

The Man he Killed

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

nipperkin – a drink

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.

'list – enlist, join the army

traps - belongings

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.

quaint and curious - strange

Hardy wrote this poem in 1902, the year that the Second Boer War ended. Again he is exploring the issue of the ordinary man plunged into the irrational situation of war (compare 'Drummer Hodge' and 'In Time of the Breaking of Nations'). Again the man is anonymous but this time we are closer to him: he is telling his story in the first person "I shot at him as he at me". And again the form is that of a simple ballad with straightforward quatrains. This poem is written as if it were a conversation, or at least, one half of a conversation. This puts us, the readers, into the position of the person the soldier is talking to and makes his side of the conversation very immediate. It's being spoken directly to us.

As is the case in several of Hardy's poems, the structure is a sawn-off syllogism. The first quatrain starts 'If'; the second "But". But where is the solution? If there is one, it's 'Yes; quaint and curious war is!' In other words, what is the point? You kill a man who, in any other situation, you would have offered a drink to. In the last quatrain, 'war is' is rhymed, ironically, with 'bar is'. The first quatrain dwells on the fact that the two of them would have had a drink together if they'd met by an inn. The second states baldly that 'I shot at him as he at me'. The last quatrain shares the brutality of war (first two lines) with friendly drink together (in the last two lines).

From the opening the two men are highlighted: 'he and I'. And the important factor of chance: 'Had he and I but met' 'Had' and 'but' = if only. 'We should have sat us down' The pronouns 'we' and 'us' underline the potential certain friendship. The dialect words for drinking 'wet / Right many a nipperkin!' underline that these are two goodhearted country chaps.

But chance intervened. Or perhaps governments intervened. The powers that Hardy referred to as organising the 'scheduled slaughter' in the War Office and who had sent Drummer Hodge out to the Transvaal, 'ranged' (lined up) these two potential friends 'as infantry' (soldiers who fight on foot) 'face to face'. The repeated 'face' literally illustrates how their heads were lined up on opposing sides. So does 'I shot at him as he at me' – both men are acting in exactly the same way. But it just so happens that (I) 'killed him'.

So, in the third quatrain, how to explain this and to justify it? 'I shot him dead because – ' and the dash, the hesitation, says it all. Because what? The glib answer supplied by the powers that be is 'Because he was my foe, / Just so: my foe of course he was; / That's clear enough...' But, for all the assertion, it isn't clear enough. The assertion is set out and repeated for reassurance: 'Because he was my foe, / Just so' 'of course he was;' 'That's clear enough'. Actually, it isn't clear at all, as the rhyme of 'my foe' and 'although' makes clear.

For 'although' without any punctuation to follow it leads straight into verse four, with all its spur-of-the-moment whims for enlisting in the army. And the enemy's reasons for enlisting were precisely the same as the speaker's. "He thought he'd 'list'; 'Off-hand like', in other words, for no particular reason, he just thought he would. Maybe he 'Was out of work', maybe he had 'sold his traps' (belongings). 'No other reason why.' This wasn't a thought-out action born of patriotism, just an impulsive one. There are four dashes in this quatrain, suggesting plenty of unconvincing, half-thought-through reasons for enlisting in the army which turned out to be such a momentous step.

War is, Hardy concludes, 'quaint and curious,' strange and odd. You shoot a fellow down that you'd treat to a drink if you met in a bar. The last verse comes full circle to where the first verse began: 'Had he and I but met / By some old ancient inn' they would have had a drink. Writing in the same war, in his poem 'Strange Meeting', Wilfred Owen was to give words to something very similar: 'I am the enemy you killed, my friend.'

Hardy was a careful craftsman, and he may well have intended a link, running through the poem, with the many monosyllables ending in 't'. Had the two men 'but met', 'We should have sat us down to wet. I shot at him. And, finally, 'Yes; quaint ... war is! / You shoot a fellow / You'd treat if met where any bar is.' He stresses this idea further by rhyming 'bar is' with 'war is.' The other thread, or motif, running through the poem, is the constant pairing of the two men: 'he and I'; 'we should have sat us'; 'I shot at him as he at me'; 'I shot him dead because / Because he was my foe'; 'just as I'. The last line stresses this kinship between the two men through alliteration 'or help to half-a-crown.'

It is not intense patriotism that motivates the soldiers in this poem: they enlist maybe because they're out of work, 'No other reason why.' The plain ballad form, and the simple a b a b rhyme scheme stress the simplicity of this personal tale with its questions about war. In ballads, typically, the story is told with little comment and in simple language. Lines are often repeated from quatrain

to quatrain with small but crucial alterations. The very simplicity of the ballad confronts the reader baldly with the question: so what is the point of war? The soldiers certainly can't tell you.

There's a nice piece on this poem at

<http://www.buckingham.ac.uk/english/schools/poetry-bank/killed>

Literary terms

Very often writers highlight important words. They do this with:

Alliteration – several words starting with the same letter or sound, for example, 'bleared and black and blind'.

Assonance – same vowel sound in different words, for example, 'abode', 'sloped'.

Cesura – a break or pause in the middle of a line of poetry.

Consonance – same consonants in words that contain different vowel sounds, for example, 'bode', 'boughed'.

Enjambement or run-on lines – when there is no punctuation at the end of a line of verse and it runs straight on to the next line.

Onomatopoeia – the effect when the sound of a word reflects its meaning, like 'plash'.

Personification – when something that is not human is referred to as if it is a person, for example, the Titanic, 'still couches she'. The effect is usually to exaggerate some aspect of the topic.

Repetition – repeated word or meaning.

Rhyme – very similar to assonance; same vowel sound and final consonant, for example, 'say', 'decay'. Masculine rhyme – when the final syllable is stress, as in 'say' and 'decay'. Feminine rhyme – when the final syllable is not stressed, as in 'growing', 'showing'.

Rhythm – the musical beat of the line, with stressed and unstressed syllables (the stressed syllables will be the important ones). The different rhythms have different names. Trochee (trochaic): strong light, strong light; iamb (iambic): light strong, light strong; dactyl: strong light light, strong light light; anapaest: light light strong, light light strong. If puzzled, try Wikipedia which is very clear on the subject.

Then there are technical words for the number of lines in a verse or stanza.

Quatrain – four lines in a verse

Sestet – six line

Octave – eight lines