

The theme of the
"outsider" in a month
in the country



Written by J. L Carr, *A Month in the Country* focuses on the story of Tom Birkin; a veteran of World War I who, after his wife leaves him, takes a job to restore a medieval painting in the church of a small village in Yorkshire named Oxgodby. The author explores the theme of “ the outsider” throughout his novel using it as a basis for the narrative and integrating it into the protagonist’s character. The development of this theme is further aided by the depiction of Oxgodby’s community, the characterization of the protagonist as an outsider and the development of his relationship with fellow veteran Charles Moon.

The setting of *A Month in the Country* portrays the theme of “ the outsider” through Oxgodby’s close communal atmosphere, typical of small village life. Presenting Oxgodby in this light further exemplifies the outcast status of Tom, Moon and Reverend Keach, forming the sub-plot integration of Birkin into the village society. Birkin observes his secluded situation in the town with the reflection that- “ Most country people had a deep-rooted disinclination to sleep away from home and a belief that, like as not, to sojourn amongst strangers was to fall among thieves”. This metaphor implies the views that “ country people” typically have of strangers, believing that allowing them into their community will be destructive due to their untrustworthy nature. However, the mood from Birkin’s perspective of this narration suggests that he is starting to accept the country way of life and beginning his assimilation into Oxgodby continuing to say- “ this steady rhythm of living and working got into me, so that I felt part of it and had my place”. In contrast, Keach displays the effects separation from the community have on his persona and relationships, being depicted as a very

private, serious and cold man with Alice the only person whom he has genuine relations with. Contrary to Keach's exclusion, *A Month in the Country* explores the healing process Tom Birkin must undergo. Hence, as he forms relationships in Oxgodby the erosion of his isolation in the community aids this healing.

Throughout *A Month in the Country*, Carr conveys the nature of what it means to be an outsider through the characterisation of Tom Birkin and the core foundations of his personality. By doing this, the author is able to personify the theme as Birkin becomes its embodiment with the development of the character facilitating further exploration into the psychological context of an outsider. The essence of Birkin's persona is that of an observer and consequently he often disconnects himself from situations and reality. Instead he prefers to contemplate on his observations, as shown when he first arrives at the church and becomes fascinated with the "Bankdown Crowther" stove whilst he disengages from his conversation with Reverend Keach stating- "He may well have said much more but I didn't hear him because I was examining the stove with great attention," continuing on to describe it in extensive detail. Birkin further disconnects from the outside world as he becomes infatuated with the mural in the church and the painter, claiming that during the many hours he spent uncovering the painting he kept thinking about the "nameless man" who'd stood where he stood, at one point he even refers to him as "this man of mine". Hence, being an observer causes the protagonist to often lose his trail of thought thus increasing his detachment from people and potential to become an outsider.

Carr utilizes the development of the protagonist's relationship with Moon, to reveal how his previous experiences of World War I affect his place as an outsider. The cause for much of Tom Birkin's behaviour comes from his encounter with the war and this forms the basis for his relationship with Moon, who is also an outsider as a result of the war. The parallelism between Birkin and Moon is evident as each of them has an instinctive understanding of the psychological and social effects of the war. Upon their first encounter Moon wonders, " Are you trying to crawl back into the skin you had before they pushed you through the mincer". The imagery of this metaphor assists the author in conveying the struggles soldiers faced following their return from the war and the effort it took to revert to their old lives. Both Moon and Birkin share a perceptive sympathy for the horrors they have confronted that separate them emotionally from those who have not experienced such things around them as Birkin states that, " Theirs was a different hell from ours," highlighting the similarity of their loss of faith caused by the war. Consequently, this atheism significantly contributes to their position of outsiders on account of religion, as the time period and setting suggests that religion, particularly Christianity, was a significantly prominent part of society.

In *A Month in the Country*, J. L Carr explores the theme of " the outsider" by presenting Oxgodby with a close communal atmosphere, through the characterization of Tom Birkin as an observer and the development of his relationship with Moon. Birkin is expressed as an outsider integrating into the village of Oxgodby. Though the novel depicts the protagonist's acceptance into the village, it's purpose focuses on the healing he undergoes throughout

his time there, and the relationships he forms that aid this healing process as he begins to feel more like an insider.