The Man He Killed

POEM TEXT

"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."

SUMMARY

"If only we'd met in some old pub, we would have sat down and shared many a beer!

"But I met him on the battlefield, each of us aiming at the other. We both took aim and fired, but he missed, while my shot killed him where he stood.

"I shot him dead because... well, because he was the enemy, that's all. He was the one I was supposed to shoot, obviously.

"Then again, he'd probably joined his army in similar circumstances to me, on a kind of whim. He was probably out of work at the time, just like I was. He'd probably had to sell his belongings—I can't think why else he would have enlisted.

"Yup, war is a very strange thing! You end up shooting someone who you'd get along well with in a bar—who you'd even give money if they needed it."

THEMES

THE SENSELESSNESS OF WAR

"The Man He Killed" is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker talks about the time he shot and killed a man during a war. Reflecting on the experience, the speaker notes how arbitrary it all seemed; rather than his enemy being someone totally different from the speaker, this other soldier was remarkably similar. Indeed, the speaker imagines he could easily have been friends with this man! The poem, then, argues that war is senseless, tragic, and brutal, and that it ignores the common humanity between people on different sides of a conflict.

The poem itself is told as if it is a conversation taking place in a pub (and the poem makes not one but two references to drinking establishments). The speaker talks unguardedly to the addressee, who could be a friend, the reader, or a combination of both. The poem builds a sense that the speaker is talking to the addressee in the same way he would have talked to the man he killed, had they met in a bar rather than on the battlefield.

The poem starts by posing an alternative reality—that is, what *could* have happened rather than what *did*. If, says the speaker, he and his "foe" had met near on "old ancient inn," they would have drunk together (expressed in the friendly slang of "wet / Right many a nipperkin"). In other words, they would have gotten along well and easily found common ground. But unfortunately the real meeting of the two men was on a battlefield, where they stood "face to face" and shot at each other. (Luckily for the speaker, his bullet found the target and the other man's missed.) The phrase "face to face" signals not only the physical closeness between the two at the time, but the similarity between them more generally. This highlights the tragedy of war, which pushes two men who have no reason to hate each other to fight to the death.

The speaker tries to offer the reason behind the killing, but all he can say is that "I shot him dead because— / Because he was my foe." There's no great animosity here, no true cause for vengeance, it was "Just so." The other man had to die because he was on the other side of the conflict. The lack of a strong and purposeful reasoning here highlights the arbitrariness of war, the way people find themselves fighting just because they're from different countries. And there is literally "No other reason why." The two men tried to kill each other because that's just what happens in war, highlighting both the senselessness and the waste of human life that comes with conflict.

In the last stanza, the speaker calls war "quaint and curious." Of course, it's more than that—it's deadly and tragic. But this

understatement foregrounds the way that the speaker, ultimately, was following orders when he killed this other man, rather than obeying any personal sense of morality. He *knows* that the man was hardly any different from him, but felt he had to shoot him out of duty (and self-preservation). The poem closes by restating its main point: if the speaker had met the other man at a bar, he would have treated him to a drink, or leant him money if he'd needed it. The speaker's normal, natural instinct would be to act compassionately and generously to his fellow man—but war corrupts this common understanding.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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

"The Man He Killed" opens with quotation marks, indicating that what follows might be something that has been overheard. This is more important than it might first appear. The poem essentially juxtaposes two scenarios, one real and one imagined. The first is the actual meeting between "he and I," the poem's two characters. These two men were on either side of a war, and the speaker—who is clearly still alive to speak these words!—shot and killed the other man. In the other scenario, this speaker recounts how he could easily have imagined going out for a drink with the man he killed—how similar the other man was to him.

This stanza sets up the juxtaposition between these two scenarios, and that the fact that poem plays out as reported *speech* captures this juxtaposition. That is, the speaker seems to be engaged in *exactly* the kind of casual conversation that might be overhead in an "old ancient inn." He uses the tone and language (if not the subject matter) that he *would* have used with the man he killed. Even before the first letter of the first line, then, the poem is already developing its exploration of the tragedy and wastefulness of warfare!

The poem opens with alliteration. The two breathy /h/ sounds of "Had he" perhaps express a kind of exasperation, anticipating the weary subject of humanity's capacity for violence—though the poem is only just beginning to introduce these themes. The use of "right" and "nipperkin" indicate that the speaker is from England; both words are colloquial English (though "nipperkin" has fallen out of usage). "Right" is an intensifying word, roughly the same as using "so" (i.e., "so many"). And a "nipperkin" is a small measurement of beer. The speaker's point is easy enough to grasp—if he'd met the man he killed under different circumstances, the two of them would have had a great time together, drinking until the early hours.

LINES 5-8

"But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

Stanza 1 presented an alternative reality in which the speaker *hadn't* killed the man of the title, while stanza 2 begins the account of what actually happened. The two men met on either side of an armed conflict (many critics associate this poem with the Boer War, but the poem doesn't mention specifics). They were "ranged as infantry"—that is, both men were *arranged* on either side of a battlefield, and within shooting *range* of one another. The use of consonant /n/ sounds in this line—"ranged as infantry"—suggests the close proximity of the two men by placing identical sounds close together.

Line 6 describes the moment just before the fatal shot was fired. The two men looked at one another "face to face," and one of them had to die—even though, as the speaker admits, there wasn't really a good reason. The diacope of the repeated "face" shows how close to one another the two men were, and it also figuratively suggests the similarity between the two men.

Like two men in a duel, the two men both shot at each other at the same time (which also emphasizes the sameness between the two men—even their actions are identical in this account!). This monosyllabic line—line 7—ducks and dives through its short words and iambic meter:

I shot | at him | as he | at me

This evokes the sound of gunfire, as though each stressed word is a shot fired, and each unstressed word is someone trying to dodge a bullet. Unfortunately for the other man, he was killed instantly.

A point should be made about the rhyme here. The poem follows a ballad-like scheme (ABAB), which in this instance has a sing-songy, almost nursery rhyme sound to it. A reader might wonder why the chiming end words of a nursery rhyme are used to express the horror of war. One way to think about this is that rhyme mimics the empty logic of war. This empty logic is captured in the way the speaker kills the other man even though he knows that they could have been friends, just because that's what he was told to do.

The use of rhyme in the poem works as an analogy to this senselessness. Normally, when two words rhyme together, they seem to fit together logically. Yet, as this stanza shows, these rhymes have more in common with nursery rhymes than with logic. That is, the false logic of the rhyme represents the "just

so" reasoning behind war, one man killing his fellow man because that's the logical and obvious thing to do. Using rhyme in this manner taps into what the ancient philosopher Plato considered to be the danger of poetry—the *sound* of it can produce a misleading sense of logic. Here, the poem uses that quality to comment on the senselessness of war.

LINES 9-12

"I shot him dead because —
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

While stanza 2 described what happened between the speaker and the other man, in stanza 3 the speaker attempts to explain the reason for the killing. It is an entirely—and intentionally—vacuous stanza, with no actual logic or reasoning. The speaker shot the man because "he was my foe, / Just so." This is what's known as a tautology—a circular kind of reasoning. The other man was the speaker's foe because he was the one the speaker was supposed to shoot, and the speaker shot him "Because he was my foe." In other words, there was no real good reason for the two men to fire at each other except for the fact they were on different sides of an armed conflict.

The instant repetition of "because," technically known as epizeuxis, at the start of line 10 highlights this absence of valid reasoning. It's like a hesitation or a stutter, indicating that there is no real reason that can follow the "because." This circular logic continues, with lines 10 and 11 essentially saying exactly the same thing—"he was my foe;" "my foe of course he was." When the speaker says "That's clear enough," this ironically highlights the way in which it *isn't* clear at all.

Also worth noting here is that this stanza is packed full of assonance:

"I shot him dead because —
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

The sounds here are intentionally absurd, reminiscent of the kind of nonsense verse written by people like Lewis Carroll. The stanza is granted an internal logic based on sound patterning, but this has an ironic purpose, highlighting the *lack* of logic—or the hollow logic—of warfare.

LINES 13-16

"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like — just as I —
Was out of work — had sold his traps —
No other reason why.

Stanza four moves on from the speaker's attempt to justify or understand why he had to kill the other man. Now, the speaker imagines how the two of them had come to be on opposite sides of the conflict in the first place. This stanza hammers home the poem's main point—that the only major difference between the two men was that they ended up on different sides of war, because of what countries they were from.

The speaker reasons that the man he killed probably decided to "'list" (enlist) for the war on a bit of a whim. Like the speaker, the other man most likely didn't have any lofty ideas about defending his country or being a noble fighter—instead, both men would have signed up because they had difficult economic circumstances and personal hardship. The speaker had been "out of work" at the time and perhaps, guesses the speaker, the other man had sold all his belongings ("his traps"). The speaker can't think of any "other reason why," and the abruptly stuttering way that this stanza unfolds indicates that he is saying this off the top of his head. Of course, the other man isn't around to confirm or deny the speaker's theory.

The multiple caesurae in the stanza (in the form of dashes) show that the speaker is jumping from thought to thought, trying to identify a valid reason for why the two men went to war in the first place. Though it doesn't seem to fully dawn on the speaker, this stanza hints that there are wider economic reasons that force people into joining armies. That is, both men enlisted because they were out of money. Furthermore, money is often a factor of why countries go to war in the first place, with battles being fought over resources, such as land. Money, then, adds another layer to these men's stories, lurking as a kind of unseen killer in the poem's corner.

LINES 17-20

"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."

The last stanza concludes the soldier's story about the man he killed. While the previous line began with a "No," this line starts with a "Yes." This can be interpreted either as the speaker finding some kind of satisfaction at the end of his inquiry into the nature of war, or, more likely, it is a hollow word—a conversation filler.

This is supported by the dissatisfying conclusion that the speaker comes to after the caesura, which is merely that war is "quaint and curious." This is an intentionally frustrating answer to the poem's genuine philosophical question regarding why one man should ever kill another. It's an understatement, really, and it's important to remember that the whole poem takes place in quotation marks—indicating that this is just part of the way that the speaker talks about his war experiences, possibly afraid to face up to the true horrors.

The use of the second-person pronoun "You" in lines 18 and 19 is particularly interesting. On the surface, the speaker is

describing himself, expressing disbelief at what his experiences have taught him: that he could kill a man who otherwise might have been his friend (suggested by the familiar term, "fellow"). The "You" could also be addressed to whomever the speaker is talking to. Finally, it can even be interpreted as a kind of challenge to the poem's readers. That is, "You" can refer directly to the reader, presenting the notion that if the reader were in the same situation, they too would kill a man just because they were ordered to. All these possible uses of the "You" lead the reader to question both the nature of war and the speaker's actions.

The poem ends on an ironic note. The speaker remarks how, had he met the man in a time of need, he might have given him "half-a-crown" (a type of coin). This would have been an act of charity—but instead of giving the man a helping hand, the speaker gave him a lethal bullet. The last line also ends the poem using the same alliteration—an /h/ sound—that began the poem: "Or help to half-a-crown." Here, it makes the closing line seem casual and conversational, emphasizing how easy it would have been for the speaker to find kinship with the man he killed—if they'd met in different circumstances.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

There are a handful of examples of alliteration in "The Man He Killed." Quite a few of them occur through repeated words, such as "face to face" in line 6 and the repeated "foe" in lines 10 and 11. The sound of these words, combined with the regular iambic meter and the rhyme scheme, make the poem sound almost like a nursery rhyme. This creates a tension in the poem, between the genuine horror of what's being discussed—the shooting and killing of a man—and the tone in which it is presented.

All in all, this serves to highlight the senselessness of war. The playfulness of the poem's sounds don't really feel appropriate, creating a sense of irony that questions the reason for war in the first place. That is, the sing-song tone of the poem seems somewhat hollow—just as the speaker's reason for killing the other man is ultimately because it was "Just so."

Other than repeated words, there are a few more instances of alliteration. Interestingly, the poem starts and ends with the same alliterative sound: the /h/. "Had he" starts the poem with a breathy tone, perhaps suggesting some kind of exasperation on the speaker's part about the stupidity of war. In the last line, the alliteration of "help" and "half" makes the speaker's imagined *alternative* meeting between him and the other man seem as though it could easily have happened, as though the difference between the two scenarios—meeting on a battlefield and meeting at a pub—is as casual as the speaker's tone.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "H," "h," "b"
- **Line 2:** "B"
- **Line 3:** "W," "w"
- **Line 4:** "R"
- **Line 5:** "r"
- **Line 6:** "f," "f"
- **Line 7:** "h," "h"
- **Line 8:** "h," "h"
- **Line 9:** "h," "b"
- **Line 10:** "B," "h," "w," "m," "f"
- **Line 11:** "m," "f," "h," "w"
- **Line 13:** "H," "h," "I"
- **Line 14:** "h," "I"
- **Line 15:** "W," "w," "h," "h"
- **Line 17:** "Y," "q," "c"
- **Line 18:** "Y"
- **Line 19:** "Y"
- **Line 20:** "h," "h"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used in a few key moments in "The Man He Killed." An early example is contained within the last word of line 4, "nipperkin." This word, which is a colloquial British term for a small measurement of alcohol (often abbreviated to "nip"), has a playful sound. This lures the reader into a false sense of security, before the dramatic turn in stanza two (when the speaker starts talking about shooting the other man).

In line 8, the poem returns to /i/ assonance:

> And killed him in his place.

These vowels, all lined in a row, have a dramatic effect. They make the line sound solemn and final, underscoring the way that the dead man is never coming back.

In the third stanza, the assonance becomes intentionally over-the-top:

> "I shot him dead because —
> Because he was my foe,
> Just so: my foe of course he was;
> That's clear enough; although

Hardly a vowel goes by in this section without chiming in assonance with another. This gives the stanza almost a nursery rhyme quality, or perhaps something reminiscent of the nonsense verse of Lewis Carroll. It's a sound that is deliberately at odds with the grave subject matter, highlighting the absurdity of war—and, indeed, of the speaker's reasoning (something like: *I killed the man because he was my enemy; and he was my enemy because I had to kill him*).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "e," "I"
- **Line 2:** "y"
- **Line 3:** "e," "a," "a," "e"
- **Line 4:** "a," "i," "i"
- **Line 5:** "a"
- **Line 6:** "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 8:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 9:** "e," "au"
- **Line 10:** "e," "au," "e," "a," "y," "o"
- **Line 11:** "u," "o," "y," "o," "o," "ou," "e," "a"
- **Line 12:** "ea," "e," "ou," "a," "ou"
- **Line 13:** "e," "ou," "e," "a"
- **Line 14:** "O," "a," "i," "u," "a," "I"
- **Line 15:** "a," "a"
- **Line 18:** "ou," "oo," "e"
- **Line 19:** "ou," "i," "e," "i"

CAESURA

Caesura is used in stanzas three, four, and five. The first example is in line 11. Here, a colon is used after the phrase "Just so." The colon is meant to indicate that an explanatory phrase is about to follow, something that expands on the empty logic of what's just come. Instead, the speaker follows up with a tautology (a circular argument): I killed him because he was my foe, and he was my foe because he was the man I killed. This caesura works to comedic and ironic effect, highlighting the absurdity of the speaker's reasoning. The next caesura—the semi-colon in line 12—serves a similar function. It's intended to signal the unfolding stages of an argument—but really there is no argument or logic to what the speaker is saying.

In stanza four, the poem uses numerous caesurae which create a stuttering effect. In this stanza, the speaker tries to imagine why the man he killed joined the army in the first place. Thinking out loud, the speaker reasons that the man was probably poor—just like he was. There's something quite tragic about the way the caesurae capture the stages of the speaker's thought, as if he's getting choked up thinking how similar he probably was to the man he killed.

The final caesura is in line 17, after the word "Yes." Again, this seemingly indicates the progression of a series of logical statements, but instead highlights that there isn't much logic at all. This caesura introduces the speaker's understated—and frustrating—conclusion that war is "quaint and curious."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** ":"
- **Line 12:** ";"
- **Line 13:** ","
- **Line 14:** "—," "—"
- **Line 15:** "—," "—"
- **Line 17:** ";"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout "The Man He Killed." In general, it gives the poem a kind of nursery-rhyme sound. This creates tension throughout, placed at odds with the serious subject matter: death and war. Some of the examples of consonance in the poem are alliteration, so these are discussed in that section of this guide.

The first stanza is full of /t/ and /n/ consonance:

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

This consonance has a playful, song-like sound that lures the reader into a false sense of security. Soon enough, the poem drops the bombshell—that the speaker is talking about the man he had to kill.

Line 5 also uses /n/ consonance: "But ranged as infantry." Here, these packed-in sounds emphasize the physical proximity between the two men on the battlefield. The closeness of the consonant /n/ sounds mirrors the "face-to-face" stare-down between the speaker and his "foe."

Interestingly, just as /h/ alliteration appears in both the first and last stanza, so does the /t/ sound. This is the final stanza:

> "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."

Here, the speaker describes how he would have treated the other man charitably in different circumstances, the consonant softness of the /t/ conveying empathy and kindness.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "H," "h," "n," "b," "t," "t"
- **Line 2:** "B," "n," "n," "t," "nn"
- **Line 3:** "W," "s," "t," "s," "n," "t," "w," "t"
- **Line 4:** "R," "t," "n," "n," "r," "n"
- **Line 5:** "t," "r," "n," "n," "n," "t," "r"
- **Line 6:** "n," "t," "r," "n," "f," "c," "t," "f," "c"
- **Line 7:** "t," "t," "h," "h," "t," "m"
- **Line 8:** "h," "m," "h"
- **Line 9:** "h," "d," "d," "b," "c," "s"
- **Line 10:** "B," "c," "s," "h," "s," "m," "f"

- **Line 11:** “s,” “s,” “m,” “f,” “s,” “h,” “s”
- **Line 12:** “Th,” “s,” “l,” “l,” “th”
- **Line 13:** “H,” “th,” “t,” “h,” “l,” “st,” “p,” “h,” “ps”
- **Line 14:** “h,” “l”
- **Line 15:** “W,” “w,” “r,” “h,” “d,” “s,” “h,” “s,” “r,” “s”
- **Line 16:** “r,” “r”
- **Line 17:** “Y,” “s,” “q,” “n,” “t,” “n,” “c,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 18:** “Y,” “t”
- **Line 19:** “Y,” “t,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 20:** “h,” “t,” “h”

DIACOPE

Diacope is used twice in "The Man He Killed." The first example is in line 6 (quoted with the rest of the stanza for context):

> "But ranged as infantry,
> And staring face to face,
> I shot at him as he at me,
> And killed him in his place.

The repetition of "face" emphasizes the physical proximity between the two men on the battle-field. They looked at each other, and—knowing they were technically "foe[s]"—they took aim and fired. But the repetition of "face" also relates to the speaker's imagined alternative scenario, in which the two men could have shared a drink together. If they'd been in an "ancient inn," there too they would have been "face to face," but for very different reasons. This also emphasizes the similarity between the two men—the only real difference between them is which side they fought for.

The other example of diacope is in lines 10 and 11, when the speaker repeats the phrase "my foe." This is part of the speaker's somewhat circular logic about why he had to kill the other man—he had to do it "Just" because. Repeating "my foe" in quick succession leads the reader to question the meaning of the phrase, in the same way that repeating a word over and over can suddenly make it seem meaningless and nonsensical (try it!).

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** “face to face”
- **Line 10:** “my foe”
- **Line 11:** “my foe”

EPIZEUXIS

Epizeuxis is used once in "The Man He Killed," appearing in the third stanza:

> "I shot him dead because —
> Because he was my foe,
> Just so: my foe of course he was;
> That's clear enough;

The repeated "because" here is like a stutter, the speaker tripping up on his words because he doesn't really have an adequate reason to explain why he shot the other man—other than that it was just what he was *supposed* to do.

The epizeuxis conveys the way that the speaker is reaching out for an explanation, hoping to get across to the poem's addressee—which could be someone in a pub, the reader, or a combination of both—why the killing was justified. The repetition allows the poem to highlight the senselessness of war, underscoring the way that there is no *good* reason to justify the other man's death.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** “because”
- **Line 10:** “Because”

JUXTAPOSITION

In essence, "The Man He Killed" is one long juxtaposition between two different scenarios. One of these is reality—what really happened between the speaker and the man mentioned in the title—and the other is hypothetical (if they met at a bar instead of a battlefield). At the time he killed his "foe," the speaker was struck by how similar they both were, probably in age, appearance, and maybe even circumstance. The only real difference between the two men was that they were on either side of an armed conflict. So, the speaker imagines this alternative scenario.

Juxtaposition, then, contrasts these two scenarios. Stanza one and five contain the imagined meeting between the speaker and his so-called "foe," while the middle three stanzas deal more with the reality of what happened. The fact that one scenario happened rather than the other comes across as almost absurd, the speaker acknowledging that he could well have been friends with the other man. Indeed, in some parallel life it *could have been* the other man that the speaker now converses with, rather than whoever is the poem's current addressee. The fact that this juxtaposition is put forward by the speaker himself also highlights the greatest juxtaposition of all, the one which now divides the speaker from the other man: life and death.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-8:** “"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.”

- **Lines 17-20:** ""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.""

VOCABULARY

Inn (Line 2) - Like a pub, but also with rooms to stay in, like a small hotel.

Right Many (Line 4) - Colloquial British term for "so many."

Nipperkin (Line 4) - Colloquial British term for a small measurement of alcohol. Often abbreviated to "nip."

Ranged (Line 5) - Spread out across a battlefield.

Infantry (Line 5) - Soldiers on foot.

Foe (Line 10, Line 11) - Enemy.

'List (Line 13) - Abbreviation of "enlist," which means to join an army.

Off-hand (Line 14) - Off the cuff; on a whim.

Like (Line 14) - A fairly meaningless filler word, sometimes conveying uncertainty.

Traps (Line 15) - Belongings.

Quaint (Line 17) - Unusual. The word is a deliberate understatement here.

Curious (Line 17) - Puzzling. Like "quaint," it's an understatement.

Half-a-crown (Line 20) - An old British coin worth roughly an eighth of a pound (a *pound* is the equivalent of a U.S. dollar).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Man He Killed" is made up of five quatrains, following a structure similar to (though not exactly like) the ballad stanza format. The steady stanza length, combined with the bouncy iambic meter, gives the poem an almost nursery rhyme sound, creating an uneasy tension between the lightness of the form and the heaviness of the subject. In a way, this makes sense, because the speaker is talking in a fairly casual manner—he isn't *glad* he killed the other man, but he's hardly expressing deep remorse either. Rather, he's trying to work through what happened in a straightforward way.

The poem is also a dramatic monologue, and the entire text is enclosed by quotation marks. This indicates it is overheard speech, though who the *listener* is is another matter—perhaps it's another man in a pub, or the reader, or both. The first stanza presents an alternative scenario in which the speaker and the man he killed could have been acquaintances, drinking together in an "old ancient inn." The second stanza explains what *actually* happened, while the third sees the speaker reaching for a reason behind his actions. In the fourth stanza, the speaker imagines that he and the other man had similar reasons for joining their respective armies. The poem closes almost whimsically, returning to the first stanza's sentiment, yet also injecting a note of tragedy.

METER

"The Man He Killed" is a metrically regular poem, using iambs (da DUM) throughout (with some variation). Generally speaking, the first, second, and fourth lines of each stanza have *three* metrical feet (making them iambic trimeter), while the third line has *four* (making them iambic tetrameter). The third stanza provides a good example of this scheme:

> "I shot | him dead | because —
> Because | he was | my foe,
> Just so: | my foe | of course | he was;
> That's clear | enough; | although

The poem is *close* to the sound of a ballad, or even a nursery rhyme. The short metrical lines, and their regularity, give the poem a breezy tone. Yet the lightness of the poem's meter sounds at odds with the gravity of the subject matter. Additionally, although the poem employs this highly formal structure, the speaker's words sound casual and unguarded. In fact, the speaker sounds like a regular person having a conversation at a bar.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Man He Killed" has a regular rhyme scheme. Each stanza rhymes:

ABAB

While this *is* a formal device, the combination of the short lines with the regularity of the rhyme makes the poem *sound* informal. The steady, clear rhymes give the tone a breezy, casual quality at odds with the subject matter. And as the whole poem is framed by quotation marks, the sound of the rhymes actually helps make this sound like overheard conversation—or, more accurately, one half of a conversation.

Additionally, the rhymes make the poem sound almost like a nursery rhyme, which again creates a tension between the lightness of the tone and the gravity of the subject matter. The sing-song quality in the rhyme mirrors the speaker's lack of reason for killing the other man. That is, by framing the seriousness of the poem in such a playful-sounding scheme, the poem highlights the *lack* of a good reason for the man having to die.

It's also notable how the last stanza rhymes "war is" with "bar is." This means the poem ends by neatly reminding the reader of the two scenarios presented by the poem: the reality, in

which the other man is dead ("war"), and the imaginary, in which the two men share a drink together ("bar").

SPEAKER

The speaker in the poem killed "the man" in the title. He is either a soldier or an ex-soldier, and enlisted in the army because he didn't really have anything better to do—he was "out of work." The poem is a first-person dramatic monologue framed by quotation marks, suggesting that it is overheard conversation. Accordingly, the speaker seems to be speaking unguardedly, as though to a friend (which is ironic, because he's imagining sitting down to a similar type of conversation with the man he killed).

This reported speech highlights the similarity between the two men. The speaker finds it easy to imagine befriending the man he killed, who probably joined his army for similar reasons that the speaker enlisted in his. Ultimately, the speaker is unable to answer the question underlying his conversation. That is, he can't really say what the purpose of war actually is. He only killed the man because it was "Just so"—that's just the way it had to be.

SETTING

"The Man He Killed" is written entirely in quotation marks, suggesting it could be an *overheard* conversation. The speaker talks in an unguarded, conversational tone, implying that he's in the kind of "ancient inn" or "bar" that he mentions. In fact, when the poem was first published, Hardy included a description of the setting: "Scene: the settle of the Fox Inn, Stagfoot Lane. Characters: The speaker (a returned soldier) and his friends, natives of the hamlet."

But the poem is also in a sense set in the speaker's thoughts—both his memory and his imagination. He recalls the episode in question—his killing of the other man—but still finds it difficult to understand. He imagines how different things could have been if the two men had met in better circumstances—which, ironically, would have been similar to the setting of the poem.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 and became one of the most successful novelists of the Victorian era. His later novels—works like *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*—challenged Victorian sensibilities, and the often angry reaction to their publication led him to focus on poetry in his later years. This poem was written in 1902 and is one of a number of anti-war poems Hardy wrote in response to the Boer War conflict. Other relevant anti-war poems of Hardy's include "Drummer Hodge," "The Souls of the Slain," "A Christmas Ghost-story," and "A Wife in London."

Other poets responded to the war in different ways. Rudyard Kipling, for example, wrote poetry that spoke enthusiastically about the British army's prospects. A.E. Housman's collection of poetry *A Shropshire Lad* is another important work within the context of the Boer War. Released in 1896, its popularity greatly increased with the advent of the war, as the book's themes of nostalgia, warfare, and patriotism struck a chord with the general public.

In an interesting twist, Hardy wrote poems that were more supportive of war when the First World War came around. By then, Hardy was seventy-four years old. At the British government's request, he wrote poems like "Men Who March Away," which advocated fighting for the British cause.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Man He Killed" was written in response to the Boer War. This was a conflict that took place in what is now referred to as South Africa, and lasted from 1899-1902. It was euphemistically called "The Last of the Gentleman's Wars," though it was anything but that. British forces fought against groups antagonistic to British rule, and total casualties amounted to 60,000 people.

Hardy himself was suspicious of the Empire's involvement in the area, believing it to be in large part due to the rich resources of the land (especially gold). More recent scholarship has highlighted the controversial use of concentration camps by the British in the war. In fact, most of the more than 25,000 Afrikaners imprisoned in these camps died due to starvation and disease.

The wider context of the Boer War is the Victorian era, during which the British Empire exerted far-reaching control over much of the globe. For some, this was a source of pride; others, like Hardy, were more critical.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading — The poem read by Jordan Harling. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzeST-jh9iQ)
- Radio Documentary — A radio documentary about Hardy's life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KwENDxyALc)
- Boer War Explanation — A BBC article that gives a clear account of the Boer War. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/513944.stm)

- Boer War Poetry — Further poetry related to the Boer War. (http://www.anthonyturton.com/assets/my_documents/my_files/Boer_War_Poetry.pdf)
- Commentaries on Hardy Poems — A valuable resource of Hardy poems and analyses, provided by The Thomas Hardy Society. (https://www.hardysociety.org/resources/poem-commentaries/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- A Wife In London
- Neutral Tones
- The Darkling Thrush

HOW TO CITE

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