

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____

Tommy

by Rudyard Kipling

Grades 8–11 · Common Core RL.9–10.6, RL.9–10.2, RL.9–10.4

“Tommy” was published in 1890 and collected in *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892).

“Tommy Atkins” was slang for the ordinary British soldier. The poem is a dramatic monologue in Cockney dialect with a strong ballad beat and a refrain that changes in each stanza.



THE POEM

- I went into a public-house to get a pint o' beer,
The publican 'e up an' sez, "We serve no red-coats here."
The girls be'ind the bar they laughed an' giggled fit to die,
I outs into the street again an' to myself sez I:
- 5 O it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, go away";
But it's "Thank you, Mister Atkins", when the band begins to play,
The band begins to play, my boys, the band begins to play,
O it's "Thank you, Mister Atkins", when the band begins to play.
- I went into a theatre as sober as could be,
10 They gave a drunk civilian room, but 'adn't none for me;
They sent me to the gallery or round the music-'alls,
But when it comes to fightin', Lord! they'll shove me in the stalls!
For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, wait outside";
But it's "Special train for Atkins" when the trooper's on the tide,
- 15 The troopship's on the tide, my boys, the troopship's on the tide,
O it's "Special train for Atkins" when the trooper's on the tide.
- Yes, makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep
Is cheaper than them uniforms, an' they're starvation cheap;
An' hustlin' drunken soldiers when they're goin' large a bit
- 20 Is five times better business than paradin' in full kit.
- Then it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, 'ow's yer soul?"
But it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll,
The drums begin to roll, my boys, the drums begin to roll,
O it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll.

25 We aren't no thin red 'eroes, nor we aren't no blackguards too,
 But single men in barracks, most remarkable like you;
 An' if sometimes our conduct isn't all your fancy paints,
 Why, single men in barracks don't grow into plaster saints;
 While it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, fall be'ind",
 30 But it's "Please to walk in front, sir", when there's trouble in the wind,
 There's trouble in the wind, my boys, there's trouble in the wind,
 O it's "Please to walk in front, sir", when there's trouble in the wind.
 You talk o' better food for us, an' schools, an' fires, an' all:
 We'll wait for extry rations if you treat us rational.
 35 Don't mess about the cook-room slops, but prove it to our face
 The Widow's Uniform is not the soldier-man's disgrace.
 For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Chuck him out, the brute!"
 But it's "Saviour of 'is country" when the guns begin to shoot;
 An' it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' anything you please;
 40 An' Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool—you bet that Tommy sees!

VOCABULARY

public-ouse — a pub

publican — the owner of a pub

red-coats — British soldiers, from their red uniforms

gallery — the cheapest seats high in a theater

barricks — barracks; soldiers' housing (dialect)

blackguards — scoundrels

plaster saints — perfect, statue-like saints

Widow's Uniform — the uniform of Queen Victoria, a widow

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What happens to the speaker at the pub and the theater?

2. How do people speak to Tommy in peacetime, and how in wartime? Quote the refrain.

3. What does the speaker mean by “single men in barracks don’t grow into plaster saints”?

4. What does the speaker ask for in the last stanza?

5. What is the tone of the poem: angry, funny, bitter, or proud? Explain.

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short monologue (150 words) from a modern worker who feels ignored until there is an emergency.

Tommy — Answer Key

1. The pub says “We serve no red-coats here”; the theater gives “a drunk civilian room, but ‘adn’t none for me”.
2. Peacetime: “Tommy, go away”, “Tommy, wait outside”; wartime: “Thank you, Mister Atkins”, “Special train for Atkins”, “Thin red line of ‘eroes”.
3. Soldiers are ordinary men, not perfect; don’t expect saintliness.
4. Respect, not promises: “prove it to our face / The Widow’s Uniform is not the soldier-man’s disgrace.”
5. Bitter and sarcastic but also proud and humorous; accept supported answers, e.g. “Tommy ain’t a bloomin’ fool—you bet that Tommy sees!”

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/tommy-rudyard-kipling/