

“The Sniper”

By Liam O’Flaherty

The long June twilight faded into the night. Dublin lay *enveloped* in darkness but for the dim light of the moon that shone through fleecy clouds, casting a pale light of approaching dawn over the streets and the dark waters of Liffey.



Draw a picture based on the description you just read. You may use the space below.

Around the *beleaguered* Four Courts the heavy guns roared. Here and there through the city, 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.



What do you know about 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*. 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 whisky 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 dangerous. The flash might be seen in the darkness, and there would be 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 upper *parapet* of the roof. The sniper took another whiff and put out the cigarette. Then he swore softly and crawled away to the left.



What point of view is this story written in? (Who is telling the story?)

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.



”Whizzed” is a word that describes how the bullet sounded as it flew through the air. What literary term is this? What are some other words that describe a sound?

He rolled over the roof to a chimneystack 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.

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 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.



What was the gray monster? What literary term is used?

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 pointing to the roof where the sniper lay. An informer.



What do you think is 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 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.



Did the sniper really think the noise would wake the dead? What does that saying mean? What literary term is being used?

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 felt the injured 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 went back easily. He ground his teeth to overcome the pain.



Describe the time you were in the MOST physical pain in your life. What did you do to help you deal with 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.



What does “morning must not find him wounded on the roof” mean?

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.



If you were the sniper, what would your plan be?

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 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 shot 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 to 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 and fell forward. The body turned over and over in space and hit the ground with a dull thud. Then it lay still.



“Thud” is a word that describes the noise of a dead body hitting the ground. What other objects might make a “thud” noise when they hit the ground?

The sniper looked at his enemy falling and shuddered. The lust of battle died in him. He became bitten by remorse. The sweat stood out in beads on his forehead.



How is the sniper feeling about what he just did?

Weakened by his own 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 clouds of fear scattered from his mind and he laughed.



Why did the sniper laugh?

Taking the whiskey from his pocket, he emptied it one drink. He felt reckless under the influence of the spirit (whisky). 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.

When the sniper reached the laneway on the street level, he felt a sudden curiosity as to the identity of the 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.

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 downward beside the corpse. The machine gun stopped.

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

Reactions:

What surprised you in this story?

What part of the story do you think the author wrote the best? Go back and put a star by that section then explain how good word choices helped you visualize or feel what was actually happening in the story.

What will this sniper's life be like now? Imagine a year after this story ends: what is the sniper doing? What is his mental state like?