

The Moral Paradox of War: A Platonic Analysis of “The Man He Killed” by Thomas Hardy

Princess Sarah Camado¹, Sheana Rose E. Barbosa², Ana Mae M. Monteza³
University of Mindanao Digos College, Digos City, Philippines
p.camado.60021.dc@umindanao.edu.ph

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Abstract. This study offers a Platonic analysis of “The Man He Killed” by Thomas Hardy, examining the moral paradoxes of war through the lens of Plato’s Tripartite Theory of the Soul or Moral Psychology. The research investigates how the poem’s speaker experiences internal conflict among reason (*logistikon*), spirit (*thymoeides*), and appetite (*epithymia*), highlighting the psychological fragmentation caused by war. The objective is to explore how Hardy uses irony, everyday language, and flawed reasoning to question the ethical excuses people make for violence and to highlight deeper philosophical issues about justice and moral responsibility. Using a qualitative interpretive method grounded in Platonic moral philosophy, the study finds that war disrupts the soul’s harmony, illustrating how individuals may act against rational moral instincts due to social duty, honor, and economic coercion. These insights deepen the understanding of Hardy’s anti-war message and support Sustainable Development Goals 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and 4 (Quality Education) by promoting ethical reflection and peace education through literature. Ultimately, the study underscores how poetic language can serve as a powerful medium for exposing moral contradictions and fostering critical engagement with issues of violence and justice.

Keywords: *Justice, Moralistic Analysis, Moral Conflict, Thomas Hardy, Tripartite Soul Theory, Plato, War Ethics*

INTRODUCTION

War has long been central to moral inquiry, often challenging the limits of ethical reasoning and human rationality. Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed" (1902) captures this complexity through a dramatic monologue in which a soldier reflects on the absurdity of killing an enemy he otherwise might have shared a drink with. Through irony and casual diction, Hardy exposes the contradictions of war—how social conventions and national duty could lead individuals to commit violence against those with whom they had no personal conflict, severing inherent human connections.

Before focusing on Hardy's poem, it is important to recognize that the moral and psychological consequences of war have also been extensively explored in other literary works. For instance, Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* (1920) and Siegfried Sassoon's trench poetry expose the physical suffering and ideological disillusionment of soldiers, while Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) presents the long-term psychological destruction caused by combat. These texts collectively challenge traditional notions of heroism and patriotism by emphasizing the lived experience of soldiers within modern warfare. However, Hardy's "The Man He Killed" was selected for this study because of its distinctive dramatic monologue form and its use of conversational simplicity to express a complex philosophical contradiction. Unlike extended narratives or graphic depictions of war, Hardy compresses moral reflection into a single ironic encounter, making it especially suitable for analyzing how ordinary reasoning collapses under ideological pressure.

This study examines the poem's moral contradictions through Plato's Tripartite Theory of the Soul, which divides the psyche into reason (*logistikon*), spirit (*thymoeides*), and appetite (*epithymia*) (Plato, 1974). These three components differ in function and orientation: reason (*logistikon*) governs logical thought, judgment, and the pursuit of truth; spirit (*thymoeides*) is associated with emotions such as pride, anger, and honor, often motivating individuals toward social approval and moral action; and appetite (*epithymia*) relates to bodily desires and survival instincts, including fear, comfort, and physical needs. In Plato's framework, these elements are hierarchically ordered, with reason ideally controlling spirit and appetite to achieve psychological balance. The study explored how the speaker's internal struggle reflected a fragmented soul—reason questioning war's logic, spirit conforming to patriotic duty, and appetite seeking survival. By analyzing the speaker's justifications for violence, the study interrogated the ethical foundations of war and highlighted Hardy's critique of justice and of the construction of enemies.

While many scholars, such as Gibson (1996), have emphasized the poem's anti-war themes and ironic tone, and Lodge (1988) has highlighted Hardy's criticism of imperialism and nationalism, other critics further reinforce Hardy's moral critique of warfare. For instance, Fussell (1975) examined the disillusionment present in war literature, noting how ordinary soldiers often confronted the absurdity of violence, a theme evident in Hardy's poem. Similarly, Hynes (1990)

discussed how war narratives reveal the psychological strain experienced by soldiers, particularly the tension between duty and personal morality. Moreover, Kendall (2006) explored how Hardy's war poetry reflects the emotional and ethical conflicts of individuals caught in nationalist ideologies. In addition, Nemesvari (2011) analyzed Hardy's poetic treatment of conflict, emphasizing how his works question traditional notions of heroism and expose the moral ambiguity of war. Likewise, Stallworthy (1991) argued that war poetry often reveals the instability of moral justification in combat, highlighting how soldiers struggle to reconcile personal conscience with institutional expectations.

Despite these contributions, few scholars have explored the poem's deeper philosophical implications through a structured theoretical lens. Notably, existing scholarship lacks a systematic application of Plato's Tripartite Soul Theory to understand the speaker's psychological fragmentation. For example, Lodge (1988) has highlighted Hardy's criticism of imperialism and nationalism but has not analyzed the interplay of rational, emotional, and instinctual forces shaping the speaker's conflicted reasoning. This absence limits a deeper understanding of how Hardy's poem dramatizes not only ideological critique, but also the internal psychological breakdown of moral reasoning within the soldier's consciousness. This study aimed to bridge that gap by drawing on Platonic theory to offer a nuanced perspective on the moral and psychological tensions in "The Man He Killed".

The poem's historical context—the Second Boer War—added depth to its moral critique. As Pakenham (1979) noted, British soldiers, often ordinary men, were compelled by imperial motives to fight in distant lands, generating internal conflict between patriotic obligation and personal conscience. Hardy's portrayal of the speaker reflected this socio-political climate, where ethical clarity was compromised by the pressures of war.

By applying Plato's framework, this research situated Hardy's "The Man He Killed" within a broader discourse on virtue, moral agency, and the human cost of conflict. In doing so, it contributed to ongoing conversations in both literary and philosophical fields regarding the ethical impact of warfare and the fragility of moral reasoning under duress.

Overview of Moralistic Literary Approach

Plato's moral philosophy, rooted in his dialogues—particularly *The Republic* (Plato, 1974) and *The Laws* (Plato, 2004)—emphasized justice, virtue, and the ideal forms of morality. His framework was built upon the tripartite soul, consisting of reason, spirit, and appetite, where justice emerged when reason governed over the baser elements (Annas, 1981). According to Plato, moral actions aligned with the pursuit of the Good, which transcended subjective human inclinations (Ebrey & Kraut, 2022). His critique of war challenged whether acts committed in warfare genuinely pursued justice or merely served transient, worldly desires.

His notion of justice, as an intrinsic good rather than a social construct, underscored the relevance of his philosophy to an analysis of "The Man He Killed". Hardy's poem presents a scenario in which war forces the speaker into morally ambiguous actions that contradict an innate sense of justice. The speaker's reflection on the arbitrary nature of violence—questioning the rationale behind killing a man who could have been a friend—mirrored Plato's concern that external forces could distort rational justice (Reeve, 1992).

Moreover, Plato's condemnation of unjust actions, even when sanctioned by societal or political necessity, paralleled the ethical conflict depicted in the poem. His theory posited that moral decisions should be guided not by convention but by universal truth (Rowe, 2007). This perspective illuminated the irony and tragedy of war in Hardy's portrayal, where the speaker grappled with violence dictated by circumstance rather than principle. By employing a Platonic critique, this study offered a framework for examining the moral paradoxes of war in "The Man He Killed", particularly the tension between social expectations and individual moral intuition. This alignment with Plato's argument—that true justice resisted the whims of war—guided the analysis that followed (Syse, 2007).

In this context, the current study aimed to examine the moral paradox of war as depicted in "The Man He Killed" by Thomas Hardy through the lens of Plato's Tripartite Soul Theory. Through an analysis of the dynamic interplay among the three components of the soul, namely reason (*logistikon*), spirit (*thymoeides*), and appetite (*epithymia*), the study illuminated the speaker's internal moral conflict. It also explored how the fragmentation of the soul mirrored the broader ethical contradictions inherent in war, particularly the conflict between personal conscience and the socially imposed duty to participate in violence.

RESEARCH METHOD

A. Corpus

The main corpus of this study is the short lyric poem "The Man He Killed" by Thomas Hardy, a prominent English novelist and poet (1840–1928). Hardy is widely recognized for his critical engagement with Victorian society, particularly his exploration of fate, social constraints, and the moral paradoxes of human existence (Gatrell, 2004). The poem was first published in 1902 in *The Times Literary Supplement* and is frequently regarded as one of Hardy's most direct poetic reflections on the moral contradictions and psychological absurdities of war.

The poem is presented in the form of a dramatic monologue in which a soldier reflects on the possibility that, under different circumstances, he and his enemy might have been friends rather than opponents. Through its simple diction and conversational tone, the poem exposes the irrational nature of warfare by emphasizing how ordinary human relationships are transformed into acts of violence through opposing national allegiances. It highlights the tension between

personal humanity and institutional obligation, revealing the psychological and moral conflict experienced by individuals in wartime conditions.

There is no scholarly dispute regarding its authorship, as the poem is firmly attributed to Thomas Hardy. However, critical interpretations vary. Some scholars read the poem as an ironic critique of war, while others emphasize its psychological portrayal of a soldier attempting to rationalize his actions (Davie, 1973). Nevertheless, it is widely regarded as an anti-war literary text due to its exposure of the moral contradictions inherent in killing an otherwise ordinary individual who could have been a friend in another context.

In this study, selected lines from the poem were examined to explore expressions of moral reasoning, emotional contradiction, and ethical uncertainty. These textual elements were interpreted in relation to Plato's Tripartite Theory of the Soul in order to investigate how internal psychological conflict arises among reason, spirit, and appetite within the soldier's moral experience.

The study employs a qualitative literary analysis approach. This approach is appropriate for interpreting thematic, symbolic, and philosophical meanings embedded within literary texts. The poem was selected due to its clear representation of moral ambiguity in warfare, making it suitable for examining how literature reflects ethical dilemmas and disruptions of rational judgment under socio-political pressures.

B. Research Design

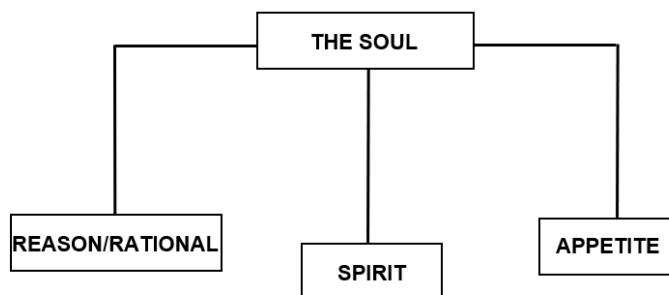


Figure 1: Plato's Tripartite Soul Theory

This study employed a qualitative research design guided by Plato's Tripartite Theory of the Soul as the framework to investigate the moral complexities of war as presented in the poem. In this theory, Plato divides the human soul into three distinct components: reason, which refers to the rational faculty responsible for logical thinking, judgment, and the pursuit of truth; spirit, which represents emotions such as anger, courage, and the drive for honor and recognition; and appetite, which pertains to human desires, including physical needs, pleasures, and material cravings.

Through this approach, the analysis revealed how Hardy portrayed the soldier's internal conflict as a disturbance in the balance among the three components of the soul: reason, spirit, and appetite, as articulated by Plato. The soldier's rational faculty, which usually guided moral decision-making, was overwhelmed by the urgent demands of military duty, resulting in a significant ethical dilemma (Santas, 2010). Motivated by culturally ingrained notions of honor and duty, the spirited element compelled him to act, while his reasoning later interrogated the righteousness of those actions. This internal dissonance reflected Plato's assertion that external conditions, such as warfare, could unsettle the soul's moral order, prompting individuals to behave in ways that conflicted with their rational understanding of justice (Kamtekar, 2017).

By analyzing the soldier's internal struggle through this philosophical lens, the study interpreted the poem as a critique of war's ability to override ethical reasoning. This approach offered insights into how external pressures, such as the militaristic ethos, disrupt the soul's harmony, leading to deeper philosophical inquiries into justice, morality, and the human condition in the context of warfare.

C. Data Collection

The data collection process in this study was conducted through a systematic close reading of Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed". The poem underwent multiple close readings to develop a comprehensive understanding of its narrative structure, tone, and thematic development. This iterative reading process facilitated sustained engagement with the speaker's reflections and enabled tracing the moral reasoning embedded in the text.

Relevant lines and expressions indicating moral ambiguity, internal conflict, emotional contradiction, and rational reflection were identified and extracted for analysis. These textual elements were interpreted within the broader context of the poem to preserve coherence and avoid fragmented interpretation. Each selected passage was examined in relation to surrounding lines to ensure that meaning was derived from textual continuity and contextual relations.

In addition, secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, literary criticisms of Thomas Hardy's poetry, and philosophical discussions on Plato's Tripartite Theory of the Soul, were consulted. These sources provided theoretical and interpretive grounding, situating the analysis within established scholarly discourse in literary studies and philosophy.

D. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative literary analysis guided by a philosophical interpretive framework based on Plato's Tripartite Theory of the Soul. This approach enables the examination of the poem not only as a literary text but also as a representation of moral and psychological complexity. Each selected excerpt was closely examined to identify manifestations of the three components of

the soul, namely reason, spirit, and appetite. The analysis focused on how the soldier's monologue reflects rational reflection, emotional response, and instinctive or socially conditioned behavior. Particular attention was given to instances of uncertainty, self-justification, and internal conflict, as these were considered key indicators of moral and psychological tension.

The interpretive process involved thematic classification and conceptual analysis. The identified textual features were then synthesized within the philosophical framework to explore how Hardy constructs war as a condition that disrupts the harmony of the human soul. Rather than asserting definitive conclusions, the analysis suggests that the poem may be read as illustrating the destabilization of rational judgment, the intensification of emotional contradiction, and the fragmentation of moral coherence under conditions of warfare. Overall, the findings indicate that the soldier's reflections may be interpreted as expressions of internal conflict shaped by external socio-political forces, positioning the poem as a critique of war's impact on human ethical and psychological equilibrium.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In "The Man He Killed", Thomas Hardy portrays the inherent paradox of war by highlighting the profound moral conflict soldiers face: rather than acting out of personal hatred, they are compelled to kill by the duties and circumstances imposed by warfare. Through the speaker's hesitant, fragmented reasoning, Hardy illustrated the breakdown of rational moral thought under the pressures of war. A Platonic analysis revealed that this moral conflict stemmed from the imbalance between the three parts of the soul, as outlined in Plato's tripartite soul theory: reason (*logistikon*), spirit (*thymoeides*), and appetite (*epithymia*). War coerces individuals to act against their intrinsic sense of justice, disrupting the natural harmony that should govern human action (Plato, 1974).

A. Reason (*Logistikon*) and Its Suppression in War

Plato's philosophy argues that justice is an objective, rational principle, unaffected by emotions or societal pressures (Bozkurt, 2023). In *The Republic*, he defines justice as "doing one's own work and not meddling with what isn't one's own" (Plato, 1974). According to Plato, individuals should act in accordance with their rational nature and fulfill their roles in society. In this view, war is inherently unjust because it forces people into roles that conflict with their rational and moral sense. The chaos of war disrupts the balance needed for a just society, preventing people from acting as rational agents.

This conflict between reason and the irrationality of war was exemplified in Thomas Hardy's poem, in which the speaker grapples with the nature of war and its impact on personal morality. The speaker realized that his enemy was likely a fellow working-class man who, driven by economic necessity, enlisted in the war not out of personal animosity but due to circumstances beyond his control. This recognition of shared hardship underscored the irrationality of war, where individuals were

pitted against each other despite having much in common. As the speaker reflected, he noted:

**"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps
Off-hand like—just as I" (Lines 13-14)**

Here, the speaker acknowledged that both men may have enlisted impulsively, driven by the same socio-economic pressures. The external forces of war—economic need or conscription—stripped both soldiers of their rational decision-making, forcing them into roles they did not choose, nor perhaps even morally endorse.

Plato's concept of justice requires that rational morality govern human actions. As Ladikos (2024) argued, this framework required individuals to act in accordance with their own reason. However, war disrupted this order by compelling individuals to adopt roles that conflicted with their rational sense of justice. In times of war, reason was often replaced by blind obedience to external commands, a shift that Plato would have deemed unjust. External pressures, such as military conscription, suppressed individuals' rational faculties, compelling them to perform actions that did not align with their personal moral understanding.

The internal conflict faced by the soldier in Hardy's poem illustrated this suppression of reason. The soldier struggled to justify the act of killing, attempting to rationalize the violence he had committed. The following lines demonstrated his attempt to come to terms with the act:

**"Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although" (Lines 11-12)**

The hesitation and fragmented syntax reflected the soldier's internal struggle. Though he ultimately identified his victim as a "foe," the fact that he needed to pause and rationalize this idea highlighted the emotional and psychological toll of the act. This moment revealed how reason, which should have governed moral decision-making, was compromised by the pressures of war, as the soldier was coerced into following the logic of the battlefield, even when he perceived its inherent absurdity.

The speaker's final justification for killing further emphasized the collapse of rational thought under the weight of war:

**"I shot him dead because
Because he was my foe" (Lines 9-10)**

The repetition of "because" signaled the soldier's attempt to rationalize his action. However, this tautological reasoning exposed the emptiness of the justification. The label "foe" is particularly significant, as it serves as the category that enables and triggers the act of killing; by defining the other as an enemy, the speaker suppresses his moral hesitation and conforms to the expectations imposed by the military structure. In this sense, he acts against his conscience, aligning instead with external military demands to eliminate his "foe"—an action that Plato would interpret as a

disturbance of the rational order of the soul, and thus a violation of true justice, particularly the rule of reason over impulse.

The absence of deeper moral reflection indicated that the soldier's decision was not the result of rational thought, but a reflexive response to external commands. Korsgaard's argument that reason should guide moral actions is pertinent here. According to Korsgaard (1996), moral reasoning enables individuals to determine their duties and to act in accordance with their ethical beliefs. Yet, in the context of war, individuals are often coerced into actions that contradict their rational moral compass. As Williams (1993) emphasized, military structures undermine ethical decision-making by compelling individuals to follow orders that may conflict with their personal moral values. In this way, war becomes a system that undermines reason and coerces individuals into fulfilling roles they may not personally endorse.

The suppression of reason in war leads to what Litz et al. (2009) describe as ethical dissonance: when individuals are forced to act against their moral beliefs, they experience psychological turmoil. This dissonance is evident in Hardy's poem, where the soldier's internal conflict results directly from being compelled to act against his moral sense. The speaker's struggle to justify his actions reveals the psychological and ethical toll imposed by the suppression of reason. Ultimately, the coercive nature of war disrupts rational moral agency, producing not only moral failure but also profound psychological strain as individuals are forced to engage in violence that contradicts their ethical understanding.

B. Spirit (*Thymoeides*) and the Influence of Honor and Duty

In Plato's tripartite soul theory, *thymos* (spirit) governs emotions such as honor, pride, and the desire for recognition, pushing people to follow societal expectations—even when these clash with their moral sense. Plato saw *thymos* as a helper of reason, supporting justice. But when it became too strong, like in war, it made people act against their conscience. Hardy's "The Man He Killed" showed this, as the soldier's sense of duty—shaped by military expectations—silenced his awareness of war's pointlessness and absurdity. The tension within the soul's spirited element was captured in the following lines:

**"But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place" (Lines 5-8)**

Here, the soldier performed his duty as a combatant mechanically, fulfilling his prescribed role without personal animosity. Plato's theory suggests that *thymos* here compelled the soldier to act according to societal expectations—his role as a soldier in a war—despite the dissonance with his rational, moral understanding of the situation. This action reflected how unchecked *thymos* overrode personal reasoning and empathy, pushing individuals to commit acts that conflicted with

their consciences. This internal struggle became more apparent in the soldier's reflection:

"That's clear enough; although" (Line 12)

This line, though brief, signaled uncertainty and discomfort. The soldier's hesitation reflected the moment of internal conflict between *thymos*, which urged him to fulfill his duty, and his rational conscience, which resisted the futility of the act. Plato argues that when *thymos* dominates, reason is silenced, and the soul is thrown into disorder. The soldier's rational awareness of war's absurdity was momentarily pushed aside by the emotional pull of duty and honor.

Jorgenson (2018) noted that *thymos* often led individuals to prioritize duty and honor over personal judgment. This dynamic was evident in Hardy's portrayal of the soldier's action—not as an act of malice, but as an unconscious submission to the military's external demands. The soldier was not engaging in violence because of personal hatred but because of the societal roles imposed upon him. Walzer (2000) argued that war created a moral contradiction, dividing individuals who might otherwise have shared peaceful, rational goals, and ultimately serving the interests of ruling powers. Hardy's poem exemplified this: the soldier suppressed his personal empathy to fulfill an externally imposed duty, mirroring Plato's concern that an imbalanced soul, led by *thymos*, strays from the just path. The closing lines of the poem further underscore the absurdity of the soldier's situation:

**"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" (Lines 17–20)**

Here, the soldier reflected on the irony of war: soldiers were compelled to kill those whom, in a different context, they might have befriended or assisted. This underscored the moral contradiction at the heart of war, where duty and honor, shaped by *thymos*, superseded rational moral judgment. Lear (2000) observed that military institutions manipulated *thymos* to ensure obedience, often at the cost of individual moral reasoning. Hardy's portrayal of the soldier's internal conflict highlighted this critique, revealing how war distorted natural human inclinations toward empathy and justice.

Similarly, Sherman (2007) argued that manipulating *thymos* in warfare fostered a sense of duty that overrode moral reasoning, compelling soldiers to engage in actions they might otherwise have rejected. This manipulation of *thymos* reflected Plato's warning: when *thymos* dominated reason, it led not to justice, but to moral disarray, which Hardy's poem poignantly captured in the soldier's inner turmoil and ultimately futile act of violence.

C. Appetite (*Epithymia*) and Economic Coercion

Bobonich (2002) explained that *epithymia* governed not only material needs but was also highly susceptible to external manipulation. Economic necessity, in particular, often coerced individuals into decisions that aligned with external pressures rather than their rational moral compass. This susceptibility was vividly illustrated in Hardy's "The Man He Killed", where the soldier's enlistment may have been driven by financial desperation.

**"Was out of work—had sold his traps
No other reason why" (Lines 15–16)**

These lines explicitly highlighted how economic deprivation may have led the other soldier to enlist. Selling one's "traps" (personal belongings or tools) signaled a state of financial hardship, suggesting that the soldier's immediate material needs, governed by *epithymia*, overpowered deliberate moral reasoning. This aligned with Hobsbawm's argument that war often exploited the working class, coercing them into conflicts that primarily served the interests of the elite (Hobsbawm, 1989). Woodruff (2014) similarly contended that economic necessity could override moral reasoning, compelling individuals to act in ways that contradicted their ethical principles. Hardy's choice of language, particularly the phrase "out of work," underscored how socio-economic precarity dictated personal decisions, illustrating how appetite-driven compulsion overrode moral autonomy under coercive conditions.

Furthermore, Hardy contrasted this with a vision of peace in the opening lines:

**"Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn" (Lines 1–2)**

These opening lines establish a single conditional construction that governs the entire passage. Hardy imagines that if the speaker and the enemy soldier had met under ordinary civilian circumstances rather than on opposing sides of war, their relationship would not have been hostile. Instead, they would have become companions in a peaceful, familiar setting. This imagined scenario reveals that their enmity is not rooted in personal hatred but in circumstance, suggesting that war arbitrarily positions individuals as enemies. Within this same conditional framework, Hardy extends the imagined outcome of such a meeting:

**"We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!" (Lines 3–4)**

Here, Hardy develops the consequences of the same unrealized condition, imagining that if they had met, the two men would have shared a drink instead of engaging in violence. The use of "nipperkin" (a small measure of liquor) evokes a casual, friendly atmosphere, reinforcing the idea that their interaction would naturally have been shaped by ordinary sociability and companionship. This moment is therefore not separate from the opening lines but a continuation of the same conditional logic, in

which friendship and conviviality emerge as the natural outcome of a world without war.

Through this imagined scenario, Hardy emphasizes the stark contrast between potential human intimacy and the reality of conflict. The peaceful image of shared drinking highlights the soldier's basic human desire for comfort, companionship, and social connection—needs that are ultimately denied by the conditions of war. This contrasts sharply with the deprivation and coercion that led him into battle against another man he could just as easily have befriended. Through this irony, Hardy underscores how natural human impulses toward sociability and peace are overridden by external political and military forces beyond individual control, revealing the tragic absurdity of war.

This portrayal of coerced violence invites comparison with philosophical accounts of justice and moral agency. Plato, in *The Laws*, argued that "no one in a just society should be compelled to act against reason" (Plato, 2004). However, the soldier in Hardy's poem is driven into war by external circumstances, reflecting a breakdown in rational moral order. Such coercion distorts the individual's capacity to act in accordance with reason, replacing deliberation with necessity. This aligns with Scarry's assertion that war strips individuals of moral agency, reducing them to instruments of destruction (Scarry, 1985).

As Millgate (2004) observed, Hardy deplored the glorification of war, lamenting that "civilized nations have not learnt some more excellent and apostolic way of settling disputes." Through irony, Hardy critiques political systems that mobilize ordinary individuals for conflicts that serve the interests of ruling powers rather than justice. In this sense, "The Man He Killed" presents war as an institution that disrupts moral harmony, compelling individuals to act against reason, ethical judgment, and shared humanity. The soldier's participation in violence thus illustrates how lower impulses and survival pressures, shaped by social and economic necessity, can override rational deliberation, entangling individuals in unjust systems.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals how "The Man He Killed" by Thomas Hardy exposes the moral contradictions of war. Through a Platonic lens, the poem shows how violence can arise not from personal anger but from external pressures, leading to a conflict between reason, emotion, and desire. Hardy used irony, plain language, and broken logic to highlight the tension between social duty and personal conscience, echoing Plato's belief that justice should be based on reason, not political demands.

The poem also offered insight into how language shapes moral understanding. Its casual tone and conversational style showed how ordinary speech can both express and conceal ethical concerns, normalizing violence and shaping public attitudes. In doing so, Hardy underscored how war disrupts human

connections and weakens shared moral values, reflecting the social cost of conflict on community and identity.

Looking forward, further research could explore how literature like Hardy's contributes to peace education and ethical reflection, particularly in support of Sustainable Development Goals 16 (Peace and Justice) and 4 (Quality Education). Studying poems like "The Man He Killed" in academic settings can help students engage with the moral dimensions of war and develop critical thinking skills about conflict and justice. In today's world, this still resonates as conflicts persist, often leading to innocent lives being lost and soldiers grappling with post-traumatic stress. The moral ambiguity of war continues to challenge our understanding of justice, forcing us to question the true cost of violence in resolving global disputes.

Overall, by examining Hardy's poem through Platonic philosophy, moral psychology, and language analysis, this study highlighted how literature can serve as a powerful tool for questioning war and promoting ethical awareness in both personal and social contexts. These perspectives—philosophical critique, moral conflict, and rhetorical analysis—offered a deeper understanding of how poetic language can reveal and challenge the deeper truths behind human violence and societal norms.

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