

# A Wife in London

- by Thomas Hardy -

## Activities

### A

Hardy's pre-occupation with the effects of war on ordinary people, commonly those anonymous and overlooked, should be teased out here. Students are unlikely to have a detailed knowledge of the Boer War, which may itself be a poignant reminder of the number of deaths in war which are not remembered for very long. The main features of the war could be ascertained by their own research. For the poem, it is important that students understand some salient features of the particular war:

- the war was fought very far from home for causes which were complex and not always well-understood by British people
- casualties were high and the war saw the use of some brutal practices on both sides, including the introduction of 'concentration camps' by the British
- the British government aimed, in part, to secure the diamond reserves in South Africa and also to further the colonial 'Scramble for Africa' – these were unlikely to directly benefit ordinary people who lost family members in the war

Hardy's portrayal of the wife – 'a wife', maybe any wife – and husband here is very poignant but there is little detail to give them individual identities. The wife lives in London, the largest city in the country, but no specifics are given about where. The news of her husband's death arrives in an impersonal and unfeeling way by an unnamed official. No names are given to any of the characters depicted or any details of their home. Candidates could discuss why and to what effect Hardy chooses to omit these details. Abler students may benefit from other examples of Hardy's poetry where different choices with different effects are made, such as 'Drummer Hodge' or 'The Man He Killed', in order to shed light on the technique used here. The scenario is seen as one which has been played out for generations in all wars, for whom these characters are representatives.

### B

Students may notice that even the two events described in the poem are labelled – 'The Tragedy' and 'The Irony' – but these headings are oddly descriptive rather than emotive. The wife's emotions are understated throughout the poem and some useful discussion may be elicited about why and to what effect this technique is used.

Students may discover other methods Hardy uses to carry the overwhelming emotions in the poem: for example, the imagery of the gloomy city and the use of incongruities

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such as the 'smartly' knocked door in the first section and the homely image of 'firelight' which contrasts with the awful sense of loss in the second. As readers, also, we 'fill the gaps' with our own empathy and imagination when confronted with this scene which is still played out during wars and conflicts the world over. Discussion of how the poignancy is achieved without explicitly describing emotions should be a productive approach here.

## C

The fog - 'a tawny vapour' - seems to have enveloped the woman who is depicted alone and motionless, waiting. Her mood is reflected by the mistiness and cold. There is a hint of imprisonment or entrapment in the use of 'webby fold on fold' to recall a spider's web. Images of light are also important here. The 'waning taper' is a simile which uses the image of light and its weakening power to prefigure the terrible news and the eclipse of her husband's life. The 'cold' light of the street lamp may also suggest to some students that the wife's life is lonely and lacking human warmth but likely to become even more so soon.

## D

Students may notice the sudden change of pace in the second stanza as the awful message is delivered. The words in red, 'cracks' and 'flashed', show Hardy's use of onomatopoeia, especially with 'cracks', to bring the reader, and the wife, up short and highlight the officiousness and abruptness of the news' delivery.

'Flashed' may also make use of visual imagery in the shock of light after the previously 'waning' light of the first stanza. Both words signal the sudden disaster which will have a huge impact on the woman.

The use of 'smartly' and 'shortly' is the only instance in the poem where these lines are not fully rhymed. The half rhyme here may show phonologically the disconnection between past and present that the wife feels on hearing the news.

The last line may be considered to use euphemisms which are supposed to soften the blow but which seem rather to show up the insincerity and cowardice of those who pass on the news. Students will recognise 'fallen' as a commonly used euphemism applied to the war dead and there may be some useful discussion about the slightly bitter tone in which Hardy uses it here. Similarly, 'the far South Land' seems to mock the woman's grief, since the man's place of death is romanticised and anonymised, with only the adjective 'far' to remind her of the distance between her and her husband. The ellipsis at the end of the stanza is ambiguous and students may be able to suggest why Hardy used it. Perhaps it is meant to stand for all the platitudes which the wife, and every wife, will hear after her husband's death, for example, or maybe it suggests that nothing more can be said to ameliorate her grief.

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## E

Hardy uses previous imagery here as shorthand to allow him economy and sparseness in his style and avoids over-emotional flourishes. The fog simply 'hangs thicker' suggesting a depth of misery and grief which was only 'fold on fold' in the first stanza. Another anonymous person arrives with news from the battlefield – the way in which the actions of the original 'messenger' are duplicated here tends to increase the reader's dread. The light imagery of the opening stanza is used differently here although the light is still only flickering. The warmth suggested by the homely fire is established, perhaps, so that the second letter is even more devastating in its impact. (The song, 'We'll Keep the Homefires Burning' is a World War 1 song but students may be familiar with the image in other literature.) The horror of the last line, so starkly phrased, will not be lost on most students. It might be helpful to compare this expression with the euphemistic one used in the first message and to discuss why Hardy used this much more brutal one here.

## F

Students may notice Hardy's use of alliteration in the first two lines. 'Fresh', 'firm' and 'full' are perhaps easier to consider first and most will see how the irony of these positive and life-affirming words are connected phonologically to increase their effect. 'highest feather' may take some explanation but the overall effect of Hardy's conscious use of alliteration could be discussed. Some may see bitterness in the repetition of sounds, others perhaps poignancy.

'home-planned jaunts', 'summer-weather' and 'new love' may be considered separately before discussing the overall impact of the ironically used happy images here. These phrases are symbolic of all the wasted opportunities lost to the dead man and to his wife because of war – a common theme in Hardy's work. The word 'jaunts' has connotations of a carefree and amusing, even frivolous existence while 'summer weather' is another example of Hardy's shorthand in using the reader's own connotations of happy times. 'New love' is ambiguous but the poem ends with the lost hope of renewal offered by love. The final line caps an overwhelming sense of waste and loss which is conveyed sparingly by reference to resonant symbols and images which are shared by many readers. The inference could be drawn that the experiences depicted in the poem are endured by many wives and husbands through history. A personal response to the poem should be the main focus here, with some analysis of how these responses are evoked by the poem, rather than spotting of devices.