Hap

hap - chance

If but some vengeful god would call to me — vengeful - vindictive, wanting revenge
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; — steeled - braced; ire - anger; unmerited - undeserved
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed. — meted - allotted, handed out

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain, — slain - killed, murdered
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown? — unblooms - fails to flower
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain, — crass – stupid; casualty - chance, fate
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . . . — dicing - throwing dice, gambling
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown — purblind Doomsters - dim-sighted fates; strown scattered
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain. — blisses - intense happiness; pilgrimage - life's journey

'Hap' is one of Hardy's earliest poem, written in 1866. It was a topic he was still exploring sixty years later in 'He Never Expected Much'. Hap means chance, and Hardy is searching for an explanation of the chances that bring humans such suffering in life.

In the first quatrain (four lines), Hardy describes what it would be like if there were a god of punishment, 'some vengeful god'. In his picture, this being actively feeds off man's misery and calls down from the sky at suffering man.

Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!

The bitter contrasts intensify the gloating of this figure: 'sorrow' / 'ecstasy'; 'love's loss' / 'hate's profiting' 'love' / 'hate'. Further intensity is conveyed through the alliterated ls in 'love's loss', and in the contrast of the repeated 'thy' / 'my'. This god-figure refers to man as a 'thing', not even human; the alliterated th in 'thou' and 'thing' intensifies this effect of dehumanising man. There is no relationship between this god and man but punishment and enjoyment of another's suffering – shadenfreude. (This godlike figure is emphatically not the Christian God, to whom Hardy would have given a capital G.) The rhythm in lines 1, 2 and 4 tends to consist of a number of unstressed short words, piling onto a stressed emotion. In line 1 'If but some vengeful god'. Line 2 'From up the sky and laugh …, Line 4 'That thy love's loss…' But in line 3, the stress comes right forward in the line: 'Know that…' It seems to me that this stress in line 3 adds to the god's insistence on his vengeful power over man. The whole of the first quatrain is one forceful sentence.

The second quatrain is concerned with Hardy's (or the persona's) response to this scenario which would, he says, be a resolute determination to 'bear it'. In a series of heavily stressed monosyllabic and muscular verbs, he outlines his intention: 'bear it, clench myself, and die / Steeled.' The power-figure or force then has its share of verbs, 'willed and meted me', and the verbs then return

to the first-person persona, 'tears I shed.' Again, the impression of power is given, not only by the initial capital in 'Powerfuller' and the personification (which continues further on in the sonnet with 'Crass Casualty,' 'Time' and 'Doomsters'). Power is further suggested through the run-on line: 'a Powerfuller (force) than I / Had willed and meted me …' The persona's part in this second quatrain is not just one of weak acquiescence, roll over and die. His verbs are active, not passive, 'bear', 'clench,' 'die' suggests decision on his part. There's some conspicuous assonance in the repeated eee sound of 'steeled', 'half-eased' and 'meted me' which I'm sure must be relevant, since Hardy was such a careful craftsman, but I haven't got there yet.

The second quatrain focuses on 'I' (three times), 'myself', 'me'. First the stern resolution, 'clench myself', 'steeled', then the sense of semi-ease because a more powerful force has determined what should happen. The rhymes reinforce the focus on the persona, 'I' who would 'die' knowing he had been overcome by a stronger force. And this force was the reason for the suffering in his life, however undeserved 'unmerited' / 'tears I shed.' This quatrain, like the first, is one sentence, reinforcing the feeling of something Hardy would definitely do if this were the answer to life's suffering. But it's not like that. It is only a possible explanation of life's misery, 'If …' And so, in the second half of the sonnet, the sestet, Hardy continues to ask questions.

After the run-on of line 7 to 8, the complete cesura after 'But not so' comes as a shock. We're slapped back to reality. With a halting question, the poem's momentum picks itself up and stumbles on – if that's not the case, then how does the universe work? Or, in Hardy's words, 'How arrives it joy lies slain, / And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?' Hardy pictures Time as a gambler, throwing (or 'cast'ing) the dice; he happens to have thrown a 'moan' and 'pain' but he could just as easily 'readily' have scattered 'strown' the dice in a way that produced 'gladness' and 'blisses'. Characteristically, Hardy coins words that bring their opposite vividly to mind. 'Unblooms' strongly suggests the flowers that should grow after best hope ever is sown. (He does this again in 'Drummer Hodge' in the word 'uncoffined' reminding you of the coffin DH should have been buried in.) Hardy's imagery suggests the naturally growing properties of 'hope' and 'joy' with words like 'unblooms', 'sun and rain'. Hardy's choice of words suggests a deliberate ruining and destruction of happiness and hope: 'joy lies slain' (murdered); 'Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain'; Time 'casts a moan'; it would have been as easy to scatter blisses as pain. In fact, the natural process is the happy one; joy has to be deliberately killed; hope is sown; Crass Casualty has to obstruct the naturally falling 'sun and rain' which are the two essentials for growth. The rhymes in the final sestet give you the natural order, 'sun and rain' and the deliberate bringing about of misery, 'slain' and 'pain'.

Hardy seems to have set this out like a sawn-off syllogism. Whereas a syllogism's reasoning goes 'If' …'But' and 'So, therefore, let's …', 'Hap' offers no such resolution. We have 'If' and 'But' and it ends unresolved, questioning and pessimistic. Perhaps the sonnet form stresses/underlines this. Normally a sonnet set out as octet (first eight lines) and sestet (last six lines) sets out a problem in the octet, which is then developed in some sense in the sestet. Here, the development section takes us nowhere except into further perplexity, bafflement with man's lot. The discipline and tight structure of the sonnet form also highlights the random nature of hap/chance. With grim irony, Hardy chooses the sonnet form, associated with love poetry, for this poem about man's suffering. If the poem was written after an unhappy love affair (as 'Neutral Tones', written the following year seems to suggest), that might explain Hardy's use of the sonnet form to express his misery.

The poem seems to be concerned with man's inability to understand and control his fate. And his inability to understand the nature of his universe. It is made the more terrible by the fact that it is written in the first person, because this involves the reader directly in all the speaker's suffering and bewilderment.

Literary terms

Very often writers highlight important words. They do this with:

Alliteration – several words starting with the same letter or sound, for example, 'bleared and black and blind'.

Assonance – same vowel sound in different words, for example, 'abode', 'sloped'.

Cesura – a break or pause in the middle of a line of poetry.

Consonance – same consonants in words that contain different vowel sounds, for example, 'bode', 'boughed'.

Enjambement or run-on lines – when there is no punctuation at the end of a line of verse and it runs straight on to the next line.

Onomatopoeia – the effect when the sound of a word reflects its meaning, like 'plash'.

Personification – when something that is not human is referred to as if it is a person, for example, the Titanic, 'still couches she'. The effect is usually to exaggerate some aspect of the topic.

Repetition – repeated word or meaning.

Rhyme – very similar to assonance; same vowel sound and final consonant, for example, 'say', 'decay'. Masculine rhyme – when the final syllable is stress, as in 'say' and 'decay'. Feminine rhyme – when the final syllable is not stressed, as in 'growing', 'showing'.

Rhythm – the musical beat of the line, with stressed and unstressed syllables (the stressed syllables will be the important ones). The different rhythms have different names. Trochee (trochaic): strong light, strong light; iamb (iambic): light strong, light strong; dactyl: strong light light, strong light light; anapaest: light light strong, light light strong. If puzzled, try Wikipedia which is very clear on the subject.

Then there are technical words for the number of lines in a verse or stanza.
Quatrain – four lines in a verse
Sestet – six line
Octave – eight lines