Channel Firing

That night your great guns, unawares,
Shook all our coffins as we lay,
And broke the chancel window-squares,
We thought it was the Judgment-day

And sat upright. While drearisome
Arose the howl of wakened hounds:
The mouse let fall the altar-crumb,
The worms drew back into the mounds,

The glebe cow drooled. Till God called, “No;
It’s gunnery practice out at sea
Just as before you went below;
The world is as it used to be:

“All nations striving strong to make
Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters
They do no more for Christés sake
Than you who are helpless in such matters.

“That this is not the judgment-hour
For some of them’s a blessed thing,
For if it were they’d have to scour
Hell’s floor for so much threatening....

“Ha, ha. It will be warmer when
I blow the trumpet (if indeed
I ever do; for you are men,
And rest eternal sorely need).”

So down we lay again. “I wonder,
Will the world ever saner be,”
Said one, “than when He sent us under
In our indifferent century!”

And many a skeleton shook his head.
“Instead of preaching forty year,”
My neighbour Parson Thirdly said,
“I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer.”

Again the guns disturbed the hour,
Roaring their readiness to avenge,
As far inland as Stourton Tower,
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.
**Channel Firing**

This humorous treatment of war is savagely critical in its scornful condemnation of man's incorrigible desire for conflict.

The poem is spoken in the first person by one of the dead buried in a church, in which the windows have been shattered by the report (noise and vibration) of guns being fired for “practice” in the English Channel. So great is the disturbance that the skeletons believe Judgement Day (and so, the resurrection of the dead) to have come. In a gruesomely comical picture, they are represented as suddenly sitting up in readiness for the great day.

The humour takes an irreverent turn as Hardy introduces God to the proceedings, reassuring the corpses that it is not time for the Judgement Day but merely “gunnery practice”, adding that the world is as it was when the dead men “went below” to their graves. That is to say, every country is trying to make its methods of destruction more efficient, and shed more blood, making “red war yet redder”. God sees the living as insane and no more ready to exercise Christian love than are the dead, who are obviously now “helpless in such matters”. In other words, the living, too, do nothing “for Christ’s sake”. Note how the archaic (old fashioned) spelling adds to the humour of the piece.

God continues, observing that those responsible for the “gunnery practice” are fortunate that it is not the day of judgement. If it were, their bellicose (warlike) threats would be punished by their having to scour the floor of Hell. While the suggested punishment is somewhat ridiculous, and so comic, it is almost a fitting one. Certainly Hell seems the appropriate place for the war makers. With a hint of malice God suggests that He will ensure that His judgement day is far hotter. He concedes that He may not bother, though, as eternal rest seems more suited to the human condition. The scriptural image of the blowing of the trumpet that signals the end of the world seems rather comic when God Himself uses it literally.

When God’s remarks are finished, the skeletons voice their own opinions of the gunnery practice, wondering if man will ever achieve sanity (that is, a rejection of armed conflict). Significantly, while many of the skeletons nod as if to suggest that man will never learn, the parson regrets having spent his life giving sermons which have had no effect on his congregation: “preaching forty year” has made no difference to his hearers.

The final stanza of the poem drops the somewhat surrealistic humour of the preceding lines. Instead, Hardy writes of the threatening sound of the guns, ready “to avenge” (to avenge what?). It resounds far inland, as far as the places he names. Hardy does not refer to these landmarks merely to provide authentic local detail: by invoking the dead civilisations of the past Hardy sets the poem in a far more expansive historical time-scale. Perhaps he further suggests that civilisations (including his own?) are doomed because man's nature never makes any moral advance.

Although the poem is comical, the humour is of a grisly kind, and “Channel Firing” is not a light-hearted piece. The humour is meant seriously, to show the stupidity of those who wish to make war. While the passages spoken by God are rather comically stilted, the narrator's contribution is written in an un-affected, natural and unobtrusive manner, which, with the simple iambic tetrameter and simple ABAB rhyme scheme make the argument of the poem easy to follow. It is not hampered by the kind of stylistic clumsiness from which, say, The Going of the Battery suffers, nor the affected, rather inflated vocabulary of To an Unborn Pauper Child.