



GCSE

# English Literature

'Drummer Hodge' (*Thomas Hardy*)

## The poet – Contextual information about the poet relevant to the poem (AO3)

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) was born in Higher Brockhampton in rural Dorset to a working-class family. While training as an architect, he began to write poetry, before achieving success as a novelist. His novels were set in the south-west of England he knew so well that included Dorset; he used the old Anglo-Saxon name for this region, Wessex.

Though more famous for novels such as *Far From The Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy wrote a series of notable poems about the Boer War and World War One, often from the viewpoint of ordinary soldiers, influencing a younger generation of war poets.

## Connections and contrast

**This list is not exhaustive and other comparisons are valid.**

'Drummer Hodge' could be compared and/or contrasted with these poems from the Anthology as they explore similar themes:

- 'The Schoolboy' – nature and childhood
- 'Blackberry-Picking' – nature, childhood and place
- 'I Shall Return' – nature, childhood and place
- 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' – nature and place
- 'Disabled' – war and loss
- 'Kamikaze' – war and isolation
- 'Remains' – war and place

## The poem

### Content (AO1)

'Drummer Hodge' describes the hasty burial of a drummer boy killed in the Boer war, in a landscape that was utterly alien to him. Hardy reflects on the fact that Hodge will never see England again, but instead will become part of the soil and vegetation of a foreign land on the other side of the world, far from his home.

### Context (AO3)

'Drummer Hodge', originally titled 'The Dead Drummer', was published in 1899, during the Second Boer War in what became South Africa. This was a conflict between the Boers, the descendants of Dutch settlers ('Boer' is Dutch for 'farmer') and the British Empire.

Hardy was inspired to write the poem after reading about a local boy who was killed at the start of the war. Drummer boys were sometimes as young as thirteen or fourteen years old. They served in the armed forces, often playing in military bands, but also using their drums for communication on the battlefield. There was a stereotype in Victorian war literature of boys becoming men through war; Hardy, who was anti-war, deliberately challenges this stereotype in the poem.

## Form and structure (AO2)

The poem's ABAB rhyme scheme creates a regular rhythm, appropriate for a poem about a drummer boy. The first stanza describes Hodge's present, the second his past and the third his future. Each stanza starts with a pair of lines describing Hodge, followed by a pair describing the landscape in which he is buried and ending with a pair describing the night sky above his grave.

## Key quotations (AO1)

- 'They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest Uncoffined'
- 'His landmark is a kopje-crest'
- 'And foreign constellations west Each night above his mound.'
- 'Young Hodge the drummer never knew'
- 'Fresh from his Wessex home'
- 'strange stars'
- 'Yet portion of that unknown plain Will Hodge forever be'
- 'His homely Northern breast and brain Grow up some Southern tree'
- 'strange-eyed constellations'
- 'His stars eternally.'



### Language and imagery (AO2)

The poem uses word choices that show that the African landscape and the stars above were unfamiliar to Hodge, such as 'unknown', 'strange' and 'foreign'. Hardy amplifies this sense of unfamiliarity by using Afrikaans words like 'kopje' (meaning 'hill'), 'veldt' (meaning 'open grassland') and 'Karoo' (a southern African plain).

#### Example of analysing a quotation:

*Hardy describes Hodge's final resting place as a 'kopje-crest / That breaks the veldt around', using the Afrikaans words 'kopje' and 'veldt' to emphasise how strange the African landscape would have seemed to a young British lad. This is ironic, as he will 'for ever' be a part of this 'unknown plain'.*

### Links for further research

- [The Thomas Hardy Society Website](#)
- [BBC - Poetry Season - Poets - Thomas Hardy](#)
- [Drummer Hodge](#)

### Key questions to ask about 'Drummer Hodge'

1. Who might 'they' be in the first line? (AO1)
2. What do the words 'throw' and 'uncoffined' suggest about how Hodge was buried? (AO2)
3. In Victorian times, the name 'Hodge' was a stereotypical name for an ordinary country boy. Why might Hardy have used this name for the dead drummer? (AO1 / AO3)
4. How do we know that Hodge would have been a teenager? (AO1 / AO3)
5. Why is it significant to Hardy that Hodge came from 'Wessex'? (AO3)
6. What is the effect of Hardy using Afrikaans words such as 'kopje-crest', 'veldt' and 'Karoo'? (AO2 / AO3)
7. Why are the stars above Hodge's grave described as 'foreign', and 'strange'? (AO1 / AO2)
8. What is ironic about Hodge's final resting place? (AO1)
9. What does the adjective 'homely' suggest about Hodge? (AO2)
10. What is the effect of the juxtaposition of Hodge's 'Northern breast and brain' with 'some Southern tree'? (AO2)
11. What structural similarities do the three stanzas share, and what effect might these have? (AO2)
12. How might nature seem more sympathetic than mankind in the poem? (AO1)