

## NATIONAL 5 CRITICAL ESSAY EXEMPLAR – ‘IN CHURCH’

**Prose:** Characterisation, setting, language, key incidents, climax, turning point, plot, structure, narrative technique, theme, foreshadowing

**Choose a novel or a short story or a work of non-fiction which deals with an important human issue (such as the abuse of power, conflict between good and evil, loss of freedom or hatred between individuals or groups).**

**By referring to appropriate techniques, show how the author reveals the issues through the portrayal of people and events throughout the text, and show how your understanding of the issue has deepened.**

A short story which deals with the important human issue of the destructiveness of war is ‘In Church’ by Iain Crichton Smith. It is about a British lieutenant’s deadly encounter with a deserter during World War I. On leave while fighting in continental Europe, Colin McLeod goes for a walk in the woods and discovers an abandoned church. It is inhabited by a deserter posing as a priest who murders McLeod in order to keep from being discovered. Crichton Smith explores the theme of the destructiveness of war through his portrayal of McLeod and the deserter, and through the darkly ironic events of the story.

Crichton Smith reveals the destructive impact of war through his characterisation of McLeod and the deserter. Both have been severely psychologically affected by their experiences. Colin McLeod is portrayed as someone who has become emotionally numb, passive, and disenchanted as a result of his time fighting. We see this at the beginning of the story when he remembers horrific sights he has witnessed in a detached, emotionless way. We also see it at the climax of the story: when Colin is murdered, his last thoughts are, ‘How funny all this is. How comical’. It is as if war has damaged his ability to feel emotions fully.

Crichton Smith’s portrayal of Colin reveals the destructiveness of war in other ways. Throughout his encounter with the deserter, Colin is portrayed as almost completely passive.

“If you would please sit down.”

“I think I had better...”

“Please sit down.”

During their conversation, most of Colin’s utterances are interrupted by the insane deserter. He also lets the priest verbally push him into coming down into the cellar for some wine, and into sitting down after the priest reveals he survives by eating animals. We would expect a healthy soldier in Colin’s

position to put up more of a fight as the situation becomes more sinister. Instead, Crichton Smith characterises him as someone who has had his strength taken away from him by war.

Through his portrayal of the deserter, Crichton Smith further shows the destructive and corrupting impact war can have on the human mind. At the story's turning point, the 'priest' reveals that he sleeps in the church's crypt and lives by eating trapped animals: 'All over the floor, bones were scattered, and there seemed to be an assortment of bloody animal traps'. This disturbing image suggests the idea that his experiences have caused the deserter to regress – he no longer lives like a man, but like an animal. Crichton does this to reveal the destructive impact war has on human civilisation.

Through his portrayal of both of the story's characters, Crichton Smith reveals the destructive impact war can have on people's values and beliefs. We do not learn much about McLeod's backstory, but when the deserter preaches about his experience we learn how much war has changed the formerly very devout man: 'I hate you because you are as indifferent as the generals. I hate you because of my weakness. I hate you, God, because of what you have done to mankind.' The deserter starts his story by telling Colin that, as a teenager, he was passionately religious. Crichton Smith doesn't portray him as someone who has simply lost his faith – he portrays him as someone who has gone from loving God to despising him, and we are told Colin genuinely agrees. By doing this, Crichton Smith reveals how war can warp the ideas that are most important to a person.

Through his portrayal of the story's events, Crichton Smith reveals how war destroys and upsets our ideas about how things are supposed to be. There are many ways the story's climax – the deserter's murder of Colin – are unexpected and ironic. Colin is not killed on a battlefield; he is killed on leave, in the middle of a wood. He is murdered in a church; churches are supposed to be sanctuaries. The deserter poses as a priest; priests are supposed to be gentle and kind. Colin is not killed by a German; he is killed by one of his own countrymen – had he been German he would have lived. Colin does not challenge the deserter; he cooperates with him and agrees with everything he says. In every way possible, Colin's death is unexpected and random. Through these events, Crichton Smith shows that war destroys how everything is supposed to be.

In 'In Church', Crichton Smith reveals the destructiveness of war by showing how it has damaged the characters' minds, morals, beliefs, and habits, and how it has made the world around them unsafe and completely unpredictable. He deepens the reader's understanding of the issue by showing just how much of what we take for granted war can destroy – both of the two characters have been badly changed by their experience, and the events of the story only happen because war has destroyed the normal rules of human civilisation.