

Iain Crichton Smith

Short Stories

Higher

Revision Guide

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The Red Door



Summary

Like other Iain Crichton Smith stories, *The Painter*, *The Telegram* and *Mother and Son*, this story takes place in a small, rural village.

We can deduce from the name of the main character, Murdo, and references to peat, porridge, the sea and the *The Daily Record* newspaper that this is a small Highland, coastal community.

Murdo is a bachelor. The morning after Halloween he finds formerly green front door has been repainted red. He is puzzled as to why anybody would do such a thing.

He recollects the previous evening, and giving treats to the children of the village, who had worn beautifully painted Halloween masks.

As the story continues, more of Murdo's character is revealed. He is well liked because he conforms to the codes and expectations of the village:

- he doesn't gossip
- he reads the same newspaper as the other villagers
- he participates in the same routines.

However, the newly painted door awakens something in Murdo and he begins to question the quality of his life. He notes that no other house has a red door. He wonders if he may even be thrown out the village, now that he is different.

He reflects on his one attempt at romance with a local spinster, a stout girl who lived with her grossly religious mother. The relationship ended after she cooked him a meal of cocoa and salt herring, a diet he refers to as so ferocious that he could not look forward to its repetition with tranquillity.

Murdo gazes at the door as though he was viewing a priceless piece of art and experiences strange flutterings. He notes the almost loving way the door had been painted. Gradually a link between the door and a local spinster named Mary is formed.

Like the door, Mary's clothes are often red. She has been known to paint fantastically creative masks for the children and she often likes to walk in the village at night.

Mary is different from the rest of the villagers. Unlike Murdo, she has never sought their approval or tried to conform. She reads books and writes poetry and is distant from the others.

Her intellect has led her to be considered odd. Murdo himself had a less than ideal experience of schooling. He took longer to learn to speak than other children, was mocked at school sports and was poor academically. However, unlike the other villagers, he is impressed by Mary's creativity and love of literature.

As the village begins to wake, Murdo realises that he has never really been himself. Instead he has always sought to hide among other people.

He reconsiders his place in the village. Gradually a sense of excitement builds in him. After eating his breakfast, he steps out of his newly painted door once more. He makes his way towards Mary's house. The story ends with him knocking purposefully on her door.

Murdo

Murdo is a 46 year old bachelor. Aside from a brief spell on board a fishing boat, he has spent his entire adult life working on the land in a dull concentrated manner.

Initially Murdo is depicted as no more remarkable than any of his neighbours. He lacks confidence, lives alone in frugal self-sufficiency and has never in his life done anything unusual.

Murdo's entire existence stems from his desire to conform and fit in. He carefully sticks to all the unspoken codes and rules of the village, even down to reading the same newspaper and wearing the same clothes.

It emerges that Murdo is unmarried as a result of shyness and a lack of eligible women in the village, rather than through choice. He had never brought himself to propose marriage to anyone.

The one romance in his life to a stout spinster came to nothing because of a meal she prepared for him. Murdo realised that this ferocious meal of salt herring was an indication that a marriage with this woman would be as unpleasant and joyless as the food she prepared. He receded back to the familiarity and security of his bachelorhood.

Despite Murdo's outwardly ordinary façade, it becomes evident that he has hidden dreams and aspirations. The newly painted door leads Murdo to confront and acknowledge the poverty of his lifestyle.

He is lonely and unlike his neighbours, feels increasingly repressed and suffocated in this stultifying community where there were times he felt that there was more to life than the village could provide.

He demonstrates romantic sensibilities that suggest he is different from the other villagers. He admits feeling particularly unsettled and unfulfilled on summer nights when the harvest moon was in the sky... and the earth was painted with an unearthly glow and the sea was like a strange volume which none could read except by means of the imagination.

These words are sensitive, intuitive and poetic. They reveal Murdo's hidden depths while simultaneously implying that he is much more in tune with the eccentric and "odd" Mary than with anyone else in his community.



As Murdo finally confronts the unfulfilling nature of his life, he experiences an epiphany revealing that, I have always sought to hide among other people. I agree to whatever anybody tells me to do. If they think I should go to church, I go to church. If they want me to cut peats for them, I do. I have never... been myself.

This moment of clarity provokes him into action and he even admits his hatred of his fisherman's jersey and wellington boots, affronted by their lack of elegance.

I have always worn these things because everybody else does. I have never had the courage to wear what I wanted to wear, for example a coloured waistcoat and a coloured jacket.

Murdo is no longer content to conform and fit in. As he admires the door he becomes increasingly aware of a building attraction for Mary. Even his realisation that the newly painted door could be provocative and could even result in him being hunted out of the village doesn't discourage Murdo from his new course. He begins to question his own identity, asking, if he were a true villager would he like the door so much?

In the uplifting and optimistic conclusion, a transformed Murdo knocks on Mary's door. This symbolises the beginning of a new and much more enriching chapter of his life where he is finally free from the shackles of conformity.

The Villagers

We never meet Mary or the other villagers in the story but their characters are revealed through the narrative.

The villagers represent the negative, closed-minded attitudes that Crichton Smith often associates with small, rural communities. These communities seem to thrive on maintaining the status quo and a set of unspoken codes and values that must be adhered to.

Being different is frowned upon. Murdo is right to be concerned about how the rest of the village might react to his newly painted red door which he realises certainly singled him out.

All his life he has felt it necessary to be as like the other villagers as possible.

In Murdo, Crichton Smith emphasises the repression and lack of fulfilment in conforming to these rigid routines. As Murdo considers their reaction to the door he notes.

It was true that the villagers when they woke would see it and perhaps even make fun of it, and would advise him to repaint it. They might not even want him in the village if he insisted on having a red door. Still they could all have red doors if they wanted to. Or they could hunt him out of the village.

In these lines we really understand the extent to which Murdo has been influenced by the small-mindedness of the villagers. In never being allowed to pursue his own dreams and ambitions, he has assimilated into the village. This has been at great personal cost.

Crichton Smith uses the village to reflect larger society, which can often conflict with the desires of the individual.

In the end, Murdo's decision to leave the door red symbolises that he has found the impetus and strength to break with this suffocating society. He is ready to live a life where he can be himself.

On a wider level, Murdo represents the everyman, and the perpetual struggle that all of us face between conforming to society and finding an existence that is personally fulfilling.

Mary

We can infer from the clues in the story that Mary is responsible for Murdo's newly painted red door:

- she is often seen wearing red
- she is creative in the way that she paints the children's masks at Halloween
- she writes poetry
- unlike the rest of the villagers she takes night time strolls through the village.



Her decision to paint the door leads to Murdo's transformation. The story is narrated from Murdo's perspective but we can assume that in him, Mary recognised a kindred spirit. In painting the door, she is trying to prompt him into action.

Mary represents those of us who choose not to conform to the small minded attitudes so prevalent in other villagers. Mary is unpopular because she never gossiped and was misunderstood because she had read many books.

Again Crichton Smith is highlighting the insular attitudes of the villagers, since being educated and not gossiping would generally be considered positive traits.

Mary's spinsterhood also marks her out as different since it would be unusual in such societies to remain unmarried through choice. These differences mean that she will never be accepted by the village.

However, in contrast to Murdo, she has never sought their approval or tried to fit in ...she made no concessions to anybody. She seemed to be saying, You can take me or leave me... she was proud and distant. She had a world of her own.

Mary's example helps Murdo realise that he no longer has to conform. Mary's choice of red, both for the door and her own clothes is hugely symbolic. It shows her breaking from the village. Most doors in the village are painted in the greens and blues of the drab landscape. They represent the limited imaginations of the villagers.

Red is associated with passion and anger. These are qualities we can see in Mary. As well as being creative she is rumoured to have sudden bursts of rage. In contrast, Murdo associates red with the colour of wine and blood. He drank none of the former and only saw the latter while repairing a fence or working with wood when a nail would prick his finger.

The red door and Mary represent pleasure and passion. These are features missing from Murdo's life. But there is potential for them to develop.

Themes

The individual versus society

Crichton Smith was often very critical of the particular oppressive restrictiveness of some aspects of rural, village life. This story employs many of these motifs.

Murdo represents the individual, whose desire for acceptance within his community eventually conflicts with his own need to live a more fulfilling life. In trying to conform and fit in with this society, Murdo has created a version of himself that, while acceptable to the community, has stifled his own desires and aspirations.

Crichton Smith highlights the dangers of conformity and of an existence founded on a fallacy.

The village is a microcosm of larger society. Murdo's predicament is one which is universal. All of us must sometimes wrestle with our need to be accepted by our peers while also fulfilling the desires of the self.

Mary represents those of us brave enough to never attempt to conform. While the cost is evident in the way she is marginalised by the villagers, ultimately her way of life is depicted as truthful and empowering.

The restrictiveness of village life

Crichton Smith grew up in a rural community not dissimilar to the one described in this story. This influenced his writing.

As is demonstrated in *The Red Door*, he often found life in these Presbyterian communities stifling and oppressive. In *Murdo* we see the emotional and intellectual isolation of the individual that can be a particular feature of these environments.

This is a theme that recurs in some of the other stories in this collection like *Mother and Son*, *The Telegram* and *The Painter*.

The Telegram

Summary



The story is set in a small Scottish rural community during World War Two. It opens with the two main characters, a fat woman, Sarah and a thin woman drinking tea and gazing out of the window.

The village appears sleepy and quiet but it becomes clear the impact of war is felt just as keenly here as in any other community in the British Isles. The villagers dread the arrival of the telegram of the title, which brings the news of a son killed in the conflict.

These telegrams are delivered by a local church elder. Residents of the village have come to fear the sight of this black clad figure stopping at their door.

The women notice the elder as he walk through the village. He clutches one of the telegrams, which is immediately recognisable for its distinctive yellow colour. The women become increasingly fearful as he makes his way closer to their houses, the last two in the village. Their mounting tension and sense of dread provokes an interesting conversation.

Although they are neighbours, these women are not friends. There are many underlying tensions in their relationship. The fat women considers her neighbour an outsider and a snob, even though she has lived in the village for more than thirty years and survives on a tiny widow's income.

She is jealous that the thin woman's son has been to university and is an officer in the navy. Her own son is merely an ordinary seaman.

The thin woman is contemptuous of most of the other mothers in the village. She believes they could have worked harder to provide a better education for their own children.

As the elder approaches the final two houses in the village it seems certain that the telegram is meant for one of them.

He passes the fat woman's house and the letter seems destined for the thin woman. At this moment, that fat woman suddenly understands the years of sacrifice endured by her neighbour for her son.

However, in an ironic twist, instead of turning in at the thin woman's house, the elder keeps walking. It later emerges that the telegram was addressed to the elder himself. So shocked by the news and

unable to face telling his wife their son had drowned, he walks six miles to the next village before he is finally stopped, still clutching the crumpled, yellow piece of paper.

Characterisation and setting

Crichton Smith is deliberately sparse with details of the location and characters. This anonymity helps to emphasise the universal impact of war.



We can deduce the time from the reference to the Bismarck, a German warship sunk by the Allies during World War Two. A sense of place is created by the use of distinctly Scottish names like Roddy and MacLeod. The mention of the mailboat reveals that this is an island community.

The village itself is described as bare, superstitious and with little colour. This bleak, uninviting environment is reflected in the inhabitants of this island community.

The fat woman, Sarah, represents the narrow-minded, insular attitudes that Crichton Smith often associated with small, rural, Highland villages.

That such communities are intolerant of others is another recurring criticism found in Crichton Smith's work. It reminds us how susceptible we are to concentrating on what is different about each other rather than what we have in common.

Sarah is described in disparaging terms as a fat domestic bird. This reflects her own lack of drive and aspirations as she perpetuates a way of life that is clearly unfulfilling.

Her discontentment is evident in her resentment of the thin woman whom she considers an outsider and a snob.

Nevertheless, Sarah represents the promise of and possibility of change and progression, even in this claustrophobic and small minded community.

At the moment when she seems certain the thin woman's son has died, all her resentment and petty grievances disintegrate. She experiences a profound moment of empathy for her neighbour. This strips away all her layers of prejudice and intolerance.

And at that moment the fat woman saw. She saw the years of discipline, she remembered how thin and unfed and pale the thin woman always looked, how sometimes she had to borrow money, even a shilling to buy food...She saw it so clearly and she was astounded. It was as if she had an extra vision.

The character of the thin woman is also depicted as a bird. In contrast to Sarah she is described as aqualine, gaunt and like a buzzard. A buzzard is a hunter, a bird of prey but it is also a scavenger and can survive on the leftover carcasses of animals killed by other predators. By using this comparison and in emphasising how thin the woman is, the theme of sacrifice is introduced.

The thin woman is a widow. She has endured hardship and poverty in order to provide a better life for her son. As a result of this sacrifice, her son is a sub-lieutenant while the fat woman's son who is just an ordinary seaman.

This results in much of the resentment between the two women since the fat woman's son must salute the thin woman's who has a better pay and uniform.

To an outsider, the women should have more in common:

- they have lived next door to each other for decades in a tiny community
- they are of the same age and social standing
- they both have sons fighting in the war

But both of them concentrate on the things that separate and divide them rather than those which could unite. While the reader probably feels more sympathy for the thin woman, she is not without flaws.

She is contemptuous of her neighbour and the other women in the village. They have not made the same sacrifices that she has. She is unable at times to hide her irritation with them, I made sacrifices to have my son educated... I lived on a pension of ten shillings a week. I was in nobody's debt..

She aspires to a more refined way of life, shown by her attempt to mimic the way the gentry hold their tea cup. This is another mannerism which annoys the fat woman.

The third character in the story is the church elder Macleod. He has either volunteered or been given the responsibility of delivering the War Office telegrams to the villagers.

Crichton Smith uses Macleod to show the hold that the church has on the community and the hierarchies within the village. Although neither of the women seems especially religious they both attend church regularly.

The elder is described as a stiff, pious man who seeks to distance himself from the rest of his community. This is viewed by others as a way of implying that he is in some way better than they are and he is clearly not a popular figure.

This sense of separation and aloofness elicits caustic comments from the women. They note with irony that he has been given the task of delivering the telegrams having never served in the war himself. This creates animosity and the fat woman relishes passing on gossip that his wife has suffered a seizure.

The twist occurs at the end of the story when it emerges that it is in fact the elder's own son who has been killed.

Themes

The harsh reality of island life

By focusing on this tiny, rural environment, the writer reveals the difficulties of living in such close-knit communities.

Crichton Smith depicts a society seething with underlying tensions and petty rivalries where people treat each other with suspicion and contempt. Until the moment of the fat woman's epiphany, we see traces of compassion or kindness in the islanders. Although they attend church their attitude completely contradicts the basic principles of Christianity.

Crichton Smith reminds us that certain strands of organised religion can have a negative impact on individuals and communities.

The fat woman epitomises these backward, insular attitudes in the way she delights in spreading gossip about the misfortunes of others.

This theme recurs in Crichton Smith's work and we can see similar criticisms of these communities in *The Red Door*, *The Painter* and *Mother and Son*.

The destructiveness of war

The physical separation and isolation of the community reminds us that no one is exempt from the devastation and destructiveness of war.

The writer empathises that while the islanders feel somewhat removed and separated from the conflict physically, geographical distance offers no protection for their sons. The effects of the war still manage to permeate many aspects of their daily life.

Similarly, the elder's attempt to shield himself from such tragedy by maintaining a distance from the others in the village while accepting the responsibility of delivering the telegrams reminds us again that anyone could be affected.

Sacrifice

The theme of sacrifice runs through the story from the outset, primarily through the hardship endured by the thin woman to secure a better life and prospects for her son. This foreshadows the greater sacrifice and loss of life that occurs in war time.

Ultimately, the message conveyed by the writer is of the pointlessness and futility of this sacrifice.

The thin woman's effort could all ultimately be in vain. Her son could well be killed in conflict. Even if he survives, she acknowledges that he may settle in England and never return to the island.

Mother and Son



Summary

Mother and son is a bitter, caustic story which examines the suffocating relationship between an infirm, aged, bedridden woman and her son.

The story opens at the end of a day in which the son, John, has been out working the land. He returns home to the inhospitable cottage to attend to his widowed mother.

From the outset, the strain in this relationship is clear. His mother is consigned to her bed and has been for a decade and so John has never been able to leave home and get a job like the other boys in the village.

He feels compelled to look after his mother and work to keep their farm going. His mother, however, far from being grateful to him perpetually goads and mocks him.

As he prepares her tea, the criticisms continue relentlessly. She tells him how she regrets naming him after her father stating My father was never like you. He was a man who knew his business.

She implies that he has inherited some kind of hereditary predisposition to mental illness from his father's side of the family and will be admitted to an asylum.

Despite the callousness of such comments, John doesn't retaliate though admits that they continue to hurt him.

Over the course of the story a transformation takes place and John experiences a moment of clarity and realisation. We begin to think that John may finally stand up to his mother and there is an expectation that this could end violently.

However, instead of using his hands to retaliate, the narrative takes an unexpected turn and ends not with him harming his mother, but turning away from her and opening the door.

John

John elicits a sympathetic response from the reader but he is not without flaws.

Though Crichton Smith depicts him as an attractive young man, with a handsome and good looking face, he also emphasises that there was something childish about it with a petulant mouth and eyes that were as dangerous and irresponsible as a child's.

We realise that John is emotionally immature and therefore ill-equipped to deal with his mother's constant berating.

His unhappiness stems not only from her perpetual hectoring, but also from a feeling he is not making progress with his life, and instead is consigned to a kind of purgatorial existence in the farmhouse.

As each of the other boys in the village begins to break away, taking jobs and having nights out, John is unable to escape from the cycle of abuse. A sense of duty compels him to look after her and their land. In doing so, his own dreams and ambitions remain unfulfilled.

Life in this rural village is bleak. Crichton Smith emphasises the hardship of such an existence in the opening paragraphs. John comes home with his clothes dripping and with water streaming down his cheeks... reddened by the wind and the rain. Yet as he comes home, he leaves one inhospitable climate for another in the cottage.

This is a home entirely bereft of any sense of warmth or comfort and the room is dominated by the four poster bed with soiled covers.

John is overwhelmed by a sense of impotence and frustration at the way he is treated by his mother. As he tries to light the fire, he curses vindictively and helplessly. This emphasises his exasperation and dissatisfaction with his situation. Yet he is unable to do anything about it.

John's relationship with his mother subverts our usual expectations of the mother and son bond. It has a deeply corrosive effect of his. The impact upon his psyche is severe and is revealed in feelings of intense bitterness coupled with a desire to tune out of her criticisms.

At times he can halt and watch her out of a clear cold mind to try to numb himself from the pain of her jibes. Despite this he admits just how hurtful he still finds her remarks. While occasionally her bitter barbs passed over him... Most often however they stung him and stood quivering in his flesh. John is no match for the psychological war waged by his mother and feels increasingly embittered and emasculated.

There are hints that even in spite of her relentless cruelty, he still seeks some sense of approval from her. He becomes deferential to her at times as if he were asking for her pity.

Here Crichton Smith highlights the particularly complex nature of the mother and child relationship. John's relationship with his mother is toxic and dysfunctional but he still seems to be bound to her and want her blessing.

As the story continues, John eventually does reach his limit as the relentlessness of her attacks finally peaks.

A terrible weariness takes hold of him till he felt himself in a dark cave, trying to protect himself from her rage burrowing into him and he experiences a moment of clarity, Everything was clearing up... She's breaking me up so that even when she dies I won't be any good for anyone.

This realisation finally seems to bring a sense of peace to John, His sense of loneliness closed round him, just as his house was on limitless moorland. There was a calm unspeaking silence, while the rain beat like a benediction on the roof.

As he observes the bitter, bitter smile upon her face and his mind is once more in a turmoil of hate, instead of lashing out at her with his clenched fists, John turns away, opens the door and listens to the rain.

In the end then, John finds release from her cruelty not through lashing out, but in withdrawing. The open door symbolises that finally he may find the strength and maturity to leave.

The mother

Unlike John, the mother is depicted in an entirely unsympathetic and negative light, with absolutely no redeeming qualities. She is utterly self-obsessed. Whatever condition has forced her to be bed ridden has made her bitter and insular, with no shred of compassion, love, empathy or kindness.

Although the narrative is told from John's perspective, it is the stinging contempt of the mother's words that are most memorable. She continually humiliates and emasculates her son, even suggesting that he has some kind of mental illness.

Her comment that this is a condition that is in your family but not in ours is incredibly revealing. She feels such a lack of affection and disconnection to John that she seems to consider that he is not even related to her. This is especially shocking given the way society idealises the relationship between a mother and her child.

Although her anger and bitterness are palpable and relentless, we never really find out the root of her unhappiness. We can deduce from the comments about John's father that she treated him with similar contempt. The fact she has been bed ridden for a decade would have an impact on her psyche.

However her particular hatred of her son, who looks after her and upon whom she is utterly dependant, can only be guessed at. Ultimately, her relentless abuse and destruction of his self-esteem makes it impossible to see anything positive in this character.

In his descriptions of her, Crichton Smith emphasises her physical fragility and feebleness: she has a frail white body and a scraggy neck and is often compared to a bird, pecking at the bed with a sharp beak and her head rising like a hen's out of her plain white nightgown.

Despite her lack of physical strength, Crichton Smith shows us that she is capable of inflicting terrible damage psychologically.

This is a woman who could never be satisfied or pleased; she knows her condition prevents her son taking a job elsewhere but then she paradoxically mocks and belittles him for not doing so. Ultimately though, John's epiphany renders her powerless and at last he seems he may be able to finally liberate himself from her.

Themes

The main themes addressed in this story are:

- the limiting and destructive nature of some family relationships
- the cost to the individual of being dutiful
- the hardship and restrictiveness of rural life

The relationship between John and his mother is memorable because it is so entirely lacking in any sense of maternal affection. Instead, the mother is a spiteful, hateful woman whose main pleasure seems to be derived from constantly humiliating and emasculating her son.

This is not an autobiographical account but there are some interesting parallels in Crichton Smith's own life. Like John, he was raised in a rural highland community by a widowed mother and their relationship was uneasy.

Despite this, it was he who looked after her in her old age and he didn't marry until after her death.

In this story, Crichton Smith forces us to acknowledge the corrosive and harmful effects of some familial relationships. He emphasises that sometimes the only way to find real fulfilment and quality of life is to sever such ties.

In John we see the detrimental effects of caring for his mother and fulfilling the role of dutiful son. He is denied the fraternal bonds available to the other boys in the village and is effectively isolated from the local community.

Despite his physical attractiveness, there is little prospect of any romantic relationship. The poverty of his existence is evident. In fulfilling his duty as a son, John has sacrificed any hope of personal happiness. The cost of duty is too high.

At the end though, there is a sense of hope that finally John will free himself from duty and find the courage to leave and address his own needs, dreams and desires.

The restrictiveness of rural life is a recurring motif in many Crichton Smith stories and this one is no exception. The conditions are hard, the lifestyle is bleak and the landscape is suffocating in its dullness.

There are parallels in this story with *The Red Door*, *The Painter* and *The Telegram*. All four contain criticisms of the insular narrow mindedness that Crichton Smith often associates with these rural environments.

However, of the four village stories, *Mother and Son* is the most negative and claustrophobic. The open door at the end therefore symbolises the wider world and society. It hints at the promise of a much more fulfilling and enriching way of life.

In Church

Summary



This story is set during World War One, just behind the front lines of trench warfare in continental Europe.

Our main character, Lieutenant Colin MacLeod finds himself with a brief period of respite from battle. It is clear from the noise, the planes and the smoke rising in the distance, he is still very close to the conflict.

As he wanders into a wood he notices that the trees looked like columns in a church. He becomes aware of two birds attacking another.

Unable to watch any more needless suffering, he ventures further into the wood and stumbles upon a small church. Incredibly it is still intact.

MacLeod enters the church and notices differences between this building and the churches he is more familiar with back home.

This church is much more ornate than the colourless, staid buildings of his homeland. Suddenly, he hears footsteps and a priest approaches him, dressed in black and addressing him as my son.

After establishing that MacLeod is alone, the man insists he follows him on a tour of the downstairs part of the church.

When they reach the crypt, a macabre scene awaits - the floor is littered with animal traps. MacLeod realises that the priest is actually a deserter from the army who has been living in these squalid conditions for a year.

Through blackened teeth, the deserter recounts his story, telling MacLeod how he could no longer bear his fellow soldiers or endure the horrendous conditions of the trenches.

MacLeod realises that he is in the presence of a madman, and when they return to the upstairs of the church, the deserter insists that MacLeod hears him preach.

His sermon is articulate but shocking. The man delivers a diatribe against God, blaming him for his immense absence in abandoning humanity. MacLeod is moved by the sermon which he feels expresses his own sentiments exactly.

However, both the deserter and MacLeod are aware that if he is allowed to leave he will be duty bound to expose the madman.

The story then ends in tragedy, as the deserter brings a gun from underneath his cassock and kills MacLeod.

The irony of course is that MacLeod dies not on the battlefields by enemy fire, but in a place designed to offer protection and sanctuary, at the hands of a fellow British soldier.

Lieutenant Colin MacLeod

From the outset, MacLeod is established as a sensitive, intelligent and thoughtful character. He has been in the trenches for so long that war has lost its ability to shock and he is increasingly beleaguered and disenchanting with the conflict.

He notes in the opening paragraph the arbitrary, senseless and random nature of war by reflecting how he noticed often before how unreal a battle might become, how a man would suddenly spin round, throwing up his arms as if acting a part in a play.

The anonymous and random nature of trench warfare is emphasised when he describes the relentless bombardment by the big German guns, and how it almost seemed as though gods were carelessly punching the soldiers out of existence.

His reaction to the bird being attacked is especially revealing. It emphasises just how sickened he is by the suffering he has been forced to witness. The sight of the church then, a mirage seems initially to offer sanctuary and safety in the midst of this chaos.

Even though MacLeod quite reasonably assumes the black clad figure is a priest, his subconscious seems to realise something is not quite right.

He notes immediately the strangeness that the priest should speak English and is hesitant about going downstairs to the crypt.

His reticence and uncertainty is emphasised in the dialogue during this section of the story. MacLeod's sentences are almost all unfinished, Well, I . . . , If it's all . . . , You mean you . . . , I think I had better . . . He is clearly uncomfortable but seems unable to challenge the priest and allows him to take control of the situation.

MacLeod's compliance to the deserter's instructions is most likely because he has adopted the persona of a priest. Even when his true identity is revealed, still Macleod seems unable to find a way to escape from the situation.

In the end, the realisation that he is going to be killed is met with a sense of ridiculous disbelief.

In his final moments, he is astonished that he is to meet his death not on the battlefields from enemy fire but in a place of worship from a fellow soldier. This utter subversion of the usual order of things underpins the chaos and randomness of war.

The Deserter

In this character, Crichton Smith clearly depicts the corrosive, negative effects of war on the human psyche. Although this character is described as a complete madman, there is a skewed logic to his behaviour.

He has the presence of mind to approach Macleod only when he is certain that he is not a German. He establishes quickly that he has come alone. This implies that his intention was always to kill him.

He immediately takes a more dominant stance and MacLeod feels compelled to follow his instructions, even though his senses alert him to the strangeness of the situation.

The deserter's need for human contact and to hear another human voice forces him to jeopardise his own safety, yet curiously he rarely allows MacLeod to speak.

Instead, it seems that really what he desires is someone to hear him. All the unspoken thoughts and feelings that have built up in him during his year of isolation are finally released.



Soldiers in the trenches

His blackened teeth symbolise his own corruption and degradation and foreshadow the callous, calculated way he kills Macleod at the end.

His observations about war are especially revealing. While articulate and insightful in condemning the senseless slaughter, his comments are almost misanthropic. He criticizes his fellow soldiers, saying he both despised and feared them, outraged by the way they fornicated and drank and spat and lived filthily.

Even though he studied theology before being conscripted into the army, there is no sense of compassion or empathy for his fellow man in any of his words. Instead, he uses MacLeod as an audience to vent his hatred of a God that would abandon his people and allow such suffering to continue.

He is angry especially that he has been forced to live alone all this time, espousing that in order to live we need language and human beings.

The deserter then reveals the subversion and chaos of war:

- He adopts the persona of a priest but in his sermon condemns God.
- He seeks human contact yet murders the only person he has spoken to in a year.
- He admits that had MacLeod been a German he would have been safe, a reversal of the usual codes of warfare.

Themes

The futility and destructiveness of war

In MacLeod's reflections on the conflict, it is clear that he has become increasingly jaded about the war. As an intellectual, sensitive man he realises it is futile and pointless.

He recounts specific traumatic and horrifying incidents with a sense of dispassion. He has become desensitized to the horrors that confront him on a daily basis. In spite of this, his reaction to the birds emphasises just how sickened he is by suffering.

Like the war, the attack on the bird seems futile. It also highlights the innate predisposition of conflict, suffering and destruction in the natural world.



Like the character of Mackinnon in *The Crater*, MacLeod's intelligence and thoughtfulness offer no protection from the horrors of the trenches. If anything, they make the situation worse.

While Macleod can recognise the irony and absurdity of the situation he finds himself in, he cannot save himself.

In the sermon delivered by the deserter, the degradation of trench warfare is emphasised. He describes horrendous conditions, rats, dead soldiers buried in the walls of trenches and being up to his knees in green slime.

He is angry not only with God but also with the generals and officers in charge back home. He seeks to find some sort of reason or rationale behind his suffering but this is pointless. His anger and rage have left him with a tremendous sense of impotence and powerlessness.

Crichton Smith draws our attention to the conflict between the needs of the individual versus those of society. The conditions of war are almost unimaginable but still society expects the deserter to sacrifice his own conscience for the greater good of the nation. Society would condemn and ostracise him for running away.

The corrosive effects of isolation on the human psyche

The conditions of trench warfare are the catalyst for the soldier's decision to desert. But as the story progresses it becomes clear that his enforced isolation has caused much greater psychological damage.

Although misanthropic about his fellow comrades, the deserter has been hugely affected by his loneliness and lack of human contact.

Crichton Smith highlights a fundamental need for fraternity that exists in all of us. In this character he shows us the terrible effects of long periods of enforced isolation.

The Painter



Summary

The narrator of the story begins by describing a local boy in the village who was a talented artist. The villagers were proud of his ability and bought his paintings to hang in their homes.

The boy seemed to favour pastoral scenes of the landscape and wildlife although the narrator admits that on occasion the community would have preferred if he depicted their village in a more flattering way.

Aside from his artistic talents, the boy was different to the rest of the village because he was both beautiful and sickly, and it was reckoned that he would not live long.

The narrator then introduces another character, Red Roderick, so called because of his red hair. When sober, Red Roderick was a popular and well liked member of the community. He seemed content and happy with his wife and seven children.

However, when he was drunk, Red Roderick's character was transformed and he became aggressive and violent. He beat his wife and picked fights. Red Roderick felt he and his wife were due some inheritance from his father-in-law - a man who in his younger days had a reputation for great strength.

The narrator then recounts an incident in which Red Roderick, under the influence of alcohol, confronted his father-in-law with a scythe. Soon the whole village heard the commotion and it drew a crowd.

As the two men began to fight surrounded by their neighbours, the narrator became aware that the young painter had set up his easel and was entirely focused on capturing the image in front of him. The narrator becomes consumed by anger and destroys the painting.

After this incident, the villagers shun the boy and take down his paintings. We learn that once he grew up, the boy left the village and little is known about him.

The story ends with the narrator reflecting that he never regretted his actions. The rest of the villagers believed that he destroyed the painting to protect the reputation of the village. In truth it was because he was afraid that the boy would capture the look of lust and enjoyment on the faces of both himself and the bystanders as they watched the fight.

The Narrator

The Painter is the only story in this collection in which Crichton Smith adopts a first person narration. Doing so makes the narrator become part of the story and one of the most important characters.

What is interesting about the narrator is the strong sense of identity he feels with his community. He often uses us and we to emphasise the feeling of belonging and attachment to his village. There is a clear affection between him and his neighbours.

Despite this, he reveals himself to be an honest, insightful and reliable narrator. He acknowledges early that the villagers would prefer the paintings to be more flattering and he is very open about Red Roderick's violent character when drunk.

However, during the fight, the narrator does not use the collective we or us but instead acts independently, I deliberately came up behind him... I pinioned his arms behind his back... I would have beaten him...I tore the painting into small pieces.

Crichton Smith reminds us that even when we feel a sense of belonging to a community there are times when everyone must follow their own sense of conscience or morality. What is revealing about the narrator is that he is able to understand why he reacted so violently to the behaviour of the painter.

His anger was not, as the villagers believed, due to any misplaced sense of loyalty to the community and its wider reputation. Instead, he acknowledges that as well as being appalled by the impassiveness of the painter, what he most feared was the painter capturing the image of his own face and that of his neighbours contorted with excitement and lust as they watched the fight.

In doing so he exposes an interesting universal truth about the human condition: that even men whom he considered decent and law abiding were capable of taking such obvious and primal pleasure in watching this barbaric display of aggression.

Red Roderick

Red Roderick is an interesting character who highlights something slightly paradoxical about certain rural communities.

When he is drunk, he is a violent and aggressive bully. When sober he is popular for his generosity and singing.

Despite the fact he beats his wife and picks fights with others he is accepted by his community. They are able to look past his failings and focus on his more attractive qualities.

In contrast, the painter is ostracised and excluded by his neighbours. For all his faults, Red Roderick is protected because he mainly adheres to the codes and expectations of the village.

The Painter

From the outset, William is depicted as different from the others in the village. The narrator describes him as a sickly, delicate and rather beautiful boy.



These qualities, of fragility and beauty are immediately highlighted as being out of place among the hardy, stoic sensibilities of the villagers.

At first they seem to embrace his differences. Pride in his skill as a painter is used to convey the notion that their village had something unique or exotic.

However, even in the days when the locals bought his paintings there is a sense that they would have preferred William created more flattering images.

It is true that once or twice he made us uncomfortable for he insisted on painting things as they were, and he made our village less glamorous on the whole than we would have liked it to appear.

Aside from his artistic talents, another quality that makes him stand out is his intelligence. Strangely, the narrator comments that many maintained that he wouldn't live very long, as he was so clever.

It seems then, just like the character of Mary in *The Red Door*, intelligence is viewed as a failing rather than a desirable quality in these communities.

While violence, aggression and drunkenness can all be accepted, cleverness is associated with feebleness and illness.

William's paintings expose the truth about the village and its people, rather than the idealised image that they would like to portray. It is for this reason that he is rejected. If the job of any artist in any medium is to hold a mirror up to their society and reflect it honestly, then William should have been celebrated.

His exclusion from the village exposes our capacity for self-delusion and our unwillingness to acknowledge or recognise a view of ourselves that may at times be unflattering or negative.

Themes

Illusion versus reality

The villagers are keen to present an idealised, yet untruthful version of themselves to the outside world.

Even though they occasionally found some of William's work a little unsavoury, with his crooked houses and spindly villagers, they were prepared to overlook this because no other village that we knew of had a painter.

Initially, William added value to the village and his precocious talent was something to be admired.

However, his quest for truth ultimately conflicted with the need of the villagers and the narrator to protect their slightly deluded perception of themselves, culminating in the painting of the fight being destroyed.

The restrictiveness of village life

This is a recurring theme in Crichton Smith's work. What is unusual about this story however is that unlike Murdo in *The Red Door* and John in *Mother and Son*, the events are recounted not from the isolated individual's point of view, but from that of one of the villagers.



We could expect Crichton Smith to identify with the artistic, sensitive and intelligent William, who finds the community in which he lives suffocating and oppressive and who ultimately has to leave to find personal fulfilment.

However, in adopting the persona of a villager, he manages to convey the specific lure that village life can have if one is prepared to fit in.

William may indeed find enrichment and contentment outside the village. But he sacrifices the sense of belonging and fulfilment that can come from being a part of a small and close-knit community.

The individual versus society

On one level, it is William who best demonstrates this theme. He is immediately singled out as being different to the others in his community and eventually must leave in order to fulfil his potential.

However, to a lesser degree, the narrator also exposes this conflict. While his neighbours believe he was prompted into action in order to save the reputation of their village, in reality what provoked him was a desire to protect his own sense of identity.

He is appalled by the prospect that he too may be captured in the painting with the same expression of lust and happiness that he had observed on the faces of his friends.

The Crater



Summary

This story is set in the trenches of World War One. The main character, Robert Mackinnon, is a young officer who is instructed to lead a group of soldiers in an attack on the enemy trenches.

These small-scale trench attacks always took place at night and the soldiers would use burnt cork to blacken their faces to camouflage themselves. The raids required stealth and cunning and often crude weaponry such as daggers would be used rather than pistols to avoid detection.

The story begins with the preparations before the raid and Mackinnon compares this scene to a play. While the rest of the men long for a minor injury so that they can be sent home honourably, Mackinnon's sergeant, a man named Smith epitomises the courage and stoicism of the soldiers.

Previously injured, he had won the right to stay at home but he has returned, determined too stay till he was killed or till the war ended.



As the attack begins, the situation seems almost surreal to Mackinnon. He has to remind himself that he is in charge.

As they cross no-man's land into enemy territory, Mackinnon acknowledges his fear.

The attack itself is condensed into just a few sentences of brutality, hackings of bayonets, a terrible stink before the flowing of blood. Just as soon as it began, the attack is over.

Recrossing no-man's land is more perilous since. Now the men have to contend with being shelled. They must avoid the huge craters filled with slimy water that scar the landscape.

By the time they finally reach their own trench, many of the squad have been injured and one soldier, Morrison, has fallen into a crater. Although he knows it may be pointless, Mackinnon decides to try to rescue him.

At first they cannot find Morrison among the dozens of slime-filled craters, but just as they decide to return they hear a cry and finally locate the soldier. Mackinnon uses his gun like a fishing rod to pull the man from the stagnant water.

However, once rescued he dies. Rather than crouching, the men walk back to their trench with him, even though the stars make them visible and an easy target for the enemy.

When they return, Mackinnon is deeply affected by the incident. He falls into a restless, nightmare filled sleep. In contrast, Smith who is more used to the horrors of war seems unscathed.

Lieutenant Robert Mackinnon

Mackinnon is a young officer. In contrast to Sergeant Smith, he is relatively inexperienced at trench warfare. His thoughtful and sensitive observations seem incongruous amongst the brutality of the trenches. His comparison of the preparations for the raid to actors preparing for a play highlights the surrealism of the situation.

In spite of his own fear and trepidation, Mackinnon carries out his responsibilities as the commanding officer with dignity, aware of the gravity of the situation. He manages to mask his own inner doubts through his own internal dialogue with questions like What am I doing here? Plaguing him.

Making his way down the trenches, he considers the idea of God. He imagines him as some kind of huge mind breeding thought after thought. . . a mind which hid in daylight.

Here Crichton Smith questions our traditional idea of God as some divine, benevolent deity. As in any times of terrible conflict, death and suffering, our usual values and belief systems are challenged.

Just like the deserter in *In Church* who is angry at a God who has abandoned his people, Mackinnon feels a sense of detached ambivalence. He is not bitter and full of rage like the deserter, but he has begun to question his previously accepted notion of God.



British troops advance

Interestingly, when the troop finally attacks the enemy German trenches, the descriptions are brief and the entire raid seems to be over in an instant. This helps to convey the confusion of the experience on Mackinnon.

As the story continues and Mackinnon turns back to rescue Morrison, it is the landscape which seems to become the real enemy rather than the German soldiers.

The fear Mackinnon feels is different from being out in the open on a battlefield. It is an older fear. The fear of being buried in the earth.

The craters take on a sinister, malevolent presence. They are filled with green slimy water and to Mackinnon, their reflective surfaces look like dead moons.

Despite his fear, Mackinnon's decision to risk his own life to save one of his men reveals him to be a man of courage and integrity. Even when the rescue is futile, he is glad that the man didn't die in the crater.

This event seems to have prompted a change in Mackinnon. While before the raid he was gripped by fear and doubt, after the rescue he seems to be reckless and deliberately provocative. He exclaims that they will not crawl back to their trench, but walk, exposing themselves much more easily to enemy fire, This time we'll bloody well walk. I don't care how light it is.

However, when safely returned to the trench, Mackinnon falls into a nightmare filled sleep, full of green monsters. This vision will plague him for a long time.

Sergeant Smith

Smith represents the pragmatic face of war. He chooses not to think too hard about the suffering. Instead he concentrates on getting on with the job at hand.

To him war is a game and he is willing to play his part. He enjoys the fraternity of the other soldiers and by actively choosing to return to the front line demonstrates a different kind of courage from Mackinnon.

He serves as a useful counterpoint to Mackinnon in this respect and reminds us of the different ways human beings cope with terrible situations.



While Mackinnon will dream about green monsters, Smith's memory of the evening will be walking back under stars so bright they remind him of the lights of Piccadilly Circus in London.

For Smith then, this event will become just another anecdote in his armoury of war stories. His resilience makes him much more suited to the atrocities of warfare than the thoughtful, sensitive Mackinnon.

Morrison



Morrison symbolises degrading and dehumanising impact of war.

We never get a sense of his character. Instead, the abiding impression of him is not a soldier but a kind of obscene, monstrous creature that emerges grotesquely from the crater like some kind of abhorrent birth.

This perception of him is heightened through the filter of Mackinnon's mind. He describes his voice like an animal's and as he begins to emerge from the water the imagery becomes even more disturbing. He is a great fish, an obscene mermaid, a monster of the deep.

This disconnection continues when Mackinnon replaces the pronoun he with it. As in, it seemed to be emerging from the deep, setting its feet against the side of the crater, all green, all mottled, like a disease.

Themes

The destructiveness and futility of War

In this story, Crichton Smith clearly depicts the almost unimaginable conditions of trench warfare.

Just as the landscape is scarred by craters, Mackinnon's nightmares demonstrate the damage inflicted on the human psyche. While Mackinnon has no physical scars, mentally he is plagued by the horrors he has seen.

In contrast, Smith takes an almost matter of fact approach to the events and has found some way to successfully function under these conditions.

The story deals with the death of just one soldier but it can be seen to represent the millions who were slaughtered in the conflict. Crichton Smith emphasises not only the destructiveness of war but also needless loss of life that occurred during these trench raids.



Soldiers crouched at the crater holes

These operations were ordered by distant generals and had very little impact on the outcome of the conflict.

As they required face to face, almost primitive methods of combat in enemy territory, they were every bit as terrifying as any of the battles fought over ground.

In Mackinnon and Smith we can see the different ways the human psyche deals with such situations. Smith's pragmatism contrasts with Mackinnon's attempts to rationalise his experience. This suggests that the events will have a much longer lasting and more harmful impact on the young officer.

In the end and despite their courageous efforts, Morrison is saved from the crater only to immediately die.

This reinforces the idea that war is futile and life and death are arbitrary. Men are killed or survive through luck or chance. We would have expected that Morrison ought to survive after such a herculean attempt was made to save him, just as we would have expected that walking back across no man's land in bright starlight would expose the others to almost certain death.

In war then, the usual codes and rules that we live by are subverted, creating a chaotic, terrifying and unfamiliar reality.