

Sentry

FREDRIC BROWN

He was wet and muddy and hungry and cold and he was fifty thousand light-years from home.

A strange blue sun gave light, and gravity, twice what he was used to, made every movement difficult.

But in tens of thousands of years this part of war hadn't changed. The flyboys were fine with their sleek spaceships and their fancy weapons. When the chips are down, though, it was still the foot soldier, the infantry, that had to take the ground and hold it, foot by bloody foot. Like this damned planet of a star he'd never heard of until they'd landed him there. And now it was sacred ground because the aliens were there too. The aliens, the only other intelligent race in the Galaxy . . . cruel, hideous and repulsive monsters.

Contact had been made with them near the centre of the Galaxy, after the slow, difficult colonization of a dozen thousand planets; and it had been war at sight; they'd shot without even trying to negotiate, or to make peace.

Now, planet by bitter planet, it was being fought out.

He was wet and muddy and hungry and cold, and the day was raw with a high wind that hurt his eyes. But the aliens were trying to infiltrate and every sentry post was vital.

He stayed alert, gun ready. Fifty thousand light-years from home, fighting on a strange world and wondering if he'd ever live to see home again.

And then he saw one of them crawling toward him. He drew a bead and fired. The alien made that strange horrible sound they all make, then lay still.

He shuddered at the sound and sight of the alien lying there. One ought to be able to get used to them after a while, but he'd never been able to. Such repulsive creatures they were, with only two arms and two legs, ghastly white skins and no scales.

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Literary

taking a closer look

- 1 How does the author build up sympathy for the lonely sentry? Why do we take it for granted that he is a human being from our own planet?
- 2 At what point does your sympathy suddenly change to shock, or even horror?
- 3 The "twist" or "reversal" ending provides some meagre clues as to the physical appearance of the sentry. Using the last two lines as a rough guide, describe this member of an intelligent, non-human race.
- 4 To the sentry, the "alien" Earthman seemed repulsive and hideous. The Earthman undoubtedly felt the same way about the sentry. Why do people find it difficult to accept things or ideas that are quite unlike their own? Be careful with your answer; it should indicate the deeper meaning of this story.

let's get involved

- 1 This very short story (sometimes called a "short short") is a good example of science-fiction literature. This form of literature requires an intelligent use of imagination both on the part of the writer and the reader. Science fiction has become widely popular today—in books, movies, and television.

By means of a class or small panel discussion (four or five students) conduct a "literary investigation" into some of today's popular science-fiction. Consider those books, movies, and television programmes which are most likely to have been read and seen by the majority of the class.

The following questions are intended to serve only as a general guide. You will likely want to change the wording of some of them and to make up some of your own.

- A What are the most common science-fiction ideas or plot-lines found in today's novels, movies, and television programmes? How often, for example, do you find the idea of world-wide destruction? How often, also, do you notice the idea of a near-at-hand catastrophe that is averted at the last minute?
- B How realistic is the idea or story? Is it too far-fetched? How important is it that the story be true to life?

- C Do the human characters behave the way they would in real life? How "human" are the non-human or "alien" characters?
 - D When does science-fiction tend to become absurd or deserving of little serious attention?
 - E Why is science-fiction so popular today, more so than at any other time? Why do some people, especially girls, care little for it?
- 2 If you are interested in science-fiction and would like to know more about it, see the Appendix at the back of this book.

recommended reading

- 1 *Red Rover*, Ray Bradbury
- 2 *The War of the Worlds*, H. G. Wells
- 3 *The Lost World*, A. C. Doyle