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Imagery in Thomas Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain"

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy's poem "The Convergence of the Twain" portrays a tragedy of human pride in the sinking of Titanic; the most famous ocean liner in its time. It became more famous when it sank in April 1912. This research analyzed the poem based on the use of imagery. From the analysis, some lessons were found that man could build and develop modern and sophisticated technology, but he would not be able to control his fate. The force of fate owned by the Almighty God was above everything. Indeed; man proposes, God disposes.

Key words: visual image, auditory image, tactile image, tragedy, fate, destiny

One of the most controversial tragedies in the 20th century is the sinking of the ocean liner Titanic in April 1912. It inspired Thomas Hardy to write "The Convergence of the Twain". This poem was published in 1915, three years after the tragedy. The title indicates that Hardy tries to compare the tragedy to a meeting of the two, in this case the iceberg and Titanic. The comparison triggers the emergence of a mystery. This paper reveals the secret through a discussion on imagery used in the poem. In some ways, the writer treats the poem as a discourse since Fowler (1980: 80) says that viewing literature as discourse produces some unusual insights.

Complexity often happens in the process of analysis, especially when it comes to the nature of the language of literature. As Brooks (1975: 3) says, the language of poetry is the language of paradox. It is not common language. Dillons (1980: 213) also warns that some poets frequently employs inversions and deletions. Fortunately, Posner (1982: 18) emphasizes that it is not a big problem. He clarifies that every word is an independent conceptual word and, as such, able to transmit an idea, every word has (at least) one constant meaning which, when combined with the meanings of other words, contributes to the meaning of the expression as a whole. Based on the views, this study proceeds.

Method and Approach

This study applies The New Criticism mechanism. This approach uses close reading to analyze works of literature. Pioneers of this school of analysis are

T. S. Eliot, Kenneth Burke, J. C. Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, R. P. Blackmur, and Yvor Winters (Pritchard 1956: 231). In a different term, Reinhart (1980: 92) calls it as focus-interpretation (to distinguish it from vehicle-interpretation). In a way some complicated words were found, the words, then, tested against ordinary usage (Canfield 1997: 6). Through this mechanism, a comprehensive discussion is hopefully achieved.

Results and Discussion

Upon first reading, Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain" appears to be a tragedy in general sense. A close investigation of the imagery in Hardy's highly detailed description, however, reveals some philosophical points. By examining the imagery that Hardy uses to strengthen the whole tone of the scene, it can be seen that beneath the tragedy in the poem is a philosophical atmosphere. The general theme of "The Convergence of the Twain" is that of a fate created absolutely by the Almighty God. By carefully and effectively describing the tragedy, Hardy creates, through his images, something more than a tragedy. Below is the poem.

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

The Convergence of the Twain 1912

Lines on the Loss of the Titanic

I
In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,

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And the Pride of Life that planned her,
stilly couches she.

II

Steel chambers, late the pyres of her salamandrine
fires, Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal
lyres.

III

Over the mirrors meant
To glass the opulent
The sea-worm crawls-grotesque, slimed, dumb,
indifferent.

IV

Jewels in joy designed
To ravish the sensuous mind
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and
blind.

V

Dim moon-eyed fishes near
Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down
here?"...

VI

Well: while was fashioning
This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything.

VII

Prepared a sinister mate
For her - so gaily great -
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

VIII

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

IX

Alien they seemed to be:
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

X

Or sign that they were bent
by paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

XI

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two
hemispheres.

(Kennedy & Gioia 2005: 486–487)

The first image appears in the title of the poem "Convergence of Twain". The visual image gives the first clue that the poem talks about philosophy. Skilleas (2001:129) emphasizes that literature is usually philosophical. The title specifically implies that there is something secret in the tragedy. Since a tragedy normally triggers disaster, while it is portrayed as a meeting of the two, in this case the iceberg and Titanic, it can be reasoned that the tragedy gives not only information but also some profound lessons, especially philosophy.

Through accurately selected imagery, Hardy succeeds to wrap the poem with moody atmosphere. The poem, obviously, isn't about a nice event; hence there are a lot of references to death. There are eleven stanzas in the poem, making it feel almost unfinished, or cut short, like the people who died on the Titanic. There are only three lines per stanza, which basically carries on the same idea of incompleteness. The eleven stanzas of three lines follow a *a a a* rhyme pattern.

Each stanza, even each line, of the poem offers numerous examples where the image sustains the tone implied in the title. The first three lines of the poem are quite tragic:

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly
couches she.

The visual and tactile image of loneliness above give an idea that the ship was in a place where it was forgotten, where no human eye could see, and where it wouldn't be disturbed by nosy humans. These lines describe a condition in which no one and nothing is around it. A condition that makes anyone frustrated of being alone. The word *vanity* was purposefully used to convey an intended image in which no one can boast himself in front of others forever. Today someone maybe successful, but later he can be a loss.

The kinesthetic image "and the pride of life that planned her, stilly couches she" emerges in the third line of the poem. Hardy used "Pride of Life" to mean technology. The latest and most modern marine equipment available went into the designing of the unsinkable Titanic. Hardy emphasized "Pride of Life" because of the over-confidence man had in his advancement in technology at the time. This over-confidence led to the deceptive believes that the Titanic was unsinkable thereby challenging fate and coincidence. This is a show of foolish human pride. The fact that the words "Pride of Life" have capital letters is ironic. It gives the impression that there

was nothing there to be proud of, that this great plan had failed. The second phrase in line three "...stilly couches she..." is the idea of the ship under the water, far from humans. It lies undisturbed. It was once full of life and now there is quietness.

Stanza two talks about how her great steel chambers, which once burned with bright red fires, now, have the cold currents of the sea running through them:

Steel chambers, late the pyres
Of her salamandrine fires,
Cold currents thrild, and turn to rhythmic tidal
lyres.

This stanza reminds of imminent death. The visual image of pyres is like cremation and even the reference to fires serves as a warning that this poem won't be pleasant. The choice of word "pyres" also implies a funeral pyre, therefore giving connotations of death. The visual image of steel chambers suggests that nothing is stronger than God Himself. How strong a substance will not be able to confront His power. Stanza three:

Over the mirrors meant
To glass the opulent
The sea-worm crawls-grotesque, slimed, dumb,
indifferent.

The combination of visual, auditory, and tactile image in this stanza gives the idea that the mirrors are only there to reflect the vanity in people, to let them see what they want to see. The mirrors mentioned represent the vanity of the rich and yet the contrast is that now a sea-worm crawls over them not caring about his look. He is indifferent, these words (used to describe a sea-worm) all give connotations of something ugly, meaning the event that happened was ugly in itself.

The following stanza four also continues with the theme of vanity. The expensive jewels that were so important are worthless:

Jewels in joy designed
To ravish the sensuous mind
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black
and blind.

The visual image in this stanza describes how the jewels that now lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind. The use of alliteration in this line is very effective. The "b" sound is a hard sound, almost harsh. This fits into the nature of the poem in the way that it is hard and isn't trying to sugar-coat the truth. This symbolizes the fact that possessions

can't save someone. The whole idea of putting faith in jewels is ludicrous. The word blind tells about the shallowness of the people who bought them. When the jewels were purchased they may have seemed precious but the people were blind to assume the jewels were really worth happiness. Now the jewels are just rubbish under the ocean.

Stanza five is ironic in the sense that all of the vaingloriousness. This is once again giving the idea that jewellery is here to please the rich:

Dim moon-eyed fishes near
Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: "What does this vaingloriousness
down here?"...

The use of olfactory image vaingloriousness is interesting as it gives connotations of boasting, giving the impression that people of a richer class are trying to out-do each other with their fineries. They take hedonism as a way of life and believe that properties are the most important thing in life.

Indeed, Hardy was a believer in the force of fate and once destiny has been prepared, man cannot control his fate. Hardy shows this in stanza six that while man was fashioning the Titanic, fate was also making the Titanic's fate, the iceberg:

Well: while was fashioning
This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges
everything

Immanent Will is used in stanza six line three as a personification of the force of fate. Hardy used the personification of the force of fate to emphasize it and human destiny which man is unable to control. An impression can be caught here that because humans thought they were doing such a great thing, and were being dismissive that anything could go wrong, fate couldn't help but intervene and put them back in their place. It was something out of man's control.

Verse seven refers to the iceberg being formed described as a sinister mate. Here, the poet is describing the iceberg:

Prepared a sinister mate
For her - so gaily great -
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate..

The use of visual image mate refers to a kind of relationship between the iceberg and the Titanic, but not the kind of romantic relationship. It refers to a relationship between two different substances which cause disaster for human civilization. The words

far and dissociate are just reinforcing the fact that nobody knew what would happen to the ship.

Stanza eight, in contrast to stanza seven, discusses how the ship growing in stature, grace and hue. This stanza is dominated by kinesthetic image:

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

There is a difference between the smart ship and the iceberg which will cause disaster. Yet both will have equal importance in verse 10 because it is told they are twin halves of one august event. They will be two halves of the tragedy:

Or sign that they were bent
by paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

The definition of “august” as found in “Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary” means having great importance and especially of the highest social class. The sinking of the ship was certainly very important, but for all the wrong reasons; reasons from people of highest social class.

In the last stanza, fate is personified as “The Spinner of the Years”: and once fate says “Now!” it is the time, nothing can change it. It is a master plan:

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said “Now!” And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

The kinesthetic image in the last line, “consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres” gives the idea that human pride was shattered when the ship sank. The two hemispheres would refer to either side of the world (i.e.: the families and friends that had seen their loved ones leave from Belfast, and the families and friends who were waiting for them to arrive in New York). The word “jar” could be the news filtering through, and the families being devastated, and also human pride being jarred because of those proud to see the ship leave and those

waiting for it to arrive gloriously. Unfortunately, fate takes its own decision, which is different from the people’s expectation.

Conclusion

Visual image dominates the use of imagery in the marvelous poem. Borrowing Keyser’s term (1980:257), both its form and content are identical in beauty. An observation on the use of imagery helps the discussion above reveals that the poem shows the tragedy of man’s overconfidence. The builders of the Titanic were so confident in their ability that they have capacity to build and develop a very modern ship and believe that the ship is totally perfect and safe. Apart from its controversy, Hardy’s poem ended in wisdom, prepare ourselves for the forces of nature we cannot control and learn from our mistakes, not taking fate and coincidence for granted. One may be optimistic of his future, but remember that finally fate decides everything. Indeed, man proposes, God disposes.

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