The Struggles Of Life Essay, Research Paper

﻿The Struggles in Life

Everyone is faced with struggles in life, whether physical or emotional. These struggles

inevitably shape an individual?s personality and outlook on life. Timothy Findley?s novels, The

Wars and Stones, suggest that the consequences of struggles in life result in a journey of self-

discovery. War exists in the character?s physical and psychological accounts of the horror of

life. In the novel The Wars, Robert Ross actually goes to war and fights in World War I . In the

novel Stones, Minna Joyce encounters a war in her life as a child, trying to survive on the streets.

These physical encounters with war lead to a psychological change in the characters and their

perception of living. Robert and Minna?s experiences make them want to escape and help

others overcome the terrible war, in their own lives. Furthermore, experiencing these struggles

leads to the character?s ultimate realization and self-discovery of life and of themselves. The

horrors of war which Robert endures are instrumental in his psychological change. Minna?s

experiences in life, in death and her internal struggles, lead her on a journey of self-discovery.

In the novel The Wars, Robert Ross is a sensitive nineteen year old boy who experiences

first-hand the horrors of battle as a Canadian Soldier in the First World War. Being named a

Lieutenant shortly after arriving in Europe, Robert is thrust into combat. While advancing to the

front with his troops Robert witnesses his first images of the brutality of war:

He was taking his troops to the front and they

were walking along a road that had been shelled

and there was a soldier lying dead by the road

whose head had been smashed. It was an awful

shock. The first dead man he?d seen. (The Wars 99)

Robert has not yet experienced anything that could prepare him for the conditions he faces. In

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this instance, Robert experiences brutality for the first time, in the form of a dead body which

has been gruesomely wounded. The shock of seeing a dead body can be very disturbing to any

individual, and not even an experienced veteran could be prepared for the horrific sight Robert

endures here. Minna Joyce, a writer in the novel Stones, also experiences and reacts to the

horrors of life. Minna?s war is not like the World War in which Robert participates, but is a

struggle with everyday life in the large city of Toronto. Minna witnesses horrific sights on

Queen Street:

… with all its resident rubbies and gentle crazies,

dressed in all weathers in their summer coats ….

….. and their eyes as crafty and innocent all

at once as the eyes of bears…. (Stones 11)

Minna Joyce experiences the harsh reality of individuals who have nothing, and are forced to

live on the streets of downtown Toronto. Minna was brought up in an area of the city inhabited

by many homeless people, or?artists?as she calls them, a little less horrifying. The thought of

having to watch the people suffer is horrifying to her. The war of life is apparent in the

challenges that both Minna and Robert are faced with in their lives. One of the most notable

events which Robert faces is trench warfare during the First World War. After being sent away

with a small battalion to begin the digging of another trench, Robert comes back to the front to

find the trench destroyed and his comrades dead.

When they made their way back through the trench

there was nothing left alive. They had all been

gassed or had frozen to death. Those who lay in

water were profiled in ice. Everything was green:

their faces ? and their fingers ? and their buttons and

the snow. (The Wars 146)

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In this situation, Robert witnesses many of the horrific ways in which soldiers were killed during

the First World War. Snow and the bitterly cold weather attributed to many Canadian soldiers?

deaths during World War One, and nearly one thousand men died from frost bite alone. The

sight of his friends frozen dead in the water is terrifying, and to look down and see another

soldier in the ice with his entire body green is a gruesome image. One of the most popular and

deadly tactics used by the Germans during World War One was chlorine gas, which Robert was

lucky to survive. He is subjected to the poison when it was sent up into the atmosphere which

produced huge masses of chlorine gas clouds. These clouds made their way across ?no man?s

land?, to the trenches, killing all in sight including Robert?s comrades. Minna?s experiences in

life are not to the same degree comparable to Robert?s, but can be related to everyday life.

Robert struggles in World War One, experiencing brutality and death at its worst. Minna

struggles on the streets of Toronto. Both characters struggle for survival in life. Robert?s

experiences are quite extreme and the average person may not be able to relate to them. Even

though Minna?s experiences are common, they are nonetheless frightening. Minna?s

experiences with the homeless became more terrifying when she had to live on the streets. ?… a

life of inherited privilege mixed with deliberate squalor.? (Stones 11) She spent some nights

on the streets because she could not find work. She was subjected to the horror that people

believe it will never happen to them. ?Queen Street and, in fact, the whole of Parkdale offered a

world of unwanted people…? (Stones 51) Minna was a part of a war that is lasting longer than

World War One. Although the books are set in different time periods, both Minna and Robert

struggle to survive day to day. Their situations are different but the goals are the same; survival.

Robert?s physical accounts of trench warfare and Minna?s physical accounts with the homeless

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displays to the reader the fact that war exists in a physical state. The consequences of the war

with life allow the two characters to justify who they are, and help them to become mentally

stronger.

The psychological change in the character?s dispositions and their increasing awareness

of the importance of life is evident throughout the novels The Wars and Stones. Through

Robert?s experiences with the utter brutality of war, he experiences a psychological change in

character. After being saved a day earlier on the battlefield by one of his comrades, Robert

experiences difficulty trying to get to sleep. ?All he wanted was a dream. Escape. But nobody

dreams on a Battlefield. There isn?t any sleep that long. Dreams and distance are the same.?

(The Wars 102) At the young age of nineteen, dreams are common. The impact of the war has

begun to affect Robert, as he has difficulty even dreaming. Sleep and the night are very

important to soldiers. The ability to dream allows them to leave the horror of war on earth and

enter into a fantasy where they can forget. Robert?s inability to dream is based on the fact that

his mind is filled with the horrors of war which prevent him from entering this dreamworld.

Minna also experiences a psychological change in her perceptions of living. ?She, too, wanted

to escape.? (Stones 43) Minna and her husband both want to depart the reality of their life in

Parkdale. She wanted trees and grass in their backyard, which is not conceivable when living in

a small apartment. Minna, like Robert, wants to escape the reality of life as she knows it, and be

in a place where everything is splendid. Minna ?wanted even once a week to make her way

down the and into the street without the ever-present threat of someone else?s panic waiting to

grab her sleeve.? (Stones 44) Minna seems to enjoy working with the homeless, but she

would just like to get away once in a while to have more peace and security. Minna and Robert

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both want deliverance from the horror in their lives. In the novel Heart of Darkness Kurtz?s final

words are, ?The horror, the horror? (Conrad 118). These words are Kurtz?s final judgement of

what he succumbed to in both the Congo and in his psychological journey into his own heart of

darkness. The horrors that Robert and Minna face are reality and must not be forgotten. The

difference between Kurtz and Robert and Minna is that Kurtz succumbs to his inner demons and

goes mad, whereas Robert and Minna do not.

Robert has experienced every aspect of the brutality of war. His psychological change is

evident through his outlook on life:

Robert struck a match and caught the rat by

his tail. It squealed as he lifted it over the

edge and set it free. Robert wondered afterwards

if setting the rat free had been a favour ? but in

the moment that he did it he was thinking: here

is someone still alive. And the word alive was

amazing. (The Wars 127)

Robert has witnessed deaths by the thousands, and the difference between a human and animal

life has escaped his mind. In this instance, Robert?s act of setting the rat free is one that could

be questioned because of the deaths that he has seen. However, because of the impact of war on

his mind, Robert recognizes the beauty of life in the midst of madness. Robert feels that he

contributed to the saving of a life, which allows him to feel better for that one instant until he

goes back out to fight again. Minna?s psychological change is evident when she makes the

homeless person feel wanted. ?Just to be seen and heard and acknowledged. That?s what they

wanted. Witness. Not to be forgotten.? (Stones 51) Minna likes to see the homeless happy,

and feel better about themselves. Minna, like Robert, does not like the reality of the

surroundings. Minna tries her best to change that by bringing the poor woman, Elizabeth Doyle,

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home to let her sleep in a bed. Minna realizes that all that the people on the streets want is to be

noticed and not to be forgotten. The trauma of the horrors of life on Robert and Minna leads the

reader to believe that ?war? does have psychological effects on the individual. The character?s

physical and psychological accounts of war lead the characters on their own personal journey of

self-discovery. The horrors of war which Robert endures are instrumental in his psychological

change. In Robert?s final stand to declare the existence of life in the midst of death, he attempts

to save some horses from a burning barn:

Robert couldn?t stand it any longer and he said to

Devlin: ?I?m going to break ranks and save these

animals. Will you come with me?? Devlin wanted

to ? and said so. But he was afraid of Captain

Leather. ?Leather is insane,? said Robert flatly. ?It

cannot be called disobedience to save these animals

when they?ll be needed, for God?s sake.

(The Wars 201-202)

The importance of life to Robert is evident here as he breaks ranks in order to save the horses.

Disobeying an order in the army can lead to a Court Marshall, dishonorable discharge and even

worse the possibility of being accused of treason. However, these consequences pale in

comparison to the thought of more deaths. Throughout Robert?s time as a soldier in the army

during World War One he witnesses first hand the destruction of war. These horrors of war lead

to his psychological transformation which inevitably leads to his journey of self-discovery,

recognizing the importance of life in the midst of death. Minna comes to a conclusion along the

same lines as Robert. As Minna is dying of an inoperable cancer of the lung, she moves to

Australia. Her physical accounts of the horror in her life lead to the psychological change which

made her change location. She has a daughter now and does not want her to grow up with the

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same horror that surrounded Minna as a child. ?They say it is quite civilized .? (Stones 19) Her

move to Australia lead to her journey of self-discovery. She realizes how important life

becomes in the midst of death.

I know why she wanted her ashes scattered there at

Ku-Ring-Gai. It was the joy and the liveliness ? the

sense of endless celebration that clung to all figures

in the rock. (Stones 25)

Minna realizes and wants others to realize that everyone, no matter of what the individual looks

like, should be able to enjoy happiness in life. Robert wantes the horses to have the freedom as

he does in life. Minna wants her daughter to have the freedom that she has in life. Minna wants

her daughter to also experience the joy of love and the sense of endless celebration. The figure

cut in the stones at Ku-Ring-Gai was a child.

The child of the two stick figures rejoicing by its

side beneath the moon. And the child had long,

albino hair and one six-fingered hand stretched out

for all the world to see forever…. (Stones 26)

Minna concludes her life with the discovery with herself. The importance of life to Minna is

apparent here, as she wants her daughter, who has six fingers on each hand, to be exposed to

society. Hiding her from people would show how she does not respect what she created. Instead

she wants to display her miracle which was created inside her, for everyone to behold.

Throughout Minna?s time in Toronto on Queens Street, she had witnessed first-hand the

destruction of life. These horror lead to her psychological change which inevitably leads to her

journey of self-discovery. Minna, like Robert, comes to the conclusion of the importance of

life, and how it should be set free to live with others.

In many ways, the war of life affects individuals, leading to physical and mental change.

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Through facing hardships in life, one can assess his/her experience and discover more about

themselves and the world around them. War does exist in Robert?s and Minna?s physical

accounts of the horror of life. Robert?s experience is in World War One. Minna?s experience is

life on the streets of Toronto with the homeless. The psychological change in Robert and

Minna can be attributed to their physical encounters of the war in life. Robert and Minna both

change their view on life because of their struggles. Furthermore, these two worlds lead Robert

and Minna to acknowledge the importance of life. Thus, in the novels The Wars and Stones,

Findley has demonstrated that the war does have an effect on the individual, leading to a journey

of self-discovery.

Bibliography

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