout. The first stanza is a quatrain (a four-line stanza) that follows the rhyme scheme ABAB. Metrically, every line follows iambic tetrameter, or four feet in a da-DUM rhythm. The third line exemplifies this meter well:

> And broke | the chan- | cel win- | dow-squares,

Hardy often uses forms like this, which is a pretty traditional one and has often been associated with songs and folk stories. Such quatrains are good for capturing the speech and rhythms of everyday people—something the poem is clearly interested in, as all the dead seem to be regular country folk.

LINES 5-9

> *While drearisome*
> *Arose the howl of wakened hounds:*
> *The mouse let fall the altar-crumb,*
> *The worms drew back into the mounds,*
> *The glebe cow drooled.*

In the next sentence, the poem describes the reactions of the local animals to the firing of the "great guns." Dogs wake up with a "drearisome," or upsetting, "howl." Meanwhile, a mouse has crawled up onto the altar in the church and picked up a crumb, perhaps—amusingly—a piece of the Eucharist (the bread used in the ritual of communion). Yet at the sound of the guns the startled mouse lets the crumb drop. Outside, worms that have poked their heads of the dirt are so startled by the vibration that they inch back underground. On other hand, the "glebe cow"—the cow kept on church property—seems relatively unperturbed. She merely drools.

This catalog of reactions does two things. First, it captures the helplessness of all these critters. They are rightly scared by the sound of war. Second, it suggests that the animals are relatively ignorant as to what they should do in the face of war. This is best exemplified by the drooling cow. If this were a real bombing, the cow would be woefully unprepared as it stood there. So these animals are not only meek and helpless, but they are also to a certain extent clueless about the human affairs happening around them.

Assonance lends unity to this sentence:

> Arose the howl of wakened hounds:
> The mouse let fall the altar-crumb,
> The worms drew back into the mounds,
> The glebe cow drooled.

The /ow/, /ah/ and /oo/ sounds pervading the stanza link all the animals together, capturing how they share a sense of helplessness.

The poem continues to be written in quatrains rhymed ABAB. The meter, iambic tetrameter (four feet in a da-DUM rhythm), continues as well. The meter and rhyme help order these images and set the scene. The rhymed quatrains, often associated with folk songs, are thus well-suited to the country scene described in this stanza.

LINES 9-12

> *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:*

In the next sentence, the poem really ramps up its satirical edge. Whereas in the first stanza, the poem took the imaginative liberty and poetic leap of having the dead speak, now the poem goes even further: God responds to the dead. More specifically, God chimes in to let the dead know that it's not the apocalypse after all. It's only warships practicing "out at sea."

This whole situation is bleakly humorous. It's a misunderstanding, a gag, which is captured by the tone, form, and diction of God's language. Just as the previous rhymed quatrains of iambic tetrameter, with their images of animal life and a country church, captured the feel of rural life, so too does God's speech have a kind of everyday quality to it. In English, religious language and the voice of God is often associated with the sound of the King James Bible. This translation was

completed at the beginning of the 17th century and has a very grand, archaic sound to it. Meanwhile, in Hardy's poem, God sounds the opposite: ordinary, contemporary, matter-of-fact.

This quality is achieved right from the get-go with God's abrupt "No." Nothing fancy, a clipped and unpretentious response to the confused dead. Because each line is only four stresses long, God's phrases are short rather than drawn out. Additionally, the consistent rhyme added on top of these short phrases creates a pithy, almost tongue-in-cheek feel to these lines.

There's another reason that the grandness and power of God seems downplayed in these lines. This is that God seems to have been sort of upstaged here. *He* is supposed to cause Judgment Day, but instead human beings have created weapons so powerful they can be mistaken for God's own wrath. In other words, human technology seems to knock God down a peg. All God can do is call out, *No, no, false alarm*. Rather than being an all-powerful creator and destroyer, God comes across more as a nagging stage manager who barely has the whole production under control.

These lines also establish the poem's concern for the relationship between modern warfare and the history of violence:

> It's gunnery practice out at sea
> Just as before you went below;
> The world is as it used to be:

When these dead people were still alive, militaries also practiced firing their weapons out at sea. So, in other words, although modernity has enabled weapons to become louder and more powerful, nothing has fundamentally changed.

LINES 13-16

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

In this section, God gets pretty cynical. Following the colon in line 12, he elaborates on how "The world is as it used to be." The world is the same because countries are still trying to find ways make to deadlier weapons, "striving strong to make / Red war yet redder." This is a use of polyptoton, where "Red" is repeated in two different forms to heighten its intensity. In turn, "Red" is also an example of synecdoche, in which "Red" stands in for blood (since it's the color of blood), which in turn stands in for the violence of war. Here, God poetically emphasizes two points. One, that violence has always been a part of human history. Two, that throughout history humans have worked to become better at killing.

Next, God employs a cliché to cynically comment on this history, saying that "nations" are "Mad as hatters." This idiomatic phrase refers to a historical reality. Hatters (people who made hats) would use mercury in the production of hats, eventually leading to mercury poisoning, which causes people to go mad (i.e., insane). So, on a contextual level, this phrase draws out how technology (in this case, the chemicals used in the hat production) can be a harmful thing, making the world *more* crazy, rather than less.

On a tonal level, the use of cliché further accentuates the everyday quality of God's speech. Rather than employing eloquent, poetic, and original language, God just recycles old human sayings. Although God is supposed to be the creator of the universe, his language suggests he has dwindled in power. Rather than using *creative* language, God is *derivative*, limited. The poem's depiction of God thus suggests a severe doubt in his power—perhaps even doubt in his existence.

Asserting the madness of "nations," God says, "They do no more for Christés sake / Than you who are helpless in such matters." "Christés" is just an archaic and poetic (even comically poetic) way of referring to Jesus Christ. In other words, God is saying that the powerful people of world do nothing promote Christian values, while common people—even if they wanted to promote such values—are powerless to do so. In God's opinion, Christianity has failed to transform the world. In the Old Testament, the first part of the bible, God often violently punished people for failing to adhere to religious values. Yet here there's a sense that such punishment would be futile and redundant. After all, humans themselves have only grown more violent. Every decade, a more violent war than the last breaks out. In a way, it's as if humans are already punishing themselves.

LINES 17-20

> *"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....*

In the fifth stanza, God continues a cynical line of thought about the human world. Speaking about the leaders of European nations, God says that it's a good thing that it's not the apocalypse. According to the bible, during the apocalypse, God will separate the sinners from the virtuous and send the sinners to hell. Since national leaders have been creating war and doing nothing to promote Christian values, they would go to Hell. As such, they're lucky that it's not the apocalypse after all.

God uses some vivid language to express this point. First, God says, "That this is not the judgment-hour / For some of them's a blessed thing." The phrase "blessed thing" means "lucky" or "fortunate." Yet it's ironic that God uses this phrase, because God is the one that grants *actual* blessings. Here, though, God acts like this "blessed thing" is an accident. National leaders haven't been blessed, they're just lucky that God hasn't ended the world.

Then, God says, "For if it were [Judgment Day] they'd have to

scour / Hell's floor for so much threatening..." The word "scour" means to clean a surface by scrubbing it with a harsh soap or sponge. God imagines the ultimate damnation as having to clean the floors in Hell. In comparison to the horrific tortures that Christianity has traditionally associated with Hell, this one is comically tame. At the same time, it again represents a colloquial and everyday use of language. It's the kind of thing a parent in rural England might threaten their misbehaving child with. God seems less like the creator of the universe and more like some mildly influential member of the local community.

The poem continues in its rhymed quatrains of iambic tetrameter (four feet in a da-DUM rhythm). It employs a notable rhyme between lines 18 and 20: "blessed thing" with "threatening." The word "blessed" should be pronounced with two syllables. As a result, it has the same stress pattern and vowel sounds (/e/ and /ee/) as "threatening":

a bless | ed thing

And:

much threa | tening

Multi-syllable rhymes have a very pronounced effect on poems, especially in relatively short lines. Here, it helps emphasize the point the speaker is making (that national leaders will go to Hell) while accentuating the meter and the comic energy of God's diction. It helps signal to the reader that this is a bleakly funny caricature of God.

LINES 21-24

"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)."

The sixth stanza is God's most cynical. It's where he drops all pretenses of being serious, eloquent, and all powerful. Instead, he merely laughs at the plight of humans: "Ha, ha." This is a grotesque moment. For one, the onomatopoeia "Ha, ha" is rarely used in poems, or even in fiction, because it has an awkward quality to it. Something is lost when people try to write down the sound of laughter, especially amid language that is otherwise very literary and composed. It comes off as artificial.

Here, though, that effect is intended. It captures the experience of hearing God laugh. After all, for all the positive qualities Christianity attributes to God, humor usually isn't one of them. One possible reason for this is that God created the world and cares for everything in it—so, what is there for him to laugh at? Here, though, he's laughing at sending people to Hell! If there ever was a good example of the phrase *Never meet your heroes*, this would be it.

God's also laughing at what he's about to say: "It will be warmer when / I blow the trumpet." Now God seems to be laughing at the prospect of the apocalypse, "blow[ing] the trumpet" and sending the world up in flames. Of course, he drastically understates these flames, saying the world will be "warmer." The parenthetical that follows this statement is strange and even more disappointing:

I blow the trumpet (if indeed
I ever do; for you are men,
And rest eternal sorely need).

God employs aporia here, expressing doubt that he'll ever "blow the trumpet."

This doubt can be read on several levels. For one, it suggests that God may never choose to end human suffering and rather let it continue forever—perhaps out of indifference. Or, God may be hinting that he doesn't even have the power to end the world, that he's not as powerful as humans thought. Finally, this can be read as doubt in God's existence in general—that the "God" depicted here is only a fictional character with no real power besides a bad attitude.

God says that humans "rest eternal sorely need." In other words, regular people sure would appreciate the apocalypse, because they would finally get a reprieve from all the suffering of the world. So, God knows that people need to be helped, but he's in no hurry to help them. This sentiment ends God's monologue. No assurances, no sense of sympathy beyond a laughing acknowledgment of human suffering. Imagine being woken from the slumber of death only to find the world has gotten more violent and that God is the equivalent of a cynical middle manager. A bitter experience indeed.

LINES 25-28

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!"

Now that God has finished explaining the situation to them, the dead lie back down in their coffins. Before they go back to sleep, or whatever it is corpses do as they lie in the ground, the dead commiserate. They reevaluate their existences in light of what God has said.

First off, one of them thinks about the violence of the world:

[...] "I wonder,
Will the world ever saner be,"
Said one, "than when He sent us under
In our indifferent century!"

In other words, *Will people ever see the light? Or will the world always be as violent as it was when we died, way back then?* The

state of the world seems to imply an answer to this question: No. Things only get crazier. World War I, which was just about to break out when this poem was written, would see the use of poisonous mustard gas, trench warfare, and deadly airplane battles.

One word in particular diagnoses the source of this insanity: "indifferent." That is, national leaders are willing to let countless civilians and young soldiers die because these leaders are "indifferent" to their deaths. They just don't care. Of course, indifference is not a very a Christian attitude. Christians are supposed to feel sympathy and pity for other people's suffering, to provide charity and do good deeds. Again, the poem leaves the reader with a pretty bleak conclusion: humanity isn't getting more ethical any time soon, and Christianity isn't going to do a whole lot to make it happen.

This line also emphasizes the wide scope of the poem. Although the poem on one hand depicts humble, common people, on the other hand it suggests the vastness of the history; these humble people died over a century ago. So while it provides a pretty cynical forecast for the immediate future, the poem also asks the reader to think about human affairs on a larger scale: centuries.

LINES 29-32

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."

In the second-to-last stanza, the poem gets more specific about the dead. First it says, "many a skeleton shook his head." For one, this description suggests that all the dead people who have been talking are skeletons. They've been dead a long time. Furthermore, a skeleton shaking its head is both a spooky image and a cartoonish one.

The image suggests the medieval genre of visual called *danse macabre*, or "dance of death," which depicts skeletons dancing on their way to the grave. Such artworks are meant to represent the universality of death. In "Channel Firing," these moving skeletons recall this old tradition of imagery while also modifying it. While in the traditional *danse macabre* skeletons have an unsettling joyfulness or energy, here they are weary and disappointed. They all lie around in their coffins shaking their heads, going *tsk tsk* at the world. Medieval artists lived a society that fervently believed in God; they represented death as a dynamic force in a world that God would eventually destroy. Here, however, death seems almost like an accident, just one more example of the brutality of a world that has spiraled out of God's control.

One skeleton seems to have come to similar conclusion. This is Parson Thirdly, a dead country priest, a character invented by the poem. After listening to God, the Parson regrets joining the clergy and devoting his life to God. Instead, he wishes he had spent life enjoying himself: hanging out in the local pub smoking tobacco and drinking beer. Presumably, the Parson joined the church because he believed in Christian values and an afterlife. Yet now that he's actually heard from God, he thinks that such a life was a waste. It's like the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when it turns out the "Wizard" is actually just a "man behind the curtain" with no actual magical powers.

The meter of lines 30 and 32 capture the gist of the Parson's feelings. Line 30 follows a perfect iambic tetrameter (four feet in a da-DUM rhythm):

"In**stead** | of **prea**- | ching **for**- | ty **year**,"

The regular meter captures the drudgery of preaching for forty years without a break. Meanwhile, line 32 adds a slight variation:

"I **wish** | I had **stuck** | to **pipes** | and **beer**."

It employs an anapest (da-da-DUM) in its second foot, adding a little energy to the line's meter, almost as if it's a traditional drinking song, a folk song celebrating getting drunk at the pub.

Additionally, the phrase "forty year" (i.e., forty years) is a subtle colloquialism. By dropping the /s/ at the end of "years," the poem captures a particular English country dialect. Hardy's early career was devoted to writing novels that often included rural characters. So, this phrase can be seen as a deliberate moment of true-to-life speech, making these grumpy skeleton seems *real*, if also humorous.

LINES 33-36

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

The previous stanza represented an ordinary person's individual feelings about Christianity and world events. It represented these things in terms of one person's life. This final stanza, however, zooms out drastically, propelling the reader through time and space.

In lines 35 and 36, the poem alludes to three distinct historical or fictitious places. Stourton Tower, also known as King Alfred's Tower, is in the county of Somerset in southern England. It was built in the 1700s to commemorate the end of the Seven Years' War with France. Camelot was the fictitious capital in medieval King Arthur legends. The Arthurian romances, or adventure stories, are most likely fictions. Even so, people have often tried to find a real basis for the legends and have suggested possible locations all over England for a real Camelot—including in the south of England. Finally, Stonehenge is the famous neolithic stone monument in Wiltshire, another county in South England. It was probably constructed between 3000 and 2000 BCE.

Two things immediately stand out, then, about this succession of places. First, these places are all clustered in the South, near the English Channel but still pretty far inland. This general area was also where Hardy set all of his novels. This creates a feeling of connection to this geographic area, both its history and its realities of daily life. Furthermore, the English Channel is England's closest sea route to mainland Europe, and thus represents England's military entanglements with its European neighbors. In other words, those who live in this area of England are at the forefront of England's life as a military power. This is exemplified by the events of the poem, in which the inhabitants of this area can hear the navy preparing for war.

The second thing that stands out here is that this list of places extends backwards in time. Stourton Tower was built in the 1700s, Camelot was a fictitious medieval city that first appeared in writing in the 1100s, and Stonehenge was built several thousand years ago. So, as the "roaring" guns' sound extends further inland, it also seems to pierce through time. This creates the impression that the guns are roaring through history. Put another way, human history has always been filled with the sound of violence. The speaker says "the guns disturbed the hour," and there's a sense in which this is an eternal hour. As if this feeling of being startled awake in the middle of the night by the sounds of violence is a ceaseless fact of human existence. The description of Stonehenge as "starlit" captures this eternal fact, as the stars hanging in the sky symbolize the undying facts of existence.

The speaker also personifies the guns once again:

> Again the guns disturbed the hour,
> Roaring their readiness to avenge,

In the first stanza, the guns acted "unawares"; now, they have a "readiness to avenge." Now they have a distinct sense of purpose, to seek revenge. What are they seeking revenge for? That's left purposely unanswered. It's whatever the excuse of war this time is. By leaving this implicit question unanswered, then, the poem suggest that this need to "avenge" is an illusion concocted by the those in power.

Line 34 uses metrical stress to highlight the violence of the guns:

> Roaring | their read- | iness to | avenge,

The speaker uses a trochee (DUM-da) instead of an iamb in this first foot. By leading with a stressed syllable, the poem captures the forceful violence of the guns. A threat of impending war that, at the end of the poem, seems like it will never go away.

SYMBOLS

GREAT GUNS

The most prominent symbol in the poem is the "great guns," the powerful artillery canons on warships. The guns symbolize how modern technology has led to increasingly brutal and unthinking forms of war. The adjective "great" is thus ironic: although the guns are "great" in the sense of powerful, they are not "great" for humankind; they're terrible.

The poem immediately shows why the guns aren't great. The noise alone from them is enough to shatter church windows, startle all the country animals, and wake the dead. While national leaders may argue that war is necessary, it clearly only has detrimental effects on the lives of everyday people. Even God, who has an omniscient view of the world, thinks the guns are awful, and that those who use them are "Mad as hatters."

Although such powerful guns are made possible by modern advances in technology, at the same time they represent an age-old trend: war and the search for more powerful forms of violence. In the last stanza, the sounds of the guns goes "roaring" not only deep into England, but also deep into history, reaching even to Stonehenge, which was built several thousand years ago. In other words, "great guns" represent the violence that has pervaded human history.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "great guns"
- **Line 10:** "gunnery practice"
- **Line 33:** "the guns"

THE TRUMPET

The trumpet alludes to the seven trumpets of the apocalypse, heralding "Judgement-day," when God decides who gets into Heaven and who goes to Hell. More broadly, the trumpet in the poem symbolizes the Christian belief in God's omnipotence, or unlimited power over the world. Implicit in this belief, then, is that no human violence can come close to what God is capable of—and which humans will witness during the apocalypse.

Of course, the poem purposefully treats this symbol ironically. It's definitively *not* the apocalypse in the poem, but only "gunnery practice." God himself chimes in and confirms that it's not the apocalypse. He even casts doubt on whether such a day will ever come (perhaps because he doesn't have as much power as humans think). It's easy to begin thinking, then, that if there ever is an end of the world, it won't be brought on by God, but by humans.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 22:** "the trumpet"

STARS

The poem ends on the image of "starlit Stonehenge." The stars in this image can be read as symbolizing eternity. More specifically, they capture the place of violence throughout human history. As "the guns disturbed the hour, / Roaring their readiness to avenge," the reader gets the sense that isn't a temporary phenomenon. The "hour" that the guns disturb figuratively represents all those moments throughout history when human life has been disrupted by violence. Read this way, the "disturbed [...] hour" is as permanent as the stars.

As the sound of the guns passes over Stourton Tower (built in the 1700s) to Camelot (a city first written about in the 1100s) and finally to Stonehenge (built in 3000 to 2000 BCE), the poem seems to travel back in time. As it finally halts at the stones of Stonehenge, the stars hanging on the blackness of night seem to sketch out over a kind of void; the endlessness of time. If God can't be expected to intervene in human affairs (such as by bringing about the end of the world) then humanity is faced with a potentially infinite future. If modern technology continues to advance, and humans keep waging war, then "Red war" will continue to grow "yet redder" for all eternity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 36:** "starlit"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Although "Channel Firing" uses alliteration throughout, the device isn't always super noticeable. Sometimes, this is because repeating sounds are spread out subtly across the whole stanza, as with "While," "wakened," and "worms," in stanza 2, or "make," "Mad," and "more" in stanza 4. Other times, sounds repeat across quieter words that don't stand out too much, such as the /th/ sound in stanza 5 (both voiced and unvoiced), in words like "That," "this" and "thing."

There are some moments, however, where alliteration does make more of an impression, offering poetic emphasis on important images and phrases. For instance, the poem begins with alliteration on the important phrase "great guns." The /g/ alliteration draws attention to the guns, whose noise pervades the poem and is the whole reason for the conversation between God and the dead. Additionally, the alliteration adds a touch of irony. This is partly due to the artificiality of alliteration—it's not how people normally talk—signaling that there may also be something contrived about the very notion of "great guns." As the poem will go on to show, these guns are not so great; they're brute and foolish instruments of destruction.

The /g/ sound reappears in the third stanza in "glebe cow," "God," and "gunnery." Here, the /g/ triangulates three important elements in the poem. First, the "glebe cow," a parish cow, represents the helplessness and limited knowledge of individuals. "God," of course, plays an important role in the poem, revealing himself to be disappointingly limited and cynical, not the all-powerful benevolent deity he is imagined to be. And "gunnery" again reiterates the noise of the weapons. This trio of individuals–God–guns will thematically guide the poem.

In the last stanza, two instances of alliteration end the poem on a bleakly lyrical note. First, the /r/ sound repeats in "Roaring" and "readiness." The /r/ captures the "Roaring" sound of guns, once more returning the poem's focus to the loud guns. Then, /s/ and /t/ sounds repeat in "Stourton Tower" and "starlit Stonehenge." These sounds add some graceful musicality to the end of the poem. Whereas the middle stanzas have been ironic, lively, and bitter, this final stanza represents an abrupt change of tone. The poem grows much more serious and cosmic. The beauty of the phrase "starlit Stonehenge" has a kind of eternal mournfulness to it, as the reader considers how violence has played such a prominent role throughout human existence. The noticeable alliteration helps emphasize this.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "great," "guns"
- **Line 4:** "We," "was"
- **Line 5:** "While"
- **Line 6:** "howl," "wakened," "hounds"
- **Line 8:** "worms"
- **Line 9:** "glebe," "cow," "God," "called"
- **Line 10:** "gunnery"
- **Line 11:** "before," "went," "below"
- **Line 12:** "world," "be"
- **Line 13:** "striving," "strong," "make"
- **Line 14:** "Red," "redder," "Mad"
- **Line 15:** "more"
- **Line 16:** "who," "helpless," "matters"
- **Line 17:** "That," "this," "the"
- **Line 18:** "them's," "thing"
- **Line 19:** "they'd"
- **Line 20:** "floor for," "threatening"
- **Line 21:** "Ha," "ha," "warmer," "when"
- **Line 22:** "if," "indeed"
- **Line 25:** "we," "wonder"
- **Line 26:** "Will," "world," "saner"
- **Line 27:** "Said," "one," "when," "sent," "us," "under"
- **Line 28:** "In," "indifferent," "century"
- **Line 29:** "his head"

- **Line 30:** “preaching”
- **Line 31:** “Parson”
- **Line 32:** “pipes”
- **Line 34:** “Roaring,” “readiness”
- **Line 35:** “Stourton,” “Tower”
- **Line 36:** “starlit,” “Stonehenge”

ASSONANCE

The use of assonance in "Channel Firing" is pretty quiet. It may be interesting to consider that Hardy started out his writing career primarily as a novelist, and that some of this early emphasis on prose may come through in his poetry as well. Prose also downplays assonance in favor other qualities like cadence and varied syntax. That's not to say that assonance is absent from the poem; far from it. Rather, assonance lurks in the background, a soft guiding structure for the poem's sound.

Some of the most noticeable uses of assonance dovetail with the poem's use of rhyme. For instance, stanza two repeats the /ow/ sound in the words "howl" and "mouse," as well as the rhyme words "hounds" and "mounds." Because the rhyme words get a lot of emphasis, these other assonant words get an emphatic boost as well. All these words describe the reaction of various critters to the sound of guns. Overall, then, these emphasized /ow/ words craft an impression of the natural world that suffuses the churchyard.

A similar effect happens in the second-to-last stanza:

> And many a skeleton shook his head.
> “Instead of preaching forty year,”

Here, the end word "head" draws attention to the short /eh/ sound, which also appears in "many," "skeleton," and "Instead." Then, the long /ee/ sound appears in "preaching" and the end word "year." These sounds draw attention to this comic and sad moment. It's comic because the images of skeletons shaking their heads undermines the spookiness of skeletons, instead making them seem like everyday people. And it's sad because the skeletons are shaking their heads at God, who's really disappointed them.

Other moments are much quieter, like the phrase "God called" in line 9, "if indeed" in line 22, and "Hell's floor for," in line 20. These moments of assonance don't necessarily have been thematic meanings. Rather, they help keep the language lively and varied. They are part of the structure and unity of the poem.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “guns,” “unawares”
- **Line 2:** “all,” “coffins,” “lay”
- **Line 3:** “squares”
- **Line 4:** “was,” “Judgment,” “day”
- **Line 5:** “upright,” “drearisome”
- **Line 6:** “howl,” “hounds”
- **Line 7:** “mouse,” “fall,” “altar,” “crumb”
- **Line 8:** “drew,” “into,” “mounds”
- **Line 9:** “cow,” “God,” “called,” “No”
- **Line 10:** “sea”
- **Line 11:** “below”
- **Line 12:** “used to,” “be”
- **Line 13:** “nations,” “make”
- **Line 14:** “Red,” “yet,” “redder,” “Mad,” “as,” “hatters”
- **Line 15:** “They,” “more,” “for,” “sake”
- **Line 16:** “you,” “who,” “matters”
- **Line 17:** “this,” “is,” “hour”
- **Line 18:** “some,” “of,” “them’s,” “blessed,” “thing”
- **Line 19:** “if it,” “scour”
- **Line 20:** “floor,” “for,” “threatening”
- **Line 21:** “when”
- **Line 22:** “if,” “indeed”
- **Line 23:** “do,” “you,” “men”
- **Line 24:** “rest,” “sorely,” “need”
- **Line 25:** “again,” “wonder”
- **Line 26:** “be”
- **Line 27:** “Said,” “when,” “sent,” “us,” “under”
- **Line 28:** “In,” “indifferent,” “century”
- **Line 29:** “many,” “skeleton,” “head”
- **Line 30:** “Instead,” “preaching,” “forty,” “year”
- **Line 31:** “said”
- **Line 32:** “I,” “I,” “pipes,” “beer”
- **Line 34:** “readiness,” “avenge”

CONSONANCE

Consonance pervades "Channel Firing." It provides texture and unity to the poem, while not making the language overly lyrical. Because the poem has such a heavy dose of irony and black humor, it mostly avoids the beautiful vowel sounds of assonance in favor of the more toned-down cohesion of consonants.

For instance, the first two lines employ quiet consonance to emphasize the speaker's formal control of language:

> That night your great guns, unawares,
> Shook all our coffins as we lay,

Apart from the alliteration of "great guns," which has a somewhat ironic effect, the rest of the assonance creates a kind of background tension, a taut, high-strung structure that mirrors the disturbance the guns create.

Later in the poem, consonance helps speed the language up, as the dead begin to reconsider their place in the world:

> 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!"

Here, /w/, /n/, /d/, /l/, /r/, and /s/ sounds repeat throughout the stanza, interlocking like puzzle pieces. It's as if the dead are putting everything together, coming to a realization about the world. They are seeing that both God and human leaders are "indifferent."

A similar effect occurs in the next stanza, though slightly more muted:

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."

As /n/, /k/, /p/, /d/, /h/, /r/, /s/, and /t/ sounds trickle down the stanza, they capture how the skeletons keep thinking about existence, expanding on the conclusions of the previous stanza. One of them—Parson Thirdly—even says he now wishes he hadn't devoted his life to God. He wishes he'd "stuck to pipes and beer."

As these examples show, consonance adds a subtle dynamic structure to the stanzas of the poem, helping them capture this strange scene of guns, skeletons, and God.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "That," "night," "your," "great," "guns," "unawares"
- **Line 2:** "Shook," "all," "coffins," "lay"
- **Line 3:** "broke," "chancel," "window," "squares"
- **Line 4:** "We," "thought," "was," "the"
- **Line 5:** "upright"
- **Line 6:** "Arose," "howl," "wakened," "hounds"
- **Line 7:** "mouse," "let," "fall," "altar," "crumb"
- **Line 8:** "worms," "drew," "into," "mounds"
- **Line 9:** "glebe," "cow," "drooled," "Till," "God," "called," "No"
- **Line 10:** "It's," "gunnery," "practice," "out," "at," "sea"
- **Line 11:** "Just," "as," "before," "went," "below"
- **Line 12:** "world," "is," "as," "be"
- **Line 13:** "striving," "strong," "make"
- **Line 14:** "Red," "war," "redder," "Mad," "hatters"
- **Line 15:** "more," "Christés," "sake"
- **Line 16:** "helpless," "such," "matters"
- **Line 17:** "That," "this," "is"
- **Line 18:** "some," "them's," "blessed," "thing"
- **Line 19:** "For," "were," "scour"
- **Line 20:** "floor," "for," "threatening"
- **Line 21:** "will," "warmer," "when"
- **Line 22:** "blow"
- **Line 23:** "ever," "for," "men"
- **Line 24:** "And," "rest," "eternal," "sorely," "need"
- **Line 25:** "down," "we," "again," "wonder"
- **Line 26:** "Will," "world," "ever," "saner"
- **Line 27:** "Said," "one," "than," "when," "sent," "us," "under"
- **Line 28:** "In," "our," "indifferent," "century"
- **Line 29:** "And," "many," "skeleton," "shook," "his," "head"
- **Line 30:** "preaching," "forty," "year"
- **Line 31:** "neighbour," "Parson," "Thirdly," "said"
- **Line 32:** "stuck," "to," "pipes"
- **Line 33:** "Again," "guns," "disturbed," "hour"
- **Line 34:** "Roaring," "their," "readiness"
- **Line 35:** "far," "Stourton," "Tower"
- **Line 36:** "And," "Camelot," "and," "starlit," "Stonehenge"

PERSONIFICATION

At the beginning and end of the poem, the speaker personifies the "great guns." In line 1, the speaker describes them as "unawares"—that is, the guns are like people who don't understand the consequences of their own actions. And in lines 33-34, "the guns disturbed the hour, / Roaring their readiness to avenge." Here, the guns are seen as more malicious, calling out their desire to seek revenge for something.

In the first instance of personification, the word "unawares" draws attention to the irony of the phrase "great guns." On its own, "great guns" suggests not only power but also goodness or glory. It might make readers feel patriotically towards war. However, personifying the guns adds a blackly humorous dimension to them, and suggesting that they are "unawares"—that they don't know what they're doing—totally undercuts any feeling of patriotism.

At the end of the poem, the black humor of the first line has disappeared. Now the guns seem to know what they're doing. They are "read[y] to avenge." That is, the terrible noise they're making is like a declaration of war, a terrifying howl declaring their intent to kill. The idea of guns that have a bloodthirsty desire to kill, filling the air with the noise of war, is a pretty scary one. It ends the poem on a note cosmic terror or pessimism. It also raises the question of what exactly there is to "avenge." By leaving this unspecified, the speaker seems to imply that there isn't actually anything to avenge. Instead, revenge is an excuse leaders make when they want to declare war.

Ending in this manner also prevents the reader from letting national leaders off the hook. At the beginning, describing the guns as "unawares" might suggest that leaders shouldn't be held guilty for all the civilian death and damage caused by war. After all, they're not aware that such effects will occur. By ending with personification that emphasizes the malicious intents of the guns, however, the poem suggests that the leaders *are* guilty. If they don't think about all the damage the war will cause, that's because they are so focused on waging "Red war" at any cost. They're to let innocent people die in the name of war.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "great guns, unawares,"
- **Lines 33-34:** "Again the guns disturbed the hour, / Roaring their readiness to avenge,"

APORIA

Aporia is when a speaker expresses doubt about what they are saying. In "Channel Firing," this occurs when God discusses "Judgment-day," or the apocalypse. God expresses doubt or uncertainty as to whether he'll ever bring about the apocalypse.

This moment of doubt occurs in lines 21-23:

> "Ha, ha. It will be warmer when
> I blow the trumpet (if indeed
> I ever do; [...]

In other words, *Things will really heat up when I end the world—if I ever end it*. This is a particularly strange, disturbing, and bleakly humorous instance of aporia. For one thing, God is not traditionally imagined as being capable of doubt. After all, he is supposed to be all-knowing and all-powerful. Christian theologians have usually supposed God to exist outside of time, grasping the entirety of world history at once. So, the suggestion here that God *doesn't* actually know the future flies against traditional religious thought.

Furthermore, this isn't just doubt about what's going to happen, it's God's doubt about what *he himself* is going to do. God seems to be unsure about his own intentions. Not only, then, does the poem cast doubt on God's power, it also wonders if God is true to his word. Will he end the world as he promised in the Book of Revelation? Does he actually care about humans at all? The doubt raised in this stanza is matched by a glib, cynical tone. There's a sense that God has perhaps given up on the world.

The aporia express in this stanza can be extrapolated to the atmosphere of doubt that pervades the whole poem. The character "God" in this poem can be read as a mouthpiece for the poem's doubt in God's very existence. In other words, the poem may be depicting God in this cheeky, cynical manner precisely *because* it's not entirely sure God exists in the first place. At the very least, the poem is extremely skeptical of the promises of religion—a theme that runs throughout the poem, and which is also expressed succinctly by this instance of aporia.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-23:** "It will be warmer when / I blow the trumpet (if indeed / I ever do;"

CAESURA

While not used excessively in the poem, caesura plays a role in varying the poem's rhythm and adding emphasis to certain moments.

One early instance, at the start of stanza 2, captures how the poem uses caesura to enhance its effects:

> We thought it was the Judgment-day
> and sat upright. While drearisome

Here, caesura combines with enjambment. The sentence begun in stanza 1 wraps around into stanza 2, coming to a sudden halt at the period in the middle of the line. This sudden halt mimics what the sentence describes, which is how the dead are startled awake by the sound of gunfire and sit bolt upright. The jamming stop of the sentence captures the feeling of being startled awake.

Stanzas 3, 4, 6, and 7 all also have sentences that end in the middle of the line. On a broad stylistic level, this keeps the poem varied and lively. Just as prose writers will often vary sentence length to create a feeling of rhythm and novelty, poets often vary where sentences stop within stanzas.

In stanza 6, four caesurae, three lines in a row, create a sort of tortuousness in God's speech:

> "Ha, ha. It will be warmer when
> I blow the trumpet (if indeed
> I ever do; for you are men,

That is, there's a stop-start rhythm to this stanza, an awkwardness. On one level, this is the rhythm of uncertainty, capturing the aporia, or doubt, that God expresses. More generally, this awkwardness reflects the poem's general distrust of God—there's something cynical and off-putting about his voice in the poem, and the rhythm created by the caesurae reflects that.

In the last line of the poem, a caesura adds to the sudden somber lyrical quality of the line: "And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge." Here, the comma adds a slowly wafting beat to the line. This new rhythm matches the imagery of the poem, as it slows down and pans out over time and space (just like a scene in a film where the camera turns away from the action to look out over a broader landscape).

So, although the poem doesn't employ caesura constantly, it makes them count when it does. They contribute to the feel of the poem's language and help it convey different ideas, tones, and images.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "guns, unawares"

- **Line 5:** "upright. While"
- **Line 9:** "drooled. Till"
- **Line 14:** "redder. Mad"
- **Line 21:** "Ha, ha. It"
- **Line 22:** "trumpet (if"
- **Line 23:** "do; for"
- **Line 25:** "again. "I"
- **Line 27:** "one, "than"
- **Line 36:** "Camelot, and"

ENJAMBMENT

"Channel Firing" moves in and out of enjambment. Instances of enjambment convey much of the poem's tension, disappointment, and frustration, as meaning is withheld until the following line. Take line 4, which is enjambed across a stanza break:

> We thought it was the Judgment-day
> And sat upright. While drearisome
> Arose the howl of wakened hounds:

Were there punctuation at the end of line 4, the line would make sense; it is a complete sentence. The enjambment pushes the reader quickly across the white space of the stanza break, however, signaling that there is more to this assumption that "it was the Judgment-day." The reader is pulled forward through these lines in a way that subtly evokes the dead being effectively pulled out of their graves by the sound of gunfire, curious to find out what happens next.

Enjambment can also create a rather tumbling feeling, almost like dominoes knocking each other over, as one line bumps into the next in the process of creating the sentence's meaning. As an example, take God's speech:

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

Here, this series of enjambments captures some of God's anger or bitterness towards national leaders who clearly don't follow the rules laid out by Christianity. The enjambment of these lines pulls the reader down the page quickly and smoothly and, in doing so, lends God's speech an air of inevitability.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "Judgment-day / And"
- **Lines 5-6:** "drearisome / Arose"
- **Lines 13-14:** "make / Red"
- **Lines 14-15:** "hatters / They"
- **Lines 15-16:** "sake / Than"
- **Lines 17-18:** " judgment-hour / For"
- **Lines 19-20:** "scour / Hell's"
- **Lines 21-22:** "when / I"
- **Lines 22-23:** "indeed / I"
- **Lines 27-28:** "under / In"

END-STOPPED LINE

As often as the poem employs enjambment, it also uses end-stopped lines. These moments, combined with enjambment, contribute to the poem's rhythm. Many of the end-stops are commas, colons, or semi-colons, creating temporary resting points as the poem's longish sentences unfold over several lines.

While enjambment creates tension and captures the poem's overall sense of uncertainty, end-stops keep the form in check. They help emphasize the poem's rhyme and meter. Together with these devices, end-stops in turn draw attention to the poem's heavy dose of irony and black humor. In a poem about the violent disorder of the human world and powerlessness of God, it's cheeky to then employ a consistent rhyme scheme and steady meter. In other words, the well-ordered poem contrasts with the uncertainty of the world.

In the third stanza, the semi-colons in lines 9 and 11, and a colon in line 12, create a sense of linguistic logic that mocks the lack of logic in the world:

> [...] 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:

Semi-colons are often used in prose to signal logical connections and related thoughts. Because they can usually be replaced with periods, they're not strictly necessary; rather, they're a stylistic choice that signals a more advanced level of argumentation. Here, they subtly add to the poem's irony. God *should* have a very sophisticated knowledge and command of the world, but as the poem goes on that's increasingly seen not to be the case.

Another expressive use of punctuation as end-stop happens in line 20:

> For if it were they'd have to scour
> Hell's floor for so much threatening....

This use of ellipsis, the series of periods after "threatening," acts almost like a punch line. It signals that God is making a kind of joke, trailing off in what he considers to be a comic manner. *Good thing for them it's not the end of world, otherwise they'd be going to HELL!* God jokes. "Ha, ha." Of course, it's not quite so

funny for those who are stuck on earth as violence rages.

As these examples show, end-stops highlights the formal qualities of the poem while also adding to the poem's moments of irony.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "unawares,"
- **Line 2:** "lay,"
- **Line 3:** "window-squares,"
- **Line 6:** "hounds:"
- **Line 7:** "altar-crumb,"
- **Line 8:** "mounds,"
- **Line 9:** ""No;"
- **Line 10:** "sea"
- **Line 11:** "below;"
- **Line 12:** "be:"
- **Line 16:** "matters."
- **Line 18:** "thing,"
- **Line 20:** "threatening...."
- **Line 23:** "men,"
- **Line 24:** "need).""
- **Line 25:** "wonder,"
- **Line 26:** " be,""
- **Line 28:** "century!""
- **Line 29:** "head," "."
- **Line 30:** "year,""
- **Line 31:** "said,"
- **Line 32:** "beer.""
- **Line 33:** "hour,"
- **Line 34:** "avenge,"
- **Line 35:** "Tower,"
- **Line 36:** "Stonehenge."

CLICHÉ

The single use of cliché in the poem happens in line 14: "Mad as hatters." This simile comes from the fact that historically hatters—people who made hats—used mercury in the production of hats. As a result, they often got mercury poisoning and went *mad*, or insane. Here, God is saying that national leaders' desire for war is insane.

It's often unusual to encounter clichés in poetry—especially relatively short poems such as this one—because poems are very self-conscious in their use of language. Much of the time, poems want to employ the most original language possible. As a result, poets may try to avoid tired old clichés. Hardy, however, pursues a slightly different strategy in the poem. In part this can be tied to the fact that he began his career as a novelist rather than a poet. Since novelists are often interested in how people speak, they'll use clichés in dialogue if that seem like what the character would actually say. The use of cliché in this poem seems to stem from a similar impulse: this is how someone might actually speak.

Of course, this isn't just someone speaking. It's *God*. Normal people fall back on clichés in everyday conversation because it can be hard to come up with something original at the spur of the moment. God, however, is all powerful. The Bible often imagines him to speak very eloquently and poetically. The fact that here he *doesn't* display that power, that he instead relies on old human idioms, signals that he's not exactly all-powerful. As the poem suggests throughout, his divine abilities are severely limited.

It's also interesting to note that this cliché comes after a particularly poetic turn of phrase: the polyptoton of "Red war redder." So, it's not necessarily that God can't speak eloquently. Rather, he can't keep it up for very long. His swing from poetic eloquence to lame cliché is all too human—decidedly not Godlike.

Where Cliché appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "Mad as hatters"

IRONY

Two instances of irony at the beginning of "Channel Firing" set the tone for the rest of the poem. More specifically, these are both instances of dramatic irony, when the reader knows more about a situation than a character does. First, the "great guns" are personified as "unawares." Then, the dead wake thinking its "Judgment-day," when it's really just the noise of gunfire.

This first moment of irony is a super straightforward example of dramatic irony, in that the poem clearly states that the guns are "unaware[]" of the consequences of their actions. Here, personification turns the guns into characters. These noisy characters spur the whole poem into being: they're responsible for the misunderstanding that wakes the dead and causes God to clarify things.

Beyond this misunderstanding, the irony of the first phrase can also be understood on the level of verbal irony—that is, sarcasm. Although the speaker describes the guns as "great," they're clearly not actually great, at least not in any positive sense. They may be great in that they are powerful, but they certainly have none of the greatness associated with people or things that have benefited the world in some way. This major dose of skepticism and sarcasm about modern war, and about modern nations more generally, informs the rest of the poem. A tongue-in-cheek attitude pervades the poem, especially its representation of God. So, this initial moment of sarcasm can be read as throwing the entire poem in a sarcastic light.

The second moment of irony occurs at the end of the first stanza: "We thought it was the Judgment-day / / And sat upright." In this instance of dramatic irony, the dead are awoken by what they think is the sound of the apocalypse, when in reality it's just the sound of gunfire. This is a form of bleak humor, and the cynical, joking tone that God adopts confirms

this humor. The poem as whole takes such giant concerns as the history of violence, the fate of humanity, the end of the world, and the existence of God, and treats them satirically. The initial moment of misunderstanding kicks off that treatment. It downplays the power of God, who can be upstaged by human machines.

At the same time, it emphasizes the foolishness of humans, who seem to be on the brink of bringing about their own destruction. This latter point adds to the irony of the fifth stanza, in which God declares that were it *actually* Judgment Day, those firing these guns and waging war would end up scrubbing the floors of Hell. This is ironic because war is often glorified as a noble and patriotic cause; here, though, God asserts that it is worthy of eternal damnation.

The poem's attitude towards God can also be considered ironic. Although the poem depicts God *as if* he's real, it also uses that depiction to cast doubt on such reality. By having God use clichés, aporia, and cynical jokes, the poem depicts God in a very different light than the Bible does. He seems more like a fictional character than a divine entity. This can be considered irony because the poem *seems* to be doing one thing (depicting God as if he is real) while it may actually be doing another (suggesting that he's only a fictional character). Throughout the poem, then, irony frames the different themes, characters, and occurrences.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "your great guns, unawares,"
- **Lines 4-5:** "We thought it was the Judgment-day / And sat upright."
- **Lines 17-20:** ""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...."

UNDERSTATEMENT

In "Channel Firing," God uses understatement as part of his cynical way of speaking. First he says that the damned leaders of warmongering nations will have to "scour," or clean, "Hell's floor," a drastic understatement of the tortures traditionally associated with Hell. Then he says "it will be warmer" during the apocalypse—massively understating the scale and strangeness of destruction the Bible promises at the end of the world.

In this first example, "scour[ing]" the floor refers to the act of vigorously scrubbing a floor with a rough sponge and strong soap. This is the kind of punishment one might assign to a child, or to someone working in a kitchen or on a ship, etc. It's not necessarily the sort of thing that adequately punishes a serious crime. Christianity usually imagines Hell as full of tortures that are so much worse than having to clean the floor—flames, whips, instruments of torture, psychological torments, etc.

On one level, this undermines the authority of national leaders. By comparing their offenses to those of a child or an unruly worker, God suggests these leaders aren't such grand figures. They're actually rather pitiful. Second, this comparison also suggests that God doesn't have much sympathy for human suffering. Usually Christianity imagines God as being sad about all the souls who are sent to Hell. Here, it seems like God doesn't think it's such a big deal. As far as he's concerned, Hell is just a bunch of naughty people cleaning the floor. This reflects God seeming attitude towards earthly suffering. Although he knows it's happening, he's not very moved to do anything about it.

Then, God says, "It will be warmer when / I blow the trumpet." The phrase "blow the trumpet" alludes to the seven trumpets that will herald the apocalypse. Of course, the apocalypse is usually imagined as full of flames and bizarre occurrences, not just the temperature getting a little "warmer." Again, this understatement suggests that God doesn't take things as seriously as people like to imagine he does. To him, in this poem, the apocalypse is a joke. It's unclear whether he'll even make it happen. And even if he does, it seems he won't take all the suffering it causes that seriously.

Where Understatement appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "they'd have to scour / Hell's floor"
- **Lines 21-22:** "It will be warmer when / I blow the trumpet"

ALLUSION

"Channel Firing" makes biblical, historical, and literary allusions. The majority of the poem is informed by an allusion to Christianity's conception of the end of the world, so let's begin with that.

In the first stanza, the poem refers to "Judgment-day," a part of the apocalypse, or Christian end of the world. Often, Judgment Day is also a shorthand way for referring to the apocalypse as a whole. In Christian theology, at the end of the world the souls of the dead are reunited with their bodies in a massive resurrection. Then, God issues judgments on each person, deciding who goes to Heaven and who goes to Hell. This is technically Judgment Day itself. More broadly, though, the Bible tells of many strange and horrific happenings during the end of the world—such as a fiery mountain that turns the sea to blood, poisoned water, and demonic torture.

Each major happening is preceded by one of the seven trumpets of the apocalypse. Angels blow these trumpets, heralding the next phase of the end of the world. This is what's alluded to in line 22 when God questions whether he will ever "blow the trumpet." To "blow the trumpet" is to start the apocalypse. In the poem, the dead mistake the sound of gunfire for this divine trumpet and all the cataclysmic events that shall

follow it. This is part of the poem's main point: the development of human warfare has reached such a stage that it's beginning to be indiscernible from the wrath of God.

Next, at the end of the poem, the speaker references three different places, each of which alludes to a certain time period. Stourton Tower, otherwise known as King Alfred's Tower, was built in the 1700s in the South of England. It commemorates the end of the Seven Years War between England and France. The Seven Years War was an incredibly bloody conflict that also drew in Prussia, Austria, and Russia, among other countries. It could be considered a world war, long before World War I happened.

Camelot refers to the mythical capital of Kind Arthur's court, as depicted in the King Arthur legends which date back in writing as far as the 12th century. Throughout the Middle Ages, Europeans were enthralled by the *romances*, or adventure stories, of the chivalrous Arthur and his knights. These legends capture a distinctly medieval attitude towards violence as part of a larger code of masculine honor. Additionally, although Camelot has never been proved to exist, many people have tried to propose real locations for it, including in the South of England as well. In more modern times, the legend of Arthur has also figured into England's national identity, becoming a part of the cultural fabric that was part of England's rise as a global military power.

Finally, Stonehenge is neolithic stone monument that was built sometime between 3000 and 2000 BCE. No one knows what it was used for or how it was built, though most people assume it was the site of rituals of one kind or another. It was possibly a burial ground as well as a site for healing, and was possibly built to coordinate with astronomical measurements. Whatever the use, Stonehenge's appearance at the end of the poem represents a reach for back into human history. The sound of the guns fills the air around the monuments, suggesting that violence has been present throughout humanity's existence. At the same time, the monument gestures towards a non-Christian era and, perhaps, an interest in healing rather than violence. Additionally, its possible use as a burial ground mirrors the church's graveyard, reminding the reader that death is an ever-present fact of life.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “the Judgment-day”
- **Line 17:** “the judgment-hour”
- **Line 22:** “I blow the trumpet”
- **Line 35:** “Stourton Tower”
- **Line 36:** “Camelot,” “Stonehenge”

REPETITION

There are a few moments of repetition in the poem. The first is an example of anaphora, with the repetition of "The" at the start of lines 7, 8, and 9. These lines also feature parallelism, each introducing a creature on the scene ("The mouse," "The worms," "The glebe cow") and then describing how that creature reacts to the sound of the guns (by dropping crumbs, wriggling back into the dirt, and drooling, respectively):

> **The** mouse let fall the altar-crumb,
> **The** worms drew back into the mounds,
> **The** glebe cow drooled. [...]

The anaphora helps set the scene, creating a swift catalog of all the reactions to the gunfire. The mice are startled, the worms frightened, and the cow, rather comically, simply drools, with no appreciation of what's going on.

Polyptoton then occurs in the phrase "to make / **Red** war yet **redder**." Here, God repeats the same root word, "Red," in the form "redder." "Red," in turn, is a synecdoche for blood (i.e., it stands in for blood), which in turn stands in for violence. Using all these devices, God is saying that humans keep developing technology that will make war bloodier, more violent.

On one level, this is just an example of the poem keeping its language vivid and lively. It's an instance of poetic eloquence. Interestingly, God immediately follows up this eloquence with a simile that is also a cliché: "Mad as hatters" (i.e., crazy). Clichés are the opposite of poetic inventiveness, since they're recycled bits of language that can be used without much thought. Line 14, then, offers a marked variation in each of its two halves. It's almost as if God runs out of poetic steam after coming up with polyptoton. As a result, this variety has a very human feel to it, capturing both the power of human creativity, as well as the limits of that creativity. God, however, is *not* supposed to experience such human limits.

Taken on its own, then, this polytpton offers a pithy and memorable criticism of the development of modern military technology. Considered in its context within the poem, it also contributes to God's tone and voice, capturing the poem's skeptical attitude towards him.

Finally, there is a brief instance of polysyndeton in the poem's final line:

> **And** Camelot, **and** starlit Stonehenge.

The repetition of "and" here draws out the phrase, in turn emphasizing just how far-reaching this sound of gunfire is (and metaphorically, how war has been with humanity for all of its existence).

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “The”
- **Line 8:** “The”
- **Line 9:** “The”

- **Line 14:** "Red war yet redder"
- **Line 36:** "And," "and"

COLLOQUIALISM

There are two very different instances of colloquialism in the poem. The first occurs in line 15 with the word "Christés," and second in line 30: "forty year."

This second instance is more straightforward, so let's look at it first. The more conventional phrase for written English would be "forty years" (i.e., *I wish I hadn't spent forty years of my life preaching*). Yet Parson Thirdly, a country priest, drops the "s." This captures a way of speaking particular to certain dialects in England, in which people drop the "s" in "years" when they are talking about a span of time. By capturing this quality in writing, the poem makes these characters seem authentic; they seem like real people in rural England. Hardy's novels all take place in South England, so it makes sense that his poetry would also harness that geographic specificity.

To return to "Christés." This is an outdated spelling of *Christ*, as in *Jesus Christ*, that was used in Middle English—the form of English used in the early Middle Ages (such as by the poet Geoffrey Chaucer). The simplest reason that it's used here is that it has an extra syllable, allowing it to fit the iambic meter:

They do | no more | for Christ- | és sake

Beyond this use, this spelling draws attention to the word, and thus to Christianity as a whole. Throughout the poem, Christianity has a received skeptical treatment. Because this archaic spelling appears amid conventional, modern spellings, it has an artificial feel to it. There's something almost cheeky about introducing this spelling. It feels as if, rather than speaking Christ's name reverently, the poem is being ironic about it. It wants to draw attention to how little *Christ*ianity has done for world peace.

These two instances of colloquialism, taken together, contribute to the lively and varied tones of the speakers in the poem.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** "Christés"
- **Line 30:** "forty year"

VOCABULARY

Great guns (Line 1) - The powerful artillery cannons on warships. "Great" means big and powerful, with positive connotations that quickly turn out to be ironic.

Chancel (Line 3) - The chancel is the part of the church that everyone faces during service—where the priest, altar, and choir are.

Window-squares (Line 3) - Presumably the stained-glass windows behind the chancel in the church.

Judgment-day (Line 4) - Most broadly, this refers to the apocalypse, the end of the world according to Christianity. More specifically, it is the day when God casts a final judgment on all the souls of the earth, deciding who goes to Hell and who goes to Heaven.

Hounds (Line 6) - Dogs in or near the churchyard.

Altar-crumb (Line 7) - A crumb left on the altar in the church, presumably from the Eucharist—the bread that ritually becomes the body of Christ during Christian communion.

Glebe cow (Line 9) - A *glebe* is a patch of land that a parish priest uses to support himself and/or the church. A "glebe cow," then, is a cow the priest keeps on church land.

Gunnery (Line 10) - The firing of the large cannons on the warships.

Red war (Line 14) - "Red war" refers to the bloodiness of war. "Red" acts as a synecdoche for the blood—that is, God refers to blood through its color. In turn, blood represents the violence of war.

Mad as hatters (Line 14) - *Mad as hatters* is a cliché. *Mad* means "crazy," and the phrase just means "really crazy." Historically, hat makers used mercury in the production of hats and often got mercury poison as a result, which caused them to go insane. Thus, *mad as a hatter.*

Christés sake (Line 15) - *Christés* (pronounced Krees-tays) is a Middle English spelling of *Christ*, as in *Jesus Christ*. This archaic spelling both helps fill in the meter and creates a somewhat ironic and artificial tone. "Christés sake" just means following the ethics and obligations of Christianity, such as helping other people and promoting peace.

Judgment-hour (Line 17) - This is just another way of referring to Judgment Day, as discussed above.

Scour (Line 19) - To clean with abrasive soap and sponge. Here, having to scour the floor is a punishment.

Hell's floor (Line 20) - Normally, Hell is a depicted as a place of unimaginable torture. Here, however, God jokingly says the damned have to scrub its floor, as if Hell is an eternally dirty kitchen.

Trumpet (Line 22) - The Bible says the will be seven trumpets of the apocalypse, which the angels blow to signal each new phase in the end of the world. To "blow the trumpet," then, is to end the world.

Indifferent century (Line 28) - *Indifferent* means not-caring. An "indifferent century," then, is a period of time when people (especially those in charge) don't care about the suffering of others.

Forty year (Line 30) - A colloquial way of saying "forty years." By dropping the "s," the poem captures how people talk in this area of England.

Parson Thirdly (Line 31) - A fictional character in the poem, who was presumably a parson, or country priest, before he died.

Stourton Tower (Line 35) - A monument built in the South of England during the 1700s to commemorate the end of the Seven Years War between England and France. This bloody conflict could be considered a world war, even though it happened over a century before WWI.

Camelot (Line 36) - This was capital of the legendary King Arthur's kingdom. Although Camelot is most likely fictional, many people have tried to find proof that it existed. Some have proposed that it was in South England.

Stonehenge (Line 36) - A famous monument made of stones in a large ring. It dates back anywhere from 2000 to 3000 BCE.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Channel Firing" is written in nine rhyming quatrains. These quatrains provide an easy-to-grasp structure for the poem—it moves forward steadily and predictably. Quatrains help the narrative of the poem move quickly and also break each section of the narrative into discrete sections.

Quatrains are often used to tell a story, as in ballad stanzas. Although this poem doesn't strictly adhere to the structure of these stanzas, it does tell a story—or, at least, crafts a short vignette. Yet whereas ballads often tell stories of tragedy or love, this poem is distinctly satirical.

The first two stanzas set the scene, as the noise of the "great guns" breaks the church's windows, disturbs the churchyard animals, and wakes the dead. Then, in stanzas 3 to 6, God responds to the dead, clarifying that it's not Judgment Day after all. In stanzas 7 to 8, the dead react pessimistically to what God has told them. And in the final stanza, the poem zooms out, following the noise of the guns deeper into space and time.

METER

"Channel Firing" is written in straightforward iambic tetrameter throughout, or four feet in a da-DUM rhythm per line. This is a common meter for quatrains.

Line 3 is a good example of the poem's meter:

> And broke | the chan- | cel win- | dow-squares,

In many such lines, the straightforward meter merely helps poem keep moving at a quick speed. Additionally, the strong, ever-present rhyme accentuates the meter. Combined with the rhyme, the meter gives the poem an almost sing-song feel. As the poem progress and reveals its satirical bite, this song-song quality comes to seem ironic. The prettiness of these formal qualities does little to mask violence of the world and God's callousness.

Sometimes, the meter varies for emphasis. Take lines 30 and 32. Line 30 sticks to the meter:

> "Instead | of prea- | ching for- | ty year,"

while lines 32 sneaks in an extra syllable:

> "I wish | I had stuck | to pipes | and beer."

The constant meter in line 30 captures the monotony that Parson Thirdly felt in his forty years of "preaching," whereas line 32 adds a little pep as the Parson thinks about a life of pleasure—getting drunk and smoking tobacco. This pep comes in the form of an anapest (da-da-DUM) in the second foot. Although the poem already has a sing-song feel to it, this anapest emphasizes that feeling even more, almost as if the Parson has slipped into an old drinking song.

Thus, throughout the poem meter helps both propel the narrative and emphasize the experiences of the different characters.

RHYME SCHEME

"Channel Firing" obeys a consistent rhyme scheme throughout:

> ABAB

This is a really intuitive and common rhyme scheme to use for rhymed quatrains, and many ballads employ similar schemes. Because the poem has a kind of narrative, a scene in which different characters interact, the rhyme helps propel those interactions. It keeps the poem churning from line to the next. Rhyme also draws attention to the meter.

Additionally, rhyme adds a kind of sing-song artificiality to the poem. As different speakers go on to describe the bleakness of world, adding to the poem's satirical and ironic edge, the rhyme stands in stark contrast to that. The consistent, snappy rhymes seem like they are trying paper over the horror of life on earth—and failing. This is of course intentional. By putting the formal prettiness of the poem at odds with its content, the poem mirrors the way that common people get lied to. They get promised "great" things by religious or national leaders, but reality turns out to be very different, much more "Mad" and "indifferent."

The poem draws attention to rhyme by using a lot of polysyllabic rhymes (words in which more than one syllable rhymes). Often, this comes in the form of feminine rhymes, where the last syllable is unstressed. Often in poetry, when poets used feminine rhymes they make the stressed syllable

rhyme as well. For example, there's "hatters" and "matters" in lines 14 and 16, and "wonder" and "under" in lines 25 and 27. There's something almost excessive about such rhymes. Not only do they tack on an extra syllable, but they also don't try to be subtle. They draw attention to the artificiality of rhyme, putting distance between the reader and the poem, leading to the reader to question these speakers and their places in the world.

The poem ends on a very strong and unexpected rhyme: "avenge" with "Stonehenge." On their own, each of these words is already vivid, provoking many different associations in the reader's mind. Yet after reading "avenge" in line 34, very few readers would have predicted that it was going to be rhymed with "Stonehenge." On a technical level, both words rhyme on their second syllables, which is already a somewhat tricky thing to do.

Furthermore, they accomplish one of the hardest and most important tasks of rhyme: linking totally unconnected words, which in turn leads the reader to ponder previously unimagined connections in the real world. What does Stonehenge have to do with vengeance, with violence in the name of revenge? Some people have suggested that Stonehenge was a place of healing, in which case these two rhyming words are almost opposites. Or could it, like Camelot and Stourton Tower, have been a place associated with military valor and male codes of honor? There is no answer. Rather, this final rhyme leaves the reader to ponder such questions.

SPEAKER

There are several speakers in "Channel Firing." The main speaker is the narrator, one of the dead people in the graveyard who are awoken by the sound of the guns. Additionally, God and two other dead people speak.

Because the poem essentially presents a small narrative or scene, the main speaker can be thought of as a narrator. Other than the fact that this narrator is one of the dead, they remain unidentified throughout the poem. At the beginning, the narrator uses the first-person plural "we" to describe the events of the poem. As this "we," the narrator speaks for all the dead in the church's graveyard. Later in the poem, the speaker does switch to the first-person singular, referring to "My neighbour Parson Thirdly." Here, the speaker becomes a little more specific. By referring to the dead person next to the speaker as their "neighbour," the speaker gives a friendly, cozy feel to the graveyard, as if it's a tightly-knit neighborhood. The dead have the feeling of humble, everyday people.

Meanwhile, God speaks in stanzas 3 through 6. In comparison to the dead, God knows a lot more about what's going on. His tone is cynical, ironic, and somewhat callous. He doesn't necessarily speak in the grand tone that he does in the bible. In fact, he even uses a cliché. It also seems that his powers are limited. He's not sure if there will ever been end of the world—even though he created the world! So although God is knows more about what's going on than the humble dead, he's not necessarily the all-powerful, all-knowing God that he's traditionally imagined being.

Two dead people, besides the narrator, speak after God. The first is unidentified. This dead person wonders, "Will the world ever saner be"—if the world will ever be less insane than the "indifferent," or cruelly uncaring, century they died in. After hearing God, this person seems to have lost some faith in the fate of the world. Then, Parson Thirdly—a country priest, speaks. The Parson seems to have lost even more faith. He wonders if, instead of devoting his life to religion, he should have spent his time smoking tobacco and drinking beer.

Each of these speakers, then, contributes to the poem's consideration of faith and the fate of the world.

SETTING

"Channel Firing" is set in a country churchyard. Since the poem takes place at night, the church and churchyard are empty except for animals and the dead, who all react to the sound of the guns.

As a novelist, Thomas Hardy set all his novels in southern England. Although this poem can't be assumed to take place in the same fictional universe as Hardy's novels, the end of the poem does suggest that it occurs in a similar region. At the end of the poem, the speaker names "Stourton Tower" and "Stonehenge," two monuments located in southern England. As the sound of the guns travels inland, in passes through these monuments. This suggests that the warships are off the south coast of England in the English Channel, the narrow body of war that separates England from France (and thus the rest of continental Europe as well). In other words, the poem happens right at the edge of England, close to the European mainland where WWI would erupt in just a few months.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was an English poet and a novelist, known for his passionate opposition to the cruelty and hypocrisy of the buttoned-up Victorian world he was born into. Though best known now for novels like *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, during Hardy's lifetime these frank and shocking books weren't especially well-received, and he made his reputation as a poet.

Many Victorian poets, such as Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, built on the poetry of the Romantics. Their

poetry focused on lyrical beauty and psychological intensity, often retelling older narratives, such as the legends of King Arthur. Hardy's poetry, on the other hand, typically offers a bleak assessment of modern life. And where Romantic writers created passionate heroes who resisted fate and whose inner lives always colored their experience of the world, Hardy's speakers usually seem quietly baffled by fate. Like characters in a realist novel, they muddle on as the affairs of the world rage around them.

In Hardy's poem "The Man He Killed," for example, the speaker, who was once a common foot soldier, tries to make sense of having to kill an enemy soldier that he probably could just as well have been friends with. And in "The Darkling Thrush," nature suggests a hopefulness for the future that the speaker can't quite believe; as far as the speaker can tell, humanity is on a path of self-destruction.

The Romantics thought that nature had all the answers, if only people looked with enough sensitivity. As the modernists came along, they cast suspicion on that belief. For them, both the human world and the natural world were fragmented. After WWI especially, it seemed that all the old promises of Western civilization had been destroyed, even revealed to be lies. "Channel Firing," with its doubt in religion and patriotism as traditional pillars of authority, represents a bridge to the full-fledged modernism of a poem like "The Waste Land," written only a few years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hardy wrote "Channel Firing" just months before the outbreak of World War I. Although WWI introduced a new level violence to the world, there were many bloody conflicts that paved the way for such a war. In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker references Stourton Tower, a memorial for the Seven Years War in the 1700s. Fought between England and France, and drawing in many other nations, the war cost hundreds of thousands of lives.

During Hardy's lifetime, wars like the Crimean War and the Boer War continued to draw in powers from all over the world and kill countless people. Thus, although in this poem Hardy almost seems to predict the onset of WWI, he hardly pulls such a prediction out of thin air. Instead, the poem can be seen as tapping into the long history of humanity's increasing capabilities for violence.

The poem also builds on the history of religious doubt in English intellectual life. Although such doubt can hardly be considered the norm, and atheists were often punished or shunned in one form or another, it was something that English writers contended with throughout the 19th century. For instance, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was expelled from Oxford in 1811 for promoting atheism. Most importantly, after Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, evolution began to undermine any hope of taking the Bible literally. The world Hardy grew up in, then, was one where religion was increasingly losing its central status in English life.

The increasing possibilities of modern technology also inform the poem. Military technology reached a new level of advancement at the turn of the century. WWI would see the use of poison gas, airplane battles, machine guns, trench warfare, and of course the incredibly powerful artillery cannons that "Channel Firing" describes. These technologies would only continue to advance throughout the 20th century. In this way, "Channel Firing" inaugurates a new era of warfare on Earth.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Biography of Hardy — A detailed biography of Hardy, along with more poems, from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-hardy)
- Making and Firing an Artillery Cannon — A short, German, WWI-era film showing the production and firing of an artillery cannon. From the archives of the British Film Institute. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZXb5uqUolM&t)
- A Brief History of Stourton Tower — Concise information about Stourton Tower, otherwise known as King Alfred's Tower, along with some pictures, from Atlas Obscura. (https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/king-alfreds-tower)
- A History of Stonehenge — Information about Stonehenge from English Heritage, the organization that looks after it. (https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/history-and-stories/history/)
- Possible Locations of Camelot — An overview of possible real locations for the mythical city of Camelot, from Historic UK. (https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Camelot-Court-of-King-Arthur/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- At an Inn
- A Wife in London
- Drummer Hodge
- He Never Expected Much
- Neutral Tones
- The Convergence of the Twain
- The Darkling Thrush
- The Man He Killed
- The Ruined Maid

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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