

# *The Sniper*

Liam O'Flaherty

# Why are we doing this?

## Learning Intentions

- To gain an understanding of the historical context of the short story
- To gain an understanding of the main themes present throughout the short story
- To gain an understanding of the techniques used throughout the short story
- To gain an understanding of the wider message present in the short story

## Success Criteria

- To be able to comment on and discuss the historical context of the short story
- To be able to identify the prominent themes throughout the short story
- To annotate the poem identifying and explaining the main themes present in the short story
- To understand and explain the wider message present in the short story

# Liam O'Flaherty

- Born August 1896 - Died September 1984.
- Novelist and short story writer.

A good student, he originally studied for a Roman Catholic priesthood. However, O'Flaherty abandoned his training for the priesthood and in 1915, he enlisted in the British Army during the First World War.

He suffered a serious injury two years later in a bomb explosion in Langemarck, Belgium. After he recovered, the army discharged him because he had developed severe depression. He travelled widely, visiting South America, North America, and the Middle East and working at various odd jobs.

When he returned to Ireland, he embraced communism, became an atheist and joined the Irish Republican Army in its campaign to liberate Ireland from British rule. In 1921, Britain and Ireland forged a treaty creating an Irish Free State. O'Flaherty and his IRA compatriots broke with fellow Irishmen who supported the treaty.

After taking part in revolutionary activities in Ireland, O'Flaherty settled in England in 1922 before returning to Dublin later in his life.

He wrote the short story 'The Sniper' after having been a soldier in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 1922.

Several of O'Flaherty's novels centre on the effects of war, revolution, and social upheaval in Ireland in the early twentieth century and in the nineteenth century.

# Historical Context

In order to gain a full understanding of the story it is important to focus on the:

- What
- When
- Who

In the story, Free Staters and Republicans wage a civil war in Ireland.



In 1919, the newly formed Irish Republican Army launched guerrilla warfare during the Irish War of Independence to liberate Ireland from British rule.

Unable to contain the IRA, London agreed in 1921 to the Anglo-Irish Treaty to create an Irish Free State. However, the agreement did not grant the independent Republic favoured by most nationalists.

Instead it would recognise the Free State only as part of the British Commonwealth of Nations much like Canada and Australia.

Members of the newly formed Irish parliament would need to take an Oath of Allegiance. It would also permit 6 counties in Northern Ireland to withdraw from the Free State (forming Northern Ireland and remaining part of the UK).

It further allowed the British to maintain ports in the south, and require the Free State to pay part of the debt Britain incurred in waging the war.

The oath was considered highly objectionable by many Irish Republicans as was the fact it was not to be called a Republic but a "Free State".

Thus, not all Irishmen accepted the agreement.

- The outbreak of the Civil War forced pro- and anti-treaty supporters to choose sides.
- Supporters of the treaty came to be known as "pro-treaty" or "Free State Army", legally the "National Army", and were often called "Staters" by their opponents.
- The latter called themselves "Republicans" and were also known as "anti-treaty" forces, or "Irregulars", a term preferred by the Free State side.
- The Anti-Treaty IRA claimed that it was defending the Irish Republic that had been declared in 1916 during the Easter Rising, that had been confirmed by the First Dáil and that had been invalidly set aside by those who accepted the compromise of the Free State.

# In Summary...

- The Irish Civil War (28 June 1922 - 24 May 1923) was a conflict that accompanied the establishment of the Irish Free State as an entity independent from the United Kingdom within the British Empire.
- The conflict was waged between two opposing groups of Irish nationalists:
  - i) the forces of the new Free State, who supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty under which the state was established  
and
  - ii) the Republican opposition, for whom the Treaty represented a betrayal of the Irish Republic. The war was won by the Free State forces.
- The Civil War may have claimed more lives than the War of Independence against Britain that preceded it and left Irish society divided and embittered for decades afterwards.
- To this day, the two main political parties in the Republic of Ireland, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, are the direct descendants of the opposing sides in the War.



# Theme

This story has the theme of the **futility of war**, particularly civil war. The conflict was between supporters and opponents of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Liam O'Flaherty fought in the war on the Anti-Treaty or "Republican" side. He had also fought in the First World War in the British Army and he therefore gives a realistic portrayal of war.

O'Flaherty later grew deeply disillusioned with the beliefs of the anti-treaty Republicans and Irish Nationalism in general, *The Sniper* reflects this feeling of the futility and tragedy of the Civil War.

# What does futility of war mean?

Futility of War means the war is pointless. It is a war which should be occurring as the reasons are not important enough.

# Question...

Are differing political views - both snipers are fighting for different causes - worth sacrificing family ties for?

Explain your response.

# Task 1

1. What are the names of the two sides?
2. What side is the protagonist on?
3. Why hadn't the sniper eaten since morning?
4. The narrator is a young man. How can age influence a person's decision-making ability? Do you think he fully understands the repercussions or the ramifications of his political convictions?
5. What risk does the sniper decide to take?
6. What pulls up in front of the building?
7. What happens to the driver and the old woman?
8. What does the sniper do once he's been shot?
9. Describe the sniper's plan to kill the other sniper.
10. How does the sniper feel about war after he had killed the other sniper?
11. What happened when the sniper threw the revolver down?
12. Who was the dead sniper?

## Task 2

Read the opening paragraph then write the answer to the question in your jotter:

**Q.** How effective is it in setting the scene?

- \*Consider what is contrasted.
- \*Consider the details provided.
- \*Consider the use of description.

# Task 3

Consider the following examples of Word Choice. Explain the denotation and connotation of each word then, answer the question which follows:

- Beleaguered
- Spasmodically
- Ascetic
- Iodine

Why is each word important to the context of the story?

# Characterisation

The character of the Sniper.

**What information do we know about the sniper?**

**What information can we deduce about him?**

# Characterisation

The character of the Sniper.

- He's undergone a change.
- He's reckless.
- He's resourceful.
- He's detached.



# Characterisation

You can DEDUCE that the Civil War has caused a **change** in the sniper.

He's described as having '*the face of a student thin and ascetic*'. Therefore, he may recently have been a student and is most likely young but has decided to join the Republican fight. The experience has changed him.

His eyes are both '*deep and thoughtful*' but hold the '*cold gleam of a fanatic*' and are '*used to looking at death*'.

This tells the reader that in, a potentially short period of time, the sniper has gone from a student to a man whose appearance shows the impact that death and destruction causes.

He's changed from pursuing knowledge - which tends to be about the expansion of knowledge of and understanding - to pursuing one agenda - which tends to be more of a narrow and inward focus.

'*Ascetic*' means that the sniper has a look of someone who abstains from life's pleasures.

# Characterisation

The sniper acts **recklessly**.

He wants to smoke yet he is aware of the risks:

*'It was dangerous. The flash might be seen in the darkness, and there were enemies watching.'*

In addition, we know that he has seen and experienced death so knows that this conflict is real. It is not a game. Despite weighing up the risk, he still proceeds with lighting the match.

The light draws gunfire from the Free State Trooper *'almost immediately'*. Yet he still takes another *'whiff'* before putting out the cigarette. So he does not immediately stub out the beacon of where he is.

*'Ascetic'* means that the sniper has a look of someone who abstains from life's pleasures.

Yet this is clearly one that he cannot give up.

This act humanises him.

# Characterisation

- The sniper is **resourceful**.

He remains rational and competent even when injured. He takes the time to survey his injury and assess the damage and decide what he needs to do:

*'The bullet had lodged in the bone. It must have fractured it... He ground his teeth to overcome the pain.'*

He is still able to focus through the pain and his predicament. While he lies on the roof he is aware of the Free Stater sniper watching for a mistake, the dead woman in the gutter and the lifeless head of the machine gunner speeding away in the armoured car.

He is surrounded by death and knows that the:

*'Morning must not find him wounded on the roof.'*

These circumstances don't cause him to panic.

Look at the word choice for the section following the sniper's injury:

Oozing, **deadened**, cut off, **ripped**, fractured, **ground**, broke, **bitter**, wound, **paraoxysm**.

These are all strong words that conjure up distinctive images. They are evocative and create a vivid mental picture and sense of the injury.

# Characterisation

The character of the Sniper.

The sniper didn't give a second thought about the old woman or man in the armoured car that he killed, what held his interest about the sniper?

# Warfare

Chart the Sniper's emotions key moments in the battle.

O'Flaherty tells you the Sniper's emotions at each of these bits. They are only a sentence or so long.

Make a note of the word choice.

Consider why the Sniper might be feeling these ways.

During  
the  
stakeout.

Just before  
he fires at  
the Free  
State Sniper.

When he  
sees has  
hit his  
enemy

# Warfare

A few key details in the story emphasize the bizarre landscape of warfare.

The sniper undergoes a number of emotional responses to the battle that non-soldiers or those who have not taken part in battle are likely to find unusual.

At the beginning of the story, during his stakeout, the sniper *"had been too excited to eat."*

Right before he shoots the enemy sniper, his *"hand trembled with eagerness."*

When he sees that he has hit his enemy, he *"uttered a cry of joy."*

All the words O'Flaherty uses to describe the sniper's reaction to meeting and vanquishing his enemy are positive, anticipatory words. In the world of warfare, killing a fellow human being is a victory; for in war, soldiers, like the sniper, face a situation where they must kill or be killed.

# Warfare

The sniper looked at his enemy falling and he shuddered. The lust of battle died in him. He became bitten by remorse. The sweat stood out in beads on his forehead. Weakened by his wound and the long summer day of fasting and watching on the roof, he revolted from the sight of the shattered mass of his dead enemy. His teeth chattered, he began to gibber to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED HERE?



# Warfare

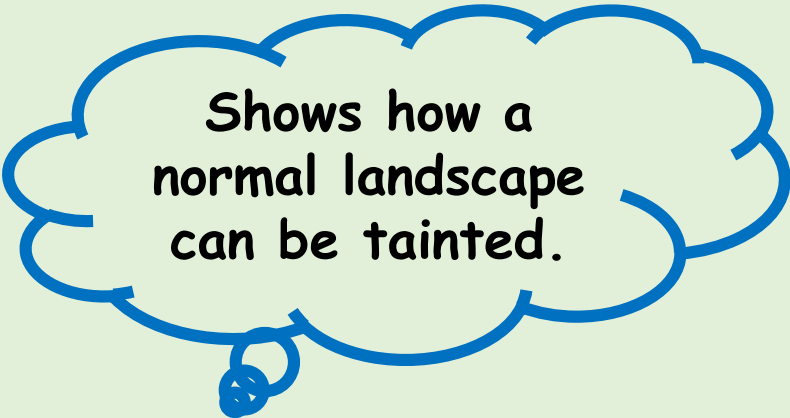
The sniper looked at his enemy falling and he shuddered. The lust of battle died in him. He became bitten by remorse. The sweat stood out in beads on his forehead. Weakened by his wound and the long summer day of fasting and watching on the roof, he revolted from the sight of the shattered mass of his dead enemy. His teeth chattered, he began to gibber to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody.

# Theme- Futility of War

In what ways is the futility of war highlighted in the story?

# Futility of War

- Shows the change in average people - the sniper is not the same person he was, nor can he ever be again after what happens.
  - Shows how a 'normal' landscape can be tainted.
- Shows how anyone can be a victim - the devastation of society.
- It uses the old woman 'in the gutter' as a symbol of the horror of war.
  - It shows how it tears families apart.



Shows how a normal landscape can be tainted.

Dublin lay enveloped in darkness but for the dim light of the moon that shone through fleecy clouds, casting a pale light as of approaching dawn over the streets and the dark waters of the Liffey. Around the beleaguered Four Courts the heavy guns roared. Here and there through the city, machine guns and rifles broke the silence of the night, spasmodically, like dogs barking on lone farms. Republicans and Free Staters were waging civil war.

# Key Events

# Being wounded

*'...and, closing his eyes, he made an effort of will to overcome the pain.'*

*Morning must not find him wounded on the roof.'*

- He's injured, but can't get help from the people around him. He isn't in a foreign place with no way of seeking assistance, he is in his home country, and surrounded by people he may have previously known and associated with. Yet he cannot cry out for help or seek assistance in case they are not on the same side as him. His role is as a sniper, and their work is solitary. Instead, he needs to focus on what he wants to achieve - death of the enemy - in order to focus through the pain and survive out the night.

# Student

*'His face was the face of a student, thin and ascetic, but his eyes had the cold gleam of the fanatic.'*

*'They were deep and thoughtful, the eyes of a man who is used to looking at death.'*

- Change in him personally as a result of the war. Gone from potentially seeking knowledge and the expansion of his mind to turning inwards and narrowing his perspective to the Republican agenda regardless of what is required of him.

'*Fanatic*' - word choice which tells you how dedicated he is to the Republican cause. '*Cold*' - word choice - showing that there is no warmth or light in his eyes, he is cold and detached from the situation.

'*...used to looking at death.*' In a short period of time, the Civil War does not last that long, he has hardened himself to the fact he will see death probably on a daily basis. This shows a change within his character brought on by the cold effects of war.



# The old woman

*'The woman whirled round and fell with a shriek into the gutter.'*

*'The woman's corpse lay still in the gutter.'*

- She is a symbol of the futility of war. Her death is meaningless, he doesn't think of her again and he is not curious about her. She is marginalised to 'an informer' based upon a hand gesture and discussion with 'the enemy' and so pays the price in his eyes. Her body lies in the gutter, discarded like rubbish and reduced to a meaningless and worthless mass. Her 'shriek' humanises her compared to the silent manner in which the sniper later takes his own bullet wound.

'*Corpse*' - word choice. Much harder and more negative connotations than body - signifies death and something that is already wasting away.

- She acts as a reminder of the fragility of life and the careless manner in which it can be taken in a war situation.

# His emotions

*'His hand trembled with eagerness.'*

*'...he... uttered a cry of joy...'*

*'The lust of battle died in him.'*

*'...he revolted at the sight of the shattered mass of his dead enemy...'*

*'...cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody.'*

- The sniper goes through a variety of emotions during his stakeout. Yet the key scene is when he has successfully killed the Free State Sniper and has a sudden moment of clarity in the aftermath of his actions. The 'lust' previously shown dies within him as he watches his mirror image die. Lust is good word choice as it highlights the sudden frenzy and absolute belief in something that can suddenly fade. It gives a hint to the man he was, prior to attaching himself to a side in the war. It shows his understanding that in the space of one night he has killed three people for having a different set of beliefs to him. It highlights the futility as he cannot amend the actions he has taken and must live with the consequences and the impact they will have not only on him, but the society in which he must inhabit.
- Word choice, alliteration, repetition all used by the author here to good effect to portray the changing emotions felt by the sniper at this particular point.

# The realisation he killed his brother

*'Then the sniper turned over the dead body and looked into his brother's face.'*

- The shocking dénouement to the story and the horrible realisation that not only did he know the person but he has ripped the heart out of his family. His actions will reverberate long after the morning has come and he will need to come to terms with them. The futility is further highlighted by the knowledge that his brother was fighting the same fight - his aim was to kill the Republican sniper, he was just less successful. Family members are unwittingly pitted against each other and the impact on society is devastating. There are no winners in this situation only repercussions.

- Sentence structure - '*brother's face*' left until the very end in order to cause maximum impact and shock.
- '*Dead body*' word choice highlighting that there is no hope, the man has been killed.

# *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*



Damien joins the IRA after witnessing British Soldier brutality. He previously claimed the war was futile.



Teddy joins the Irish Free State which replaces British Rule. They patrol and wear National Army Uniforms.

# Teddy vs Damian

- In the film, Damian is not originally involved with the IRA. He is going to be a Doctor in London. It's the violence that he witnesses which persuade him to stay and fight for change.
- Teddy is in charge of his branch of the IRA and believes in fighting the British. Therefore, this has been his political struggle for longer than Damian.
- Yet, by the end, Teddy is willing to compromise and Damian is not.



# Teddy vs Damian

- How do you feel towards Teddy?
- What are your feelings towards Damian and his decisions?
- Who do you think was in the right?
- Team Teddy v Team Damian?

# Critical Essay Question

*Choose a novel or short story that explores an important theme.*

*By referring to appropriate techniques show how the author has explored this theme?*

# REMEMBER:

You are aiming to show your knowledge of how the authors use of word choice, alliteration, personification, simile and symbolism show us that he thinks war is futile.

Keep this in mind when making your explanations.