The Drummer Hodge

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.

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.

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

Drummer Hodge

This economical and very restrained poem contains no explicit condemnation of war, but the implied criticism can hardly be missed. The editor's note, that this is "one of the greatest of all war poems" seems somewhat extravagant and his reference to "sheer horror" seems melodramatic and inappropriate, though the "waste and pity" of war appear in Hodge's fate. The language of the poem is for the most part simple and natural and conveys with clarity what befalls Hodge.

Drummers were usually the very youngest of soldiers, considered too young to fight. This drummer has a name that was once used as a kind of nickname or disrespectful term for people from the country (like "bumpkin" or "yokel"). Hardy does not support this kind of prejudice, and intends no ridicule here.

The poem tells of a West Country boy, who has fallen in battle in South Africa, during the Boer War. The strangeness of the terrain, of the soil even, and of the constellations that nightly appear over Hodge's grave is repeatedly stressed. Hardy uses Afrikaans words to emphasize this strangeness. The poem is restrained but evokes great sympathy for Hodge. From clues that Hardy works skilfully into the verse account we can work out a great amount of information about what has happened.
Stanza 1

"They" are not identified but are evidently Hodge's fellow soldiers, members of a burial detail. The use of the monosyllabic pronoun is most economical. Hodge is thrown, not lowered with dignity and propriety, into his grave. He is not even placed in a coffin (there is no time, or inclination from his superiors, to find one) and is buried "just as found" (a phrase better suited to an object than a person) as if his body has not even been properly laid out, a suggestion confirmed by his being thrown into the ground. Hodge is given no headstone to mark the site of his burial, and so the only landmark to show the position of his grave is the "kopje crest/That breaks the veldt around". The foreignness, to Hodge, of his resting place is made emphatic by the use of Afrikaans terms such as "kopje" and "veldt", and by the strangeness, to him, of the stars that rise nightly over his grave. The concluding reference to the stars recurs in the remaining stanzas of the poem, providing a kind of linking motif.

Stanza 2

The contrast between the simple English boy, "Young Hodge the Drummer", fresh from his west-country home, and his remote and alien resting-place is here further developed in the references to the "Karoo" (another Afrikaans term), to the scrub and barren soil, and, again, to the foreign constellations which Hodge would have witnessed before his death, but too rarely ever to come to know them.

Stanza 3

Yet, despite his ignorance of his surroundings, Hodge will now be a part of the South African veldt for ever. The roots of "some Southern tree" will be nourished by his remains. This stanza, too, ends with a reference to the alien constellations which will "reign" forever over Hodge's grave.

The pathos of Hodge's fate is made more striking by the restrained manner in which Hardy relates his burial. His innocence and youth make his premature death seem all the more wasteful.