

Example answer for poetry analysis – The Man He Killed

Thomas Hardy's poem, 'The Man He Killed', was written at the end of the Boer war and focuses on the act of killing in wartime. The narrator is troubled by his killing of an enemy soldier and attempts to justify his actions, exploring the close relationship between 'foe' and 'fellow'. The simplicity of the language, abab rhyme and quatrain form reflect Hardy's implication that the act of killing can come with relative ease.

In the opening stanza, Hardy's narrator imagines meeting an enemy soldier in an "ancient inn" during peace time, with the exclamation mark after 'nipperkin' creating a light hearted tone.

This image is soon reversed through the pivotal use of the word 'But', the contrasting nature of which is emphasised through its position at the start of the line. The narrator describes the two soldiers in combat, "face to face", with the parallel rhythm of the line "I shot at him as he at me" reflecting the opposing sides. Furthermore the structure of this line indicates a sense of futility and resignation.

The poem goes on to question the act of killing. The dash at the end of line nine creates a pause as the narrator contemplates the purpose and morality of war. The sense of confusion is enhanced by the fragmented punctuation and enjambment between stanzas three and four, with the phrases "just so" and "that's clear enough" only reinforcing his uncertainty and repressed guilt.

Recognising the similarities between himself and the enemy soldier, the narrator questions both men's commitment to war. He suggests that their decision to "list" was made without consideration. The colloquial language of "off-hand like" emphasises the lower class nature of both men, whose primary motivation for joining the army was being "out of work".

In the final stanza, Hardy's poem returns to the upbeat tone of the opening. Unable to fully explain his actions, the narrator concludes that war is "quaint and curious". Hardy states that it is as easy to kill a man as to be friends with him, with "shoot" being as straightforward as "treat" or "help". This simple action is enhanced by the simple abab rhyme.

The assertive 'Yes' at the opening of the first line is unconvincing. The poem offers no solution to the moral issue of killing during warfare, but Hardy does indicate that soldiers have no choice but to comply with convention. The term "quaint" implies that the concept of war is ancient. Furthermore the anonymous title suggests that the moral question addressed in the poem could refer to any deaths caused through armed combat.