

Guests of the Nation Study Guide

Guests of the Nation by Frank O'Connor

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Plot Summary

Most of the stories contained within focus on the experiences of the young rebels involved in the movement against England and the consequences of their resistance, but some of the stories also focus on women or children of the era.

Many of the stories are satirical or farcical in nature, reflecting the absurd situations that many people alive at the time faced on a regular basis. Several of the Irish dissidents are either friends with English soldiers or not directly interested in the resistance as a matter of principal. Of the female characters portrayed, several are nuns and many of the characters who have grown too old to fight nonetheless encourage Ireland's youth to continue to rebel, heedless of the death and destruction they are responsible for.

Few of the characters within families get along very well at all. Husbands and wives constantly argue. Friends routinely suspect each other of defecting to the other side or some other form of treachery, and at least one person in any given story is afflicted with alcoholism, which regularly assumes great importance in the story as it greatly influences the decisions made by the characters involved. In this respect, O'Connor takes a critical look at Irish society rather than a blindly patriotic one, and even goes so far as to mock many societal problems that were highly common in his time, particularly the family strife that many inhabitants of Ireland suffered at the turn of the twentieth century and the ineptitude with which Ireland attempted to regain its independence.



Guests of the Nation

Summary

Noble and Bonaparte guard two English soldiers named Belcher and Hawkins. The two prisoners are very friendly and they seem to have no desire to escape. Hawkins, however, is very prone to argumentation. One night, after a card game, their commanding officer Jeremiah tells Bonaparte that Belcher and Hawkins are being kept as hostages, and that if the English execute the Irish soldiers they are holding, Belcher and Hawkins will be executed in response. This happens the very next day, and Jeremiah comes to collect the Englishmen. Bonaparte and Jeremiah take them out into a swamp where they meet with Noble. Bonaparte wants them to try to escape, because he knows no one would shoot them if they ran, but they don't run and Jeremiah kills both of the prisoners.

Analysis

This is a brief but very emotional story about enemy soldiers who become friends. It is established early on that Belcher and Hawkins are essentially good people. Jeremiah, who insists on the executions as they have been ordered, asks Belcher if he understands that the shootings are simply their duty, but both Bonaparte and Noble feel quite differently. They've both become friends with the prisoners and suffer from immense guilt after the shootings.

Vocabulary

bloke, pretence, platoon, cardinal, chum, rigmarole, banished, recollecting, extraordinary, shrieking



Attack

Summary

Owen and Lomasney are sent to destroy an old barracks containing a garrison of police that the locals do not like. They stay briefly with a family Lomasney knows from the past. Lomasney tells Owen that the old couple claims their son has moved to the United States, and although the father insists that he's still alive, no one has heard from him in years. They meet the father, who Owen thinks is a little insane. The older man warns them about what they plan to do, that blowing up the garrison is extremely dangerous. Owen and Lomasney eat dinner with the old couple, and as they say the prayer the old man interrupts to say one for his son, Patrick.

That night, Owen and Lomasney go outside to get a view of some kind of commotion, but they are stopped by Kieran in a loft, along with his son, Paddy, who has been hiding in the loft from the police the entire time his father claimed that he was in the United States. They go back into the house and Lomasney tells Kieran to drop Paddy off in the city the next morning, so that he can pretend that he came back from the U.S. Kieran asks about the police, but Lomasney says there won't be any police after tomorrow.

Analysis

This story focuses on the fear that the Irishmen have of the English police officers. It is very likely that Lomasney leads Owen to Kieran's house out of curiosity over what happened to Paddy. When Paddy is discovered and Lomasney tells him he won't have to worry about police soon, Kieran's suspicion of them turns to joy, and Lomasney is correct in his assumption that because they've managed to free Paddy from the loft, they've earned a very valuable recruit.

Vocabulary

ambushed, hailed, tempestuous, petulantly, emaciated, sullenly, garrulous, exultant, conscience, recruit.



Jumbo's Wife

Summary

Jumbo gets very drunk one night and beats his wife. She runs away, and is brought back by Pa Kenefick, who threatens Jumbo if he beats her again. Jumbo supposedly became furious after she brought home a picture that he thought was too expensive to purchase.

She wakes up the next morning and makes breakfast for Johnny, her son. He tries to put an envelope into the flames and she snatches it from him and opens it. She discovers that it is a money order for a large sum, and takes it to Pa to learn what it means. Pa thanks her for bringing him the letter, telling her that they had been waiting for this information for some time.

Later that night, Jumbo asks if a letter came for him and she lies about the envelope, saying it never came. A car comes up their street and two men get out and run towards their house. She suddenly panics and tells Jumbo what she did with the letter. Jumbo runs away and tells her to keep them busy. She goes out to the car, where a man asks if Jumbo has been caught yet, but he's escaped. He's stopped drinking and feels terrible for showing Pa the money order, so she stops the man chasing him by wrapping her shawl around his head.

She finds Jumbo in a police barracks the next day, but he is sullen and unhappy to see her. No one in her neighborhood will speak to her anymore. Jumbo gradually becomes sick, and the English military refuses to help him. She comes to the barracks one day to find him attacking several policemen, then suddenly he collapses on the floor. They wake him up and he begs to enlist in the English military, but his wife knows he is dying. The police lose patience with Jumbo and send him away. She begins to hate Pa, and misses Jumbo because she no longer knows where he is.

One day she follows Pa, and finds herself in an unfamiliar place. A local tells her that a hospital is nearby, and she fears that Pa is on his way to kill Jumbo. She tries to stop Pa and the others, but the men get into a car, and by the time she asks for Jumbo, it is too late. She races after the men who have taken him, but they shoot him, and she finds his body with the word "SPY" written on a card over it.

Analysis

This story focuses on the life of a man who served the English military, and even though it ruined his life, wants nothing more than to continue to serve them. His wife is the one who betrays him to Irish rebels, the military and police betray him just the same in the end. Jumbo is unable to maintain good relationships or even emotional stability because he is suffering from alcoholism brought about by his time as a soldier.



His wife's betrayal of him came after a particularly bad beating over a picture that she purchased without his permission, and she does not realize that giving the money order to Pa will cause so much trouble for him. This is made worse by the fact that he ends his drinking binge, and when the men come for him, she suddenly panics and does everything she can in order to help him, but the damage is already done, and can't protect him from the consequences of her actions.

Vocabulary

insolent, confounded, trollop, crestfallen, suavely, placidly, beckoned, curt, drearily, beguiled, conviction

Nightpiece with Figures

Summary

Two men stumble into a barn. One of them tells the other he's gotten threatening letters from the Irish Republican Army, but that he's threatened them back and been left alone since. They hear footsteps and Peter checks outside to see what's happening. Two nuns come in, one old, the other young, and the group discusses others who have joined their cause and gone on to do other things, or have been killed by enemies. The nuns say goodnight to the men who have gathered. The young men extinguish the lights and rest, still thinking of the young nun.

Analysis

This is a brief and fairly mysterious story about the presence of several young men who appear to be hiding, either on their way to some kind of attack or headed away from it. Each wonders what his own fate, along with the fate of Ireland, will be. This future is personified by the young nun who enters, and the older nun, who complains that the young one is too hot-blooded, represents Ireland's past.

Vocabulary

animatedly, sardonic, cobbles, extravagance, hypocrite, gaol, scapulars, unerringly, quenches



September Dawn

Summary

A group of soldiers has fled, and officers Keown and Hickey try to determine what needs to be done next for their safety. They return to their twelve soldiers and announce that they've disbanded. An hour later, Hickey and Keown are still together when someone shoots Keown's hat off. Hickey runs to an old mansion where a girl has come out to investigate the shots and returns to Keown. They decide to run, and several guns, including a machine-gun, are fired at them. They want to get back to their homes in the mountains, but the danger is great because enemies are looking for their column. They are pursued constantly through the day. They take refuge in a house owned by Hickey's aunt. Keown takes interest in a young woman there, and Hickey warns him against pursuing her.

Keown drinks too much and begins shouting about the wind early in the morning. He then swears that enemies are outside. Hickey strikes him and tries to convince him there's no one out there. From there, he goes to the young woman who is near the fireplace. He holds her and kisses her.

Analysis

This is a story about the lives that people lose in war, not through death, but instead through losing the possibilities they once had. Keown deals with the trauma of war by drinking and womanizing, but his loss is not so great compared to Hickey, who misses college but knows he can never return. His encounter with the girl at the end of the story also goes to show that he wants a family and decent life, which helps to better explain why he and Keown dismissed their soldiers the morning before. They don't want anyone else to suffer from this kind of life.

Vocabulary

outflanked, pugnacious, elocution, contemplated, irregulars, melodious, earmarked, rheumatism, obstinate, indignation



Machine gun Corps in Action

Summary

On a hillside, Sean Nelson and another soldier hear machine-gun fire. They find the man with the gun and speak with him briefly. He's taking his machine gun to join Jo Kenefick's column. They depart from the man and go to a schoolhouse where the schoolmaster's daughter complains about the gunfire. They find Jo Kenefick, who says he's been looking to kill the machine-gun man. The gunner turns up a few days later. They decide to attack a nearby village and the soldiers gather together in vehicles. The battle lasts for two and a half hours. The main character's vehicle gets struck and he must crawl under gunfire to restart it. The shooting stops as he starts up his vehicle, and he returns inside to discover that his crew has run over to the other side. He drives to the other soldiers, Jo Kenefick and Nelson amongst them, who are furious at the treachery. A few weeks later the man with the machine gun is seen shooting at a nearby farm. They travel to the mountainside and enter a farm tended by a widow, and the machine-gun man comes in. Sean insists that he be taken prisoner, but the man's wife arrives.

Nelson agrees to let the man, James, go, but refuses to let him take the machine gun. Again, the wife protests, and demands five pounds for it. They pay it, and the main character drives away with the machine gun.

Analysis

This is a satirical story about trying to fight a war and be decent humans at the same time. The machine-gun corps has no machine-gun, and the owner of the only one in the area is completely unreliable. The main character and Nelson are both decent human beings, but incompetent soldiers, as evidenced by their willingness to let James go and pay a huge sum for the machine gun at the end of the story.

Vocabulary

brigade, hamlet, converging, appalling, firebrand, quixotic

Laughter

Summary

A man tells the story of Alec Gorman to an old woman. Alec Gorman is a man who bombed several soldiers all by himself and then fled. Eric Nolan arrives and the old woman gives him a bomb. Suddenly a drunk man enters to retrieve a bracelet he forgot. The old woman goes with Eric and Stephen to a dark street and hands over guns and bombs to the two young men. They wait until two figures appear in the darkness and Stephen sees that one of them has a revolver. A vehicle approaches down the street and Stephen begins firing at it. The bomb explodes and the group flees. An old woman stops them to ask if the fighting has begun, but they tell her that an old woman was popping bags for fun.

Analysis

This story explores the dark attitudes adopted by many of the soldiers in the conflict between England and Ireland. The characters laugh at the destruction and loss of life that they cause, and even the old women in the story are somewhat deranged from the fighting. After all, Stephen would never have been in a position to bomb anything if it hadn't been for the old woman who gave him the weaponry.

Vocabulary

prudence, abstractedly, elegance, consternation, rheumatics

Jo

Summary

The reader is told the story about Jo and the Marshal. After a truce between factions in the Irish civil war is broken, the fighting resumes. Jo and the narrator get involved in combat, then spend the night in a castle. When they return to the other soldiers they learn that the Marshal wants to join the other side of the fighting. Jo becomes somewhat unstable, and believes the narrator is going to give him up to the other side. One morning not that long after, the narrator discovers the Marshal has been killed in fighting. Jo later explains he was the man who killed him.

Analysis

This is another story about the emotional effects that war can have on people, as exemplified by Jo, who begins to obsess that friends of his are after his girl, and who shoots and kills the Marshal, a son of a good friend of both himself and the narrator.

Vocabulary

squabble, daft, astray, melancholy, hypocrite



Alec

Summary

Alec is well-liked in town, especially amongst the women, but goes into a rage when he hears that a woman has insulted his friend, himself, and the Republic of Ireland. He gets into a fight with this woman, Najax. Alex tells war stories in the bar afterwards, and one man comes up to the narrator to tell him that he knows his father. They leave and make their way back to Alec's home, and Najax approaches them with a gun. She tells Larry what happened, and explains that she means harm to the woman that put Alec up to the assault earlier.

Larry rejoins Peter, Alec, and Alec's mother, who scolds Alec for what he did to the woman. Afterwards, Peter, Alec, and Larry get ready to go to battle. They travel the next day and take a bed in a house that evening, and Alec says he would like to speak to the master. Larry wakes up to a room filled with soldiers and fears being shot for having revolvers. However, the soldiers search the room and cannot find any weapons. Still, Larry and Alec are taken into custody and questioned. The questioning turns into a beating, but their luck changes as they are removed from the courthouse and sent to the prison. There they meet up with Peter, who has also been badly beaten. Alec gets very sick, befriends a watchman, and signs a declaration of allegiance to the enemy. He disappears with a watch officer shortly after. The last they hear of Alec, he managed to escape the enemy by throwing two men off of a rooftop while pretending to show them a cache of hidden weapons.

Analysis

This story focuses on the character Alec, and the way in which he has managed to survive through the conflict. Alec is impulsive, combative at times, as he is with Najax, but everyone who knows him likes him a great deal, and this is his strength as a character. When they are all taken prisoner, Alec grows sick in the jail, and this appears to symbolize the idea that Alec will not be able to survive without his freedom. The tension in the story comes from Peter and Larry's fear that he has defected to the enemy, and for a brief time it appears that the war has changed Alec forever. But this quickly proves not to be the case, as Larry hears through Najax, that Alec has not only recovered from his time in prison, but has protected Peter and Larry from being discovered through his actions.

Vocabulary

idler, breeches, misbegotten, solemnly, sordid, remonstrate, grudged, crotchety, confoundedly, suburbs, consumption, exposure



Soiree Chez Une Belle Jeune Fille

Summary

Helen Joyce is given a secret message to go to the Western. She is led into a back room there and given a message and instructions. She travels to a farmhouse looking for a few young men. A man tells her that the boys she is looking for are at Crowley's, and he offers to lead her there. Once she arrives, a woman she met a long time ago takes her to the drawing room. Michael Redmond takes the message, shrugs, and Helen must make her way back to the city, disappointed that the message seems unimportant. She decides to stay for tea first, and is told the story of Tommy and Vincent. Tommy is at the Crowley, and Vincent is a commanding officer of Staters, but they were once best friends.

An army doctor arrives and asks one of the men to come back with him to town. He has the body of a man who died in some fighting earlier. Jordan agrees to go with him, and Helen rides her bike home by herself.

Analysis

Helen is eager to begin her work at the beginning of this story, but it turns out to be very different from what she'd managed. There is no mention of the dispatch once she has delivered it, which disappoints her, but she is even more surprised about the story of Vincent and Tom, as the story details a more complicated relationship between enemies than she has imagined. Dr. Considine wants help burying the body from enemy soldiers, for example, and promises them no trouble from the assistance.

Vocabulary

drowsy, wain, discreet, inquisitive, unctuous, abashed, vague, pompousness, lingered, repulsive



Patriarch

Summary

The narrator, Jeremiah Dermot, tells the story of the Patriarch, who used to give candy to any children who could speak Irish. The narrator, a young child at the beginning of the story, goes to a grandmother who speaks some of it. He learns some phrases from her to share with the Patriarch. It turns out that the Patriarch does not speak Irish himself, but loves to hear it. The narrator grows close to the Patriarch, named Michael, and his housemaid Ellen. Time passes, and he becomes involved in the rebellion as a young teenager when the Patriarch is arrested briefly, but a peace treaty is signed several years later and Dermot and the Patriarch part company for a time.

The fighting resumes and Dermot goes back to the Patriarch's house. Ellen is furious with the Patriarch over his support of the young rebels and their fighting. The youngest rebel in their group is eventually killed, and the Patriarch meets Dermot as he goes to see the body. They walk together and the Patriarch says that the young man's death is his fault. Later, the Patriarch grows sick and Jeremiah goes to visit him. The Patriarch and Ellen are arguing about many things, and have been doing so constantly. The Patriarch has gone completely senile, and Ellen argues with a woman nicknamed "the Drake," until the Patriarch dies.

Analysis

In this story Dermot describes his relationship with the Patriarch, his boyhood hero, who convinced him of the importance of the rebellion. As both of them grow older, Dermot realizes that the man is not quite the hero he once believed him to be. He is patriotic and idealistic about Ireland, but ignorant of the effects that the revolution has on the lives of the young men he has influence over. For example, Jeremiah's father is permanently in England, and many of the young men hope for peace instead of war. When the Patriarch's youngest and favorite young soldier is killed, he blames himself for the death completely, and this is what causes him to become sick. Ellen and the Drake argue about religion downstairs from his deathbed, but for Jeremiah the strangest thing about the Patriarch's death is that a man once so full of ideals and pride could have been reduced to complete senility in his last hours.

Vocabulary

indiscriminately, induced, sedition, imbibed, decanter, pensions, irreverence, armistice, varnished, protruding



After Fourteen Years

Summary

The narrator returns home after traveling across country for fourteen years. He arrives and a woman discusses with him all of the changes that have taken place since he was gone. They part ways and the man knows that at least for a while, it will be painful adjusting to living here as he takes the train into the city.

Analysis

The title of this story is very important, as it gives the reader the amount of time the main character has been away from his place of birth. The reader does not know the specifics of the time he has spent away, but it is strongly suggested that the nun he speaks with was a girl he once had romantic feelings for. The irony of having his life settled comes from the fact that most of the people the two discuss are dead.

Vocabulary

lurched, jovial, convent, constraint, lumbering

The Late Henry Conran

Summary

An old man, Larry, tells the story of Henry Conran, an alcoholic. Henry leaves his wife, and his son, Aloysius, works hard to buy the house, and also found jobs for many of his siblings. Aloysius gets married, and his fiancé suggests they mention his father in the wedding announcement as “deceased.” But Henry is not dead, and he goes to the narrator when the news of Aloysius’ marriage reaches him. Since his disappearance many years ago, Henry has become an American citizen. He wants to take his wife to court over the announcement for defamation of character. Larry takes him to see Nellie, the wife, and even though he’s still furious with her, she talks him into going to bed. His daughters arrive, but Nellie sends them away.

Analysis

This is another satirical story that contrasts sharply with the short story presented before it. Henry has been missing for long enough that everyone assumes he is dead. He complains of “defamation of character,” yet left his wife twenty-five years ago and hasn’t spoken to anyone in the family since. Nellie seems very relieved to have him back despite his complete abandonment, and their relationship appears to pick up right where it left off over two decades ago.

Vocabulary

cross, delegations, defaming, aspersion, bigamy



The Sisters

Summary

Norah Coveney tells the story to the narrator about Miss Kate and Miss Ellen. Ellen is mentally ill, and Kate works hard to keep her out of an institution. Miss Kate dies suddenly. They find Ellen, and discover that she is not in fact the woman's sister.

Analysis

Kate is described as prideful. Though the shock of discovering her dead is great, it takes the men and even a few of the women a while to realize what has happened. It is never explicitly stated in the story, but Kate appears to be Ellen's daughter as opposed to her sister.

Vocabulary

shabby, astray, stupefied, pertly



The Procession of Life

Summary

Larry, the narrator, is a young man who has been locked out of his father's house for being out too late. He returns to the city and speaks to a watchman, who tells the boy that he hit his father with a fire-poker when a similar situation occurred to him. The watchman is about to send him away, but a woman arrives and sees him. Though the watchman is upset, she insists that he make tea for all three of them. She asks Larry to come home with her. They begin to leave, but are caught by a constable, who threatens to lock Larry up, but instead sends Molly on her way home and makes Larry stay with the watchman, Squinty. Finally, Larry goes home, unafraid of his father and fed up with the current situation.

Analysis

This is another humorous tale. Larry begins the night not having drunk before, and only having smoked once. His encounter with the police nearly leads him to do both, and he almost goes home with a strange woman. What began as fear over his father's reaction ends as a rejection of the authority of the constable and the watchman.

Vocabulary

quays, infirmary, reeling, surlily, subsiding, deftly, submissively, sniggered, constable, contentedly



Characters

Bonaparte

Bonaparte is a soldier with the Irish resistance. He is friends with his two prisoners, Belcher and Jeremiah, until he is ordered to assist in their execution.

Belcher and Jeremiah

Two English soldiers captured by the Irish and kept as hostages. They are generally accepted by their captors as friends, but executed when England decides to execute their own captives.

Lomasney

Lomasney is a soldier with the Irish resistance who discovers Paddy, an old acquaintance of his that had been rumored to have gone to the United States. Lomasney finds Paddy hiding in the loft of his parent's home.

Kieran

Paddy's father, who has been hiding him in his loft for many years.

Paddy

Kieran's son, who supposedly fled to the United States after a fight with another Irishman, but was in reality hiding in his father's loft.

Jumbo

Jumbo is an English informer and severe alcoholic. He is discovered by the Irish when his wife notifies them of a money order sent to him. Though he escapes capture once, he grows sick while being watched over by the English police forces, who send him to a hospital where he is found by the people trying to kill him.

Pa Kenefick

Pa is the one searching for Jumbo, and he eventually kills the other man for being a spy.



Keown

Keown is an Irish officer prone to womanizing and drinking. He is partners with Hickey.

Hickey

Hickey is an Irish officer. He is partners with Keown, but far more even-tempered.

Sean Nelson

Sean Nelson is a member of a machine-gun corps with no machine gun, and spends a great deal of time tracking down the owner of one.

Eric Nolan

Eric is a member of the Irish resistance who engages in bombing police barracks.

Jo

Jo is a member of the Irish resistance who suffers from paranoia and irrationality. He kills a man known as the Marshal, who is the son of a good friend of his.

Alec

Alec is a well-liked member of the Irish resistance who is captured one morning, only to make friends with his prison guards and escape to continue the resistance shortly after.

Helen Joyce

Helen is sent to the countryside for intelligence work and leaves quickly after a doctor arrives with a dead body he needs someone to help him bury.

The Patriarch

The Patriarch, also known as Michael, is the owner of a general store who promises candy to children who can speak Irish and eventually encourages many of these children to join the rebellion.



Henry Conran

Henry is an alcoholic who leaves his wife in Ireland for the United States, but returns after twenty-five years when he is listed as deceased, and blames his wife for doing so.

Nelly Conran

Nelly is Henry's wife, who did not want him mention in their son's engagement announcement, but is nonetheless blamed for the error by Henry.

Miss Ellen

Miss Ellen is supposedly Miss Kate's sister, and mentally challenged.

Miss Kate

Miss Kate is supposedly Miss Ellen's sister, and works hard to provide for her and keep her protected from others.

Larry

Larry is a young man who is locked out of his father's house for being home too late. He returns to the city to find it is far less welcoming than his father's house.



Objects/Places

Guns

Guns occur commonly throughout most of the stories, as many of the characters are soldiers.

Tea

Tea is usually made in social situations throughout the stories.

Letters

Many letters are sent back and forth in the stories, including the money order received by Jumbo, and the dispatch Helen is trusted with.

Nuns

Nuns appear in several of the stories, often encouraging the fighting.

Police Barracks

Barracks are common throughout Ireland, housing police from England used to enforce their laws on Ireland.

Villages

Villages are common occurrences throughout Ireland, and usually contain a small group of people who are all familiar with one another.

Inns/Bars

Many of the characters meet and congregate inside bars.

Themes

War

Each of the stories takes place during the Irish war of independence. The nature of this war is somewhat different from the stories of war most readers will be familiar with. Instead of large battles filled with cannon fire and trumpets, much of the fighting that occurs happens in small bursts, or in acts of sabotage after which the Irish soldiers withdraw quickly to evade authorities and regroup at a later time.

Also different about this war is the closely knit bonds between Ireland and England. Many of the soldiers feel no personal anger towards the other side, and this can leave them at odds with their duty quite often, especially with many of the characters who have family in England or serving the English military. As a result of many of these personal bonds, the fighting is often halted or modified to allow friends or even mere acquaintances to escape, and many from both sides seem to be aware of enemies in their midst, and can be surprisingly tolerant of them.

Family

Many of the stories explore the relationship between husband and wife, and several more explore relationships between mothers, daughters, and siblings. None of these relationships are portrayed as pleasant, and fights are very common within families, often erupting in violence and argumentation. Many families are split apart as the husband or wife decides to end the relationship for one reason or another, but divorce is unthinkable, so instead one family member decides to abandon the rest.

It is not clear that the tension within families is entirely derived from the stress caused by the war, though this is clearly a cause of it in many of the stories. The divisions within families instead seem to come from something more deeply rooted in the culture, related to the alcoholism that many of the characters suffer from.

Alcoholism

Almost every story in the collection deals with some degree of alcohol use, and fights commonly begin after a male has had too much to drink. As with the divisions in family life, some of the alcoholism may be attributed to the war, but that is not always clearly the case. Instead, it seems to be an accepted fact of life in Ireland at the times.

The fact that alcoholism appears so common in Ireland at the time goes unnoticed by many of the characters, and as a result is never directly discussed or considered seriously. Even Jumbo's wife is generally unconcerned with Jumbo's drinking after he is calmed down, and feels that she is capable of managing him despite the fact that she has been severely beaten by him numerous times.



Style

Point of View

As this is a collection of short stories, they are written in different points of view. At times they are first person, but typically they are written in the third. Another device used that affects point of view is to have a portion of the story told to the narrator through yet another character. Almost all of the stories are told in past tense, but “Nightpiece, with Figures” is told in the present tense.

The point of view of each of the stories depends primarily on the mood and atmosphere the author wishes to convey. Much of the violence is only described to the reader through another character or after the fact, and the point of view is often used to create mystery or ambiguity surrounding many of the characters. Some of the main characters in these stories are never identified by name at all, which emphasizes the idea that they may only be witnesses to the story itself, and not integral pieces of it.

Setting

The stories are all set in Ireland in the early twentieth century. The areas in which they take place vary greatly, from wilderness regions to cities to smaller villages. Most of the characters in the stories are young males, but many of the stories feature primarily female characters as well. As each of these stories is ultimately about life in this time and place, the setting works perfectly for them.

The setting of these stories can be somewhat difficult to understand. The author wrote these stories assuming that the reader would be more or less already familiar with the region and culture of Ireland at the time, so little explanation regarding the war itself is ever given. However, this does not seriously disrupt the stories themselves, because they are about the outcome of the wars presence in individual lives, as opposed to Ireland as a whole.

Language and Meaning

The language of the stories differs depending on the background and education of the characters involved, and for the most part is simple and straightforward. However, some portions of the stories can be difficult to follow, especially in dialogues where the reader is unlikely to be familiar with the patterns of speech adopted by early twentieth century Irish. This makes rereading several critical passages necessary, but does not seriously disrupt the flow of the stories in general.

The language of the stories are appropriate to the plots because they are first and foremost stories about life in Ireland, and their particular dialects are an important part of their social structure. Indirect language is used, especially by characters attempting



to avoid difficult subjects, and the reader must be careful to take note of important events and interactions between characters, as discussions can often become unclear otherwise.

Structure

The collection contains fifteen short stories, ranging from less than ten pages to over twenty. Each of the stories is told by a single narrative voice, but the type of character telling the story can vary greatly from story to story. There is much dialogue in each of the stories, and this tends to be the driving force for many of them.

The narrators also tend to pose questions to the reader at the end of the stories. Each of the stories contains one major plot, but as they are short stories, the nature of these plots can be somewhat subdued in comparison to a novel. Many of these plots end in an unsatisfactory manner, which is to say unfavorably for the characters, but this works well with many of the points O'Connor is trying to make with his fiction.



Quotes

It was an extraordinary thing, but in those few minutes Belcher said more than in all the weeks before. It was just as if the sound of the shot had started a flood of talk in him and he could go on the whole night like that, quite happily, talking about himself.

Once we heard a distant explosion that reminded us sharply of the men who had been out since midnight, felling trees and destroying bridges.

She heard a gate slam; it was a stretcher with a man's body lying on it. She flung herself screaming upon the body, not heeding the little streams of blood that flowed from beneath the armpit and the head.

They were interrupted by the sound of heavy footsteps. The young men sit up and listen tensely, but the one who has been speaking reassures them with a backward wave of his hand.

Hickey, dressed all in a black coat and green riding-breeches, was very tall and slim. He had the reputation of being as conscientious as he was inhuman, and there was a strain of fanaticism in his pale face and in the steely eyes behind their large horn-rimmed spectacles.

I sat in among a heap of spent bullet cases, made the doors tight, and drove lamely out of town.

Already, he could hear in the distance the sound of another lorry tearing up the road. He no longer wished to go, but felt as if he were rooted to the spot.

Say what you like, boys, the war with England was only a squabble between friends. A squabble that is beside our war.

Those were the last words of Najax as reported to Alex by Kate Nagle. Innocent enough, you will agree, but Alec in his simple way went off into a rage.

It was her first experience of headquarters work and already it was too much. She had come all this way and must go back again that night; yet it appeared as if the dispatch she had carried was of no importance to anyone and might as well have been left over until morning, if, indeed, it was worth carrying at all.

I remember one fateful day when I went into the shop on the Marsh. There was a young man inside talking over the counter with the Patriarch. And when he saw me, the Patriarch began to speak in his vivid and moving way about Holy Ireland, and about the beautiful tongue in which our fathers had sent down their message of undying hatred to children forgetful of their fame.



They sat together on a garden seat from which he saw again the town and the bay, even more quiet now. He heard nothing of its noise but the desolate screech of a train as it entered the station.

‘Up the Mollies!’ says he in the top of his voice. ‘Me ould flower, strike up the anthem of Fair Lane! Do you remember the night we carried deat and destruction into Blackpool? Shout it, me hearty man — Up the Mollies!’

I tell you there was a silence like the grave in that room for a full minute, an awful silence, and we looked at the corpse and back at Minnie, and at long last light began to dawn on us one by one.

He was locked out. Since his mother died, a year ago, it had been a cause of dire penalties and direr threats, this question of hours.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What makes Bender and Hawkins so likeable to the Irishmen? Why do they enjoy Hawkins' company if he is so argumentative and opinionated? Why are they executed and why doesn't Bonaparte encourage them to escape openly? Are they just doing their duty in killing the two Englishmen? If so, what makes them feel so guilty after the outcome?

Topic 2

Compare the soldiers in Attack to those in Laughter. How are they similar and how are they different? What role do women play in both of the stories and how are they different? What are the soldiers trying to accomplish in Attack? What about in Laughter, or is their goal completely clear to the reader?

Topic 3

Discuss Jumbo's wife's betrayal of him. Was it really a betrayal? Why does she instantly regret her actions the moment men come for Jumbo? Why is she so determined, despite the abuse, to save her husband and keep him safe, even in the face of his attackers? How does her opinion of Pa Kenefick change in the story?

Topic 4

What is happening in the story Nightpiece with Figures? Why have the men gathered inside the barn, and what are the nuns doing there with them? What about the young nun preoccupies the men after both the women have left? Why does the older nun say that the younger nun is hot-blooded?

Topic 5

Discuss Alec's character. Is he a hero, or a manipulative drunkard? When he pretends to defect to the other side, what are his companions' reactions, and how do they discover that Alec actually saved them from being discovered? Was his treatment of Najax at the beginning of the story set right by the end?



Topic 6

Compare and contrast the stories *After Fourteen Years* and *The Late Henry Conran*. Both stories explore characters who have been missing for long periods of time, but how are they different from one another? Which story is funnier? Which story makes a stronger point about the disappearance of time?

Topic 7

Who is The Patriarch, and why does he encourage children to learn Irish if he cannot speak it himself? Is he right that he is responsible for the deaths of the young men he encourages to participate in the resistance? Why does he not marry his housemaid, and why did he never have children of his own?