‘Secrets’ by Bernard MacLaverty

Secrets by Bernard MacLaverty
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About the author

Bernard MacLaverty was born in Northern Ireland and moved to Scotland in 1975. He is an accomplished writer, having written many novels and a few short stories and novels (including Cal and Lamb). He often focuses on the ideal of family relationships and violence. His writings have being influenced by the violent nature of Scotland during the time which can be seen through his writings

In a nutshell:
In the Short story 'Secrets' by Bernard McClaverty the themes of guilt, betrayal and deception are explored by looking at the reflection of the relationship between a young boy and his Great Aunt Mary, who we are first introduced to as she is lying in her death bed. In a flashback to his youth, we see that the child adores the aunt, who is portrayed to have a mysterious and secretive past through a stash of treasured letters. This leads the boy to ask questions about a Brother Benignus (a catholic monk) who wrote many letters to her. We are told that one day the boy is left alone in his Aunts room and out of curiosity invades her privacy by looking through her letter and personal belongings. She catches him in the act and their rel...

Mrs Wilding says:
Whether or not she forgave him is unresolved, just as much about our relationships in life are. The protagonist cries not just at the loss of his aunt, but at the loss of the years wasted; because of his childhood curiosity, his Aunt felt an irreconcilable betrayal of trust and their close relationship was severed. It is too late. At the end "tears came...he cried silently...for the woman who had been his maiden aunt, his teller of tales, that she might forgive him". This is an act of contrition (as a Catholic, this is important with MacLaverty) - he shows remorse and asks forgiveness (empowering her as a God-like figure) but this is futile as he weeps in the terrible understanding that it is just too late.

In uncovering the truth of her past, we see how little the woman's family really know about her. Much like Games at Twilight, after her youth has faded, there is little beyond death and being forgotten (literally symbolised by the burning and sorting through of her belongings for what is 'useful'.

PRIORITY: MEDIUM HIGH.
It's an accessible story with ideas that have a lot in common with other stories. However, there is less 'obvious' stuff to grab on to to build a detailed, developed analysis in comparison with other stories. Worth reading and having as a very decent back up.

POSSIBLE ESSAY PAIRINGS WITH:
- Yellow Wallpaper (change, isolation, conflict);
- Lim's Journey (childhood, innocence lost, change, isolation, gender, age/youth, suffering, isolation);
- Games at Twilight (childhood, innocence lost, change, isolation, gender, age/youth, suffering, isolation; death/mortality; futility);
- Five Twenty (age/youth, oppression, colours and objects as symbols - esp flowers, isolation, change)

Ways of Seeing

Gender identity/Feminist perspective
The aunt is seen as the 'maiden' aunt, so her identity is based soley on the preconception that she has never had a relationship: perhaps this is why she rejects the possibility of being seen a different way.

In addition, as an older lady and a staunch Catholic, the idea of sex before marriage would have utterly shocked her
family: the letters clearly imply that her and John have had a physical relationship (the buttons on the back of the shirt, the nape of her neck); this would be further compounded by the fact that he became Brother Benignus. Incidentally, Benignus was a disciple of St Patrick, who founded the Catholic Church in Ireland; John chooses his religious faith over his romantic love, showing how she is less important to him. Arguably, the aunt's identity is massively juxtaposed: her youthful identity was filled with vibrance, love, passion and companionship; while her identity as an old woman is filled with a fierce independence, family (before the boy's betrayal) and ultimately isolation (the rest of the family don't seem to really know her, given their comments). In the way the protagonist cries, asking for forgiveness, she ironically becomes a figure like the Virgin Mary: a maternal figure who comforts in the hour of need yet is pure and untainted. What does this say about societal perceptions of women and the roles that are created for them?

**Rough thematic areas**: isolation, transition/change, growing up, loss of innocence, powerlessness, age and youth, death, male identity.

**Enquiry**

1. How does Bernard MacLaverty present to the reader that all of the events are flashbacks or memories to the past?
2. Give supporting evidence the title of the short story is “secrets” how could this be significant and relate to the entire story?
3. What is the importance of the story being in 3rd person?
4. What are the main themes presented in the story?
5. Find quotes where the boy had felt extreme guilt within him.
6. What are the most symbolic moments of the short story?
7. What emotions are seen throughout the story and what does this tell us about the story?
8. What repetition on diction can you see and what is symbolic of?
9. How is war portrayed by the letters in the story, how could this be significant?
10. Why is the kitchen referenced by aunt, how could this be important?

Mrs Wilding’s other questions:

1) Look at the Aunt's response to the betrayal of the letters: 'you are dirt. And always will be dirt'. Divergent thinking time: other than the obvious insult, how else is this line significant? Think about the death imagery, as well as other possibilities.
2) How is the aunt made to seem frail and repulsive on her death bed? Why is this important?
3) How does the aunt come across in life? Find evidence to back this up.
4) What does the language in the letters imply about the relationship and about the aunt in her youth? Why is this significant?
5) There is repeated use of religious lexis and imagery. After finding examples, select the most significant. Why are they important?
6) How does MacLaverty build a tone of a) guilt ad b) regret. Remember that regret and guilt are not just in the obvious places...
7) what does MacLaverty's focus on regret, guilt and the lost identity of our youth tell us about our lives?
8) In the way the protagonist cries, asking for forgiveness, the aunt ironically becomes a figure like the Virgin Mary: a maternal figure who comforts in the hour of need yet is pure and untainted. What does this say about societal perceptions of women and the roles that are created for them?