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**THE CONSTRUCTION AND FUNCTION
OF THE CHARACTER OF ROBERT ROSS
IN TIMOTHY FINDLEY'S *THE WARS*
BA thesis**

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**TARTU
2021**

ABSTRACT

Timothy Findley's *The Wars* focuses on the story of a young man named Robert Ross with the novel presented as a research project with the aim to find out who Robert Ross was and what the possible reasons for his questionable decisions were. The story is structured from various intertexts such as interviews and photographs and the complex narrative is constructed through multiple narrators with Robert Ross never appearing as a narrator himself. The aim of this research paper is to find out how Robert is constructed: which intertexts and methods are implemented in order to build and explore him as a character as well as construct the narrative around his story. Another aim is to find possible functions that Robert Ross serves in the novel and what groups he could represent.

The thesis is divided into four parts: an introduction, a literature review, an empirical part and a conclusion. The introduction offers an overview of *The Wars*, introduction of Robert Ross and possible inspirations behind the name and lastly, the reasons for the chosen thesis topic. Literature review tackles various topics that were previously explored by different scholars and are connected to the character of Robert Ross, whether influencing him as a character or helping to build the narrative around his story. Such topics include war and war related intertexts, poetry, different forms of violence, the importance of privacy and photography and its functions. The empirical part of the thesis is divided into three major topics: Robert as a reflection of biases and the representation of repressed groups such as 'victim' of the war and queer men. The first topic focuses on Robert Ross as a representation of biases in the narrative, the second tackles Robert Ross as one of the 'victims' of the war, reflecting on young innocent men having to engage in the war. The last topic explores Ross as a figure of repressed homosexuality and the reflection of the attitudes towards male relationships. The conclusion summarises the main findings of the thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
INTRODUCTION.....	4
1. LITERATURE REVIEW	7
1.1. War themes and related intertexts	7
1.2. Poetry as a consolidation and a collective memory	8
1.3. Violence in its many forms	9
1.4. The importance of privacy and its disappearance	11
1.5. The functions of photography in <i>The Wars</i>	14
1.6. Complex narrative and multiple narrators.....	15
2. EMPIRICAL STUDY	18
2.1. Robert Ross as a reflection of biases.....	18
2.2. Robert Ross – one of many ‘victims’ of the war.....	20
2.3. Robert Ross as a representation of repressed homosexuality and attitudes towards male relationships	22
CONCLUSION	26
REFERENCES.....	28
RESÜMEE	29

INTRODUCTION

The Wars is a postmodernist novel written by Timothy Findley in 1977. It is considered to be a historiographic metafiction. Historiographic metafiction is a term introduced by Linda Hutcheon, which refers to the kind of literature that “rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts” (Hutcheon 2004: 122). It often tackles the idea of documents as functions of perceptions and concrete problems “by using the paratextual conventions of historiography” in order to challenge and “undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations” (Hutcheon 2004: 123). The novel is largely composed of recollections and interviews mixed with historical facts and documents. Robert Ross is the main character of *The Wars* whose story is being told and explored by a researcher. Apart from interviewees’ recollections, the story is largely told through his perspective. The story is structured as a research mission in order to find out who Robert Ross was and what led to many of his rather reckless actions. The novel uses first-, second- and third person narrative and relies heavily on intertexts in various forms such as photographs, interviews and literature. In 1977, *The Wars* won the Governor General’s Literary Award in English-language fiction category (Athabasca University 2015). The novel was adapted for a 1983 film and stage play, which premiered in 2007.

Theories regarding the chosen name of Robert Ross and possible sources of inspiration have arisen through time. In *Character Parts: Who's Really Who in Canlit* written in 2003 Brian Busby suggests that Robert Ross was inspired by Findley’s own uncle, whom Findley dedicated his novel to, alongside his parents (Busby 2003) with another prominent person is T. E. Lawrence, known for his war writings. Another suggested person was Robbie Ross, who was mostly known as one of Oscar Wilde’s lovers

(Busby 2003). The latter version together with speculations from narrators in the book, allow for speculations regarding the possibility of Robert Ross being a queer character.

Findley's novel tells the story of Robert Ross who, after the tragic death of his sister, enlists and goes to participate in World War I. By making such a choice, he hopes to deal with his grief and guilt of not being able to save his sister. After enlisting, Robert makes new friends, while slowly and reluctantly opening up to them. At some point, he is in charge of a convoy, appearing intelligent and caring towards his soldiers, saving them multiple times throughout their journey. With them he experiences gas attacks, having to hide and live in a dugout, constantly fearing for their lives. Tragic events overtaking his life, such as many deaths of his soldiers and friends, sexual assault and neglect from the higherups, result in a mental breakdown. After hearing the refusal to his request about letting horses out of a barn so that they would not accidentally get hit, Robert attempts to open the gate himself, disobeying orders. After being confronted, Ross shoots a captain and takes the animals away. Later after his disappearance, Robert is found by other soldiers to be hiding in abandoned barns. Trying to get Robert out, soldiers light up the barnyard, which causes the roof to collapse on him and animals before Ross could open the gate to escape. Robert suffers from bad burns, being unable to function properly, he is tried *in absentia* and spends the rest of his short life in a hospital before dying of wounds a couple of years later.

I chose to study the construction and function of Robert Ross because I took a great interest in the character of Robert Ross and the way he was presented in the book. With the amount of time he is present in the book, it is paradoxical how little the reader will learn about him, apart from the general information from the official documents. Instead, the reader is presented with assumptions and versions of what might have pushed Robert to this mental state. Furthermore, a huge part of the deeper characterisation and the

personality of Robert is also mostly constructed from the biased versions from the interviewees, therefore it is fascinating to see and analyse how Robert Ross is built through these different narratives and intertexts. Previous scholars have mostly dealt with such topics as intertextuality in *The Wars*, complex narrative and novel's portrayal of social issues and differences between pre- and postwar society. Robert himself is rarely analysed as a character on his own, therefore, it would be beneficial to focus on Robert Ross as a character, his construction and function(s) in the novel in order to contribute to a wider understanding of his character.

This thesis will be focused on how the character of Robert is constructed and through which intertexts and using which methods he is explored as a character. The literature review will focus on the topics that were previously explored by scholars and how they are connected to Robert Ross and contribute to his construction. It will also explore the implemented methods used to construct the narrative of Robert's story. The empirical part of the work will focus on the analysis of Robert Ross and introduce the possible functions that Robert Ross serves in the novel.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous scholars have extensively explored various themes presented in the novel, ranging from the multitude of intertexts appearing in the novel and their functions to the analysis of violence in its different forms in *The Wars*. While Robert never appears in the center of analysis (instead he usually serves as an example of the use of a concept or an intertext), these themes are largely intertwined with his character, effectively shaping Ross and allowing for a wider understanding of his purpose in *The Wars*. The literature review will be focused on the topics explored by the scholars, such as themes in the novel, methods and intertexts that are present and used to construct the character of Robert Ross.

1.1. War themes and related intertexts

The topic of war and concepts related to it are prevalent in the novel as the majority of the novel's action takes place in dugouts, hospitals and characters being surrounded by military people, comrades. War is also featured in many instances, often in songs, literature, photographs. For example, Robert was photographed wearing a military uniform, on the back of which was written Second Lieutenant, C.F.A (Findley 2001: 48). Even the paintings such as *The Death of General Wolfe* are included in the novel. Many scholars tackle war-related themes in their own works, exploring a variety of topics, one of which is intertextuality presented in the novel and the use of intertexts. Ann Chinnery, for example, points out that Robert's story is built through different intertexts, allowing "Findley to highlight the difficult process of writing historical and biographical narratives" (Chinnery 2014: 591). *The Wars* has a notable number of war-related intertexts which both Corinne Bigot and Helen Goethals have explored in their works. Goethals explains that

intertextual references to the works of war poets are generally portrayed in a positive light, which contrasts greatly with Bigot's portrayal and opinion regarding intertexts. She is critical of the representation of war in the intertexts, arguing that through war-positive intertexts such as photographs, children's literature and music, glorified versions of war are constructed (Bigot 2015: para 1). Robert himself was quite influenced and amazed by the heroic men such as Eugene Taffler, whose names appeared to be "credential enough" for Robert (Findley 2001: 30). However, despite the rather negative associations with the war related intertexts, scholars point out their significance, nevertheless.

1.2. Poetry as a consolidation and a collective memory

Another form of intertexts, which in this case, has a positive effect on characters, providing them with guidance and even consolidation, is poetry. In the novel, most of the poetry is war themed. Poetry as a topic is thoroughly explored in Goethals' work. She argues that "poems /.../ written out of the experience of war are historical documents in their own right" (Goethals 2015: para 1) and the use of poetry and its connection to various situations and characters aid the story further. Goethals explores poetry as a historical document which could provide further insight into the society and values of that time, also focusing on the concept of 'collective narrative' which is produced by a group of people, in this case poets, that can shape and provide the outlook on the war and society's perceptions. She refers to Findley's use of war poetry as light, subtle and profound and argues that it does not only provide a solid narrative background but also "make[s] tragic what to the military historian would have appeared as a (relatively) simple tale of disgrace" (Goethals 2015: para 18). Many important moments are interconnected with poetry in one way or another: Robert's mother seeks comfort in *Wind and the Rain*, while *Madame Sosostreis, famous clairvoyante* appears to be haunting Robert. Suddenly hearing a birdsong during a stressful situation, where Robert noticed a young German soldier keeping an eye

on Ross' team, makes it difficult for him to pull the trigger and kill the German man, which contrasts with the 'heroic' actions usually depicted in war-positive intertexts. However, such positive sides of the war-related intertexts or the war itself are rare, instead anti-war ideas are pointed out in many scholars' works. Shane Rhodes, for example, compares war to sexual violence that changed relationships between men, now now longer trusting each other "because they had learned to kill in such great numbers that the act itself became trivial" (Rhodes 1998: 47).

1.3. Violence in its many forms

The war had changed social constructs regarding private and public, relationships between people and the people themselves. Even from a linguistic standpoint, the notion of war is not one-dimensional or straightforward, but instead both internal and external. Chinnery focuses on the use of plural in the title, arguing that such a decision was made to refer to both the war itself and the internal struggles and wars Ross had to face (Chinnery 2014: 591). As a young man he had to endure many hardships: his sister's death, war, loss of his comrades and friend, loneliness. Both those who remained home and those going to war are presented, their internal struggles are explored. Despite hoping that Robert's decision to go to war is a noble cause, Ross's family "never fully recovered from his departure" (Chinnery 2014: 591) and it appeared that Robert lost respect of the most of his family members due to the mention of his father being the only one who "came to see him buried" (Findley 2001: 217). Violence takes multiple forms in *The Wars*, appearing not only as a war violence but sexual and emotional as well. As Chinnery points out: "portrayal of the complex interplay of external and psychic violence unsettles /.../ readers" (Chinnery 2014: 591).

Rhodes further focuses on the topic of violence, now intertwining it with sexuality and masculinity, portraying the violence not only on the level of the war, but also on the

level of sexuality and sexual acts. Rhodes explores sexuality and queer erotics presented in the novel and argues that *The Wars* portrays the change from pre-war and war-time relationships between men and “Robert Ross's voyage through the novel and his slow accretion of ‘manhood’” (Rhodes 1998: 39). Rhodes also points out that Findley portrayed difference in homosocial relationships before and during war, showing how they escalated to violent homosexual relationships (Rhodes 1998: 44), adding that *The Wars* does not only tackle the themes of war by also the social changes in definitions of male sexuality (Rhodes 1998: 50). He notes that all the scenes that include homosexual encounters or relationships are between soldiers (Rhodes 1998: 44), pointing to the connection between sexual acts and violence, bringing as an example a masturbation scene before Rowena's death, sado-masochistic beating and sexual assault. All these acts are described as violent, and Rhodes explains that “this association between violence, death and sex becomes the filter through which Robert reads any ensuing sexual activity” (Rhodes 1998: 40). By using the device ‘ostranenie’, explored in Tumanov's work, sexual acts are made strange and confusing for Robert. Tumanov argues that “ostranenie inherent in /.../ points of view is part of the general atmosphere of strangeness that characterizes *The Wars* (Tumanov 1991: 111). Robert Ross's confusion regarding sexual acts and sexual hierarchy is further explored in Rhodes's work, explaining how Robert's idea of heroic manhood changes before his eyes as he peeps through the hole in a brothel ‘Wet Goods’, seeing his hero engage in homosexual acts, which is described his hero being ‘ridden’, the one playing the horse instead of the rider (Findley 2001: 43). His perception of ‘heroic’ completely changes and appears to be now reversed “in a moebius loop of tops and bottoms” (Rhodes 1998: 42).

These new discoveries made by Robert Ross do not only concern sexuality and manhood but also violence. Cruel realities and hardships are depicted without the

glorification or use of 'heroes'. Through the novel Robert discovers and realises how different the reality is compared to the 'idealised' and glorified portrayals of war and its heroes he often read in books or heard from heroic praising songs. Ironically, when compared to multiple mentions of encounters with Germans and the number of men lost during the war outside of the area where Robert and his men are situated or moving, Ross himself rarely participates in battles, instead, he is mostly left out of the action, apart from indirect encounters such as hiding in dugouts during the bombing or trying to survive the gas attack. Therefore, there are no 'wins', instead the idea of 'winning' comes down to surviving the attack and not losing any more men. The ones outside of the narrative are the ones leading the fight. Bigot contributes to this idea by saying that Robert does not explicitly 'win' any battle nor does he directly fight anyone (Bigot 2015: para 7), only on rare occasions does he need to use his weapon at all. Ross himself did not experience the 'full' war. Despite this, he is still considered to be the 'real' victim of the war as many other younger men, stripped of their innocence as pointed out by many scholars. Hastings reflects on the use of 'fathers' and how they represent the abusive patriarchal authority, ready to slaughter generation of young men (Hastings 1998: 86), while Bigot point out that in the war "the British army is seen waging is waged against Robert" (Bigot 2015: para 13).

1.4. The importance of privacy and its disappearance

The war has not only 'stolen' the innocence of a generation of young men, but also stripped them and the society as a whole, of their privacy. Various critics have explored themes of privacy and its erasure in the novel, often pointing out how drastically different privacy is in pre- and war eras. Susan Billingham brings attention to a number of important scenes taking place in 'private' places, such as bathrooms. For example, Ross's mother talks to Robert as he is taking a bath (Billingham 2001: 210), a rather private and unusual place to have the dialogue in. Violent crimes, such as sexual assault, also take place in the

bathroom, which is considered to be the place where one could obtain privacy. Even the reason for Robert's enlistment in the army is a deeply private matter and decision he himself makes, without the influence or pressure from his family. As Allan Weiss further elaborates, it was "a very private and personal imperative drives him to participate in a public act of violence" (Weiss 1993: 93), therefore Robert ironically 'loses' his privacy once he enlists. Whereas Billingham concentrates on specific places that erase the concept of privacy, Weiss portrays the overlap and connection between the changes in Robert Ross and society, focusing on the distinct changes in understanding what is public and private. He starts by pointing out how World War I had changed past perceptions and foundations, both philosophical and moral, elaborating that "characters lose their former sense of what is supposed to be kept private and what may be shared with others" (Weiss 1993: 91). He also points out that Findley built his novel using contrasts between what is considered to be public and private (Weiss 1993: 91), where pre-war society had a clear and distinct understanding of private and public. Some of these important things include avoiding bringing attention to themselves, preferring isolation of emotions, instead relying on traditional forms at that time such as politeness and courtesy (Weiss 1993: 91). He further focuses on the structural and narrative features, especially regarding the exploration of Robert's life, arguing that "the very act of reading the novel is therefore an attempted violation of Ross's privacy" (Weiss 1993: 101) since we as readers intrude on his private life by exploring his family photographs and documents together with the researcher. It is also in a way a violation of his privacy due to the number of assumptions made by the interviewees regarding Robert's character which cannot be confirmed or disproved. Weiss sees Robert as someone wanting to preserve his privacy, one means of which is to distance himself from war activities (Weiss 1993: 92), especially if we take into consideration how Robert acts and appears in photographs, often standing on the sidelines and looking with a

‘dubious expression’, always unsure and seemingly not wanting to stand out (Findley 2001: 6). Weiss makes a point to note how war changed the previous beliefs of privacy and social image. Ross' family abandons its pre-war beliefs and importance of privacy for “the needs and enthusiasms of war” (Weiss 1993: 92) and despite making attempts to try preserve one's privacy, there is no success.

Robert's connection to his family is also a major theme in *The Wars*. The novel portrays Ross' mother's worry about her son's departure and well-being, Robert's letters to his family and his close relationship with his older sister Rowena, who was the reason why Robert decided to enlist in the army. Scholars, such as David Williams, focus on privacy in connection to family relations. While the war exposes them to the wider public, there is still a distance between the family members and the society, especially regarding Rowena, the eldest child who remains absent, “never in photographs that are apt to be seen by the public” (Williams 2007: 61) but has the strongest connection to Robert, arguably being the most important person in his life. However, Rowena does not fit the public narrative that the family wants to maintain, due to her being disabled. Family's privacy and values include having a clear image presented to the public by means of distancing themselves from the disabled child. It is only Robert who is connected to Rowena by having a photograph of her. William regards this as a rare private expression of his brotherly love for her (Williams 2007: 61) and further implies the value of privacy for Robert. Such deeper connections to photographs are frequent in the novel with the photography and its functions have an important role in *The Wars*, effectively keeping the memory of Robert Ross alive and providing the researcher with much needed information, even if limited. Memory in terms of photography is explored by Williams, who categorises memory to be “structured photographically” in the novel (Williams 2007: 54). He further elaborates on how memory is modified throughout the story with the use of photography, whether

photographs are “moved into ‘memory’” (Williams 2007: 60), act as a force of interruption or connect the reader to historical events (Williams 2007: 57). Different memories often interrupt the narrative, instead telling a story from Robert’s childhood or introducing new narrators. Williams refers to it as a ‘flash’, explaining that it is used to stop the flow of events and make it possible for “history to emerge from the break” (Williams 2007: 69), thus helping to construct the complex narrative.

1.5. The functions of photography in *The Wars*

Both Williams and Tumanov explore and analyse photography in *The Wars*, considering it to be a useful intertext. Williams compares the story structure to a photo album, noting how the story is fragmented, resembling an album with captured instances (Williams 2007: 59). He even goes as far as to refer to the novel as an “example of this tearing or breaking force in the medium of photography” (Williams 2007: 60), further establishing the significance of photography in *The Wars*. William cites Timothy Findley’s comment when defying the importance of photographs: “*The Wars* unfolds as a series of pictures” (Williams 2007: 54), noting that it was important to find the ‘right’ pictures. He argues that the novel uses concealed connections between photography and history, making it appear as a “text about historicism” and asking to be read as such (Williams 2007: 55). Both Vladimir Tumanov and David Williams consider photography to have multiple qualities and functions in the novel, Tumanov thinks of such functions as ‘unusual’ and argues that photographs often “come alive” (Tumanov 1991: 109) in the novel in order to help tell the story. It is through photography that Robert Ross first ‘appears’ in the story, resembling “another of the photographic ghosts we normally associate with the period in question” (Tumanov 1991: 109), not yet fully developed but present. While Tumanov explains how photography introduces Robert Ross for the first time, making him appear distant and rather uninterested, while Williams explains another concept that distances the

main character from the reader - delay. Williams describes such phenomenon as “photographic technique that would sever all continuity between his era and ours, freeing him to come riding down the light rays, in cinematic fashion, into our age” (Williams 2007: 54) and further explains that the novel uses dramatization of delay in order to recognize the “image's latency, its danger, and its discontinuity” (Williams 2007: 55). Photography can also have different effects on the reader and the story, as William points out that pre-digital photography first needs to be perceived in a negative light before being printed (Williams 2007: 56). In his work, Williams refers to Eva-Maria Kröller’s idea of photography acting as an antagonist in the novel, explaining that Kröller limits Robert’s perception by isolating confining rooms within *The Wars* (Williams 2007: 55). In this case, photography works directly against Robert, making him confused in various situations, questioning his prior knowledge. This allows the reader to learn more about Robert Ross. One good example would be Ross reacting to homosexual sex with confusion, not quite grasping the idea of two men engaging in sexual activities, especially with one of them being his heroic figure, who he looks up to. He remains anonymous in this situation, trying to figure out what is going on in the other room much like the researcher together with the reader try to piece together Robert’s own character.

1.6. Complex narrative and multiple narrators

In *The Wars*, the narrator and therefore the reader are tightly connected throughout, both making attempts to figure out who Robert Ross is or as Williams puts it: “to capture the essence of Robert Ross' life” (Williams 2007: 56). In order to do so, multiple people are interviewed, therefore appearing as narrators themselves. They all have distinct personalities and they are connected to Robert Ross in one way or another, while, as Bigot points out how the main narrator remains genderless and anonymous, only using ‘you’ when referring to themselves (Bigot 2015: para 22), which further helps the narrative of a

conducted research regarding Robert's character. Grace adds to this by elaborating on many difficulties throughout the research such as incomplete archives and inconsistent eyewitness testimonies. She brings out the fact that female narrators spoke from personal experience and memories, which often contradicted official history (Grace 2018: 51), arguably making the narration unreliable and more complex. Despite all the gathered information, Robert Ross, in many instances, feels distant from the reader, often acting as a lens throughout the novel, never actually revealing his deeper thoughts or reasons for often confusing behavior and actions. Tumanov explores the lens phenomenon, introducing the concept of de-automatization of perception. It relies on the idea of 'ostranenie', which comes from the Russian word *stranny* ("странный") or 'strange' and is used as a "device that attracts our attention to something by causing it to appear strange" (Tumanov 1991: 108). In this case, Robert plays the role of a naïve observer (Tumanow 1991: 110) and it is through his eyes that the story is built. While readers can distinguish and understand many situations (especially sexual scenes), it is the innocence and unfamiliarity of different concepts that is explored and actively used in the narration, making the impact of the novel so much stronger and allowing for a wider interpretation and assumptions. Such effect of naïve observer is also presented and explored in Rhodes' work, further elaborating on how the reader's perception of the rather ordinary situations is influenced by Robert's confused reaction and bewilderment. Reader often "becomes surprised by what may not surprise him through a process of empathetic reading" (Rhodes 1998: 41), in cases of sexual acts, reader perceives them as acts of violation or violence. As mentioned before, Robert's perception of his hero is completely changed when he does not understand why his 'hero' was being ridden by the supposed 'enemy' despite it being a natural sexual act. Through this situation and use of a naïve observer, we learn about Robert's experience with certain concepts or in this case, the lack of it. Paradoxically, we get closer to Robert by learning something new

about him, however, the lack of his perspective and thoughts distances the reader from him. Williams mentions this importance of distance and proximity regarding Robert. In many instances Robert is “distanced from us by his marginal position in a distant epoch” (Williams 2007: 61) in photographs, often appearing detached from objects and situations surrounding him. It is further supported by Williams’s claim that the narrator tries to ‘save’ Robert from many historical moments by isolating him (Williams 2007: 61), making him appear to be more passive during the war, most of the time hiding in dugouts or escaping indirect attacks such as gas attacks. And while there are instances where Robert feels close to the narrator, for example having a picture of his sister Rowena hidden away, only later to be examined by the narrator, Robert is generally described as a detached observer instead of being presented as a main character. Ann Chinnery argues that leaving many things hidden is engaging and the novel “disturbs and disquiets its readers” (Chinnery 2014: 594). The narrative is often displayed in different ways, changing the narrators and points of views to engage the reader in the research, leaving the main narrator/researcher to be as an unknown figure. This is further supported by Rhodes’s claim that Findley tried to “displace the narrative from that of an openly gay man to an almost genderless and unknowable researcher” (Rhodes 1998: 48), later making an assumption that the narrator hides their sexuality due to paranoia that had appeared “from the fear of being found out, the fear of realizing that this is not ‘normal history’ as we have learned it” (Rhodes 1998: 49).

2. EMPIRICAL STUDY

It is important to note that each explored topic is significant to Robert Ross's characterisation and the analysis of his character. However, in the aforementioned studies Robert as a character on his own is vaguely explored. Most of the time he appears as a connection between explored topics and how they are realised in the novel and rarely does Robert take a central position in the analysis. It would be beneficial to analyse and concentrate on Robert through different concepts used in *The Wars* that help build his character and find out what his functions are. In this part, a deeper analysis of Robert Ross will be conducted in order to find out what the possible functions of Robert Ross in the novel are and what or who he can represent. The empirical part will focus on Robert's character in various ways, exploring his thoughts, feelings and actions in the novel together with speculation from the narrators and possible social issues present in the book. The analysis will be divided into different sections, each presented as a theme through which Robert could be examined, while the general conclusion regarding Robert Ross' functions in *The Wars* will be made in the end.

2.1. Robert Ross as a reflection of biases

The Wars approaches narration and therefore storytelling in a unique way, mixing and switching first, second- and third person narrative while intertwining them with a diverse number of intertexts such as photographs, poetry and interviews. It is through different narrators and opinions of Robert Ross that our perception of him and the timeline is built. However, since his story is built using memories of multiple interviewees, the bias towards Robert Ross also changes, with some favouring Robert's actions. For example, Marian Turner, who was a nurse during the war and was the one who cared for Ross after his arrest, considers Robert Ross to be a hero (Findley 2001: 10). Lady Juliet d'Orsey,

whom Ross met earlier while staying at their home, which was transformed into a hospital during the war, is another narrator who has positive feelings towards Robert's character, going as far as to be proud of him (Findley 2001: 110). However, there is another group of those, who condemn his actions. It could be said for certain that due to disobeying the captain's orders, the "official" aka army related side is negative towards Ross' actions and held him under arrest. For example, even after Robert arrives in the hospital with severe burns, not being able to function properly, there is still a "young MP" who never leaves Ross's presence (Findley 2001: 214) and watches over him, despite Ross not being a threat. Surprisingly, even his own family seemed to have disowned him, as it appears that none of the family members apart from Ross's father had witnessed him getting buried (Findley 2001: 217).

It is important to note how unreliable many claims can appear to be, especially due to the research being conducted decades later with the interviewees admitting to not having clear recollections or not wanting to reveal all the information, such as Lady Juliet who refused to "read everything" (Findley 2001: 175) from her diary that she had as a child. For example, Marian Turner, who at the time of the interview was a woman in her 80s, notes that "you get them [soldiers] all mixed up, after a long time" (Findley 2001: 9). There is rarely proper direct information regarding Robert's personality and thoughts apart from documents regarding his military service and witnesses' accounts, often restating the same official facts while including their own opinions and theories regarding Robert's possible reasons for his actions. However, such opinions are few and far between, instead the reader is allowed to interpret Robert's actions on their own. The most the reader will get from different narrators and intertexts is general timeline, assumptions about Robert, official information regarding his family, military career and eventual conviction. Such a decision to build Robert Ross through different biased narrators with the inclusion of

official documents, allows the reader to critically perceive Robert and the information presented in the novel. Using the aforementioned concept of naive observer, Robert Ross is made to appear less as an individual but instead as a guide through the novel, through which various situations are portrayed without the bias from his part. While Robert does occasionally express his emotions, the majority of the important situations are left uncommented by him, therefore allowing the reader to make their own assumptions and suggest theories, especially regarding his actions. With the decision to leave out the main character's bias and instead allowing outside biases to be present in *The Wars*, Robert Ross acts as reflection of different reactions and biases towards his character and actions in the novel, with one side considering him to be noble while the other deeming him a criminal. Such unbiased character also allows the reader to critically engage and perceive the novel.

2.2. Robert Ross – one of many ‘victims’ of the war

The Wars tackles the consequences of war through official documents and recollections, often told in a straightforward way with mentions of the historical places (for example mentioning St Eloi) and figures, such as the appearance of Kaiser Wilhelm standing on the Unter der Linden (Findley 2001: 46). However, it is through Ross that the reader can experience a more personal and human side of war and the reflection of the consequences of the war on young men and the society.

Through Robert Ross we learn about social changes that war brought, such as changes in privacy (there is no ‘real’ privacy during the war, all men are usually constantly together, having to rely on one another), family homes (many were used as hospitals) but he also represents a generation of young men going to war, the ‘victims’ of patriarchal society. Through Robert we see other soldiers, their interactions and struggles during the war. His unspoken nature and lack of a wider personalisation allows the reader to watch

other soldiers and how the war has changed them. Many of them share the same fate as Robert, being broken by the war and not being able to return to the normal life. For example, his comrade Levitt “had gone quite mad” (Findley 2001: 148), Harris came down with a cold which led to pneumonia and his eventual death. Another friend of his, Rodwell, committed suicide by shooting himself, after witnessing other soldiers going mad and slaughtering innocent animals (Findley 2001: 150). Even his role model, Eugene Taffler, ends up trying to commit suicide due to him being devastated after losing his arms. Each one of them is a victim of the war in one way or another, either mentally or physically scarred.

There is one prominent scene in the novel that reflects on the confusion and innocence of the young men and allows the reader a rare opportunity to witness Robert’s true emotions and attitudes towards the war. At some point, Robert encounters a German soldier, hiding from a far. Making sure that his soldiers escape safely, Ross keeps an eye on the German, rather confused as to why the latter is not shooting Robert or his men despite the perfect opportunity. As Robert himself hesitates to shoot first, he allows for a brief moment of silence, a great reflection and the contemplation of what is occurring. In this moment Robert Ross opens up more as a character, showing his bias towards peacefulness and reflecting a more pacifistic side. The encounter has changed Ross, as he questions German’s decisions (“But why he’d relented? Why?” (Findley 2001: 146)), and noting that the sound of the bird that was singing at that moment “would haunt him to the day he died” (Findley 2001:146). At that moment, when both lock eyes, Ross functions a bridge between two sides, showing the side of war often hidden from the general historical information. During that brief pause, there were no right and wrong sides, instead both enemies were confused young men - an unfortunate result of the war and hierarchical society.

2.3. Robert Ross as a representation of repressed homosexuality and attitudes towards male relationships

As mentioned by Rhodes, sexuality and its exploration in *The Wars* is a frequent occurrence (Rhodes 1998: 39), which could be a reflection of the attitudes of that era and the issues that are connected to sexuality, such as violence and possible repression. With speculation from different interviewees and aforementioned inspiration behind main character's name, it is possible that Robert Ross could represent repressed homosexuality or queerness. He does not seem to be attracted to nor interested in his then "girlfriend" Heather Lawson and to what extent they were close is unspecified, however Robert seems to be completely detached from her. Later, he seems to not be interested in Barbara d'Orsey, acting rather detached and reserved.

A prominent figure in connection to speculation regarding Robert's homosexuality is Harris, who, as multiple interviewees speculated, was the man Robert was in love with. It is further supported by multiple occasions in which Robert's thoughts appeared in the novel. Such as an instance where after the two of them shared a blanket and Harris decided to lie down to sleep. Robert felt confused wanting "something more, not knowing what it was" (Findley 2001: 71) while he watched Harris. Unrelated things also remind him of Harris. After one of his men comment on the coldness, Robert is reminded of Harris and his slowly worsening health. He notes that it is "the last thing he needed reminding of" (Findley 2001: 102), feeling worried for the man. When Harris' health started to worsen significantly and he was sent to London, Robert took his embarkation leave to accompany him. As Ross started to visit him almost every day, he noted feeling confused by his feelings towards Harris, especially when the latter smiled at him, making him flustered and embarrassed. Robert himself makes a point to say that since Rowena, Harris has been the one other person that makes Robert "feel [that] he wanted to be with them all the time" (Findley 2001: 104). This shows how important Harris was to Robert, as the latter never

really opened up to anyone apart from Rowena nor was he as attentive to someone as he was to Harris, spending most of his time by his side until Harris' eventual death. Ross is the one who eventually scatters Harris' ashes (Harris has been cremated due to a mistake in the morgue), saying the final goodbye. The confusion regarding Robert's feelings is most likely due to the social situation during that era and the fact that homosexual feelings were not explored or acknowledged within the society, therefore Robert did not have any examples of positive homosexual relationships. At that time, any sexual preferences outside of 'norm' were not tolerated and would often be considered prohibited, therefore, many had to hide their homosexuality and instead appeal to the heteronormative standards at that time.

Eugene Taffler, who had a strong influence on Robert and even was his role model at the start of the novel, also reflects on the imposed norms at that time. Taffler later in the novel appeared to have a heterosexual relationships with Barbara d'Orsey, therefore further reinforcing the idea of homosexuality being a rather 'forbidden' and abnormal, especially due to him having to hide with his male lover in a brothel. Likely influenced by Taffler, Ross also engages in a heterosexual relationship, functioning as a possible reflection of repressed queer men who were usually 'erased' from the official history, often not recognised and their sexuality removed from documents and general knowledge altogether, having to fit the 'standard' at that time - heteronormativity. That is why the reader learns about Robert's possible queerness from the narrators' assumptions, since as with Ross's older disabled sister Rowena, these things were hidden away in order to 'maintain' social image. The way in which language is used to describe homosexual relationships also reflects the issues of erasure and intolerance in the society. Homosexual relationships and situations are almost exclusively portrayed and described as violent. Sex between Taffler and Swede scares Robert as he is not able to understand the concept of sadomasochism and

possible BDSM, instead referring to consensual infliction of pain as “hitting” and “beating” (Findley 2001: 42-43), which further shows how the connection between homosexual relationships and violence is starting to appear in Robert’s mind. The scene uses the aforementioned Tumanov’s concept of *ostranenie* (Tumanov 1991: 111), which makes the consensual sexual act appear confusing and violent to Robert. The sexual assault that Ross experiences happens between men with the implication that they were Robert’s fellow soldiers, therefore further destroying Ross’ trust and confidence and establishing sex as a violent act in his mind. The result of it could be seen in the scene where Robert and Lady Barbara d’Orsey are having a sexual intercourse and it is portrayed as violent and confusing with Lady Juliet describing Robert and Barbara as “two people *hurting* one another” (Findley 2001: 178). However, not only is the romantic aspect of the relationships between men looked down upon but also the platonic element and masculinity in general. When in the start of the novel Heather suggests that Robert should fight his ‘potential rival’, Ross is confused by her request and even says that it is “idiotic” (Findley 2001: 13). This idea of having a ‘duel’ for the young woman’s love could be a reflection of a ‘heroic’ and toxic masculinity imposed on younger men at that time, often romanticized and cheered on. Such concepts of rivalry and distance between men is further amplified when Robert comments on his wish that men could embrace, however, he quickly notes that “they couldn’t. Mustn’t” (Findley 2001: 195). This further shows how even platonic relationships between men were uncommon and generally questioned, making Robert and many others feel repressed and confused on what to do with their feelings.

Robert Ross could be analysed through a variety of different topics and intertexts that are interconnected with his character. He actively reflects on the greater issues that are present in *The Wars*. Such issues construct his perception of himself and his feelings together with the world around him. With the lack of bias from Ross’ side and anonymity

of the researcher, Robert's story is constructed and therefore reflects biases of opposing sides, with one supporting and the other judging him. Since as a character he remains rather neutral, Robert Ross acts as a representation of oppressed and troubled groups of people, such as repressed homosexual men and young men who became 'victims' of the war and social constructs at that time.

CONCLUSION

The Wars is a unique novel, combining the elements of a research with complex narrative, which often raises the question of the trustworthiness of the ‘official’ documents. The novel consists of a research-like narrative with the objective to find out who Robert Ross was and what the possible reasons for his actions are. This thesis focuses on Robert Ross as a character on his own, rather than the mystery behind his story. The aim was to analyse and find out how Robert Ross is constructed in the novel with the exploration of possible narrative concepts and intertexts used in *The Wars*. Another aim of the thesis was to find out what functions Robert Ross serves in the novel.

The analysis of the construction of Robert Ross was largely made through previous topics explored by scholars. The literature review introduced not only the explored topics themselves but also a variety of concepts that are used to construct Robert Ross. Concepts like “ostranenie” (Tumanov 1991: 108) and “naïve observer” (Rhodes 1998: 41) allow for the understanding of Robert Ross’ thoughts and perceptions of such topics like homosexuality. Through intertexts such as photography and poetry, a more general connections to Robert’s life and character were made. The exploration of violence and privacy allow for an overview of the social situation during Robert Ross’ story, with which we can analyse Robert’s reactions and concerns regarding social constructs and ‘norms’. Various intertexts, such as interviews, photographs contribute to the construction of the complex narrative through assumptions and recollections regarding Robert Ross. This allows for a wider interpretation and analysis of his character and the possible reasons behind Ross’ actions. Due to the lack of concrete information together with the emergence of subjectivity in the interviews, it was found out that Robert Ross appears less as a character but more as a representative of the groups of people struggling during that era and functioning as a reflection of the issues that were prevalent in the society in regard to

the various groups. Such groups include young men who were ‘victims’ of the war and toxic masculinity imposed on them. Repressed queer men, who often had to hide their homosexuality and instead fit into the ‘norm’ that was the heteronormative society were another group that Robert Ross reflects. On the narrative level, Robert Ross represents a clash of biases, which are tightly intertwined with the narrative, making it often unreliable. This allows for various interpretations and analysis of Robert Ross’ actions and his character as a whole.

This thesis can serve as an addition to the exploration of the Robert Ross as a character in previous scholarship. It can also serve as a basis for further exploration of the topics that Robert Ross represents in *The Wars*. Due to the variety of themes interconnected with Robert Ross, the topic of his character can be explored further in various ways. One would be focusing on him as a queer character and analysing Ross from the perspective of the queer representation. From a narrative standpoint, a deeper analysis of the construction of Robert Ross’ character from biased sources could be conducted in the future.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Arina Krainova

The Construction and Function of the Character of Robert Ross in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*

Robert Rossi tegelaskuju konstrueerimine ja funktsioon Timothy Findley *Sõdades*

Bakalaureusetöö

2021

Lehekülgede arv: 28

Annotatsioon:

Timothy Findley „Sõjad“ on romaan noormehest nimega Robert Ross. Romaan on kirjutatud uurimistöö stiilis, mille eesmärk on teada saada, kes Robert Ross oli ja mis olid tema tegude tagamaad. Narratiiv tekib läbi mitmete intertekstide, nagu intervjuud ja fotos. Narratiivne kompleksus tekib sellest, et romaanil on mitu jutustajat. Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on uurida Robert Rossi konstrueeringut: millised intertekstid ja meetodid on kasutusele võetud, et jutustada terviklik narratiiv Robert Rossist. Töö teine uurimiseesmärk on avastada Robert Rossi potentsiaalseid funktsioone tegelasena ja kirjeldada gruppe, keda ta võiks romaanis esindada.

Bakalaureusetöö on jaotatud nelja ossa: sissejuhatus, kirjanduse ülevaade, empiiriline analüüs ja kokkuvõte. Sissejuhatus annab ülevaate romaanist „Sõjad,“ tutvustab Robert Rossi ja tema võimalikke nimekaime ning seletab teema valikut. Kirjanduse ülevaade keskendub mitmetele teemadele, mida on eelnevalt uuritud seoses Robert Rossi karakteriga või narratiiviga, mis teda ümbritseb. Need teemad on: sõda ja sõjaga seotud intertekstid, luule, erinevad vägivalda avaldumise vormid, privaatsuse tähtsus, fotograafia ja selle funktsioonid. Empiiriline osa bakalaureusetööst on jaotatud kolmeks põhiliseks teemaks: Robert, kui eelarvamuste peegeldus, Robert, kes esindab allasurutud gruppe, nagu sõjaohvrid ja homoseksuaalsed mehed. Esimene teema keskendub Robert Rossile, kui narratiivi eelarvamuste peegeldusena, teine teema käsitleb Robert Rossi, kui sõjaohvrit ja noort meest, kes on sunnitud minema sõtta. Viimane teema käsitleb Rossi, kui repressseeritud homoseksuaali ja analüüsib teose suhtumist meestevahelistesse suhetesse. Kokkuvõtte sõnastab bakalaureusetöö tulemid.

Märksõnad: Kanada kirjandus, kirjandus, intertekstid, tegelaskuju konstrueerimine

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