Drummer Hodge

POEM TEXT

I

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
Uncoffined—just as found:
His landmark is a kopje-crest
That breaks the veldt around;
And foreign constellations west
Each night above his mound.

II

Young Hodge the Drummer never knew—
Fresh from his Wessex home—
The meaning of the broad Karoo,
The Bush, the dusty loam,
And why uprose to nightly view
Strange stars amid the gloam.

III

Yet portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge for ever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow up a Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally.

SUMMARY

A group of people buries Hodge, the military drummer, without a coffin, exactly as they found him. His only marker is the crest of a small hill, rising above the flat surrounding grassland. Unfamiliar stars move west in the sky at night above his burial mound.

Hodge, the young military drummer, never understood—because he'd come straight from his home in Wessex, England—the wide semi-desert landscape of South Africa, the South African wilderness, or the dusty soil. He never understood why unfamiliar constellations rose in the sky each night at dusk.

And yet Hodge will always be a part of that unfamiliar land. His humble English body and brain will fertilize a South African tree, and unfamiliar stars, peering down strangely, will preside over him for the rest of time.

THEMES

THE CRUEL RANDOMNESS OF WAR

"Drummer Hodge" depicts the lonely death of a humble soldier: a British drummer in the Second Boer War (1899-1902). Hodge's body is buried unceremoniously on the "veldt," or South African grassland, beneath "foreign" constellations. Stars are traditional symbols of fate, and these "strange" ones above the soldier's burial site come to represent the cruel, random-seeming destiny that led Hodge to die in this unlikely place. In turn, the poem suggests that war itself is a force of random cruelty that causes "meaning[less]" suffering.

The treatment of Hodge's corpse illustrates how war fosters a casually brutal attitude toward life and death. An unnamed "They" briskly "throw" Hodge's body into an unmarked grave, suggesting that they have either no time or no inclination to bury him properly. (Note, too, how the poem itself mirrors the brusque, impersonal way "They" treat Hodge: other than his last name, birthplace, "You[th]," and role as "Drummer," the poem withholds all details about Hodge's life.) Since the poem never identifies "They," it's unclear whether "They" are comrades, enemies, or civilians. The war seems to strip everyone of all but the crudest identity markers.

Not only is this war brutal, it's *senselessly* brutal. The poem frames Hodge's death as "strange" and incomprehensible, while offering no indication that his role in war—or even the war more broadly—served any higher purpose. Hodge was a young "Drummer," not a regular soldier; he was there to play music, not engage in combat. His small, extraneous role makes him an especially senseless casualty of the war.

The poem doesn't actually mention that war, indicate how Hodge died, nor reveal what, if anything, he died for. Instead, it emphasizes how far away from home he died, and how ignorant he was about the place he died in. The "Strange stars" above his burial site illustrate this ignorance—the constellations were strange to Hodge, not the locals—while symbolizing the cruel incoherency of his fate. Since he died in a place that he "never knew [...] The meaning of," and for a cause that's never stated (much less endorsed), his death seems to *have* no larger meaning.

Though Hodge's remains do "Grow [into] a Southern tree," this form of natural rebirth means nothing to Hodge himself;

ironically, death has rooted him in an "unknown" land where he had no roots. Broadly, then, the poem portrays war as dehumanizing, wasteful, and absurd: a misadventure that sends confused young people to die far from home for no good reason.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-12
- Lines 13-18

IMPERIALISM AND DISORIENTATION

"Drummer Hodge" portrays the cruelty not only of war in general but of a particular war, which was taking place at the time the poet was writing. The poem's apparent setting is the Second Boer War, in which the British Empire fought the Boer Republics (independent states founded by Dutch colonialists) for control of natural resources in what is now South Africa. The speaker's keen focus on the "foreign" environment where Hodge died serves to stress how ridiculously *out of place* Hodge was. Implicitly, the poem criticizes imperialist meddling in faraway lands by depicting the disorientation felt by the foot soldiers of empire.

The poem's many references to the South African landscape and skies establish a specific political context for the poem, while framing the Englishman Hodge as a fish out of water. Dutch/Afrikaans and Khoemana-language terms like "kopje" (hill), "veldt" (South African grassland), and "Karoo" (a large semi-desert region in South Africa) pinpoint the poem's geographical setting over and over. The poet's contemporaries would have understood that Drummer Hodge, a young English military recruit, could be in this place for only one reason: to serve in the Boer Wars.

The speaker stresses that Hodge "never knew [...] the meaning of" the South African landscape in which his army fought. He had no previous connection to the region and, thus, no real connection to the cause for which he served. Since Hodge could stand in for any number of soldiers like him, the poem seems to imply that the army itself—or the British Empire—has no rightful connection to this land. (Remember, the British and Dutch were fighting to plunder South African natural resources.)

Essentially, then, the poem shows that imperialist wars send people where they don't belong. The poem repeatedly highlights the wide gap between Hodge's birthplace and death-place. His "home" was rural England ("Wessex"), but he died in the "Karoo," which struck him as utterly foreign. His "Northern" body ends up fertilizing the growth of "a Southern tree," so he's now a "portion" of a land that meant nothing to him. Ultimately, Hodge's unceremonious burial—which seems wrong on a human level—points to a larger, political wrong. He isn't buried with honor, the poem suggests, because he's far from any community that would have honored him (or in which he could have served honorably). His empire uprooted him and sent him to be an interloper in someone else's homeland.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-6
- Lines 7-12
- Lines 13-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
Uncoffined—just as found:
His landmark is a kopje-crest
That breaks the veldt around;

Lines 1-4 introduce the poem's title character, "Drummer Hodge," after he's already died. This first stanza is set in the present tense; the second, which adds a hint of Hodge's backstory, will be in the past tense, and the third will look ahead to the future.

Here, an unnamed "They" dumps Hodge's lifeless body into an improvised grave. They bury Hodge "Uncoffined" (without a coffin), "just as [they] found" him on the "veldt," or open country of southern Africa. His grave is unmarked, except that it's set atop the geographical "landmark" of a "kopje-crest": a small hill that disrupts ("breaks") the flatness of the surrounding landscape.

"Kopje," like "veldt," is a term particularly associated with the landscape of southern Africa, so these words help establish the poem's setting. Both come from the southern African language called Afrikaans, which combines Dutch with elements of German and the Khoisan languages native to the region. Both words, then, are artifacts of European colonialism, particularly Dutch settlement in what is now South Africa. They would have struck Thomas Hardy's main audience (UK readers) as distinctively "foreign," and would have had topical significance as well. Hardy wrote the poem in 1899, the year the British Empire and the Boer Republics (states founded by Dutch colonists) began waging the Second Boer War in southern Africa.

Readers of the time would have immediately recognized that Hardy was alluding to this war and that the "Drummer Hodge" character was supposed to be a British casualty of that war. Military drummers were typically young men—often too young to fight as regular soldiers—who played field music as their armies marched into battle. Meanwhile, "Hodge" was a kind of stock name for an English country dweller or farm laborer.

Just in these first few lines, then, the third-person speaker casts Hodge as an unlucky fish out of water, a young English army recruit who has died under unknown circumstances far from home. He's also a somewhat generic figure, buried without a funeral or headstone in the midst of a vast landscape. It's not even clear who's burying him—comrades, enemies, or civilians.

Already, the poem is starting to offer an implied commentary, portraying war as a heartless force that doesn't care about individual identities. (In that way, it may be like the natural landscape surrounding Hodge's body.)

LINES 5-6

And foreign constellations west
Each night above his mound.

Lines 5-6 introduce what will become a recurring image, and symbol, in the poem: the stars above Hodge's burial "mound."

- While Hodge lies motionless, these stars "west" (move westward) each night above him; basically, the universe continues without him.
- These are also "foreign constellations": stars that wouldn't be visible in the Northern hemisphere (including Hodge's "Wessex home," mentioned in the next stanza), but are visible in the skies above southern Africa. Like the landscape details, they're another indication that Hodge has died a long way from home.
- Since stars are traditionally associated with destiny (think of astrology, etc.), they also seem to represent the grim fate he encountered in this "foreign" land.

The enjambment after the word "west" helps highlights the poet's unusual choice to use this word as a verb. It also draws attention to the phrase after the line break, which indicates a recurring event: "Each night." These references to the stars, too, will repeat (with altered phrasing) at the end of each stanza, mimicking the cyclical reappearance of the constellations.

As they complete the stanza, these lines also clarify the poem's form. Each of the poem's three stanzas contains six lines, which follow an ABABAB rhyme scheme and alternate between iambic tetrameter (a da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM rhythmic pattern) and iambic trimeter (da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM). This is a modified version of the ballad form, which has often been used for narrative poetry—including tragic narratives about war! (For more, see the Form, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme sections of this guide.)

LINES 7-12

Young Hodge the Drummer never knew—
Fresh from his Wessex home—
The meaning of the broad Karoo,
The Bush, the dusty loam,
And why uprose to nightly view
Strange stars amid the gloam.

The second stanza (lines 7-12) switches to the past tense and provides a very quick sketch of Drummer Hodge:

- In life, this soldier was "Young" and "Fresh from his [...] home" in "Wessex," England. "Wessex" is a fictional, largely rural region of England that appears in many of Thomas Hardy's novels and poems. It's based on the area around Dorset county, where Hardy grew up.
- The fact that he was *fresh* from home suggests that he died shortly after arriving in southern Africa.
- Before he died—perhaps in battle—he "never knew / The meaning" of the place in which he fought. For example, he never understood "the broad Karoo" (a semi-desert region in present-day South Africa), "The Bush" (the region's wilderness), or "the dusty loam" (the dusty soil underfoot). He may not have grasped what place names like *Karoo* and *Bush* referred to, and he certainly didn't have any deeper connection with the land. (There's some implied irony here, because he was fighting in the Second Boer War, on behalf of an empire hoping to control the region's natural resources.)
- Hodge didn't even understand why "Strange stars" rose overhead in the "gloam" (twilight). That is, he wasn't informed or well-traveled enough to know why he was seeing unfamiliar constellations at night. (Due to the curvature of the Earth, different stars are visible from different points on the globe.) By all appearances, he was a young, naive country boy who signed up for—or was drafted into—a misadventure in a place he knew nothing about.

While this brief sketch provides a tiny bit of Hodge's backstory, it's also notable for how much it *doesn't* say. All the reader really learns about Hodge—and maybe all "They" knew about him, whoever "They" were—is that he was "Young," a "Drummer," and ignorant about Africa. The speaker doesn't even share the circumstances of his death.

Strong alliteration ("broad"/"Bush," "Strange stars") and assonance ("Young"/"Drummer," "never"/"Fresh"/"Wessex," "why"/"nightly," "loam"/"uprose") give this stanza an especially lyrical quality. The intensity of the language—which also features uncommon and, well, poetic words like "loam," "uprose," and "gloam"—helps convey some of the disorienting intensity of Hodge's experience.

LINES 13-16

Yet portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge for ever be;

His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow up a Southern tree,

Lines 13-16 highlight an ironic element of Hodge's death: it has literally rooted him in a place where he had no roots. According to the speaker, he will always be a part ("portion") of the landscape that was "unknown" to him, because his "Northern" body will "Grow up [into] a Southern tree." That is, his "breast and brain" (physical remains) will fertilize the soil of this "plain," and a tree will grow from his burial site.

The antithesis between "Northern" and "Southern" reinforces how out of place Hodge was. In life, he was an English military drummer sent to southern Africa by an exploitative empire. He felt uprooted and disoriented in a place that contrasted sharply with "home." In death, however, he's become embedded in the land. His "homely" (humble, plain) body has found a strange *kind* of home by returning to nature. Previously, the poem has juxtaposed England and southern Africa—"Wessex" and "the broad Karoo"—in order to suggest their differences. Here, this contrast is reconciled in a peculiar, ironic fashion; Hodge has had to die in order to connect with this place at all.

Alliteration does a lot of work in these lines. The repetition of /p/ sounds in "portion" and "plain" underscores the newfound connection between Hodge and the landscape. Repeated /h/ sounds reinforce the "homeli[ness]" of "Hodge," as if the trait is intrinsic to the person. Repeated /br/ sounds also suggest the inseparability of Hodge's "breast" and "brain"; pointedly, the poem uses this phrase, rather than "body and mind" or "body and soul," to describe what's left of him after death. (In Christian theology, body and soul are supposed to part ways at death, but Hardy, a religious skeptic, seems to suggest that they're part of the same material organism, which has now returned to the earth.)

LINES 17-18

And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally.

The poem closes with another reference to the stars above Hodge. The lofty words "reign" and "eternally," along with long /ay/ assonance ("strange-eyed constellations reign"), make this last phrase ring out grandly:

> And strange-eyed constellations reign
> His stars eternally.

In other words, those southern stars, which looked so foreign to him (like *strange eyes* peering down), will preside over his body for the rest of time. Ironically, too, they will forever be "His stars"—a phrase that suggests they are symbols of his fate:

- According to astrology and similar superstitions, the movement of the stars shapes human destiny, and "our" stars are the ones that govern our individual fates.
- Usually, "our" stars appear at our birth, but in the speaker's view, Hodge's stars seem to be the ones present at his *death*.

And in a way, "strange[ness]" itself is his fate: he died in an utterly foreign setting as a result of the random cruelty of war. No comforting God "reign[s]" over him for all "etern[ity]"—just a night sky that confused him. He's permanently *estranged* from his homeland, and his death seems to have no coherent meaning or higher purpose. He fertilizes the soil, and that's about it.

This bleak vision of war, life, and death is typical of Hardy's poetry. Still, through soaring imagery, he manages to find something grand in the bleakness!

SYMBOLS

STARS

Stars are traditional symbols of fate. In this poem, the "Strange" constellations of the Southern hemisphere specifically symbolize the strangeness, or apparent senselessness, of Hodge's fate.

The stars visible from southern Africa looked utterly "foreign" to Hodge, who was used to the stars visible from his home in England. Just as he "never knew" the southern African landscape in any "meaning[ful]" way, he never understood "why" these foreign constellations appeared "nightly" during his time at war. As a humble ("homely") country youth, he may never have learned that the night sky looks different as one travels around the globe. The "foreign[ness]" of these stars thus stands in for everything that felt disorienting and alienating about his journey abroad, or his war service in general.

Not only are these the stars he serves under, they're the stars he dies under. The "strange-eyed constellations" end up being "His stars," now and "eternally" (lines 17-18). Symbolically, they represent a fate that he didn't understand—that struck him as incomprehensible even while he was alive and carrying out his mission. In a sense, disorientation, alienation, and war's random cruelty *were* his fate.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "And foreign constellations west / Each night above his mound."
- **Lines 11-12:** "And why uprose to nightly view / Strange stars amid the gloam."
- **Lines 17-18:** "And strange-eyed constellations reign / His stars eternally."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem's moments of alliteration help to emphasize its strong, march-like, iambic rhythm. Alliteration also reinforces the poem's meaning by adding emphasis to a few important words.

For example, the /n/ alliteration in "never knew" (line 7) accentuates a phrase that's key to understanding Drummer Hodge's character. Even though he went off to serve in the Boer War in southern Africa, Hodge *never understood* the land he died in. He had no real connection to the place, its people, or its terrain (including the natural resources his army was fighting to control). Basically, he was a naive kid who died bewildered.

The alliterative phrase "Strange stars" (line 12), later in that stanza, drives home the same idea. Hodge was even disoriented by the *sky* above the land he died in. He was so far from home—so out of place—that he didn't even recognize the constellations.

Nevertheless, line 13 stresses that Hodge will always remain a "portion of that unknown plain" (i.e., the southern African "veldt"). Here, the two alliterative /p/ words underscore the newfound, ironic connection between Hodge and the landscape. In line 15, the alliterative phrase "His homely Northern breast and brain" highlights other important character details: Hodge's "homel[iness]" (plainness) and the concrete physicality of his remains ("breast and brain" sounds less abstract and clichéd than "body and mind"). Notice, too, how alliteration closely links "Hodge" (line 14) with "homel[iness]"!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "kopje-crest"
- **Line 7:** "never knew"
- **Line 9:** "broad"
- **Line 10:** "Bush"
- **Line 12:** "Strange stars"
- **Line 13:** "portion," "plain"
- **Line 14:** "Hodge"
- **Line 15:** "His homely," "breast," "brain"

ASSONANCE

Assonance adds some extra musicality to this ballad-like poem, particularly in the second stanza. Listen to how short /u/, short /e/, long /o/, and long /i/ vowels repeat in lines 7-8 and lines 10-11:

> Young Hodge the Drummer never knew—
> Fresh from his Wessex home [...]
> The Bush, the dusty loam,
> And why uprose to nightly view [...]

Packed into short lines that already feature end rhymes, this assonance gives the language a richly lyrical quality. Together with unusual words such as "uprose" and "gloam" (an archaic synonym for *twilight*), this lyricism gives the language a strange intensity that helps convey Hodge's disorientation in an unfamiliar landscape. Assonance also adds some extra emphasis to the key word "Fresh," which indicates that Hodge, as a fresh young recruit, had only just arrived in the country. He may have been killed so quickly that he barely had *time* to learn the landscape.

Assonance also appears in the poem's next-to-last line:

> And strange-eyed constellations reign
> His stars eternally.

Again, the device intensifies the language, underlining the power and "strange[ness]" of the stars that "reign" over Hodge—in other words, the strangeness of his fate.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Young," "Drummer," "never"
- **Line 8:** "Fresh," "Wessex"
- **Line 10:** "loam"
- **Line 11:** "why," "uprose," "nightly"
- **Line 17:** "strange-eyed constellations reign"

REPETITION

Several forms of repetition appear in the poem. First, there's the simple repetition of Drummer Hodge's name, once in the title and once in each stanza: "Drummer Hodge" (line 1), "Hodge the Drummer" (line 7), and "Hodge" (line 14). This device helps unify the three stanzas and cement the central character in the reader's mind within the space of a short poem.

There's also the parallel structure of the phrases in lines 9-10: "the broad Karoo, / The Bush, the dusty loam." This list-like structure helps pack several vivid details into two short lines, while also suggesting that the list could go on from there: in other words, that it's just a sample of the things Hodge "never knew" about southern Africa.

Most important are the repeated references to the "foreign constellations" (a.k.a. "Strange stars" or "strange-eyed constellations") above Hodge's burial site. Each stanza closes with a reference to these stars, which come to symbolize a fate that was incomprehensibly "foreign" to Hodge himself. Although the phrasing is a bit different each time, this repetition functions almost like the refrain of a ballad, ending each stanza or "verse" on much the same note. Just as the stars "eternally" circle back to their positions over Hodge, the poem keeps circling back to an image that encapsulates its themes.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Drummer Hodge"
- **Lines 5-6:** "And foreign constellations west / Each night above his mound."
- **Line 7:** "Hodge the Drummer"
- **Line 9:** "the"
- **Line 10:** "The," "the"
- **Lines 11-12:** "And why uprose to nightly view / Strange stars amid the gloam."
- **Line 14:** "Hodge"
- **Lines 17-18:** "And strange-eyed constellations reign / His stars eternally."

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem contains two important juxtapositions.

The first, and more obvious, is the juxtaposition between Hodge's "Northern" birthplace and "Southern" burial site—in other words, England and southern Africa. The one is Hodge's "home" (line 8); the other is "foreign" and disorienting to him (line 5). One contains the landscape and skyscape he grew up with; the other contains geographical features ("the broad Karoo, / The Bush, the dusty loam") and constellations ("Strange stars") he doesn't understand at all. And just as the land he dies in means nothing to him, he seems to mean nothing to the land and its people. An anonymous "They" throws his body, "Uncoffined," into an improvised grave, in contrast with the family and community who might have laid him to rest back home.

The poem also juxtaposes the southern African landscape, including Hodge's burial "mound," with the sky above it. Whereas Hodge is now motionless forever in an apparently flat, quiet landscape, the stars continue to move across the sky "Each night" (line 6). In other words, the universe goes on without him. However, in returning to the land and nature—his corpse fertilizes "a Southern tree" (line 16)—Hodge does attain something like the permanence of the stars. He'll be part of the landscape "for ever" (line 14), just as the constellations will "reign [...] eternally" (lines 17-18).

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-12
- Lines 13-18

ANTITHESIS

There's only one clear antithesis in the poem, but it helps to underline the poem's themes. In the final stanza, the speaker says that Hodge will always be a part ("portion") of the landscape he died in, and that "His homely Northern breast and brain [will] / Grow up a Southern tree." This geographical contrast—a "Northern" (i.e., English) youth dying in a "Southern" (i.e., southern African) landscape—reinforces the idea that Hodge died very far from home, in a place where the poem seems to feel he didn't belong. Ironically, however, this uprooted young man is now rooted in the "unknown" landscape his army shipped him to.

There seems to be another implied contrast here, too: between the "homely" (humble) quality of Hodge's "breast and brain" (body and mind) and the "tree" they foster as they decompose. What was plain or even unattractive in life ends up producing something beautiful. Presumably, whatever species of "Southern tree" grows here would be unknown in Hodge's home country—in other words, it wouldn't be "homely" in the sense of home-like and familiar to his people. And the tree will be standing atop a "kopje-crest" (hill) that "breaks" up the flat surrounding landscape, so it will be lofty and distinctive in a way that the humble Hodge was not. In multiple ways, then, this single detail in lines 15-16 highlights the unlikely, ironic, yet oddly poetic quality of Hodge's death.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "His homely Northern breast and brain / Grow up a Southern tree,"

CAESURA

The poem contains only three caesuras, but the first two, in particular, add a bit of dramatic tension.

In line 1, the comma after "They throw in Drummer Hodge" forces the reader to pause a moment after this abrupt, attention-grabbing opening phrase. Who are "They"? Who is "Drummer Hodge"? What are they "throw[ing]" Hodge into, and why? All these questions, except the first, will be answered with further context, but the mid-line pause creates a split second of suspense.

The second line contains an even more dramatic pause: a dash after "Uncoffined." Along with the enjambment over the line break, the caesura draws extra attention to this grim, unusual word. It's then followed by the terse, and equally grim, phrase "just as found." The speaker means that Hodge's body was buried in the same way it was discovered: without a coffin, on the open plain. The pause allows the reader an extra moment to take these details in, and to linger over their sadness.

A final caesura occurs in line 10, where it marks part of a list:

> The meaning of the broad Karoo,
> The Bush, the dusty loam,

Again, the pause forces readers to slow down a bit—here, while taking in details that might seem as "foreign" to them as to Hodge. (Hardy was an Englishman writing mainly for a UK audience.)

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Hodge, to"
- **Line 2:** "Uncoffined—just"
- **Line 10:** "Bush, the"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains a number of enjambments, which often place significant emphasis on a word/phrase just before or after the line break. Look, for example, at the three enjambments in the first stanza, which fall on alternating lines:

> They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
> Uncoffined—just as found:
> His landmark is a kopje-crest
> That breaks the veldt around;
> And foreign constellations west
> Each night above his mound.

The first enjambment draws particular attention to the unusual word "Uncoffined," and thus to the grim circumstances of Hodge's burial. The second helps highlight the (very unusual) compound word "kopje-crest," which combines an Afrikaans word for a small hill with an English word for a hilltop. In fact, it causes the reader to pause a moment over the poem's first indication of its southern African setting. The third enjambment follows yet another oddity: the word "west" used as a verb, to describe the westward movement of stars.

One could say that this poem about "strangeness" and "foreignness" uses enjambment, in part, as a way of leaning into its more unusual features. Notice that the word "Strange" itself—which is also a stressed syllable that varies the poem's meter—follows yet another enjambment, in line 12.

For one last example, look at the third of the three enjambments in the final stanza. Here, the pause inserted by the line break helps the reader work out some unconventional grammar:

> And strange-eyed constellations reign
> His stars eternally.

In the overall context of the sentence, this means that strange constellations *will* reign *as* Hodge's stars for the rest of time. That is, the stars above the African landscape will continue to symbolically preside over his destiny, even though they were unfamiliar to him in life. (Notice how "His," coming right after the line break, receives a little extra emphasis—as if to say that these stars were once alien to him, but they're *his* now.)

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "rest / Uncoffined"
- **Lines 3-4:** "kopje-crest / That"
- **Lines 5-6:** "west / Each"
- **Lines 11-12:** "view / Strange"
- **Lines 13-14:** "plain / Will"
- **Lines 15-16:** "brain / Grow"
- **Lines 17-18:** "reign / His"

VOCABULARY

Uncoffined (Line 2) - Without a coffin; buried as is.

Kopje-crest (Line 3) - The top of a small hill. *Kopje* is a Dutch word for a small hill, usually on a flat plain, and is especially associated with the South African landscape.

Veldt (Line 4) - A Dutch word for the open grassland of southern Africa. Now usually called by the Afrikaans version of the word: *veld*.

West (Line 5) - Here, a verb meaning "to move west." (This isn't a standard usage of the word; Hardy's taking some poetic license!)

Mound (Line 6) - That is, burial mound; the hill where "They" disposed of Hodge's body.

Wessex (Line 8) - A fictional area in rural England, based on Dorset and surrounding counties, where Hardy set many of his novels and poems.

Karoo (Line 9) - A large semi-desert region covering much of present-day South Africa.

The Bush (Line 10) - Uncultivated country; wilderness. A term used by European settlers in southern Africa and Australia, among other places.

Loam (Line 10) - Soil; earth.

Uprose (Line 11) - Rose up (here referring to the rising of stars in the sky).

Gloam (Line 12) - A largely archaic synonym for *twilight*.

Northern/Southern (Line 15, Line 16) - Here referring to the Northern and Southern hemispheres, or, more specifically, to northern Europe and southern Africa (or England and the country now called South Africa).

Reign (Line 17) - Rule over, control (here referring to the stars that rise over Hodge's body and seem to rule over his fate).

His stars (Line 18) - That is, the stars that rise over his body *and* seem to rule over his fate (an allusion to the superstition that stars govern human destiny).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of three six-line stanzas, or sestets, whose lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. (In other words, they alternate between having four and three iambic feet, or metrical units consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. There are small variations in the pattern, of course; see Meter section for more.) This makes the poem's form a modified version of common meter or ballad meter; rather than four lines of alternating tetrameter and trimeter, each stanza has six.

Thomas Hardy wrote many poems in the ballad tradition, and it's a natural choice for this particular subject. First, the iambic rhythm has a march-like sound that seems to fit a poem about the military. Second, the poem draws on a long tradition of narrative ballads—both comic and tragic—about soldiers and military life. One of the most popular English poetry collections of Hardy's era, published less than a decade before "Drummer Hodge," was Rudyard Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses* (1892), whose poems focus on working-class soldiers in the British Army.

Notice, too, that Hardy uses Roman numerals to mark each stanza as a separate *section* of the poem. These section breaks may seem surprising in a short poem whose stanzas are all fairly similar; in fact, Hardy often used section breaks where other poets might not. Here, however, the numerals draw attention to at least one key difference among the stanzas: each is set in a different tense. The first stanza describes the present, the second the past, and the third the future. Thus, each section of the poem captures Hodge from a different angle: what he is now (a dead body), what he was (a disoriented soldier), and what he will be from now on (part of the southern African landscape).

METER

The poem consists of alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. That is, it alternates between lines of eight and six syllables arranged in an unstressed-stressed rhythm (da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM / da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM). Readers can hear this rhythm clearly in lines 1-2, for example:

> They throw | in Drum- | mer Hodge, | to rest
> Uncof- | fined—just | as found:

This is the pattern associated with ballad meter. Ballads usually consist of four-line stanzas, but the six-line stanzas of "Drummer Hodge" are one of many possible modifications of the form. There's also a long tradition of narrative ballads, including tragic ballads about soldiers (the march-like iambic rhythm fits military subjects well), so Hardy is drawing on that tradition here.

Like nearly all metrical poems, "Drummer Hodge" contains occasional rhythmic variations. For example, line 8 stresses the first rather than the second syllable ("Fresh from his Wessex home"), as if to emphasize how "Fresh" and inexperienced this young recruit was. For the most part, though, the poem's meter is very regular. Its steady rhythm seems to evoke Hodge's drumming—and perhaps the rigidity of the fate that sent him marching toward death.

RHYME SCHEME

Each of the poem's three stanzas rhymes on alternate lines in an ABABAB rhyme scheme. (Thus, the scheme of the full poem is ABABAB CDCDCD EFEFEF.) All the rhymes in the poem are exact.

Along with the steady, march-like meter, this neatly regular pattern helps convey the rigidity of Hodge's military life. It also makes his death seem that much more inevitable—as if he was marched to his doom by forces he couldn't control. In other words, the poem's rhyme scheme suits its depiction of a fate that seems written in the "stars."

SPEAKER

The poem is narrated by a third-person speaker, who maintains a fairly objective tone. This seemingly detached voice—which doesn't mourn Hodge in a sentimental or traditional way—underscores the loneliness of Hodge's death far from "home."

Of course, no speaker can be *completely* neutral. There's a hint of editorializing, for example, in the word "homely" (line 15), which the speaker uses to describe Hodge's body and mind. This word can imply "unattractive" or "unimpressive," but it can also connote things like "down-home," "simple," and "humble." Basically, the speaker depicts Hodge as an average English country boy. The speaker's own apparent Englishness (or "Northern[ness]") is also reflected in words like "foreign," "Strange," and "strange-eyed," which describe how Hodge would have viewed the stars of the Southern hemisphere—but seem to describe how the speaker views them, too.

SETTING

The geographical setting of the poem is the open grassland, or "veldt," of southern Africa. The historical setting is 1899, the year Hardy wrote the poem, and the year the Second Boer War (1899-1902) began. This conflict was a competition between European colonial powers: the British Empire and the Boer Republics founded by Dutch colonists. It's sometimes called simply the Boer War (the First Boer War was minor by

comparison) or the South African War. It ranged over what later became the independent countries of South Africa, Lesotho, and Eswatini; since the latter two are very small, the poem almost certainly takes place in present-day South Africa. Hodge, a fictional character, is a young British drummer in the war.

The reference to the "Karoo" (line 9) helps narrow down the location a bit further; the Karoo is a large, semi-desert region that exists entirely within present-day South Africa. "The Bush" (line 10) is a more general reference to the region's wilderness. The "kopje-crest" mentioned in line 3 refers to a small hill that interrupts ("breaks") the generally flat expanse around it. Finally, the references to "foreign constellations" indicate that different parts of the world see different stars; the constellations visible throughout most of the Southern Hemisphere would have been unfamiliar to Hodge.

The poem mentions one other place as well: Hodge's "Wessex home" in England. Wessex is actually a fictional English region that appears in many of Thomas Hardy's novels and poems. It's based on the area where Hardy grew up and named after a medieval kingdom that once existed there.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Drummer Hodge" was first published as "The Dead Drummer" in November 1899, shortly after the outbreak of the Second Boer War. It then appeared, retitled, in the "War Poems" section of Thomas Hardy's collection *Poems of the Past and the Present* (1901). It's one of many Hardy poems that express deep skepticism about war; another famous example is "The Man He Killed," written during the same conflict. Generally, Hardy's vision of war is one in which ordinary people, such as Hodge, suffer and die for causes that don't benefit them or make any sense to them.

The poem appeared in an era when the British Empire was engaged in conflict and colonial exploitation around the world, and when other prominent British writers were reflecting on the experience and costs of war. For example, Rudyard Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses* (1892) consists of ballads about British Army life and was a major popular success during its era. The book is mainly set in British-colonized India, but in 1903 Kipling also published a follow-up group of poems, "Service Songs," about the Boer War.

Less than 20 years after "Drummer Hodge," a number of famous UK poets wrote critically about World War I (1914-1918)—including Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and Hardy himself, in such classic poems as "Channel Firing" and "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations.'" Lines 13-14 of "Drummer Hodge" ("Yet portion of that unknown plain / Will Hodge for ever be") parallel and may have influenced the opening of Rupert Brooke's famous WWI poem "The Soldier":

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is for ever England.

The similarity is ironic, however, since "The Soldier" is a sentimental and patriotic poem.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Drummer Hodge" was based on a real young man from Hardy's native Dorset, who died in the Second Boer War. Shortly after composing it, Hardy wrote to a friend:

> [...] in the country one knows everybody, or about everybody, for miles round, rich & poor, & many husbands & sons have disappeared from our precincts, & are continually talked about by their relatives, naturally enough. I wrote a little poem about the ghost of one who was killed the other day [...]

"Hodge" wasn't the real name of the deceased; rather, it was a colloquial nickname for a country boy or farm laborer. Its somewhat unflattering tone reflects the British Empire's condescending attitude toward its soldiers. To politicians and military leaders, the poem suggests, the young men sent off to die were just "Hodge" types—expendable country bumpkins.

The Second Boer War (also called simply the Boer War, or the South African War) lasted from 1899 to 1902. It was a brutal colonial conflict in which the British Empire fought the Boer Republics (independent republics founded by Dutch colonists) for control of southern African natural resources, particularly gold and diamond mines. Along with some 30,000 military deaths, it caused a high number of civilian casualties, especially among native Africans and Dutch Boers interned in concentration camps.

In alluding to this event, "Drummer Hodge" pointedly omits any mention of a larger cause or supposed justification for the violence. Instead, it focuses on a single, "Young" casualty of the war, who felt completely alienated from the surrounding terrain and may not have clearly understood what he was doing so far from "home" (line 8).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a recitation of the poem in the film The History Boys (2006). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QI1DdIn2xkg)

- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a biography of Hardy at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-hardy)
- Hardy's Era — Read the Poetry Foundation's introduction to the Victorian era in which Hardy wrote. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/153447/an-introduction-to-the-victorian-era)
- A Hardy Documentary — Watch the BBC documentary "The Heart of Thomas Hardy." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Jgx6ez9LYM)
- More About the Author — Learn more about Hardy at the website of the Thomas Hardy Society. (https://www.hardysociety.org/life/)
- The Second Anglo-Boer War — Learn more about the conflict on which Hardy based the poem. (https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/second-anglo-boer-war-1899-1902)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- At an Inn
- A Wife In London
- Channel Firing
- Neutral Tones
- The Convergence of the Twain
- The Darkling Thrush
- The Man He Killed
- The Ruined Maid

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