

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict

The Man He Killed - *Thomas Hardy*

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THE MAN HE KILLED

Thomas Hardy

Brief Summary

The poem centres around the speaker's experience of having to kill a man whilst in combat during The Boer War. The speaker considers how under different circumstances the man he is faced with killing could be a friend. He cannot fully justify his actions, and the poem discusses his struggle with trying to rationally explain his actions other than it just being what happens during conflict.

Synopsis

- The speaker begins by conjecturing about other circumstances the eponymous man and he might have met under. He claims that if he had met him in an inn then they would have drunk together.
- Instead, he reveals that during the war they both shot at each other, a conflict which ended with the speaker killing the man.
- The speaker attempts to justify the killing.
- He weakly reasons that he killed the man because he was his enemy.
- The speaker then speculates that the man was probably in a similar situation to him - he had joined the army simply because he was out of work. The man possibly enlisted very casually.
- The speaker finishes by evaluating the nature of war.
- He points out that soldiers kill each other even though they could have been friends if they met under different circumstances.



Context

The Boer War (1899-1902)

The Boer War was fought between the **British Empire** and **two states in South Africa**. The Boers fought for independence but the British were adamant that they should remain in control. This raised a number of questions, as it appeared as though the Boers were only defending their homes while the British greedily launched an attack, allegedly fighting for the diamond mines. They destroyed farmland that civilians relied upon, forcing the inhabitants into concentration camps. Many died of disease and hunger, especially children. Unsurprisingly, there were many from within the empire who were strongly against the war.

Thomas Hardy

Hardy was an English man originating from Dorset who was **against the Boer War**. He made it publically clear that he didn't agree with the politics of his time, writing that "The offhand decision of some commonplace mind high in office at a critical moment influences the course of events for a hundred years". This statement reveals that Hardy believed that the politicians of his time were inept and didn't consider the wider ethical consequences of their actions. Therefore, the poem can be read as a **response to the political situation of the time**. This is reflected in the soldier's lack of understanding surrounding the war, emphasising the fact that politicians make decisions which the ordinary man is forced to carry out.

It is interesting to note that Hardy's background allows him to relate to the persona of the poem. Despite his status as a successful novelist, his mother was particularly poor as a child and his father was employed as a mason and a builder, a profession which was defined as 'working class'. As a result, **it could be argued** that Hardy writes sympathetically towards his persona, as he is able to empathise with his situation. Furthermore, his **working-class origins** evidence the suggestion of a **class commentary** within the poem. Hardy takes care to replicate Dorset expressions in the poem. In this way, the language of working-class Dorset people is represented in a 'high art' form.

The Man He Killed (1902)

In the original publication of the poem, Hardy began the poem with the following clarification:

"SCENE: The settle of the Fox Inn, Stagfoot Lane. CHARACTERS: the speaker (a returned soldier) and his friends, natives of the hamlet."

By choosing to set the poem with a typical pub backdrop, Hardy immediately creates a **contrast between the setting and the action** of the poem. The mundane setting of the pub with its atmosphere of friendly, casual sociality are a stark contrast to the terrifying, life-or-death situations of war. This emphasises **Hardy's liberal viewpoint**, that is, that **war is unnatural** and should not be accepted as the norm. Furthermore, it polarises the two



settings, making it clear that while war is unethical, it is also unethical to watch events unfold without taking action to prevent injustices from occurring.

The Man He Killed

This is informal Dorset dialect - 'nipperskin' can refer to a container of alcohol or a unit of measurement - this whole stanza refers to the idea that these two men could easily be friends if they weren't faced with killing each other in a war.

The phrase "face to face" is emotive and highlights the tense nature of this situation.

The balance of this line - four syllables & words apportioned to the speaker's action and four to the subject's action - further reinforces the idea that the men are fundamentally equal. This continues the sentiment of the first stanza.

He can only justify his action to kill the soldier by saying it was "just so - it's just the nature of war - and he's also justifying this to himself.

The use of a semi-colon reflects a pause.

This stanza focuses on the life of the man that the speaker presumably kills, which may reveal how guilty the speaker feels with regards to his actions.

In the fourth stanza, the rhythm breaks down and becomes halting, due to the comma in the first line separating the final two syllables from the rest, and the hyphens / pauses in the second and third lines. This breakdown in rhythm suggests that the speaker is having difficulty making sense of the *why* of the event.

The speaker expresses how strange he finds war, considering that if he met the other men in any other context, they would treat each other with respect. This sentiment is a variation of the sentiment in the first stanza, and contributes to the poem's cyclical nature.

The nine-syllable penultimate line leads the listener to expect a longer final line. The final line is only six syllables and this inequality produces a sense of deflation, which is at one with the speaker's melancholy train of thoughts.

'Had he and I but met

By some old ancient inn,

We should have sat us down to wet

Right many a **nipperkin!**

'But ranged as **infantry,**

And staring **face to face,**

I shot at him as he at me,

And killed him in his place.

'I shot him dead **because --**

Because he was my foe,

Just so: my foe of course he was;

That's clear enough; **although**

'**He thought** he'd '**list,** perhaps,

Off-hand like – just as I –

Was out of work – had sold his traps

No other reason why.

'Yes; quaint and curious war is!

You shoot a fellow down

You'd treat if met where any bar
is,

Or help to half-a-crown.'

Hardy opens the poem anecdotally, contrasting the actual circumstances of the two men (within a war) with the possibility that in some other reality, they might have met in a pub. Highlights how Hardy is perhaps criticising the cruelty and irrationality of war.

Immediately, the second stanza introduces the theme of war, and the use of enjambment (allowing the lines to run over) accelerates the pace of the poem, perhaps reflecting the lack of time the speaker had to make his decision as to whether to kill the soldier or not.

"Killed him in his place" is very blunt and suggests the speaker hasn't processed the conflict yet.

The speaker stumbles here - all the more noticeable since poetry is characteristically elegant / eloquent. His hesitation suggests his inability to find a sufficient justification. This inability to justify his action is further signalled by the repetition 'he was my foe' 'my foe of course he was', which is in turn heightened by the similar sounds 'foe,/ Just so... foe'

The stanza ends with enjambment, reflecting the fact that his thoughts are unresolved. Unlike the two previous stanzas, the stanza does not conclude neatly like but runs on.

Placing 'although' at the very end of the stanza makes it visually prominent – the speaker's ambivalence and lack of assurance is clear to the reader.

The speaker is pondering over the reasons the soldier may have enlisted to fight. The reasons he comes up with are pretty arbitrary. The speaker does not imagine it is patriotism that pushed him to fight – it is simply poverty that caused him to enlist.

The use of colloquial language (enlist shortened to 'list) and colloquial / local expressions ('off-hand like' and 'traps' (meaning belongings, or literally trappings)) suggests that the speaker may be telling the story in an informal setting like a bar and / or to friends or acquaintances of a similar social standing.

The speaker is now reflecting on war in a more general sense. The line well may be ironic - 'quaint' means 'pleasingly or strikingly old-fashioned' and its connotations are positive, whereas war is devastating in every respect - including psychologically, as the poem in question demonstrates.



Title 'The Man He Killed'

The title is very blunt and unemotional, which may suggest that the speaker has been unable to process the events of the conflict.

The bluntness of the title is heightened by the fact that all four words are monosyllabic.

The title is in past tense, which situates the poem in the historical context.

The Man He Killed

The theme of the poem is immediately implied to be about conflict and death.

Opening

The poem **opens on an arguably positive note**, with a stanza which suggests that suggests if these two unnamed protagonists had met in a different situation, like a pub, they'd have had a drink together and been civil. This intrigues the reader and makes them consider what the actual reality is if that is the alternative.

'Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

Structure

Rhyme Scheme

Hardy uses a deceptively simple and light-hearted **ABAB rhyme scheme**. This creates a rhythm which **mimics a nursery rhyme**, establishing an eerie contrast between the rhythm of the poem and its violent content. It could be argued that this reflects the very nature of conflict, as politicians often make war appear patriotic and honorable, when in reality it is destructive and devastating. Furthermore, Hardy may have **drawn parallels** between a nursery rhyme and the poem in order to illustrate the idea that those in power make



catastrophic decisions as though it is child's play. This raises questions about the ethics of war, as it highlights the utter disregard of human life.

The **traditional rhyme scheme** contrasts with the use of **non-standard English in the Dorset dialect**.

Cyclical Structure

The poem both begins and concludes with a reference to a pub, creating a **cyclical structure**. This **epitomises** the destructive cycle of war, implying that there are no answers to the speaker's anxieties. Instead, Hardy **illustrates** that war and conflict will continually pose the same moral questions. Furthermore, the cyclical nature of the poem suggests a futility to conflict, presenting the idea that war has no goal nor end and so is effectively pointless.

Language Techniques

Tone and Atmosphere

The **speaker is very blunt** as he discusses the situation he found himself in - choosing to be killed or to kill - and Hardy conveys the tension in the situation very well. The **tone of the poem is rather bleak**, and highlights how war forces people into very distressing and traumatic situations.



Manipulating sound

Hardy uses **literary sound devices** including **assonance** (he 'o' sounds in "you shoot a fellow down") and **consonance** (like the 'n' sound in "ranged as infantry"). This **improves the rhythm** of the poem, as well as making the text more **lyrical**.

Enjambment

Enjambment increases the poem's pace, which could reflect the minimal amount of time the speaker has to decide if he's going to kill the other soldier. This makes the poem more intense and highlights the tricky situation the speaker is in.

Semantic field of war and conflict

Hardy **utilises** language which refers to the war - "infantry", "shot", "killed", "foe" - with many of these terms repeated throughout the poem to solidify the theme of conflict. Repeating these words may reflect how the memories of war are repeating themselves in the speaker's mind.



Content

Patriotism – or lack of

The poem highlights the futility of war and the senselessness of the tragedy it causes. As the speaker repeatedly points out, the man he killed was his equal, someone he would have treated with respect and kindness ('help to half-a-crown') if he'd met him in a bar. Therefore, we can **infer** that the speaker is wondering, why was it he that died and not I? Likewise, the speaker imagines the man enlisted casually 'off-hand like' or for poverty-related reasons. The speaker does not even conjecture that the man might have felt patriotic – perhaps patriotism is so remote or alien a sentiment that it is not even considered a possible motivating force. The complete **lack of patriotic spirit** evinced by the speaker means the poem **contrasts dramatically with other more patriotic war poems** written in the late nineteenth century or earlier twentieth century – a good example of this would be Rupert Brooke's (1914) poem 'The Soldier'.

