After Rain Short Guide

After Rain by William Trevor

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Characters

Inevitably, considering the number of stories Trevor has written, character types are repeated. Still, these characters are never stereotypes; Trevor says he writes out of curiosity to discover what his characters will do. Readers, too, must be alert for surprises.

"A Day" focuses on the interior life of one character. Mrs. Lethwes, an uppermiddle-class London housewife, appears quite ordinary at first, but as the day goes on it is clear that she is addicted to alcohol.

The reader tends to sympathize as she reveals the small tragedies of her life. She blames herself for her childlessness and has rejected her husband's wish to adopt a child.

As layers of the past are revealed, we learn that on a vacation trip she intercepted a letter from her husband's lover, a musician named Elspeth. Both husband and wife know of this affair, but will not discuss it.

Mrs. Lethwes carries on her daily routine, with its allowance of two drinks. As her imagination works overtime, however, her drinking veers out of control. Just before she passes out in the midst of her dinner preparations, she imagines that Elspeth is expecting her husband's child. Because Elspeth travels, Mrs. Lethwes will make the supreme sacrifice of caring for this child.

The final scene, however, casts doubt on Mrs. Lethwes as a victim. Mr. Lethwes finds his wife unconscious and carries her to bed, "gentle when he carries her, as he always is." Perhaps Mr. Lethwes deserves more sympathy; if there was at one time an affair, its continuance and the possibility of a child may be the distorted imagination of an alcoholic.

Harriet in the title story "After Rain," having been rejected by her most recent lover, seems at first to be the typical lonely melancholic. The narrative weaves past and present as Harriet seeks to overcome her despair by returning to a pensione in Italy where she vacationed as a child with her parents. In a moment of insight that often occurs in a Trevor story, Harriet courageously faces the reality of her plight: "He [her recent lover] backed away, as others have, when she asked too much of love, when she tried to change the circumstances that are the past by imposing a brighter present, and constancy in the future above all else. She has been the victim of herself; with vivid clarity she knows that now and wonders why she does and why she didn't before." The outcome suggests some hope for the future, as Harriet compares her revelation with the painting of The Annunciation she sees in a church, suggesting a religious vision. Perhaps (although this is by no means certain) Harriet will eventually find the love that has eluded her.

Trevor seems especially interested in his women characters. In "The Piano-Tuner's Wives," Belle, who might be a classic example of the jealous woman, becomes a far more complex exploration of the insidious power of the past. Belle, fifty-nine years old, who had been rejected years ago in favor of Violet, becomes Owen Dromgould's wife when Violet dies. Violet, a plain woman who did not have Belle's beauty, has enabled him to succeed in his work because she drives him to his appointments with clients and keeps the accounts. More importantly, she enriches his life with her vivid descriptions of the sights he cannot see. "He saw his mother's eyes closed in death, her hands crossed on her breast. He saw the mountains, blue on some days, misted away to grey on others.... And he would nod, and know."

Belle, jealous because her own youthful beauty has been wasted, sees Owen's blindness as her punishment. "And what else but a punishment was it that darkness should be thrown over her beauty.... and they would have been a handsome couple, she and Owen Dromgould. An act of grace it would have been, her beauty given to a man who did not know it was there."

Compelled by the perception of this injustice, Belle begins a series of deceptions, reinventing the scenes Violet had described, giving him false descriptions of familiar people and places in order to assert her own rights over the woman who "still claimed existence." However, she also hints at the cruel truth: "The wife he had first chosen had dressed drably: from silence and inflections—more than from words—he learned that now. Her gray hair straggled to her shoulders, her back was a little humped."

These characters come alive as individuals, often giving readers a shock of recognition, or at least compelling them to wonder how they might act in these situations.

Social Concerns

In this new collection of twelve stories, first published individually in British and American periodicals including The New Yorker and Harper's, William Trevor develops the themes that have characterized his previous fiction, while demonstrating his inventiveness with new material. Trevor was born in County Cork, a Protestant in Catholic Ireland, but left Ireland as a young man to earn his living in England. Seven of these stories are set in Ireland, four in London, and the title story in Italy. Most critics agree that, while Trevor is equally at home in all three landscapes, his best work is set in Ireland, whose history and culture dominated his childhood and continue to inspire his storytelling. Trevor's novels and short stories have won a number of literary prizes; he has been called the finest living writer of short fiction in English. He resists the judgment of critics who attempt to define the politics or philosophy of his work, saying: "My fiction may, now and again, illuminate aspects of the human condition, but I do not consciously set out to do so: I am a storyteller."

Whether the setting of a story is Ireland, with its history of colonialism and violence, or the apartment of sophisticated upperclass Londoners, Trevor's consuming interest is always on the lives of his characters as they are caught in moments of decision that will forever alter their lives. Often these moments arise, not from wars, natural disasters, or social upheaval, but out of small domestic matters: a disagreement over an unpaid bill, bitter quarrels between two sets of divorcing parents, an adult son's failure to show up for the birthday party his parents have planned.

Do these characters act as free individuals, or are their lives determined by gender, social class, or the indifferent workings of history? Trevor's stories fascinate and disturb the reader because he raises such questions without offering closure. A Trevor story may close the door firmly at its conclusion, but leave the reader to ponder its meaning.

The characters in these stories live and breathe and (except for the occasional sociopath) are recognizable as ordinary human beings caught in a moment of choice.

Trevor's fiction resonates with the conflicts and compromises of marriage, the disappointments suffered by the parents of adult children who make irrevocable mistakes, the child victims of the strife in contemporary marriage, and the inevitable failure of love. Still, as in the world of classical trage dy, the fabric of society is held together at the expense of individual fulfillment. Often these characters must "come to terms," a phrase Trevor himself has used, with the consequences of their own actions and the reality of the world into which they were born. Some—literally—get away with murder. Trevor's stories are sometimes called dark comedy; while there are moments of humor (and Trevor sees himself as hopeful in his view of human nature), his stories can be disturbing.

The harsh economic reality of life in Ireland's villages and farms is always present in the Irish stories. Money (or the lack of it) is indeed the root of all evil and, when combined with the provincial demands for keeping up appearances, is an important issue in these

stories. In "Widows," Catherine is the survivor of a loving marriage; her husband, Matthew, was known for his honesty and conscientious dealings. Catherine's crisis occurs when Leary, a crafty workman "with tight features and bloodshot eyes, his appearance occasionally reminding people of a hedgerow animal they could not readily name" demands a substantial payment of two hundred pounds he claims Matthew owes him. Catherine and her sister Alicia share a tangled psychological history. Alicia, the beautiful sister, is the widow of a gambler and philanderer; while Catherine, the plain one, had the better husband. Both are well aware that Leary is extorting the money; Alicia demands that Catherine confront him and refuse to pay. Catherine, too insecure to protest, gives in to Leary "in case, somehow, the memory of her husband should be accidentally tarnished." At the story's center is the subtly changing relationship between the sisters that occurs over the disagreement, but this relationship is played out against the background of a provincial Ireland that allows petty evil to win out for the sake of a dead man's reputation.

The heritage of rural poverty wrought by British rule is the background of "The Potato Dealer." Ellie and her widowed mother, having no means of support after the death of Ellie's father, are taken in by the widow's brother. The arrangement is to his advantage because he is unmarried and uses the two women as servants and farm workers. Ellie becomes pregnant and refuses to name the father. Her uncle forces her into a loveless marriage with Mulreavy, an unattractive older man, who is greedy for the financial advantages of the match. Ellie accepts reality: she must pay the price for her sin—an illegitimate child is a disgrace in the community. After the financial terms have been discussed, the callousness of the transaction between Mulreavy and the uncle is described: "Eight days after their conversation on the road the two men shook hands, as they did when potatoes were bought and sold. Three weeks went by and then there was the wedding." The harsh economic reality and provincial morality of rural Ireland demand this marriage, but the theme of the story, as will be noted later, is the price of deception.

"Lost Ground," the most shocking story in the collection, refers directly to the historical "troubles" between Protestants and Catholics. Milton Leeson, a sixteen-yearold farm boy, has a series of visions (whether a true religious revelation or a fantasy of a disturbed imagination is never clear) of a woman in the fields who identifies herself as St. Rosa. She speaks to him and gives him a "holy" kiss. Milton has "the distinct impression that the woman wasn't alive." Troubled by his vision, he consults his brotherin-law, a Protestant clergyman, who dismisses it as an adolescent sexual disturbance. Milton then goes to the local Catholic priest, who is angered and mystified that a Catholic saint should appear to a Protestant farm boy. Milton's family is horrified when he confesses his vision. Leeson, his father, is the leader of the Protestant faction that parades yearly to celebrate a victory of the 17th century, an intimidating show of power in the Catholic community. Milton's brother Garfield, a violent drunk who works in Belfast, is a member of "an organization intent on avenging the atrocities of the other side." The narrator never takes sides, describing the "troubles" as: "The tit-fortat murders spawned by that same hardman mentality, the endless celebration of a glorious past on one side and the picking over of ancient rights on the other, the reluctance to forgive."

Milton, compelled by his revelation to preach throughout the countryside in the hope of bringing peace, instead brings scandal to the family. Even when his father imprisons him in his room, Milton escapes and continues to preach. Garfield provides the solution to the family's public shame— he arranges for and takes part in Milton's murder. The story concludes with words of the narrator: "The family would not ever talk about the day, but through their pain they would tell themselves that Milton's death was the way things were, the way things had to be: that was their single consolation. Lost ground had been regained."

A horrifying form of social justice has been upheld at the cost of Milton's life. As in many of Trevor's Irish stories, the bloody history of Ireland has its stranglehold over the lives of the characters who are unable to free themselves from the past.

In two quite different stories Trevor explores the mind of the criminal who disrupts society's order. In "A Bit of Business," two young burglars take advantage of the Pope's visit, an event that will empty the houses in Dublin and provide an excellent opportunity for robbery. These two are indifferent to human feelings, addicted to casual sex and drinking, and preoccupied with regret at the story's conclusion because they hadn't killed the old man who could testify against them in court. Their thoughts are described: "As they had at the time, they sensed the old man's shame and the hurt to his pride, as animals sense fear or resolution. Privately, each calculated how long it would be before the danger they'd left behind in the house caught up with them."

While these two show a chilling indifference to human values, the evil they cause is limited. But the son in "Gilbert's Mother" is a sociopath, the ultimate outsider in a society that has denied the unequivocal evidence before its eyes. Gilbert's mother (and the story belongs to her) has connected her adult son's peculiar behavior and his absences from home with an escalating series of crimes—a fire, a car theft, and finally the murder of a woman. Gilbert fits a pattern that modern psychiatry knows well: highly intelligent, a voracious reader and writer, a pathological liar and social outcast—clearly manifested to the social workers and his mother by the time he was nine years old.

As his bizarre behavior grows more evident, his mother pleads desperately that he be confined to a treatment center. The social worker ignores her concerns, explaining that: "it stood to reason he could not remain there. Her son was fortunate to have her, she was informed. She had a role, that same lofty manner insisted, without words. She was, after all the mother." Seeing the ironic truth in this decision, she will not betray her son to the law: "Her role was only to accept: he had a screw loose, she had willed him to be born. No one would ever understand the mystery of his existence, or the unshed tears they shared."

Trevor's language is clear, often cryptic, and his stance as an objective reporter appears deceptively simple. The questions arising from these stories are not. Are these ordinary people who "come to terms" with the conventions of society, to be seen as heroes or victims? Certainly they deserve respect, as they make choices that are at best mistaken, at worst tragic. The ordinary people in these stories make the compromises and sacrifices that they see as necessary to their survival. Might they have chosen

otherwise if not confined by the expectations of their family and society? In the case of the criminals, who is to blame—the circumstances of birth, or history, or an evil that defies comprehension? Readers are often disturbed by the darkness of the world Trevor portrays. His characters seem to have the moral obligation of free choice, but are unable to exercise it when constrained by the forces of culture and history.

Techniques

These stories demand an attentive reader to take note of Trevor's narrative techniques: precise description, abrupt shifts in scene, and the seamless melding of direct and indirect discourse.

Trevor, with a few brush strokes and the authoritative voice of a seemingly objective narrator, defines physical appearance as a mark of character. Here is the description of the two street punks in "A Bit of Business": "The one who'd given the instruction, the older and taller of the two, was Mangan.

The other was a pock-marked, sallow youth known as Lout Gallagher, the sobriquet an expression of scorn on the part of a Christian Brother ten or so years ago. Mangan had gelled short hair, non-descript as to colour, and small eyes that squinted slightly, and a flat, broad nose." Physically repellent, primitive, but quite ordinary, these two can be expected to act without any moral sense and can as easily kill as not while committing a robbery.

A deft description of Harriet, the protagonist in "After Rain," reveals a wealth of information: "Wearing a blue dress unadorned except for the shiny blue buckle of its belt, she has earrings that hardly show and a necklace of opaque white beads that isn't valuable. Angular and thin, her dark hair cut short, her long face strikingly like the sharply chiseled faces of Modigliani, a month ago she passed out of her twenties.

She is alone in the Pensione Cesarine because a love affair is over." Self-effacing, suffering, and lonely, Harriet becomes understandable as she reviews her past and contemplates her future.

Trevor's abrupt scene shifts frequently disorient the reader, but they work to move the action forward. In "A Bit of Business," we observe the actions of the two thieves juxtaposed against the scenes of the Pope's visit to Ireland; and the reader views these scenes through the eyes of the old man who will be the victim of the crime as he watches television.

Trevor telescopes past, present, and a suggestion of the future as he moves back and forth in time, filling in information necessary to the story. In "Gilbert's Mother," sketches of Gilbert's childhood cast light on how the character developed into a serial killer. In "After Rain," brief episodes from Harriet's childhood and the broken affair that has brought her to Italy foreshadow the ambiguous character assessment Harriet will announce to herself. Trevor's narrative consciousness most often remains in the third person, moving seamlessly between direct and indirect discourse. He often begins a story with a firm authorial voice, then moves directly into the minds of the characters. He also interposes commentary from an omniscient narrator, but this can be an illusion, with the reader uncertain as to whose voice is in control of the narrative. This last technique is worth noting for its subtlety.

In "Timothy's Birthday" the reaction of the parents to their son's failure to show up is described: "They were not bewildered, as their birthday visitor [Eddie, the faithless lover] was: they easily understood. Their own way of life was so much debris all around them, but since they were no longer in their prime, that hardly mattered. Once it would have, Odo reflected now; Charlotte had known that years ago. Their love of each other had survived the vicissitudes and the struggle there had been; not even the bleakness of the day that had passed could affect it."

Here Trevor has invited the reader into the minds of three characters, as well as that of the narrator who sums up the meaning of the event.

Often the narrative position is unclear.

In "The Piano-Tuner's Wife," the narrator reports that Owen Dromgould accepted Belle's deceptive descriptions negating the details his former wife has given. Does Dromgould himself know which version of the scene is real? The narrator says: "Belle could not be blamed for making her claim, and claims could not be made without damage or destruction. Belle would win in the end because the living always do. And that seemed fair, also, since Violet had won in the beginning and had had the better years."

How much of the "fairness" of this deception does Dromgould himself perceive?

With stunning swiftness Trevor can move from objective description to an authorial judgment. In "Lost Ground" he describes the scene of the Protestant picnic following the parade: "By five o-clock necks and faces were redder than they had earlier been, hair less tidy, beads of perspiration catching the slanting sunlight. There was euphoria in the field, some drunkenness, and an occasional awareness of the presence of God."

In several interviews Trevor has dismissed critics' attempts to analyze his literary style. In a response as evasive as the secrets of many of his characters, he says: "I simply tell people's stories for them."

Themes

As these examples show, a common theme of these stories is the mysterious power of truth and deception. In "Widows," Leary demands payment for a debt that does not exist; Catherine accepts the lie in the interest of preserving her dead husband's reputation. In "Lost Ground," the family and the community know that Milton was murdered with the complicity of his own brother, but this truth will never be openly admitted. The criminals in "A Bit of Business," will succeed in their petty crime unless the old man comes forth as a witness. And Gilbert's mother, knowing instinctively that all evidence in the story points to her son as a serial killer, will keep her secret at the cost of other lives.

The complex interweaving of a series of deceptions is most evident in "The Potato Dealer." Mulreavy does not know (but Ellie's uncle suspects) that the father of the child was a visiting priest. The village accepts Mulreavy as the child's father, even though there has not been (and never will be) a physical relationship between Ellie and her husband. He has never asked his wife for the truth, and has developed a strong affection for the little girl. When the child is ten years old, Ellie, observing the coarse, peasant-like nature of Mulreavy, decides that the child deserves to know the truth. Ellie remembers the priest as a romantic, spiritual person (although the reader may question this, knowing that he abandoned her). Against all advice to let the past remain hidden, Ellie makes her shocking announcement, causing malicious gossip in the community and making a laughingstock of Mulreavy. In this and other stories, the gradual unfolding of layers of information creates a moral dilemma for the reader.

In the last paragraph of the story, sympathy shifts from the callous treatment of Ellie as a woman wronged by the conventions of society, to some respect for Mulreavy, who has apparently lived up to his bargain in the marriage. The narrator says of Ellie: "She mended his clothes, she kept them clean. She assisted him in the fields, she made his bed. In all the time she'd known him she had never wondered about him."

Nor did the reader, who is left to ponder his own misplaced sympathies and question the absolute value of truth.

The story of Irish Protestants, "The PianoTuner's Wives," explores another form of deception. Owen Dromgould, the blind piano tuner whose first wife Violet has died, marries Belle, who claims to have always loved him, but had been rejected years ago in favor of Violet. Belle is bitterly consumed by her jealousy of Violet, who successfully managed her husband's career and enriched his life by her vivid descriptions of the sights he was unable to see. Belle, intending to banish the memory of Violet, begins a series of lies to achieve her revenge. She deliberately changes the familiar people and scenes Violet had described to her husband, making a liar of Violet and asserting her own dominance as the second wife.

Deception also colors the story "Timothy's Birthday." Charlotte and Odo, an elderly couple, have as one of their remaining joys the yearly visit of their son, a homosexual

whose life is a disappointment, but one they have come to accept. Timothy, in a singular act of cruelty, decides not to come for his birthday visit, sending instead the boorish Eddie, his current lover who (although Timothy does not know this) intends to leave him. Charlotte and Odo hide their pain and maintain the fiction that Timothy is ill, offering Eddie the special food and drink that they had prepared for their son. In a final insult, Eddie steals a small object they cherished and sells it for a pittance. Charlotte and Odo share the understanding that Timothy, jealous of the love of his parents for each other had turned to "deviousness and cruelty." The narrator reports at the end of the story that: "Their love of each other had survived the vicissitudes and the struggle there had been; not even the bleakness of the day that had passed could affect it." There is a question whether this recognition should be taken as truth. Trevor's narrative technique, to be noted later, suggests doubt.

If Trevor is fascinated by the theme of truth and deception, his conclusions about these mysterious relationships are ambiguous. In some instances, he suggests that evil flourishes in secret because the truth is denied. In others, life is made bearable by the complicity of denial. In yet others, the truth itself can cause irreparable damage when it is revealed at last.

Key Questions

Trevor has said that he is not interested in philosophical or psychological questions, but readers will find many opportunities to discuss these issues in his fiction. Readers should work closely with the text to suggest interpretations of individual stories, to compare two stories that share similar themes, and to consider these twelve stories as a group.

1. In a Trevor story there is usually a moment when a character must make a choice that will change his or her life.

Select any story and imagine how the conclusion might be different had the character made another choice. For instance, what if Timothy's parents had refused to play along with Eddie's deception about Timothy's illness? What if the two thugs in "A Bit of Business" had decided to kill Mr. Livingston?

2. Some of the scenes in these stories are darkly comic: for example, the conversations in "Child's Play" in which the children imitate the arguments of their divorcing parents. Identify other instances of this kind of comedy.

3. Accounts of dreams, visions, and fantasies abound in these stories. Select examples of these workings of the imagination and debate whether they are grounded in reality or suggest that a character is losing touch with the world.

4. Critics have observed that Trevor more strongly identifies with—and has more compassion for—the characters in his Irish stories than those in his English stories. Find examples that support or cast doubt on this judgment.

5. In studying the author's narrative technique, identify places in the stories where he moves from direct discourse (the words and thoughts of the characters) to indirect discourse (the narrator's comment or interpretation of the meaning of these thoughts or actions).

How does this shift in narrative position influence the reader's interpretation?

6. In these stories, gender, physical appearance, social class, the natural environment, or historical background play a part in the character's actions. To what degree do they have free will to make choices? When are their actions determined by forces beyond their control?

7. Show how the author uses his concluding paragraphs to make a statement (or to raise doubts) about the events in the story.

8. Some critics find Trevor's fiction darkly pessimistic; others find hope in the quiet dignity with which his characters come to terms with the minor tragedies of their lives. Taking this collection as a whole, which view seems a better interpretation of his work?

Literary Precedents

Trevor's skill in sketching vivid scenes and the physical appearance of his characters suggest the influence of the London novels of Charles Dickens. The Irish stories also invite comparison to Chekhov's portrayal of family and rural life in Russia.

Inevitably Trevor's work is compared to that of James Joyce, as they share the experience of an Irish childhood and later emigration to England where both began their careers as writers. Trevor, as a Protestant outsider, however, views rural Catholic life much differently than does Joyce. Also, his clear, straightforward language has little in common with Joyce's linguistic experiments.

His work is also ranked with that of masters of the British short story, V. S. Pritchett and Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen. Some critics compare Trevor's stories of provincial Ireland to the rural American South of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor.

Related Titles

Trevor began publishing in 1964; his literary work includes eleven novels, two novellas, and nine collections of short stories. He has also written television scripts and criticism, and has edited collections of the work of other writers. Earlier prizewinning novels The Children of Dynmouth (1976) and Fools of Fortune (1983) are good introductions to his longer work. Readers who want to observe the development of his themes over time should compare the stories in After Rain with his first collection The Day We Got Drunk on Cake (1968). The Collected Stories (1992) represents a generous sampling of his work. A collection of autobiographical essays, Excursions in the Real World (1994) invites readers to speculate on possible relationships between Trevor's own life and the subjects and themes of his fiction.

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