

Student Essay (2013)

Prompt: Read the following poem carefully. Then, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the techniques the poet uses to convey his attitude toward human achievement.

The 1912 collision of the luxury liner *Titanic* was, at the time, a tragedy of unprecedented scope and power, for not only was the loss of life significant (over 1500 passengers and crew dead), but the ship itself was designed as monument to human engineering, a technological marvel unprecedented in size and scope. The irony that, on its maiden voyage, the unsinkable ship would, in fact, sink in the north Atlantic after a collision with an iceberg, was not lost on Thomas Hardy-- his "Convergence of the Twain" a near contemporary response to the tragedy. Far from bemoaning the loss of human life, however, Hardy is more concerned with exposing the folly of human arrogance, as, for the poet, human achievement is insignificant when juxtaposed against an indifferent and uncaring universe.

That Hardy is not interested in celebrating human achievement is easily revealed through his language choices. In Stanza I, for instance, the remains of *Titanic* are described as "deep from human vanity" (2), linking the ship itself to the idea of excessive self-regard. Wrecked and unmanned, the speaker locates the ship's remains far from the "Pride of Life that planned her" (3), the capitalization of this personified concept seemingly mocking its own self-importance, since no longer do the "pyres / Of her salamandrine fires" (5-6) burn; instead nature is ascendant: water rhythmically moving through once opulent cabins. The contrast, then, is between an inflated human vision of technological progress and the reality that has punctured that dream. Thus, "mirrors meant / To glass the opulent" (7-8) reflect only "sea worms" (9), the once dazzling jewels of the wealthy passengers now lying "bleared and black and blind" (12). Expectation is continually subverted by a reality that mocks its original reason and purpose, and good intent is canceled out by its own antithesis at the end of each stanza.

Similarly, *Titanic* itself is, for the speaker, a symbol of humanity's essential "vaingloriousness" (15). Significantly, the victims of the catastrophe do not even merit a mention. Consider, for example, how a contemporaneously written poem about such a large-scale disaster would have been perceived by its audience without mention of the dead. Indeed, Hardy argues that it is "Immanent Will" (18) of Fate at fault, which may be attractive as a philosophical concept, but hardly much comfort to a shocked and grieving public. Indeed, the only voice in the poem is not human at all, but a "dim moon-eyed [fish]" (13) who wonders how *Titanic* could have invaded its domain. The detail is intended to be ridiculous, at least as ridiculous in the eyes of the poet as the ostentatious enterprise of constructing *Titanic* in the first place. Hence, the ship, and not the people who man her, becomes the protagonist, a vessel fated to collide with her "sinister mate" (19), an iceberg fashioned contemporaneously by the "Spinner of Years" (31). People, in the poem's view, are comparatively insignificant.

This, then, becomes the central extended metaphor of the second half of the poem. The ship and iceberg were "[fashioned]" (16) and "prepared" (19) respectively by Destiny, each ignorant of the other. They seem "alien" (25) to one another, yet they belong together, achieving fusion in the "august event" (30) of the crash, so that, in the language of the poem, "consummation comes" (33). The diction appropriates the language of a conventional love story, as boy and girl, raised apart, meet through destiny, marry, and consummate a life together. That this appropriates the language of a conventional happy-ending subverts expectation, since this expectation is predicated on perceiving everything from a human-centered point of view (in which the collision is a tragedy). Hardy, however, is not interested in this. Instead, by adopting the wider perspective of Fate, it illustrates how the

universe is indifferent to people's projects and designs. Even the loss of hundreds of lives is ultimately insignificant from this point of view, and it is only human arrogance that assumes that people's projects and desires should automatically set the standard by which all events are evaluated. As the poem illustrates, the universe often has other ideas.