

He Never Expected Much



POEM TEXT

[or]

A Consideration

[A reflection] *On My Eighty-Sixth Birthday*

- 1 Well, World, you have kept faith with me,
- 2 Kept faith with me;
- 3 Upon the whole you have proved to be
- 4 Much as you said you were.
- 5 Since as a child I used to lie
- 6 Upon the leaze and watch the sky,
- 7 Never, I own, expected I
- 8 That life would all be fair.

- 9 'Twas then you said, and since have said,
- 10 Times since have said,
- 11 In that mysterious voice you shed
- 12 From clouds and hills around:
- 13 "Many have loved me desperately,
- 14 Many with smooth serenity,
- 15 While some have shown contempt of me
- 16 Till they dropped underground.

- 17 "I do not promise overmuch,
- 18 Child; overmuch;
- 19 Just neutral-tinted haps and such,"
- 20 You said to minds like mine.
- 21 Wise warning for your credit's sake!
- 22 Which I for one failed not to take,
- 23 And hence could stem such strain and ache
- 24 As each year might assign.

until they were buried."

"I don't promise too much, kid—just impersonal, random happenstance, and that kind of thing," you told people like me. To your credit, that was a sage warning! I, for one, didn't manage to ignore it, so I was able to curb whatever stress and pain the years sent my way.



THEMES



REALISM, PESSIMISM, AND ACCEPTANCE

"He Never Expected Much" considers the wisdom of not expecting too much out of life. The elderly speaker addresses the "World" in frank terms, admitting that it has met the low expectations it seemed to set from the start. The speaker then clarifies what the World has seemingly always "said" to him: that people may love or hate it for pleasing or disappointing them, but it doesn't *promise* anything beyond random happenstance. With subtle [irony](#), the speaker says he "failed not to take" that warning—in other words, he *did* take it—and has therefore remained stoic in the face of life's troubles. Ultimately, the poem suggests that such sober realism is a wise approach to life, while also making clear that it's not the same thing as actual happiness.

The speaker claims to have always expected that life wouldn't "all be fair," and he credits the "World" with meeting that expectation. In other words, looking back from the perspective of old age, he judges life to be as random and unfair as it seemed to him in childhood. He tells the World that it has lived up to its promises ("kept faith with me"), adding that "Upon the whole you have proved to be / Much as you said you were." Life hasn't bitterly disappointed him—although the qualifiers "Upon the whole" and "Much" suggest that he may have *some* hidden bitterness. Significantly, too, his lack of disappointment comes from his lack of initial hopes. The world turned out to be as harsh as it looked to start with, so his lack of disappointment isn't the same as satisfaction!

Through his imagined dialogue with the "World," the speaker positions himself as a clear-eyed realist: someone who accepts life as it is rather than loving or hating it. He imagines the world telling him that many people *have* loved or hated it (as if it were a godlike entity), but that, in truth, it's governed by chance. It can only promise "neutral-tinted haps": random, neutral happenstance, rather than rewards or punishments.

Thus, the speaker takes the world on its own terms rather than regarding it with "desperate[]" love or bitter "contempt." He even seems to reject an attitude of "seren[e]" love; he sees *any* kind of love for the world as irrational, because the world is



SUMMARY

Well, World, you've kept your promises, kept your promises. By and large, you've turned out to be pretty much what you claimed to be. Ever since childhood, when I'd lie back on leased land and stare at the sky, I have to admit I never thought life would be entirely fair.

It was back then that you told me, as you've told me many times since, in that cryptic voice that seems to fall from the clouds and surrounding hills: "Many people have loved the world madly. Many have loved it peacefully. Some have despised it

random. Moreover, in summing up what the world has "said to minds like mine," he implies that his attitude isn't unique. Rather, he's taking one of a few major attitudes you can adopt toward life—optimistic idealism, angry cynicism, etc.

The speaker believes his neutral, illusion-free stance is the wisest, but he also hints that it's not necessarily the most gratifying. By praising the world's "Wise warning" about its true nature, he implicitly praises his *own* wisdom in taking that warning. His phrasing is oddly ironic, however: he says he "failed not to take" the warning. He accepted the world as it really was, but that acceptance strikes him, on some level, as a failure. Though he takes pride in his wisdom, he seems to regret not being more idealistic or emotionally invested in life. Overall, his attitude hasn't brought him happiness; it's just helped lessen life's pain ("strain and ache"). In the end, then, the poem is even realistic about the limits of realism!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*Well, World, you have kept faith with me,
Kept faith with me;
Upon the whole you have proved to be
Much as you said you were.*

"He Never Expected Much" has a subtitle, which also serves as an introductory note:

[or]
A Consideration
[A reflection] On My Eighty-Sixth Birthday

The speaker of the poem, then, seems to be Thomas Hardy himself, taking his 86th birthday as an occasion to reflect on life.

Lines 1-4 kick off the poem itself with an [apostrophe](#). Addressing the "World" in general, the speaker acknowledges that it has "kept faith with [him]," or kept its promises to him. He adds that "Upon the whole" (that is, by and large), the world has turned out to be "Much as [it] said [it was]." It's as if he's going out of his way to stress that he's *not* bitter or disappointed.

At the same time, there's something humorously [colloquial](#) and a little world-weary about that "Well." Its [tone](#) might be read as dryly [ironic](#), as in a phrase like, "Well, what can I say." The word "faith" definitely turns out to be loaded with irony: the speaker goes on to clarify that the "World" has lived up to its promises only because it promised so little. Meanwhile, he "Never

Expected Much," even as a child. In other words, he doesn't feel anything like traditional faith; he doesn't believe that any kind of god or deity has rewarded (or punished) him.

The poem is highly musical from these first lines onward. The [epizeuxis](#) of "Kept faith with me, / Kept faith with me" sounds downright sing-song, and the first two lines of each subsequent stanza contain similar [repetition](#). Strong [alliteration](#) ("Well, World"/"with"/"with") and [assonance](#) ("Well"/"kept"/"Kept"; "you"/"proved to") add musicality as well, both here and throughout the poem.

LINES 5-8

*Since as a child I used to lie
Upon the leaze and watch the sky,
Never, I own, expected I
That life would all be fair.*

The speaker relays a childhood memory. Building on the jaded realism of the first four lines, the speaker makes clear that he was never much of an optimist or idealist:

Since as a child I used to lie
Upon the leaze and watch the sky,
Never, I own, expected I
That life would all be fair.

He "own[s]" (admits) that, ever since he was a kid lying on the grass and staring up at the sky, he expected life to contain plenty of unfairness. (Remember, the poem's title is "He Never Expected Much"!.) Whereas some kids might feel awe or reverence while staring up at the heavens, the speaker apparently felt skepticism or foreboding. As he looks back in his old age, it's clear that the world as he's known it has lived up to that early impression.

The old-fashioned word "leaze," which refers to a leased plot of land, implies that the speaker's family never owned the land he grew up on. It may also have a [symbolic](#) element, suggesting that the world itself is something that people figuratively "lease" for a while, but never truly own (i.e., we give it up when we die).

Heavy /i/ [assonance](#) ("child," "I," etc.) chimes with the [end rhymes](#) in lines 5-7 ("lie"/"sky"/"I"), making the language sound rich and lyrical. At this point, readers can also see that the poem uses an AAABCCCB [rhyme scheme](#) and an [iambic](#) (da-DUM) [meter](#) (with either four, three, or two iambs per line; see the Form, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme sections for more context). These formal effects give the poem a lilting or swinging sound, which tempers the pessimistic content just a little.

LINES 9-12

*'Twas then you said, and since have said,
Times since have said,
In that mysterious voice you shed*

From clouds and hills around:

Lines 9-12 continue to address ([apostrophize](#)) the "World" as a whole. The speaker claims that, since childhood, the world has told him something over and over in a "mysterious voice":

'Twas then you said, and since have said,
Times since have said,
In that mysterious voice you shed
From clouds and hills around:

The "clouds and hills around" the speaker seem to "shed" this voice. That is, the voice seems to emanate from the natural environment. The speaker heard it while lying on his back and "watch[ing] the sky" as a kid (lines 5-6), and he has apparently heard it many "Times since." (The [repetition](#) in these lines—"said [...] since have said, / [...] since have said"—mirrors the repetitiveness of the voice itself.)

The poem is [alluding](#), here, to religious stories (e.g., from the Bible) in which the voice of God booms down from the heavens. But the allusion turns out to be [ironic](#), since what the voice actually says (in lines 13-19) doesn't square well with most faith traditions. Arguably, it fits better within the atheist tradition! Notice that it's the "World" and not "God" talking here; this speaker may not believe in any kind of god.

In fact, this "voice" probably isn't supposed to be literal at all. Through imaginary dialogue, the speaker is expressing what the world has always *seemed* to say to him: in other words, he's [personifying](#) (or [anthropomorphizing](#)) the world in order to convey his worldview.

LINES 13-16

*"Many have loved me desperately,
Many with smooth serenity,
While some have shown contempt of me
Till they dropped underground.*

Lines 13-16 quote the "mysterious voice" mentioned in lines 11-12, which is the voice of the "World" itself. With the help of [anaphora](#) ("Many [...] Many"), the voice describes different kinds of attitudes people have held toward the world:

"Many have loved me desperately,
Many with smooth serenity,
While some have shown contempt of me
Till they dropped underground.["]

In other words, many people have been madly (or despairingly) in love with the world, many have loved it in a calm and stoic way, and some have resented it until they died. ("Dropped underground" is a blunt way of saying "were buried.")

The following lines will imply that the "World" considers *all* these attitudes more or less unjustified. The world is simply

random; there's no reason to love or hate it. This view aligns with the speaker's—not surprisingly, since the speaker is explaining how the world has always seemed to *him*. (It's not clear that the speaker is literally hearing this voice; more likely, he's just interpreting what the world seems to communicate by its very nature.)

Once again, [alliteration](#) and [assonance](#) add musicality to the poem's language. "Many" shares an /eh/ sound with both "desperately" and "serenity," while the /s/ sounds in "smooth serenity" make this phrase roll smoothly off the tongue.

LINES 17-20

*"I do not promise overmuch,
Child; overmuch;
Just neutral-tinted haps and such,"
You said to minds like mine.*

Lines 17-20 finish quoting what the "mysterious voice" of the world "[has] said" to the speaker since he was a child:

"I do not promise overmuch,
Child; overmuch;
Just neutral-tinted haps and such,"
You said to minds like mine.

"Overmuch" is a synonym for "too much," so the "World" is warning that it can't make excessive "promise[s]" to humanity. All it can offer are "neutral-tinted haps and such." The archaic word "haps" means "happenstance" or "chance events," and "neutral-tinted" [metaphorically](#) suggests that these events are unemotional and impersonal; they don't favor or disfavor anybody in particular (unlike, say, armies, which wear non-neutral colors). Basically, the "World" is saying that it can promise only indifferent, random occurrences—as opposed to a divine plan, a system of rewards and punishments, or any kind of personal investment in people's lives.

The phrase "neutral-tinted haps" also echoes ([alludes](#) to) the titles of two poems from Hardy's early career: "[Neutral Tones](#)" and "[Hap](#)." The first is a bitter poem of romantic disappointment, set in a chillingly "grayish" landscape; the second is a protest against the randomness of fate. In other words, the grimness of both poems has a lot in common with this one! Looking back at the end of his career, the poet seems to be riffing on, and agreeing with, poems he wrote decades earlier.

Finally, the speaker specifies that the "World" delivered this bleak news "to minds like mine." Here, he is contrasting people like himself—cool, dispassionate realists—with the kind of people who "love[]" or "show[]" contempt" for the world (lines 13-16). But he also seems to recognize that his attitude toward the world is only one among many. Could there be some implied regret, here, for the expectations he "Never" had, or the feelings he never felt?

LINES 21-24

Wise warning for your credit's sake!
Which I for one failed not to take,
And hence could stem such strain and ache
As each year might assign.

Lines 21-24 sum up the speaker's response to the world's "warning":

Wise warning for your credit's sake!
Which I for one failed not to take,
And hence could stem such strain and ache
As each year might assign.

Since childhood, the world has told him that it can't promise more than a bunch of random events. The speaker takes this as a "Wise warning" and "credit[s]" the world for having delivered it to him. But he may actually be complimenting *himself* on his own wisdom; after all, it's not clear that he literally received this message from a "mysterious voice." (More likely, he's speaking [figuratively](#) about what the world, by its very nature, *seemed* to tell him—that is, about the worldview he formed early on and retained throughout his life.)

With strangely [ironic](#) phrasing, the speaker declares that he "failed not to take" the world's "Wise warning." In other words, he *did* heed the warning, but seems to feel that this choice represented a kind of failure. He concludes that his "Wise" attitude (i.e., never expecting much from life) has alleviated life's pain, allowing him to "stem such strain and ache / As each year might assign." But perhaps, on some level, he wishes he'd made a greater emotional investment in life, risking greater pain and disappointment in return for a chance at greater happiness. Though the poem is framed as a justification of the speaker's realism, it carries an ambiguous undertone of regret.



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) adds to the poem's musicality, and it often reinforces its meaning as well. The poem begins with alliteration, in fact:

Well, World, you have kept faith with me,
Kept faith with me;

The repeated /w/ sound heightens the emphasis on those first two stressed syllables—"Well, World"—drawing out the speaker's dryly [ironic](#) tone. That same sound then repeats twice in "with [...] with"; in fact, the whole phrase "kept faith with me" repeats (an example of the device [epizeuxis](#)). In general, the poem's alliteration is part of its pattern of intensive [repetition](#), which adds to its song-like quality.

For another example, listen to the swing of lines 9-10:

'Twas then you said, and since have said,
Times since have said,

The insistent /s/ alliteration ([sibilance](#)), triple repetition of "said," and so on make these lines sound a lot like song lyrics. Poems don't usually repeat themselves to this extent, but songs often do.

Sibilance appears in other lines as well. Soft, repeating /s/ sounds make the phrase "smooth serenity" (line 14) that much smoother to say aloud. By contrast, the three straight /s/ words in line 23 ("stem such strain") sound a little labored, in keeping with the description of "strain."

Why the difference? For one thing, three words sound weightier than two; for another thing, two of the alliterative words in line 23 share a *double* consonant sound, /st/, rather than /s/ alone. Also, the two /st/ syllables are both accented by the meter ("**stem** such **strain**"), whereas only one /s/ syllable was accented in line 14 ("**smooth** serenity"). All these factors make the alliteration in line 23 sound slower, heavier, and more "strain[ed]."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Well, World," "with"
- **Line 2:** "with"
- **Line 5:** "lie"
- **Line 6:** "leaze"
- **Line 9:** "said," "since," "said"
- **Line 10:** "since," "said"
- **Line 14:** "smooth serenity"
- **Line 15:** "some"
- **Line 20:** "minds," "mine"
- **Line 21:** "Wise warning"
- **Line 22:** "for," "failed," "to take"
- **Line 23:** "stem such strain"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#), like [alliteration](#), adds to the poem's musicality—its song-like or [ballad](#)-like quality—and often reinforces the poem's meaning as well.

Listen to lines 5-8, for example, which are full of long /i/ and short /e/ sounds:

Since as a child I used to lie
Upon the leaze and watch the sky,
Never, I own, expected I
That life would all be fair.

The poem already incorporates triple [end rhymes](#) (such as "lie"/"sky"/"I" in these lines). Layering assonance on top of

these—"child"/"I"/"life"—makes for an especially rich, lyrical sound. About a third of the words in this passage either assonate or rhyme!

The emphasis that assonance provides can also seem to heighten emotion, as when the words "desperately" and "serenity" assonate with "Many" (lines 13-14). Very dense assonance can make lines sound heavier or slower for dramatic effect, as in lines 23-24:

And hence could stem such strain and ache
As each year might assign.

This thick cluster of short /e/, long /a/, long /e/, and long /i/ vowels slows the language to a crawl. The speaker may claim that he can "stem" (curb) the "strain and ache" of life, but the lines themselves seem to *reflect* that strain.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Well," "kept"
- **Line 3:** "you," "proved to"
- **Line 5:** "child I," "lie"
- **Line 6:** "sky"
- **Line 7:** "Never," "I," "expected," "I"
- **Line 8:** "life"
- **Line 9:** "then," "said," "said"
- **Line 12:** "clouds," "around"
- **Line 13:** "Many," "desperately"
- **Line 14:** "Many," "serenity"
- **Line 17:** "not promise"
- **Line 20:** "minds like mine"
- **Line 21:** "warning for your"
- **Line 23:** "hence," "stem," "strain," "ache"
- **Line 24:** "each year," "might assign"

REPETITION

The poem has [repetition](#) built into its structure: the first two lines of every [stanza](#) contain a repeated phrase. These repetitions have a lyrical, chorus-like quality; they derive from the [ballad](#) tradition, as does the form of the poem overall. (See the Form section of this guide for more.)

Extraneous as they might seem, these repetitions also contribute to the poem's [tone](#) and meaning. Take lines 9-10, for example:

'Twas then you said, and since have said,
Times since have said,

In this context, repetition accentuates the speaker's weariness; it's as if the world has "said" the same thing to him a thousand "Times" over.

Finally, a special form of repetition, called [anaphora](#), appears in

lines 13-14:

"Many have loved me desperately,
Many with smooth serenity [...]"

Repetition, here, helps emphasize how numerous the "Many" are (the "World" is describing any number of human beings throughout history). Anaphora also places the two lines in [parallel](#), inviting the reader to compare and contrast the forms of love they refer to.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "kept faith with me, / Kept faith with me;"
- **Line 9:** "said," "since have said"
- **Line 10:** "since have said"
- **Line 13:** "Many"
- **Line 14:** "Many"
- **Line 17:** "overmuch"
- **Line 18:** "overmuch"

APOSTROPHE

The poem addresses the "World" in the abstract: an example of [apostrophe](#). It talks to the world at large even though the world can't literally respond:

Well, World, you have kept faith with me,
Kept faith with me;
Upon the whole you have proved to be
Much as you said you were.

Somewhat unusually, the poem treats the abstraction it's addressing as a kind of [anthropomorphic](#) character, complete with a "voice" that seems to talk back to the speaker:

'Twas then you said, and since have said,
Times since have said,
In that mysterious voice you shed
From clouds and hills around:
"Many have loved me desperately [...]"

Still, this voice isn't literal; it represents what the speaker *imagines* the world saying, both to him and to human beings in general. It has a "mysterious," godlike quality, but it says things the God of Christianity (the dominant religion of Hardy's time/place) would never say.

[Ironically](#), in fact, it suggests that the world is governed by random chance rather than any divine power. Since literary characters often use apostrophe to address God or the gods, Hardy may be intentionally subverting convention here: his speaker addresses a "World" that seems to have no God at all.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 9-21

IRONY

There's an element of [irony](#) in the poem's overall [tone](#) and [conceit](#). The speaker, looking back on life, admits that the "World" has "kept faith with" him—that is, lived up to the "promise" it seemed to offer when he was young. But this is true *only* because the world promised the bare minimum: just a bunch of random events ("neutral-tinted haps").

In fact, the promise was more like a "warning." It was so grim, and his youthful expectations so low as a result ("Never, I own, expected I / That life would all be fair"), that the world's having "kept faith with [him]" isn't all that impressive. Even the word "faith" sounds ironic in this context, since the speaker is declaring his own *lack* of faith in any God or higher meaning.

Lines 21-22 are also laced with irony:

Wise warning for your credit's sake!
Which I for one failed not to take,

The speaker credits the world for having "Wise[ly] warn[ed]" him that it couldn't promise much. (In reality, he may be crediting *himself* for recognizing that he couldn't *expect* much.) Ironically, though, he sees his acceptance of this wisdom as a kind of "fail[ure]." Maybe the wisdom isn't so wise after all, or maybe the speaker regrets embracing it so early, numbing himself to disappointment rather than taking a more idealistic path.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Well, World, you have kept faith with me, / Kept faith with me;"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Never, I own, expected I / That life would all be fair."
- **Lines 17-19:** "'I do not promise overmuch, / Child; overmuch; / Just neutral-tinted haps and such,'"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Wise warning for your credit's sake! / Which I for one failed not to take,"

beautiful (as in "fair weather").

'Twas (Line 9) - An archaic contraction of "It was."

Shed (Line 11) - Here meaning "sent down," like a voice from the heavens.

Serenity (Line 14) - Calm; peace of mind.

Contempt (Line 15) - Derision; an angry or bitter lack of respect.

Underground (Line 16) - That is, under the earth when they're dead and buried.

Overmuch (Line 17, Line 18) - Too much; an excessive quantity.

Neutral-tinted (Line 19) - Neutral-colored. Here used [metaphorically](#) to mean indifferent or impersonal in nature.

Haps (Line 19) - Happenstances; chance events. "Neutral-tinted haps" means impersonal, random occurrences (the kind that happen in a random universe, as opposed to one governed by a God, a system of rewards and punishments, etc.).

For your credit's sake (Line 21) - To your credit. ("Wise warning for your credit's sake!" means, basically, "To your credit, that was a fair warning!")

Hence (Line 23) - Therefore; for that reason.

Stem (Line 23) - Hold back; keep in check.

Strain and ache (Line 23) - Stress and pain.

Assign (Line 24) - Dole out [something]; give to someone as their share, or as a task to complete.

**FORM, METER, & RHYME****FORM**

The poem consists of three eight-line stanzas, or *octaves*, each of which follows the same pattern of [meter](#) and rhyme:

- The [rhyme scheme](#) of each [stanza](#) is AAABCCCB, with the first two lines forming an identical rhyme. The rest of the rhymes are exact or nearly exact ("were" and "fair" in lines 4 and 8 make a [slant rhyme](#)).
- The meter varies: lines 1, 3, and 5-7 of each stanza are [iambic tetrameter](#); lines 4 and 8 are iambic trimeter; and line 2 is iambic dimeter.
- This means that while all the lines generally follow a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm, the second line of each stanza contains four syllables, the fourth and eighth lines contain six, and the rest contain eight. As in most metrical poems, there are occasional variations in the pattern.

Overall, the form is song-like, one of many possible variations on the traditional [ballad](#) (a form traditionally set to music, and

**VOCABULARY**

Kept faith with (Line 1, Line 2) - Kept promises to; dealt honestly with.

Leaze (Line 6) - Leased land (a variant of "lease").

Own (Line 7) - Here meaning "acknowledge" or "admit."

Fair (Line 8) - Can mean *just* (as in "fair to everyone") or

which Hardy used and varied often). The poem could be described as formally traditional, but with a couple of unusual wrinkles—characteristic of Hardy's tendency to mix "traditional" and "modern" poetic effects. (See the Context section of this guide for more.)

METER

The poem has an unusual, shifting [meter](#). Lines 1, 3, and 5-7 of each [stanza](#) are set in [iambic tetrameter](#) (i.e., they generally follow a da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm); lines 4 and 8 are in iambic [trimeter](#) (da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM); and line 2 is in iambic [dimeter](#) (da-DUM, da-DUM).

The shifting meter adds some swing to the rhythm, lightening the pessimistic subject matter ever so slightly. Listen to how this pattern plays out in the second stanza, for example:

'Twas then | you said, | and since | have said,
Times since | have said,
In that | myster- | ious voice | you shed
From clouds | and hills | around:
"Many | have loved | me des- | perately,
Many | with smooth | seren- | ity,
While some | have shown | contempt | of me
Till they | dropped un- | derground.

Like most metrical poems, this one contains occasional rhythmic variations. Here, the first foot of the second line ("Times since") is a [spondee](#) (stressed-stressed) rather than an iamb (unstressed-stressed), while the first feet of the fifth and sixth lines ("Many"/"Many") are [trochees](#) (stressed-unstressed) rather than iambs. These are very common metrical substitutions. They help prevent the poem's rhythm from becoming too predictable.

RHYME SCHEME

The [rhyme scheme](#) of each [stanza](#) is as follows:

AAABCCCB

The first, second, and third lines [rhyme](#) with each other (with the first two lines making an [identical rhyme](#)). The fourth line rhymes with the eighth; the fifth, sixth, and seventh lines rhyme with each other. Most of the poem's rhymes are exact (although "were"/"fair" in lines 4 and 8 is more of a [slant rhyme](#)).

Like the shifting [meter](#), this uncommon rhyme scheme shows off the poet's technical skills. It also places heightened emphasis on the B rhymes, because they're unique within their respective stanzas and because the triple A and C rhymes seem to build up to them. This effect lends line 16, for example ("Till they dropped underground"), an air of heavy finality—appropriate to a line about death.



SPEAKER

The poem's headnote ("[A reflection] On My Eighty-Sixth Birthday"), along with the "He" in the title, establishes that the speaker is an 86-year-old man. It also suggests that the speaker is the poet. Thomas Hardy did, in fact, write the poem about a year before his death at age 87.

The speaker reflects on the "World" and judges that it has lived up to his expectations—because his expectations were so low. Lines 5-8 make clear that, even as a child, he was never a starry-eyed idealist; he never expected "That life would all be fair." As a result, he's not a disappointed cynic in his old age. He considers himself a clear-eyed realist who accepts the world as it is, rather than "lov[ing]" it or "show[ing] contempt" for it. He has to admit that the world has "kept faith with [him]"; that is, it's turned out to be pretty much the way it always appeared (neither just nor unjust but simply random).

However, lines 21-22 inject a little ambiguity into the speaker's attitude. Oddly, the speaker says that he "failed not to take" the world's "warning" about its true nature. This convoluted phrasing suggests that his wisdom feels, on some level, like failure: it's taken the edge off the world's "strain and ache," but it may have cost him some happiness (or other kinds of emotional experience).



SETTING

The poem doesn't have a clearly defined [setting](#), though it makes a few references to the speaker's (former) physical environment. In lines 5-6, for example, the speaker recalls when "as a child I used to lie / Upon the leaze and watch the sky." The "leaze" (an archaic spelling of *lease*) refers to a piece of leased land. When he was young, then, the speaker would sometimes lie in a field, stare at the sky, and ponder the world around him.

Both then and in "Times since," the world has seemed to speak to him in a "mysterious voice," reverberating "From clouds and hills around." In other words, the speaker's natural environment seems almost to be a living presence, addressing him in godlike tones. However, its message (that the world can only promise random "haps," or happenstance) doesn't sound like something the Judeo-Christian God would say; it conflicts with the prevailing religious ideas of the poet's era.

In the broadest sense, the poem's setting is the "World"—it's a reflection on the nature of earthly existence. The poem is also set at a particular moment in time: the speaker's "Eighty-Sixth Birthday." Since the speaker appears to be the poet, the poem is likely set in 1926, the year Hardy turned 86.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"He Never Expected Much" appears in Thomas Hardy's final collection, *Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres*, which was published posthumously in 1928. Hardy died at the age of 87, so it's fair to assume that he is the speaker of this poem and that the poem really is a reflection on the occasion of his "Eighty-Sixth Birthday." In his final years, he's looking back at his life and summing up his view of the world.

As a retrospective piece, "He Never Expected Much" [alludes](#) to at least two of Hardy's previous poems. The phrase "neutral-tinted haps"—which describes the indifferent, chance workings of the universe—echoes the titles of Hardy's "[Neutral Tones](#)" and "[Hap](#)" (from *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, 1898). The first of these [juxtaposes](#) a failing romance with an ominously "grayish" or "Neutral"-colored landscape. The second protests the sheer randomness of the world's suffering. These two poems share a fundamental pessimism with "He Never Expected Much," though their [tone](#) is more bitter. Both are from early in Hardy's career, so the later poem seems to show the elderly writer agreeing with his younger self.

Hardy's literary career began in the 19th-century Victorian era and ended during the 20th-century modernist movement. This poem features conventional [meter](#) and [rhyme](#), the tools that dominated pre-20th-century verse. Starting in the early 1900s, many English-language poets began loosening or abandoning meter and rhyme (i.e., writing in [free verse](#)), while using an increasingly indirect or fragmented style. These experimental techniques helped define what is now called "[modernist](#)" [poetry](#). Though Hardy lived until 1928, however, his verse remained formally traditional throughout his career.

His celebrated novels, such as [Tess of the d'Urbervilles](#) and [Jude the Obscure](#), convey much the same philosophical pessimism as his poetry. His skeptical outlook influenced a number of 20th-century poets, including Robert Frost and Philip Larkin.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem doesn't make any historical references; it's framed as a timeless, universal reflection on the nature of existence. However, its anecdote about the "leaze"—an archaic word for a leased plot of land—suggests that the speaker's "child[hood]" probably took place before the 20th century. (Hardy grew up in 1840s and 1850s England, making him a man of the [Victorian era](#), which lasted from 1837 to 1901.)

The poem uses some other words and phrases (e.g., "Twas") that mark the author as a product of 19th-century literary culture. At the same time, his philosophical pessimism and religious skepticism—stances that made his work controversial in Victorian England—had a major impact on modernism.

Modernist writers often wrestled with the growing

secularization of Western society, the atheism of late 19th-century philosophers such as [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) (who proclaimed that "God is dead"), and the horrors of 20th-century warfare, which shook the faith of many who witnessed them. In its form and diction, then, "He Never Expected Much" reads like a quintessential Victorian poem. In its worldview, it reads more like a product of the decade in which it was written: the 1920s, when modernism peaked.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poet's Life](#) — Read a brief biography of Hardy at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-hardy>)
- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a reading of "He Never Expected Much." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MykNXf8idSo>)
- [The Victorian Era](#) — An introduction to the Victorian era in which Hardy lived most of his life, and which continued to influence his poetry into old age. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/153447/an-introduction-to-the-victorian-era>)
- [The Modern Era](#) — An introduction to the modernist movement that encompassed Hardy's later years and shaped his poetry as well. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152025/an-introduction-to-modernism>)
- [The Hardy Society](#) — An organization devoted to the appreciation of Hardy's work (contains a biography and other resources). (<https://www.hardysociety.org/>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- [At an Inn](#)
- [A Wife In London](#)
- [Channel Firing](#)
- [Drummer Hodge](#)
- [Neutral Tones](#)
- [The Convergence of the Twain](#)
- [The Darkling Thrush](#)
- [The Man He Killed](#)
- [The Ruined Maid](#)



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