



Guns, Coffins and Judgment Day: A Dual Reading of Historicism and Psychoanalysis in Hardy's "Channel Firing"

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a dual reading of Thomas Hardy's poem 'Channel Firing' through the critical frameworks of Historicism and Psychoanalytic Theory. By contextualizing the poem within the tensions leading up to World War 1, Hardy portrays the war as a manifestation, a force- capable of marring not only England's physical and historical monuments, but also the psyche of both the dead and the living. Although the battle is only a drill and not an actual war, the deafening sound of the explosions are powerful enough to wake the dead-as if heralding Judgment Day. This paper examines trauma and repressed emotions as they surface amidst ongoing wartime practices, analyzing how historical violence and psychological distress intersect in the narrative of the poem.

Introduction:

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), an English novelist and poet, belonged to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during Victorian era. His first completed novel, 'The Poor Man and the Lady' was considered too radical for the public at the time and was never published. In 1862, he relocated to London, where his experiences further revealed the stark contrasts in class and opportunity -a theme that would become central in his later works. Despite achieving significant success as a novelist, Hardy regarded poetry as his true vocation. Nature, as he experienced it, was a recurring theme in both his poetic and fictional works.



It is well documented that the poem “Channel Firing” was written in April 1914, mere months before the outbreak of the First World War, and thus serves as a grim harbinger of the conflict to come. The poem opens with a conversation between God and the dead, who have been disturbed in their graves by the sounds of gunnery and war practices along the coast. Given the thematic complexity and layered meanings in Hardy’s “Channel Firing”, it would be both insightful and appropriate to examine the poem through two methodological lenses: psychoanalytic theory and New Historicism. Historicism allows us to examine a text within its historical, cultural, and social contexts. It enables us to explore the time and era in which the poem was written, considering the historical circumstances of its composition, the themes addressed and the purpose behind the work. In the case of “Channel Firing”, we can analyze how the events and anxieties of 1914- the eve of World War 1 shaped Hardy’s depiction of war and its moral implications. Psychoanalytic theory, on the other hand, offers a lens through which we can interpret the poem’s unique structure- a conversation between God and the dead. This interaction, I believe, reflects a form of repressed unconsciousness, with the voices of the dead symbolizing hidden fears, anxieties, and existential reflections, the unconscious emerges through the dead speaking from their graves, providing us with deeper insights into the poem’s psychological and emotional dimensions.

The contextual landscape of the poem takes place along the English Channel, where gunnery practice is underway at sea. The sounds of gunfire, cannons, and explosions reverberate across the coastal area, reaching the graveyard where the dead are buried. These sounds so thunderous and intense, described in the line “your great guns”- awakens the deceased from their graves in a country churchyard. Upon being roused by the noise, the dead mistakenly interpret the sounds as the voice of God, believing that it signals the arrival of Judgment Day. Having been long deceased, they are convinced that the moment of divine reckoning has arrived as reflected in their line from the poem “We thought it was the Judgment Day”. The violent force of the blasts is vividly captured in the lines “shook all our coffins as we lay”, “And broke the chancel window-squares”. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the phrase “your great guns” can be interpreted as a manifestation of the death drive- what Freud refers to as “Thanatos”-representing humanity’s unconscious compulsion toward destruction and repetition. In contrast, “our coffins” may symbolize the unconscious mind, a space of repressed memories and dormant anxieties. The line “shook all our coffins as we lay” reflects how these destructive external forces repeatedly disturb the unconscious, forcing repressed fears-particularly of death and annihilation- back to the surface. The id represents instinctual desires and urges, for instance the line “great guns” which signifies the death drive (Thanatos). In psychoanalytic term, the dead’s assumption that the noise signals Judgment Day may be read as an activation of the superego- a symbolic representation of the internalized moral authority that



demands accountability and order. Judgment Day can be likened to an uncanny moment—strangely familiar yet deeply unsettling. This experience is not comforting, as it confronts the subject with repressed fears and existential truths.

In the second stanza, the phrase “sat upright” is indicative of a response to a sudden shock, fear, or even threat. Within a psychoanalytical framework, this moment symbolizes the intrusion of the id, with its death drive, violence, and uncontained aggression into the realm of the superego. Just as repressed guilt and desires are brought into consciousness, the skeletons which have been lying dormant and passive are now jolted into an upright position. War strips away everything; it disrupts not only human lives but also distorts the natural landscape. The devastation caused by war affects not only the physical terrain but also the living creatures – the hounds, the mouse and the worms. These creatures in their instinctual response to the chaos, retreat, “drew back” in fear or withdrawal. The hounds howling suggest an impending threat that evokes feelings of anxiety or dread. It is quite natural to associate creatures such as worms, mice, and hounds with darkness, filth and horror-elements that evoke discomfort and fear. These creatures are often linked to unwanted or unsettling experiences in the human psyche. The presence of these creatures serves as a powerful metaphor for the resurfacing of repressed desires and emotions. Their sudden movement—startled, retreating, or howling—can be seen as symbolic of the return of the repressed—a core concept in psychoanalysis. The appearance of these low-dwelling creatures—scavengers and detritivores (worms and rodents) are traditionally associated with decay and death. Symbolically, they represent the unveiling of the moral rot—what society tries to bury. Hardy powerfully conveyed a streak of irony through the image of the altar, a symbol traditionally associated with reverence and divine order (superego). Placed against the backdrop of war, it becomes a mute witness to human hostility and aggression (id). This juxtaposition reveals Hardy’s critique of the disconnect between religious ideals and human reality.

It can be inferred that the dead in “Channel Firing” are long deceased, likely reduced to bones and skeletal remains. This detail is significant: it takes years for a body to decompose to that state, implying that a considerable amount of time has passed since their burial. Yet, despite the passage of all this time “The world is as it used to be”. This realization delivered by God underscores that the living have not changed. Humanity is trapped in blood-thirsty vengeance. War and violence are not anomalies but constants. In most religious contexts, God’s appearance signifies intervention, the arrival of a miracle, or the beginning of a redemptive process—often aimed at restoring harmony, or solving a profound moral crisis. However, in Hardy’s “Channel Firing”, this expectation is subverted. In the third stanza of the poem, God appears not to enact “Judgment Day”, but merely as a means to clarify a misunderstanding to



reassure that the world has not come to an end and that the deafening sounds are the sounds of bombs and explosions, merely military drills; entirely man-made, caused by the “gunnery practice out at sea” and not cosmic. Here, the dead, symbolizing the unconscious are stirred by external stimuli (the thunder of warfare), only to realize there is no divine reckoning.

In the fourth stanza, the word “nations” refers to a collective entity, implying that every human, every country, and every part of the world is driven by a thirst for blood, more “Red war yet redder”, underscoring a desire for revenge; united by a common impulse toward violence. From a Freudian perspective, this collective drive reflects the id’s dominance- the realm of instinctual desires, particularly aggression and destruction. The impulse for violence induced by war is likened to the irrational anger and erratic behaviour historically associated with mercury poisoning among hat makers during eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hardy draws a sharp comparison between chemical-induced madness and the collective derangement of warmongering nations. God continues speaking to the dead through the line “They do no more for Christe’s sake”, unveiling to them that the living no longer adhere to the sacred principles that uphold the sanctity of life and the moral imperative to cherish it. In the poem, God continues addressing the dead who according to Him “are helpless in such matters”. The dead are presented as passive spectators and through this the ego’s powerless to intervene between id and superego is at a vivid display. This aligns with the Freudian idea that ego can only function effectively if there is a balance between the id and the superego.

In the following stanza, God proceeds to inform the dead that the living are fortunate “That this is not the judgment hour”. He implies that if it were, the living would have already been condemned to hell, punished for the violence and destruction they committed on earth, and would by now be scouring “hell’s floor” as a consequence of their actions. The id is the root of these primal drives: violence, aggression, selfishness, etc. The ego caught between the cravings of the id and the demands of the superego implies to the rational self. As World War 1 looms in the background, Hardy critiques how nations become blind to the universal humanity and shared human connections that transcend borders.

In the succeeding lines, God lets out an iconic hearty laugh “ha, ha”- declaring that it will be even hotter when he blows the trumpet, alluding to the Judgment Day, when many among the living would be damned for their actions-bloodshed and dehumanization they have unleashed and justified, all in the name of sovereignty and nationalism. The “trumpet” is the symbol of divine awakening often associated with judgment and final reckoning. God intervenes not to punish but to clarify and console. He understands the frailty of mankind, and His compassion is discernible as He says “for you are men” who are prone to temptation, sin and violence. Yet instead of immediate judgment, He offers rest “for you are



men, And rest eternal sorely need". The word "rest" in this context carries multiple layers of meaning. On the surface, it refers to the literal rest of the dead-they must return to their graves after having been temporarily awoken by the disruptive sounds of human folly- bombs and explosions. However, on a deeper level, rest suggests spiritual peace. In offering His reassurance, God calms the fears of the dead, enabling them to return to their graves in peace. One could view God as a manifestation of the superego exerting control over the dead. The dead temporarily awoken can be seen as symbol of the id-representing chaos. The id having awoken by external stimuli reflects the deep-seated fears and anxieties which have been subdued by the voice of divine moral authority. His words restore the psychic order.

As the poem progresses, the superego reigns over the unconscious as the dead obediently laid back to rest. However, even in their slumber, the ego emerges through the reflective voice of one of the dead as he speaks "Will the world ever saner be". He is questioning whether there will ever be rationality in the world of conflict than the time in which they lived. This implies that humanity has always been power-driven, blood- thirsty, self-destructive, and predatory.

Subsequently, one of them, Parson Thirdly- then a symbolic figure of the church, laments having lived a pious life; instead wished he had indulged in worldly pleasures like drinking "beer" and smoking "pipes". Through him, Hardy exposes the emptiness of rigid moralism (superego) in an indifferent world. At this time, the skeleton becomes confessional. The ego was able to shield his behaviour, but now in death the id breaks through in the form of regrets for having repressed his desires.

Lastly, Hardy again reminds us of the looming catastrophe, at the time as tensions between European powers were rising. He goes on to critique modern war and its destructive force, which spreads across all parts of England-reaching not only its land, but also Camelot-the legendary court of King Arthur, the historical significance of Stourton Tower, and Stonehenge- the famous prehistoric monument of Celtic religious site, evokes dreams of a romantic era.. The roar of the guns sunders the peace not only of present-day England but of England's past as well. Historicism underscores how modern militarism ravaged not only the landscape of England but also its historical and cultural heritage. In psychoanalytic theory, the roar of the guns disturbing the hour symbolizes the repression of human aggression; set in motion by the outbreak of war. Through a psychoanalytic lens, just as the unconscious mind buries repressed thoughts and desires, similarly society too suppresses humanity's primal urge for violent impulses.

Hardy, in "Channel Firing" presents the absurdity of the cycles of war and violence; undermines any hope of cosmic order with the least scope for future redemption. The skeletal arose to the sound of artillery practice and not by divine power, becomes a testament to humanity's hostility. By examining the



intersection of historical warfare and psychological distress, Hardy reveals the intricate nature of human suffering and exposes the inherent futility of progress.

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