

# **A Month in the Country Study Guide**

**A Month in the Country by J. L. Carr**

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## Plot Summary

*A Month in the Country* is the story of a World War I survivor named Thomas Birkin. Birkin travels to the small town of Oxgodby in the summer of 1920. He has been hired as part of a townspeople's will to uncover and restore a medieval wall painting in the church's arch. He arrives in Oxgodby, scarred by his experiences in the war and unwanted by the church's priest. He also knows not a soul in town.

As Birkin sets up living quarters in the church's bell tower, he begins working on uncovering the painting. He meets several townspeople. Moon, a war survivor, has been hired by Miss Hebron's executors to find a lost grave in the meadow next to the church. He and Birkin find an immediate friendship. They share their morning tea together and discuss their tasks and experiences. Birkin also befriends two females: Kathy Ellerbeck, a fourteen-year-old girl and Alice Keach, the priest's wife. He begins to fall in love with Alice. They share an unspoken and unconsummated love. Birkin senses several moments in which he could have acted, thus changing the course of their lives.

As Birkin works on restoring the painting, he experiences a deep sense of communication and contentment within his rural surroundings. His face twitch, which developed during the war, almost fades away. Mentally, Birkin feels happy and fulfilled. He is content and proud of his work. The painting itself leaves several questions in Birkin's mind: why a second painter appears to have finished the part of the painting depicting hell's fires and whether one of the damned was a real person from the parish. As he works, Birkin ponders these questions and marvels at the skills of the original painter.

As time goes on, Birkin finds himself drawn more and more into the community. His feelings of contentment deepen. He watches Moon plot out the outlines of an ancient basilica. He talks about a variety of topics with both Kathy and Alice. He also finds himself in unexpected places, including a church picnic and preaching in a neighboring town church.

As the novel ends, Birkin realizes that the original painter fell to his death in the church before finishing the painting. When Moon uncovers the lost grave, they also realize that the damned man in the painting is none other than the excommunicated ancestor of Miss Hebron. When Alice arrives to see, they share a moment where their love is almost spoken, but not acted upon. In the end, neither crosses the line. Alice leaves Oxgodby with her husband the next day. Birkin receives a letter from his estranged wife and decides to return to her. After gazing on the painting one last time, Birkin leaves Oxgodby and his time there comes to a close.



## Section 1 (through page 13)

### Section 1 Summary (through page 13)

*A Month in the Country* opens in Osgodby, England with a train stopping at the station platform. Thomas Birkin gathers his things and steps down. He adjusts his pack and takes a look at his map. A girl stares at him from the station house. Birkin imagines that she is looking at his coat, a pre-war herringbone tweed which reaches his ankles.

The stationmaster approaches him and offers an umbrella. Birkin tells him that he is going to the Church and can dry out when he gets there. As he arrives at the church, he speculates that the area probably has not seen a medieval wool boom. The church is modest. It is pretty in its own way including a squat tower and stone walls. It also seems to be in good repair. The rain does not appear to be leaking anywhere. The graveyard attached, has 18<sup>th</sup> century tombstones. Birkin pushes the squeaking door open and sees a stone floor, two aisles and a chancel beyond. Scaffolding fills the chancel's arch. Birkin climbs up the ladder attached to the scaffolding.

Birkin thinks about how everything Rev. J.G. Keach has told him. Birkin looks down and sees a man walking toward him. It is Keach. He tells him that he is not fond of Birkin living in the bell chamber of the church and hopes that Birkin has made other living arrangements. Birkin mutters that he doesn't have the money to rent anything. He asks if it is all right if he uses the church stove. After some discussion, Keach agrees to let Birkin use the stove and takes Birkin over to look at it. As they talk, Keach tells him that another man named Moon is also living at the church.

From the conversation, it is revealed that Birkin has been hired to uncover a wall painting in the church. Keach asks whether Birkin knows how old the wall painting is. Birkin responds that he won't know until he uncovers it. Birkin also learns that Keach doesn't want him working on the painting and the executors of a Miss Hebron's will are paying Birkin for his work. Miss Hebron had found part of the painting before painting over it. Her will left money for the painting to be uncovered. The church would not receive its share of the will until the painting is uncovered. This leaves Keach dependent on Birkin in order to get money for the church.

After Keach leaves, Birkin climbs the ladder and looks over the wall where the painting is thought to be. He thinks to himself that he knows the painting is underneath the paint and that it is bound to be a Judgment painting. This is Birkin's first solo job. Although the pay is bad, he will be able to show the painting to potential customers in the future.

### Section 1 Analysis (through page 13)

*A Month in the Country*, an understated, yet moving piece, tells the story of a man finding peace after the torments of war and a troubled relationship. Birkin has been hired to uncover and restore a historical painting in the church. As he works, he will, in



many ways uncover and restore his soul. The contrast in Birkin from start to finish illustrates a change. However, by the end, he will be transformed and healed.

In the beginning pages, we see Birkin introduced to Oxgodby, the church and the church's minister. We see Birkin's introduction to the painting he will be working on. Although it remains a mystery, he feels that it is beneath the paint, waiting for him to restore it. The job and the painting represent a possible new start for Birkin. The chapter also introduces the reader to Rev. Keach. He dislikes the fact that Birkin has been hired, but can do nothing about it, as the church's money depends on Birkin completing his task. Keach comes across as harsh and unyielding. He is directly contrasted to both Birkin and the station manager. The manager offers Birkin an umbrella and appears to be friendly and welcoming. Keach, in contrast, does not welcome Birkin or seem friendly.

Birkin, at this point, remains a mystery to us. Although he is narrating the story, we do not know his name. There is no indication about where he has come from or his background. We only see his passion for the painting he will uncover and a glimpse of his brokenness.



## Section 2 (pages 13-49)

### Section 2 Summary (through page 13-49)

Birkin sleeps in the bell tower. From the window, he can look out over the village. On the first morning there, Birkin unpacks his food. He thinks that if he is careful, he may be able to manage on fifteen bobs a week. The money he will be paid may last him until it is time to go back to London for the winter. He thinks that this opportunity may just help him turn the corner and make a new start.

Looking around the church, Birkin finds a baluster and a wall monument. The monument was a bas-relief of a young woman named Laetitia Hebron, who is "modestly hiding her essential glory by hanging on tight to a shroud as she clambered from an elegant cataglogue" (pg. 16). Under the monument are a few words from the woman's husband.

Birkin climbs up the ladder and lays out his tools. As he surveys the area, the church door opens and a man named Charles Moon enters. He says he is digging in the meadow next door and has stopped in to meet him. Birkin and Moon take an immediate liking to each other. "I liked him from that first encounter: he was his own man. And he liked me (which always helps)" (pg. 18).

They wander outside and Moon explains that he is looking for the grave of Miss Hebron's ancestor, Piers Hebron. Hebron had been excommunicated from the church and thus, buried outside the official cemetery walls in an unmarked grave. Moon has to make "reasonable efforts" in order to find the grave, but will be paid whether he does it or not. He says that he told the Colonel, Miss Hebron's brother, that the grave could be anywhere. He pulls out a picture of Miss Hebron and both men glance at the likeness of the woman. They talk about what she may have been like. When Birkin questions why Moon is there, he replies that he saw the outline of an early basilica and wants to plot out where it stood. After he finishes plotting the survey, he'll look for the man's bones. Birkin thinks in hindsight that Moon knows where the man is buried all along.

Moon invites Birkin to his tent for some breakfast. The tent is pitched over a hole in the ground. Moon jokes that he grew fond of holes during the war and it is better insulated that way. He tries to point out the basilica to Birkin. As he does, they see someone crossing the meadow towards them. Moon exclaims that it's the Colonel, who is wandering around like a lost soul. "He was a tall drooping man, carelessly dressed, disorganized, remote, the sort of man you couldn't make any contact with, who didn't even *look* as though he was listening" (pg. 23). Moon introduces Birkin to the Colonel. He asks them both how they are coming with their work, but doesn't wait for any replies before leaving.

The first day at the church was how Birkin spent most of his days in Oxbodby. He arose early, had a cup to tea with Moon, and then worked on uncovering the painting. Birkin



started by testing to see whether the painting is a Judgment work. He finds a head painted at the apex, meaning that more than likely, it was a Judgment. The head has a sharp beard, drooping moustache, and eyes outlined in black. The raised right hand of the figure is pierced. Birkin begins to see that the original painter was a skilled person, exhibiting a great deal of knowledge about color and paint. The figure's robe was blue, ground from lapis lazuli. It indicated that the painter had probably used some paint from a monastic job that he had also been working on, for a church like the one he was in couldn't have afforded it. Birkin thinks the Christ figure is uncompromising and threatening in its depiction.

Kathy Ellerbeck visits the church. She is the young girl that he saw staring at him when he arrived in Oxbogby. She asks if she can come up the scaffolding. Birkin replies that he has made a rule that no one will be allowed up for safety reasons. She says her dad told her to come look and see how he was coming along. "Well Kathy Ellerbeck was one of that rare breed and, to boot, she had the sense to know a kindred spirit wasn't going to be on hand for ever and that she must catch the fleeting moment e'er it fled" (pg. 27-8). She talks to him about the town and the lily painting that is behind the pulpit. Her father had told her she could bring a gramophone over to the church and play Birkin some records. She turns it on and sings some hymns and other songs for Birkin. Kathy comes on most days and sometimes brings her brother, Edgar. She often brings Birkin something to eat from her home.

Birkin works several days before Alice Keach comes to the church. The day is hot and Birkin has gone outside to eat his lunch. He lays back on one of the stone tables in the graveyard and drops off to sleep. When he awakes, Alice is there staring at him. She wears a straw hat which disguises her age. She asks him if there is anything he needs and if he is sleeping well. She promises to bring him a rug even though Birkin says everything is fine. "She walked forward only a few paces, but near enough for me to see that she was much younger than Keach, no more than nineteen or twenty, and that she was very lovely. More than pleasant-looking I mean; she was quite enchanting" (pg. 33). She and Birkin talk about the puzzle that the painting represents and not knowing what lies beneath the paint. She tells him that she will have to come back to see how the puzzle is fitting together. When she leaves, Birkin wonders about her relationship with Keach, thinking that the oddest people sometimes end up together.

That evening, Moon comments on Alice's visit. He remarks about her beauty. Both are surprised that someone like Alice would be married to a man like Keach. Moon argues that it's an outrage. Birkin thinks to himself that he is glad that he still has the chance to at least look at Alice and admire her beauty. He hopes that she will visit him often at the church.

Birkin's work on the painting goes well in the days ahead. Due to the condition of the painting, he believes that it could have been hidden beneath the paint for a very long time. He speculates on why this happened so quickly. He wonders if the priest found fault with it or if there was a resemblance to someone in the church within the painting. Over the centuries, numerous coats of paint had been added. Birkin first makes a grid over the areas most likely to have part of the painting. He aims at making the painting



look right instead of returning it to its' original state. Birkin thinks that he is growing obsessed with uncovering the dead man's painting. He has an idea of what the final picture will include: the judge, a bailiff, the three Lords of Matthew 5, the multitudes moving towards heaven, and those being tossed into hell.

One day, Kathy arrives and invites Birkin to lunch and Sunday school with her and Edgar. When Birkin questions whether he is too old for Sunday school, Kathy suggests that he could help Mr. Dowthwaite with the "dafties." She suggests that Birkin could then come back with them to the house and have lunch with them. That Sunday, Birkin gets ready to go to the Ellerbeck house. Mr. Jagger, who is preaching in their city that day, will also have lunch with the Ellerbeck family. Birkin goes to Sunday school with Kathy and Edgar. The Superintendent, Mr. Dowthwaite, identifies three boys for Birkin to watch over. He does just that and is recruited to come back every Sunday to help with the boys.

On the way back to the Ellerbeck's, Kathy suggests that they stop by to see Emily Clough, who is dying of consumption. They decide to give her the flowers that Edgar has picked for his mother. They enter the house and go up the stairs to Emily's room. Kathy gives her a card that has been stamped with an "S," because Emily is sick. She tells her that she only needs six more stars or S's in order to get a prize. Emily says that she has been thinking that she'd like to get *The Forgotten Garden* as her prize and the children discuss their prize options, Sunday school, and how Emily likes Kathy's hat. On their way home, Kathy comments that Emily knows she is dying.

Birkin is down to his last bob and Keach has not given him the first installment for the work uncovering the painting. He thinks that Keach has not forgotten, but rather, is going to make Birkin ask for it. This irritates Birkin as he has no money to even buy a paper. He decides that he must knuckle under and ask Keach for the money. Birkin goes to the vicarage located in a small wooded area. When Birkin reaches the door, he rings the bell several times. Alice appears and starts talking about what it is like to live in the woods. "Here I was, almost a stranger, being told of a most alarming nightmare she'd been having—how trees had been closing in on her, first swaying menacingly, then dragging up their roots and actually advancing, closing in until mercifully fended off at the last minute by the house walls" (pg. 45). When she pulls herself together, Birkin asks to see her husband. She leads him through the large house. They reach Keach, who is in the relatively bare living room. He takes Birkin on a tour through the near empty house. Birkin becomes eager to leave the house and the inhabitants' strange behavior. Alice follows him out and shows him a Sara van Fleet rose bush. She says that she always wears one of the pink blooms in her hat. It is not until later, that Birkin realizes that he forgot to ask Keach about the money. However, Mossop shows up the next day with the installment.

## Section 2 Analysis (pages 13-49)

On Birkin's first full day in Oxgodby, he is introduced to a number of new people. The first person he encounters is Moon, the man searching for the unmarked grave of Piers





Hebron. Moon and Birkin find an immediate friendship due to the fact that they have both lived through WWI and are tormented by their experiences. Each is working to uncover and restore something. For Birkin, it is the painting and for Moon, it is the basilica and grave. They begin sharing their morning tea, as well as conversation throughout various parts of the day.

Birkin also begins receiving visits from Kathy Ellerbeck, a young girl who draws him into her family life and the community. In many ways, Birkin becomes almost a surrogate family member for the Ellerbecks. They invite him to lunch and spend time with him, bringing him food and generally caring about his well being. Both of the Ellerbeck parents seem to take Birkin under their wing. They encourage him and try to make his time there pleasant.

Birkin is also introduced to Alice Keach. She is beautiful and intelligent, though shy. Birkin is drawn to her and the two become friends. Alice visits him in the church often. She is intrigued not only by Birkin, but by the painting. We see that Rev. Keach complicates Alice's life. His unease in Oxgodby seems to be transferred to Alice at times, particularly when we see their house and Alice's tales of her nightmare.

In addition to the people Birkin meets during his days in Oxgodby, he also starts uncovering the painting in the church's arch. He begins to see what the painting is, a Judgment, and what is included in it. He also learns things about the original painter. Birkin feels that he is working on the masterpiece of a skilled artisan. Birkin finds a comforting rhythm, a growing confidence in the job, and his growing relationships with those around him.

We begin to see Birkin's transformation here. He is slowly being drawn into a web of relationships with those around him. He is enjoying the work that he is doing. He is finding a sense of happiness and peace as well. From the broken, displaced man who arrives in Oxgodby, we begin to see Birkin growing in confidence and contentment.



## Section 3 (pages 49-74)

### Section 3 Summary (pages 49-74)

The summer in Oxgodby is wonderful. The meadows are green and the woods are leafed out. Birkin feels content living there and working on the painting. He thinks that he could go on and on like this. The days fall into a similar pattern: eating breakfast in the bell tower, shaving in the graveyard, sharing a cup of tea with Moon, having a short mid-day break, and working until six or seven in the evening. A few days after Birkin's visit to the Keach's, Kathy comes to visit him. She is out of school for the summer. She asks him if he's thought about staying in Oxgodby. She suggests that he could work as a rent collector or a schoolteacher. Kathy admits that her parents are very fond of Birkin and that everyone in town would miss him if he left. Birkin promises to think about it, but does so in a joking manner.

Alice has also started visiting Birkin while he is working. She enters the church, leaving the door slightly ajar, and sits in the back pew. They talk casually, often just a remark, question, or answer. He tells her a bit about where he is at and how the paint is made out of a variety of materials. After a long silence, Birkin knows that she has gone.

Before coming to Oxgodby, Birkin hadn't really attended church since he was a boy. However, Birkin cannot help to be thrown into the middle of it. First, he awakes to Mossop ringing the bell above him. He hears Keach below him, leading the worship in the church. On Sunday evenings, Birkin attends the Wesleyan church with the Ellerbecks and has dinner with them. Birkin muses that the Wesleyan services are much livelier than the ones Keach leads. The church has a different preacher each service and even Mr. Ellerbeck preaches, transforming himself into a passionate and roaring man on the pulpit. After services, the people gather around the organ and sing hymns. One night, Birkin sings a song that mentions drinking alcohol, which Mrs. Ellerbeck nicely reprimands him about. Later, Mr. Ellerbeck reveals that Mrs. Ellerbeck's father had been an alcoholic and one night while drinking, he fell down the stairs and died. At the next gathering, she asks him to sing the song again, but Birkin changes the words so that it's about drinking tea instead.

By this time, Birkin has finished the apex and the left hand side of the painting. The original artist used gold leaf on the nobles' clothes and cinnabar to the lips and cheeks of the angels. Yet, Birkin finds that once the painter started on the damned souls, he used cheaper materials and the workmanship isn't as good as the rest. To most of the damned, the painter had given little detail. However, there was one who had a great amount of detail and Birkin thinks this may be a portrait. The man has bright, red hair and a crescent shaped scar on his forehead. Two demons clutch him, splitting him with shears while he plunges down headfirst. Birkin is excited by the find and decides to take a look at the whole painting. While Birkin is looking at it, Moon climbs the ladder and says that the painting will cause quite a stir because of the man's depiction. Birkin tells him that this painting is unique because one man painted the vast majority of the



painting. According to Birkin, other paintings from this time period were drawn by one person and filled in with coloring by an assistant. Moon comments that he likes the fact that only the two of them know about how great the painting is. However, Birkin states that he thinks Alice might know as well. Moon expresses regret that nothing has occurred between the two of them and then asks if Birkin is married. Birkin tells him that he is, but his wife, Vinny, has left him for someone else. It has not been the first time she had done this. They continue to stand, looking at the painting. Birkin tells him how the man with the crescent scar was covered up soon after it was done and before the rest of the painting. Moon states that as well and thinks the man may have resembled a real person. He asks what Mossop, the caretaker, thinks about the painting. Birkin replies that he thinks Mossop assumes Keach will paint back over the painting as soon as he can.

Birkin and Moon go out into the sunshine. Birkin thinks back to what Moon said earlier about the possibility of something happening between Alice and him. He thinks about what it might be like and that everyone must have dreams. "What with being absorbed in my work and her being *Mrs. Keach*, I'd never thought of her except as a charming woman I enjoyed talking to and, given an excuse, looking at. But Moon's speculative enquiry had changed that, and now I found it pleasantly disturbing to consider the possibility of wandering off with her to some quiet room, eating supper, taking her hand, touching her, kissing" (pg. 64). Just then, Keach appears and asks if Moon has found anything. He states that it seems like a waste of money to be searching for the man's bones. Birkin and Moon discuss what it must be like to live with him.

The weather stays hot and dry in August. Birkin finds the steady rhythm of working and living agreeable. He is happy and content. "Standing up there on the platform before a great work of art, feeling kinship with its creator, cosily [sic] knowing that I was a sort of impresario conjuring and teasing back his work after four hundred years of darkness. But that wasn't all of it. There was this weather, this landscape, thick woods, roadsides deep in grass and wild flowers" (pg. 67).

Birkin has dinner with the Ellerbecks' every Sunday. One Sunday, Mr. and Mrs. Ellerbeck discuss the problem that Mr. Ellerbeck has for the day. He has been scheduled to preach at Barton Ferry in the afternoon and then in Malmerby at six. Mrs. Ellerbeck says her husband has been doing too much and should take a rest. She suggests that Birkin go in Mr. Ellerbeck's place, giving the sermon at Barton Ferry. The family plans it out and Birkin is unable to create a successful evasion, so he finds himself biking to Barton Ferry to give the sermon.

When he arrives, he finds a young woman. She is waiting by the door. Birkin explains why he is there and it turns out that the woman is the organist. Two children, a farm lad, and an elderly man arrive and sit down. Birkin leads them through several hymns and a stumbling prayer. He decides on the pulpit not to give a sermon, but rather, talk about what he is doing in Oxbodby. His talk is well received.

Afterwards, the young organist invites Birkin to her parents' home for tea. They have a photo of a young soldier who they tell Birkin was their son Pierce. It is implied that he



died during the war. On his way home, Birkin curses those who started the war and cries that there is no God. When he arrives at the Ellerbecks, he tells them that he has learned that he is not cut out to be a preacher. They tease him about his tea with Lucy Sykes and they try to arrange for another meeting between the two. The Ellerbecks, it seems, want to do some matchmaking. However, they also don't realize that Birkin is married. In the coming days, he finds news of his tea with Lucy has spread around town quickly.

### Section 3 Analysis (pages 49-74)

The title of the novel, *A Month in the Country*, points us to part of the transformation of Birkin. The rural, country town is romanticized and idealized in the book as a place of contentment and happiness. Birkin finds the restorative powers that he couldn't find elsewhere. This is true for other characters as well. Moon also finds a sense of peace after his experiences in the war. Even the young, dying Emily seems at peace with her situation. The landscape, hills, and woods creates a sense of peace and rightness. Although we see darkness in their backgrounds (Mrs. Ellerbeck's alcoholic father, for example), the past fades and peace and warmth replace it.

Interestingly, though, this peace and contentment is not available for everyone. Keach, in particular, finds life in Oxgodby difficult. He is not well liked by his parishioners and other townspeople. This appears to bother him. Both he and Alice comment that he was not like this before Oxgodby, but here, he has become troubled, contrary, and harsh. Although they profess this to be true, Birkin and Moon react with skepticism to this, indicating a certain belief that Keach has always been like this. In this way, it appears that the restorative powers of the country are available to only those who receive it openly and to those who have been broken down by events. Keach appears rigid and hard. He does not welcome the peace that the country offers. Keach's disconnection to the country also affects Alice. Although she seems at times to be at peace and carries with her part of the country, she is also somewhat tormented. We see this when Birkin visits her at the vicarage and she tells him about her nightmare. We get the sense that without Keach, Alice would be completely at peace in Oxgodby and able to become comfortable in the warmth of the town.



## Section 4 (pages 74-111)

### Section 4 Summary (pages 74-111)

While working, Birkin thinks about the work, the painting, and the painter. The original painter had very good technical skills. He also wonders about the man who is plunging into hell and whether the painter knew him. When Moon asks him about the painter, Birkin responds that the work isn't signed, but he does know that the man had light hair, as strands of it turned up in the paint. He was also right handed and probably around six feet tall. The painter had also filled in the whole painting except for the small corner of hell, apparently not trusting his apprentice with the painting. After Moon leaves, Birkin suddenly realizes why the original painter hadn't filled in the bottom section: the painting was the man's last job. Birkin realizes that the man must have fallen from a ladder or scaffolding and died while working on the painting. This explained why the painter hadn't finished.

The next day, Alice climbs up the ladder, surprising Birkin. When she sees the painting of hell, she asks him if he believes in hell. Birkin thinks to himself that his experiences in the war were hell. He answers that he thinks hell is different for different people. She asks about hell on earth, apparently reading his thoughts. Birkin tells her that he's seen it and lived it. As they talk, Birkin thinks to himself that he may have missed a chance to touch her and to find a greater intellectual intimacy with her. Instead, she climbs down the ladder and tells Birkin that she has left him some eggs. Birkin wonders to himself what her first night with Keach was like.

After she leaves, he goes to Moon's tent. They talk abstractly about the war, reminiscing about the horrors without actually talking about them. Moon tells him of a man he knew, who went back to teaching after the war and who would throw himself to the ground whenever a student would drop a desk lid. The men admit to still having trouble with the memories of the war, but admit that they are doing better in Oxgodby. Moon says that sometimes during the war, he just wanted to die. They watch the landscape and Moon decides that they need a holiday the next day.

The following day, Moon and Birkin set out for the field where Mossop is working. They help him with the sheaves and then eat rabbit and potato pie with Mossop and his wife. When they return to the church, Birkin finds Kathy waiting to remind him about the Sunday school treat the next day. When asked, she says that Moon won't be able to come because the treat is a reward for service and only Birkin has attended the church.

The next day, Birkin is picked up by a horse and cart and taken to the treat. Birkin says that the day will always remind him of the summer days: cloudless skies, flowers, and green grass. The group arrives on a plain where the families eat lunches of hard-boiled eggs and tomato sandwiches. The men take off their jackets and run around. Couples sneak off alone and women sit around talking to each other. As night falls, they return to Oxgodby, where they hear that Emily Clough has died.



Birkin leaves Oxgodby once to visit Ripon. The Ellerbecks are going to look for a new pipe organ and they invite him along as they want his opinion on a possible purchase. They arrive in Ripon by train and go to Mr. Baines's Piano and Organ Warehouse. They find at least thirty pianos and a couple of pipe organs. The proprietor shows them several organs and the Ellerbecks try one or two out. When the proprietor leaves, they look at the price tags and narrow down the choices to three. Kathy plays each of the organs and they compare notes on the conditions of the organs. At one point, other customers also begin playing the organs. Kathy asks Birkin to see how long they will be because she can't hear. When Birkin looks, the other customer is Alice and he thinks that she almost laughs at seeing him. He retreats before talking to her, telling Kathy that the others are almost finished. The Ellerbecks sing a hymn along with Kathy's playing and Birkin is embarrassed by what Alice must think of them. They finally buy one of the organs.

Birkin remains in Ripon, telling the Ellerbecks that he needs to visit a Minster. Afterwards, he wanders around the town looking for something to eat. While resting, a man named Milburn approaches Birkin. They had both been in the war and Milburn asks Birkin what he was up to now. When Birkin mentions Moon, the man says that he has heard of him. Apparently, the military police found Moon in bed with his batman and Moon had been through a court martial. Birkin isn't upset that Moon is homosexual, but feels it isn't something he'll forget. After returning, Birkin thinks that Moon knows he knows something and things are not the same between them.

Birkin's work is almost done. He's been touching up various parts and is enjoying the days of summer. He realizes that he is secretly in love with Alice, but he is married and so is Alice. Although Vinny had left him for someone else, neither had ended the marriage and he is sure that Alice would never step over the bounds of marriage. Alice continues to come each day. They even talk about Vinny and the man that she'd left him for. When Alice asks him how he can laugh about it, he tells her that Oxgodby has been good for him. Alice tells him of her school days and how the village has not been easy on Keach. They are thinking of leaving. Birkin tells her that he's sure that people would miss them if they left. As proof of this, he tells her that Mrs. Ellerbeck thinks that Alice is attractive. He then tells her that he finds her attractive. But as he is telling her, she only gives him a nod. Mossop interrupts them and she leaves.

The next day, Keach shows up with Birkin's money and says that the work is done. Birkin wonders what Alice may have told him of their conversation the previous day. Birkin says that he isn't finished yet and if Keach tries to prevent him from finishing, he'll tell the executors. As they face off, Keach softens. He says that he wasn't always like this, but life in the village has been hard on him. Before leaving, he hands the envelope to Birkin.

When Birkin tells Moon of the encounter, Moon says that he sees Keach's point. Birkin really is finished. He thinks Birkin is avoiding finishing because it will mean that he will have to leave Oxgodby and the friends he has made. Moon says that he is almost ready to take off himself. He has done what he came to do.



The next morning, Moon calls out to Birkin and produces a Divining Rod, which he wants to use to search for the remains of Miss Hebron's ancestor. They start at the depression that Moon pointed out when Birkin first arrived. Using the diving rod, Moon thinks that he has found it. He begins to dig and is excited about being where someone dug five or six hundred years ago. They find various artifacts, which seem to date back to the time that Miss Hebron's ancestor was buried. A number of visitors' come during the day to see how they were doing. Finally, they find the stone tomb and Moon thinks there may be a name on it. When he wipes off the lid, he finds "I of all men most wretched" in Latin. He photographs the grave and eventually publishes an account of it. They remove the lid and look inside, finding "dessicated [sic] brown bones and a little dust" (pg. 103). They also find a crescent inside, indicating that the man had been Muslim. Moon tells Birkin to find Keach and he'd get the colonel so they can show them. "But first we'll climb your ladder and have a look at his face before it fell off" (pg. 104). The man in the grave was the damned man in the painting.

Birkin decides that the next day will be his last. He works through the morning and takes his lunch around two. Falling asleep on the tomb slab, he awakes to find Alice standing there. She has brought him some apples and they talk about the apples and Alice's childhood. She asks to see Birkin's living area in the church. They climb up to the bell tower. Alice wonders about the picture the congregation must have made on Sundays for Birkin. However, Birkin tells her that he has only been able to see her hat. As they talk, Birkin leans forward to point out where Moon had been working and Alice leans into him. Later, he thinks that he should have turned and kissed her and everything would have been different. But, he does nothing. She withdraws and leaves.

The next day, she is not in church. Birkin didn't want to face anyone, so he sets off across the fields, walking west. It is dark when he gets back. He is not really thinking as he follows the drive up to the vicarage. A bedroom window is open and Birkin thinks for a minute that he can see Alice in her nightdress. However, he realizes that it is only the curtain. Later, he has no recognition of returning to the church. In the morning, Birkin stays in the belfry, ignoring Moon's calls. Finally, he leaves at night to see if Alice is waiting for him. When he reaches the vicarage, he realizes that the house is empty. He thinks to himself that Alice and Keach have gone and that he will never see her again.

The following day, Birkin looks out from the belfry and sees that summer has gone. He receives a letter from Vinny, who wants him to come home to her. He has no illusions, knowing that she will leave again, but he will go anyway. He packs his gear and gazes once more at the painting. He feels little as he steps from the church. "Then (and I can't explain it) the numbness went and I knew that, whatever else had befallen me during those few weeks in the country, I had lived with a very great artist, my secret sharer of the long hours I'd laboured in the half-light above the arch" (pg. 111). Birkin returns to the church and climbs the ladder. He feels the old excitement and a sureness that someone would stand there in the future and understand.

Birkin never returns to Oxgodby and never communicates with anyone from there again. The days of that summer remain in his memory alone.



## Section 4 Analysis (pages 74-111)

By the end of the book, Birkin has spent long summer days uncovering a masterpiece and awakes each morning to a soothing view outside the bell tower windows. He has made friends with the Ellerbecks and has been invited into their home weekly, as well as receiving visits and food from them. He has found fraternal companionship with Moon, discussing their work and the townspeople. He has fallen in love with Alice and has been able to see the potential of new life through her. Most striking, however, is the inner transformation in Birkin. When he arrives in Oxgodby, he is a broken man, tormented by his war experiences and a failed marriage. He is afflicted by a face twitch that contorts his features. Yet, in the country, Birkin experiences a sense of restoration. He is able to laugh at the events of his marriage and feels content and happy. His face twitch fades and he is drawn into a web of relationships in the town. Instead of a lonely, meager existence, his life bursts forth with love and people who care for him and treat him well.

In many ways, the process of uncovering the painting symbolizes the larger uncovering of the characters and the restoration of their lives. Like the painting, Birkin arrives in Oxgodby as a mystery. In fact, we don't find his name until well into the novel. Instead, he is a mysterious figure, dressed in an old, ankle-length coat. We know little about his background or his life, beyond that he has come to uncover the painting and he has been in the war. As the novel progresses, the painting is slowly uncovered as Birkin is revealed to us. We learn his name. We learn that he is married. We learn some of his experiences in the war, and so on. Yet, like the painting, we don't see the big picture of Birkin at one time. Rather, Carr slowly reveals him to us, giving us hints of things to come. As the painting is restored, Birkin also finds a sense of healing. He is able to laugh about his marriage and he feels content and happy in Oxgodby. He has become more whole after the brokenness that he has experienced. There are still flaws and issues in the painting, but for Birkin, he has now revealed the identity of the damned man, bringing his legacy to the public eye. Birkin's life is not perfectly restored, though. His marriage to Vinny has all the promise of continued trouble and the woman he now loves has left his life.

This same process of revelation also takes place with Moon. For him, the search for the tomb and its inhabitant reflects his life. Like Birkin, Moon searches for healing from the horrors of the war. His search for the basilica is hidden from most of the other characters and the executors of Miss Hebron's will. In many ways, Moon remains hidden to us. We know bits and pieces about him, but most of what is revealed to us, is through Birkin's eyes. We know very little about his background or what he thinks and dreams about. His discovery of Piers Hebron mirrors Birkin's discovery of Moon's homosexuality. Both men have been tormented and persecuted, albeit in different ways, for whom they were and the choices they made. Both of the secrets about the men are revealed to Birkin in the end.





# Characters

## Thomas Birkin

Birkin is the narrator of *A Month in the Country*. He has been hired to uncover the painting in the Osgodby church's arch. Tormented by memories of the War and his troubled marriage, Birkin hopes to find peace and a new start in Osgodby. He stays in the church's bell tower and spends his days working on the painting and talking with Moon, Kathy, and Alice.

We know little about what Birkin looks. We know that he is in his twenties and that he has a face twitch on his left side. He appears to have been afflicted with this sometime during, and because of, the War. Birkin is a dedicated worker and passionate about the painting he is uncovering. He trained with another man to learn how to do this and the job at the church is his first solo job. Spending much of his time working on the painting by himself, he seems to enjoy contemplating the painting and the original painter.

As the story unfolds, we learn Birkin is married, but his wife has left him for another man. This has happened before. His discussions of the War illustrate the horror and pain that Birkin experienced. Yet, as his story unfolds, we also watch Birkin become connected to individuals in Osgodby. He is transformed in many ways by life in Osgodby and the people there. The long summer days and companionship with Moon, Alice, and the Ellerbecks leave Birkin content and happy, ready for a new start in life.

## Charles Moon

Moon is a short man around twenty-seven or twenty-eight. He has a round face and blue eyes. He has been hired by Miss Hebron's executors to find the grave of her ancestor, Piers Hebron, who had been buried outside the graveyard because of his excommunication. He had taken the job because he believed that a basilica was located in the meadow where he was to be searching for Hebron's bones. He spent most of the summer surveying and plotting the basilica before locating the grave just before Birkin leaves Osgodby.

As the book progresses, we learn that Moon has been in the War. He has pitched his tent over a pit. He tells Birkin that he found the pit familiar and has shrapnel in his leg that causes it to stiffen up. Moon received an M.C. award for saving another man, but is put through a court martial after he is discovered in bed with another man. Although Birkin doesn't seem to care that Moon is homosexual, the knowledge and Moon's sense that Birkin knows of his homosexuality change their friendship.



## Mrs. Alice Keach

Alice is Rev. Keach's wife. She is around nineteen or twenty and is beautiful. She is however, shy. At one point, Birkin compares Alice to Botticelli's Primavera. Alice typically wears a wide brimmed straw hat with a Sara van Fleet rose stuck in it. Birkin first meets Alice when she comes to the church to inquire about whether he is comfortable in the belfry. She returns often to visit with Birkin while he works of the painting. Their conversations range widely from topic to topic.

She appears to be haunted, not only by the nightmare that she tells Birkin about, but also by her marriage to Keach. Although she defends Keach to Birkin, it is also clear that she is not entirely happy or content with him. By the end of Birkin's time in Oxgodby, Alice has also fallen into love with Birkin. Although there are several instances where something almost happens between the two of them, ultimately, neither Birkin nor Alice seems to want to cross over that line. This is probably because both are married to others.

## Kathy Ellerbeck

Kathy is an Oxgodby resident who visits Birkin often at the church and sings while he works. She is fourteen with blue eyes and freckles. She is big for her age. She encourages Birkin to come to her home to eat with her family and to attend Sunday school with her and her brother, Edgar.

Through Birkin's eyes, we see Kathy as a smart, precocious child who is concerned with the welfare of others. We see this not only in her approach to Birkin, but in drawing him into her family. Her concern is also seen with the way that she treats Emily Clough, who is dying.

## Rev. J.G. Keach

Keach is around thirty, tall, and slightly weak looking. Birkin describes him as businesslike and somewhat arrogant. Both Keach and Alice state that Keach has had trouble fitting in as the minister in Oxgodby and that he has not always been how he appears now. However, from Birkin's descriptions and from Keach's actions, it appears that this is exactly how Keach is. We never really see him as anything other than a slightly arrogant. He is always ill-at-ease man and resents Birkin's presence. Keach is opposed to Birkin's employment at the church, but has to put up with it in order for the church to receive its share of Miss Hebron's inheritance.

## The Painter

Although not physically present in the novel, the painter of the masterpiece that Birkin is uncovering is present in Birkin's mind. Birkin thinks that the man had blond hair and was



around six feet tall. He speculates that he eventually fell to his death in the church. Birkin believes the man to be very skilled and talented.

## **Mr. Ellerbeck**

The town's train stationmaster, Mr. Ellerbeck is a kind man who takes Birkin under his wing. In addition to his duties at the station, he sometimes preaches at the Wesleyan church in Oxgodby and at neighboring churches. One day when he has been scheduled to preach two services in a single afternoon, Birkin fills in for him at one. Birkin states the pulpit transformed Mr. Ellerbeck from mild mannered to a roaring, raving madman, who bashed his fists upon the podium.

## **Mrs. Ellerbeck**

Kathy's mother, Mrs. Ellerbeck welcomes Birkin into her home and family. She often invites him to lunch and sends him food. She appears as a warm, friendly woman who cares deeply for her family and has great concern for Birkin. She once reprimands Birkin for singing a song about alcohol. Mr. Ellerbeck later reveals to Birkin that her father had been an alcoholic.

## **Miss Hebron**

Miss Hebron had died by the time the novel takes place, but she has instructed her executors to pay for the restoration of the painting and for Piers Hebron's grave to be found. Thus, it is through Miss Hebron that Birkin and Moon end up in Oxgodby. Moon has a picture of Miss Hebron, which shows a woman with fair hair, a long face, and a slightly cynical smile.

## **Piers Hebron**

He lived during the Middle Ages. He had been excommunicated from the church and buried outside the graveyard of the church. Moon has been hired to find his grave. When he and Birkin are in their last days in Oxgodby, they realize that Piers is the damned man in the church's painting.

## **Mossop**

He is the caretaker for the church and vicarage. He also rings the bell on Sunday mornings. Birkin and Moon also spend a day helping him in the field with the sheaves. For the most part, Mossop remains behind the scenes of the novel with his appearances coming through other people mentioning him.

## Vinny

Although she never directly appears in the book, Birkin discusses her from time to time. She is his wife, but she had run off with another man. From Birkin's dialog, we know that she has done this before and he expects her to do it again. At the end of the novel, she writes to Birkin asking him to return home to her.



# Objects/Places

## Oxgodby

This is the town where Birkin is living when he uncovers the painting in the church. It is a small, quiet, rural area surrounded by woods, orchards, and meadows. Birkin describes it as a "vast and magnificent landscape" (pg. 14). The people are friendly and several, including the Ellerbecks, take Birkin under their wings, inviting him for dinners and other events.

## The Painting

Birkin is hired to uncover a painting in the Oxgodby church's arch. Throughout the book, the painting is slowly uncovered and restored. It is a Judgment painting. A depiction of Christ was located in the apex of the arch. The painter had given him a sharp beard, drooped moustache, and heavy, lidded eyes. His garment was an ultramarine, which had been made with ground lapis lazuli. Birkin sees the painting's Christ as uncompromising and threatening. The painting also has notabilities, a seraphic cast, and a host proceeding to heaven.

In the lower corner, the damned souls are shown on the brink of hell's flames and they are hurtling into them. Most the damned were shown with little detail, but one man seems to be a portrait of Piers Hebron himself. Birkin is very interested in this man and supposes that it is a portrait before figuring out who it most likely was.

## The Church

Birkin is hired to uncover a painting in the church. It has a squat tower, a chancel with a shallow, pitched roof, and a graveyard next to it. Inside, is a stone floor, two low aisles, and three pillars on each side of the nave. Keach has set up scaffolding for Birkin in the chancel's arch, where the Judgment painting is.

## Vicarage

The Vicarage that the Keach's live in is located in a small, wooded area. The woods form something like a tunnel over the drive to the vicarage. The house itself was large, but the walls had an unpleasant greenish tinge to them. Inside, the house was largely empty of furniture with the Keaches only having a few items in several rooms.



# Themes

## Revelation

Much of the book centers on the uncovering or revelation of something: the painting, Piers Hebron's bones, the basilica, and in some ways, each of the characters. The painting has brought Birkin to Oxgodby, as he uncovers the painting from the many layers of paint that have gone over it. Slowly, each piece of the painting is revealed: Christ, the angels, and the damned. We, like Birkin, only see parts of it as he works, with the whole revealed to us later. Likewise, the search for Piers Hebron's bones and the basilica has brought Moon to Oxgodby. Both men have been hired to uncover and restore things that have significance to Miss Hebron, and by the end, each has done just that.

Like the painting and the bones, the characters themselves are also uncovered over the course of the book. We see the secret, unspoken love of Alice and Birkin develop and slowly reveal itself to the two of them. We also learn of the lives of some of the characters before Oxgodby. Birkin slowly reveals that the Vinny he spoke of early on is his wife, making his growing love for Alice all the more complicated. Birkin also discovers that Moon was court martialed for homosexuality and that Mrs. Ellerbeck's father was an alcoholic. We see Alice's uneasiness with Keach, Kathy's warmth for others, and Birkin's brokenness. In many ways, the characters' secrets and hidden desires are revealed as the events of the book occur. Throughout the book, there are hints and glimpses of what will be revealed before it is fully seen.

The book also reveals the painting's mysteries. As Birkin uncovers the painting, he questions why the lower corner lacks the same detail and skill as the rest. He also questions the significance and history of the one damned. These questions haunt him to some degree and he returns to them again and again. Gradually, Birkin comes to realize that the painter had not painted the lower corner and that this painting had been his last. The painter had died while working on the painting, probably falling to his death. It takes Moon's discovery of Piers Hebron for the mystery of the damned man to be solved. They realize that Piers Hebron is that man.

## The Country

The very title of the book, *A Month in the Country*, suggests a restorative and restful period of time in a rural, quiet setting. Although the period of time in the book appears to be longer than a single month, the connotation of peace and contentment amidst a quiet and beautiful setting is fulfilled. Carr presents the country as idyllic and subtly which is a contrast to city life. Birkin knows no one and his wife has left him. In Oxgodby, Birkin finds friends and feels content and happy as he works on the painting. He often refers to the possibility of Oxgodby bringing him a new start. Although Keach doesn't find the same contentment, his personality is such that it is easy to believe that he has caused



his own problems in the town. Everyone, including the Ellerbecks, seems happy and content. Even the death of young Emily is presented almost as if it is just part of the cycle of life, in contrast to the horrors of war that Birkin and Moon have experienced. Moon describes Birkin's life there in the following quote: "I mean here, Oxdgodby, the friends you've made, this marvelous summer, the splendid job you've done. I mean the lot" (Pg. 99). Birkin has been restored and healed by his time in the country.

Life in Oxdgodby and the country surrounding are contrasted to both the war and to more urban areas. Birkin states that in the city, he didn't know any of his neighbors. In Oxdgodby, he becomes friends with a number of townspeople and becomes involved in community events. The country has restorative powers for the problems and alienation of both urban areas and the war. Both Birkin and Moon have lasting problems from their experiences in World War I. We see the influence that it has had on them through Moon's choice of pitching his tent over a pit and in Birkin's face twitch. As the summer passes, each experiences peace in Oxdgodby and the effects of the war lessen for each of them. Birkin's face twitch almost disappears. In addition, Birkin expresses during late summer how living in Oxdgodby has made it so that he can laugh about his situation with Vinny.

The country represents for both men a change: a chance at new beginnings and a respite from the horrors that they faced in the war. However, this is not true for everyone. In many ways, the experience in Oxdgodby is drastically different for Keach than it is for Moon and Birkin. Keach finds himself disliked and outside of community life despite his position in the community. The differences in the men's experiences are not entirely clear, however, Carr appears to point to Keach's attitude and actions as the reasons why the country isn't healing and restorative for him. In the end, Keach and Alice leave Oxdgodby.

## Restoration

Just as the book contains the theme of revelation, the idea of restoration also weaves through the book. Birkin, in particular, is restored in several ways. He is restored by the country and life in Oxdgodby with his new friends and the work he is doing. These things help to give Birkin a new sense of contentment and peace after the horrors of the war. His face twitch becomes better and he is happy there. His brokenness has been healed. In addition, his marriage to Vinny is restored. When he arrives in Oxdgodby, Vinny has run off with another man. Just before he leaves town, he receives a letter from her asking him to come back to her and their marriage. Although the transformation in their marriage may not last, Birkin seems to sense this. It has at least the potential of becoming better. Oxdgodby has left with him the chance of beginning again and of finding a new start.

The tasks of both Birkin and Moon are also about restoration. Birkin uncovers the painting in the church's arch, allowing others not only to see it, but also appreciate it. Given the skill of the original painter, he feels that this painting is on the same level as other church paintings that have been restored. Birkin imagines that people will want to



see the painting as a restoration of the original purpose of the painting. As he works on it, he restores not only the painting, but also the legacy of the painter. Although much about the painter remains shrouded in mystery, Birkin is able to deduce the man's fate and what he was doing when he painted the damned man. Moon's task is to find Miss Hebron's ancestor in the meadow. He is also trying to plot out the site of the basilica, a restoration of sorts. Moon's discovery of the grave allows the damned man's identity in the painting to be restored to him just as his grave will be restored as a place of memory rather than a forgotten tomb. In each of these cases, the restoration isn't necessarily a welcome one. Keach, in particular, feels that the restorations are not needed and are a waste.





# Style

## Points of View

*A Month in the Country* is written in a first person narrative from Thomas Birkin's perspective. Throughout this, we are able to hear Birkin's thoughts and perspectives. The first person perspective allows the reader to see Oxgodby and the people there through Birkin's eyes as well as to see the painting he is uncovering through him. This allows the reader to identify with Birkin. The things he struggles with, unrequited love, failing relationships, past torments, and so on, are issues that most people deal with at one time or another. While Birkin's are unique to his character, these themes are a familiar part of human nature.

Carr focuses much of the book on Birkin's inner thoughts, particularly those as he works on the painting and ponders both it and its creator. The revelations about the painter, the lost grave, and the identity of the man damned to hell are slowly unwound through Birkin. This allows the reader to experience the slow uncovering of the painting and its secrets just as Birkin does. Using the first person works well for the story. The thoughts and actions of the other characters are important only as they intersect with Birkin and his work.

## Setting

*A Month in the Country* takes place in the rural town of Oxgodby, England in 1920. Birkin arrives to restore the historical painting in the church's arch. He spends the greater part of the book in the church, graveyard, or in the meadow surrounding the church. He often has tea in the meadow with Moon and lunch in the graveyard. Within the church, Birkin sleeps in the bell tower, but spends many hours on the scaffolding in the church's arch uncovering and restoring the historical painting. These areas become a haven of sorts for Birkin, who is tormented by his experiences in the war and by his failing marriage.

The rural aspect of the setting is important. Carr spends a great deal of time describing the views from the bell tower. Throughout, the country setting is described as idyllic and peaceful. It is a respite from the experiences and the realities of the war and the city. Townspeople are friendly and warm to Birkin. They draw him into their lives and care for him in a variety of ways. This all helps to make Birkin content and happy, as well as helping his face to stop twitching. Moon finds much of the same contentment in Oxgodby that Birkin does. They both are experiencing a restoration of their own after the horrors of the war.



## Language and Meaning

The language in the book is simple and straightforward. Using a great deal of description, interspersed with dialog, Carr writes a rich and detailed story of Birkin's time in Oxgodby. He does not use any strong or vulgar language and there is no violence in the book.

As an English writer, Carr uses language, references, and slang familiar to England. Yet, this presents no large problem to the overall simplicity of the language or to the comprehension of the story or dialog.

## Structure

*A Month in the Country* follows a linear plot line. It moves from the time Thomas Birkin arrives in Oxgodby until the time he leaves. The primary focus is on Birkin's work on the historical painting and the friendships he develops with Moon, Kathy, and Alice. Carr uses primarily description and Birkin's inner thoughts to discuss his work on the painting and the things he discovers about it. Dialog is a more frequent tool when Carr is showing Birkin's evolving relationships with others.

The book slowly unwinds itself, just as the painting is slowly uncovered. Information about the characters and past events is divulged piece by piece. Carr, in fact, does not reveal the main character's name until some time into the book and it is even later, that the hints about Vinny reveal that she is his wife who has left him for another man. Likewise, Carr slowly reveals information about the painting and the painter, giving hints and insights along the way about what the painting looks like, what happened to the painter, and the identity of the damned man. By the time of the final revelations on these aspects, the groundwork has been laid. The uncovering of the painting mirrors and uncovering of the characters are making sense.

The book is a singular piece, interrupted only by slight breaks, but not by chapters. Additional books by the author are listed in the front of the novel.



## Quotes

"But I *knew* it was there. And I knew it was a Judgment. It was bound to be a Judgment because they always got the plum spots where parishes couldn't avoid seeing the God-awful things that would happen to them if they didn't fork out their tithes or marry the girls they'd got with child." Pg. 12

"The marvelous thing was coming into this haven of calm water and, for a season, not having to worry my head with anything but uncovering their wall-painting for them. And, afterwards, perhaps I could make a new start, forget what the War and the rows with Vinny had done to me and begin where I'd left off. This is what I need, I thought—a new start and, afterwards, maybe I won't be a casualty anymore." Pg. 15

"I liked him [Moon] from that first encounter: he was his own man. And he liked me (which always helps). God, when I think back all those years! And it's gone. All the excitement and pride of that first job, Oxgodby, Kathy Ellerbeck, Alice Keach, Moon, that season of calm weather—gone as though they'd never been." Pg. 18

"It was tremendously exciting: perhaps you can understand if I explain that, to begin with, I wasn't sure what I was uncovering." Pg. 25

"And I wondered about Keach and his wife and how the oddest people meet and then live together year after year, look at each other across hundreds of meals, watch each other dress and undress, whisper in the darkness, cry aloud in the marvelous agony of sexual release." Pg. 34

"It was like a window in a filthy wall which, every day or two, opened a square foot or so wider. You know how it is when a tricky job is going well because you're doing things the way they should be done, when you're working in rhythm and feel a reassuring confidence that everything's unraveling naturally and all will be right in the end." Pg. 36

"There was so much time that marvellous [sic] summer. Day after day, mist rose from the meadow as the sky lightened and hedges, barns and woods took shape until, at last, the long curving back of the hills lifted away from the Plain." Pg. 49

"Each day I used to avoid taking in the whole by giving exaggerated attention to the particular. Then, in the early evening, when the westering sun shone in past my baluster to briefly light the wall, I would step back, still purposefully not letting my eyes focus on it, then I looked. It was breathtaking. (Anyway, it took my breath.) A tremendous waterfall of colour, the blues of the apex falling, then seething into a turbulence of red; like all truly great works of art, hammering you with its whole before beguiling you with its parts." Pg. 61

"Summertime! And summertime in my early twenties! And in love! No, better than that—secretly, in love, coddling it up in myself." Pg. 92



"Do you know, until that moment, it hadn't occurred to me that this bundle of bones was my falling man." Pg. 104

"I should have lifted an arm and taken her shoulder, turned her face and kissed her. It was that kind of day. It was why she'd come. Then everything would have been different. My life, hers. We would have had to speak and say aloud what both of us knew and then, maybe, turned from the window and laid down together on the makeshift bed. Afterwards, we would have gone away, maybe on the next train. My heart was racing. I was breathless. She leaned on me, waiting. And I did nothing and said nothing." Pg. 106



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the symbolism of the painting in the novel. What characters and/or story lines does it parallel?

Carr titles the novel *A Month in the Country*. What is the importance of the country in the story? Why do you think Carr places the story where he does? Is the experience of the country the same for all characters?

Describe Birkin's transitions in the novel. What is he like when he arrives in Oxgodby? How does he change? What causes these changes?

Who is the damned man in the painting? What role does he play in the novel?

Compare the original painter and Birkin. How are they connected to one another? What does Birkin learn about the painter?

Discuss the relationship between Birkin and Alice. Why do neither of them act on their feelings for each other? How does their relationship compare to the Keach's marriage?

Why do you think Birkin never returns to Oxgodby? Why doesn't he communicate with the people he met there after he leaves?

Miss Hebron arranges in her will for both the painting to be uncovered and for her ancestor's grave to be found. Why do you think she does this? What role does Miss Hebron play in the novel?

Compare and contrast Birkin and Keach. What do they think of one another? Why do they experience such differences in Oxgodby?