A Wife in London

POEM TEXT

I — The Tragedy

She sits in the tawny vapour
That the City 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 is in her hand
Of meaning it dazes to understand
Though shaped so shortly:
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 by brake and burn
In the summer weather,
And of new love that they would learn.

SUMMARY

The wife of the of the title is sitting at home, surrounded by the dull orange fog that the streets of Victorian London produce. The fog has a spidery quality to it. Through the mistiness, the street lamp shines dimly.

Suddenly, there is a loud and purposeful knock at the door. A messenger gives the wife a short but bewildering message. It tells that her husband has died at war in South Africa.

It is the following day and the London fog has grown thicker. The postman arrives and delivers a letter to the wife. By firelight, she opens the letter and sees the handwriting of her husband, who is now dead.

The letter has an air of confidence, evidently written enthusiastically. In it, the husband talks optimistically about what the two of them will do when he comes back. He looks forward to walking with her in the summer by country streams and greenery, and anticipates the development of their love.

THEMES

WAR

"A Wife in London" is an anti-war poem that seeks to illuminate the absurdity and tragedy that go arm-in-arm with violent conflict. It is a message of war's hopelessness—how war cuts life short needlessly, affecting not just those immediately involved but those back home as well. The poem argues that war is not just tragic, but also unnecessary, and suggests that people are wrong to think of war as something noble or heroic.

The poem is a tale told in two sections, which concern two very different pieces of communication. In the first section, a wife receives news of her husband's death in battle. In the second, set the next day, she receives a letter from the husband himself. The mismatch in content and timing between the official telegram and the husband's letter develop the poem's central message of war's absurd hopelessness.

The poem has a domestic setting, focusing on a wife whose husband has gone to war (in this case to fight for the British in the Boer War). Her isolation is established from the beginning, as she sits in the murky fog of Victorian London. The setting suggests that decisions to go to war take place in a kind of moral fog; that is, war makes morality itself unclear. The wife is a passive figure—she takes no action, things only happen *to* her. Her helplessness, then, may be a stand-in for mankind's inability to stop itself from going to war. When news comes of her husband's death, the short message uses the euphemistic "fallen" to mask what was probably a horrible death. This unemotional language speaks to the disconnect between the unfeeling official bureaucracy of war and the all-too-real tragedy it visits upon soldiers and their families.

In the poem's second event, the wife receives a letter from her husband the next day—because of the slowness of mail (as opposed to the speed of underwater cable-enabled telegrams), this communication is effectively from the grave. The letter is full of hope, with her husband looking forward to his return and their imminent time together. But, of course, war has cut this young life short. The promise of good times to come only highlights the fact they never will. The letter makes a tragic scenario even worse, painfully reminding the wife of her sudden loss. As described in the poem's two events, the wife

represents all loved ones who lose someone in war—these deaths, though eventually just a number in the history books, are immediate, visceral and, as the poem ultimately argues, unnecessary. The sense of the futility of war is developed as much by what is left out of the poem as by what is present. That is, there is a notable lack of any heroism or honor—there is no patriotic language nor suggestion of noble sacrifice. The overall effect, then, makes the husband's death feel devoid of meaning or purpose.

The husband's letter speaks of "new love that they would learn" on his return, suggesting further development of the love between husband and wife. Of course, his death is already confirmed and he will never come home. This knowledge, then, modifies the poem's conclusion—the "new love" that the wife will have to learn, alone, is that of a widow for her deceased husband. The poem thus ends on a double tragedy: one life cut short by death, and a second life irreversibly altered by the death of a loved one. "A Wife in London," then, has nothing positive to say about war and focuses only on these tragic details, suggesting that war itself has no higher purpose or justification. Cleverly, it uses distancing—in the husband's absence first at war and then in death—to bring the reality of war *closer* to the reader, who is made to feel the wife's loss and thereby to reflect on bigger questions of who war is for, what it achieves, and whether it's ever worth it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I — The Tragedy
She sits in the tawny vapour

The poem begins with scene-setting. Readers already know who the subject of the poem is—the "wife" from the title. Indeed, they also know that the poem is set in London.

A sense of passivity is introduced from the very first line. "Sits" is not a very active verb, and it gently indicates the wife's helplessness in her particular situation—her husband has gone to war and is far away, and whatever happens to him is out of her control.

"Tawny vapour" describes a very specific type of fog particular to London at the time. It was partly mist from the river, but mostly consisted of emissions from chimneys and factories. It had a particular yellowy-brown tinge, which earned it the unappetizing nickname of "pea soup" (and it was also known as "smog"). Its presence here is a kind of pathetic fallacy—though it is more man-made than natural—which creates a feeling of murkiness, as though it is hard to see clearly. As this is a poem that discusses the hopeless absurdity of war, the obscurity of the fog surrounding the wife gestures towards the similarly murky morality of armed conflict. The slowness of the assonant vowel sounds in the phrase (/i/ in "sits" and "in," /a/ in "tawny" and "vapour") also helps to conjure this idea of the smog enveloping the city and forming a kind of inescapable confusion.

LINES 3-6

That the City lanes have uprolled,
Behind whose webby fold on fold
Like a waning taper
The street-lamp glimmers cold.

Lines 3 to 6 primarily develop the image introduced in the opening. Line 4 picks up on the ethereal look of the fog and, in the adjective "webby," suggests that it is thin and complex like a spider's web. This makes the wife seem entangled in something, like a fly in a spider's web, an image which contributes to the sense of her helplessness. The alliteration of "fold on fold" also gives the fog a layered, almost suffocating quality. Again, the word choices here all combine to make the wife seem trapped by circumstance.

Lines 5 and 6 introduce the next element of the scene—the street-lamp. Somewhat strangely, the detached speaker compares one type of light with another through the use of simile. The street light is compared to a candle (a "taper") that has almost gone out. Whereas light is usually meant to bring clarity and warmth, here it only "glimmers cold." That is, the low light symbolically represents both the wife's state of not-knowing—the messenger with the bad news has not yet arrived—and the moral murkiness of war.

Additionally, the fact that the taper is "waning"—which also has a slightly assonant chime with "tawny" from the first line—suggests that it is about to go out, foreshadowing the husband's life too being snuffed out as a casualty of war.

The use of consonance in the last two lines of the stanza makes the lines feel clogged up—/l/ sounds appear throughout—

Like a waning taper
The street-lamp glimmers cold.

—and that sonic effect contributes to the sense of the wife being stuck in her situation.

LINES 7-11

A messenger's knock cracks smartly,
Flashed news is in her hand
Of meaning it dazes to understand
Though shaped so shortly:
He—has fallen—in the far South Land...

The second stanza accelerates the tempo of the poem. If the first stanza created a sense of stasis—not much happening, and

nothing much to see—the first line here is a sudden and almost violent interruption. A messenger appears in line 7—and the use of "messenger" is suitably anonymous—and knocks on the door to deliver the news that the wife's husband is dead.

The line itself "cracks" onomatopoeically, with the harsh consonance of /k/ sounds and the assonance of "cracks" and "smartly" making the line a shock to the reader, in line with the shocking news that comes with it. The use of meter here, with three stressed syllables in a row, also creates a violent, stressful effect that mirrors the content of the message:

knock cracks smartly

The use of "flashed" in the next line sounds equally urgent, partly suggestive of the flashes of gunfire and explosives that occur in war. The word also points to the medium of the message: a telegram, in which the content is rendered in a series of on-and-off electrical signals.

The "news" in line 8 is both easy and difficult to understand. The literal content of it is clear—the husband is dead. But the implications are bewildering for the wife, "dazing" her—what exactly happened, and what happens now? The brevity of the message indicates the regularity of this type of communication. People die in war, almost anonymously—but each death affects everyone in that person's life. But war—or this type of war, anyway—depends on sheer numbers, and so the shortness of the message both points to the relative unimportance of the husband in the overall scheme of the war *and* the shortness of his now-ended life. The almost monosyllabic quality of "though shaped so shortly" emphasizes this sense of constraint.

The caesura created by the use of dashes in the final line of the stanza perhaps mimics the physical act of reading performed by the wife. She probably knows what the message is going to say, but can barely bring herself to read it. It also indicates a kind of senselessness to the message, as though its content could be undone by the sentence itself falling apart.

"A Wife in London" also employs euphemism here in the word "fallen." Line 12 is the message that has just been delivered to the wife, and its literal content is the information that the wife's husband is dead. He has been killed at war, and probably died a gruesome, painful death. But that's not how the official-speak of the army's letter puts it—the use of "fallen" deliberately underplays the stark horror and tragedy of what has happened. This might be because it somehow sounds more dignified to have "fallen" than to have been killed, and also because it delivers the core information without going into any of the gory details (that might further distress the wife). That's a somewhat optimistic interpretation, though. An alternative way of looking at the use of "fallen" is that it tries to euphemistically conceal the horrors of war, with its softening tone making the army—and the politicians that sent them into the conflict—somehow less culpable for what has happened. It could, then, be interpreted as a rather cynical use of language and a choice that points to the essentially corrupt nature of war.

LINES 12-14

II — The Irony
'Tis the morrow; the fog hangs thicker,
The postman nears and goes:

Here begins the second section of the poem, which promises to add the "irony" to the "tragedy" of the husband's death. The use of caesura after "morrow" marks the fact that this is not just a new day, but rather one in which everything has changed.

The intensity of the fog increases to match the sorrow of the wife's state of mind (again demonstrating pathetic fallacy). As with the first stanza, the two lines here uses consonance to conjure that thickness with /g/ sounds. What was already a morbid sense of gloom is becoming more and more impenetrable, signifying the way in which the wife is enveloped in her sudden grief.

What's more, the verbs used in the line about the postman purposefully create a sense that, though the wife is suffering, the world goes on around her with an almost relentless indifference. The postman doesn't stop to talk, only draws near before almost immediately leaving—he is in a hurry, mirroring the way that the world doesn't stop just because one soldier has fallen. There is a contrast, then, between the raw personal grief of the widow and the mundanity going on outside. The plain iambic meter of this line mimics this sense of getting on with things:

The post- | man nears | and goes

LINES 1-1

A letter is brought whose lines disclose
By the firelight flicker
His hand, whom the worm now knows:

The following three lines of the third stanza introduce the second piece of communication in the poem—the husband's letter, sent, of course, before he died. The use of passive voice here—"a letter is brought" rather than "the postman brings a letter"—emphasizes the detachment between the wife and the world, on account of her sudden grief-stricken state.

Line 16 is another description of low lighting, mirroring the "waning taper" in the first stanza. The assonance of /i/ sounds here creates a sense of the flickering light and the image again suggests a sense of confusion or murkiness.

Line 17 plays on the word "hand." This word acts as both a description of the husband's handwriting *and* a rather macabre reminder of his body, which is now just that—an inanimate body. This, then, is a kind of mixture of metonymy (the

handwriting representing the person) and synecdoche (the "hand" standing in for the rest of the body). The combination has an unsettling effect, conjuring a sense of disembodiment that mirrors the husband's move from life to death. The rest of the line picks up on this eeriness and suggestion of loss, referring to the husband as one "whom the worm now knows." The worm here is a symbol for the grave, suggesting the process of decomposition. The use of assonance here is very deliberate, with the /o/ sounds literally worming their way through each word apart from "the." The mention of the "hand" also contrasts with the image of the wife's hand in stanza 2—one alive, and dead, and forever unable to rejoin in partnership.

LINES 18-22

Fresh—firm—penned in highest feather —
Page-full of his hoped return,
And of home-planned jaunts by brake and burn
In the summer weather,
And of new love that they would learn.

The final stanza deals entirely with the contents of the husband's letter. It describes the overall tone of his letter as one of good spirits, with the "freshness" and "firmness" mentioned in line 18 contrasting with the reference to the body's decomposition in the previous stanza. "Highest feather" simply means that the letter has a confident, happy tone. Of course, all of the emotions here are subverted by the tragic news that arrived in advance of the letter—the happiness the husband expresses only deepens the wife's sadness. The alliteration in the first line has an almost absurd lightness to it, contributing to the sense of irony that the section's title advertises. It's also worth noting the way that the punctuation here mirrors that used at the end of the second stanza—the two pieces of communication look quite similar, but they couldn't have more contrasting messages.

The husband has filled the page with optimistic thoughts of returning home—but the word "hoped" instead ends up standing for the "hopelessness" of the situation. "Hoped" and "home" alliterate and are assonant, showing that they are conceptually linked: the husband's hope was linked to his memory of home. "Jaunt" is a light word, suggestive of being carefree—which, in a way, the husband now is, but at the same time, such lightness now feels impossible to the wife. The alliteration of "brake and burn"—words which essentially mean "stream" and "greenery"—evokes a sense of frivolous fun that is, of course, never to come.

The final line is key to the poem's meaning, and it is also deliberately ambiguous. This "new love" that the husband mentions might refer to his expectations about how things will be when they are reunited—it'll be a new kind of love because it will be heightened by the fact that he has come back from war. Some critics also suggest that the line might imply that the wife is pregnant, and that the "new love" will be as parents for a child—but there isn't enough evidence here to make that claim conclusively. The most likely, and most depressing, meaning of the line (though not the meaning the husband intended), is that the "new love" to be learnt is the wife's. She will have to get used to loving her husband in the past tense, as a widow. This conclusion indicates that the senseless tragedy of war subverts all good things, even something as pure as a wife's love for her husband.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs intermittently throughout "A Wife in London." It is generally used to make the poem's imagery more vivid—that is, to make the words *sound* like what they're describing.

The first instance is in the third line of the first stanza. The /f/ sounds combine across "fold on fold" to create an enveloping sound that evokes a spider's web and generally speaks to the way the London fog surrounds the wife.

The next example of alliteration is in "shaped so shortly" in the penultimate line of the second stanza. The uniformity of the sounds emphasizes the "shortness" of the message. It's as if there isn't time for any other sounds to be in there, such is the urgency of the communication.

In the third stanza, "firelight flicker" has a sonic quality to it that is reminiscent of a flame on the edge of going out. These /f/ sounds continue in the first two lines of the final stanza, contrasting the idea of extinguishment (of flame and of life) with the perky optimism of the husband's words. This is part of the irony mentioned in the section title.

The repeated /h/ and /b/ sounds in lines 19 and 20 add a final note of tragic contrast by highlighting the upbeat, joyful tone of the husband's letter. The breathy /h/ sounds of "hoped" and "home" conjure a sense of breathless excitement, as the husband puts all his hopes in the idea of returning home. The /b/ sounds of "brake" and "burn" sound lively and active, which reinforces the idea of the husband and wife out for "jaunts" in summer—happy occasions which, of course, will never happen.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "f," "f"
- **Line 10:** "sh," "s," "sh"
- **Line 16:** "f," "f"
- **Line 18:** "F," "f," "f"
- **Line 19:** "h"
- **Line 20:** "h," "b," "b"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout "A Wife in London," sometimes with more significance than other times.

The vowel sounds in "tawny vapour" in the second line are very similar to those in "waning taper," though this is also due to the rhyme scheme. The assonance here adds a sense of claustrophobia that matches the atmosphere of London smog.

In the first line of stanza 2, assonance gives the poem a sharp jolt in sound: "cracks smartly." The line describes an interruption, and it also *sounds* like an interruption compared with the sonics of the previous stanza. Including the word "knock," these three words sound like a purposeful knock at the door—and that's in part due to the choice of vowel sounds.

In stanza 3, the /i/ sounds in "firelight flicker" (which call back to the rhyming vowel in the word "thicker" in line 13) create a sense of narrowness and vulnerability in keeping with the image of a flame on the edge of going out. The final line of this stanza is perhaps the most outwardly obvious use of assonance, combining four /o/ sounds across five words: "whom the worm now knows." Here, the speaker is talking about the body of the husband now in the ground—the repetition of vowels is a linguistic representation of the worm making its way through the earth.

In the final stanza, the /u/ sounds across "full," "jaunts," "burn," and "summer" create a sense of playfulness that contributes to this section's irony by being inappropriate to the somberness of the situation.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "a," "a"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 11:** "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 13:** "i"
- **Line 16:** "i," "i"
- **Line 17:** "o," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 19:** "u"
- **Line 20:** "au," "u"
- **Line 21:** "u"

CAESURA

Caesura is used sparingly in "A Wife in London." It first appears at the end of stanza 2. Here it has a fragmenting effect, embodying the way in which the delivered message "dazes" its recipient, the wife.

It's next employed at the start of the second section. The semi-colon after "morrow" creates a pause that signals both that time has passed and that something has changed irrevocably. The caesura after "hand" at the end of this stanza allows for the dramatic effect of the assonance in the words that follow, which creates a visual and aural sense of the "worm" moving through the earth.

The final example of caesura is in the first line of the final stanza. Visually, it is nearly the mirror image of the last line from stanza 2. This is part of the poem's irony—the loving letter from the husband arrives *after* news of his death. The literal content of the line reflects the husband's optimism at the time of writing—but the use of caesura reflects the line that brought news of his death.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "—," "—"
- **Line 13:** ";"
- **Line 17:** ","
- **Line 18:** "—," "—"

METONYMY

Metonymy is used just once in "A Wife in London." It appears in the final line of the third stanza with the words "his hand." It's subtle, but "his hand" stands literally for the husband's handwriting and figuratively for him when he was alive. It is a kind of disembodied presence—the words are his voice and his feelings, but they are read by the wife after he has already gone. This instance, then, is part of the overall feeling of helplessness that goes through the poem: these words, which were intended to represent the husband's happy perspective on the future, actually come to stand for the brutal fact of his sudden non-existence.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "His hand"

SYNECDOCHE

Synecdoche occurs just once in the "A Wife in London," with the words "His hand" in the last line of stanza 3. The mention of the husband's hand combined with the morbid imagery that follows—which imagines his body in the ground—turns his "hand" into a representation of the man more generally. This connection emphasizes his deadness, given that the "hand" will never be able to write another letter. The image makes the reader think of the husband's body more generally, which in turn highlights the absence of, for want of a better word, his soul—or the personality that inhabited the body. In a way, then, the poem is the story of two hands as much as it is about two pieces of communication—the wife's hand (mentioned in line 8) represents life, and the husband's hand represents death.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "His hand"

PATHETIC FALLACY

Pathetic fallacy occurs in the first and third stanzas of "A Wife in London."

The poem describes the London smog at length in the first stanza, showing its oppressive effect on the light in the streets. The use of "webby" conjures an image of a spider's web, which has menacing associations of predator, prey, and entrapment. The pathetic fallacy, then, helps to portray the wife as trapped by her situation, unable to disentangle herself from her approaching fate. She is enveloped by the smog, perhaps suggesting that she is already depressed about her husband's absence—even before the telegram arrives in stanza 2.

In stanza 3, the fog has grown "thicker." This shows an increased intensity in the situation as the reality of the husband's death takes hold. It also contributes to the stanza's sense of irony, in that in his letter he specifically looks forward to "the summer weather"—the oppressiveness of the London smog imbues this hope with deep and ironic sadness.

It's worth noting that, though pathetic fallacy usually refers to weather or natural elements as a reflection of mood, the smog in this poem—nicknamed "peasouper" at the time of the poem's writing—is largely of man's own making. That is, it is a form of toxic pollution. Perhaps this choice hints at the fact that war is also man's own doing.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "the tawny vapour / That the City lanes have uprolled, / Behind whose webby fold on fold"
- **Line 13:** "the fog hangs thicker"

IRONY

As the title of the second section advertises, "A Wife in London" makes extensive use of irony.

There are two key components to the poem's irony. The first is the mismatch in timing and content between the two pieces of communication presented in the two different sections. Obviously, death follows life—not the other way round. But the unfortunate disparity between the two different modes of communication—telegram in the first section and letter in the second—turns this on its head. The expression of death—and it is a cold, indifferent and bureaucratic expression—comes *before* the expression of life. This, then, is the type of irony in which events pan out in a bleakly tragic way in contrast to what was expected.

The other main function of irony in the poem is specific to the husband's letter. Here, the irony is in the contrast between the husband's words and the impossibility of his knowing their true meaning and significance. That is, far from being an expression of optimism and anticipated joy as he intended, his words actually heighten the sense of tragedy because the wife and reader already know that he is dead and that, consequently, he and the wife will never experience the joys he describes. In other words, each mention of happiness confirms its absence. This irony, then, is the disconnect between the intention behind somebody's words and, unbeknownst to them, what these words really say.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs between the final three lines of stanza 1, the middle lines stanza 2, the final three lines of stanza 3, and the third and fourth of lines of the final stanza. It's fairly prevalent in "A Wife in London," then, but some moments are more significant than others.

The first example allows for the development of the imagery, with the smooth unfolding of the lines mimicking the "webby fold on fold" of the fog.

In the second stanza, the enjambment creates a sense of suddenness in line with the delivery of tragic news. It suggests a sense of panic and disbelief in the wife's mind.

The third stanza's enjambment is less significant, but mirrors its usage in stanza 2. Though the wife knows her husband is dead, reading his letter still feels urgent and perhaps even surreal; the enjambment may reflect the disjointed nature of her thoughts in this moment.

The enjambment between "burn" and "in" in the final stanza creates a lightness that embodies the letter's content—a hopeful look into the future, full of good times. The enjambment here, then, contributes to the section's overall sense of tragic irony.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "vapour"
- **Line 3:** " That"
- **Line 4:** "fold"
- **Line 5:** "Like," "taper"
- **Line 6:** " The"
- **Line 8:** "hand"
- **Line 9:** " Of," "understand"
- **Line 10:** "Though"
- **Line 15:** "disclose"
- **Line 16:** "By," "flicker"
- **Line 17:** " His"
- **Line 20:** "burn"
- **Line 21:** "In"

SIMILE

Simile occurs just once in "A Wife in London," in lines 5 and 6. It

compares the "street-lamp"—not the "webby fold on fold" of line 4—to a "waning taper." A taper is a thin candle. This simile is primarily a comparison of different kinds of light—because the London smog is so oppressive, the streetlights are hardly even visible. The "waning" suggests that the taper is about to go out, just as the street lights are almost entirely useless. More importantly, there is also a sense that, in suggesting a flame going out, the image foreshadows the news that arrives with the messenger in stanza 2: that the husband has been killed at war. That is, his own "flame" of life has been extinguished.

It's quite an unusual simile in that it compares two very similar things—both the taper and the lamp are man-made sources of light and serve roughly the same function. It seems, then, that this simile might reinforce the poem's emphasis on the flaws of manmade systems--namely, war.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Like a waning taper / The street-lamp glimmers cold."

VOCABULARY

tawny (Line 2) - Orange-brown or yellowy-brown.

vapour (Line 2) - A gas-like substance floating in the air.

City (Line 3) - The word "City" is often used to refer to London, as it does here.

uprolled (Line 3) - This just means rolled up, perhaps into the air--picture waves of fog floating upward from the street. It's a slightly confusing word that suggests the "City lanes" are the source of the fog.

webby (Line 4) - Web-like, as in a spider's web.

fold on fold (Line 4) - This means that there seems to be layer upon layer of fog.

waning (Line 5) - Diminishing; almost going out or fading.

taper (Line 5) - A thin candle.

smartly (Line 7) - Briskly, and/or with a sense of official purpose and decorum.

South Land (Line 11) - A contemporary way of referring to modern-day South Africa, the site of the Boer War.

morrow (Line 13) - Tomorrow, or in this case, the day after the telegram arrived.

highest feather (Line 18) - In a good cheer; optimistic. Also with a pun on the image of the husband's letter being written by feather quill (which would have been highly unlikely in this scenario).

jaunts (Line 20) - Happy, care-free escapades or journeys.

brake (Line 20) - A thicket of trees or greenery.

burn (Line 20) - A large stream or small river.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of two distinct sections, each with its own heading: The Tragedy and The Irony.

In each of these two sections, there are two stanzas, all of which are quintains (five-line stanzas). The form is fairly plain and simple, but the division between the two sections does help the poem frame both the "tragedy" and the "irony" of the story related. Each section contains one piece of communication—the first brings news of the husband's death, and the second brings his hopeful letter. The form, then, mirrors the mismatched timing of these events by following them chronologically—from one day to the next. The form also contributes to the passivity and helplessness of the wife: the jump from one day to the next means that the reader gets no description of her grief, only the events that cause it. The reader must then, in a way, engage with the poem by filling in the gaps and imagining the wife's state of mind.

METER

The meter in "A Wife in London" is quite inconsistent. Generally, the poem's momentum comes from the rhyme, rather than the relatively non-existent meter. The lines vary between three stresses and four stresses, and no metrical foot dominates throughout. Occasionally, the does slip into consistent iambs, as in line 4:

Be**hind** | whose **web** | by **fold** | on **fold**

and line 14, which captures the patterns of the coming and going of the postman:

The **post-** | man **nears** |and **goes**

But those lines are exceptions to the rule, rather than the rule.

The poem does occasionally use stress in interesting and evocative ways. For instance, the use of stresses is notable in the first line of the second stanza. Three stresses in a row create the sound of knocking, making the messenger's arrival an interruption in both form and content:

A **mess**enger's **knock cracks smart**ly

Overall, the lack of a dominant meter lends the poem a prosaic, almost mundane rhythmic quality. This could be interpreted as reflecting the fact that what happens in the poem is actually quite unremarkable—war always creates casualties, and those deaths have terrible consequences for loved ones. Though the

event is momentous and tragic for the wife, it's an everyday occurrence in armed conflict—and the prose-like quality of the mostly meter-less writing embodies this commonplace reality.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "A Wife in London" follows an ABBAB formula in each stanza throughout. So the overall rhyme scheme can be written as:

ABBAB CDDCD EFFEF GHHGH

The rhymes establish in the ear of the reader very early on, giving a sense of forward momentum to what happens in the poem. This relentless rhythm makes the events seem inevitable, linking the tragedy of the husband's individual death with the overwhelming nature of warfare more generally.

Note that the rhyme between "smartly" and "shortly" in stanza 2 is not a perfect rhyme. This doesn't signify a lapse in concentration on the writer's part, but rather represents the disruptive effect of the contents of the messenger's telegram. The news disorientates the wife, and the subtle break in the rhyme scheme reflects her fractured state of mind.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "A Wife in London" is third-person and detached. It offers no explicit commentary on what happens in the poem, instead functioning as a narrative voice (a choice that is perhaps reflective of Hardy's career as a novelist). The distant sound of the speaker's voice means that the poem lacks emotional engagement—the reader hears nothing from the wife about the sudden onset of grief, and the speaker offers no information about her experience. This lack conjures a sense of futility, and in a way reflects the fact that the husband is just another death among many others. The wife's voice is completely replaced by the cold, almost bureaucratic tone of the speaker's voice, which reinforces the idea that she is at the mercy of larger forces that she cannot control. Additionally, the seeming distance of the speaker reflects the way that the wife is isolated from her husband both by his initial geographical distance at war, and, later, by the impossible distance between life and death.

SETTING

As the title makes clear, the poem is set in London. Many of Hardy's poems were set in Wessex—a collective term for a large area of south-western England—and this poem is notable as an exception. In part, the urban setting allows for the use of smog as a pathetic fallacy, which creates an oppressive and murky atmosphere.

But London is also important for another reason—it was the political center of the British Empire (and is, of course, still the heart of decision-making for the country more generally). The tragedy thus takes place not just in southern Africa, where the husband died, but in the very political environment in which the decision to go to war was made in the first place. The poem's setting, then, brings the tragedy of war to its point of origin and reinforces the point that husband and wife--and, by extension, other citizens--are helpless in the face of their government's decisions.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 and became one of the most successful novelists of the Victorian era. His later novels—works like *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*—challenged Victorian sensibilities, and the often-angry reaction to their publication led him to focus on poetry in his later years. This poem is dated December 1899 and is one of a number of anti-war poems Hardy wrote in response to the Boer War conflict. Other relevant anti-war poems of Hardy's include "Drummer Hodge," "The Souls of the Slain," "A Christmas Ghost-story." Other poets responded to the war in different ways. Rudyard Kipling, for example, wrote poetry that spoke bombastically about the British army's prospects. A.E. Housman's collection of poetry *A Shropshire Lad* is another important work within the context of the Boer War. Released in 1896, its popularity greatly increased with the advent of the war, as the book's themes of nostalgia, warfare, and patriotism struck a chord with the general public.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"A Wife in London" was written in response to the Boer War. This was a conflict that took place in what is now referred to as South Africa, and lasted from 1899-1902. It was euphemistically called "The Last of the Gentleman's Wars," but it was anything but—British forces fought with groups antagonistic to British rule, and total casualties amounted to 60,000 people. Hardy himself was suspicious of the Empire's involvement in the area, believing it to be in large part due to the rich resources of the land (especially gold). More recent scholarship has highlighted the controversial use of concentration camps by the British in the war. In fact, most of the more than 25,000 Afrikaners imprisoned in these camps died due to starvation and disease. The wider context of the Boer War is the Victorian era, during which the British Empire exerted far-reaching control over much of the globe. For some, this was a source of pride; others, like Hardy, were more critical.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "A Wife in London" Reading — A reading of the poem by actor Richard Armitage. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFTldgDtLzI)
- Boer War Poetry — Further poetry related to the Boer War. (http://www.anthonyturton.com/assets/my_documents/my_files/Boer_War_Poetry.pdf)
- Radio Documentary — A radio documentary about Hardy's life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KwENDxyALc)
- Hardy poetry commentaries — A valuable resource of Hardy poems and analyses, provided by The Thomas Hardy Society. (https://www.hardysociety.org/resources/poem-commentaries/)
- Boer War Explanation — A BBC article that gives a clear account of the Boer War. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/513944.stm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- At an Inn
- Channel Firing
- Drummer Hodge
- He Never Expected Much
- Neutral Tones
- The Convergence of the Twain
- The Darkling Thrush
- The Man He Killed
- The Ruined Maid

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