

# Life and (Mostly) Death: An Interpretation of Liam O'Flaherty's "The Sniper"

by David Taylor

Humanity gets a strip-search in Liam O'Flaherty's classic story of war, "The Sniper." What does the search reveal? A simple but frightening truth: War eats away our humanity and leaves something very ugly staring back at us: an animal devoid of any feeling except raw survival: kill or be killed.

This theme is woven tightly into virtually every element of O'Flaherty's short story set during the Irish Civil War of 1922-23, during which brother killed brother as two political groups vied for Power. The P-word. Sound familiar? It should. War's underlying purpose transcends place and time. That's why O'Flaherty gives only barebones background for the fighting. The historical-political context is allotted a single sentence: "Republicans and Free Staters were waging civil war." That's all we need to know: humans are it again, doing what we do best.

Why does O'Flaherty skimp on the history? Perhaps because he's not interested in the *reasons* for war, only its *effects*. This story isn't about a single war; it's about all wars. "The Sniper" is a universal tale of humankind's ugly secret: our lust for killing, especially each other. The only history that matters is human history, not Irish, not British, not Republican or Free Stater, whatever that means. These soldiers are not of a single place and time, but of all places and all times, wherever and whenever blood has been spilled in the quest for power.

O'Flaherty signals this theme in a variety of ways. First is the characterizations. They are bare, stripped-down like everything in this story. No one has names in this fiction, not even the main character, "the sniper." But that's only the first clue to what O'Flaherty is up to. The primary things we are told about this main character are his basic drives and feelings. He eats a "sandwich hungrily," devouring it like an animal. When he hears the enemy approach, "his heart beat faster," readying itself for the kill. His only words in the story are a factual

First two paragraphs are the introduction that set up the basis of my interpretation—the theme (as I see it) of the story.

First piece of evidence to support my interpretation: what O'Flaherty does (and doesn't do) with the element of "background," one of our five modes.

Notice that paragraphs have introductions too. They state the main topic and connect to the overall thesis, as well as use signpost words like "first."

observation devoid of feeling: “I’m hit.” Not until the pitch of battle, aiming his pistol to kill another human, does the sniper feel an emotion. It’s excitement: “His hand trembled with eagerness.” Only after the kill does the tiniest morsel of humanity enter him: “The lust of battle died in him. He became bitten by remorse.” However, his fleeting brush with sentiment is quickly replaced by morbid curiosity to examine the body of his victim. So much for remorse.

**Human beings aren’t the only dead things in this story. So is the setting.**

This short piece is covered in shadows, the not-so-subtle hints of the spiritual darkness that has overtaken this country and the people in it. The story is set at night, when “Dublin lay enveloped in darkness.” Only a “dim” moon casts a “pale light” over the “dark waters of the **Liffey,**” where guns and rifles break “the silence of the night.” And that’s just the opening paragraph, which contains no less than seven references to the absence of light. This opening description makes it clear: this is a dark time for Ireland and for humanity.

**The sense of deadness also extends to the way that the story is told: in**

**simple prose devoid of color or feelings.** In their place is simple action told in a cold, factual way. The most profound example of this is the double murder committed by the sniper, which includes an old woman wearing a “tattered shawl.” The slaughter is related with the same cold detachment used in describing the lighting of a cigarette:

The turret opened. A man’s head and shoulders appeared,  
looking toward the sniper. The sniper raised his rifle and fired. The head  
fell heavily on the turret wall. The woman darted toward the side street.  
The sniper fired again. The woman whirled and fell with a shriek into the  
gutter.

Two dead in a total of seven sentences, each constructed with simple subjects, simple verbs and no emotions. The language is as numb as the people doing the fighting. Excuse me, sir, but didn’t you just shoot an old woman in the back as she ran for her

**A quote within a quote requires three marks on each side.**

**Another paragraph’s topic sentence and transitions that point back and ahead, keeping things connected.**

**Please—comma ALWAYS inside quote marks.**

**Paragraph topic sentence—as if I needed to tell you—that points back and ahead.**

**Quotations of 4 lines or more are set off and do NOT require quote marks.**

life? Would you care for another cigarette? Like the humans it describes, this is language stripped of everything beautiful or noble. The prose is as gray and grimy as the streets.

The jarring irony between the language and the acts it describes is preparation for the final irony at the story's end. O'Flaherty lays the groundwork for this moment carefully, lulling the reader into the same stupor that all soldiers must find in order to remain sane as they systematically kills others. And then, as we lie with the sniper in that bullet-ridden Dublin street, as we roll the lifeless body over to stare into the face of our victim, we find ourselves in the trap O'Flaherty has laid for us:

Denial does not last forever. One day, whether we wish to or not, we will confront the outcome of our willingness to wage war. One day, whether we wish to or not, we will look into the faces of our victims and see the truth staring back at us: we are all brothers.

## The Roots of Interpretation

Reflecting on my interpretation, I immediately see a series of prime drivers. First is the Iraq wars of the 1990s and today. One of the most remarkable facts about this war is how unaware we in America are of the death and suffering of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, both civilian and military. Mainstream media coverage of these wars has been nearly totally lacking in images and details of the aftermath of our weaponry and war making. At times, distance killing has taken on absurd characteristics. During the first Iraq war, many Americans got their morning's entertainment by watching the daily briefings that featured video footage of our high-tech weaponry flying into buildings, tanks and bunkers. The similarity between that footage shot from far away by our airplanes was eerily similar to video games—killing without consequence. We saw the buildings explode, but never the people inside. I related this detachment from the consequences of war to the main

**What is that stuff marked in yellow?**

**This shortie could be joined to the graf above, but I wanted to emphasize it (and to show you that short paragraphs are sometimes more effective than long).**

**It makes sense that the reasons for my interpretation come after it.**

character's detachment. In the story, the tank soldier, old woman and other sniper were merely targets for him, not people. Killing them brings the sniper a rush of adrenaline characterized by eagerness and excitement—until he is forced to face the consequences of his actions.

I also related on a personal level to the sniper's disassociation from his victims. As a sailor stationed aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Ranger* during the Vietnam war, I often loaded bombs on our squadron's planes with rarely a thought of the death and destruction they would inflict upon people I could not see. Like all soldiers, we were encouraged to disassociate our emotions from our actions and to see the enemy as less than human. We laughed as we painted on the bombs "Merry Christmas Gooks" and "Kill a Commie for Christ." How profane and evil that seems to me now, to associate killing with Christ. But I now know that only through emotional detachment can a soldier do his job and remain sane. What frightens me is that I realize there is the same emotional killing zone in all of us, and it's the same one that O'Flaherty's sniper has found.

The emotional detachment and stripped-down narration in O'Flaherty's prose style is also something that guided my interpretation. I've always admired writers who avoid the flowery phrase in favor of telling a compelling story, one that moves quickly and muscularly. As a writer, I know that what seems artless in O'Flaherty's style is actually something enormously difficult to pull off and is the result of a lot of work and revision. It's like a champion's golf swing or tennis backhand: they look effortless, but in reality they are the result of complete mastery of a complex set of skills.

## **Conclusion**

Students have told me that they read this story in high school. Indeed, I found it on a web site for "classic" short stories. I certainly would put "The Sniper" in that category. Liam O'Flaherty takes on one of the most complex subjects in

literature, war, which has been written about in every genre and every age, from Homer to Shakespeare. But instead of an epic or five-act play, O'Flaherty uses one brief, insignificant conflict to capture the universal experience of war in the distilled form of the short story, leaving us at the end as shocked as the young killer staring into the face of his own brother. The sniper is shocked at what he has done. We should be too. Aren't we all supposed to be brothers, siblings in a family known as the human race?

**I try to refer back to my overall interpretation to wrap things up.**