

# The Man I Killed essay: How does the narrator present the dead soldier at the opening of the story?

**Full title: \*How does the narrator present the dead soldier in “The Man I Killed” from the opening of the story to “... this particular individual gets A-plus”?**

Tim O'Brien's short story *The Man I Killed* describes the life and futile death of a young Vietnamese soldier killed during the Vietnam War. It seems that the narrator is shocked and terrified by the harm he caused with his own hands.

The author starts off brutally, with the adjective “gone” giving a sense of the horror and irreparability of the wound and how vast and final the injury was. The contrast between the two eyes of the soldier amplifies the impression of the damage done to the body by the grenade – the juxtaposition of the normality and calm when “one eye was shut” and the horror of the jagged and gaping “star-shaped hole” of the other eye. Tim O'Brien pays close attention to small details of the dead body, noticing even the “slight tear at the lobe of one ear” as if haunted by a suggestion of innocence of the Vietnamese soldier. He continues to describe details showing that the man he killed was new to war and still had “clean black hair” and clean fingernails. The author quickly switches back and forth between the two facets of this young man's dead body, between life and death. The delicate and untouched: “his right cheek was smooth and hairless”, his nose “undamaged” and the horrifically mutilated: “the skin at his left cheek was peeled back in three ragged strips”. The word “peeled” further objectifies the injury, with connotations to fruit. The narrator further builds the sense of contrast between life and death and between beauty and horror. First, he talks about the “butterfly on his chin”, with associations of peace and calmness, but suddenly Tim O'Brien turns to the darker side, saying that the soldier's “neck was open to the spinal cord”. However, he ends his description on a less negative note, describing the man using adjectives with more positive connotations such as “slim”, “dainty” and “shapely”, returning to the theme of woman-like qualities similar to those at the opening of the story. Overall, through his detailed description of the dead body, Tim O'Brien juxtaposes beauty and battle and clearly conveys the sheer pain of killing a man.

Next, the narrator recounts the soldier's life, building the sense of the futility of his death. O'Brien details things such as the “gold ring on the third finger of his right hand” – perhaps a love token, hinting at the man's life before the war and his potential future. As the author suggests that the dead man was a scholar, it adds to the vanity of this person's death. The comparison of the wrists of the soldier to the wrists of a child emphasises the brutality and injustices of war, gaining more sympathy from the reader. Specific facts such as the year and place of his birth, send a message to the reader that every life lost in the Vietnam war could tell a unique story like this one. The description of farming, family and the undisturbed calmness of “several centuries” makes the war against the Americans seem even more questionable. Next, the short and powerful sentence “He was not a Communist” further shows how pointless this death was since the US fought the Vietnam war against Communism. Tim O'Brien's choice to put the word “citizen” first in the sentence “He was a citizen and a soldier” emphasises the fact that he was a person like any other and that being a soldier was only a duty that had been forced upon him. Next, the author tells of the traditions in My Khe, where defending the land “was a man's highest duty and highest privilege”, showing the expectations for this soldier, and although “He accepted this” it was something that “he could not picture himself doing”. Through this description, the narrator identifies with the soldier, as going to fight may have been just as

difficult for him too. The war, like a giant and lasting black hole, sucked in many people, and sometimes one had to kill an innocent man with little reason to do so.

The story abruptly returns from the narration back to the scene, switching to Azar's description of the body: "Shredded f\*\*\*in' Wheat." The choice of language here shows how little sympathy he has for the man, and the repeated swearing even creates a somewhat sadistic image of Azar. For him, this killing is just another trophy to show off, proving his macho and warrior mentality, which the narrator does not have. The comparison to food objectifies the body and Azar's joke about "this particular individual gets A-plus" on the "dead test" sounds cruel and humiliating. For Azar, the Vietnamese soldier is not a person, but simply a material to work with. From his point of view, such an "A-plus" killing should make the killer proud, not shocked and bewildered. The contrast between the narrator, who is stunned by the fact that he killed a man, and Azar, who is insensitive to the horrors of war, helps the reader to draw their own conclusions and perhaps to have more sympathy for the dead soldier and his killer alike.

In conclusion, the reader can find out a lot about the soldier from the first few paragraphs of the story. The dead man becomes human, despite the state of his body; he does not seem an enemy anymore, neither to the reader nor Tim O'Brien, due to all the minute details that he meticulously gives us. Also, we see that in war, one person's victory is always somebody else's utter defeat.