

The wars by timothy findley essay sample

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The Wars by Timothy Findley is one of the best-known novels that are concerned with the challenges facing the fighting soldiers. Findley writes this novel in the camouflage of a researcher trying to reconstruct the life story of a soldier. He analyses and conveys his theme by the use of symbols and imagery that form a basic part of the structure of his novel. The protagonist of the novel, Robert Ross, is a sensitive, 19-year old soldier. This young man is sent to the theatre of the First World War where he finds himself exposed to unbelievable violence, horrifying death, and nauseating insanity of trench warfare. Ross himself is victimized by seeing his companions dying or losing sanity. Eventually, he is accused of having betrayed his country. The story of Ross's attempt to save horses at the cost of human beings becomes almost a myth. The unfolding events clearly depict Ross's experience that saw the war turning humans into brutes.

Theme

The story is based partly on wartime correspondence of his uncle, Thomas Irving Findley, and on family photographs. It explores Findley's concerns regarding whatever is wrong with the society. The theme of the novel that clearly emerges is that it is not only an anti-war novel but also the one that tries to analyze all that is wrong with the society. The novel explores violence, loneliness, a deep concern for animals' rights, and survival of the individual in a world of madness. Findley is of the firm belief that a writer must speak out his feelings about society's ills.

This war even fragments the family, and we see the members of the family become practically brutes engaged in committing acts of depravity. Ross

begins as a simple young man in Canada and ends as a mad, vilified, and misunderstood soldier in Europe. The complexity of Ross's character is identical to the complexity of the structure of the novel. Findley changes the narrative every twenty pages or so, which makes the structure quite confusing – as confusing as Ross's response to the world. The book is an attempt to find some traces of humanity in the callousness and brutality of war, and Findley's aim is to do so by having a look at fictional but personal case of Ross. As strands of life are never clearly tied up, the novel's strands also end untied, and often rambling; showing that nothing fits. The symbols of fire and struggle with animals make the book forceful and strengthen the basic structure of the book.

Spread across European battlefields, the life of Ross is essentially an enactment of a drama where diverse pieces are brought together. The personal accounts of absolutely humiliating circumstances of insanity and impotence are presented in the first person. This first person presentation of the inner conflict is quite convoluted as he is pursued by the events. These first person accounts guide us and, are practically walk us through a process that does not justify the action but does provide the reader a pinhole camera insight into the reasons that explain why Ross's life ended so clearly diametrically opposed to the way it began.

Timothy Findley begins to present the theme of antiwar by a clear manipulation. He manipulates the conventions that try to explicate the atrocities of the war. And by this manipulation he destroys those conventions. With this objective in view, he proceeds to show that Ross's

concerns for humanity made him dishonor himself. The destruction of the conventions results in absolute shambles of all that is held honorable. The war becomes a hideous act camouflaged as military honor that is essentially promoted by propagandists and arms dealers. We not only see but also recognize the destruction of our individual in the process of an overwhelming ordeal that cannot be minimized through use of words like ‘tragedy’ or ‘catastrophe’.

Life is never a smooth-running process. In a similar manner, *The Wars* imitates real life and the flow of the story is occasionally interrupted by the activities of the researcher who is engaged in investigating the life of Robert Ross. This investigative process is itself quite confusing. It is never clearly stated why the purported researcher is investigating and on whose behalf he is investigating. There is no real closure to the researcher’s activities nor is there a real closure to the novel. Ross dies shortly after the end of the war and the researcher’s activities simultaneously cease. Life still lives on and continues. ‘The king is dead. Long live the King.’ The death of an individual makes no perceptible difference to life as such.

The trench fighting is described in a manner that brings out the nauseating situation in a focused manner – dirty, mud-filled trenches create an environment that is akin to the psychological condition of the protagonist. The flashbacks of Ross’s remembrances of Canada, however, detract from the impact because they break the continuity. None of the characters that we see here leads a normal life. The use of transcripts and tapes from witnesses does not show any definite conclusion. Heroism is one of the

important themes of the book but you can never identify who these heroes are. Can the soldiers, who died fighting, be called heroes? Or do we characterize the survivors as heroes? The survivors are covered with ignominy and the people who died become a part of statistics. Findley does attempt to make the protagonist Ross a hero.

He does so by presenting Ross's rebellion and disobedience in order to save 130 horses. Ross thinks war is pointless and it is imperative to save the horses that did not opt for the war. This action of Robert Ross might be heroic. But real heroic is something that is accepted by the societal concurrence. Do the actions of Ross conform to the epigram of the book: "In such dangerous things as wars, the errors which proceed from a spirit of benevolence are the worst." There is definitely a common strain between the actions of Ross and the epigram. They are antithetical. Findley possibly used Clausewitz' writings as an irony. Clausewitz poem on the wonders of war is an extremely well articulated poem. He speaks of the beauties of human beings and their actions in the context of war. This epigram testifies to the same. Caring has no meaning in war. And if that is so, how can Ross be a hero. His error of benevolence is the worst.

The Wars has a clear commentary on the role of the political leaders. They are not perceived as heroes or extraordinary people, nor are they perceived as lunatics though they have some element of madness. Basically, they are as normal human beings. The emotions of Ross during the war make him a little monster himself, and these feelings are akin to the feelings and emotions of the leaders who are responsible for the war. If Ross is a hero

then all those instigators and perpetrators are heroes as well. But Findley would never accept them as heroes and, by the same measure, we cannot consider Ross as a hero. In a situation of war, human beings, leaders or followers, touch off a communal monstrosity appealing to the basest of human instincts. Findley uses the image of fire in a very extended manner: it is resonant of the use of flamethrowers. According to Findley himself, nothing is more threatening than fire and that led to the creation of flamethrowers. Findley himself endeavors to heighten the impact of the crazed situation of the huge fire, which terrorizes the reader.

He displays a comparative heroic trait when saving the horses from the raging fire. The fire is again a symbol of death and of regeneration. But the irony lies in the fact Robert has been transformed. Prior to his departure for Europe, he was a callow youth, tied to his sister. When his sister died, her rabbits were to be killed, since there was no one to care for them. Robert did have some reservations about killing the rabbits, but he did not display the violent behavior. But having been exposed to the carnage caused by the war, he rebels against his officers to save the horses. This paradox in the character and actions of Ross is left unexplained by Findley. Possibly, it is the horror of war that changed his perception. He was now more concerned with the fate of helpless than for carrying out the crass orders of his superiors. He was desensitized to the suffering but felt some kinship with the poor animals since he and the animals were at the mercy of the superiors.

The War as a book is quite puzzling, as puzzling as the life itself. When we desire to piece together a puzzle, it is imperative to identify first the corner pieces. Similarly, we have to identify the important pieces of the war. It is of extreme importance to analyze Ross's relationship with his father, mother, and sister. These relationships are the corners of the puzzle of his life. To understand Ross's relationship with his mother, we must analyze this relationship keeping in view the perception of the lady. It is her interpretations and consequent reaction to the tragic events that reveal her relationship with Ross. In the beginning of his novel, she is seen as an implacably adamant woman and, as the story progresses, her apparent adamant posture can be seen as a veneer for the tragedies that she had faced. She kept aloof because she could not be intimate with people. She felt that "being loved was letting others feed from your resource – all that you had in life was put in jeopardy." (Findley, 153).

Mrs. Ross, the mother, for years was tormented by the death of her brother and father. Then she lost her daughter. And now the war was taking her son away. Even at her daughter's death she showed a stoic calm because she did not want to be pitied. There was a time when she used to be very social and handed over chocolates to the soldiers going to war. When Ross joined the army, she withdrew into her shell. She was not concerned when Ross had to kill his sister's rabbits. The conversation between Ross and his mother regarding the death of Ross's sister when he is going for war is quite revealing. The mother says: "I know you are going away and be a soldier. Well – you can go to hell. I'm not responsible. I'm just another stranger. Birth I can give you but life I can't. I cannot keep anyone alive." (Findley,

23). She told him to go to hell and he does go to hell. The hell outside was the theatre of war and the hell inside is the conflicting emotions and confusing thoughts that rage within him. The novel occasionally breaks its form and the reader wonders how the war affected Ross's family; especially, his mother. Findley here uses the image of an empty glass, which signifies the empty life. This empty life characterizes both the mother and the son, who is miles apart from her and yet they are linked together by the letters that Ross writes and which the mother keeps in a special place. Nevertheless, the lives remain as empty as the empty glass.

Similarly, the relationship between the father and the son is as important as the relationship between the brother and the sister. His father Tom was always there to support him and he told Ross the stories in the dark. There was a strong bond between them, but their personalities differed. The father is like a walnut, firm and strong on the outside but sensitive inside. And he could control his emotions which Ross himself could not. The father bonded to his son and this bond is not only an important factor in the family but also in life. The father is bedrock that sustains him when he is vilified all over.

However, the most important relationship is his relationship with his sister. When he was very young, he mistook his sister for his mother. She was his guardian. But when she fell sick the roles reversed. Her death made Ross feel empty. And possibly that was one of the major factors that prompted him to join the war. He was haunted by the fact that he was not there to protect her when she died. He had broken his promise and that changes his entire perspective on life. He had become so guilt-ridden that he lost all

feeling. A large part of him died the day his sister died. These relationships show the enigmatic character of Ross who, because of his experiences, is gradually losing his sense of values because of the inherent contradictions between what he has imbibed, what he is told to do, and what he feels. He is gradually becoming a confused identity. His rape is essentially to be visualized as the rape of his sensitivity.

The symbol of horses is an equally powerful one. Ordinarily, horses are a symbol of male virility. They are also symbols of domination and freedom. Here also the horse has the same significance, but there is more to it. It has become a symbol of virile homosexuality, particularly in the context of the relationship between Robert and Captain Taffler. It can also be seen as the homoerotic relationship between Robert and Taffler. The story moves in a homosexual direction through Robert's observation of sex between Taffler and the Swede and also through the triangulation of the apparently destructive heterosexual relationship each has with Barbara.

The Wars shows the wastage at a colossal scale, and this depiction is done both at micro and macro level. When Mrs. Ross goes to the church she has an intense urge to let out her true emotions about the war. She knows that there is every possibility of her losing her son Robert. But she is inhibited from expressing her personal feelings since the social norms direct people to sit and sing the glory of war. This clearly proves that war is not only killing people at the battle field but also destroying ordinary human emotions by constricting their expression. This is also an attack on the conventions. Findley is not only engaged in depicting antiwar feeling but is equally

concerned with anti-convention attitude. According to convention, Taffler is a war hero: and he is homosexual; although the image of war hero brings to mind a tall strapping heterosexual male. Robert, too, does not conform to this image. And yet his disobedience – an act of breaking conventions – makes him a hero though not a war hero.

The structure of the novel employs the images and symbols haphazardly. The insensitivity of the war is again exemplified by the bemoaning of Mrs. Ross. It is against the popular concept that the soldiers are fighting for a just cause. The novel does not undermine the status of military. Rather it aims at clearing the concept of military and the war from all cant and hypocrisy. Findley desires war to be perceived as it is – obnoxious, dirty, inhuman – and not something worthy of glorification. As he says: “ It is the war that was crazy.” (Findley, 12).

The *Wars* thus emerges as an antiwar novel full of images, pictures, and symbols. The outstanding major symbols are the empty glass, the fire, the mud-filled trenches, the ‘ before’ and ‘ after’ photographs that Findley uses. These symbols make the structure of the novel forceful and effective, apart from making the novel thematically sound. The novel emerges as a testament of the writer’s concern. It is undoubtedly a masterpiece as a revelation of human emotions. The emotions of Mrs. Ross are most overwhelming. The symbols of the novel enable it to become an analytical commentary on Findley’s concern for humanity, and animals and also show his anti-convention and anti establishment attitudes. Ross becomes the alter ego of the writer, but also retains his own entity, thereby making the novel a

comment on the societal and establishment comments. The human psychology is analyzed by symbols. The novel encompasses the diverse variety of emotive language, evocative symbols and Findley uses this diversity of structure to present the diversity of emotions. *The War* does remain a man's disgust with violence, with filth, and with inhuman societal functions.

References

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