



*It's the 1920s, and Dublin's streets have become
a battlefield in Ireland's struggle
for independence.*

The Sniper

Short Story
by Liam O'Flaherty

GOALS AT A GLANCE

- Assume a role to write a factual report.
- Analyse the use of vivid verbs.

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, 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 were 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 draught. 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 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 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.

Just then an armoured car came across the bridge and advanced slowly up the street. It stopped on the opposite side of the street, forty-five metres 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 grey 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 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 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 stopped 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 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 armoured 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 centre of the cap. The sniper slanted the rifle forward. The cap slipped 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 the left, 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 forty-five metres—a hard shot in the dim light, and his right arm was paining him like a thousand angry knives. 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 the 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.

Taking the whisky flask from his pocket, he emptied it at a draught. 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.

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 a 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 face downward beside the corpse. The machine gun stopped.

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

1. RESPONDING TO THE STORY

- a. Reread the first paragraph. What details in the author's description of the setting establish the tone or atmosphere of the story?
- b. What message about this civil war is Liam O'Flaherty trying to convey? How does his message compare to the theme in "War"?
- c. List words and phrases the author uses to describe the sniper and what he's doing. Write your own description of him, using some or all of these words.
- d. The sniper is the only character the author describes in great deal. Why do you think the author chose to do that?
- e. Were you surprised by the ending? Why or why not? Did you find it a powerful ending?
- f. Do you think such a story could occur in Canada? Give reasons for your opinion.

2. WRITING A FACTUAL REPORT

Imagine you are the main character in "The Sniper." You've just returned to your company and have been asked to write a report about what happened. List the events in the story in the order they occurred. Use a complete sentence for each event. Because this is an official report, leave out how you felt or what you thought—just include the facts as you saw them.

3. EDITOR'S DESK VIVID VERBS

Words are all an author can use to create images and events in the reader's mind. Verbs are especially useful because they help the reader to picture the action. Here are two examples from "The Sniper." The verbs are underlined.

- Almost immediately, a bullet flattened itself against the parapet of the roof.
- Then taking out his field dressing, he ripped open the packet with his knife.

Why is the first example more vivid than simply writing "...a bullet hit the parapet of the roof"? What does "ripped" in the second example tell you about the state of the sniper's mind?

Choose a short story from your writing portfolio that you would like to revise. Rewrite it using verbs that create a clear and direct image. Keep in

mind, however, that too many vivid verbs can make a story difficult to read or make the language sound too forced and artificial. Look over your rewrite. Is it clear? Is it better or worse than your first version?

STRATEGIES

4. ORAL LANGUAGE DEBATE AN ISSUE

Although Ireland has gained independence since the events of the story, Northern Ireland continues to be a place of conflict, which can be viewed in at least two ways:

- Northern Ireland should remain separate from Ireland.
- Ireland should become *one* country without a north and south division.

Work in a group to debate these two opposing viewpoints. First, use the print and media resources in your library to research this conflict. Then decide on a statement to debate; for example, *Northern Ireland should remain a separate country*. Divide into two groups, one for and one against, and then prepare to debate with your classmates. Use the following guidelines as you prepare:

- review the facts in your research
- think about your opinion or the position you'll be taking
- prepare a persuasive argument about two minutes in length
- work co-operatively with others on your team to develop three arguments that support, but don't repeat, each other
- revise your argument
- memorize and practise delivering your argument
- during the debate listen carefully to the opposing team's arguments
- prepare your *rebuttal* (your response to the argument of an opposing team member)

SELF-ASSESSMENT: Evaluate the debate process you've gone through and think about these questions:

- Did you prepare a clear and logical argument?
- Did you present your argument clearly?
- Did you listen carefully to other arguments?
- Did you present a rebuttal based on an opposing argument?

