

The Telegram

by Iain Crichton Smith

every day activity

contrast

opposites - sets the scene

colon introduces explanation

repention makes it sound worse.

solation

metaphor illness/ causes mass death

metaphor weapon causing destruction

links * to conflict between the women

word choice fear anxiety

The two women - one fat and one thin - sat at the window of the thin woman's house drinking tea and looking down the road which ran through the village. They were like two birds, one a fat domestic bird perhaps, the other more aquiline, more gaunt, or, to be precise, more like a buzzard.

simile

different purposes of the women.

word choice source of worry

It was wartime and though the village appeared quiet, much had gone on in it. Reverberations from a war fought far away had reached it: many of its young men had been killed, or rather drowned, since nearly all of them had joined the navy, and their ships had sunk in seas which they had never seen except on maps which hung on the walls of the local school which they all had at one time or another unwillingly attended. One had been drowned on a destroyer after a leave during which he had told his family that he would never come back again. (Or at least that was the rumour in the village which was still, as it had always been, a superstitious place.) Another had been drowned during the pursuit of the Bismarck.

parenthesis - builds tension

link to remote location

What the war had to do with them the people of the village did not know. It came on them as a strange plague, taking their sons away and then killing them, meaninglessly, randomly. They watched the road often for the telegrams.

Personification - like a thief

word choice - emphasise horror.

The telegrams were brought to the houses by the local elder who, clad in black, would walk along the road and then stop at the house to which the telegram was directed. People began to think of the telegram as a strange missile pointed at them from abroad. They did not know what to associate it with, certainly not with God, but it was a weapon of some kind, it picked a door and entered it, and left desolation just like any other weapon.

word choice - suggest death.

shows importance of religion in this village.

The two women who watched the street were different, not only physically but socially. For the thin woman's son was a sub-lieutenant in the Navy while the fat woman's son was only an ordinary seaman. The fat woman's son had to salute the thin woman's son. One got more pay than the other, and wore better uniform. One had been at university and had therefore become an officer, the other had left school at the age of fourteen.

contrast

When they looked out the window they could see cows wandering lazily about, but little other movement. The fat woman's cow used to eat the thin woman's washing and she was looking out for it but she couldn't see it. The thin woman was not popular in the village. She was an incomer from another village and had only been in this one for thirty years or so. The fat woman had lived in the village all her days; she was a native. Also the thin woman was ambitious: she had sent her son to university though she only had a widow's pension of ten shillings a week. *

word choice - highlight her difference!

As they watched they could see at the far end of the street the tall man in black clothes carrying in his hand a piece of yellow paper. This was a bare village with little colour and therefore the yellow was both strange and unnatural. The fat woman said:

ominous, like the grim reaper

'It's Macleod again.'

word choice - stands out, creates shock/fear.

'I wonder where he's going today.'

They were both frightened for he could be coming to their house. And so they watched him and as they watched him they spoke feverishly as if by speaking continually and watching his every move they would be able to keep from themselves whatever plague he was bringing. The thin woman said:

Don't worry, Sarah, it won't be for you. Donald only left home last week.'

Attempt at comfort.

Spreading the fear/negativity through the village.

repetition
- worried, not comforted by thin woman

resentment

'You don't know,' said the fat woman, 'you don't know.' And then she added without thinking, 'It's different for the officers.' - Jealousy

question
- defensive
- insulted
- her
- worries
- are just
- as
- important

'Why is it different for the officers?' said the thin woman in an even voice without taking her eyes from the black figure. ← Focus on the real source of anxiety.

'Well, I just thought they're better off,' said the fat woman in a confused tone, 'they get better food and they get better conditions. ← unable to understand the reality

'They're still on the ship,' said the thin woman who was that the fat woman was very stupid. But then most of them were: they were large, fat and lazy. Most of them could have better afforded to send their sons and daughters to university but they didn't want to be thought of as snobbish. word choice - insulting

'They are that,' said the fat woman. 'But your son is educated,' she added irrelevantly. Of course her son didn't salute the thin woman's son if they were both home on leave at the same time. It had happened once they had been. But naturally there was the uneasiness. word choice - lack of comfort

Tone
- defends
- her
- actions

'I made sacrifices to have my son educated,' said the thin woman. 'I lived on a pension of ten shillings a week. I was in nobody's debt. More tea?' ← Question - breaks tension, contrasting attitudes.

'No thank you,' said the fat woman.

'He's passed Bessie's house. That means it can't be Roddy. He's safe.' Short sentence - not happy.

For a terrible moment she realised that she had hoped that the elder would have turned in at Bessie's house. Not that she had anything against either Bessie or Roddy. But still one thought of one's own family first. ← link to bird imagery / extended metaphor

selfish?

repetition
- not
- backing
- down
- or going
- to let
- it go.

The thin woman continued remorselessly as if she were pecking away at something she had pecked at for many years. 'The teacher told me to send Iain to University. He came to see me. I had no thought of sending him before he came. "Send your son to university," he said to me. "He's got a good head on him." And I'll tell you, Sarah, I had to save every penny. Ten shillings isn't much. When did you see me with good clothes in the church?' ← defends her decision, chatty tone

word choice
- suggests
- lack of
- interest

'That's true,' said the fat woman absently. 'We have to make sacrifices.' It was difficult to know what she was thinking of the whale meat or the saccharines? Or the lack of clothes? Her mind was vague and diffused except when she was thinking about herself. The thin woman continued: 'Many's the night I used to sit here in this room and knit clothes for him when he was young. I even knitted trousers for him. And for all I know he may marry an English girl and where will I be? He might go and work in England. He was staying in a house there at Christmas. He met a girl at a dance and he found out later that her father was a mayor. I'm sure she smokes and drinks. And he might not give me anything after all I've done for him.' ← question - more women

short sentences
- simple
- actions
- and
- thoughts

'Donald spends all his money,' said the fat woman. 'He never sends me anything. "When he comes home on leave he's never in the house. But I don't mind. He was always like that. Meeting strange people and buying them drinks. It's his nature and he can't go against his nature. He's passed the Smiths. That means Tommy's all right.'

There were only another three houses before he would reach her own, and then the last one was the one where she was sitting. - building up tension

Trying
- to
- distract
- herself.

'I think I'll take a cup of tea,' she said. And then, 'I'm sorry about the cow.' But no matter how you tried you never could like the thin woman. She was always putting on airs. Mayor indeed. Sending her son to university. "Why did she want to be better than anyone else? Saving and scrimping all the

← word choice - critical

word choice - possession

time. And everybody said that her son wasn't as clever as all that. He had failed some of his exams too. Her own Donald was just as clever and could have gone to university but he was too fond of fishing and being out with the boys.

Gossip - means of escape

As she drank her tea her heart was beating and she was frightened and she didn't know what to talk about and yet she wanted to talk. She liked talking, after all what else was there to do? But the thin woman didn't gossip much. You couldn't feel thinking about at ease with her, you had the idea all the time that she was something else. The thin woman came and sat down beside her.

'Did you hear,' said the fat woman, 'that Malcolm Mackay was up on a drunken charge? He smashed his car, so they say. It was in the black-out.' ← lighten the mood

'I didn't hear that,' said the thin woman. 'It was coming home last night with the meat. He had it in the van and he smashed it at the burn. But they say he's all right. I don't know how they kept him out of the war. They said it was his heart but there was nothing wrong with his heart. Everyone knows it was influence. "What's wrong with his heart if he can drink and smash a car?' ← strange logic

word choice - careful

The thin woman drank her tea very delicately. She used to be away on service a long time before she was married and she had a dainty way of doing things. She sipped her tea, her little finger elegantly curled in an irritating way. word choice suggests she annoyed the fat woman / another snobbish act.

Takes out her aggression

'Why do you keep your finger like that?' said the fat woman suddenly.

'Like what?'

The fat woman demonstrated.

'Oh, it was the way I saw the guests drinking tea in the hotels when I was on service. They always drank like that.' ← link to past / hard working / desire for better.

short sentence - build tension

'He's passed the Stewarts,' said the fat woman. Two houses to go. They looked at each other wildly. It must be one of them. Surely. They could see the elder quite clearly now, walking very stiff, very upright, wearing his black hat. He walked in a stately dignified manner, eyes straight ahead of him. 'He's proud of what he's doing,' said the fat woman suddenly. 'You'd think he was proud of it. Knowing before anyone else. And he himself was never in the war.' ← criticism

'Yes,' said the thin woman, 'it gives him a position.' They watched him. They both knew him well. He was a stiff, quiet man who kept himself to himself, more than ever now. He didn't mix with people and he always carried the Bible into the pulpit for the minister. ← isolated / snobbish

word choice - suggests cruel

'They say his wife had one of her fits again,' said the fat woman viciously. He had passed the Murrays. The next house was her own. She sat perfectly still. Oh, pray God it wasn't hers. And yet it must be hers. Surely it must be hers. She had dreamt of this happening, her son drowning in the Atlantic ocean, her own child whom she had reared, whom she had seen going to play football in his green jersey and white shorts, whom she had seen running home from school. She could see him drowning but she couldn't make out the name of the ship. She had never seen a really big ship and what she imagined was more like the mailboat than a cruiser. Her son couldn't drown out there for no reason that she could understand. God couldn't do that to people. It was impossible. God was kinder than that. God helped you in your sore trouble. She began to mutter a prayer over and over. She said it quickly like the Catholics, O God save my son O God save my son O God save my son. She was ashamed of prattling in that way as if she was counting beads but she couldn't stop herself, and on top of that she would soon cry. She knew it and she didn't want to cry in front of that woman, and that foreigner. It would be weakness. She felt the arm of the thin woman around her shoulders, the

repetition of 'she' - selfish

lack of motivation speaking Luckily

← harsh word choice

← link to enemies in war.

simile
- kind, caring
act of support

list
- positive emotions

word choice
- part of her died with the news

personification
- helped her see the truth

simile
- not present fully

Anti-climax
- no major realisation

word choice
- sleep walking

thin arm, and it was like first love, it was like the time Murdo had taken her hand in his when they were coming home from the dance, such an innocent gesture, such a spontaneous gesture. So unexpected, so strange, so much a gift. She was crying and she couldn't look ... 'He has passed your house,' said the thin woman in a distant firm voice, and she looked up. He was walking along and he had indeed passed her house. She wanted to stand up and dance all round the kitchen, all fifteen stone of her, and shout and cry and sing a song but then she stopped. She couldn't do that. How could she do that when it must be the thin woman's son? There was no other house. The thin woman was looking out at the elder, her lips pressed closely together, white and bloodless. Where had she learnt that self-control? She wasn't crying or shaking. She was looking out at something she had always dreaded but she wasn't going to cry or surrender or give herself away to anyone. And at that moment the fat woman saw. She saw the years of discipline, she remembered how thin and unfed and pale the thin woman had always looked, how sometimes she had had to borrow money, even a shilling to buy food. She saw what it must have been like to be a widow bringing up a son in a village - not her own. She saw it so clearly that she was astounded. It was as if she had an extra vision, as if the air itself brought the past with all its details nearer. The number of times the thin woman had been ill and people had said that she was weak and useless. She looked down at the thin woman's arm. It was so shrivelled, and dry.

contrast
- lacking true emotion

word choice
- Shocker

word choice - creates sympathy

And the elder walked on. A few yards now till he reached the plank. But the thin woman hadn't cried. She was steady and still, her lips still compressed, sitting upright in her chair. And, miracle of miracles, the elder passed the plank and walked straight on.

word choice
- suggest control not prepared to give up

They looked at each other. What did it all mean? Where was the elder going, clutching his telegram in his hand, walking like a man in a daze? There were no other houses so where was he going? They drank their tea in silence, turning away from each other. The fat woman said, 'I must be going.' They parted for the moment without speaking. The thin woman still sat at the window looking out. Once or twice the fat woman made as if to turn back as if she had something to say, some message to pass on, but she didn't. She walked away. It wasn't till later that night that they discovered what had happened.

word choice - issue / favorite

The elder had a telegram directed to himself, to tell him of the drowning of his own son. He should never have seen it just like that, but there had been a mistake at the post office, owing to the fact that there were two boys in the village with the same name. His walk through the village was a somnambulistic wandering. He didn't want to go home and tell his wife what had happened. He was walking along not knowing where he was going when later he was stopped half way to the next village. Perhaps he was going in search of his son. Altogether he had walked six miles. The telegram was crushed in his fingers and so sweaty that they could hardly make out the writing.

← unpleasant ending / destruction

Important techniques:

Use of setting: Sparse, Scottish Island - in WW2. Anonymity shows universal impact. Microcosm.

Characterisation: Two characters in conflict. Fat woman - judgmental, unchanging vs Thin - progressive, accepting

Symbolism: Telegram as a destructive weapon

Structure: Seems to build to climax - but ends with an anti-climax.

Themes: The harsh reality of island life, the destructiveness of war, sacrifice

The Telegram

Notes

Imagery

1. The writer uses a simile, "They were like two birds", comparing the women to birds. He then extends the simile by writing that one is like a "fat domestic bird", suggesting something which is ready to be eaten; the other is "more gaunt, or, to be precise, more like a buzzard", suggesting a bird of prey. This establishes tension and introduces the conflict between the two women early in the story. It also clarifies the contrast between them: one belongs here, the other does not.
2. The writer uses a simile, "as if she were pecking away at something she had pecked at for many years", to compare the thin woman's resentment about her social position in the village to a bird pecking at something. This effectively reveals the emotional injury and her resentment towards the villagers, who despised her and thought her snobbish for sending her son to university, not realising that she had to sacrifice a lot to send him there.
3. The writer uses a simile "she said it quickly like the Catholics", to compare the way the fat woman prayed to the way Catholics pray. This implies that the fat woman was not a Catholic herself, and so this was not the way she would normally pray. This is extended through expressions such as "prattling" and the use of "O God save my son O God save my son O God save my son". The repetition of "O God save my son" and the lack of punctuation in the phrase give an impression of speed, showing the fat woman's desperation, and her fear for her son.
4. The writer uses a simile "It was like first love" comparing the thin woman's sympathetic gesture to her memories of love, drawing attention to the comfort it brought. Smith further extends the simile by writing that it was "like the time Murdo had taken her hand in his when they were coming home from the dance" suggesting how exciting and loving the thin woman's touch was.
5. "And at that moment the fat woman saw. She saw..." This is the turning point in the story, as the fat woman suddenly understands the thin woman's difficult life. This realisation is emphasised by the repetition of "she saw" through the paragraph, and the use of parallelism, as "she saw" is placed at the start of three sentences. This is highlighted by the simile "it was as if she had an extra vision", comparing her sudden empathy with the thin woman to extra sight, which shows how clear her realisation of the thin woman's difficult life was, an idea which is heightened through the simile "as if the air itself brought the past with all its details nearer". This simile suggests that the fat woman could not help empathising with the thin woman, that the "air itself" showed her the details of the thin woman's life that she had never before noticed. This insight helps the reader feel sympathy for the thin woman.
6. "Walking like a man in a daze". This simile, comparing the elder's walk to that of a "man in a daze", is effective because it conveys how distracted with shock the elder is.
7. "a telegram directed to himself" refers back to the comparison of the telegram to a missile "pointed at them from abroad".
8. "a somnambulistic wandering", compares the elder's journey to sleepwalking, which again shows shock.

9. The writer uses a simile: "It came on them like a strange plague". This is effective because the word "plague" has connotations of sickness and death, and idea which is extended by the expression: "taking their sons away and killing them, meaninglessly, randomly."

10. The writer uses a simile, describing the telegram as a "strange missile pointed at them from abroad", comparing the telegram to a weapon, bringing emotional devastation to the families it 'hit'. This is extended by the use of personification "It picked a door and entered it, and left desolation..." The telegram is given the ability to choose. This personification suggests the randomness of the missile, adding tension to the story.

Genre of short story

- One main character
 - The elder (MacLeod) - he carries the telegram (the title)
 - He experiences death (sacrifice) of his son
 - This is the twist and outcome of the story

One main setting

- The thin woman's kitchen
 - Microcosm - It represents all of Scotland's homes during WW2

One main issue

- Sacrifice
 - Foreshadowed in the thin woman's sacrifice for her son's education
 - "death" and "black" run right through the story - the death of the elder's son

Twist

- The use of suspense as the elder passes a number of homes

Anti climax

- He walks past the thin woman's house
 - The revelation that the elder's son has been killed

Contrast

Thin woman

"that foreigner"

"an incomer from another village"

Social

Position "a widow's pension of 10 shillings a week"

"When did you see me with good clothes in the church?"

Fat woman

Thin woman's son ('Iain')

"a sub lieutenant in the navy"

"Iain got more pay"

salute the thin woman's son"

"better off... they get better food

And better conditions"

"had been at university"

"I made sacrifices to have my son educated"

Fat woman's son ('Donald')

"an ordinary seaman"

"The fat woman's son had to "wore better uniform"

"left school at 14"

The telegram

"her lips pressed together,
White and bloodless"

"She wasn't going to cry
or surrender"

"She said it
quickly like the Catholics"

"mutter a prayer over
and over

"She wanted to stand up and dance all
round the kitchen

'The Telegram' by Iain Crichton Smith – Key Quotes

1. 'The two women – one fat and one thin – sat at the window of the thin woman's house...'
2. 'They were like two birds, one a fat domestic bird perhaps, the other more aquiline, more gaunt, or, to be precise, more like a buzzard.'
3. 'the local school which they all had at one time or another unwillingly attended.'
4. 'a strange plague, taking their sons away and then killing them, meaninglessly, randomly.'
5. 'the local elder...clad in black'
6. 'People began to think of the telegram as a strange missile...it picked a door and entered it, and left desolation just like any other weapon.'
7. 'The two women who watched the street were different, not just physically but socially.'
8. 'Thin woman was not popular in the village. She was an incomer...the fat woman had lived in the village all her days; she was a native. Also the thin woman was ambitious.'
9. 'They were both frightened because he could be coming to their house. And so they watched him and as they watched him they spoke feverishly as if by speaking continually and watching his every move they would be able from themselves whatever plague he was bringing.'
10. 'the thin woman who was thinking that the fat woman was very stupid. But then most of them were: they were large, fat and lazy. Most of them could have better

afforded to send their sons and daughters to university but didn't want to be thought of as snobbish.'

11. 'I made sacrifices to have my son educated...I lived on a pension of ten shillings a week. I was in nobody's debt.'
12. 'The thin woman continued remorselessly as if she were pecking away at something she had pecked at for many years.'
13. 'But no matter how you tried you could never like the thin woman. She was always putting on airs...Why did she want to be better than anyone else?'
14. 'she was frightened and she didn't know what to talk about and yet she wanted to talk. She liked talking, after all what else was there to do? But the thin woman didn't gossip much.'

Possible Essay Questions for 'The Telegram' by Iain Crichton Smith

1. Choose a **novel** or **short story** which features a relationship between two characters which is confrontational or corrosive.
Describe how the relationship is portrayed and discuss to what extent the nature of the relationship influences your understanding of the text as a whole.
2. Choose a **novel** or **short story** in which one of the main characters is not in harmony with her / his society.
Describe the character's situation and go on to discuss how it adds to your understanding of a central concern of the text.
3. Choose a **novel** or **short story** in which the writer's method of narration (such as first person narrative, diary form, journal...) plays a significant part.
Explain briefly the method of narration and then discuss its importance to your appreciation of the text.
4. Choose a **novel** or **short story** which reaches a climax which you find dramatic or moving or disturbing.
Explain how the writer achieves the effect and discuss how it contributes to your appreciation of the text as a whole.

Close reading questions: The Telegram

Paragraph 1

1. Quote the simile found in this paragraph.
2. What information do we learn in the rest of this paragraph which extends this simile?
3. Begin a character notes for the two women and add details when you learn something about them.

Paragraph 2

4. From the context, can you work out the meaning of the word "reverberations?"
5. Comment on the use of the colon in line 6.
6. What do we learn about the boys who went off to war?
7. From this paragraph, can you work out when this story takes place? Comment on the word choice in this paragraph.

Paragraph 3

8. Comment on the sentence structure in the first line of this paragraph.
9. "It came on them as a strange plague" is an example of what literary technique and what does it mean?

Paragraph 5

10. Why is it appropriate that the elder be "clad in black?"
11. Identify and quote a literary device used in this paragraph.
12. Explain how this image is extended in the rest of the paragraph.

Paragraph 6

13. List the differences between the two women's sons.

Paragraph 7

14. What can you learn about the setting from this paragraph?
15. Add to your character notes for the two women.

Paragraph 8

14. Why is the colour yellow significant?

Paragraph 9

1. Why do they speak "feverishly?"

Paragraph 18

2. Why does the fat woman want the elder to turn at Bessie's house?

Paragraph 19

3. "As if pecking away at something she had pecked at for many years" is an example of what literary technique and what does it mean?

Paragraph 36

4. What effect does the lack of punctuation have on the reader in "O God save my son O God save my son."
5. "It was like first love" is an example of what literary technique and explain why it is effective.

Paragraph 37

6. Describe how the two women handle the potential news of their son being dead. What does this say about each woman's character?

Paragraph 38

7. What is the turning point of this story?
8. How is this made clear to the reader?

Paragraph 39 and 40

9. How does the ending of the story explain the simile "walking like a man in a daze."