The Sniper Study Guide

The Sniper by Liam O’Flaherty

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"The Sniper," a story about the Irish civil war, was Liam O'Flaherty's first published piece of fiction. It appeared in 1923 in the London publication *The New Leader*. Over the years, it has been reprinted several times, and as of 2004 it could be found in O'Flaherty's *Collected Stories*. "The Sniper" helped set O'Flaherty firmly on the writer's path. Upon reading it, Edward Garnett, an influential London editor, recommended a publisher bring forth the novel that O'Flaherty had just completed. Thus began a literary career that lasted for three decades.

O'Flaherty was intensely involved in Irish politics as a young man, joining both the Communist party in Ireland and later the Republican army. Nonetheless, throughout his career, O'Flaherty only wrote a handful of overtly political stories. In the fall of 1922, after taking part in the Four Courts incident as a Republican soldier, O'Flaherty fled Ireland. Settling in London, O'Flaherty procured a typewriter and wrote "The Sniper" while the devastating Irish civil war was still going on. O'Flaherty drew upon his experiences to create a piece of fiction that shows that the civil war had repercussions stretching far beyond the field of battle. O'Flaherty places his protagonist, a sniper, in a kill or be killed situation. After the sniper shoots an enemy soldier, he discovers he has just killed his brother. The sniper's emotional detachment throughout the story, coupled with this startling ending, allows O'Flaherty to indirectly address the way in which the Irish civil war led to the disunity of Irish society.

Author Biography

The Sniper: Liam O'Flaherty [graphic graphicname="TIF00167381" orient="portrait" size="A"]

Liam O'Flaherty was born in 1896 on Inishmore, an Aran Island off the coast of Ireland. O'Flaherty wrote his first piece of fiction when he was about seven years old. He also proved to be an exceptional student, and a visiting cleric thought he showed an aptitude for the priesthood. In 1908 O'Flaherty won a scholarship to attend a Catholic school, Rockwell College, on Ireland's mainland, where he studied until 1912. He continued his education at Blackrock College from 1912 to 1913, also run by priests, where he organized a group of students who supported the Republican cause in Ireland. In 1914 he entered Holy Cross College in Dublin, which was a seminary designed to prepare young men for the priesthood. O'Flaherty, however, did not want to become a priest and left after one semester. He then went to University College, also in Dublin, where he studied for a year from 1914 to 1915.

World War I disrupted O'Flaherty's studies. He left college in 1915 to join the Irish Guards of the British army. During the war, he served in France and Belgium. Due to shellshock, O'Flaherty was given a medical discharge from the military in 1917.

After a few months in Ireland, O'Flaherty spent the next two years traveling about and doing odd jobs. He went to London, South America, Canada, and the United States. He also crewed on ships sailing the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. During this period, his brother urged him to write about his experiences. O'Flaherty wrote four short stories, but they were rejected by publishers, and O'Flaherty gave up writing.

O'Flaherty returned to Ireland in 1920 and became involved in politics. He supported the Republican cause and also joined the Communist party. In 1922 he and a group of unemployed men seized control of a public building. They raised the Communist flag over it and declared an Irish socialist revolution. In the Irish civil war, he aligned himself with the Republicans, opposing the division of Ireland, and took part in the Four Courts rebellion. A fugitive from the Irish authorities, O'Flaherty fled to London in 1922.

Once again O'Flaherty took up writing. In 1923, he published his first short story, "The Sniper," in a British weekly paper. After that, he wrote steadily. Later that year, he published his first novel, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. He spent the next three decades as a professional writer.

Most of O'Flaherty's novels and short stories take place on the Aran Islands of his youth. However, some of his most well-known works have Dublin as their setting, like *The Informer* (1925), which won the 1926 James Tait Black Memorial Prize in England for the best novel of the year, as well as a prize in France. O'Flaherty also wrote nonfiction and stories in his native tongue, Irish Gaelic. In 1932 O'Flaherty and a group of other well-known writers founded the Irish Academy of Letters.

O'Flaherty retired from writing in the mid-1950s, moved to Dublin shortly thereafter, but spent much of his time traveling. He died in 1984 in Dublin.

Plot Summary

Late at night, a lone Republican sniper waits atop a rooftop in Dublin, Ireland. It is June of 1922. Nearby Republican and Free States forces battle over the Four Courts judicial building and throughout the city.

The sniper has been on the rooftop since the morning. Now he eats a sandwich and drinks some whiskey. He risks lighting a cigarette for a quick puff. The light from his cigarette alerts an enemy soldier to his presence. A bullet flies toward the sniper's rooftop. He puts out the cigarette and switches position.

However, the flash of the rifle tells the sniper his enemy's location. The sniper realizes that his enemy also has taken cover on the roof of the house across the street.

In the street below, an armored car moves. The sniper knows it is an enemy car but it would be useless to shoot at it. As he watches, he sees an old woman approaching the car. She speaks to the soldier manning the turret, pointing at the sniper's rooftop. As the turret opens and the soldier looks out, the sniper raises his rifle and shoots him, killing him. Then the sniper shoots the old woman as she tries to run away.

From the roof opposite, the enemy sniper fires. His bullet hits the sniper in the arm, and he drops his rifle. The sniper examines his wound. He realizes that the bullet is still lodged in his arm and that the arm is fractured. He painfully applies a field dressing and then rests from his effort.

The sniper knows he must devise a plan. He cannot leave the roof because the enemy is blocking any exit from the building, but if he is still on the roof in the morning, Free State soldiers will come for him and kill him. He must kill his enemy before morning so he can escape.

The sniper places his cap on the muzzle of the rifle, which is now useless because he cannot operate it with only one good arm. He pushes the rifle upward so the cap appears over the edge of the roof. In response, the enemy sniper shoots, hitting the cap dead center. The sniper lets his rifle fall forward. He lets the hand holding the rifle dangle over the side of the roof. Then the rifle clatters to the street. Finally, the sniper drags his hand back.

When the sniper peers over the roof, he sees that his plan has fooled the enemy into thinking he is dead. The other sniper now stands uprights and looks across the street that separates the two houses. The sniper lifts his revolver. Taking careful aim, the sniper fires and hits the enemy. The other sniper falls over the edge of the roof down to the pavement below. On the street below, he lies still.

Now that the battle is over, the sniper feels remorse. He curses the civil war and his own role in it. Then he hurls the revolver to the ground. It goes off, sending a bullet past his head. The shock of the near miss returns him to his senses.

The sniper takes a drink of whiskey and decides to descend from the roof and try to rejoin his company. Retrieving his revolver, the sniper crawls down into the house. Once at the street level, the sniper has an urge to see the man he killed. He might know the man from the army before the civil war began. The sniper runs into the street, drawing a spate of machine gun fire from a distance. He throws himself on the ground besides the corpse of the enemy sniper. He turns the body over. He looks into the face of his brother.

Characters

The Enemy Sniper

The Enemy Sniper is the Sniper's main opponent in the story. A member of the Free State army, he still shares similarities with the Sniper. The two men are engaged in the same role. The Enemy Sniper, too, is a good shot, enough so that he wins the respect of the Sniper by the end of the story. His physical presence, on a rooftop across the street, further reinforces the idea that he is a mirror image for the Sniper.

The Enemy Sniper wants to kill the Sniper. He appears to have the advantage after shooting and injuring the Sniper. He makes a fatal error, however, when he falls for the Sniper's ruse. Once he thinks he has killed the other man, the Enemy Sniper stands up on his rooftop, thus making himself a clear mark. The Sniper shoots him, and he falls to the street below, dead. After that, the Sniper□along with the reader□discovers that the two snipers are brothers.

The Old Woman

The Old Woman points out the Sniper's location on the rooftop to the Soldier in the Turret. The Sniper shoots and kills her.

The Sniper

The Sniper is the main character of the story. This young man is a member of the Republican army and his eyes have "the cold gleam of the fanatic." A hardened fighter, the Sniper has become a man "used to looking at death." In his role as a soldier, he functions efficiently and automatically. For instance, when he gets shot, he applies his own field dressing despite the excruciating pain. Only occasionally does he allow himself to make poor decisions, notably when he decides to risk lighting a cigarette, which alerts the enemy soldiers to his location on the roof. He also runs into the street to find out the identity of the Enemy Sniper, drawing machine gun fire upon himself.

The Sniper has been positioned atop a roof in Dublin. His role in the battle is not clear, but the streets of Dublin are awash with fighting, and he likely has been assigned to shoot enemy targets in the streets below. Once the Free State soldiers learn of his presence, the Sniper becomes involved in a standoff with the Enemy Sniper on a rooftop across the street. The Sniper cannot leave his rooftop since the Enemy Sniper has him covered. Nor can he risk staying on the roof until morning, which assuredly would lead to his death at the hands of Free State soldiers. Injured by the Enemy Sniper, the Sniper devises a clever plan to draw fire and make the Enemy Sniper think he is dead. Once his ruse succeeds, the Enemy Sniper lets down his guard and stops keeping his cover, so the Sniper is able to fatally shoot him.

Once the Enemy Sniper is dead, the battle-hardened Sniper undergoes a transformation. The excitement of the battle fades. Looking over the rooftop at the three people he has just killed□the Soldier in the Turret, the Old Woman, and the Enemy Sniper□the Sniper feels remorse. His disgust for the civil war manifests itself physically, as his teeth begin to chatter, and he starts cursing both himself and the war. When the Sniper recovers his senses, his fear dissipates so much that he even risks being shot at to learn the identity of the Free State soldier he has just shot. Only then does he realize that he has killed his own brother.

Throughout the story, the Sniper remains a somewhat mysterious, one-dimensional character. The narrative reveals little of his feelings about what is happening around him, nor does it even share his reaction to the knowledge that he has become his brother's murderer. Instead, the story directs the Sniper's actions and thoughts to the battle. The Sniper's only identity is that of a solider.

The Soldier in the Turret

The Soldier in the Turret is a member of the Free State army. He learns of the Sniper's location on the rooftop from the old woman. Before he and his men can go after the Sniper, the Sniper kills him with a rifle bullet.

Themes

Civil War

The complementary themes of civil war and warfare are the most obvious in "The Sniper." The story takes as its setting Dublin, Ireland, during the Irish civil war. The fighting began in 1922, after the Irish Parliament voted to accept the Anglo-Irish Treaty dividing the island of Ireland into northern and southern parts. Before the treaty, Irish nationalists had united against the British, their common foe, or against Northern Irish Protestants who supported union with England. After the treaty was signed, however, Irish aggression was turned inward. Over the next few years, the Irish people remained bitterly split, and some took up arms against their friends, family members, and countrymen.

O'Flaherty sets the stage of the civil war in his opening paragraph with sensory descriptions such as the "heavy guns [that] roared" at the "beleaguered Four Courts" and the "machines guns and rifles [that] broke the silence of the night, spasmodically, like dogs barking on lone farms." O'Flaherty concludes this first paragraph with the factual statement, "Republicans and Free Staters were waging civil war." This simple statement both serves to place the conflict and to undercut the devastation that this war has caused.

Though the story is quite brief, the reader can infer that the Irish civil war has brought great change to its protagonist. The phrase that the sniper has "the face of a student, thin and ascetic" implies that the sniper may have recently been a student but has taken up the arms of a soldier. Now warfare has transformed him. His "deep and thoughtful" eyes are "used to looking at death," and they even hold "the cold gleam of the fanatic" in his dedication to the Republican cause. The protagonist is only one of many young men who have joined either one side or the other of this brutal civil war.

The story also makes clear that this civil war has driven enormous rifts into Irish society. After the sniper has killed his enemy, he grows curious about the other man's identity. "He wondered did he know him," and he even speculates, "Perhaps he had been in his own company before the split in the army." With the final sentence, however, the civil war's power to divide takes on even greater significance: "Then the sniper turned over the dead body and looked into his brother's face." This sentence tells the reader that members of the same family could become enemies because of civil war. It also underscores the long-lasting repercussions of warfare that breaks up a society.

Warfare

A few key details in the story emphasize the bizarre landscape of warfare. The sniper undergoes a number of emotional responses to the battle that non-soldiers or those who have not taken part in battle are likely to find unusual. At the beginning of the story,

during his stakeout, the sniper "had been too excited to eat." Right before he shoots the enemy sniper, his "hand trembled with eagerness." When he sees that he has hit his enemy, he "uttered a cry of joy." All the words O'Flaherty uses to describe the sniper's reaction to meeting and vanquishing his enemy are positive, anticipatory words. In the world of warfare, killing a fellow human being is a victory; for in war, soldiers, like the sniper, face a situation where they must kill or be killed.

By the end of the story, the protagonist has undergone a wide range of feelings stemming from his own actions. With his enemy dead, the sniper feels regret at what he has done. After the "lust of battle died in him," his body reacts by shuddering and sweating, and his teeth chatter. His mind gets involved in denying his situation as "he began to gibber to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody." However, even these regrets only last a short time. He throws down his revolver, and it accidentally goes off, returning him to his senses. He also bolsters his courage and brings himself back to the proper state of mind by taking a drink of whiskey. Again able to face the state of warfare, laughing, the sniper descends from the rooftop to rejoin his company and continue his role as a soldier. By the end of the story, the sniper's emotions have moved in a circular pattern, from excitement to nervousness to remorse and back to excitement.

Survival and Isolation

The concept of survival underscores the entire story. Even before the sniper kills any of the Free State soldiers, he knows "there were enemies watching." The sniper's actions are driven by his desire for survival. He must kill anyone who has the capacity to bring about his destruction. So the soldier manning the armored tank must be taken out. Indeed, anyone who takes part in this warfare can become an enemy, even an old woman who becomes an informer with a few simple words and the point of a finger.

The sniper's main combatant and the biggest obstacle to his survival is the Free State sniper on the rooftop across the street. The man has the power to keep the sniper pinned down throughout the night, but he knows that "[M]orning must not find him wounded on the roof." Such an event would mean certain death. The sniper has little choice but to devise a plan, even though it is a long shot, to kill his enemy first.

The fact that the sniper is isolated on his rooftop emphasizes his need to depend upon his own wits, courage, and abilities for survival. Though other men fight side by side with their companies, for instance, at the Four Courts and in the streets of Dublin, the sniper conducts his fight alone. It is up to him to kill the other sniper. No one will come to his aid. Because of his isolation, the sniper finds the resources within himself to overcome fear and pain and continue to fight.

Style

Setting

The setting of "The Sniper" is integral to the narrative, for it draws its action from the Irish civil war. The story takes place in Dublin, Ireland, in June 1922. At this time, the Irish civil war has been going on for several months. The Republicans hold the Four Courts judicial building, but the Free Staters are attacking them with heavy arms.

"The Sniper" also takes place between the hours of dusk and dawn. Beginning as "twilight faded into night," the action of the story instantly becomes more dangerous. The sniper must conduct his battle in the dark. He has only "the dim light of the moon that shone through fleecy clouds" to see by. This lack of clarity has a realistic impact in making his task□difficult even in the light of day□even more challenging. The sniper has to aim at his enemy, about fifty yards away, and get off one fatal shot with a revolver. The lack of light also has symbolic significance: it underscores the murky, ambiguous situation that a civil war poses. The civil war pits friends, neighbors, and even family members against one another. As is borne out by the story's ending, people cannot see very clearly during such a conflict.

Point of View

The narrative takes a limited, third-person point of view. The action is entirely funneled through the protagonist. The reader sees only through his eyes, hears sounds through his ears, and processes events through his thoughts. Despite this limited point of view, readers can clearly follow the action. The sniper observes the old woman on the street below as she talks to the soldier in the turret of the armored car. "She was pointing to the roof where the sniper lay," and the sniper□and the reader□knows that she is pining down his location and that the soldiers may well come after him. When the sniper carries out his plan to trick the enemy sniper into thinking that he is dead, he can tell that he has been successful. For the enemy "seeing the cap and rifle fall . . . was now standing before a row of chimney pots, looking across, with his head clearly silhouetted against the western sky." Though the story never gets deep in the mind of the enemy, the reader, like the sniper, knows that the Free Stater "thought that he had killed his man."

This point of view works well with the emotional detachment of the narrative. Rarely does the protagonist show his reaction to the events around him, other than the excitement of the battle and his momentary repulsion at having killed another human being. Even when he learns that the man now lying in a "shattered mass" is his brother, the sniper does not react. Instead, the story ends, leaving the reader to only speculate about his feelings.

Details and Sound

O'Flaherty employs a number of specific details to make his story realistic. He describes the battle sounds taking place around the sniper, and he refers to actual events and places, such as the Four Courts siege and the nearby O'Connell Bridge. The description of the sniper's first aid efforts is also filled with many concrete details, like the "bitter fluid" of the iodine, the "paroxysm of pain [that] swept through him," and his need to tie the ends of the bandage with his teeth. Such details help ground the reader in the action.

O'Flaherty also uses details to emphasize the darkness. The sniper can see only by the "dim light" from the moon and, later, approaching dawn. Even the flare from lighting a cigarette is easily seen. The sniper decides to risk the cigarette, striking a match, taking a drag on the cigarette, and then putting out the light. Though this process takes only a matter of seconds, if that, "[A]lmost immediately, a bullet flattened itself against the parapet of the roof."

Although the story is rooted in reality, O'Flaherty employs descriptive sound imagery to emphasize the stillness and dark of the night. Throughout Dublin, the machine guns and rifles "broke the silence of the night, spasmodically, like dogs barking on lone farms." When the sniper gets shot and drops his rifle with a clatter, he "thought the noise would wake the dead." Once his personal battle is over, and he has killed all his immediate enemies□the soldier in the turret, the old woman, and the other sniper□"Everywhere around was quiet." This technique emphasizes the danger of the situation, as well as the sniper's complete isolation and his need to vanquish his enemies on his own.

Ending

A. A. Kelly writes in *Liam O'Flaherty: The Storyteller* that "The Sniper" "with its surprise ending based on coincidence is in the older tradition of Maupassant and O'Henry." Such an ending hinges on an unexpected revelation at the end, be it light-hearted or tragic. Few writers have been able to employ the surprise ending effectively. However, O'Flaherty does so successfully because he has already engaged the reader through the fast-paced action and the unique detachment of the protagonist. The shocking ending seems likely to challenge that detachment, but O'Flaherty refuses to reveal the sniper's reaction to the knowledge that he has murdered his brother. Instead, O'Flaherty leaves it up to the reader to draw conclusions and to wonder how, or if, this event will affect the future choices the sniper makes.

Historical Context

The English in Ireland

In the twelfth century, the English monarch, backed by a large army, declared himself overlord of Ireland. For the next several centuries, English rule was generally confined to the area around Dublin. The English monarchy, however, continued efforts to subdue the entire island, resulting in ongoing Irish rebellion. In the early 1600s, the monarchy overthrew the native Irish political system, bringing the entire country under its control. For the next hundred years, the English created colonies in Ireland. As part of this effort, they drove many Irish from their land and gave estates to English landowners. Religious problems arose as well, since most Irish were Roman Catholics while the new English settlers, who mainly lived in the north, followed the Protestant faith. Laws continually favored Protestants over Catholics.

By the late 1700s, Irish rebels were making repeated efforts to gain some kind of independence. Their efforts were to little avail, and in 1801 the Act of Union formally united Great Britain and Ireland. This law abolished the Irish Parliament; instead, Ireland voted for representatives who served in the British Parliament.

Beginning in the 1870s, a Home Rule movement was on the rise among Irish nationalists, most of whom were Catholics. Supporters demanded some form of self government. They were opposed by Irish Protestants, who were called unionists because they wanted to preserve Ireland's status in the United Kingdom. Irish political leader Charles Parnell, who sat in the British Parliament, led a nationalist party and demanded a separate Irish Parliament. Later, in 1902, a new nationalist political party known as Sinn Féin was formed. Its goal was to secure Irish independence.

Because of these nationalist efforts, by the 1910s, the British Parliament enacted a Home Rule bill. While most of Ireland supported this bill, Protestants in Northern Ireland vowed to resist any home rule by force; they feared that the island would become dominated by the Catholics. The onset of World War I, however, delayed the enactment of home rule in Ireland.

The Easter Rising

Irish home rule supporters were frustrated by this delay. In April 1916, a rebellion known as the Easter Rising began in Dublin. About 1,000 Irish forces rose against British rule. Over the next week, street fighting sprang up throughout Dublin, and Republicans seized some government offices. British soldiers, however, forced the Republican leaders to surrender and executed some of the leaders.

In the aftermath of the Easter Rising, when the elections of 1918 took place, Irish voters backed many members of the Sinn Féin political party as their representatives in the British Parliament, over members of the more moderate Irish party. Sinn Féin advocated

complete independence for Ireland, and instead of taking their seats, these Irish Republicans set up a revolutionary government and formed an Irish assembly called Dáil Éireann in Dublin.

Until 1921, a brutal war rocked Ireland. The newly created Irish Republican Army (IRA) fought against the British, resisted efforts to renew British rule, and forced Britain to recognize the Irish government. They relied on guerrilla tactics, to which the English government, represented by the police force known as the Black and Tans, responded with brutal reprisals.

During this period, the divisions between north and south grew, with northern unionists threatening to rebel if they were cast free from Britain. In response, the British government passed the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, which called for two separate parliaments for Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. Finally, in 1922, leaders of the Dáil Éireann signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty with Britain. This treaty made 26 of Ireland's 32 counties into the Irish Free State, a self-governing dominion within the British Commonwealth of Nations, while the six counties of Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom.

Irish Civil War

Within Ireland, not everyone supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The British prime minister had even threatened open war on Ireland if the treaty was not accepted. Republicans particularly objected to the oath of allegiance that members of the Dáil Éireann would have to make to the British monarch, as well as the provision that allowed Northern Ireland to remain out of the Irish Free State. Eamon de Valera, head of the Dáil Éireann, would not support the treaty, and he resigned. Elections were held for the new Irish Parliament, which led to the ousting of most of the Republicans. Before the new Parliament could meet, a civil war had broken out between supporters of the treaty, known as Free Staters, and its opponents, called Republicans. In April 1922, Republican forces occupied Dublin's justice buildings, the Four Courts. They came under siege from the Free State forces. For several days in June, the Free Staters bombarded the Four Courts. They retook the buildings and captured the enemy leader. Before their capture, however, the Republicans blew up the Four Courts. Despite this Free State victory, battles continued to take place in Dublin until early July, when Free States forces gained control of the city.

Fighting continued outside of Dublin, and the Irish government (still controlled by Free Staters) initiated official military operations. The government took strong measures to quell the civil war, including executing Republican leaders. Within a few months as well, the Dáil Éireann met to draft and ratify a new constitution for Ireland.

The Irish Free State

The Republican resistance became less organized. By early 1923, Republican forces had ceased fighting. De Valera, the Republican leader, ordered a cease-fire. A few

years later, he re-entered the Irish political scene. He formed a new political party and served several times as Ireland's prime minister. In 1937 De Valera drafted a new constitution that made Ireland into a new state, called Éire, which was a republic in all but name. In 1948, Ireland finally gained complete independence. The six counties of Northern Ireland, however, remained part of the United Kingdom.

Critical Overview

"The Sniper" was O'Flaherty's first published short story, and as it would turn out, was different from the main body of his short fiction. O'Flaherty became most known for his stories about nature, animals, and Irish peasants, not for the stories he wrote about urban Ireland. Of his numerous stories, only four stories deal with the Irish civil war, while another handful are set in Irish cities. However, according to James M. Calahan, author of *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction*, O'Flaherty's political stories cannot be separated from the others, for "politics permeate all of his works." In a story like "The Sniper," politics are simply more obvious.

The Sniper: Four Courts Building in Dublin, Ireland, seen here in 1922, is the location of the standoff described in the "The Sniper" [graphic graphicname="TIF00167385" orient="portrait" size="A"]

Generally, O'Flaherty's urban stories present a bleak view of humankind. A. A. Kelly, writing in *Liam O'Flaherty: The Storyteller*, noted that such stories "contain much despair and any humour is at man's expense." The protagonist in "The Sniper" might well fall into the role of an urbanized character "imbued with various forms of self-interest based on . . . fear."

The few critics who have directly explored "The Sniper" tend to disagree over a crucial aspect: O'Flaherty's position on the Irish civil war. In his 1929 essay "The Position of Liam O'Flaherty," which was published in *Bookman*, William Troy commended "The Sniper," along with the short story "Civil War," both of which deal with the "real and imagined circumstances" of the Irish civil war. Troy wrote that these stories "constitute the most remarkable record of the period which we are likely to receive: the most complete because derived largely from personal observation and participation; the most reliable because written without any other bias than that of artistic selection." Years later, A. A. Kelly contradicted parts of Troy's statement. Kelly did agree that O'Flaherty drew upon his personal experiences to write "The Sniper." However, she believed that O'Flaherty's "reason for writing is to damn warfare in general as inhuman and debasing." Another critic, James H. O'Brien, would also seem to agree that O'Flaherty condemns warfare. In his discussion of O'Flaherty's short stories, entitled *Liam O'Flaherty*, O'Brien wrote that "the open, matter-of-fact presentation of the shooting and the pain of the wound makes the revelation that brother has shot brother the final atrocity in a barbaric world." The critics, however, do generally emphasize O'Flaherty's careful attention to detail, although Kelly did believe that the "historic aspect and factual accuracy of the work is secondary."

Of all the critics, Kelly has paid the most attention to "The Sniper." She highlighted such elements as its surprise ending and O'Flaherty's "abruptness and economy of style." Similarly, Calahan noted that, as a writer, O'Flaherty was a "master of the art of omission." Kelly also proposed her belief that the sniper served as a "type figure illustrating all those caught up by warfare and forced to shoot the enemy."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In this essay, Korb considers how "The Sniper" demonstrates the division the Irish civil war has inflicted on society.

In crafting his first published short story "The Sniper" O'Flaherty took as his setting and dramatic impetus an issue that he knew well: the Irish civil war of the early 1920s. In this story, two snipers on opposing sides of the conflict face off in a duel. The hero of the story prevails. He kills his enemy, thus assuring his survival, at least for the moment. Only after his enemy is dead, however, does the sniper make a startling revelation: the enemy sniper is his own brother.

The story does not address the problems of the civil war from any historical perspective; notably, O'Flaherty makes no mention of the Anglo-Irish Treaty that sparked the civil war or the ongoing problems the native Irish had with the British rulers. O'Flaherty need not do so, for the Irish and British reading audience in the 1920s was well versed in the ongoing troubles that surrounded Ireland and its relationship to the United Kingdom. Modern readers, as well as non-Irish readers, however, likely may need to be reminded that in the spring of 1922, fighting broke out in Ireland over the Anglo-Irish Treaty. This agreement would make southern Ireland an independent state within the British Commonwealth and leave the six counties in northern Ireland part of Great Britain. Free Staters, who supported the treaty, and Republicans, who opposed it, took up arms and fought for control of Ireland's government and national spirit.

O'Flaherty□who fought for the Republicans at the famous Four Courts rebellion□wrote "The Sniper" within months of this incident; "The Sniper" first appeared in a London magazine in January 1923. So, at the time of the story's writing and publication, the civil war was still going on. The cease-fire between the two Irish armies was not called until spring of that year. This detail of timing may cause readers to more closely examine O'Flaherty's story for a political message about the civil war. It also immediately renders more provocative O'Flaherty's choice to create a narrative with what A. A. Kelly, writing in *Liam O'Flaherty: The Storyteller*, calls a "controlled emotional response." Many readers will be struck by the sniper's emotional detachment from the violence around him and the very deaths that he causes. There are different reasons O'Flaherty may have chosen to treat the subject this way, however. By making the sniper less of an individual and more of a type character, O'Flaherty imbues him with him greater symbolic meaning. The sniper comes to represent all soldiers, both Republican and Free Starters. Indeed, the sniper could be any soldier, caught up in any deadly conflict. O'Flaherty's stylistic device also shows his lack of interest in using his writing as any sort of political propaganda. He does not try to use words and thoughts to win the reader into siding with the sniper, though the man served in the same army as O'Flaherty. Nor does he try to manipulate the reader into feeling that the sniper is a monster. Instead, with his carefully chosen words he presents the situation in as straightforward a manner as possible and then retreats, allowing the reader to draw conclusions. He even resists temptation to comment on the sniper's discovery that he

has killed his brother. Instead, O'Flaherty ends the story on this devastating, potentially life-altering fact.

Such narrative detachment is in keeping with O'Flaherty's choice not to present an overall picture of the Irish civil war. O'Flaherty does not describe such incidents as the raging battles, the Four Courts seizure and bombing, or the assassinations of major leaders from both sides of the conflict. Instead, O'Flaherty creates only four characters□two of whom appear only briefly□and selects a few specific details that show the effects of the conflict on Irish society. O'Flaherty begins this task in his opening paragraph, describing the noise from the machine guns and rifles that "broke the silence of the night, spasmodically, like dogs barking." O'Flaherty also references the sniper's nearness to the "beleaguered Four Courts [where] the heavy guns roared." However, despite having comrades on the ground who work as a unit in their fight, the Republican sniper faces the conflict alone. He is pinned on a rooftop by the enemy sniper across the street and the armored cars and soldiers down below. Thus in a few sentences, O'Flaherty effectively sets the scene, both for the battle that lies ahead, as well as for the sniper's supreme isolation.

On the one hand, this battle between the two snipers represents the larger battle between the Republicans and the Free Staters. The Republican sniper becomes engaged in fighting both the Free State sniper on the opposing rooftop, as well as Free State forces in the streets below. When the Republican sniper descends from his rooftop at the end of the story, even more Free States forces at the end of the street fire upon him with their machine guns. However, it is the enemy sniper who emerges as his main foe. This is the man whom the Republican sniper most fears and who seems to have the most capability of either killing him or cutting off his escape. The two soldiers thus become engaged in a deadly battle, for the Republican sniper must kill the other if he wants to get off the rooftop alive.

O'Flaherty creates the men as mirror images. Both men have positioned themselves on opposing rooftops, thus reinforcing the idea of similarity. Both men are good shots; the enemy sniper delivers his bullet to the center of the sniper's cap, while the Republican sniper kills his enemy with a single revolver shot from fifty yards away, which is "a hard shot in the dim light." The sniper even notes that he and his enemy may have been in the same company before the disintegration of the Irish army into Republican and Free State companies. O'Flaherty's artistic decision to make the two men so similar reinforces the idea that the civil war has broken strong ties throughout Ireland and shows the extent of the division in Ireland's current political situation. Men in opposing armies only become enemies because they disagree over the governing of their country. If not for this problem, these men could have been colleagues or friends□even brothers. O'Flaherty's subtle demonstration of the snipers' similarity underscores that this disunity is occurring throughout the country and destroying the very fabric of society.

Through O'Flaherty's writing, the Irish civil war also emerges as a battle between individuals. All citizens must take sides. The old woman who alerts the Free State soldier to the sniper's presence on the rooftop becomes an enemy in this act. By

pointing out the sniper's location, she directly involves herself in the battle. Because of it, she pays the ultimate price with her life; the sniper kills her with a bullet from his rifle. This detail points to the way that the Irish civil war affects all of Ireland, not merely those directly involved in warfare.

While the civil war holds all the Irish people in its clutches, the fighting has a much greater effect on the combatants, significantly dehumanizing them. The sniper on the rooftop is driven by fear and excitement—at the beginning of the story, O'Flaherty writes that "his eyes had the cold gleam of the fanatic." The sniper also operates superbly, but more like an automaton than a man. When the sniper gets shot, he feels no pain, "just a deadened sensation"; the arm becomes symbolic of the numbness that he must make himself feel to take part in the war at all. Despite the pain, the sniper proceeds to apply his own field dressing to his broken arm and come up with a plan to kill his enemy. Throughout these events, up through the death of his enemy, the sniper carries himself coolly and efficiently. No doubts about his actions or about the war itself distract him, not even when he kills the raggedy old woman who dies like a dog in the gutter. Only after the gunfire is over, however, after "the lust of the battle died in him," does the sniper show any human response to the deaths that he has caused. "[R]evolted by the sight of the shattered mass of his dead enemy," he shudders, sweats, and becomes "bitten by remorse." He even, for a brief moment, "gibber[s] to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody." This lapse into human feeling is momentary, however. His nerves soon steady, at which point he even laughs—a gesture that may strike the reader as stunningly inappropriate, though, in fact, it may be a reaction to the insanity of war.

The most significant detail that shows how the civil war disunites the people of Ireland does not emerge until the very end of the story, however. Unbeknownst to them, the two snipers—neither of whom can see the other's face—are brothers. Throughout the ordeal, the sniper had remained true to his cause and pursued the sole aim of vanquishing his enemy. While the men battled it out, the enemy sniper had no individuality; he was simply a Free State soldier. Not until the enemy is dead and his selfhood thus eradicated does the sniper feel a spark of curiosity as to the man's identity. Only when the other man ceases to be a threat does the sniper acknowledge his status as another human instead of merely an enemy soldier.

O'Flaherty chooses to end his story with this surprising sentence, "Then the sniper turned over the dead body and looked into his brother's face." The reader is left to wonder about this unexpected development. What kind of relationship did the brothers have? How did two members of the same family come to take opposing sides in the civil war? How will this incident affect the sniper and his future? While these questions remain unanswered by the narrative, the reader sees in this simple statement the breach that the civil war has caused in Irish society. No longer are neighbors, friends, or even family members united. And this dissent, though perhaps with less extreme results, is playing out in other households across Ireland. Further, this dramatic ending highlights the terrible stakes of the civil war. The sniper will carry for the rest of his life the knowledge that he has killed his brother.

By presenting his stark ending but not exploring it, O'Flaherty also emphasizes the universality of civil war. History abounds with examples of how civil wars have broken up families. In the American Civil War, for instance, one man might have fought for the Confederate states while his brother may have enlisted in the Union Army. O'Flaherty's story could exist, with details and locations changed, and tell the tale of any civil war. This universality allows "The Sniper" to be a universally applicable condemnation of civil war. This additional layer only enhances the literary richness of "The Sniper" and makes it a tale that surpasses borders and time.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "The Sniper," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Irish civil war. After you have conducted your research, write a paper analyzing "The Sniper" from a historical point of view.

Imagine that you are directing a movie version of "The Sniper." How would you direct the final scene? What kind of emotions would you ask your actor to convey?

Write an essay describing how you think the sniper feels at learning he has killed his brother and what he does next. Does this event keep him from further participation in the Irish civil war?

Investigate another civil war or conflict that has divided families, friends, and communities. Use what you have learned to write your own short story exploring the way that such conflict affects members of society.

The events surrounding the Irish civil war brought to the forefront many important political leaders. Research one of these leaders, either a Republican or a Free Stater, and find out about his influence on Irish history.

Find out more about the role that religion has played in Ireland's history from the late 1800s through the present day.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. Many Irish have long been unhappy with this situation. In the late 1910s, Irish forces rebel and begin fighting with British forces. They seek independence from British rule.

Today: Four-fifths of the island of Ireland makes up the independent Republic of Ireland, or Eire in the Irish language. Northern Ireland makes up the rest of the island, and it is part of the United Kingdom.

1920s: Republicans and Free Staters engage in a deadly and destructive civil war. Republicans refuse to accept the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which makes southern Ireland a dominion within the United Kingdom, known as the Irish Free State. The Republicans want all of the island of Ireland to have independence. Free Staters, however, support this treaty. The civil war carries on from 1921 until 1923, when a cease-fire is declared, with the Free Staters victorious.

Today: After decades of fighting between Protestants in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republican Army□the paramilitary arm of Sinn Féin, the two sides agree to a cease-fire in 1998. Troubles, however, still brew in Ireland over the division of the island. In 2004, Protestant and Catholic political parties struggle over ways to share power, and allegations of kidnapping and violence on the part of the IRA still take place.

1920s: Irish political leaders are all men, such as Michael Collins, Eamon de Valera, and Arthur Griffith.

Today: Women take a much more active role in politics. In 1990, Mary Robinson becomes the first woman to serve as president of the Republic, and women serve as leaders of political parties.

What Do I Read Next?

O'Flaherty's novel *The Informer*, first published in 1925, is set in the aftermath of the Irish civil war. It tells about an outlaw who is the object of a Dublin manhunt. *The Informer* is one of O'Flaherty's most well-known pieces of fiction.

Like "The Sniper," O'Flaherty's short story "Civil War," included in the 1925 collection of the same name, explores the experience of the war through two Republican soldiers□one an idealist and one a realist□who are trapped on a rooftop, waiting for death.

Liam O'Flaherty's Ireland (2001), by Peter Costello, features biographical information about O'Flaherty, excerpts from his fiction, and photographs from his time period.

The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty (1996), edited by A. A. Kelly, can provide additional information on this writer.

O'Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" (1905), Guy de Maupassant's "The Necklace" (1884), and Saki's "The Open Window" (1914) all provide variations□both humorous and tragic□on the same type of surprise ending employed by O'Flaherty.

James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), a collection of short stories about the lives of people in Dublin, includes the masterpiece "The Dead."

Sean O'Casey's play *Juno and the Paycock*, perhaps his most popular, was originally staged in 1924 and set during the Irish civil war. This tragicomedy chronicles the fortunes of one family as they struggle for Irish independence.

Sean O'Faolain's first collection of short stories, *Midsummer Night Madness and Other Stories*, was first published in 1932.

Further Study

Bates, H. E., "The Irish School" in *The Modern Short Story: A Critical Survey*, The Writer, 1972, pp. 148—62.

Bates, himself a writer of numerous novels and short stories, places O'Flaherty's work within the context of other important twentieth-century Irish writers.

Brewer, Paul, ed., *Ireland: History, Culture, People*, Courage Books, 2002.

This volume provides an illustrated introduction to Ireland, focusing on its history through the early 2000s, its people, and its culture.

Doyle, Paul A., *Liam O'Flaherty*, Twayne Publishers, 1971.

Doyle's work provides a good overview of O'Flaherty's entire body of fiction, both short stories and novels, as well as a detailed biographical chapter.

Kiely, Benedict, *Modern Irish Fiction: A Critique*, Golden Eagle Books, 1950.

Kiely discusses the preeminent Irish writers of the first half of the twentieth century and dubs O'Flaherty a romantic.

Ranelagh, John O'Beirne, *A Short History of Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

This updated edition covers Irish history from ancient times through the end of the twentieth century.

Zneimer, John, *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty*, Syracuse University Press, 1970.

Zneimer's detailed work investigates O'Flaherty's personal life, the themes of his work, and specifically analyzes his body of short fiction.

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Calahan, James M., "Politics," in *Liam O'Flaherty, A Study of the Short Fiction*, Twayne Publishers, 1991, pp. 30—40.

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Kelly, A. A., "Urban and War Themes," in *Liam O'Flaherty: The Storytellers*, Harper & Row Publishers, 1976, pp. 23—36.

O'Brien, James H., "The Short Stories," in *Liam O'Flaherty*, Associated University Presses, 1973, pp. 92—117.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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