

By the end of studying [The Man He Killed](#) I need to know:

**Plot:** A poem which begins with two men drinking together in a public house contrasted to one brutally killing another on a battlefield.

**Ideas:** Conflict, War, Death. Power

<p><b>Vocabulary</b></p>	<p>Inn - a pub, typically one in the country.          nipperkin - a small quantity of beer, wine, or spirits          infantry - soldiers marching or fighting on foot.          Foe - enemy          Quaint - attractively unusual or old-fashioned.          half-a-crown - a former British coin and monetary unit equal to two shillings and sixpence.</p>
<p><b>Context (To inform interpretation)</b></p>	<p>Thomas Hardy - was a Victorian novelist and poet, who mixed elements of realism and romanticism in his writing. His works were highly critical of much in Victorian society - many of his novels and poems contain tragic characters who struggle against both their emotions and social circumstances.          Hardy was a Humanist- meaning he believed in the importance of and value of human life- therefore he was openly against the Second Boer War; which Britain was fighting at the time the poem was written. Even though it was written during this conflict, the poem itself is deliberately vague- it is about all wars so has a universal message. Hardy's belief also means that he didn't fight in the war himself, therefore is not writing about his own personal experiences, this causes more generalised and vague descriptions (in contrast to the more vivid and brutal imagery of Owen in 'Exposure').</p> <p>The Boer Wars - The Boer Wars were a series of wars fought between the British Empire and two Boer states (the South African Republic and Orange in Free State) in the area now known as South Africa. As with many wars fought throughout the late 19th Century, the British fought in order to consolidate their empire.</p> <p>The Victorian Era - The Victorian era describes the period in which Queen Victoria sat on the English throne - between 1837 and 1901 (most of Hardy's life).          Whilst this was a time of industrial revolution, it was also an extremely harsh time to live, and there was a huge difference between the lives of the richest and the poorest. The poor lived in danger and poverty on a daily basis, and Hardy was a vocal critic of these inequalities.</p>
<p><b>Themes</b></p>	<p><b>The Futility of War</b> - The poem has a strong anti-war message. The speaker knows that man he killed is supposedly his 'foe' but he cannot understand why. This serves to demonstrate the pointlessness of war, in which men kill each other, merely because they are told to. The inclusion of 'everyday' ideas and colloquialisms (inn, nipperkin) show that this it is ordinary people who are affected.</p> <p><b>Dehumanisation</b> - Neither the speaker nor the man that he killed are given a name - their identity has been removed. This represents the idea that they do not matter to those in power. The fourth stanza suggests that the men are working class; they have more in common with each other than with those who command them.</p> <p><b>Guilt</b> - Throughout the poem the speaker fails to justify his action. He is very clearly haunted and traumatised by the thought of killing the innocent man who came to war just to serve his nation.</p> <p><b>Society and Class</b> -The speaker of "The Man He Killed" is an enlisted infantryman, which means that on the battlefield, he was on the front lines, taking orders from someone way in the back. This was possibly due to the fact that he wasn't wealthy and was of a lower class than those who gave him commands.</p>

**Form/structure:**

Form - The poem contains 5 stanzas each of which are 4 lines long, with alternating rhyme in an ABAB pattern.

This rigid structure can be seen to represent the regimented lives and strict orders that the men face in their lives as soldiers at war.

Structure - The poem is a dramatic monologue. There appears to be a slow realization (marked by the caesura) that the man killed was in fact not an enemy. Stanza 5 sums up the futility of war and its effect on those doing the fighting. The poem is written in iambic trimeter and tetrameter- a rhythm often associated with nursery rhymes. This gives the poem a lyrical quality and reinforces the idea of innocence- either of the naïve persona who killed someone in a war, or of the destruction of innocence that comes with war.

<p><b>Deeper understanding</b></p>	<p>In the opening stanza, the speaker considers if the two men had met under different circumstances - perhaps they could have been friends. The speaker uses simple language, with colloquialisms (e.g. 'nipperkin' - containers for holding drinks) to demonstrate that these are ordinary, 'everyday' men. Also, the fact they would wet 'many a nipperkin' suggests they would have got drunk together, implying the idea that outside of war they would have been good friends. The term 'nipperkin' as well could also allude to the practice of 'wetting the baby's head'- the tradition of the father going to the pub to celebrate the birth of his children. This suggests the idea that war not only kills soldiers, but robs future children of their lives too.</p> <p>'Staring face to face' suggests proximity - it could easily have been the speaker to have died. The simplistic description of death suggests that he has grown used to the violence.</p> <p>The first two lines of the third stanza highlight that the speaker did not truly know why he killed the man; the repetition of 'because' echoes his stuttering and stalling as he struggles to establish his reason. In lines 3 and 4, he tries to convince himself that this was what he was supposed to do ('just so', 'of course.') It is clear that the speaker is uncomfortable with what he has done and is trying to rationalise it in his mind. The enjambment after 'although' at the end of the stanza leads the reader hanging on the idea that he is still questioning his actions.</p> <p>The similarities between the men reinforces the idea that they could have been friends. The final line of the stanza is particularly powerful - 'no other reason why' on the surface level refers to their reason for joining the war (not out of personal/ political beliefs or hatred for the other). However, it also leaves the reader with the idea that the men are fighting the war for 'no reason' - war is futile.</p> <p>The final stanza is consistent in that the cheerful, down-to-earth personality of the speaker remains at the forefront, but the underlying tone is darker and more ominous. 'Quaint' and 'curious' are not two words that one would automatically consider to describe war, but they do allude to the unusual experience of being violent towards someone he bears no hatred towards. It also further emphasises his background - he does not have the vocabulary to adequately communicate all of the horrors that he is experiencing. The use of the vocabulary 'fellow', 'treat', and 'help' in the final three lines underline the main message - we are all fellow people and should treat each other as such.</p>
<p><b>Quotes and references</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "set us down in some ancient inn"- The image of having met his enemy at the pub instead of the battlefield. Gives the sense of a traditional British setting and a cosy drink, which contrasts with the reality of shooting.</li> <li>• "Staring face to face, I shot him as he at me. And killed him in his place" - Creates an image of personal relationships, but then an image of brutality as he had no choice; kill or be killed</li> <li>• "I killed him in his place"// "I shot him dead because he was my foe" - Enjambment that shows doubt and also a lack of knowledge of why he had to kill him</li> <li>• "Yes; quaint and curious war is!" - Effective adjectives, trying to show war as inoffensive and acceptable but said in a humouring way to support Hardy's ideas that war is futile</li> </ul>
<p><b>Terminology</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simple Language - This reflects the speaker's background and character: a working class, 'everyday' man.</li> <li>• Colloquialisms - The inclusion of colloquial terms further enables the reader to view the speaker and his foe as ordinary men.</li> <li>• Enjambment/ Caesura - Enjambment and caesura are used to affect the rhythm and pace of the poem, and to emphasise meanings.</li> <li>• Repetition and Fillers - Words are repeated, and fillers are inserted, to show the speaker struggling to think about why he had to kill the man.</li> <li>• Latinate syntax- 'my foe of course he was'- the Latinate syntax here reflects he persona's struggling to express his reasons for killing his enemy 'foe'.</li> <li>• Paralellism- Hardy is careful to demonstrate the equality between the persona and eponymous 'man he killed' in order to create a sense of equality. The rhythm of the lines fall on the same stress, lines are weighted equally between him and the 'foe' and the depiction of 'he shot at me as me at him'. It's impossible to tell the difference between the persona and the dead soldier, aside from the fact one is dead and the other alive.</li> </ul>

Links across other poems:

**Exposure-** Both poems explore the futility of war; however, the poets themselves have very different experiences. Owen is far angrier than Hardy- the latter using a rather jovial or mocking tone in the final stanza- this is because Hardy is distant from the conflict himself and instead reflecting on the loss of life.

**The Charge of the Light Brigade-** Contrasts with the poem due to the depiction of war/ battle. Even though the loss of the soldiers' lives in 'The Charge...' is pointless, the partisan nature of the poem (and Tennyson's role as Laureate) causes the poems' message to be twisted to one of honour. This contrasts with Hardy- there's no honour here.

**A Poison Tree/ Extract from the Prelude-** In all three poems, the them eof guilt is evident. The persona in 'The Man He Killed' is clearly struggling to express his ideas as a result of his guilt, unlike 'A Poison Tree' where the persona's control of speech reflects his lack of guilt. All three poems form a didactic purpose, using guilt (or lack thereof) to highlight their messages.