

Summary notes for the Last Battle lecture (Tennyson and Ciardi), Oct. 8, 2014

KEYWORDS: DESPAIR, HOPE, TRADITION, ALIENATION

We explored Tennyson's representation of the final battle in the *Idylls of the King*, considering how the end of the poem juxtaposes a nightmarish battle, full of expressions of despair and doubt, with a final assertion of hope

We compared the treatment of the same battle in John Ciardi's modern poem *Lancelot in Hell*

We considered the ways in which Ciardi's poem rejects the idealism of the tradition from which it springs

We considered how both Tennyson and Ciardi used various poetic devices to underline moments of despair and alienation, as well as, in Tennyson's case, to close on a note of hope

ONOMATOPOEIA

Onomatopoeia is the use of words that sound like what they describe ("bees buzz"): we explored the sound patterns (also including alliteration, assonance, and consonance) in these lines:

And ever and anon with host to host
Shocks, and the splintering spear, the hard mail hewn,
Shield-breakings, and the clash of brands, the crash
Of battleaxes on shattered helms, and shrieks
After the Christ

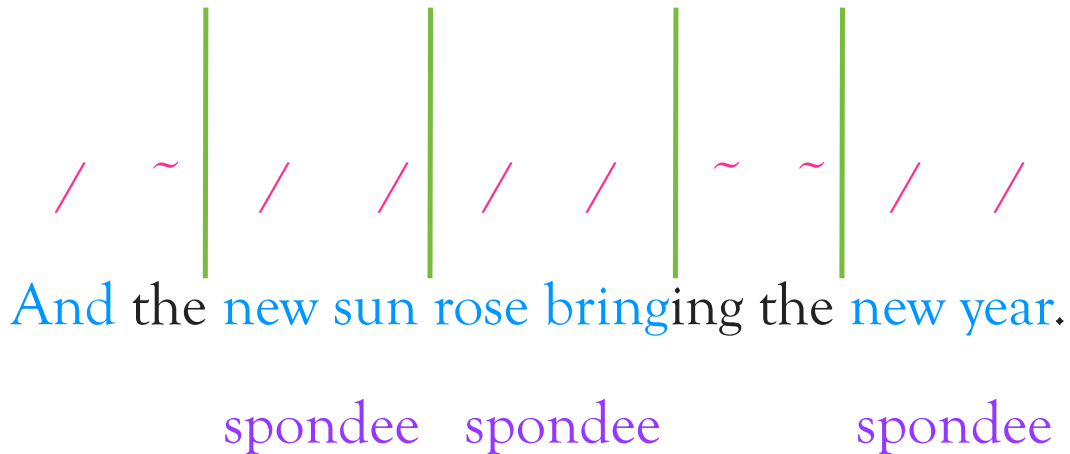
REPETITION

As in our last lecture on Tennyson, we explored how he makes use of repetition: here it is used to reinforce an impression of chaos, and sound effects work in conjunction with the repetition of key words to suggest equivalences between opposites (friend and foe, golden youth and ghost)

For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,
And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew;
And some had visions out of golden youth,
And some beheld the faces of old ghosts
Look in upon the battle; and in the mist
Was many a noble deed, many a base,
And chance and craft and strength in single fights

SPONDEE

A spondee is a metrical foot composed of two strong stresses: we scanned the final line of the *Idylls* to show how Tennyson finally replaces the chaos of the last battle with an assertion of hope:



SCANSION, STRESS

Scansion is the process of marking stress in a line of poetry, and dividing that line into feet (metrical units), as in the above example from the *Idylls*. The main feet are

iamb: ~ / (a**way**) [this is the most common foot in English]

trochee: / ~ (**lovely**)

anapest: ~ ~ / (under**stand**)

dactyl: / ~ ~ (**desperate**)

spondee: / / (**dead set**)

We discussed how to tell where stress should fall in one-syllable words: the following kinds of single-syllable words attract strong stress:

- Nouns
- Action verbs
- Adjectives and adverbs

- Conjunctions, pronouns, prepositions, and linking verbs ONLY IF there is an unstressed syllable between them and the next stressed syllable

You can see how these rules are mostly about finding the “important” words (single-syllable articles, for example, do NOT attract strong stresses)

John Ciardi’s *Lancelot in Hell* was published in 1961. It is in free verse.

FREE VERSE

Free verse has no regular metre or rhyme scheme to give it structure; sometimes, the irregularity mirrors the treatment of the subject matter (it can, for example, highlight confusion and alienation)

REGISTER, DICTION

The register of language refers to the level of language used; to the formality or informality of the word choices. We discussed the effect of the appearance of prosaic, mundane words in the description of the final battle in Ciardi’s poem:

That noon we **banged** like **tubs** in a blast from Hell’s mouth.
Axes **donged** on casques, and the dead steamed through their armor
their wounds frying. Horses screamed like cats, and men
ran through their own dusk like darks howling.

We also pointed to how sound effects worked in the above lines: alliteration and consonance on a plosive (“b”), and onomatopoeia (“banged”) draw attention to the word “tubs”: the form is underlining the deflation of knightly, chivalric activity and idealism, and this deflation is a major theme of the poem

EXTENDED METAPHOR

Guenevere is compared to a horse in an extended metaphor; the comparison underlines the traditional misogyny in the treatment of Guenevere. Note that her name is never mentioned, though Arthur’s is. The poem resolves in suggesting that the essence of the battle (“iron to iron”) is not in the “love” story, but in the basic, aggressive encounter of man to man