

The Sniper by Liam O'Flaherty (1923)

The long June twilight faded into night. Dublin lay enveloped in darkness but for the dim light of the moon that shone through fleecy clouds, casting a pale light as of approaching dawn over the streets and the dark waters of the Liffey. Around the beleaguered Four Courts the heavy guns roared. Here and there through the city,
5 machine guns and rifles broke the silence of the night, spasmodically, like dogs barking on lone farms. Republicans and Free Staters were waging civil war.

On a rooftop near O'Connell Bridge, a Republican sniper lay watching. Beside him lay his rifle and over his shoulders was slung a pair of field glasses. His face was the face of a student, thin and ascetic, but his eyes had the cold gleam of the fanatic.
10 They were deep and thoughtful, the eyes of a man who is used to looking at death.

He was eating a sandwich hungrily. He had eaten nothing since morning. He had been too excited to eat. He finished the sandwich, and, taking a flask of whiskey from his pocket, he took a short drought. Then he returned the flask to his pocket. He paused for a moment, considering whether he should risk a smoke. It was
15 dangerous. The flash might be seen in the darkness, and there were enemies watching. He decided to take the risk.

Placing a cigarette between his lips, he struck a match, inhaled the smoke hurriedly and put out the light. Almost immediately, a bullet flattened itself against the parapet of the roof. The sniper took another whiff and put out the cigarette. Then he
20 swore softly and crawled away to the left.

Cautiously he raised himself and peered over the parapet. There was a flash and a bullet whizzed over his head. He dropped immediately. He had seen the flash. It came from the opposite side of the street.

He rolled over the roof to a chimney stack in the rear, and slowly drew himself up behind it, until his eyes were level with the top of the parapet. There was nothing to be seen--just the dim outline of the opposite housetop against the blue sky. His enemy was under cover.
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Just then an armored car came across the bridge and advanced slowly up the street. It stopped on the opposite side of the street, fifty yards ahead. The sniper
30 could hear the dull panting of the motor. His heart beat faster. It was an enemy car. He wanted to fire, but he knew it was useless. His bullets would never pierce the steel that covered the gray monster.

Then round the corner of a side street came an old woman, her head covered by a tattered shawl. She began to talk to the man in the turret of the car. She was
35 pointing to the roof where the sniper lay. An informer.

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
40 round and fell with a shriek into the gutter.

Suddenly from the opposite roof a shot rang out and the sniper dropped his rifle with a curse. The rifle clattered to the roof. The sniper thought the noise would wake the dead. He stooped to pick the rifle up. He couldn't lift it. His forearm was dead. "I'm hit," he muttered.

Dropping flat onto the roof, he crawled back to the parapet. With his left hand he
45 felt the injured right forearm. The blood was oozing through the sleeve of his coat. There was no pain--just a deadened sensation, as if the arm had been cut off.

Quickly he drew his knife from his pocket, opened it on the breastwork of the

parapet, and ripped open the sleeve. There was a small hole where the bullet had entered. On the other side there was no hole. The bullet had lodged in the bone. It must have fractured it. He bent the arm below the wound. The arm bent back easily. He ground his teeth to overcome the pain.

Then taking out his field dressing, he ripped open the packet with his knife. He broke the neck of the iodine bottle and let the bitter fluid drip into the wound. A paroxysm of pain swept through him. He placed the cotton wadding over the wound and wrapped the dressing over it. He tied the ends with his teeth.

Then he lay still against the parapet, and, closing his eyes, he made an effort of will to overcome the pain.

In the street beneath all was still. The armored car had retired speedily over the bridge, with the machine gunner's head hanging lifeless over the turret. The woman's corpse lay still in the gutter.

The sniper lay still for a long time nursing his wounded arm and planning escape. Morning must not find him wounded on the roof. The enemy on the opposite roof covered his escape. He must kill that enemy and he could not use his rifle. He had only a revolver to do it. Then he thought of a plan.

Taking off his cap, he placed it over the muzzle of his rifle. Then he pushed the rifle slowly upward over the parapet, until the cap was visible from the opposite side of the street. Almost immediately there was a report, and a bullet pierced the center of the cap. The sniper slanted the rifle forward. The cap clipped down into the street. Then catching the rifle in the middle, the sniper dropped his left hand over the roof and let it hang, lifelessly. After a few moments he let the rifle drop to the street. Then he sank to the roof, dragging his hand with him.

Crawling quickly to his feet, he peered up at the corner of the roof. His ruse had succeeded. The other sniper, seeing the cap and rifle fall, thought that he had killed his man. He was now standing before a row of chimney pots, looking across, with his head clearly silhouetted against the western sky.

The Republican sniper smiled and lifted his revolver above the edge of the parapet. The distance was about fifty yards--a hard shot in the dim light, and his right arm was paining him like a thousand devils. He took a steady aim. His hand trembled with eagerness. Pressing his lips together, he took a deep breath through his nostrils and fired. He was almost deafened with the report and his arm shook with the recoil.

Then when the smoke cleared, he peered across and uttered a cry of joy. His enemy had been hit. He was reeling over the parapet in his death agony. He struggled to keep his feet, but he was slowly falling forward as if in a dream. The rifle fell from his grasp, hit the parapet, fell over, bounded off the pole of a barber's shop beneath and then clattered on the pavement.

Then the dying man on the roof crumpled up and fell forward. The body turned over and over in space and hit the ground with a dull thud. Then it lay still.

The sniper looked at his enemy falling and he shuddered. The lust of battle died in him. He became bitten by remorse. The sweat stood out in beads on his forehead. Weakened by his wound and the long summer day of fasting and watching on the roof, he revolted from the sight of the shattered mass of his dead enemy. His teeth chattered, he began to gibber to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody.

He looked at the smoking revolver in his hand, and with an oath he hurled it to the roof at his feet. The revolver went off with a concussion and the bullet whizzed past the sniper's head. He was frightened back to his senses by the shock. His nerves steadied. The cloud of fear scattered from his mind and he laughed.

100 Taking the whiskey flask from his pocket, he emptied it a drought. He felt reckless under the influence of the spirit. He decided to leave the roof now and look for his company commander, to report. Everywhere around was quiet. There was not much danger in going through the streets. He picked up his revolver and put it in his pocket. Then he crawled down through the skylight to the house underneath.

105 When the sniper reached the laneway on the street level, he felt a sudden curiosity as to the identity of the enemy sniper whom he had killed. He decided that he was a good shot, whoever he was. He wondered did he know him. Perhaps he had been in his own company before the split in the army. He decided to risk going over to have a look at him. He peered around the corner into O'Connell Street. In the upper part of the street there was heavy firing, but around here all was quiet.

110 The sniper darted across the street. A machine gun tore up the ground around him with a hail of bullets, but he escaped. He threw himself face downward beside the corpse. The machine gun stopped.

Then the sniper turned over the dead body and looked into his brother's face.

THE END

Glossary:

Line number	Word	Explanation:
Line 19	parapet	low wall along the edge of the roof, to protect the roof
Line 19	whiff	smell you notice for a short time only
Line 34	tattered	old and worn
Line 38	to dart	to move quickly and suddenly
Line 67	report	sound of a gun being fired
Line 72	ruse	Trick
Line 80	recoil	sudden movement backwards, esp. of a gun being fired
Line 92	to gibber	to oneself to speak in a way difficult to understand, esp. in fear

The Sniper – Questions:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Liam O'Flaherty was a significant Irish novelist and short story writer and a major figure in the Irish literary renaissance, born 28 August 1896, died 7 September 1984...“The Sniper,” Liam O'Flaherty's first published work, is a short story. It was printed in London in the January 12, 1923, issue of a weekly socialist publication, The New Leader.

"The Sniper"

by Liam O'Flaherty

First read the story and then answer the questions.

1 p	1. What kind of point of view do we have in ' <i>The Sniper</i> '? A. a first person view. B. a second person view C. a third person view.
1 p	2. What time of day is the story set? Give examples.
1 p	3. What are the names of the two sides who are fighting?
1 p	4. Why hadn't the sniper eaten since morning?
1 p	5. What risk did the sniper take? Why do you think he took this risk?
2 p	6. Why did the sniper shoot the unarmed woman? Was he justified? Explain why or why not.
1 p	7. How does the author describe the physical appearance of the sniper? A. The author describes the sniper as a large man with warm eyes. B. The author describes the sniper as a thin man with eyes that looked as though they were used to seeing death C. The author described the sniper as a poorly dressed soldier with eyes that were scared
1 p	8. How is the armored car described? What is the metaphor?

2 p	9. Explain how the sniper tricks his enemy. Be specific.
1 p	10. How does the sniper feel about war after he had killed the other sniper?
1 p	11. The tone the author uses concerning war is A. is necessary to encourage growth B. is evil C. is a painful experience for everyone D. brings economic benefits to countries
1 p	12. Besides curiosity, why does the sniper want to see the face of his attacker?
2 p	13. Identify three qualities that made the two snipers alike beyond being brothers.
1 p	14. In this short story the purpose of irony is to create feelings of A. horror B. indifference C. satisfaction D. amusement

LITERARY TERMS:

2 p	15. What is the setting of the story? A setting is the time, place, and atmosphere (e.g. happy, sad, exciting, frightening, etc.) the novel is taking place in.
2 p	16. What is the theme of the story? A theme is the main idea, moral, or message, of an essay, paragraph, movie, book or video game. The message may be about life, society, or human nature.
2 p	17. Identify the 'inciting incident' of the story. Explain why you think that this is the inciting incident. (Write down the first two words of the sentence + line number).

2 p	18. Identify the 'climax' of the story. Explain why you think that this is the climax. (Write down the first two words of the sentence + line number).
2 p	19. Identify the 'dénouement' of the story. Explain why you think that this is the 'dénouement'. (Write down the first two words of the sentence + line number).