

Literary Analysis: The Wars

(INDENT) *The Wars*, a novel by Timothy Findley, is a story about a Canadian boy named Robert Ross who enlists in the first World War. Upon entering, Robert and his fellow soldiers experience the true barbaric nature of warfare. To survive, they are forced to change their once naïve nature to fit the aggressive atmosphere of the war. For some soldiers, this transition is too extreme, and they experience a descent into madness. As the story progresses, Findley illustrates the soldiers' gradual descent into madness through effective use of symbolism and diction. This main theme truly illustrates the inhumane nature of the war and the effect it can have on once normal people.

(INDENT) First, the war makes a soldier think quickly and makes them rely on their survival instinct. If they second guess their choices or are not assertive, they will not succeed in the war. When Robert is first introduced in the story, he is reminded of a former girlfriend of his upon waiting at the train station. This girlfriend, named Heather, asked Robert to fight a man because he had claimed to love her. After Robert declined, Heather got angry and left him: "There were even social complications for his parents in the aftermath and Heather said she never, never, never wanted Robert in her sight again. All because he wouldn't fight a man she didn't love and whom he'd never seen." (13) A first glimpse of Robert tells the reader that Robert is not a fighter. Women want their partners to be by their side and willing to defend them at any time. In this instance, Heather wants Robert to show his loyalty to her by fighting another man. When Robert does not agree to, it shows that he is the opposite of a woman's ideal man, one unwilling to defend his partner. Therefore, Heather never wants to see him again. He simply lacks the dominance necessary in a relationship. Heather says never multiple times to emphasize how disappointed she is in his decision making. Later, in the novel, Robert and his troops had been attacked by chlorine gas. There is only one mask between the eight men and they all fight for it:

(BIG QUOTE INDENT) Eight men and one mask. Robert had to fight to keep it and he ended up kicking both the living and dead. At last, lying flat on his back, he managed to get the automatic out of his

pocket ... he pointed it straight at Bates. 'Tell them to back off,' he said; 'or by Jesus I'll fire!' ... He swallowed hard and looked at the gas. 'All right,' he said, 'you sons-of-bitches do exactly what I say.' One of the men began to run. Robert fired. The man fell down but was not hit, Robert having missed on purpose. (139)

Robert is determined to take control of this situation, rather than have everyone die due to their stubbornness. Since no one is willing to cooperate, he becomes a leader and starts to order them around. When a man tries fleeing, a cowardice gesture, Robert shoots but intentionally misses. This shows his guts and confidence in missing, but also his willingness to kill if somebody tries to oppose him. Furthermore, he refers to them as sons-of-bitches to further emasculate the men and assert his dominance. He then orders them to urinate on their shirt cloths and stuff in their mouths to survive. The men have trouble urinating, so Robert again takes charge: "'Damn you! *Damn you!* Give it to me!' and he ripped the shirt tail away from the man and urinated on it himself." (140) The men could not urinate due to their state of fear. They are extremely nervous in the heat of the moment, so Robert does the job for them. The juxtaposition of these quotations show how Robert has molded into a war soldier. Once a passive young man not willing to initiate when his girlfriend wants his help, he has outgrown his old behaviour and is a personification of war. He not only takes charge in a situation where people are out of order, but does it with authority. By false shooting the man, he warns the other soldiers around him that he will not take any idiocy from the other troops, and will kill them if any more chaos ensues. The other soldiers are hesitant in urinating on their shirt cloths, but Robert enforces them to do so, and for a couple of the soldiers, he offers to do it for them. These acts of dominance truly demonstrate how the war has changed Robert Ross. He does not second guess himself anymore and does what is necessary to survive. Urinating on a cloth is seen as unsanitary and unethical to the men, but he disregards that to live. The war has successfully changed Robert's nature to become more assertive and authoritative, characteristics mandatory for survival in the setting of war.

(INDENT) Next, a soldier slowly loses their innocence during war without knowledge. They tend to look positively hoping that their faith in humanity is justified. As Robert progresses through the war, his faith in humanity dissipates. At the beginning of the novel, Robert explores his sexual fantasies whilst leaving his handicapped sister Rowena all alone: "She fell. It was Sunday. Stuart was meant to be watching her and so it was Stuart's fault but no—it wasn't Stuart's fault. It was Robert's fault. Robert was her guardian and he was locked in his bedroom. Making love to his pillows. Jesus. She fell. It was Sunday. Robert wasn't there." (15) Robert had a responsibility to tend for his disabled sister. Instead, he decided to make love to his pillows. This sexual act shows his naivete early on in the novel, and how his hormones get the best of him. He completely disregards his sister, the person he is the guardian of, to go explore his sexual fantasies. Rowena's death is the beginning of Robert losing his innocence. As the story progresses, Robert keeps a picture of Rowena by his side throughout the war. This picture is a symbol of his hope in humanity. His sister was an innocent person, not exploring the sinful part of the world. As long as he keeps this picture, he is still with his sister in this joyful and good-natured world. After his graphic rape scene near the end of the novel, he finds the picture of Rowena in his kit: "Robert sat on the mutilated mattress and opened his kit bag. Everything was there—including the picture of Rowena. Robert burned it in the middle of the floor." (195) Many soldiers throughout the war experienced inner conflict regarding their morals and their sexuality. Homosexuality was common due to the soldiers' desire of sexual interaction. Robert Ross's own fellow soldiers let their desires control their decisions and dehumanized Robert. From this happening, Robert concludes that the world is simply immoral by nature. He has accepted that this pure utopian society he pictures is non-existent. In correlation, he ends up burning Rowena's picture. The picture provided him with ambition towards life and gave him closure in the death of Rowena. Now, he burns the pictures and moves on with his life. Robert has gone from a naïve boy unfamiliar with the outside world to a man who has realized how immoral the world can be. The misery of the war has overpowered him and he no longer feels no hope in mankind. Robert has

changed his standpoint on the morality of mankind due to the war, and as a result, loses his innocence and hope.

(INDENT) In contrast to Robert's perseverance, some soldiers facing the heat of the war simply are too overwhelmed. They experience a descent into madness caused by the horrific scenes the war is capable of projecting. One of Robert's fellow soldiers, Rodwell, is too pure to deal with the savage actions committed in the war. When Rodwell is first met, his connection with nature and animals is mentioned: "Any man whose love of horses is stronger than his fear of absurdity is all right with me." (98) Rodwell has a love for animals. He draws animals in his spare time and states that any man who loves horses more than they fear insanity is a man with the right mindset. This pure man enlisted in the war not knowing what he would later witness:

(BIG INDENT) Apparently he'd gone 'down the line' and been assigned to a company who'd been in the trenches all through the fire storms without being relieved. Some of these men were madmen. This was understandable, perhaps. When Rodwell arrived, he found them slaughtering rats and mice—burning them alive in their fires. Rodwell, being Rodwell, had tried to stop them. They would not be stopped—and, seeing that he took an interest, they'd forced him to watch the killing of a cat. Half an hour later, Rodwell wandered into No Man's Land and put a bullet through his ears. (150)

When Rodwell is admitted to another company the people around him have been isolated the entire length of the war. They have lost their sense of morality and have turned to their animalistic instincts, like killing animals for food. Findley uses the word slaughter to portray just how barbaric the acts of the men were. In the novel animals are a symbol of companionship and purity. The entire book Findley uses animals as Robert's fallback when he is in need of hope. When Rodwell is introduced, he also connects with the animals in a heartfelt way, just like Robert. Unfortunately, when he encounters these men who have lost all their sanity, they take what he loves and uses it against him. They are aware of Rodwell's

love for animals and force him to watch the killing of a cat, one of nature's most innocent animals.

Rodwell, not having the mental strength to endure the violence of the war, shoots him in No Man's Land.