

# [The use of the four elements in the wars essay](https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-the-four-elements-in-the-wars-essay/)

In Findley’s The Wars, the four basic elements (earth, air, water, and fire), exhibit dual meanings.

These dual meanings play a large part in making this book a piece of anti-war propaganda. Before the war, the element of earth can be seen as Robert’s way of dealing with his beloved sister’s death. During the war, the element of earth becomes nothing more than a death trap for Robert, threatening to take his, and others’ lives. Again, before the war, water was used as a way for Robert to heal, in a bathtub, but during the war, water, or the seas, violently act against a ship, and almost cause it to sink. When Robert is away from the war, and on his own, he can use fire to help heal mental wounds. However, on the battlefield, fire is used against Robert in the form of a weapon, and nearly kills him in another part of the book.

Before the war, air, or sharing air, is a way that Robert is able to connect with his mother, while during the war, it is used as a weapon against him. Prior to Robert enlisting in the army, and going off to war, he took care of his hydrocephalic older sister. She was a huge part of his life. When she died, he felt somewhat responsible, and had trouble coping. It was directly after her burial that he enlisted in the army. Her burial seemed to help him move on from mourning, and to try and find another purpose for his life.

“ Rowena was buried in the morning. Under the trees in frozen earth they had to split with axes. “(Findley 18) The mention of the ground being hard to break may be symbolic of how hard it was for Robert to move on. It was her burial beneath the earth that helped Robert gain perspective and realize he had a new life to start, one without Rowena. In a sense he was being reborn.

This shows how earth served as a giver of new life for Robert. Some time later, after Robert had enlisted in the army, the element that once gave him new life, threatened to take it. The earth served as a place for the soldiers to take cover from barrage, and gunfire. In a way, it may have been better for the soldiers to be out in the open. The result of living in the trenches was usually disease, lice, and being in the presence of very large rats. “ Rats in there millions infested trenches.

There were two main types, the brown and the black rat. Both were despised but the brown rat was especially feared. Gorging themselves on human remains (grotesquely disfiguring them by eating their eyes and liver) they could grow to the size of a cat”(“ Trench life”) Often men afflicted with these things took their own life because they could not deal with them. Deeming the trenches a futile form of protection, and a source of madness, or death. Another form of earth (mud), also threatened the life of Robert and other soldiers.

It was very common for soldiers to have their life taken by the earth. Soldiers would disappear into the mud never to be seen again. “ Men and horses sank from sight. They drowned in mud. Their graves, it seemed, just dug themselves and pulled them down. “(Findley 76) Robert had a close encounter with this most treacherous mud.

Water is another essential element for life. We use it to stay hydrated, and to clean ourselves, and our food. In addition to these, we have spiritual ties to water. Most Christian religions welcome people into their religion by giving them a chance to be reborn. This ceremony is known as baptism.

It involves the person being blessed, and having holy water poured over their head. This welcomes them into the religion and cleanses them of their sin. In Christianity, baptism is the sacramental act of cleansing in water that admits one as a full member of the Church. “(“ Baptism”) After Robert is in a skirmish with the soldier who had come to kill Rowena’s rabits, he finds himself in a bathtub nursing his wounds. “ That night Robert was lying in the bathtub, soothing his aches and bruises with water that was almost scalding hot.

“(Findley 20) Although water will obviously not aid in the healing of bruises in a physical sense, Robert sought out healing of a mental nature by soaking himself in water. He clearly saw peace in water, and went to the tub to escape the horror and pain of the last living memory of Rowena being slaughtered. This shows that before the war, water could represent new life, and salvation. When water is not controlled or contained, it can become quite a hazard to mankind. Not too long ago the world was shown how dangerous water can actually be by the horror that was caused by the flood in New Orleans. “ Scenes of death, damage and chaos are being played out throughout the Gulf Coast.

Authorities were overwhelmed as they tried to rescue the living and count the dead amid the destruction left by the powerful Hurricane Katrina”(“ Hurricane”) This shows what water is capable of when it is not contained. When the manmade dams were overcome by the power of water during the Katrina disaster, the result was death on a massive scale. There is a scene in the book where a ship carrying many men comes very close to sinking.” Panic was perversely averted by watching one of the other ships in the convoy almost being sunk as she tried to make it into harbour past the rocks. (Findley 63) This shows how something so essential to our lives can be corrupted and turned around and nearly cause our death in the face of war.

Fire is an element that is commonly thought of as scary or evil. However, it is also essential to our existence. It cooks our food, boils our water, and heats our homes. There are a few instances in the book where fire is proven to have a positive impact on Robert’s life.

After Robert was raped, he lost a lot of self-respect. He was ashamed, and felt guilty. He felt as though he had let his beloved Rowena down, and that he was undeserving of her companionship. In order to spare Rowena the shame of being associated with a man who had been raped, he burns her picture.

“ Everything was there- including the picture of Rowena. Robert burned it in the middle of the floor. This was not an act of anger- but an act of charity. “(Findley 195) By burning the picture he was dissociating his sister from him, and therefore doing what he thought would preserve, or restore her honour. The fire that burned the picture helped him deal with what had happened to him, and helped him to remain seeing Rowena as a symbol of perfection.

In a way, fire gave him a second chance, or new life. Much like water does at a baptism. Robert also has some fond memories of his parents and his home town that involve fire. As he returns to his home town in chapter 18, he smells his home town, and comments on how he enoyed knowing that the fires of his father’s factories were burning.

“ Then he could smell the city of his birth-even though it lay about him in the dark-and he stood and he stared as he passed the fires of his fathers factories, every furnace blasting red in the night. “(Findley 45) The fire he speaks of here has to do wth his father’s job. Back then the father was the primary bread winner, threfore a father’s job would determine his son’s life. This fire is representative of Robert’s father’s job, and his father’s job is representative of Robert’s life, therefore, the fire can represent life. The more stereotypical view of fire, a dangerous reaction causing death and destruction, is also featured in this book. It is actually used against Robert in the form of a weapon during the war.

This weapon was a flamethrower. A flamethrower is a weapon that spews out pressurized flammable gas in a controlled manner. Once ignited, the flamethrower becomes exactly what it sounds like: A weapon that shoots fire at it’s victims. “ The flamethrowr is a potent weapon with great psychological impact on unprepared soldiers, delivering a particular horrendous death-being burnt alive.

“(“ Flamethrower”) Findley vividly describes a scene where Robert’s battalion was attacked by German soldiers bearing flamethrowers. “ Men carrying tanks of fire on their backs came in advance of the troops and spread the fire with hoses. Water burned and snow went up in smoke. Nothing remained. It was virtual attrition.

The ultimate weapon had been invented. “(Findley 147) Fire is depicted here as something horrible and dangerous. It threatens to take human life in a very slow and painful manner. In addition to this, fire, was the ultimate cause of his death.

Near the end of the book, there are many animals trapped in a barn. Robert ran into the barn, in order to try and save the animals. Once inside he freed the animals, but was trapped. Although he did eventually get out of the burning barn, he died in the hospital in a great deal of pain. Fire, an element that once gave Robert a second chance, somehow was corrupted and ended up taking his life. “ It is not possible for a healthy person to voluntarily stop breathing indefinitely.

If we do not inhale, the level of carbon dioxide builds up in our blood, and we experience overwhelming air hunger. This irrepressible reflex is not surprising given that without breathing, the body’s internal oxygen levels drop dangerously low within minutes, leading to permanent brain damage followed eventually by death. (“ Breathing”)This quote tells about how imperitive it is for us to breathe. Air is often looked at as the main source of life, mainly because we can only live minutes without it. Robert uses breath as a way to connect to his mother and it may symbolize his Mother-child relationship with her. After Robert is beaten by the soldier who had come to kill Rowena’s rabits, he had gone for a bath to nurse his wounds.

His mother then came in to have a talk with him. This was the last conversation that Robert and his mother had before he left to become a soldier. The last time he spoke to his mother as a boy, the moment he left for war, he had become a man. “ Nothing more was said. Each one faded from the other through steam.

This was the last time they breathed in one another’s presence. In the morning he was gone before she woke. “(Findley 23-24) The mention of breath in this quote is significant, because breath is air, and this breath or air symbolizes Robert’s life and youth. Therefore, the element of air in this book can symbolize life, and youth. This element just like the other three has a second, and very contradictory meaning. In the first world war, at the battle of Ypres, a new weapon was introduced by the Germans.

This weapon was capable of taking out an entire fleet of enemy soldiers. This weapon was chlorine gas. When inhaled, the gas causes a fluid to build up in the lungs. Once enough fluid builds up, the person will drown in the fluids, and die from asphyxiation.

“ Slithering over the crater’s rim-a pale blue fog appeared. Like a veil his mother might’ve worn. Robert blinked. It tumbled over the edge and began to spread out over their heads-drifting on a layer of cold dank air rising from the pool below them. “(Findley 137) This is a description of Robert’s encounter with the poisonous gas. Many of the soldiers inhaled the gas and died.

Robert instructed his platoon to put on their masks. When they told him they were without masks, he gave his to a needy soldier who was unable to move. He then instructed the rest of them to urinate on their handkerchiefs, and to put them over their face. The alkaline acidity of their urine would protect them from the effects of the gas. This gas was evil, and threatened to end Robert’s life. This shows that in the face of war, this element that is so essential to his life, can become poisonous and threaten to kill him.

Each of the four elements has played a large part in The Wars. The elements all possess dual, and contradictory meanings: life and death. The way in which these meanings are presented greatly contributes to the negative spin Findley puts on war. Before, or away from war, each element plays a part in the maturation, healing, and growth of Robert as a human being.

They each do positive things for the protagonist. During the war, and in combat, the elements seem to have been turned around to work against Robert. Each makes an attempt at ending his life. The purpose of this is not only to show the duality of things, but also to show how war can take good things and make them bad. Such is the case for each of the four elements. This has aided Findley in portraying war as a horrible thing, which ends, or ruins, the lives of many, solving nothing.

This piece is very much a counter to wartime propaganda.