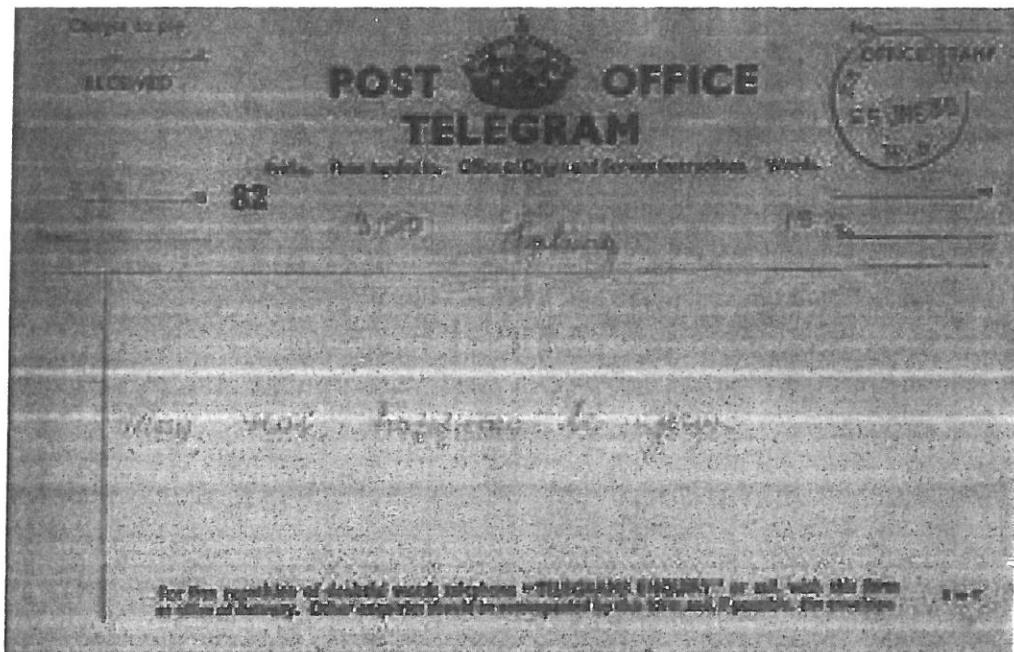


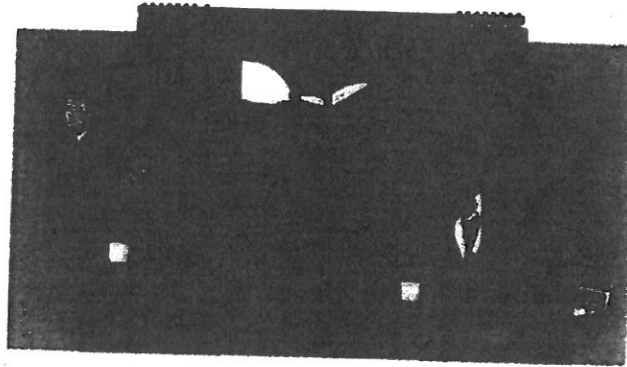
The Telegram



Higher Revision booklet

The Telegram

Summary



The story is set in a small Scottish rural community during World War Two. It opens with the two main characters, a fat woman, Sarah and a thin woman drinking tea and gazing out of the window.

The village appears sleepy and quiet but it becomes clear the impact of war is felt just as keenly here as in any other community in the British Isles. The villagers dread the arrival of the telegram of the title, which brings the news of a son killed in the conflict.

These telegrams are delivered by a local church elder. Residents of the village have come to fear the sight of this black clad figure stopping at their door.

The women notice the elder as he walk through the village. He clutches one of the telegrams, which is immediately recognisable for its distinctive yellow colour. The women become increasingly fearful as he makes his way closer to their houses, the last two in the village. Their mounting tension and sense of dread provokes an interesting conversation.

Although they are neighbours, these women are not friends. There are many underlying tensions in their relationship. The fat women considers her neighbour an outsider and a snob, even though she has lived in the village for more than thirty years and survives on a tiny widow's income.

She is jealous that the thin woman's son has been to university and is an officer in the navy. Her own son is merely an ordinary seaman.

The thin woman is contemptuous of most of the other mothers in the village. She believes they could have worked harder to provide a better education for their own children.

As the elder approaches the final two houses in the village it seems certain that the telegram is meant for one of them.

He passes the fat woman's house and the letter seems destined for the thin woman. At this moment, that fat woman suddenly understands the years of sacrifice endured by her neighbour for her son.

However, in an ironic twist, instead of turning in at the thin woman's house, the elder keeps walking. It later emerges that the telegram was addressed to the elder himself. So shocked by the news and

unable to face telling his wife their son had drowned, he walks six miles to the next village before he is finally stopped, still clutching the crumpled, yellow piece of paper.

Characterisation and setting

Crichton Smith is deliberately sparse with details of the location and characters. This anonymity helps to emphasise the universal impact of war.



We can deduce the time from the reference to the Bismarck, a German warship sunk by the Allies during World War Two. A sense of place is created by the use of distinctly Scottish names like Roddy and MacLeod. The mention of the mailboat reveals that this is an island community.

The village itself is described as bare, superstitious and with little colour. This bleak, uninviting environment is reflected in the inhabitants of this island community.

The fat woman, Sarah, represents the narrow-minded, insular attitudes that Crichton Smith often associated with small, rural, Highland villages.

That such communities are intolerant of others is another recurring criticism found in Crichton Smith's work. It reminds us how susceptible we are to concentrating on what is different about each other rather than what we have in common.

Sarah is described in disparaging terms as a fat domestic bird. This reflects her own lack of drive and aspirations as she perpetuates a way of life that is clearly unfulfilling.

Her discontentment is evident in her resentment of the thin woman whom she considers an outsider and a snob.

Nevertheless, Sarah represents the promise of and possibility of change and progression, even in this claustrophobic and small minded community.

At the moment when she seems certain the thin woman's son has died, all her resentment and petty grievances disintegrate. She experiences a profound moment of empathy for her neighbour. This strips away all her layers of prejudice and intolerance.

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 always looked, how sometimes she had to borrow money, even a shilling to buy food...She saw it so clearly and she was astounded. It was as if she had an extra vision.

The character of the thin woman is also depicted as a bird. In contrast to Sarah she is described as aqualine, gaunt and like a buzzard. A buzzard is a hunter, a bird of prey but it is also a scavenger and can survive on the leftover carcasses of animals killed by other predators. By using this comparison and in emphasising how thin the woman is, the theme of sacrifice is introduced.

The thin woman is a widow. She has endured hardship and poverty in order to provide a better life for her son. As a result of this sacrifice, her son is a sub-lieutenant while the fat woman's son who is just an ordinary seaman.

This results in much of the resentment between the two women since the fat woman's son must salute the thin woman's who has a better pay and uniform.

To an outsider, the women should have more in common:

- they have lived next door to each other for decades in a tiny community
- they are of the same age and social standing
- they both have sons fighting in the war

But both of them concentrate on the things that separate and divide them rather than those which could unite. While the reader probably feels more sympathy for the thin woman, she is not without flaws.

She is contemptuous of her neighbour and the other women in the village. They have not made the same sacrifices that she has. She is unable at times to hide her irritation with them, I made sacrifices to have my son educated... I lived on a pension of ten shillings a week. I was in nobody's debt..

She aspires to a more refined way of life, shown by her attempt to mimic the way the gentry hold their tea cup. This is another mannerism which annoys the fat woman.

The third character in the story is the church elder Macleod. He has either volunteered or been given the responsibility of delivering the War Office telegrams to the villagers.

Crichton Smith uses Macleod to show the hold that the church has on the community and the hierarchies within the village. Although neither of the women seems especially religious they both attend church regularly.

The elder is described as a stiff, pious man who seeks to distance himself from the rest of his community. This is viewed by others as a way of implying that he is in some way better than they are and he is clearly not a popular figure.

This sense of separation and aloofness elicits caustic comments from the women. They note with irony that he has been given the task of delivering the telegrams having never served in the war himself. This creates animosity and the fat woman relishes passing on gossip that his wife has suffered a seizure.

The twist occurs at the end of the story when it emerges that it is in fact the elder's own son who has been killed.

Themes

The harsh reality of island life

By focusing on this tiny, rural environment, the writer reveals the difficulties of living in such close-knit communities.

Crichton Smith depicts a society seething with underlying tensions and petty rivalries where people treat each other with suspicion and contempt. Until the moment of the fat woman's epiphany, we see traces of compassion or kindness in the islanders. Although they attend church their attitude completely contradicts the basic principles of Christianity.

Crichton Smith reminds us that certain strands of organised religion can have a negative impact on individuals and communities.

The fat woman epitomises these backward, insular attitudes in the way she delights in spreading gossip about the misfortunes of others.

This theme recurs in Crichton Smith's work and we can see similar criticisms of these communities in *The Red Door*, *The Painter* and *Mother and Son*.

The destructiveness of war

The physical separation and isolation of the community reminds us that no one is exempt from the devastation and destructiveness of war.

The writer empathises that while the islanders feel somewhat removed and separated from the conflict physically, geographical distance offers no protection for their sons. The effects of the war still manage to permeate many aspects of their daily life.

Similarly, the elder's attempt to shield himself from such tragedy by maintaining a distance from the others in the village while accepting the responsibility of delivering the telegrams reminds us again that anyone could be affected.

Sacrifice

The theme of sacrifice runs through the story from the outset, primarily through the hardship endured by the thin woman to secure a better life and prospects for her son. This foreshadows the greater sacrifice and loss of life that occurs in war time.

Ultimately, the message conveyed by the writer is of the pointlessness and futility of this sacrifice.

The thin woman's effort could all ultimately be in vain. Her son could well be killed in conflict. Even if he survives, she acknowledges that he may settle in England and never return to the island.

Mother and Son

'The Telegram' by Iain Crichton Smith

You gain marks in your critical essays by analysing and evaluating the effectiveness of the author/director/poet's techniques.

Quotation:	Analysis:	Evaluation:
<p>'They were like two birds, one a fat domestic bird perhaps, the other more aquiline, more gaunt...'</p>	<p>Imagery of the two women highlights the difference between them. The word 'domestic' suggests that the fat woman is more 'homely' and friendly whilst describing the thin woman as a 'buzzard' suggests she is dangerous, aloof.</p>	<p>We are made to feel and immediate dislike for the thin woman, whilst the fat woman comes across as far more likeable. This reflects the villagers' feelings towards these women and highlights the separation between them as they are physically very different.</p>
<p>'People began to think of the telegram as a strange missile pointed at them from abroad.'</p>	<p>Symbolism used to suggest that the telegram is destructive – it is a weapon of war. It comes into their lives, homes and village and destroys their way of life.</p>	<p>The impact of war is clearly devastating for those on the island and by describing the object as a weapon it highlights the fear they feel that at any point their lives may be destroyed by the arrival of a telegram.</p>
<p>'One got more pay than the other, and wore better uniform. One had been to university and had therefore become an officer, the other had left school at the age of fourteen.'</p>	<p>Repetition of sentence structure used here to highlight the difference between the two families. By leaving Sarah's son till last as 'the other' it seems to be highlighting that he is seen as 'lower', 'behind' the thin woman's son.</p>	<p>It is important for our understanding of the impact of war that we see how it affects families from different social classes. Background didn't matter in war as all had to fight. It is also important for the theme of 'isolation' as these women are unable to become friends because of their background.</p>
<p>'She knew it and she didn't want to cry in front of that woman, that foreigner.'</p>	<p>Tone is important here as we can sense from the repetition of 'that' that Sarah looks down upon the thin woman. Also the word 'foreigner' suggests that she sees the thin woman as alien, an outsider with different views, attitudes etc.</p>	<p>We see that fat woman as someone who is small minded, cruel and a bully. It is sometimes the case that people are unwilling to accept those who they see as 'outsiders' and this can lead them to be cruel and unsympathetic. This highlights how isolated the thin woman is and also can be seen as a reason why the fat woman is isolated also.</p>

<p>'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.'</p>	<p>Sentence structure is important here. The delay of the phrase, 'but she didn't' highlights her struggle and hesitation.</p>	<p>It is at this point that we see that these two women will remain isolated and unsupported. Perhaps it is their prejudices that have stopped them from appreciating that they share a common experience that should unite them. The thought of death caused by the war has left them shocked and unable to express their emotions – even the fat woman!</p>
<p>'He was walking along not knowing where he was going when later he was stopped half way to the next village.'</p>	<p>Structure of the story leads to an 'anti-climax' in which we sense the despair of the Elder. The tone here could be described as sombre, depressing to reflect the mood at the end of the story.</p>	<p>At a time like this, we would expect that the villagers would support each other and would become closer as they shared the same fears. However the villagers remain isolated as they are wrapped up in their own fears. We see the Elder's actions as the result of his despair which highlights the impact the war has had on him as he loses his child.</p>

The Telegram Sample Quotes and Techniques

"One a fat domestic bird perhaps, the other more aquiline, more gaunt, or, to be precise, more like a buzzard"

Writing Techniques: Imagery. - From this description, we get the impression that the two women are complete opposites of each other. One is home-loving, has a lack of inspiration, has a life that's unfurling and has never worked for anything. The other is ugly, has a curved nose but is thin, bony and skinny. Buzzards hunt to find food while pet birds are handed everything on a plate, illustrating the contrast between the women.

"Reverberations from a war fought far away"

Theme: Rural Life

Theme: Destructiveness and futility of war

Theme: The devastating effects of war.

Writing Techniques: Imagery. - The shock waves of the foreign war still manage to reach the village, despite its distance from the front. These shock waves are often brought by the telegrams the families of the dead receive.

"It came on them as a strange plague, taking their sons away and then killing them, meaninglessly, randomly."

Theme: Destructiveness and futility of war

Theme: The devastating effects of war.

Theme: Resentment. + Theme: The Random Nature of War.

Writing Techniques: Imagery. - This metaphor helps us understand how nobody was immune from the disease that is death that spreads, killing randomly and without point.

"It was a weapon of some kind...and left desolation just like any other weapon."

Theme: Destructiveness and futility of war

Writing Techniques: Imagery. - The telegram is like a weapon of mass destruction which takes many from life. It's like the village is a target also that is pointed at them from overseas; where their sons are being killed.

"She was an incomer from another village and had only been in this one for thirty years or so."

Theme: Isolation

Theme: Resentment. - The thin woman is not a native in the village which on the small island is cause for resentment from the others in the community, no matter how long they have lived there or what they have done for the community.

"This was a bare village with little colour and therefore the yellow was both strange and unnatural."

Theme: Isolation

Writing Techniques: Imagery. - The village is a bland place, the people lack imagination and all conform and the telegram is out of the ordinary, stands out amongst the colourless village.

"And so they watched him and as they watched him they spoke feverishly."

Theme: The devastating effects of war. The language and actions of the woman suggest heightened tension/anxiety as if they were talking in a bid to delay the inevitable of bad news.

"For a terrible moment she realised that she had hoped that the elder would have turned in at Bessie's house. "

Theme: The Random Nature of War. - The fat woman does not show any compassion and is selfish in the way that she thinks. She doesn't even realise that she wishes another woman's son go to her death when she has done little in the past to do well for her own. This is rather ironic.

"Two houses to go. They looked at each other wildly. It must be one of them. Surely."

Theme: The devastating effects of war. + Theme: The Random Nature of War. - The good word choice and sentence structure within this quotes shows a building up of tension. This is also the paragraph in which we first learn of the thin woman's emotions because she is relatively calm.

"O god save my son. O God save my son. O God save my son."

The Telegram Page 215 - Theme: How different people cope in different situations. - In the face of adversity, the fat woman looks to someone else to save her son rather than doing anything herself. This has been the same person all their lives, God in fact. This may also her questioning her faith or looking for order within the chaos.

"She felt the arm of the thin woman around her shoulders."

The Telegram Page 216 -Theme: The devastating effects of war. + Theme: How different people cope in different situations. - On the thin woman's part there is no bitterness toward the fat woman, despite all that she had done to her in the past. However the fat woman cannot help but like the comfort though she cannot offer any in return because it doesn't even cross her mind to.

"She wanted to stand up and dance all around the kitchen."

Theme: How different people cope in different situations. - When the fat woman finds out that her son is safe, she doesn't care that the only other possibility is that the woman beside her son must be dead and jump up, unable to contain herself. This shows the selfish nature of the fat woman.

"She wasn't going to cry or surrender or give herself away to anyone. "

Theme: Rural Life + Theme: The devastating effects of war. + Theme: How different people cope in different situations. + Theme: Resentment. + Theme: The Random Nature of War. - The thin woman, unlike the fat woman, is quite private and keeps her cards close to his chest. She can contain and compose herself in front of the fat woman, who is amazed at her strength but still can't console her.

"She saw it so clearly that she was astounded."

Theme: How different people cope in different situations. - The fat woman couldn't believe that the thin woman could keep such a plain face toward the bad news about her son. Maybe she is jealous even of her superiority in this sense. The repetition of 'She saw' indicates that for the first time, the fat woman is consciously thinking about someone else for once in her life and starts to appreciate what she's been through.

"And the elder walked on."

The Telegram Page 215 - Theme: The Random Nature of War. - After all the turmoil, the elder does not stop but instead goes on. This is a random event and a turning point within the short story but also adds to the confusion within the war.

"The thin woman still sat at the window looking out."

Theme: How different people cope in different situations.
Theme: Isolation + Theme: Resentment. + Theme: The Random Nature of War. - Unlike the fat woman, after finding out that her son is safe the thin woman does nothing but sit and look out of the window. She is unable to believe what's just happened but maintains a strong sense of composure and attitude.

"His walk through the village was a somnambulistic wandering."

Theme: Destructiveness and futility of war. + Theme: Isolation + Theme: The devastating effects of war. + Theme: How different people cope in different situations. + Theme: Resentment. Theme: The Random Nature of War. - The elder goes on, as if in a trance because he has been devastated by the effect the telegram has had on him. He cannot even bear to go home and tell his wife of his son's death.

"The telegram was crushed in his fingers and so sweaty that they could hardly make out the writing."

Theme: Isolation

Theme: Destructiveness and futility of war. + Theme: The devastating effects of war.
+ Theme: How different people cope in different situations. + Theme: The Random Nature of War.

Writing Techniques: Imagery. - The elder is obviously destroyed by the news. The fact that the telegram is crush is as if he were trying to destroy what has taken his son away and was away the truth but the writing does remain and there is nothing he can do to reverse the destruction.

- "one a fat domestic bird" (suggesting laziness, conformity)
- "more like a buzzard" (suggesting opportunistic, swarming above)
- "though the village appeared quiet". "appeared" suggests it is deceptive, that much is going on underneath the surface.
- The students had "unwillingly" attended the school, suggesting they had no interest in bettering themselves through education.
- "superstitious" hints at the illogical attitudes of the village.
- The war was "a strange plague". "plague" suggests death, a spreading disease, while "strange" suggests the villagers' confusion about the war.
- This is reinforced by the description of the telegram being a "strange missile". Literally, a missile is a weapon designed to cause great harm. Metaphorically, the innocuous piece of yellow paper destroys lives / homes. The repeated "strange" here reinforces the confusion and lack of understanding about the realities of what is going on.
- The thin woman was an 'incomer', suggesting an invasion, and had "only been in [the village] for thirty years or so". The use of the ironic "only" reinforces the tight-knit nature of the community.
- The fact that the woman was not liked because she was "ambitious" says a lot about the fat woman's and the rest of the villagers' attitudes towards people who dare try and make better lives for themselves. It is a strange mix of jealousy and contempt.
- The yellow of the telegram is "strange and unnatural" in the village, suggesting that any colour / life / anything that stands out is unwelcome.
- The fat woman saying "It's different for the officers" illustrates the illogical attitudes towards the ambitious. There is no reason why things would be different for them, especially on a ship.
- "But then most of them were: they were large, fat and lazy". "Them" suggests that the thin woman sees herself as separate from the villagers, too (perhaps caused by them shunning her). The negativity in the rest of the line – as if they were big, useless animals – hints at her disdain towards them, too.
- Most people could have made better lives for their children, "but they didn't want to be thought of as snobbish". This suggests that the villagers would rather not appear snobbish than have a better life.
- "For a terrible moment she realised that she had hoped that the elder would have turned in at Bessie's house". The word 'terrible' hints at the deep-rooted sense of humanity we feel for others. Even though she is glad her own son is not dead, it's 'terrible'.
- The fat woman's mind "was vague and diffused except when she was thinking about herself". "vague" and "diffused" suggests unfocused or uncaring about anyone else, hinting at a deeper self-centeredness.
- The fat woman says that her son "never sends me anything...But I don't mind". Her very matter-of-fact tone suggests that this is just a fact, that she is not really bothered by it.
- According to the fat woman, the thin woman was "always putting on airs". The imagery suggests she believes the woman is always acting, pretending to be something she is not. The tone of "Mayor indeed. Sending her son to university" is very dismissive, annoyed. Her own son *could* have gone to university, but "he was too fond of fishing and being out with the boys". This conveys a sense that *trying* is discouraged. There is a deep-rooted fear of failure.
- "You'd think he was proud of it" (the fat woman's feelings about the elder), suggesting a judgmental, negative feeling. This is reinforced when she comments "viciously" on the elder's wife's "fits". There is an intense anger in her tone.
- In the large paragraph when she believe the elder is coming to her house, the fat woman's thoughts are presented in a mixture of long, rambling sentences and short, sharp sentences, reinforcing her fear.
- When the thin woman put her arm around the fat woman, "it was like first love". Comparing it to a romantic love emphasises the intensity of emotion.
- The fat woman's humanity is emphasised when, after she realises her son is ok, she doesn't "dance all around", as "She couldn't do that". The sense of humanity surpasses any ill feeling towards this "ambitious" woman.
- "And at that moment the fat woman saw". The imagery of "saw" suggests a deep realisation of the thin woman's sacrifice, a deeper understanding.
- The idea of the elder "walking along not knowing where he was going" is very pathetic, emphasising the heart-breaking nature of the elder's walk through town.

CENTRAL CONCERN(S):