

# "cal" by bernard maclaverty essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



## **“ Cal” by Bernard MacLaverty Essay Sample**

I consider that “ Cal” by Bernard MacLaverty is a novel with something permanent to [a1]give which will find a lasting place. I believe this is true because of the effective characterisation, thought provoking themes and clearly significant setting [a2]in which it takes place.

The novel “ Cal” is about a nineteen year old youth, called Cal, who lives in Northern Ireland in the early seventies and is unwillingly recruited into the IRA through his friend Crilly, with whom he helps murder an RUC policeman. Later he meets the man’s widow, Marcella and becomes infatuated with her despite the overwhelming guilt he feels about the murder. He starts a relationship with her, but in the end is actually grateful when he is arrested for his part in her husband’s murder.[a3]

One of the things which make this a memorable novel[a4] is the characterisation of Cal. The novel is told from Cal’s point of view and this helps us to sympathise with Cal even though he has helped in murdering a man. From the beginning we can see how [a5]troubled and tense Cal is. He is described “ as rigid with the ache of want” when waiting to get a cigarette from his father. This shows how desperate he is for the nicotine to calm his nerves. This nervousness is also emphasised by his behaviour at home in his own bedroom. Every time he heard a noise he “ stiffened” afraid because his is the only Catholic family living in a Protestant Estate and he feels threatened “ he felt the eyes on him” as he walked home, showing he felt everyone was watching him as he did not belong there. He is eventually beaten up and burned out.

[a6]We can also feel sympathy for Cal as he is obviously a sensitive person who hates the blood and gore of the abattoir where he used to work. We are told “ Cal turned away” at the sight of the gutted cattle. “ You hadn’t a strong enough stomach”. It is obvious that Cal is not someone who would normally get involved in murder. Later we discover he is trying to leave the IRA but it is very difficult for him to do so as this would be seen as a betrayal by them. The organiser Skeffington says to him, “ That would make things very difficult”. This veiled threat warns Cal that he might be hurt if he tried to leave.

Another reason[a7] we are made to sympathise with Cal is the fact that it is clear he is wracked by guilt over what he has done. We realise this even before we know what it was he had done as he curses himself in French. “ Crotte de chien. Merdre.” He is also described as wishing he “ knew more words to curse himself with” showing the extent of his self disgust. Later when he is alone in the cottage he describes his feelings as “ his sin clawed at him, demanding attention.” This makes it seem as if a wild animal is scratching him painfully, giving him no peace. He also feels he can no longer go to mass as he would have to confess his sins first and feels alienated from God. “ He had not been to confession for two years and never would again”.

He is also shown to be a kind person who loves and cares for his father and is good with Marcella’s child. His relationship with Marcella also makes us feel sorry for him as it is obvious that it will not last as he himself realises “ he was in love with the one woman he should be a million miles away from.” Not only had he helped murder her husband, but she was much older than

him and they had very little in common. This characterisation of the main character helps make this a novel that will last.[a8]

The themes in the novel will also stand the test of time[a9]. The guilt Cal feels and the way he deals with it is one of the main themes. We are shown the effect of the guilt on his peace of mind and also his need to make amends for his sin. He keeps thinking of martyrs who have suffered for their fate and to atone for their sins like Matt Talbot who spent years wrapped tightly in chains which had been “ so tightly tied that it was almost impossible to remove them from the mortified flesh of his body”. He imagines the dead man’s clothes as “ a hair shirt”. When he is at the curling match he reflects that the flags represent sin: “ Red for sex and murder, white for working while you’re on the dole”. This again shows that guilt preys on his mind all the time. In the end when he is arrested he is relieved “ that at last someone was going to beat him with in an inch of his life”. This shows that guilt is a terrible feeling and the only way to relieve it is to be punished and atone for the sins you have committed.

Another important theme is the consequences on ordinary people of being brought up in N Ireland at that time. It shows the hatred between Protestants and Catholics which is inbred and inescapable. Cal’s family is the only Catholic family left in a Protestant estate and they cannot escape the fact. Even the pavements were painted “ red, white and blue”. They had threatening notes through the door; Cal was beaten up and eventually their house was fire bombed, just because of their religion. The effect on Cal’s father Shamie showed what the troubles did to ordinary decent people. From

being someone who was strong and defiant: " I hate to let the bastards get the better of me" to a pathetic, broken old man ; " the man had aged twenty years in a couple of weeks" and " sobbed quietly". It also shows quite clearly that Cal had little choice in those circumstances to get involved when the attitude was " if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem". This was said to Cal by Crilly to show that he would not be accepted if he did not try to help free Northern Ireland from the British Protestant rule.

Therefore, in conclusion, " Cal" is a novel which will last because of the skilful characterisation of Cal and the themes on the effect of guilt and also because of the insight it gives into what life was like for ordinary people living in that society at that time.