

- [2] The speaker begins by contrasting the circumstances of warfare with those of peace. He does not identify himself, but his speech reveals that he is common and ordinary—a person, one of “the people”—who enjoys drinking in a bar and who prefers friendship and helpfulness to violence. If he and the man he killed had met in an inn, he says, they would have shared many drinks together, but because they met on a battlefield they shot at each other, and he killed the other man. The speaker tries to justify the killing but can produce no stronger reason than that the dead man was his “foe.” Once he states this reason, he again thinks of the similarities between himself and the dead man, and then he concludes that warfare is “quaint and curious” (line 17) because it forces a man to kill another man whom he would have befriended if they had met during peacetime.
- [3] To make the irony of warfare clear, the poem uses easy, everyday language to bring out the speaker’s ordinary qualities. His manner of speech is conversational, as in “We should have sat us down” (line 3), and “list” (for “enlist,” line 13), and his use of “you” in the last stanza. Also, his word choices, shown in words like “nipperkin,” “traps,” and “fellow” (lines 4, 15, and 18), are common and informal, at least in British usage. This language is important because it establishes that the speaker is an average man who has been thrown by war into an unnatural role.
- [4] As another means of stressing the stupidity of war, the poem makes clear that the two men—the live soldier who killed and the dead soldier who was killed—were so alike that they could have been brothers or even twins. They had similar ways of life, similar economic troubles, similar wishes to help other people, and similar motives in enlisting in the army. Symbolically, at least, the “man he killed” is the speaker himself, and hence the killing is a form of suicide. The poem thus raises the question of why two people who are almost identical should be shoved into opposing battle lines in order to kill each other. This question is rhetorical, for the obvious answer is that there is no good reason.
- [5] Because the speaker (and also, very likely, the dead man) is shown as a person embodying the virtues of friendliness and helpfulness, Hardy’s poem represents a strong disapproval of war. Clearly, political justifications for violence as a political policy are irrelevant to the characters and concerns of the men who fight. They, like the speaker, would prefer to follow their own needs rather than remote and vague ideals. The failure of complex but irrelevant political explanations is brought out most clearly in the third stanza, in which the speaker tries to give a reason for shooting the other man. Hardy’s use of punctuation—the dashes—stresses the fact that the speaker has no commitment to the cause he served when killing. Thus the speaker stops at the word “because—” and gropes for a reason (line 9). Not being articulate, he can say only “Because he was my foe. / Just so: my foe of course he was; / That’s clear enough” (lines 10–12). These short bursts of words indicate that he cannot explain things to himself or to anyone else except in the most obvious and trite terms, and in apparent embarrassment he inserts “of course” as a way of emphasizing hostility even though he felt none toward the man he killed.

- [6] A reading thus shows the power of the poem’s dramatic argument. Hardy does not establish closely detailed reasons against war as a policy but rather dramatizes the idea that all political arguments are unimportant in view of the central and glaring brutality of war—killing. Hardy’s speaker is not able to express deep feelings; rather he is confused because he is an average sort who wants only to live and let live and to enjoy a drink in a bar with friends. But this very commonness stresses the point that everyone is victimized by war—both those who die and those who kill. The poem is a powerful argument for peace and reconciliation.

### Commentary on the Essay

This close-reading essay begins by stating a central idea about “The Man He Killed,” then indicates the topics to follow that will develop the idea. Although nowhere does the poem’s speaker state that war is senseless, the essay takes the position that the poem embodies this idea. A more detailed examination of the poem’s themes might develop the idea by discussing the ways in which individuals are caught up in social and political forces, or the contrast between individuality and the state. In this essay, however, the simple statement of the idea is enough.

Paragraph 2 describes the major details of the poem, with guiding phrases like “The speaker begins,” “he says,” and “he again thinks.” Thus the paragraph explains how things in the poem occur, as is appropriate for a close reading. Paragraph 3 is devoted to the speaker’s words and idioms, with the idea that his conversational manner is part of the poem’s contrasting method of argument. If these brief references to style were more detailed, this topic could be more fully developed as an aspect of Hardy’s implied argument against war.

Paragraph 4 extends paragraph 3 inasmuch as it points out the similarities of the speaker and the man he killed. If the situation were reversed, the dead man might say exactly the same things about the present speaker. This affinity underscores the suicidal nature of war. Paragraph 5 treats the style of the poem’s fourth stanza. In this context, the treatment is brief. The last paragraph reiterates the main idea and concludes with a tribute to the poem as an argument.

The entire essay therefore represents a reading and explanation of the poem’s high points. It stresses a particular interpretation and briefly shows how various aspects of the poem bear it out.

### Writing About the Close Reading of a Passage of Prose Fiction or Narrative Poetry

Focus on the general meaning and impact of the passage or poem. By raising and answering a number of specific questions, you can gather materials for shaping your essay. Once you create answers, write them into a form that you can adapt in your essay. Try to reach specific and focused conclusions.

## Writing an Essay on the Close Reading of a Poem

The close reading of a poem does not mean that you need to explain everything you find in the poem. Theoretically a complete or total explication would require you to explain the meaning and implications of each word and every line—a technique that obviously would be exhaustive (and exhausting). It would also be self-defeating, for writing about everything in great detail would prohibit you from using your judgment and deciding what is important.

A more manageable and desirable technique is therefore to devote attention to the meaning of individual parts in relationship to the entire work. You might think of your essay as your explanation or “reading” of the poem. You will need to be selective and to consider only those details that you think are significant and vital to the thematic development of your developing essay.

### Ask Questions to Discover Ideas

- What does the title contribute to the reader’s understanding?
- Who is speaking? Where is the speaker when the poem is happening or unfolding?
- What is the situation? What has happened in the past, or what is happening in the present, that has brought about the speech?
- What difficult, special, or unusual words does the poem contain? What references need explaining? How does an explanation assist in the understanding of the poem?
- How does the poem develop? Is it a personal statement? Is it a story?
- What is the main idea of the poem? What details make possible the formulation of the main idea?

### Organize Your Essay on the Close Reading of a Poem

In this close-reading essay you should plan to (1) follow the essential details of the poem, (2) understand the issues and the meaning the poem reveals, (3) explain some of the relationships of content to technique, and (4) note and discuss especially important or unique aspects of the poem.

**Introduction** In your introduction, use your central idea to express a general view of the poem, which your essay will bear out. A close reading of Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” for example, might bring out the speaker’s understanding that philosophical and religious certainty have been lost and that therefore people can find certainty only within trusting individual relationships. In the following demonstrative essay describing Hardy’s “The Man He Killed,” the central idea is that war is senseless.

**Body** In the body of your essay, first explain the poem’s content—not with a paraphrase but with a description of the poem’s major organizing elements. Hence, if the speaker of the poem is a first-person “I,” you do not need to reproduce this voice yourself in your description. Instead, *describe* the

poem in your own words, with whatever brief introductory phrases you find necessary, as in the second paragraph of the following demonstrative essay.

Next, explain the poem’s development or growth in relation to your central idea. Choose *your own* order of discussion, depending on your topics. You should, however, keep stressing your central idea with each new topic. Thus, you might wish to follow your description by discussing the poem’s meaning, or even by presenting two or more possible interpretations. You might also wish to refer to significant techniques. For example, in Dudley Randall’s “Ballad of Birmingham,” a noteworthy technique is the unintroduced quotations (i.e., quotations appearing without any “she said” or “he said” phrases) as the ballad writer’s means of dramatizing the dialogue between mother and “baby.”

You might also introduce unique topics, such as the understatements in stanza two of “Ballad of Birmingham” that instruments of violence “Aren’t good for a little child.” Such a reference to the mother’s language underscores adult attempts to shield children from the potential violence of the outside world, and it therefore makes the event described in the poem’s conclusion especially ironic. In short, discuss those aspects of meaning and technique that bear upon your central idea.

**Conclusion** In your conclusion, you may repeat your major idea to reinforce your essay’s thematic structure. Because your essay reflects a general but not an exhaustive reading, there will be parts of the poem that you will not have covered. You might therefore mention what might be gained from a more complete discussion of various parts of the poem (do not, however, begin an extensive discussion in your conclusion). The last stanza of Hardy’s “The Man He Killed,” for example, contains the words “quaint and curious” in reference to war. These words are unusual, particularly because the speaker might have chosen *hateful*, *senseless*, *destructive*, or other similarly descriptive words. Why did Hardy have his speaker make such a choice? With brief attention to such a problem, you may conclude your essay.

## Demonstrative Essay

### A Close Reading of Thomas Hardy’s “The Man He Killed”<sup>o</sup>

- [1] Hardy’s “The Man He Killed” exposes the senselessness of war.<sup>\*</sup> It does this through a silent contrast between the needs of ordinary people, as represented by a young man—the speaker—who has killed an enemy soldier in battle, and the antihuman and unnatural deaths of war. Of major note in this contrast are the speaker’s circumstances, his language, his sense of identity with the dead man, and his concerns and wishes.<sup>†</sup>

<sup>o</sup>See page 336 for this poem.

<sup>\*</sup>Central idea.

<sup>†</sup>Thesis sentence.