

'In Church', by Iain Crichton Smith

N5 Study Guide

Past Questions

1. Choose a novel or a short story or a work of non-fiction which explores an important theme.

By referring to appropriate techniques, show how the author has explored this theme.

2. Choose a novel or a short story in which the author creates a fascinating character.

By referring to appropriate techniques, show how the author has created this character and why you found him/her so fascinating.

3. Choose a novel or short story in which you feel sympathy with one of the main characters because of the difficulties or injustice or hardships he or she has to face.

Describe the problems the character faces and, by referring to appropriate techniques, show how you are made to feel sympathy for her or him.

4. Choose a novel or short story with an ending which you find satisfactory.

By referring to appropriate techniques, explain why you find the ending satisfactory in bringing to a conclusion the main concerns of the text as a whole.

5. 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.

6. Choose a novel or short story or work of non-fiction which has a key incident.

Give a brief account of the incident, and by referring to appropriate techniques, show how this incident is important to the text as a whole.

7. Choose a novel or short story in which there is a character involved in some form of conflict.

By referring to appropriate techniques, show how the character comes to be involved in this conflict and how the conflict develops throughout the text.

Key terms to use when writing on PROSE

Characterisation:	What and how Crichton Smith tells us about these characters.
Setting:	The peaceful French forest; the church.
Language:	Similes, metaphors, descriptions.
Key incidents:	The deserter's murder of Colin.
Climax:	The priest's sermon OR the murder of Colin.
Turning point:	The priest shows Colin his bed.
Structure:	The atmosphere of peace and calm before the turning point; the nightmarish atmosphere that follows the turning point.
Themes:	The far-reaching and insidious destructiveness of war (it destroys lives, beliefs, and minds, and its effects are not isolated to the battlefield). The corrosive effect of isolation on the human mind. Religious faith, and how it can be affected and changed.
Description:	Details about the priest, the priest's living conditions, his environment.

When: World War I

Where: Somewhere in continental Europe, not far from the front lines (he can hear the fighting, and see smoke rising).

Synopsis: Colin Macleod, a Lieutenant in the British army, finds himself in a brief break from the fighting.

He wanders into a wood, and finds a church, which appears to have been empty for some time. A priest appears, and offers to show Colin the rest of the church. It's revealed that the priest is a deserter, and that he lives like an animal.

He pressures Colin into hearing him preach (which he says he has never done before). The deserter was religious, but now he hates God. Colin is moved by the sermon.

The deserter murders Colin to prevent him from turning him in.

Character

Lieutenant Colin Macleod

From the outset, MacLeod is established as a sensitive, intelligent and thoughtful character. He has been in the trenches for so long that war has lost its ability to shock and he is increasingly beleaguered and disenchanted with the conflict.

He notes in the opening paragraph the senseless and random nature of war by reflecting how he noticed often before how unreal a battle might become, how a man would suddenly spin round, throwing up his arms as if acting a part in a play.

The anonymous and random nature of trench warfare is emphasised when he describes the relentless bombardment by the big German guns, and how it almost seemed as though gods were carelessly punching the soldiers out of existence.

His reaction to the bird being attacked is especially revealing. It emphasises just how sickened he is by the suffering he has been forced to witness. The sight of the church then, a mirage seems initially to offer sanctuary and safety in the midst of this chaos.

Even though MacLeod quite reasonably assumes the black clad figure is a priest, his subconscious seems to realise something is not quite right.

He notes immediately the strangeness that the priest should speak English and is hesitant about going downstairs to the crypt.

His reticence and uncertainty is emphasised in the dialogue during this section of the story. MacLeod's sentences are almost all unfinished, Well, I..., If it's all..., You mean you..., I think I had better.... He is clearly uncomfortable but seems unable to challenge the priest and allows him to take control of the situation.

MacLeod's obedience to the deserter's instructions is most likely because he has adopted the persona of a priest. Even when his true identity is revealed, still Macleod seems unable to find a way to escape from the situation.

In the end, the realisation that he is going to be killed is met with a sense of ridiculous disbelief.

In his final moments, he is astonished that he is to meet his death not on the battlefields from enemy fire but in a place of worship from a fellow soldier. This subversion of the usual order of things underpins the chaos and randomness of war.

Character

The Deserter

In this character, Crichton Smith clearly depicts the corrosive, negative effects of war on the human psyche. Although this character is described as a complete madman, there is a skewed logic to his behaviour.

He has the presence of mind to approach Macleod only when he is certain that he is not a German. He establishes quickly that he has come alone. This implies that his intention was always to kill him.

He immediately takes a more dominant stance and MacLeod feels compelled to follow his instructions, even though his senses alert him to the strangeness of the situation.

The deserter's need for human contact and to hear another human voice forces him to jeopardise his own safety, yet curiously he rarely allows MacLeod to speak.

Instead, it seems that really what he desires is someone to hear him. All the unspoken thoughts and feelings that have built up in him during his year of isolation are finally released.

His blackened teeth symbolise his own corruption and degradation and foreshadow the callous, calculated way he kills Macleod at the end.

His observations about war are especially revealing. While articulate and insightful in condemning the senseless slaughter, his comments are almost misanthropic. He criticizes his fellow soldiers, saying he both despised and feared them, outraged by the way they fornicated and drank and spat and lived filthily.

Even though he studied theology before being conscripted into the army, there is no sense of compassion or empathy for his fellow man in any of his words. Instead, he uses MacLeod as an audience to vent his hatred of a God that would abandon his people and allow such suffering to continue.

He is angry especially that he has been forced to live alone all this time, espousing that in order to live we need language and human beings.

The deserter then reveals the subversion and chaos of war:

- He adopts the persona of a priest but in his sermon condemns God.
- He seeks human contact yet murders the only person he has spoken to in a year.
- He admits that had MacLeod been a German he would have been safe, a reversal of the usual codes of warfare.

Theme **The futility and destructiveness of war**

In MacLeod's reflections on the conflict, it is clear that he has become increasingly jaded about the war. As an intellectual, sensitive man he realises it is futile and pointless.

He remembers specific traumatic and horrifying incidents with a sense of dispassion. He has become desensitized to the horrors that confront him on a daily basis. In spite of this, his reaction to the birds emphasises just how sickened he is by suffering.

Like the war, the attack on the bird seems futile. It also highlights the natural conflict, suffering and destruction in nature.

Like the character of Mackinnon in *The Crater*, MacLeod's intelligence and thoughtfulness offer no protection from the horrors of the trenches. If anything, they make the situation worse.

While Macleod can recognise the irony and absurdity of the situation he finds himself in, he cannot save himself.

In the sermon delivered by the deserter, the degradation of trench warfare is emphasised. He describes horrendous conditions, rats, dead soldiers buried in the walls of trenches and being up to his knees in green slime.

He is angry not only with God but also with the generals and officers in charge back home. He seeks to find some sort of reason or rationale behind his suffering but this is pointless. His anger and rage have left him with a tremendous sense of impotence and powerlessness.

Crichton Smith draws our attention to the conflict between the needs of the individual versus those of society. The conditions of war are almost unimaginable but still society expects the deserter to sacrifice his own conscience for the greater good of the nation. Society would condemn and ostracise him for running away.

Theme **The corrosive effects of isolation on the human psyche**

The conditions of trench warfare are the catalyst for the soldier's decision to desert. But as the story progresses it becomes clear that his enforced isolation has caused much greater psychological damage.

Although misanthropic about his fellow comrades, the deserter has been hugely affected by his loneliness and lack of human contact.

Crichton Smith highlights a fundamental need for fraternity that exists in all of us. In this character he shows us the terrible effects of long periods of enforced isolation.

Quotations

The destructiveness of warfare

He had noticed often before how unreal a battle might become, how a man would suddenly spin round, throwing up his arms as if acting a part in a play... - **Colin's memories.**

...the artillery battles which were so much worse than local fights, for the death which came from the distant giants was anonymous and negligent as if gods were carelessly punching them out of existence. – **Colin's memories.**

The triplane made a perfect landing. The British troops rushed up to find the pilot seated at the controls, upright, disciplined, aristocratic, eyes staring straight ahead, and perfectly dead. – **Colin's memories of the dogfight; death is random and everywhere.**

The other two birds were zeroing in at it all the time, pecking and jabbing, going for the head. – **Conflict is part of the natural order of things.**

We, that is, the others, played football. And at the end of it a German officer came up to us and said. "You had better get back to your dugouts: we are starting a barrage at 1300 hours." He consulted his watch and we went back to our trenches after we had shaken hands with each other. – **the deserter's memories of the Christmas truce.**

'I think, Lord, that I hate you. I hate you for inventing the world and then abandoning it. I hate you because you have not intervened to save the world.

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's ultimate thoughts on the God he once loved.**

In any case it was very strange to die in that way, so far from home, and not even on the battlefield. – **Colin's final thoughts.**

Quotations

The effects of isolation

The face was pale and ill looking. – **the deserter's initial appearance**

They arrived at a small room. 'Here is my bed, you see,' said the priest. 'And here ... '

All over the floor, bones were scattered, and there seemed to be an assortment of bloody animal traps. – **the deserter has regressed, and now lives like a primitive.**

The priest smiled showing blackened teeth. – **his black teeth symbolise the psychological rot.**

'Do you know what it is to be alone? Sometimes I wish to go back but it is impossible now. To hear the sound of one human voice again! One human voice.' – **the deserter is desperate – to the point of murder – for talk and conversation.**

'I did not know what this was since my gaze was always directed inward and not outward. I was put among men whom I despised and feared - they fornicated and drank and spat and lived filthily. Yet they were my comrades in arms'. – **even before the war, the deserter was so withdrawn it negatively affected his relationships with others.**

'Betray me? But you are an officer. It is your duty. What else can you do?'

He looked at Colin from the pulpit and for the time his hands came out from beneath the gown. They were holding a gun. – **the deserter has approached Colin knowing that he'll kill him for his conversation.**

Quotations

Dream, Nightmare, Unreality

Released for a short while from the war he wandered into a wood whose trees looked like columns in a church. – **there is something holy about the wood.**

It was completely intact though quite small and with gravestones beside it. It was strange to see it, like a mirage surrounded by trees whose brown leaves stirred faintly in the slight breeze. – **the church appears like a mirage - something not real.**

He had never been in a church like this before with the large effigy of the Virgin Mary all in gold looking down at him, hands crossed. – **Colin is in a church, but it's different from the ones he is used to.**

He was so astonished that he could think of nothing to say. To find a priest speaking English here seemed suddenly nightmarish. For some reason the thought came into his mind of the most macabre sight he had seen in the war, a horse wearing a gas mask. – **Colin is wrong-footed by the deserter's speaking English.**

How funny all this is. How comical. Here I am in a church which is not like my own church with the golden cross and the effigy of the Virgin in front of me. Here I am, agreeing with everything he says. And it seemed to him for a moment as if the gold cross wavered slightly in the blast of the gun. But that might have been an illusion. – **Colin's last thoughts on the situation's unusualness.**

Dramatic Irony throughout 'In Church'

- I. Colin is away from the frontline, where death is common; he is murdered in a church in a tranquil forest.
- II. Colin is murdered by a former British soldier; had he been German, the deserter could not have spoken to him, and so would have left him alone.
- III. Priests are supposed to be gentle, kind, and moral; the 'priest' in 'In Church' is a lunatic killer.
- IV. The deserter poses as a priest and lives in a church; the deserter was religious but has grown to hate God.
- V. Colin agrees with everything the deserter says; the deserter kills him for fear Colin will turn him in as a traitor.
- VI. A church is supposed to be a place of sanctuary and safety; Colin is murdered in it by someone who has gone mad.