Sarah Waters's Monument to Women of World War II

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Abstract

British women's visions of equality and acknowledgement of their contribution to the World War II effort were soon revised for them after the war was over. They were sent back to their traditional role to keep the hearth and home. It was not until the year 2005 that a monument was erected in Whitehall in London – the Memorial to the Women of World War II – eerily evocative by its array of nameless, empty uniforms of the lack of recognition accorded to those who wore them. A year later, in 2006, Sarah Waters in her novel The Night Watch *filled some of these reluctantly abandoned uniforms with bodies as well as faces and gave them names, albeit fictional. The paper reads Waters' story as a pointed individual account of the visions and revisions of the countless, for the most part faceless and nameless war women commemorated by the Whitehall memorial, sixty years on.*

To mark the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, a new memorial was unveiled by Queen Elizabeth II on 9 July 2005. Among the numerous statues of war heroes in Whitehall, the Memorial to the Women of World War II is to commemorate the role of women during the war. It represents the uniforms and working clothes worn by women and in contrast to the surrounding male statues (five marshals of WW I and II) and other monuments, there are no names on it or even faces. This array of nameless, empty uniform shapes is eerily evocative of the lack of recognition accorded to those who wore them although the memorial is designed to remedy that debt. A year after the monument was erected, in 2006, Sarah Waters in her novel *The Night Watch* virtually filled some of these abandoned uniforms with bodies and faces and gave them names, albeit fictional. Underpinned by meticulous research and in full agreement with sociological, historical and feminist studies of the period, Waters recreates the lives and work of several young women during the war and its aftermath showing how their skills and energy tapped in the war effort were wasted when the war was over. When men returned, the women were sent back to their traditional role to keep the hearth and home while those not willing to conform were sidelined or viewed with contempt. The paper will read Waters's story as a pointed individual account of the

visions and revisions of the countless war women commemorated by the Whitehall memorial and as Waters's kind of monument celebrating them.

At the unveiling ceremony of the Memorial, Baroness Betty Boothroyd, former Speaker of the House of Commons, pointed out that "it is not by its nature purely a military memorial. It depicts the uniforms of women in the forces alongside the working clothes of those who worked in the factories, the hospitals, the emergency services and the farms" (*Memorial*). Her list of areas where women joined in embraces practically all there was to provide the army and the nation with the necessities and life-saving services. Sociological and historical studies supply ample details (e.g. see Cassin-Scott, Costello, Harris, Purvis, Trueman, Vyšný). The novelist Maureen Duffy, in her non-fiction work *England: the Making of the Myth* (2001) suggests that the many women working as drivers of all kinds of vehicles during both World Wars contributed to the emergence of a new (third) "stereotype of the Englishwoman, the antithesis of either the flapper or the rose: masculine, tweedy, crop-haired […] a favourite of cartoonists until the fifties" (Duffy, 205). After the war, the situation and views on women's employment changed very quickly. Jane Lewis, summing up various sociological studies, claims that in the 40s it was generally accepted, even by postwar feminists that "women's most vital task was that of motherhood" (Lewis, 24). To promote a stable family and increase the birth-rate, women's paid employment was not encouraged, mainly because it was seen to be in conflict with the demands of motherhood (17). Sarah Waters moulds all of these pieces of information, of facts and attitudes, stereotypes and individual fates and feelings into the text of her fiction. Although largely realistic and firmly rooted in a recognisable 1940s landscape, the novel surveys its historical terrain from today's perspective. This approach to the past proved to be successful in Waters's previous, Victorian novels *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002).

It is, of course, not uncommon that contemporary novels, as Mara Reisman puts it, "not only challenge literary and social authority, but also lay bare cultural expectations about gender, women's writing and language" (Reisman, 213). She believes that this attitude generates, as well as it is generated by, women writers' interest in rewriting and revision of old stories, which in turn cannot fail to have some impact on the potential for social and cultural change (ibid.). There is a visual image of such processes if we juxtapose The Memorial to the Women of World II and the temporary occupant of the Plinth in Trafalgar Square: the statue of a pregnant woman, completely hairless, armless, with dwarfed legs. Both sculptures allow conflicting interpretations with references to the past and

present. Or we can go further back in history and still see parallels between Waters's women in World War II and after and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English women writers' fight for recognition and equality both for women and themselves as women writers, as Peter Ackroyd argues in *Albion* (2002) (Ackroyd, 359). It is chilling to see how comparatively little change there seems to have occurred between the concerns of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century canonical writers and those of the mid twentieth century in terms of general attitudes.

With reference to World War I, Angela K. Smith already finds prose "testifying to women's inclusion in a war which had traditionally been identified as a primarily male experience" (Smith, 35), even though for the most part in the role of nurses. The seven million women involved in the British war effort three decades later proved Smith's point in a much wider sense. Unlike Ian McEwan in *Atonement* (2001) with two nurse protagonists, Waters does not foreground this, by then traditional women's domain in war, but rather ventures into a less explored territory. During the war, her heroines acquit themselves brilliantly as ambulance drivers in bombed London or as administrative staff in government offices. In 1947 though, we find them feeling redundant, in unsatisfactory jobs or at a loose end.

In *The Night Watch* Waters works with a temporal scheme moving backwards. The novel starts in September 1947 – "the third September after the war" (4) – with the traces of the devastation still visible ("the zig-zag of phantom staircases and the dints of absent hearths", 7). Not only did houses lie in ruins. Relationships were ruined by the years of separation, different experience and changed expectations: "Servicemen, returning from overseas, found wives and girlfriends transformed out of all recognition […] Women complained about their exhusbands. 'He wanted me to stay in all the time'" (15). Not everything had been shattered though and some old patterns were surviving or, often regrettably, falling back into place. Helen and Julia are suddenly too shy to drink beer in public and therefore drink it out of china cups with the bottles tactfully hidden out of sight in their picnic canvass bag. The ex-ambulance drivers Kay and Mickey do not want to conform to pre-war expectations. But while Mickey takes a job at a petrol pump, because that is the only position where she can wear trousers, Kay becomes a forlorn, tragic figure unable to cope with the loss of her arduous war-time job and her lover. Waters's portrayal of 1947 fully corresponds to Richard Bradford's words: "the citizens of the capital were trying to balance their sense of relief against the dreary aftermath of the conflict" (Bradford, 98). Both Viv and Helen admit being disappointed by their new, peace-time work in a marriage agency while they talk almost nostalgically about their more demanding and more helpful war jobs.

Women are no longer needed or wanted in such jobs as Arthur Marwick confirms, quoting from a case study: "Miss T. […] smokes heavily and drinks a good deal for a girl – mostly gin and lime. She was in the Land Army during the war and liked the life, except that is was too lonely. She is not happy as a shop girl […]" (Marwick, 67). Further Marwick goes on to sum up the postwar era as still being "an age when many old traditions governed the roles and rewards of men and women" (67).

After the war, women in what are once again deemed to be male jobs and men's clothes are slighted and ridiculed. Mickey at the petrol pump is given a meagre tip and told "to buy a lipstick with it" (102). Owing to her appearance, Kay Langrish has to suffer slights repeatedly:

> "Don't you know the war's over?" the man behind the counter in a baker's shop asked Kay.
> He said it because of her trousers and hair, trying to be funny; but she had heard this sort of thing a thousand times, and it was hard to smile. (100)

Kay cultivates her mannish looks both due to her war-time experience and her lesbian identity, the two aspects of her being equally problematic in 1947. Although Waters foregrounds the lesbianism of her protagonists and their need to hide it, she joins it seamlessly with her agenda of celebrating the women's work and courage during the war by retelling their stories the way they could not be told at the time, with new insights and openness.

Waters then soon moves the setting from 1947 back to the London of 1944, the period of renewed intensive bombing, and actually describes in detail the eponymous night watch at an ambulance station: from the hours of waiting for being called into action to a busy night of rushing to bomb-blasted houses or hit shelters, to shocked, injured, maimed or dead people or scattered body parts. All of it is captured with the immediacy of the moment including the smells, colours and feelings as they hit the senses, every fibre of the body and mind. Most of the team on duty are women working as ambulance drivers and first aid squad. Waters's heroines Kay, Mickey and Binkie wear their uniforms and meet as friends also off duty. They have become good friends over the years since the Blitz of 1941.

The year 1941 is when Waters ends the novel although it is the year when the war and postwar life stories of her heroines start. The reversed chronology unsettles any sense of progress of change. Whatever visions there may have been for women have always remained slow to materialise, not least due to the deep-rooted distrust and lack of self-confidence. That the crippling attitudes towards women are even embedded in women

themselves arises from the passage describing Viv's abortion followed by near-fatal bleeding. When Kay and Mickey arrive with the ambulance, Viv thinks they are men and feels comforted. Then she realises that they are women and inexplicably, "all the confidence she'd had in them […] disappeared" (410). Even though more or less let down by her married lover and almost killed by the abortionist, Viv in distress feels that women in a male profession cannot be trusted. It is not until 1947 that Viv experiences an empowering and freeing epiphany after she returns to Kay the ring which she had slipped on Viv's finger in 1941 to help her pretend that her bungled abortion was a miscarriage happening to a married lady.

All of the encounters, friendships, love affairs and ruinous air raids of *The Night Watch* unfold in London. But London cannot be viewed as a mere backdrop to the events. It has multiple significance whose intertextual potential Waters taps and which offers itself for further resonances: with history – all the war monuments in Whitehall – with literature – the many recent novels in which London has the force of a protagonist (Penelope Lively's *The City of the Mind*, 1991; Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 1992; Martin Amis's *London Fields*, 1989 and many others; also see Phillips and Rudaityte) – and as a prominent and indispensable part of what Peter Ackroyd calls the English imagination. For the most part Waters paints a grim picture of war-time London portrayed in its extreme condition of ruin:

> So they left the cathedral behind and started on the line of stone and broken tarmac that had once been Cannon Street, but was now more like the idea or the ghost of a road […]. They might have been walking through murky water, so absolutely strange and dense was the quality of the night here, and so freighted with violence and loss. (361)

Waters's London is how her women protagonists see and perceive it and accept it as part of their own, war-affected lives.

From the vantage point of sixty years after, Sarah Waters recreates scenes from London in 1941, 1944 and 1947 as experienced by several women of different backgrounds and in different jobs. First directly involved in the war effort, later missing their work and responsibility when the war was over, Waters's heroines stand for the countless women whose achievement during the war was not sufficiently recognised by postwar society which failed their visions of empowerment and independence. Waters's revisiting of three years of the period results in a celebratory

revision of the women's role and can be read as a textual contribution if not a full parallel to the Memorial to Women of World War II.

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