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Close Study One: 'The Sun in Winter'

'The Sun in Winter' is a short tale about a young Australian tourist who goes into a church in Bruges to escape the cold outside in the middle of the day. He encounters a woman who professes to be a tour guide and wants to show him places that he wouldn't normally go to. Ultimately, it becomes a moment of realisation that is beyond the ordinary and is more about the tension between life and death.

This is a very short story but it displays Malouf's skill as a short story writer. There is no word out of place and all the elements of the narrative – setting, character, imagery – lead logically to the final paragraph and the message of the work.

The story becomes a series of oppositions as the guide shows the tourist the extraordinary in the ordinary. The first paragraph captures this sense of tension between the two opposing forces:

It was dark in the church, even at noon. Diagonals of chill sunlight were stacked between the piers, sifting down luminous dust, and so thick with it that they seemed more substantial almost than stone. He had a sense of two churches, one raised vertically on Gothic arches and a thousand years old, the other compounded of light and dust, at an angle to the first and newly created in the moment of his looking.

The contrast in the title of sun and winter persists in the passage from dark to light from a thousand-year-old Gothic church to a newly created church of 'light and dust'. These oppositions are reinforced through such language devices as the oxymoron ('chill sunlight'). All of this changes in his moment of 'looking'. The looking becomes embodied in the tourist and the guide who each bring very different backgrounds and therefore different ways of seeing. The guide's offer to show him 'our dear sad Bruges' is in many ways a challenge that continues the present oppositions when she tells him that:

'. . . all you see then . . . is what catches the eye, the odd thing, the unusual. But to see what is common, that is the difficult thing, don't you think? For that we need imagination, and there is never enough of it – never, never enough.'

Activities

Pre-reading

If you had to show someone around where you live and they wanted the 'real' experience of your life and not the tourist sites where would you take them? What would they see there?

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Consider this quotation from critic John Berger (*Ways of Seeing*, published by the BBC and Penguin in 1972):

Seeing comes before words ... It is seeing that establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain the world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relations between what we see and what we know is never settled. (p. 7)

Think about a place, object or artwork that made an impact when you first saw it. How did it make you feel?

Post-reading

Oppositions

What is the purpose of the oppositions in the story? What is Malouf trying to show through these contrasts?

Sun	Winter
Young	Old
Male	Female
New world	New world
Australian	European
Ordinary	Extraordinary
Light	Dark
Angels	Demons
Not religious	Religious
Church of 'light and dust'	Gothic church
Life	Death

Character

The story centres on two characters but the story is very much from the young man's point of view. He is embarrassed that such a physical event as the cold led him to the church so he fails to explain this to the woman. He also fails to explain his religious background and yet the woman is 'relieved at last to have comprehended him'. Even in this very short story we see revelation of the depth of the character through the subtle characterisation. There is little plot but the experience changes the young man.

- What kind of person is the young man in the story and how does he develop?
- Consider the quotations that appear below:

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- 'She made it sound so romantic, so much more of a venture than he had ever seen it, that he laughed outright, then checked himself'
- 'It seemed foolish after all that to say simply, "I was cold."'
- 'Something more was expected of him, he knew that. But what?'
- '[He senses] unspoken demands . . . Was he to name it? . . . He ought to have known – he had known'
- 'But his moment of incomprehension passed.'
- 'he was relieved of awkwardness, and was moved, for all his raw youth, by an emotion he could not have named, not then – for her, but also for himself – and which he would catch up with only later'
- What does the woman believe in and why does she attach herself to the young man?
- What values are revealed through the characters?
- How does Malouf capture the point of view of the protagonist? When do we see the woman's point of view?

Imagery

The story is filled with powerful imagery, especially in the description of the cold. Annotate this passage to show how Malouf uses language to create a sense of cold:

Out there, blades of ice slicing in off the North Sea had found no obstacle, it seemed, in more than twenty miles of flat lands crawling with fog, till they found him, the one vertical (given a belltower or two) on the whole ring of the horizon. He had been, for long minutes out there, the assembly point for forty-seven demons. His bones scraped like glaciers. Huge ice-plates ground in his skull. He had been afraid his eyeballs might freeze, contract, drop out, and go rolling away over the ancient flags.

Use this passage as an exemplar to write a passage about the feeling of rain, or intense sun. Why was the window 'the brightest thing she had shown him'? What is Malouf saying about life and death?

In his address to Australian Literature Conference in Milan, 1984, (published in the book of essays *My First Place*, p. 33) Malouf writes about 'the imaginative possibilities of living in and through other cultures to find your own, misreading sometimes, and misadapting as you translate into your own terms, but getting it wrong in the right – that is the most useful – way.' Consider the story in the light of this quotation to see if this offers new insight.

Other related stories for comparison:

Death: 'Towards Midnight', 'Every Move You Make', 'Mrs. Porter and the Rock', 'Blacksoil Country'

Old/New world: 'Southern Skies', 'A Trip to the Grundelsee', 'A Change of Scene'