

War-Erotica and Destruction of Innocence: A study of Timothy Findley's *The Wars*

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Abstract

World War I, also known as the First World War, the Great War, or the War to End All Wars, was a global war originating in Europe that lasted from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918. Troops from Canada played a prominent part in World War One. Canada was part of the British Empire in 1914. As a result of this, when Great Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, Canada was automatically at war. The causes of World War One are complicated. No wonder so many of Canada's great writers, from Timothy Findley to Anne Michaels, have been driven to write about the impact of war on our individual psyches and collective society. Findley's *The Wars* is about the experiences of a young Canadian officer, Robert Ross in World War I. He had explored the happenings take place in the battle field. He also shows that the war urged the outer conflicts as well as inner conflicts in the minds of people. The protagonist's loss of innocence in the novel gives a clear picture of the frustrated minds in the society which existing aftermath of the war. This paper involves discovering how the world war one created impact on the society.

Key words: wars, violence, isolation, death, sexuality, gas attack, animals and frustration.

Timothy Irving Frederick Findley is a well known author in North America and in Europe and has a hefty reputation for his novels. He was a Canadian author and playwright. He was born on October 30, 1930 in Toronto to upper class parents. He attended St. Andrew's college, boarding school, until the 10th grade when he left for health reasons. He studied dance and acting before turning to writing. Findley has such a distinctive style of writing that he really cannot be compared to other authors. Findley's writing style evokes frequent themes Sexuality, Gender and mental illness. He is sometimes associated with the Southern Ontario Gothick style of writing. Many independent writers and the society appreciate Findley's writing and compare him to works of those of Margaret Atwood. It is argued that Findley's international reputation is second in Canadian authors, next to Atwood. Many of his characters burdened with personal secrets that torment them and challenge the limits of their sanity. Findley's other notable works are *Headhunter*, *Pilgrim* and *Elizabeth Rex*. He won Governor General's Award and Trillium Book Award. No author has captured, in essence, what Findley has contributed to the world of literature. He died on June 21, 2002 in Brignoles, France.

There is a pretty interesting correlation between the title and the theme. The title of the book gives insight into life as a general theme. There seems to be a constant battle or a war between destruction or death and life. This is evident throughout the novel with the rabbits, horses, on the boat, the death were witnessed by Robert at war and at the end his attempt to save the horses. The title can be applied in a literal sense to world war one, applied to Robert's internal conflicts and also applied to the general theme that is war between life and death. Findley dedicates the novel to his uncle, Thomas Irving Findley, who fought in the first world war and survived. Findley drew upon letters his uncle had sent, as well as his verbal accounts of life on the front, to draw an image of the war in the novel. Findley took six months to complete and went on to win the Governor General's Award for fiction in 1977.

The beginning of this novel introduces the background of Robert and his family. Character development is key in this part of the storyline. Ross joins the Canadian Army at 19 in response to the accidental death of his beloved handicapped older sister, Rowena. She was born with hydrocephalus, and Robert was tasked with taking care of her. One day she fell out of her wheelchair onto a hard concrete floor in the stable while Robert was supposed to be keeping an eye on her. Instead, Robert was in bedroom "making love to his pillows". When she died, Robert felt remorsefully guilty. After her death their mother tells Robert that the rabbits must be killed which were taken care of by her. Robert argues that it is unnecessary and illogical but she insists that they be killed and Robert be the one to kill them. Robert's mother then resulted in calling Teddy Budge, a man with no remorse, to proceed with the assassination of the rabbits. In an attempt to save the rabbits, Robert was beaten by Teddy Budge and the slaughter was completed. Robert felt guilty that he could not have stopped the tragic event from happening. He enlisted into the Canadian Armed Forces after Mrs. Ross and he mauled over a feud over the death in their family.

In training camp, Robert met a war hero, Eugene Taffler, while searching for lost horses. Taffler was a very large, strong man who was shattering bottles with rocks, while his dog sat alongside him. During his training at Lethbridge, Robert and some fellow soldiers make a trip to the nearby "Lousetown" and the brothel fittingly nicknamed "Wet Goods." Here Robert meets the prostitute Ella, and encounters his war hero Taffler. Then the novel describes about Robert's life on the boat. On the voyage, Robert made his closest friend that he would ever in the army. His name was Harris and he contracted a bad case of pneumonia, which later got him reassigned to the hospital in England. In the voyage on a crowded troopship carrying 140 horses to Great War. During the hellish storm, one of the horses broke their leg and Robert was commanded to put it out of its misery. This event traumatizes him. Robert had to go against his morals and love of animals to put the horse out of its pain. He struggled. It took Robert six shots to finally put the beast to rest, which scarred him mentally and emotionally and the war hasn't even begun for Robert. The natural world presents a freedom and authenticity that Robert does not find in his army life.

As the novel progresses Findley begins describing the setting of war itself. Robert's destination is a place called Wytsbrouk. The second battle of Ypres had taken place in 1915. Most of the Canadian troops were deployed there. There was a word comes down that the Germans are making a gas attack at the Ypres Salient. This is some five miles away from Robert's location so all he gets is a taste of it on snowflakes. In the later part of the novel Ross's experiences in the trenches include a gas attack (during which he saves his men by

rigging makeshift gas-masks from urine-soaked cloths); the shooting of a German soldier who turns out to have been peacefully watching birds, not reconnoitering; and the bombing of a dugout which has become home to him and other soldiers. These individuals suffer various horrors; Rodwell, for example, is later sent "down the line" to a very traumatized group of men whose cruelty to animals causes him to commit suicide. Deaths are mostly meaningless, accidental, and pitiful.

Deeply empathetic, Robert has a kinship with all animals. for he is sensitive to suffering in animals as well as humans, and has an exaggerated sense of responsibility. Throughout the novel it is clear that Robert has a connection to the natural world and animals, most notably horses. He shares this with his sister Rowena, Harris, and Rodwell. All these characters foster a deep respect and reverence for the natural world and it is among animals that Robert feels the greatest peace and belonging. He runs with coyotes and horses almost as one of them. There is a freedom and authenticity in the natural world that Robert does not find in human society. The destruction of these animals is what ultimately pushes him to act out violently against the human construct of war. Isolated from other human beings, Robert finds himself more at home with animals. They do not judge him. He feels no need to impress them or to hide from them. He can simply be himself. When it comes to other human beings, Robert is deeply caring of others, but there is an otherness about him. Rodwell captures this in his sketch of Robert. He is both human and non-human at the same time. Findley makes a conscious effort to distance this novel from other war literature. Instead of focussing on great detail to capture the experience, Findley utilizes multiple points of view to try to capture how the experience of war feels.

As the novel progresses several innocent figures are consumed by the war. Findley comments on the age of men on board going to war to draw attention to their boyish innocence. They are barely men at all. Ross has an affair with Lady Barbara D'Orsey in England, where he is further traumatized by meeting the officer he admired during training, and discovering he has been horrifically wounded and he would rather die than survive maimed. When Juliet witnesses Robert and Barbara making love, "hurting one another"(156), it becomes clear that the violence of the heterosexual encounter is decidedly one way. The two lovers are not hurting one another but it is Robert who, as Juliet states, "must be trying to kill her"(156). Juliet's changing body represents her loss of innocence and the unmistakable sensation that one cannot go back in time and undo what has been done.

Findley's purpose in *The Wars* is to reveal an architectural break between pre-war male relations and war-time male relations and to document Robert Ross's voyage through the novel. While Findley portrays pre-war male relations in an idyllic light, signifying the possibility of camaraderie and friendship, his portrayal of male-war relations based on violence and predation. The violent homosexual encounters we see in the novel result from a violence inherent in any war-time expression of male -sexuality. During the war time the soldiers stayed in a military bath-house. Robert was brutally raped and beaten up by the gang of soldiers. Robert's privacy is most violated when he is raped. While it is a physical assault, his spirit suffers the most damage. This private sphere, his body and his mind, are invaded not just by his assailants, but by the war itself. The fact that Robert's fellow soldiers rape him is an irony emblematic of the paradoxical nature of male-relationships in war that the novel has already constructed. Just men fight with men for their country so *The Wars* also

shows men of the same country fighting each other to save themselves, as when Robert is raped, for other men's sexual pleasure.

Findley's war is such a battle of contradictory emotions, where beating and healing are accomplished almost in the same swing, where, during war time, sex and violence become one and the same and fellow soldiers become rapists. This portrayal is marked discontinuity when compared to the pre-war male relations Findley had shown. In *Inside Memory*, Findley relates a discussion with Margaret Laurence over the problematics of the rape-scene in *The Wars*. Findley tells Laurence that "it has to be there because it is my belief that Robert Ross and his generation of young men were raped, in effect, by the people who made that war. Basically, their fathers did it to them." He argues further: I cannot remove it. As a scene, it is intrinsic-deeply meshed in the fabric of the book as I first conceived it"(151). Findley's insistence on the rape scene and its significance to the total construction of the novel has been left, though not untouched somewhat neglected. Findley makes an explicit connection between sex and war.

The last scene returns to the prologue of the novel. Robert finds a black horse and a black dog beside it. As he is about to ride he realizes there are horses in the abandoned train; he frees a hundred and thirty horses and flees the area. As Robert is riding with all the horses a soldier attempts to stop him. Robert shoots him, too. Orders come in to a Major Mickle to pursue Robert and capture him. Robert is finally cornered in an abandoned barn with the horses he took. Major Mickle asks Robert to surrender. Robert, instead, fires upon him. Major Mickle orders his men to set the barn on fire in order to force Robert out. The barn goes up more quickly than expected and the roof collapses on some of the horses. Robert himself is set ablaze. Mickle's men get Robert out but he is badly burned. He is sent to St. Aubyn's to recover after being tried in absentia. A nurse, Marian Turner, takes pity on Robert and offers him a peaceful death. He refuses. Robert remains at St Aubyn's for the rest of his days, with Juliet d'Orsey at his side. He dies in 1922. Mr. Ross is the only member of his family to come see Robert buried.

As the novel ends, Findley leaves us with two photographs of Robert. The first is of him sitting on a keg of water, again invoking a natural element. He is holding the small skull of an animal in his hands, symbolizing death as well as his connection to animals. The quote by Fagan establishes that nothing cements our acknowledgement of the existence of a thing as much as our destruction of it. This suggests that human nature drives us to both worship and destroy what is beautiful around us. It is only when we destroy that beauty that we truly are able to acknowledge it. The second photo shows Robert with Rowena atop Meg, a pony. An inscription on the back of the photo reads, "Look! You can see our breath!". The caption in the photo states that the breath of the subjects is visible; Findley ends on an image that evokes life instead of death. Despite the negative imagery depicted in the book, Findley ends on a positive one invoking a sense of life and hope. The continuance of life is, simply, the embodiment of hope. In this case it was the war that was the great antagonist of hope.

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