



Explore the Function and Significance of War in *Tristram Shandy* and *A Month in the Country*

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Abstract: In this essay, the author will primarily focus on the function and significance of war in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and J. L. Carr's *A Month in the Country*. Although their literary contexts are different, in both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Month in the Country*, the concept of war plays a significant role in the development of exploring the characters' journeys of identities.

Keywords: War, *Tristram Shandy*, *A Month in the Country*

1. Introduction

According to the idea of Catherine Savage Brosman argues that 'with its powerful images and its association with both individual conduct and collective values, war may be considered one of the broadest of myths, and tragically, a necessary one.' [1] Here, although Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* does not entirely present the war as the main theme, the description of Uncle Toby's military illusion represents how war makes sense in the novel. In contrast, J. L. Carr's *A Month in the Country* directly illustrates how significant the war makes sense in both characters' mental and physical sides.

In addition, Catherine Savage Brosman also reveals, 'For most modern readers, the function of war writing I have saved for the last may be most familiar: literature as a way of resolving, or attempting to resolve, war experiences whose recurring trauma must be relived, reexamined, and, though an apparent catharsis, accepted.' [2] Therefore, the trauma that was caused by the war cannot be ignored. Besides, based on her interpretations, it is significant to explore the reason why war can be applied to fiction. In doing so, I first examine different kinds of representations of war and trauma in these two literary works. I then examine the function and significance of war in light of the characters' trauma that shapes their identities. In addition, I will make comparisons and contrasts between *Tristram Shandy* and *A Month in the Country*. In the end, I will give a conclusion.

2. Introduction of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Month in the Country*

On the one hand, Laurence Sterne primarily uses the character Uncle Toby to convey the depiction and impact of war. Not only because Uncle Toby is a retired soldier, but also because he is still lost in the military illusion after his retirement due to the injury. The fiction has 18 direct references to war, and each of them has a different emphasis. For example, he writes in chapter 21 of volume 1, 'As war begets poverty; poverty peace, must, in course, put an end to all kind of knowledge, and then, we shall have all to begin over again; or, in other words, be exactly where we started.' [3] Because Sterne's descriptions of the war do not follow the traditional chronological order, sometimes they are difficult to understand. As the chapters proceed, it becomes clear that Sterne follows three stages to introduce the issue of war, which highlights its function and significance. From my point of view, the front volumes particularly from volume one to volume three emphasises the military background of Uncle Toby. Still, in chapter 21 of volume 1, Sterne interprets what kind of type Uncle Toby belongs to, 'My uncle Toby Shandy, Madam, was a gentleman, who, with the virtues which usually constitute the character of a man of honour and rectitude, possessed one in a very eminent degree, which is seldom or never put into the catalogue;'[4] Indeed, uncle Toby is a kind gentleman with great temper from *Tristram Shandy*'s description. However, this does not come from nature, just as he writes, 'though I correct the word nature, for this reason, that I may not prejudge a point which must shortly come to a hearing, and that is, whether this modesty of his was natural or acquired.' [5] This point of view encourages readers to explore what actually happened to Uncle Toby that caused him to become a gentleman. Then, Sterne gives readers the answer in the following lines, 'A blow! Yes, Madam, it was owing to a blow from a stone, broke off by a ball from the parapet of a horn-work at the siege of Namur, is long and interesting; but it would be running my history all upon heaps to give it you here.' [6] Here actually shows the physical trauma that caused a deep impact on Uncle Toby, it also marked the beginning of his obsession with war and military strategy. So, the war shapes Uncle Toby's character and makes him become an innocent

gentleman. Whilst his obsession with military model buildings adds a kind of humor and satire to the fiction. Furthermore, the war in Uncle Toby's life is not only a historical event, but also symbolises his pursuit of a certain order and meaning in life. He uses war to understand the world, which represents the mental trauma caused by it. In chapter 19 of volume 2, the physical and psychological trauma has a profound influence, which makes his interactions with other characters full of absurdity. For example, as Tristram Shandy recalls, 'my father had certainly fallen with that great philosopher plumb into the centre of the mistake, had it not been for my uncle Toby, who rescued him out of it.' [7] Uncle Toby told Walter Shandy an unbelievable story that showed his craziness and imagination towards the power of war, 'by a story he told him of a Walloon officer at the battle of Landen, who had one part of his brain shot away by a musket-ball, and another part is taken out after by a French surgeon; and after all, recovered, and did his duty very well without it.' [8] Thus, how to deal with the war trauma during the peace period is a crucial topic for people to think about, and this represents another aspect of the function and significance of war in Tristram Shandy.

On the other hand, war also plays an important role in J. L. Carr's *A Month in the Country*. The social context set after the First World War, as Dwight H. Purdy illustrated, '*A Month in the Country* treats Tom Birkin's recovery from Passchendaele and from an unfaithful wife. He recuperates in the hamlet of Oxgodby, in the North Riding, where he has been hired to restore a thirteenth-century mural in the local church.' [9] Critically, this novel mainly focuses on the art, country life and interpersonal relationships, while the profound impact of war on characters serves a crucial function in the novel as well.

3. Analysis of Function and Significance of War

The significance and function of war in the novel mainly reflect on three aspects. To begin with, it is the physical and psychological trauma caused by the war that can reflect the characters' development. Tom Birkin as the protagonist was deeply scarred by the First World War both in body and mind. Birkin's facial twitch is a symbol of his trauma. For example, there is an interior monologue of Tom Birkin when he meets Revd. J. G. Keach, 'long after he must have become used to my face-twitch, he still talked to someone behind my left shoulder.' [10] His facial twitch is directly mentioned four times in the novel, which gets people's attention to the war trauma. In contrast, Birkin's interior pain is more concealed. His journey in the novel is not only about the process of restoring a thirteenth-century mural in the local church but also about his gradual recovery from the mental trauma caused by the war. Another character Charles Moon who appears to be a professional archaeologist also scarred by the war. He excavates graves in the village as same as Birkin's work on the mural, which suggests a process of recovering interior emotions. As Tom Birkin illustrates at the end of the novel, 'Moon explained that he was digging his own grave as he confidently expected to leave life on the following sabbath and Mossop, remarking that us southerners were fair cautions, went on his way.' [11] Charles Moon uses his indifferent attitude to express a kind of satire and humor, not only because he is internally numbed after experiencing the harsh war, but also because it is an efficient way to deal with traumatic memories.

In addition, the second function lies in the symbolism and themes of war. The journey of Tom Birkin to restore the medieval mural symbolises the discovery of war trauma. The previous mural had been covered by layers of whitewash, which seemed to reflect mental traumas buried within the characters that are gradually coming to light. Besides, the restoration of the mural symbolises the possibility of healing. Because of the peaceful country life in Oxgodby provides comfortable surroundings to heal his bad memories. Some bitter memories like 'once when I dreamed that the tower was crumping and, once, sliding forward into machine-gun fire and no pit to creep into, slithering on through mud to mutilating death. And then my screams too joined with the night creatures. Well, there was a third sleepless night but that came much later and for a different reason.' [12] It is the war that plays a central role in struggling with nightmare and reality. The peaceful rural life clearly contrasts with the brutality of war, which highlights the contradictions between the ideal pre-war life and brutal post-war realities. Through exploring how the peace in the country provides a refuge that cannot get rid of the profound impact that the war brings. According to Rosemarie McGerr, 'the opening sequence encourages us to read these details as further signs that he still feels the pain of his past experiences very deeply. The past cannot easily be distinguished from the present.' [13] Finally, J. L. Carr develops societal criticism through war, and criticises the innocent life losses brought by the war. The absence of many young men in the village who evidently lost their lives in the war. Birkin's life has been disrupted by the war, and the village is also burdened by this sense of loss. The mural can be regarded as a relic of a distant past that symbolises a lost golden age as well as contrasts with the broken present.

4. Similarities and differences between Tristram Shandy and *A Month in the Country*

After analysing the function and significance of war in Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy and J. L. Carr's *A Month in the Country* separately, the similarities and differences between them should be discussed. There are some common points

between them. First of all, war usually serves as a significant role in affecting characters' lives and storytelling. Although concrete descriptions of war do not widely exist in *Tristram Shandy*, the existence of war occasionally impacts characters' lives and ideas, particularly apply to Uncle Toby. War is a kind of efficient way to explore human complexities under circumstances of satire and humor. Similarly, war does not belong to one of the main themes in *A Month in the Country*, however, war trauma profoundly exists in Tom Birkin's mind and influences his emotions as well as behaviors. The trauma memory forms a clear contrast with the peaceful rural life, which becomes one of the themes for curing in the novel. Second of all, Laurence Sterne uses satire and humor to criticise the ridiculous war in *Tristram Shandy*, through Uncle Toby's obsession towards war to announce the meaninglessness of war. Besides, in *A Month in the Country*, Birkin's physical and psychological trauma reflect the cruelty of war, and emphasise the profound pain caused by the war. As for their differences, the first one is the narrative role of war, war is not the main theme in *Tristram Shandy*, the function of war is better portrayed through Uncle Toby. The purpose of war is to strive to serve a satirical and humorous circumstance, and it is also an important tool to explore human nature. In *A Month in the Country*, the function of war is much more significant in the societal context. Tom Birkin's war experience directly impacted his behaviors and emotions in the countryside, the war became one of the main themes in the novel. Secondly, their writing styles are different. *Tristram Shandy* is famous for its special narrative style and sense of humor. War is not discussed as a serious topic but uses ways of exaggeration, satire, and humor. In contrast, *A Month in the Country* prefers a kind of lyrical and calm tone, and the description of war is full of a deep tragic feeling. Carr uses a sort of peaceful portrayal towards rural life to reflect the profound impact of war on individuals and society. Here, war is regarded as a traumatic power, and Carr uses a sort of sentimental way to explore the sequelae of war and the possibility of healing. Finally, the relationship between war and character is different. In *Tristram Shandy*, Uncle Toby's obsession towards war is rational and ironic, whilst in *A Month in the Country*, Tom Birkin's attitude towards war is more sentimental and personal.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, no matter how different writing places and identities they have, the war still plays a crucial role in both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Month in the Country*. War is presented through a satirical and humorous perspective, especially in Uncle Toby whose obsession with military affairs reveals the absurdity and meaninglessness of war. Sterne's description towards war mainly focuses on personal behaviors and impacts of social values rather than its direct impacts. War as a societal context in the novel allows Sterne to explore the broader themes of human nature and the pursuit of meaning in a chaotic world. On the other hand, *A Month in the Country* presents war as a deeply traumatic personal experience that shapes the characters' identities and lives in the novel. The mental and physical trauma that Tom Birkin got from the First World War represents the enduring impact of war, whilst making stark contrasts between rural life and terrible war. Carr uses this contrast to examine the issues of healing, memory, and the passage of time, which implies that war trauma can never be entirely recovered. Lastly, from my perspective, the core of the war is tragic. According to Gaoshan Zuo's illustration, 'War can be defined as organized political violence among two or more nations.' [14] Thus, no winner survives in a war, and peace is what people should pursue in contemporary society. Although the writing places and identities of Sterne and Carr are different, their portrayal of the war reflects a profound meaning in the literature. As Catharine Savage Brosman writes, 'At its best, war writing, like other literature of enduring quality, is at once an expression of the individual writer (and thus has a psychological element), a means of communication with individual readers, and an expression of collective values (and thus has moral and social elements).' [15] Both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Month in the Country* have this characteristic of war literature, which allows their literary works to transcend the restrictions of individuals and times. Furthermore, both of them employ different writing techniques to reveal the enduring influence of war on human behaviors and societal values after analysing their literary works. Hence, war as a literary topic plays a significant role in the modern society.

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