

# Demystifying the Other: A Study in Owen's "Strange Meeting" and Hardy's "The Man He Killed"

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## ABSTRACT

This paper harnesses the term Other, though not in a strictly postcolonial sense, to uncover an essential role war poetry played to reveal a hidden side often overshadowed by war propaganda. The two poems, Hardy's "The Man He Killed" and Owen's "Strange Meeting," serve as effective counter-war-propaganda tools that demystify a crucial element of war ideology that the enemy is an Other: the enemy is unlike me. Wilfred, an outspoken poet of the evils of war, and Thomas Hardy, who penned in some of his poems his abhorrence to war, show that the Other, which stands for their enemies, could have been a friend had the spatiotemporal factors been different. Both poets enact an imaginary meeting between the speakers and their enemies to depict the human side in their enemies. Moreover, the paper traces the various poetic techniques that are employed by those poets to achieve this goal. Whereas Owen, for instance, uses par rhyme to depict the fallacy of war claims by drawing attention to the unlikelihood of the meeting in real life, Hardy resorts to orthography to probe the sense of guilt his speaker endures as a result of killing his "enemy." The form of the two poems contributes to the sense that war propaganda fails to sustain itself in legitimizing the act of killing and in providing a shield against the feeling of remorse. Throughout the two poems, the Other is no longer a stranger nor is an enemy in the first place. Owen finds that his enemy is a poet who has similar dreams and ambitions. Thomas Hardy, on the Other hand, reflects on how he could have offered the man he killed in battle a drink or even lent him money had they met elsewhere.

**KEY WORDS:** Hardy, Other, Owen, War Poetry, War Propaganda

## 1. THE CONCEPT OF THE OTHER

Although not an exclusively postcolonial concept, the Other has become an important critical term following the appearance of postcolonial studies during the second half of the 20th century which literary critics take as "an oppositional reading practice to study the effects of colonial representation in literary texts" (Cuddon, 2013,

p. 551). Al-Saidi states that postcolonial studies focus mainly on "people and their personal experiences: The sense of disempowerment and dislocation... and it is built in large part around the concept of Otherness" (2014, p. 96). This concept of Otherness reconstructs the world into "mutually excluding opposites: If the Self is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the Other is chaotic, irrational, feminine, and evil" (Ibid.). Othering people tends to foreignize them, and according to Saunders, the foreign is the one who lacks identity, propriety, purity, and literality (2001, p. 219). In this sense, the Other is politically oriented to demarcate the lines between including and/or excluding other people. The process of Othering entails a hierarchy of power distribution divided between two sides:

*One that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its faults, devalued, and susceptible to discrimination. Only dominant groups ... are in*

Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (KUJHSS),

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2020.

Received 09 June 2019; Accepted 21 June 2019,

Regular research paper: Published 19 June 2020

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a position to impose their categories in the matter. By stigmatizing them as Others, Barbarians, Savages, or People of Color, they relegate the peoples that they could dominate or exterminate to the margin of humanity. (Staszak, 2009, 43).

Staszak above uses two important epithets, which became part of the stereotypes of war propaganda; these are “Barbarians” and “Savages.” War propaganda presented the enemy as an Other who lacks purity, identity, and propriety, and thus, he is rendered to be different and evil. By dehumanizing the enemy, the propaganda aimed at facilitating the act of killing and thus, clearing the conscience of the soldiers who are the perpetrators of this act. The following section sheds light on the role war propaganda played in shaping the public opinion and in casting the enemy within the framework of the Other.

## 2. WAR PROPAGANDA AND MIND FRAMING

War has always been one of the most enduring themes in literature. Poetry, specifically, has responded to this plight in various ways. Depending on his orientation, the poet could serve as an effective recruiting sergeant using his linguistic skills and his remarkable persuasive power to convince the young to be enlisted. However, poetry in the hands of the anti-war poets was turned into a weapon aimed not at the enemy but at home, revealing thus what they thought as a jingoistic aberration by those who had the power to stop war. Poetry was also used to demystify the deliberate falsifications war propaganda did in portraying the enemy as an Other whose humanity was stripped off.

The two poems under discussion deal with two different wars in the history of Britain. Hardy’s “The Man He Killed” (1902) deals with the Second Boer War (1899–1902), a war that Britain undertook against South African Republic (Transvaal). In “Strange Meeting,” on the other hand, Owen meets his enemy during the First World War (1914–1919). A brief introductory background about the role of media and war propaganda in both wars will be presented shedding light on how these two means turned the enemy into an Other, whose killing was justified and validated on basis of dehumanization.

Media and propaganda constitute a major mind framing device and two of the most powerful tactics of war. Newspapers, posters, and poetry were used to serve the purpose of recruiting men for war. Kent explains that British public opinion in 1898–1899 did not favor a war with South Africa, so public support had to be manufactured (2013, p. 2). Kent further explains that

the Boer War took place at an important time of Great Britain’s “imperial history and was a turning point in the use of propaganda, both by the British government and the national press, in shaping public opinion. This

propaganda also perpetuated the stereotype of “the Boer”” (Ibid., p. 1). The purpose of propaganda during the Boer War “was to preserve the empire in the hearts of its citizens. It used all forms of media, including theater, newspapers, historical and children’s books, radio, postcards, biscuit tins, pamphlets, poetry, and music halls” (Ibid.).

The two war propagandas relied on disinformation in the form of half-truths and rumors. Newspapers like Times played a significant role in spreading a disfigured image of the Boers. Kent states that the “Times’ desire to portray the Boers as vicious, inhuman, and backward is inexcusable. Many pro-Boers recognized the Times’ rhetoric for what it was: malicious rhetoric attempting to incite hatred against the Boers and foment public approval for war.” (2013, p. 3). Thus, these newspapers deepened the image of the enemy as brutal and lacking in humanity.

Similarly, World War I enjoyed a media coverage that aimed at transforming the public opinion and in manufacturing consent necessary for the ongoing war. World War I propaganda used similar tactics to that of the Boer War in which the enemy is again showed to lack any human traits. In her article “Weapons of Mass Persuasion: The First World War in Posters”, Nina Kruglikova shows how media was used to gain public approval and support, and as a recruiting agenda (2016). Kruglikova talks about the persuasion strategies used to encourage young men, through posters, to join the military. One of these is the Them/Us divide where the enemy is demonized as “German barbarians” while the British had God on their side (2016, p. 5). One of the posters divided people into “Those who hear the call and obey, those who delay, and The Others”, a clear indication of dehumanizing those who do not join the army, if not worst by considering them traitors. Slogans like “Can you fight? The empire needs every fit man. If the Germans win, no home on British soil will be safe. Wives, daughters, and mothers will be at the mercy of the barbarian. Enlist now” (Milan & Lane, 2018) were very common during the war years. Epithets such as “savages,” “barbarians,” and the like were dehumanizing, thus legitimizing the act of killing in cold blood. Posters of similar messages were at every corner encouraging young men to enlist to defend their country against the “barbarians.” Owen was one of those young men who were driven by this propaganda to become combatants. Later, he showed his dismay in his poem “Dulce et Decorum Est” by calling it “old lie.” Hardy sarcastically brushed away the propaganda and war in general in poems like “Channel Firing.”

## 3. THE MAN HE KILLED OR THE MAN I KILLED?

Hardy’s poem “The Man He Killed” was written in the year 1902 following the Boer Wars 1899, which

Britain undertook against the Boers in South Africa. Hardy penned his abhorrence of the war in a letter to a friend: "I constantly deplore the fact that 'civilized' nations have not learnt some more excellent and apostolic way of settling disputes than the old and barbarous one, after all these centuries" (cited in Millgate, 2006, p. 370). Although he was not a soldier himself, Hardy followed the war news avidly and visited the Dorchester barracks in early February 1900 after learning that another local unit was about to leave for the war zone (Ibid.). This, coupled with his curiosity about war and his close acquaintance with the mind of the common soldier, enabled him to emphasize experience over hearsay and war propaganda which is affirmed many times by war poets in the twentieth century (Kendall, 2006, p. 5).

Hardy's poem is an example of poetry that deals with the concept of the Other which is implicitly indicated in the title as "the man". Interestingly, the title refers, through the pronoun "He," to a third person that is reverted immediately in the first line of the poem into the first- person voice "I." This manipulation with pronouns opens the way to a number of interpretations. The use of the third person pronoun "he" distances the speaker from the event and thus eases his burdened soul. This burdened soul reveals itself in several interjections and interpolations all achieved through the use of certain punctuation marks. However, this seems to be a desperate attempt from the speaker's side to evade the sense of remorse he feels over killing his "enemy" because it could not sustain these attempts for long enough to finish his speech. The other possible meaning is that "he" refers to his dead enemy. According to this, the poem carries a deeper sense that the narrator feels already dead as a result of this killing.

The poem opens with the voice of a veteran who is ruminating upon his war experience while sitting in a public house. The informal diction suggests that the man is not a high brow but an ordinary working-class soldier. It also creates a conversational tone suitable to the dramatic nature of the poem. His story begins in medias res; thus, readers immediately find themselves in the present of the deadly encounter between the two soldiers:

*"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.*

The speaker here contemplates the possibility of a brotherhood to have been established between the two combatants had they but met in a cozy and friendly

place like an "old ancient inn." The informal expression "to wet/ Right many a nipperkin," which simply means to offer a drink, intensifies the possibility of a friendly relation between the two and thus demystifies the Other as a human rather than a thing. In addition, the poem starts with a hypothetical "if." This implies that the dream of having that brotherly relation is to be destroyed by the "But" of the following stanza. The matter-of-fact tone of the second stanza as it depicts the scene of shooting his enemy is no less effective than the graphic description in Owen's poetry. Its terseness and brevity leave no space for the reader to ponder upon the reasons and justifications for this horrible act. As if the speaker himself is evading this moment.

The climax reaches when the speaker tries desperately to justify the killing of that man. The lines of the following two stanzas are in a way an imitation of the intermittent shooting of a rifle:

*I shot him dead  
because - because  
he was my foe,  
Just so: my foe of course  
he was; that's clear  
enough; although"*

This clearly is a man who is struggling to cope with what he considers to be a grievous crime. In an attempt to justify his killing, the speaker gives a readymade reason which is: "He was my foe." This is the reason perpetuated by war propaganda that the enemy deserves to be killed and no feeling of remorse should ensue this act. He tries to convince himself that the reason he provides is plausible enough and needs no more justifications.

The idea of the Other as a brother rather than an enemy becomes evident in the next stanza, where the speaker draws a comparison between himself and the other soldier:

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

He believes that the man he killed was enlisted because he was most likely driven by the same urgent need of earning his living which he believes to be the only possible cause that brought him to the battle. The sympathetic tone of these lines serves as a gauge of the speaker's emotional and psychological problem as he desperately tries to rationalize his act. Repeated words such as "because," "foe," and the expression "Just so" all explain how perplexed and disoriented this man is as he relates the accounts of taking out the life of his enemy. The jarring rhythm created by the remarkably several dashes in that short stanza, halts any possibility of a

reconciliation with his troubled psyche. The fragmented short phrases testify to the turmoil of sense of guilt the speaker is having at the moment of recalling the act of killing.

The last stanza only confirms the speaker's feelings about war. The "Yes" that opens the first line of this stanza answers implied questions raised by the speaker's monologue. War is "quaint and curious" because it turns a potential friend into a foe:

*"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 Man He Killed" is a poem about the coping with the aftermath of a trauma of war in which the enemy who is turned by the war propaganda into an Other proves to be a human being whose resemblance to his killer is intensified through several ways. It is important to note the shift in the narrators tone when he comes to mention how he killed that enemy. The lucidity of the rhythm of the first and second stanzas is contrasted with jarring short phrases of the third and fourth stanza. War propaganda had warranted his victim to the status of a "foe" and thus legitimized his killing. However, we find that this warranty crashes and becomes void as the narrator tries in the third stanza to bring this warranty into effect. He stumbles over his words. The caesuras created by the semicolon in "enough; although" and by the several dashes as in "Off-hand like - just as I -" work as an "objective correlative" of the narrator's state of mind. The ready-made justification for the act of killing, "he was my foe", falls short of providing relief and purging the speaker's tormented soul.

The Other in Hardy's poem is demystified technically and thematically. What is obvious here is what we do not hear but cleverly suggested by Hardy through the form of the poem. The poem is stark and straightforward in terms of language and images, which is yet another way Hardy emphasizes the impossibility of making sense of the act of killing. Tim Kendall asserts that "'The Man He Killed' foreshadows Great War poems in its portrayal of the enemy as a brother or mirror-image" (Kendall, 2006, p.19), rather than, of course, as an Other. In the end, the real guilt comes from the fact that he killed a man who was just like himself. The colloquial language and the imagined public setting of the meeting underpin an essential fact about war, which is that those who fight are the ones who take orders not give them. Most soldiers of both sides share the same social background which again intensify the tragedy and unveil the fallacy of war propaganda. The lack of conviction in the narrator's voice about the necessity of killing the enemy emphasizes the idea that the soldiers who fight just follow orders, rather than

knowing what it is they are doing. A symbiosis is created between the two soldiers to strengthen the idea that the Other is no less human than the speaker. Harvey maintains that in his concentration on the pity of war, Hardy anticipates the poet of the Great War, Wilfred Owen (2003, p. 129).

#### 4. A VERY STRANGE MEETING

Owen's best friend and fellow fighter, Siegfried Sassoon, held "Strange Meeting" to be Owen's "passport to immortality" (cited in Simcox, 2000). Sassoon's evaluation is important because it comes from a poet who had the same firsthand experience of war. The poem was written in 1918 and published posthumously in 1920. It is considered one of the best poems for its thematic and technical significance. The setting of the poem is not an inn as in Hardy's poem, nor is it anywhere on ground. The meeting takes place in Hell, which gives the poem a Dantesque dimension. In addition, Owen goes further than Hardy by representing the enemy as a poet who shared with the speaker similar ambitions, dreams, poetic sentiment, and sense of frustration due to being involved in this bloody fighting. Drawing upon this fact, it becomes evident that the Other is presented not only as a human being but rather a person who bears in his heart the delicate sensibility of a romantic poet, and thus intensifying the sense of guilt and remorse over the act of killing. By choosing to represent his victim as a poet, Owen is indicting politicians, warmongers, and war propaganda of deliberately distorting the facts about the enemy.

The strangeness of the meeting in "Strange Meeting" does not only lie in the place where the encounter takes place but also in the unlikelihood of the occurrence of such meeting in the first place. It is a conversation in hell between a dead soldier and his killer. The enemy is again presented as a human being who bears striking similarities to the poet. Unlike Hardy, Owen had the firsthand experience of war necessary for the making of his "pity the war distilled." Thus, the poet prefaced his poems with this remark indicating the chasm he saw between poetry of beauty and poetry of truth:

*This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit  
to speak of them.  
Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory,  
honor,  
might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all  
I am not concerned with Poetry.  
My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in  
the pity.  
All a poet can do today is to warn (Owen, 31).*

In the present poem, the pity can clearly be found in the way Owen demystifies the Other by presenting him as a poet who has similar ambitions and dreams. Muir

explains that the words spoken by the dead soldier are Owen's words. He speaks of "The pity of war, the pity war distilled," as Owen had declared above, "The poetry is in the pity." In Other words, Owen meets his doppelganger (Muir, 23).

The grim and eerie opening of the poem encompasses the whole human history of war and bloodshed through its reference to the "titanic wars:"

*It seemed that out of battle I escaped  
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped  
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.  
Though his hands are raised to bless, it is in vain and  
distressful to the beholder.*

The two soldiers are now beyond the realm of blessings and curses. The gloomy hall now comes across as hell. As soon as the first speaker discovers that he is really in hell and surrounded by dead bodies that are making a groaning sound, one of the bodies sprang up and looks directly in his face:

*With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;  
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,  
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.*

These lines are remarkable because they create a contrast based on the dead soldier's face and the serenity of the place they are in. Although the dead soldier's face is engraved with misery and fear, the speaker is amazed as to the reason of that, for they are for the first time in a place where there is no sound of guns that can be heard nor is there killing and bloodshed. Again, this idea correlates with that of the first line, in which war is given an eternal sense. The following line is remarkable for it immediately establishes friendly and safe atmosphere by the reference to that strange man as "strange friend" rather than enemy.

*"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."  
"None," said that Other, "save the undone years, The  
hopelessness"*

Whereas Hardy's speaker engages into a kind of monologue, Owen gives his enemy the opportunity to relate his story of how his youth has been wasted in vain. The second soldier responds with kindness, showing how the two of them, though on different sides in the war, are deeply the same - with the same hopes, and the same desire to live and to know. The strangeness of the meeting lies also in the way death and life, the "Self" and the Other, and chaos and tranquility are put together within the same frame:

*Whatever hope is yours,  
Was my life also; I went hunting wild after the wildest  
beauty in the world,*

The dead soldier laments that their deaths would prevent them from warning future generations about the

reality of war. By emphasizing the similarities between them, Owen is deliberately debunking war fallacies about the Other being less human. The enemy appears here as having a deep and sensitive sensibility which is that of a poet. Hence, he is not only a human but also a person with refined sense of humanity that can easily be affected and injured emotionally by the mere act of fighting, let alone the act of killing.

By the end of the poem, readers - shockingly - come to realize that the speaker was actually the enemy who was killed by the first speaker in the poem:

*I am the enemy you killed, my friend.  
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned  
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.  
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.  
Let us sleep now....*

He identifies his attacker from the frown on his face that he had worn on the previous day while killing him. It is as if Owen here is confirming and validating the speaker's statement in Hardy's poem. Having met in a place other than the battleground, a friendship has at once been established and a sense of human bond has bound them together. Despite the fact that the meeting is in hell, this latter seems less hostile and less aggressive than the man-made hell. The poem is intended to be a fragment, leaving much untold. As if the "truth untold" about how "quaint and curious" war is can only be expressed through implications.

On the level of form and technique, Eliot considered that the poem "will never be forgotten" not only for its vigor representation of the war but also for its "technical achievements of originality" (Quoted in Bergonzi, 126). The poem follows a distinct half-rhyme that is also called pararhyme. Pararhyme is a half-rhyme in which there is a vowel variation within the same consonant pattern and "Strange Meeting" is often quoted as the best example of this type of end rhyme. Words such as "escaped"/"scooped," "groined"/"groaned," "bestirred"/"stared" emphasize the difference between the vowels of each pair of words and thus refer to the difference between the two soldiers who were the direct cause of justifying the act of killing. Difference creates contempt. Wade asserts that the poem "goes into an impassioned perspective of reconciliation, appeal for brotherhood, and a revision of how we are asked to see humanity within such horrors as warfare" (Wade, 67).

The deliberate failure of a perfect or full rhyme creates a sense of incompleteness and lack of achievement. Here, Owen highlights the fact that the poetry that was used as war propaganda to encourage young people to fight and which tried to justify the act of killing as valid if not sanctified, fails horribly on the formal level to sustain that claim. The sensibility that permeates the poem is deformed and numbed by this horrible act of

slaughtering a fellow human and thus rendered unable but to create a discordant and incomplete rhyme.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In their humanistic debunking of war fallacies and pretensions, Hardy and Owen emphasized the human elements in their enemies. The demystification of the heroics of war here takes the form of setting human realities against the clichés of war propaganda that justifies slaughter. The speakers in the poems reflect on the curious fact of killing a man who, away from the field of conflict, would have treated to a drink, or in Owen's case would have become a fellow poet. In addition, Owen goes further than Hardy by representing the enemy as a poet who shared with the speaker (Owen) similar ambitions, dreams, poetic sentiment, and sense of frustration due to being involved in this bloody fighting. The brotherhood in arms is achieved through the emphasis on how this Other is similar to the "Self." Strong affinities between the soldiers and their victims have been created. These affinities help in drawing the curtains away from the obscurity with which the enemies are wrapped. At last, these two poems present a strong argument against war.

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