**A Wife In London Thomas Hardy**

December 1899

I - The Tragedy

She sits in the tawny vapour

That the Thames-side lanes have uprolled,

Behind whose webby fold-on-fold

Like a waning taper

The street-lamp glimmers cold.

A messenger's knock cracks smartly,

Flashed news in her hand

Of meaning it dazes to understand

Though shaped so shortly:

He—he has fallen—in the far South Land…

II – The Irony

'Tis the morrow; the fog hangs thicker,

The postman nears and goes:

A letter is brought whose lines disclose

By the firelight flicker

His hand, whom the worm now knows:

Fresh—firm—penned in highest feather—

Page-full of his hoped return,

And of home-planned jaunts of brake and burn

In the summer weather,

And of new love that they would learn.

This must be one of the most affecting of war poems. Other poems (think of ‘Dulce et Decorum est’ or ‘Exposure’) describe the horrors of actual warfare but this simple piece of writing has an additional emotional kick. Had the letter arrived first it would have been bad enough, but the awful reversal, *the irony* as Hardy puts it, makes it even harder to bear.

Hardy’s language, however, is restrained and unemotional. The characters are anonymous and, as such, symbolic of all the other wives, girlfriends and soldiers.

It would be easy to fill the margins with annotations. Be selective. Solve any vocabulary issues (brake, highest feather…) Then ask students to pick out one thing in each stanza that is of interest and be prepared to say why. (Some things may be of interest because of a connection with another stanza, of course.) These can then be shared in groups so that each group comes up with, say, half a dozen different items of interest. Now mix the groups up and share again. Take each stanza in turn and ask for one item from each group.

These would be my selections and initial thoughts:

*Waning taper* – intimation of death

*Glimmers cold* – contradiction (oxymoron if you must) – like a dying ember

*Knock cracks smartly* – one of the few changes in pace and tone

*He – he has fallen* – repetition, why?

*A letter is brought* – passive voice, distancing

*His hand* – both handwriting and the physical hand

*Fresh—firm—penned in highest feather*— cheerful, lively tone

*Summer* – contrasting with the winter fog

Hardy’s verse structure is interesting. He liked to play with different rhyme and rhythmic schemes. But does the pattern he uses here have any significance? The final single syllable word at the end of each stanza does seem to have a melancholy effect – but am I imagining that?

**A Creative Insight**

Here are the words of the poem. Ask students to construct a short poem (3 or 4 lines) using these words. One half of the class will write one with a positive slant, the other a negative. Allow additions such as -ed or an ‘s’ for plurals or verb agreement and prepositions.

a a a and and and and behind brake brought burn by cold cracks dazes disclose fallen in far feather firelight flashed flicker fog fold-on-fold fresh firm penned glimmers goes hand hand, hangs has have he he her highest his his home-planned hoped in in in in irony is it jaunts knock knows lane lanes learn letter like lines love meaning messenger's morrow nears new news now of of of of of page-full postman return shaped she shortly sits smartly so south street-lamp summer taper tawny thames-side that that the the the the the the the the the the the they thicker though 'tis to understand uprolled vapour waning weather webby whom whose whose worm would

in the glimmer of summer

the postman jaunts smartly

down the lanes

she understands love’s meaning

fallen in the fog

worm vapour shapes his morrow

his hand webby shaped

cold on Thames-side

It doesn’t matter how ‘good’ the poems are. Students will be playing with the language, becoming familiar with Hardy’s vocabulary and tone. In fact, you could make this an introductory activity before they read the poem.

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