

Thomas Hardy's Antiwar Opinion in his Poems, 'The Man He Killed', 'Channel Firing' and 'In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations''

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Abstract

This paper studies Thomas Hardy's 'antiwar poetry' and endeavors to demonstrate and identify his clear-cut opinion on war, which he consistently, adopts. It explicates how his poetry presents horribly a pessimistic view of man's bellicose stupidity, whilst a few of his other antiwar poems consider him to be triumphantly optimistic in asserting the fact that the good things of everyday life would survive when wars are long forgotten. This study describes Thomas Hardy's great diversity of attitudes which are to a large extent noticeable in his writing (Antiwar Poems), his literary career in general and his critical works. His antiwar poems reveal him to be rather a kind and a gentle person, who is very much aware of the pain; human beings suffer, in their struggle for a decent life. He wrote eleven "antiwar poems". In this study, three antiwar poems are discussed in order to display Hardy's varied attitudes towards war.

Keywords: Antiwar Poetry, Thomas Hardy & Hardy's attitudes towards War

Introduction

Hardy wrote poems during the second Boer War of 1899-1902 and the Great War of 1914-1918. Some of these poems (*The Darkling Thrush* and *Channel Firing*, for example) obviously reflect those particular conflicts. But others, though written at the same period, have a more general relevance - such as *The Man He Killed* and *In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"*. This is not accidental - Hardy explicitly tried to relate specific historical conflicts to a wider historical scheme. The main concerns of his antiwar poetry are essentially those of his fiction - the forces both inside and outside human life that lead, almost inevitably, to triumph, sorrow, frustration, and loss.¹

Some critics admired Hardy's poetry and his work of art in general.

Geoffrey Harvey said:

"Insisting that his writing did not offer a philosophy of life, Hardy claims that each poem was an 'impression', intensely subjective and evanescent. He was tired of being misread. He had also been thinking for some time about devoting considerably more attention to the writing of poetry. Hardy's decision to abandon fiction was confirmed by a review of the volume edition of *The Well-Beloved*, published after *Jude the Obscure* in 1897. The reviewer in *The World* proclaimed: 'Of all forms of sex-mania in fiction, we have no hesitation in pronouncing the most unpleasant one to be the Wessex mania of Thomas Hardy'"²

¹ Holt, Rinehart. *Adventures in English literature*. 1st Ed. Holt. New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1996. P: 652

² Harvey, Geoffrey. *The Complete Critical Guide to Thomas Hardy*. London: Routledge, 2003. P: 40.

Hardy did *not* like what he would learn, hear and notice about **war**, and he thought that poetry might help him air his dovish beef with the world. That's why, more than a century later, readers are reading his scathing poetic critique of war poetry.

The Boer Wars were incredibly violent, and the Brits committed more than their share of atrocities, including rounding up the Boers (South African farmers) in concentration camps, where many perished. Almost 100,000 lives were lost in total, and while the war had widespread support in Great Britain, it did not at all improve their picture elsewhere. To Hardy, this was all a little too much. So he penned "Antiwar Poems" to reveal the war for what he thought it *really* was - a messy, seemingly pointless conflict between groups who shouldn't really be at odds in the first place. The poems are sharp in their irony, unforgettable in their imagery, and more than a little depressing in general.

In *his antiwar poems*, Thomas Hardy portrays the death of the soldiers. Most of the poems were written around the time of the Boer War, so it seems likely that the poems relate to that war. This can somehow be seen in the language he used for the war poems like the poem (*Drummer Hodge*), which has several items of Afrikaans vocabulary, such as "kopje-crest". There is a sense that death in war is rather senseless, the repetition of words, the disjointed punctuation which slows the rhythm, and the juxtaposition of some words in those poems. This elevation in war poems were created by the quite jaunty rhythm of the meter, and the regular rhyme, and the voice of the narrator.

In war poems there is a strong sense that the moment of death in war is rather "off-hand", in *The Man He Killed* the remembrance of the dead man, is only to remark on the strangeness of war, in pitting two soldiers against each other who have more in common with their foe than with their commanders. Most of the war poems have a strong anti-war message, in terms of the treatment of soldiers, not just in death, but also in life. The "Antiwar Poems" record Hardy's deep reservations about British imperialism and the cost of war to ordinary men. Hardy was a Victorian novelist and a twentieth century poet. He remarkably, abandoned his prose writing in favor of his first and enduring love – poetry. Some of the most powerful and moving English poetry of the modern period was written during or about the First World War; some in favor of the war, and celebrating 'the happy warrior' proud to give his life for his country, whilst some representing the horror and what Hardy called the 'pity' of war. This study examines the context of these war poems, the issues involved in studying those poems, and it provides opportunities for the exploration of a wide range of First World War poetry as well as in-depth analysis of the life and suffering of the soldiers at the war.

War has long figured as a theme in poetry - after all, some of the world's oldest surviving poems are about great armies and heroic battles. But while Homer may have idealized his combatants and revered their triumphant, incessant fighting, the treatment of war in poetry has grown increasingly more complex since then. The numerous conflicts of the twentieth century produced poets who sometimes chose to concentrate their writing on the horrifying effects of war on civilians. World War One, more than any other war, is associated with the so-called 'war poets'. These include the poems written by men such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke, and Thomas Hardy.

Hardy wrote a number of significant war poems that relate to both the Boer Wars and World War I, including "Drummer Hodge", "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations,'" and "The Man He Killed" and his work had a profound influence on other war poets such as Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon". Hardy in these poems often used the viewpoint of ordinary soldiers and their colloquial speech.³

Hardy wrote poems at the times of the second Boer War of 1899-1902 and the Great War of 1914-1918. Some poems obviously reflect these particular conflicts (Drummer Hodge and Channel Firing, for example). But others, though written in the same periods, have a more general relevance - such as *The Man He Killed* and *In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"*. This is not accidental - Hardy explicitly tried to relate specific historical conflicts to a wider historical scheme. He attempted to do this in a grand or epic poetic drama manner of the Napoleonic Wars - *The Dynasts* (which has three parts, nineteen acts and one hundred and thirty scenes). In this he also relates the great moments of history to the lives of ordinary people.

³ Axelrod, Jeremy. "[Thomas Hardy: 'The Shadow on the Stone,' Poetry Foundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org). 2010, The New Atlantis

Hardy's antiwar poems show a great diversity of attitude. One cannot, on their evidence alone, identify a clear-cut opinion of antiwar which Hardy maintains consistently. Channel Firing presents a horribly pessimistic view of man's *bellicose* stupidity. In Time of "The Breaking of Nations" it is triumphantly optimistic in asserting the fact that the good things of everyday life will survive when wars are long forgotten. ⁴

War poets are a convenient, though somewhat diffuse, term referring primarily to the soldier-poets who fought in the First World War, of whom many died in combat. The best-known are Richard Aldington, Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, Julian Grenfell, Ivor Gurney, David Jones, Robert Nichols, Wilfred Owen, Herbert Read, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Charles Hamilton Sorley, and Edward Thomas. Most of these writers came from middle-class backgrounds; many had been to public schools and served as army officers at the front. In fact, hundreds of 'war poets' wrote and published their verse between 1914 and 1918, often capturing the initial mood of excitement and enthusiasm, although only a handful—largely those who wrote in protest—are read and admired today, with Wilfred Owen achieving an iconic status within British literature and culture. Other war poets whose work appeared between 1914 and 1918 were not involved in fighting. *The Times* supplement, *War Poems, August, 1914–15*, for example, included contributions from established civilian poets such as Robert Bridges, Rudyard Kipling, Laurence Binyon, and Thomas Hardy. ⁵

Antiwar Poems

The Man He Killed:

In this poem Hardy is showing his science of war and is pondering on the philosophy of fighting. He sees no evidence of a conscious state of war or of what would have to be. Why there is ever a war. He does not approve on war because of its consequences. He is certain that the causes of war are either political or humanity and the victims will be the innocent human beings.

"Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipper kin!

"But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place. . ! ⁶

In the first stanza the narrator establishes the common ground between himself and his victim: in more favorable circumstances they could have shared hospitality together. This idea is in striking contrast to that in the second stanza: the circumstances in which the men did meet. "Ranged as infantry" suggests that the men are not natural foes but have been "ranged", that is set against each other (by someone else's decision). The phrase "as he at me" indicates the similarity of their situations. (<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/poetry/hardy>.)

"I shot him dead because —
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although ⁷

The hesitations and repetitions of this stanza beautifully reflect the thought processes of the speaker. The pause after "because" occurs because he is groping for an explanation. When he finds one, he must repeat the

⁴ <http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/poetry/hardy>.

⁵ <https://www.firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/hardyt.html>

⁶ Gibson, James. Thomas Hardy, The Complete Poems, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

⁷ Ibid.

"because." He then has to convince himself that this answer is correct and sufficient. He does this (or tries to do it) by telling himself three times emphatically that it is "Just so"; "my foe of course he was"; and "That's clear enough." But despite this triple emphatic effort at self-assurance, readers know that the attempt is unsuccessful, as it trails off into "although..."⁸

It is worth mentioning that this poem is a simple, and an uncomplicated piece. It is, in fact, a very skilful poem heavily laden with irony and making interesting use of colloquialism. The title is slightly odd, as Hardy uses the third-person pronoun "He", though the poem is narrated in the first person. The "He" of the title (the "I" of the poem) is evidently a soldier attempting to explain and perhaps justify his killing of another man in battle.

"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like — just as I —
Was out of work — had sold his traps —
No other reason why.

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown."⁹

The real reason for the victim's enlistment in the army, like the narrator's, is far from being connected with patriotic idealism and belief in his country's cause. The soldier's joining was partly whimsical ("Off-hand like") and partly the result of economic necessity: he was unemployed and had already sold off his possessions. He did not enlist for any other reason. The narrator concludes with a repetition of the contrast between his treatment of the man he killed and how he might have shared hospitality with him in other circumstances, or even been ready to extend charity to him. He prefaces this with the statement that war is "quaint and curious", as if to say, "a funny old thing". This tends to show war as innocuous and acceptable, but the events narrated in the poem, as well as the reader's general knowledge of war, make it clear that conflict is far from "quaint and curious" and Hardy employs the terms with heavy irony, knowing full well how inaccurate such a description really is.¹⁰

This is a rather bitter poem showing the stupidity of war, and demolishing belief in the patriotic motives of those who confront one another in battle. The narrator finds no good reason for his action; Hardy implies that there is no good reason. The short lines, simple rhyme scheme, and everyday language make the piece almost nursery rhyme like in simplicity, again in ironic contrast to its less than pleasant subject. There is a strong anti-war message in the poem. The fact that neither the speaker nor the man who has been killed is named gives it a universal feel – a sense that it could be anyone in this position. The reasons given for killing the man are weak – he was a "foe" but the speaker cannot work out why that is true. This shows the stupidity of war, in that men kill each other because they are ordered to. In *The Man He Killed* the remembrance of the dead man is only to remark on the strangeness of war, in pitting two soldiers against each other who have more in common with their foe than with their commanders. The poem has a strong anti-war message, in terms of the treatment of soldiers, not just in death, but also in life.

Also, through reading this poem deeply one can demonstrate that there is a great emphasis on the worthlessness of war. In it, Hardy shows that the soldier here is only following orders. In other words, Hardy is clarifying that war's cause is only political one rather than knowing what it is or what is the war's aim. Sometimes it is well known among people that to die in the battlefield will lead to a great martyrdom but still in the attitude of Hardy even death in war is rather senseless. Hardy is revealing that neither the killer knows why he killed nor the killed knows why he had been killed. The only obvious reason is that one is the enemy and the other is the defender but still there is no aim for war. The Boer Wars were incredibly violent, and the Brits committed more than their share of atrocities, including rounding up the Boers (South African farmers) in

⁸ Pishkar, Kian. *A Reader's Guide to English Literature*, Ardebil: *Sib-E-Sorkh*, 2000.

(p:155).

⁹ Gibson, James. *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

¹⁰ <http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/poetry/hardy>.

concentration camps, where many perished. Almost 100,000 lives were lost in total. Hardy did not like what he saw. He is implying that innocent people needlessly die because of war and that the ones that suffer are normal, ordinary people, like you or I.

Moreover, Hardy is emphasizing that the cause of war is always political one. Hardy cares about humanitarian side. For it's often hard to remember that war always has and always will have a human cost. Men and women die at the hands of other men and women. Somewhere, someone made a choice that made that happen.

Channel Firing:

Thomas Hardy's "Channel Firing" was published several months before England and the world were immersed in WWI. It is quite possible that Hardy actually heard vessels of the Royal Navy practising their firing techniques in preparation for the outbreak of war. That is why he excelled in describing how the sound and noise of war were so horrible in a way that even, frighten and awaken even the dead.

This poem is typical of a certain pastoral or rural view of humanity's rightful place in Nature. The poet is emphasizing a view that is opposed the mechanized horror of man's present wars. Pastoral scenes and the depiction of rural life were popular in poetry before the First World War, the poet is deeply focusing on peace and contentment that are found in nature, the space for thought and refuge, and the nostalgia is felt there .

In 'Channel Firing', Hardy manages a savagely satirical attack on war. The dead are awakened by the sound of gunnery practice at sea and sit up thinking that it is Judgment Day, until advised by God that it is merely the same old human madness. The speaker is one of the skeletons, who in the opening line addresses the reader in inclusive blame:

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 ¹¹

Hardy's dating of this poem may make it seem prophetic, since World War I broke out in August, 1914; but it was a prophecy almost anyone could have made, for the event referred to in (line 1) was well known: the Royal Navy was conducting gunnery practice in the English Channel, and the guns could be heard many miles inland. (Hardy is reported to have been surprised, in fact, that the war began only a few months afterwards.) ¹²

The speaker is among the dead, perhaps at one time a soldier, and he begins by telling us that he and the other dead thought the noise so loud that it must be judgment day. The use of "your" in the opening line emphasizes the separation of the living from the dead--these are not "our" guns but "your" guns because we, the dead, are no longer concerned with what goes on in the world of the living.

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

¹¹ Gibson, James. *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

¹² Pishkar, Kian. *A Reader's Guide to English Literature*, Ardebil: *Sib-E-Sorkh*, 2000.
(P:507-508)

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 Christes sake
Than you who are helpless in such matters." ¹³

The poem is spoken in the first person by one of the dead buried in a church, in which the windows have been shattered by the report (noise and vibration) of guns being fired for "practice" in the English Channel. So great is the disturbance that the skeletons believe Judgment Day (and so, the resurrection of the dead) to have come. In a gruesomely comical picture, they are represented as suddenly sitting up in readiness for the great day. The humor takes an irreverent turn as Hardy introduces God to the proceedings, reassuring the corpses that it is not time for the Judgment Day but merely "gunnery practice", adding that the world is as it was when the dead men "went below" to their graves. That is to say, every country is trying to make its methods of destruction more efficient, and shed more blood, making "red war yet redder". God sees the living as insane as and no more ready to exercise Christian love than are the dead, who are obviously now "helpless in such matters". In other words, the living, too, do nothing "for Christes sake". Note how the archaic (old fashioned) spelling adds to the humor of the piece. ¹⁴

The speaker in the poem is one of the dead, presumably a clergyman buried within the chancel of his church where the clergy were usually interred; he is familiar with the altar, chancel windows, and "glebe cow," and seems to be in the habit of having chats with others buried nearby, including "Parson Thirdly." The folk like simplicity of the poem, achieved through its tetrameter quatrains and simple diction, makes the whole experience seem rustic and unsophisticated, the material of the ballad. The dead have been awakened by the great guns ("loud enough to wake the dead," we may say), and at first they suppose that "judgment day" has come. The noise has even terrified the hounds, the church mouse, the worms, and the cow – not because they anticipate the apocalypse, of course, but because they instinctively fear loud sounds. Above three stanzas point up how disturbing this noise is to the world of the dead (the worms seek protection) and the world of the church (the mouse is so startled it loses its "altar-crumbs").

The world of the living, represented by the "howl of wakened hounds," is equally disturbed. Then, the image of the "glebe cow" reinforces the larger setting of the poem--a glebe cow is a cow provided by the parish citizens for the benefit of the church vicar. More important, however, is the appearance of God, who understands what is going on and makes one of the poem's important points: mankind is preparing for war just as it always has. Not to worry, boys, for now it is just practice. The following stanzas continue to expand God's first observation. The world of the living is trying to make living much harder, "to make Red war yet redder." In a relatively damning comment, especially for a solidly Christian country, God says that men are no more effective at advancing Christ's message than the dead are. Further, if this were Judgment Day, some of these warriors would be in serious trouble, punished by having to clean the floor of Hell for causing so many disturbances.

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)." ¹⁵

¹³ Gibson, James. *Thomas Hardy, The Complete Poems*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

¹⁴ (<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/poetry/hardy>)

¹⁵ Gibson, James. *Thomas Hardy, The Complete Poems*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

God, however, sardonic but comforting, tells the dead to return to their sleep: it's only men threatening men, not a divine event. Although many men deserve to go to hell, God has not destroyed the world, nor he seem to want to anytime soon, for takes pity on mankind's need for "rest eternal" ¹⁶

This stanza is a simple threat--if Judgment Day comes, those who cause such trouble will find themselves in hot water (literally and figuratively). God also makes an interesting side comment in this stanza, indicating that he may or may not ever enact Judgment Day. In a conventional Christian context, the idea of a Judgment Day never happening is somewhat troubling because Judgment Day is a fundamental rite of passage for Christians. The God, Hardy is depicting here is not an Old Testament fire-and-brimstone God but rather seems to be somewhat capricious and a God with a good sense of humor.

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." ¹⁷

Parson Thridly's reaction to this news in the penultimate stanza is pragmatic: if God is not going to separate the sheep from the goats, it might have been more pleasant to have "stuck to pipes and beer" instead of depriving himself for the sake of piety. ¹⁸

The concluding stanzas bring the voices of the dead back again, who wonder if the world will ever become saner than the century in which they died, implying that, while they were alive, war was an element in their lives just as it is in the present. To emphasize their disgust with the militancy of the present, one of the dead quotes a parson, who believes he should have concerned himself with worldly things--"pipes and beer"--rather than preaching.

Again the guns disturbed the hour,
Roaring their readiness to avenge,
As far inland as Stourton Tower,
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge. ¹⁹

The last stanza simply describes the wide distance the sounds of gunfire traverses, basically all over southern England, and the mention of specific historic landmarks emphasizes what is at stake in another war. The references to the locations of Stourton Tower, Camelot, and Stonehenge expand the poem's time frame from the immediate present back through history (Stourton Tower) and legend (Camelot) to the dim past of prehistoric Britain (Stonehenge). Because these places are all gone, the implication is that our present civilization, too, may vanish if warfare continues and if red war continues to get redder.

¹⁶ (<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/poetry/hardy>)

¹⁷ Gibson, James. *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

¹⁸ Pishkar, Kian. *A Reader's Guide to English Literature*, Ardebil: *Sib-E-Sorkh*, 2000.
(P:507-508)

¹⁹ Gibson, James. *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

The tone of the poem shifts markedly in the last stanza. Instead of the folk narrative of the speaker and the paternal chattiness of God, the last stanza turns to brooding lyricism. Alliteration, consonance, and assonance (roaring/readiness; again/guns; hour/roaring; readiness/avenge) pack the first two lines. The last two abound in *st* and sounds: Stourton Tower, Camelot, starlit Stonehenge; and the last two feet in this iambic poem are trochees, mysteriously trailing off in the mournful music that the theme demands. The bulk of the poem has been whimsical, folksy, and not particularly alarming - ironically, since the subjects have included naval bombardment, skeletons, damnation and piety, and God's potential wrath; but the theme is the persistence among men of aggression, violence, and the recurrence of military conquest to establish and maintain civilization. God (who tends to speak in clichés, the rustic father of his rustic flock) puts it directly: "The world is as it used to be." A "glebe cow" is pastured in the parcel of land allotted to a clergyman as part of his benefice; like the land and the parsonage, it is provided for his use but is not his private property. The name "Parson Thirdly" may allude to the Holy Trinity; a Parson Thirdly is a character in Hardy's novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The spelling "Christes" (line 15) is archaic, in keeping with the ballad style and the time references implicit in the last stanza.

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In *Fact Channel Firing* is a dialogue among the dead who are awakened by the naval "great guns" firing artillery in the English Channel. The central theme of the poem suggests that warfare has gotten so destructive that Armageddon, the final battle at the end of the world, is at hand, and the dead are awakened for Judgment Day. God reassures them that no, it's just the living engaging in "redder" warfare; a skeleton that used to be the parson states that his lifetime would have been better spent enjoying himself ("I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer,") rather than preaching, since apparently it had had no positive effect on the subsequent generations. The last stanza suggests the enemy's "return fire" with shells landing far inland. What's interesting is that Hardy was writing about the First World War, but the intensity of the destruction he conveys in his poem more accurately describes the destruction during and at the conclusion of World War II, when the most destructive weapon of all was set upon the world. Although the poem is comical, the humor is of a shocking kind, and of course "Channel Firing" is not a light-hearted piece. The humor is meant seriously, to show the stupidity of those who wish to make war.

It is worth mentioning that for Hardy the rural and simple life will go on, whereas war will not, this he sees war as inferior and less significant than country life since it will be out lived by it, it will be lost and forgotten whereas country life go on. War is a destructive power, cause the poet through this poem implies to the reader that as the world is still finding a way to go on as it did before even through the destruction of War, that generations will pass but things will always remain the same.

In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations':

Hardy called himself a meliorist, believing in the doctrine that the world may be improved by human endeavour. He identifies himself as one, who holds that if way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst. Hardy's practical philosophy is distinctly against man's inhumanity to man and to woman .

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

II

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

III

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night

²⁰ Pishkar, Kian. *A Reader's Guide to English Literature*, Ardebil: Sib-E-Sorkh, 2000.

Ere their story die.²¹

The title of the poem is a direct quote from the Bible Jeremiah 51:20. 'Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms.' This adds emphasis to the war's magnitude since it is compared to a biblical battle. The poem itself is a series of comparisons between what Hardy considers the parts of country life to live on forever, never to be forgotten and the First World War which Hardy believes will not be remembered forever. So this poem really depicts war, to not have significance, since it will be forgotten however, farmyard practices and youths falling in love will outlast war, this giving to them more significance.²²

Hardy's treatment of war was varied and he was extremely versatile in discovering appropriate poetic forms for the expression of his views. Among his finest is 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"', a comment not only on the Great War, but on all war. It is a complex poem, but it is organized around artfully simple pastoral images embodying profound feelings, which are understated with the utmost economy. The image of the man harrowing, the burning of the couch-grass, and the young lovers who enter the rural landscape are brought together in the poem.

Hardy's Time of "The Breaking of Nations reveal 'self-reflective doublings, that is the ambiguous nature of the double self is explored, in which

the poem raises questions about the integrity and continuity. Hardy in this poem is concerned with presenting multiple views, selves and voices

Hardy consistently condemned war throughout his career as a poet, labeling it both futile and wasteful of life. However, this poem goes one step further than to merely condemn the subject. Hardy was always a meliorist, and this poem is a fine example of his belief that man can overcome the evils of war. The poem is divided into three sections, each illustrating a different facet of a society and a way of life that has continued for thousands of years, despite the coming and going of different dynasties and political parties. The first depicts a simple ploughman, lazily ploughing his field with his old, seemingly immovable horse. He, the farmer, represents sustenance. The second is an image of a compost heap silently burning, a visual metaphor for the cycle of life, and nature's rebirth. The third shows the lovers, the 'maid and her Wight.' These represent human procreation and the cycle of life, as well as the human capacity for compassion and deeper emotion. Together, these combine create the picture of persistent life, a timeless and eternal tradition, continuing despite the passing of dynasties and the impact of war. Note the archaic language used to illustrate this point; 'Wight,' 'ere.' Essentially Hardy is commenting that life, in its most basic form, will continue as it has done despite the impact of war and other human scourges.

However, these can also be class and societal comments read into the poem. Hardy is showing the simple real life of the lower classes, the true 'Wessex' types, to be much more lasting than the upper class quarrels and political struggles that dictate war and the passing of dynasties, thus endorsing the simple rural values that the modern world threatens to erode. However, there is, as always, a faith that human life and love will prevail.²³

First Hardy shows us an old horse being led along, slowly, as it breaks up the clods of earth with a harrow. Both the animal and the man leading it walk half asleep. The slowness of the harrowing and the silence of the scene create a sense of peacefulness. Next Hardy describes the equally slow and peaceful burning of the weeds, which, he asserts, will continue despite the "War". Finally, he depicts a girl and her lover, also silent as they whisper, and assures us that their story will outlast the stories of war. Hardy shows these three simple and

²¹ Gibson, James. *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

²² (<http://thedimofdawn.com/in-time-of-the-breaking-of-nations>)

everyday details of the scene to represent: work (seen as work of an agricultural nature, for it is this which sustains life) and love (which also sustains the life of the human race). These things, the poet claims, will survive, in spite of “Dynasties” and “wars”. This is an unusually optimistic poem, but the optimism is asserted rather than reasoned: perhaps Hardy implies that the things he describes are so fundamental and natural to human existence that they must survive, whereas kingdoms and wars are not essential to man's life - a very different conclusion from that drawn in *Channel Firing*.²⁴

This is a simple and unpretentious piece marked by a rather uncharacteristic optimism that is in clear contrast to the resigned, almost fatalistic, character of *Channel Firing*. Hardy presents the reader with a series of three impressionistic glimpses or cameos of everyday, rural life and suggests that these will persist, unchanged, while kingdoms rise and fall, and long after the details of the various wars have been forgotten.

Conclusion

What do we mean by ‘greatness’ in poetry and what possible relevance can Hardy’s poetry have for us today? In an important sense these two questions are connected because it is a feature of all truly great writing that it transcends its own time and remains relevant for future generations. This does not imply that the poet sets out to write about vague immortal subjects in a remote and artificial language. He does not. Nobody could have his feet more firmly on the ground than Hardy. What it means is that whatever subject he is dealing with, he is able through the strength of his own feelings and his powers of expression to make us, far away from him in time and space – share his feelings. Whether we are old or young, black or white, rich or poor, live in the sixteenth century or the twenty-first, we all have certain feelings that we share. Most of us witnessed war, fall in love. Love for our parents and children, are capable of feeling sympathy, of experiencing happiness and sadness, and, in fact, feeling in many vital ways much as the great writers of the past convince us they felt. The future for mankind depends upon our perception of how much we all have in common, and great writers like Hardy perceived this and helps us to see it and helps us to end the war with all its aspects and reasons. When he talks about war and poetry touching each other, as he does in the introduction to one of his books of verse, this is what he means. Hardy, the accomplished poet, makes us feel the inescapable truth that we are separated by war but joined by our ability to feel love and all of us are one. War is destructive but love is creative, and in spite of wars men and women will continue to fall in love as a result they will hopefully end it.

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²⁴ <http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/poetry/hardy>.