

Charting a Poem

Your name: John Farrell

Author & title of poem: Thomas Hardy, "Drummer Hodge"

Genre and subject: Elegy for a young English drummer killed in the Boer War.

Who is speaking? The poet-observer.

Thematic structure (arrangement of exposition, turn, and closure) and how it fits with or cuts against stanzaic or other formal divisions: The three compact, numerically divided and self-contained stanzas present, in sequence, the unceremonious burial of the young drummer in an alien South African setting during the Boer War; his background, which provided him with little means to understand the situation that led to his death; and his final metamorphosis into a "Southern tree," with the parting observation that his condition of uncomprehending estrangement will last "eternally." This note is struck at the end of each stanza in quite similar terms. The stanzas render the boy's present, past, and future.

Range and shifts of tone: The burial of the drummer is presented with shocking casualness and lack of preparation, like the event itself, but the tone quickly elevates to correspond with the cosmically fatalistic perspective of the stars that "reign" over Hodge's unmarked grave.

Diction: Hardy uses local Afrikaner words that would have been strange to Hodge and so emphasize the boy's bewilderment in a foreign land—the "kopje-crest," the "broad Karoo," etc. Hardy also treats himself to the made-up verb "west" to construct a rather artificial rhyme. Is this awkwardness a calculated effect?

Metrical form and rhyme scheme: Ballad stanza (4-3) with alternating rhymes. The ballad is suitable for popular storytelling, which makes it particularly appropriate for the young soldier's tale.

Details of metrical style (substitutions, caesuras, & enjambments): The poem has a strong iambic rhythm like a drum beat, with first-position trochees at strategic points for the deeply resonant and ironic "Fresh from his Wessex home" (8) and for the striking word "Grow to some Southern tree" (16). There is also the emphatic spondee for the stanza-climaxing "Strange stars" (12). The enjambment between lines one and two enables the emphatically delayed arrival of the key adjective "uncoffined." Then comes a hard caesura giving us time to pause over it.

Effects of rhyme: The rhymes are very full and so contribute to the straight-talking and unvarnished quality of the ballad, but Hardy uses some of the foreign words as second rhymes—"Karoo," "kopje-crest"—making for a somewhat exotic or outlandish effect. The final rhyme-word is the polysyllabic "eternally," which gains extra resonance from its contrast with its shorter rhyming partners, "be" and "tree."

Syntax: Each stanza is a single sentence, but the first one could easily have been three, being constructed of three independent clauses, so the effect is rather artificial. The lines in the first stanza each contain separate clauses, building up the situation couplet by couplet. In the later stanzas, as the poem moves from

storytelling to background and commentary, the subjects and verbs get farther apart, but each line still feels like a separate chunk of meaning. The most striking effect is the emphatic delay of the subject of the last independent clause in stanza two—"Strange stars amidst the gloom" (also emphasized by the initial spondee, as noted above).

Significant symbols and imagery: The key symbolic elements are the strangeness of the landscape (instead of a gravestone Hodge's "landmark is a kopje-crest"), Hodge's metamorphosis into a tree, the graphic reference to his "homely Northern breast and brain," and the "Strange stars" which close each stanza.

Other effects (allusions, quotations, dialogue, etc.): The multiple meaning of "homely"—unattractive, unpretentious, local.

What makes this poem successful or unsuccessful in its genre? The ballad form fits the subject, and the story is a powerful and important one succinctly told. The abrupt beginning is shocking, Hodge's ignorance presented in stanza two evokes our sympathy in part because the setting is strange to us too, and Hodge's metamorphosis and union with the setting in the final stanza have a powerfully ambivalent effect. It is introduced with a "Yet," which seems about to qualify what has come before, and it will qualify it in the sense that Hodge will become a permanent part of what was foreign to him in life. Still, those constellations remain "strange-eyed" and thus distant and pitiless. Compare the attitudes in Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," where it is comforting that the dead Lucy is "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course/With rocks and stones and trees" and in Rupert Brooke's WWI poem "The Soldier," where a soldier's death means "That there's some corner of a foreign field/That is for ever England."

Most striking line: "Grow to some Southern tree."