Hap

POEM TEXT

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan...
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

SUMMARY

If only some cruel, angry god would call out from the heavens and mock me, saying: "You miserable creature; you should know that your sadness makes me happy. Your lost love is my hate's gain!"

If that were the case, then I would take it on the chin, make myself brave, and die, emboldened by the fact that I was the victim of undeserved anger. That is, I'd be partly reassured that a being stronger than me had decided to punish me with these tears that I cry.

But that's not how things are. How has it come to pass that my happiness is dead? Why do my best hopes, planted in the ground like seeds, wither away? It's because brute Chance blocks out the sun and rain, while Time rolls the dice for fun. These partially blind doom-mongers could just as easily have spread happy things in my life's path as sorrows.

THEMES

CHANCE AND SUFFERING

"Hap" laments the fact that human life is governed by chance. It would be better to suffer the malice of a hateful deity, the poem argues, than to put up with random bad luck. If only "some vengeful god" were to appear and confess to taking pleasure in torturing the speaker, the speaker feels they could at least die with some sense of understanding. But there's no plan or personality guiding the cosmos, the speaker says. Existence, in this poem's view, is just a series of arbitrary events—and that arbitrariness is harder to bear than divine injustice.

The speaker is unhappy with their life and seemingly with human existence in general. Life is full of ups and downs; for this speaker, it's been mostly downs. They complain of "love's loss," "tears," "slain" happiness, and the "unbloom[ing]" of "the best hope ever sown." In other words, there were times when life seemed to be looking up for the speaker—but nothing ever worked out as they hoped. Completely jaded, the speaker declares that "joy lies slain" and "hope" fades, as if these were universal truths.

The speaker reflects that if an evil God were causing all this pain, suffering would at least have some sort of explanation—and people could find relief from their pain in suicide. The existence of a "vengeful god," however terrifying, would at least provide a *reason* for human suffering. Simply understanding would "Half-ease[]," or partly comfort, the speaker. The speaker thus wishes some divine figure, calling down from "the sky," would confess that it savors human "sorrow"—and that it had "willed" all the speaker's misery. If this were so, suicide would seem like a logical and justified choice, a simple way out of a terrible predicament.

But life *isn't* that simple, the poem argues, and there's no divine plan at work, spiteful or otherwise. Everything happens randomly; suffering is doubly hard to bear because it's not only painful but completely arbitrary. According to the speaker, the world is governed not by a god but by the blind forces of "Time" and "Casualty" (chance). Though personified, these aren't conscious gods, just brutal facts of life. (The title word "Hap," or happenstance, refers to random chance as well.)

Statistically, the speaker would have been just as likely to experience "blisses" as "pain," but things didn't work out that way. And that's exactly what's so frustrating: human beings have no power over how their lives pan out, and no "god," good or bad, will ever help them make sense of it all. In short, "Hap" laments the fact that life plays out *hap*hazardly. It's governed by sheer luck—and there's no way of knowing or controlling which way the dice will fall.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

"Hap" is a sonnet in which the speaker laments the way that their life has turned out. The poem presents life as a game of chance—one which the speaker feels they've been losing, leading them to conclude that there is no god. True to the sonnet form, this borrows the language of logic/argument: if only *x* were true, then I could do *y*.

First, the poem imagines an angry "god" calling down from heaven, mocking the speaker. Note how "god" here isn't capitalized, indicating that the speaker doesn't really believe in the existence of the deity being discussed.

The speaker imagines their suffering making this god happy: "thy sorrow is my ecstasy." The antithesis between the speaker's "sorrow" and the god's "ecstasy" creates the impression of a logical system at work. While cruel and unfair, suffering, in this system, would at least have a purpose or explanation. Human beings would be the playthings of a higher power, placed in terrible situations as a kind of divine amusement.

The fourth line gets more specific: the speaker imagines a god taking special delight in the speaker's "loss" of love. This implies that the speaker has recently gone through a breakup (or, perhaps, that their beloved has died). The god's hate increases (metaphorically "profits") from the speaker losing what's most dear to them. This is a simple equation with a weirdly reassuring balance to it; the speaker wishes life were this straightforward.

Notice how the spitting, hissing quality of the sibilance in these lines makes this "vengeful God" seem extra bitter and hateful: "sky," "suffering," "sorrow," "ecstasy," "loss."

Note, too, that the poem is written in iambic pentameter. This is the typical meter of sonnets, in which each line consists of five iambs (poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm). Here's that meter at work in the first line:

If but | some venge- | ful god | would call | to me

These iambs steadily plod along, subtly evoking the speaker's state of weary resignation. But there's an important variation in line 3, which begins with a trochee (the opposite of an iamb): "Know that." That stress on the word "Know" emphasizes the god's command to the speaker to *know* their place in the world.

LINES 5-8

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

If such a "vengeful god" were to exist, the speaker continues, the speaker would "bear it, clench myself, and die." That is, they would tolerate their suffering and face death emboldened by the knowledge that, in a way, everything is working out as it's supposed to.

"Die" might be a reference to suicide or simply to going through life knowing that an evil god reigns over everything that happens. The speaker would paradoxically regain some agency and take action, even if that action is just to accept the god's cruel plan.

This acceptance would be made possible by the fact that the speaker would know that they didn't really deserve this suffering. It would be the product of an "ire unmerited"—unjustifiable anger sent from up above. By implication, the speaker doesn't know what they've done to deserve such sorrow, nor whether they could have taken different choices and thereby lived a happier life. Even so, the speaker would be "steeled" simply by being hated. There would be a kind of enemy around which the speaker's feelings could crystallize. In short, a cruel god would at least *make some sense* of the world.

The speaker would only feel "Half-eased" rather than fully at peace, however, because they'd still have to deal with all the same sorrows. Still, at least the speaker's suffering would have an explanation if there were a "Powerfuller [being]" than the speaker calling all the shots, singling out the speaker for pain.

If this god existed, then the speaker's "tears"—that is, their sadness—would be "willed." Those tears would be the product of a more tangible force than sheer luck. The word "meted" conveys that the speaker's sorrow would be a kind of punishment.

LINES 9-10

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?

Line 9 marks the sonnet's turn, or volta: a sudden shift in the poem's line of reasoning. The speaker suddenly dismisses everything imagined in the sonnet's octave (the first eight lines) as "not so." This change of direction is made even more abrupt by the full-stop caesura after "so," halting the poem in its tracks and marching it back to reality.

There is no malicious god pulling the strings, the speaker declares, and no logical explanation for why things pan out the way they do. The speaker introduces this new argument through two rhetorical questions:

> [...] How arrives it joy lies slain,
> And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?

The first question asks, "Why has it come to pass that my happiness has been brutally killed?" The speaker metaphorically depicts "joy" as a creature that's been murdered. "Lies slain" is a phrase that could be plucked from old legends about knights and maidens, perhaps a further hint that this poem is about lost love.

Next, the speaker compares their "hope" to a bunch of seeds planted in the ground ("sown"). The speaker asks why this hope "unblooms," a word that suggests the plants never sprouted or that they somehow went *backward* through the growth process and shriveled up.

LINES 11-14

> *—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,*
> *And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan...*
> *These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown*
> *Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.*

The speaker reveals who/what they really blame for their unhappiness. These lines provide an answer to the questions that came just before, explaining that chance ("hap") and time are the two main forces that govern life. It is because of them that "the best hope" never blossoms.

The speaker calls chance "Crass Casualty," or dumb luck. The sharp alliteration of this phrase conveys the speaker's disgust. "Crass Casualty" seems like lumbering oaf wreaking havoc on the speaker's life without giving it a second thought. "Crass Casualty" is the figure who stands in the way of "the sun and rain," blocking the two vital elements that would allow the speaker's hope to bloom.

The next line personifies time as a gambler: it's "dicing," or tossing dice, for fun. This suggests that time enjoys the way that human life plays out by chance.

There is a slight contradiction in the fact that the speaker personifies both "Casualty" and "Time" (hence the capitalization). They become god-like figures ruling over life—which is *kind of* what the speaker seemed to desire in the poem's octave! If hateful gods called the shots, those lines reasoned, at least human beings would know what *causes* their suffering.

"Casualty" and "Time," though, lack the intelligence and motivating psychology of gods. They do what they do without thinking about it. And that's what really upsets the speaker: the arbitrariness of it all. "Casualty" and "Time" may be powerful figures, but they are also "purblind," or partially blind, "Doomsters." They don't appreciate the consequences of what they do, imposing themselves on human life without really paying attention.

They don't ruin *everyone's* lives, either. It would be just as easy for time and luck to have tossed "blisses" onto the speaker's path (their "pilgrimage") as "pain" (which is all the speaker seems to get). Notice how the harsh plosive alliteration of "pilgrimage" and "pain" links the two words together, linking life with suffering.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Hap" uses alliteration for dramatic effect, bringing its ideas to life on the page and often conveying the speaker's frustration. Sometimes alliteration emphasizes the thematic link between words as well.

In the first stanza, hissing /s/ alliteration in "sky," "suffering," and "sorrow" makes the speaker's imagined "vengeful god" seem all the more mean and hateful. The lines feature broader sibilance as well, boosting the effect:

> From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
> Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
> That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

It sounds like this imagined god is practically spitting out these words from on high.

Later in the poem, the speaker uses alliteration again when describing the forces that *really* seem to govern human life. "Crass Casualty," a.k.a chance, a.k.a "hap," has a suitably crass-sounding name. Those sharp /c/ sounds make this personified figure seem brutish and totally uncaring. The phrase leaps off the page, evoking how much this chance figure has ruined the speaker's life.

In the last line, alliteration again conveys frustration while also linking important words together. The speaker's "pilgrimage"—that is, their life's journey"—has been full of "pain." Life, in this case, *is* suffering. The plosive /p/ sounds are aggressive, helping to convey the idea of life as a punishing experience.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "sky," "suffering"
- **Line 3:** "sorrow"
- **Line 4:** "love's loss"
- **Line 6:** "Steeled," "sense"
- **Line 8:** "meted me"
- **Line 11:** "Crass Casualty"
- **Line 14:** "pilgrimage," "pain"

ANTITHESIS

"Hap" uses antithesis in the first stanza, where the speaker imagines the speech of a "vengeful god":

> Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
> That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

Note the parallelism of these phrases: "thy [blank] is my [blank]." This phrasing emphasizes the *inverse relationship* between the speaker and this imagined god: the speaker's *unhappiness* makes this god *happy*.

The antithesis conveys that, in this scenario, the speaker's considerable "sorrow" would at least have a purpose: it would be how the god gets its kicks. Further suffering would only lead to further divine happiness, and the world, though terrible, would at least make a twisted sort of sense. Everything the speaker has lost ("thy love's loss") would have served to make the god happier and more powerful—to make its hate more "profit[able]." The speaker would prefer this terrible balance to the way things actually seem to be: random and chaotic.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "thy sorrow is my ecstasy"
- **Line 4:** "thy love's loss is my hate's profiting"
- **Line 14:** "Blisses," "pain"

METAPHOR

Metaphor creates drama in the poem's sestet, bringing the speaker's experiences to life on the page.

First, the speaker questions why everything always seems to go wrong in their life:

> [...] How arrives it joy lies slain,
> And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?

These searching questions are rhetorical; the speaker isn't looking for an answer but rather asking them to make a point. Each question also contains a metaphor. The speaker compares their joy to a living creature that now "lies slain." In other words, their joy has been killed. This metaphorical depiction of joy dramatizes the speaker's "loss" of love (perhaps a little hyperbolically). It also emphasizes the speaker's frustration with the world and their own lack of agency: joy didn't just up and disappear, but was violently cut down.

The speaker develops this idea with the rhetorical question in line 9, which again relies on a metaphor. The speaker depicts hope as a bunch of seeds scattered in the soil. Every time these hope seeds start to grow into the flowers of happiness, however, Chance and Time come running through the field, treading on any fledgling life. The creative word "unblooms" hammers home the idea that the speaker's hopes are utterly unrealized; they've never had a chance to grow or, perhaps, have grown only to *ungrow*, to shrivel up and die.

Finally, the speaker metaphorically compares chance and time to god-like figures lumbering about and ruining the speaker's life. These personified entities block the "sun and rain" the speaker's hope needs to bloom, gamble with the speaker's happiness like someone rolling dice, and carelessly litter "pain" all over the speaker's life path.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-14:** "How arrives it joy lies slain, / And why unblooms the best hope ever sown? / —Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain, / And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan... / These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown / Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain."

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies "Crass Casualty" (that is, chance) and "Time," treating these concepts as two god-like figures. There's some irony to this personification: the speaker envisions Casualty and Time as figures with will and agency even as the poem emphasizes that there's no meaning or order to the speaker's suffering.

To explain this seeming paradox, the speaker declares that "Crass Casualty" and "Time" lack the intelligence and motivation of the "vengeful god" imagined in the first stanza. They are like two lumbering doofuses, blundering about and thoughtlessly ruining human lives.

Chance "obstructs the sun and rain," blocking out the two things the speaker's metaphorical seeds of "hope" need to grow. Time, meanwhile, is a kind of gambler (tossing dice, or "dicing"), doling out suffering and joy to human beings as if playing a cosmic game of roulette.

The speaker continues the personification in the poem's final two lines:

> These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
> Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

Life is a journey (a "pilgrimage"), but Chance and Time have littered the speaker's path with "pain."

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-14:** "—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain, / And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan... / These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown / Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain."

VOCABULARY

But (Line 1) - Only.

Vengeful (Line 1) - Angry and looking for payback.

Thou/Thy (Line 2, Line 3, Line 4) - You/your.

Ecstasy (Line 3) - Pure joy.

Profiting (Line 4) - Increase/betterment; the speaker's "loss" makes the god's hate grow stronger/more powerful.

Bear (Line 5) - Put up with.

Clench Myself (Line 5) - Tense up (as if to face something bravely).

Steeled (Line 6) - Reassured/made stronger.

Ire (Line 6) - Anger.

Unmerited (Line 6) - Undeserved.

Half-eased (Line 7) - Partially soothed.

Powerfuller (Line 7) - A more powerful being.

Meted (Line 8) - Dealt out as punishment.

How arrives it (Line 9) - How has it come to be?

Slain (Line 9) - Killed violently.

Unblooms (Line 10) - Never grows or un-grows (i.e., withers or shrivels).

Sown (Line 10) - Planted in the ground.

Crass (Line 11) - Unintelligent and insensitive.

Casualty (Line 11) - Chance/luck.

Dicing (Line 12) - Gambling (as in to throw dice).

Casts (Line 12) - Throws.

Purblind (Line 13) - Partially unable to see.

Doomsters (Line 13) - Purveyors of destruction and dread.

Readily (Line 13) - Easily.

Strown (Line 13) - Scattered/thrown.

Blisses (Line 14) - Joys/happy things.

Pilgrimage (Line 14) - Journey (of life).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Hap" is a mixture of a Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet:

- It consists of 14 lines of iambic pentameter (more on that in the Meter section of this guide).
- Like a Petrarchan (a.k.a. Italian) sonnet, the poem can be broken up into an octave (the opening eight lines) and a sestet (the closing six lines).
- That octave can be further broken down into two quatrains (or four-line stanzas), following an ABAB CDCD rhyme scheme. This is actually the rhyme scheme of a *Shakespearean* (a.k.a. English) sonnet. Otherwise, however, the poem sticks to the Petrarchan form.
- This mish-mash of forms might reflect the poem's main idea: at first seems like there's one particular form guiding the poem, which the sestet then upends—not coincidentally, just as the speaker starts talking about the way chance has ruined his life.

Sonnet speakers are often working through a problem of some sort, which is precisely what happens in "Hap." Petrarchan sonnets also feature a shift in the poem's argument in line 9. This is called the poem's turn or volta, and it appears right on schedule in "Hap":

- While the poem's octave muses on the existence of a vengeful god who's ruining the speaker's life, the speaker declares in line 9 that this is "not so." That is, there is no "vengeful god" who's got it out for the speaker; on the contrary, the speaker's misfortune is the fault of dumb luck.
- The speaker spends the rest of the sestet expanding on the idea that life is ruled by happenstance.

Note, too, that sonnets are often poems about love. The sonnet is thus an especially appropriate form for this poem, where "love's loss" is making the speaker miserable.

METER

Like most sonnets, "Hap" is written in iambic pentameter. An iamb is a poetic foot with two syllables arranged in an unstressed-stressed pattern (da-DUM), while pentameter means there are five iambs per line. Here's how that looks in line 1:

If but | some venge- | ful god | would call | to me

Iambic pentameter lends the poem a, perhaps reluctant, sense of motion. The steady, marching beat subtly conveys the speaker's acceptance of life's misery.

Occasional variations in the poem's meter keep things from feely too stiff or plodding, however, and call readers' attention to important moments. For example, a trochee (stressed-unstressed; DUM-da) opens line 3, adding force to the imagined god's command that the speaker "Know" how much pleasure this god derives from the speaker's pain:

Know that | thy sor- | row is | my ecs- | tasy,

Line 6 also begins with a trochee, appropriately adding oomph to the phrase "Steeled by." This evokes how emboldened the speaker would feel by the existence of a malicious god because this would, at least, make some sense of suffering.

Finally, listen to the powerful spondee (stressed-stressed) that starts line 11: "Crass Ca-." This makes the personified figure of chance seem all the more clumsy and lumbering.

RHYME SCHEME

"Hap" follows the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEFFE.

Those first two quatrains thus follow the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet, while the sestet's rhyme scheme is a variation on the Petrarchan sonnet form. This shift subtly mirrors the poem's content. The poem's octave considers the existence of a vengeful god guiding the speaker's life, while the sestet insists that life is in fact totally random; similarly, the first eight lines follow a predictable pattern, while the final six lines switch to an entirely new pattern.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Hap" is terribly unhappy. Life clearly hasn't gone the way they'd hoped; in fact, their hopes have all "unbloom[ed]," withered away. They've lost their love, their "joy lies slain," and their life's road is littered with "pain."

The speaker wishes that their suffering was due to the malice of some hateful god who found joy in the speaker's misery. If this were the case, the speaker argues, then there would be some *explanation* for their misfortune. However unfair their punishment, the speaker would at least understand why they've been having such a hard time. They'd be "Half-eased," mildly soothed, knowing that some more powerful being was behind their sorrow.

The speaker declares that this isn't the case, however. They believe that they're simply the victim of bad luck, personified as a bumbling gambler playing with the speaker's life.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a specific setting. Instead, it considers the speaker's life in general. Readers might assume that the speaker has recently gone through a breakup, given the reference to lost love. At the very least, the speaker has experienced a string of hardships that they attribute to "Crass Casualty" and "dicing Time." Otherwise, the poem doesn't reference any specific time or place; it's simply set in the world, a place the speaker considers ruled by randomness.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was an English poet and a novelist, known for his passionate opposition to the cruelty and hypocrisy of the buttoned-up Victorian world he was born into. Though most famous now for novels like *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, during Hardy's lifetime these frank and shocking books weren't especially well-received, and he made his reputation as a poet.

Hardy wrote "Hap" in the 1860s and later included it in his 1898 collection *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*. These poems were collected over the decades and set against the same semi-fictional backdrop as Hardy's novels: Wessex.

"Hap" might be thought of as a kind of companion piece with "Neutral Tones," which juxtaposes a failing romance with an ominously "grayish" or "Neutral"-colored landscape. Critics presume that "Neutral Tones" was written about Hardy's cousin, Tryphena Sparks, and it's possible that the same is true of this poem.

"Hap," like the rest of Hardy's poetry, features conventional meter and rhyme, the tools that dominated pre-20th-century verse. The poem also conveys much the same philosophical pessimism that marks Hardy's writing more broadly. His skeptical outlook influenced a number of 20th-century poets, including Robert Frost and Philip Larkin.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hardy grew up in 1840s and 1850s England, making him a man of the Victorian era, which lasted from 1837 to 1901.

This period can be simultaneously described as a time of great advancement and great loss. Thanks to scientific developments by people like Charles Darwin, the geologist Charles Lyle, and the paleontologist Richard Owen, Victorian writers (and people more generally) were faced with stark evidence that at best cast doubt on the literal interpretation of the Bible and at worst disproved God altogether. Here, Hardy's speaker desperately wants some kind of god, even a hateful one, to make the sense of their existence, but can't bring themselves to actually believe in such a power.

The Victorian period more generally was one of technological innovation and expansion, with the British Empire spreading and tightening its hold on the entire globe. England was at the height of its power and prosperity, but this was also a world of deep divisions between the rich and the poor, the upper classes and the lower classes, and men and women.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — The poem out loud, read by YouTube reader Tom O'Bedlam. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HB6bpP7jIbI)
- The Hardy Society — Check out a wide range of resources provided by the society set up in Hardy's honor. (https://www.hardysociety.org/resources/)
- Thomas Hardy Documentary — Watch a BBC documentary about Hardy's life and works. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Jgx6ez9LYM)

- Victorian Pessimism — The British podcast "In Our Time" discusses the general atmosphere of pessimism in which Hardy was writing. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007d9k6)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- At an Inn
- A Wife in London
- 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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