



Winter 2019

Steven Acroyd Goes to War: Expressions of the War Experience in "The Victim"

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Recommended Citation

Squires, Sydney, "Steven Acroyd Goes to War: Expressions of the War Experience in "The Victim"" (2019).
Modernist Short Story Project. 27.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp/27>

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English 376

22 April 2019

Steven Acroyd Goes to War:

Expressions of the War Experience in “The Victim”

While “the image of the ‘shell-shocked soldier’ remains one of the most enduring of the First World War” (Keown, “Statements”), it is nearly impossible to find information about women’s trauma from World War I. While women were noncombatants, they were still heavily involved in warfare: they built the machines, drove the ambulances, and tried to keep their city from being bombed. However, after the war, their psychological trauma was not taken seriously. However, these war experiences still carried significant psychological weight for those who bore them. May Sinclair is one example of this: she was on the Belgian warfront for seventeen days, but it “would shape her fiction for the next ten years” (Jones).

One of those stories shaped by the war experience is “The Victim,” a ghost story bookmarked by violence. It opens with Steven Acroyd, the main character, nearly beating a young man to death for “meddling with his sweetheart,” Dorsy (Sinclair 66), and ends with the ghost of his employer, Mr. Greathead, forgiving Steven for murdering him. However, “The Victim” is more than a story about a young man who kills his employer. Instead, Steven’s experience represents the experiences that noncombatant participants—usually women—had during the First World War. In particular, sections of “The Victim” line up with May Sinclair’s *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* in both content and sentiment. The noncombatant’s struggle

with guilt and trauma mirrors Steven's emotions after the murder. This guilt is further reflected in the ever-present question of whether or not he deserves forgiveness. However, "The Victim" is ultimately a hopeful short story as Sinclair holds up Dorsy, here representing Great Britain, as a source of understanding, forgiveness, and trust for Steven and other war participants.

Steven and Sinclair

Sinclair's "The Victim" and *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* sit on opposite sides of the war. "The Victim" was published in 1922, when society was still reeling from and processing the devastation that had happened in the war. *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* was published in 1915, "when her horror and guilt [were] still raw" (Jones). It was one of the first records of the war published by a woman, tells of her work as an ambulance chauffeur in Belgium immediately after the war started. She worked on the front for seventeen days before she was sent home. This brief experience seems almost shallow in comparison with the lengthy war—even her *Journal* is often criticized for being "based on the way Sinclair wishes the War to be, rather than based on 'truth'" (Smith, "Introduction" 5). However, the contents of the *Journal* make it clear that there is more than wish-making going on, that "the war had irreparably altered both her own consciousness and the world in which she lived" (Prieto 174). There are two key factors that may have affected how Sinclair wrote her *Journal*. First, she was a woman, and she likely knew that her experiences would not be treated with the same gravity as a man's. Second, she had signed CFG Masterman's "Author's Manifesto," "in which they [she and other writers] pledged to support the war through their writing" (Smith 5), which would have made it difficult to directly criticize the war. Still, even with these stipulations, "*Journal* is a profoundly traumatised book; regardless of how peripheral Sinclair's role in the corps seems to have been, the intense pain of

witnessing such suffering coupled with an awareness of her own superfluity resonates through the narrative” (Jones).

Sinclair’s trauma rings clearly through “The Victim.” There are a few clear parallels between her two works. First, Sinclair refers to herself as a “chauffeur” (*Journal* 10), though her responsibilities are almost anything but driving ambulances; she ends up more as a nurse’s assistant than an ambulance driver. Similarly, Steven is Mr. Greathead’s chauffeur, but he also serves as a footman, valet, and groundskeeper. Second, as mentioned, Sinclair serves seventeen days at the front. Steven, upon murdering Mr. Greathead, cuts his body up in seventeen pieces in order to conceal the crime. Third, May Sinclair was a patriot and openly jealous of anyone who was able to fully participate in the war, from other drivers who were allowed to go out into the field to the soldiers themselves. Steven, likewise, is jealous to the point of violence of anyone who gets between him and Dorsy. Finally, they both deal with alienation; May Sinclair is not taken seriously on the front, and Steven is certain that “everybody hated him” (“The Victim” 65).

This estrangement was a common experience for women in the war, both on the front and on their return home. In Belgium, Sinclair was constantly sidelined, pushed aside, and discounted. Still, she had striking, difficult war experiences, from sleeping with a Taube hovering over them, armed with bombs that it did not drop (Sinclair, *Journal* 7) to working with war refugees. Returning from war, Sinclair found that “the process of treatment for women [of recovering from war] was often a similar process of ‘re-feminization’ that relied on teaching them to be dutiful, productive, and cheerful” (Keown, “Gendered”). Sinclair was expected to recover by simply continuing on as if nothing had happened in the first place.

In “The Victim,” Steven’s war experience takes place in the time between the Dorsy’s departure and her return. If Steven truly represents Sinclair’s emphasis on the “psychology of the

war” (qtd. in Pietro 181), then it is interesting that “he had once had a feeling of tenderness for Mr. Greathead as the tie that bound him to Dorsy” (Sinclair, “The Victim” 68). In other words, he has no reason to loathe Mr. Greathead until Dorsy, in his mind, drives him to it. When he finally commits to killing Mr. Greathead, the crime goes impeccably well; Steven is even struck by inspiration all throughout it. No suspicion is cast upon Steven, and soon Mr. Greathead “and his disappearance [are] forgotten” (75). Despite his success, when Dorsy returns, Steven is living in a state of paralysis in order to keep himself alive.

He made a point of keeping the house as it would be kept if Mr. Greathead were alive. . . . Upstairs his bed was made, the clothes folded back, ready. This ritual guarded Steven not only from the suspicions of outsiders, but from his own knowledge. By behaving as though he believed that Mr. Greathead was still living he almost made himself believe it. By refusing to let his mind dwell on the murder he came to forget it. His imagination saved him, playing the play that kept him sane, till the murder became vague to him and fantastic like a thing done in a dream. He had waked up and this was the reality; this round of caretaking, this look the house had of waiting for Mr. Greathead to come back to it. (76)

Much like these noncombatants returning from war, Steven is living as if nothing has changed, but beneath the surface, everything is different. He can only keep himself alive by staying in denial that he killed Mr. Greathead at all—that he was at war at all—but that inevitably begins to break down as Mr. Greathead’s ghost begins to make an appearance.

Mr. Greathead and Guilt

While the war had enormous effects on noncombatants such as women, they did not receive the same acknowledgement and treatment after the first world war. Many women’s experiences with post-traumatic stress disorder, survivor’s guilt, and other traumas went unacknowledged because of overburdened doctors and gendered assumptions (Keown, “Gendered”). Many people focus on Sinclair’s humiliation at being sidelined from the ambulance corps and overshadow the time that she spent at the Belgian hospital with refugees:

You don't know whether it is "*triste*"¹ or not. You are not sure that "*triste*" is the word for it. There are no words for it, because there are no ideas for it. It is a sorrow that transcends all sorrow that you have ever known. You have a sort of idea that perhaps, if you can ever feel this again, this sight will be worse to remember than it is to see. You can't believe that you see; you are stunned, stupefied, as if you yourself had been crushed and numbed in the same catastrophe. (*Journal* 56)

Her time at the hospital left an enormous impact on her—much as how Steven is afraid to recall Mr. Greathead's murder and loathes to think of it, so is she afraid to remember it for fear that her memory of those days in the hospital will be even worse than what she witnessed.

The reader might protest that a murder is different than looking after refugees. Even if both the murderer and the nursing volunteer are struggling with guilt, one of them killed someone; the other simply did what they could, and then left. The latter surely deserves forgiveness. Steven, on the other hand, may not. However, to the women who served as nurses or in other noncombatant roles, it may feel as though they do not. It may feel, to them, like one and the same. Much as how Sinclair supposes "by night . . . it [the hospital] is even more '*triste*' than it was by day" (*Journal* 56) so is Steven constantly aroused at night to go and check the rusted ring of blood on the dairy floor, even though he knows that he "washed it out clean" ("The Victim" 74). While these noncombatants may not have killed anyone, the memory of their guilt and helplessness may have haunted them in the same manner; like Steven, there may be no trace of their guilt, but they nonetheless feel responsible for a crime of which no one would dream to accuse them.

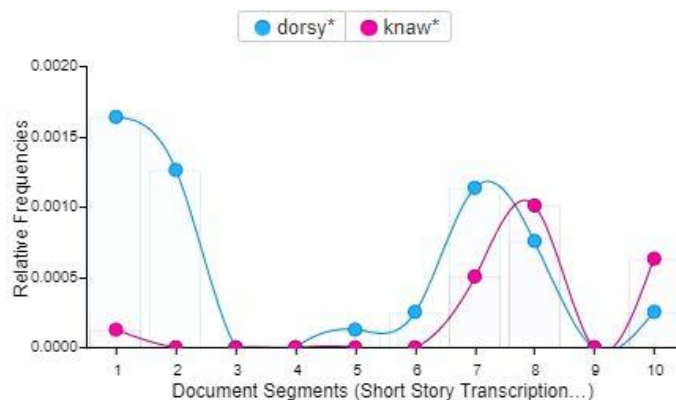
As such, it is critical that Mr. Greathead begins to appear in ghostly form to Steven. Furthermore, Dorsy sees Mr. Greathead, so readers know that Steven is not descending into madness. Instead, Mr. Greathead relieves Steven of his guilt while also emphasizing the

¹ French for "sad" (previous to the quoted entry, Sinclair had been conversing with a nurse in French).

inconsequentiality of his actions: “Let me tell you, this idea of things [murder] being horrible and revolting is all illusion. . . . You mustn’t imagine that these things have any eternal importance. Don’t flatter yourself [that] you’ve electrified the universe” (85–86). Mr. Greathead telling Steven that his actions were inconsequential mirrors what many noncombatants likely felt when surrounded by the horror of war. However, feeling that what they did was unimportant does not mean that these noncombatants did not feel any guilt. On the contrary, this feeling helplessness in the face of such consuming violence feeds directly into the condition of survivor’s guilt, which can haunt people for years after the traumatizing incident (Pajer).

What Dorsy Knows

In terms of forgiveness, Sinclair holds up a surprising source: Dorsy. Dorsy, who Steven vehemently insists “would have never thought of it [leaving him] herself” (68) if not for Mr. Greathead’s influence, who continually works on her white wedding clothes, who stays by Steven’s side in Mr. Greathead’s house long after he has been murdered. Steven insists that he doesn’t dare to marry Dorsy because “[s]he doan’ know I killed ‘ee [Mr. Greathead]” (88).² Then, Mr. Greathead reveals that Dorsy knew all along, and chose to stay beside him anyway.



² “She doesn’t know I killed you.” Dorsy and Steven speak in a Scottish dialect that resembled Doric. Mr. Greathead and the narrative voice do not have a particular dialect.

After Dorsy returns to Steven, she is associated with “knowing.” Looking at the Voyant correlation between Dorsy and knowing (“knew” in the Scottish dialect), it is revealing that the two are so paralleled with each other (Squires). As she says, “nowt can ‘appen to thee but I maun know it”³ (Sinclair 82). Her use of “maun,” or must, is interesting here—it implies an obligation. That, in addition to Mr. Greathead’s statement, means that Dorsy possesses a great knowing about Steven than we originally give her credit for. It is extraordinary that she would choose to stay by a man who murdered their employer in a brutal way and calculatingly concealed it from everyone, including her.

As such, it would make sense that, to Sinclair, Dorsy represents Great Britain. Upon first returning from the war, soldiers and noncombatants alike had to readjust to life, and it would be easy to feel isolated. Steven feels completely alone, and thinks that by murdering Mr. Greathead, he has separated himself from Dorsy forever—he doesn’t dare to marry her now. Even Mr. Greathead’s ghost acknowledges the impossibility of Steven reaching understanding and forgiveness: “There isn’t a jury of flesh-and-blood men who would understand it [the murder and the circumstances surrounding it] . . . any flesh-and-blood man would tell you [Steven] to go and get hanged to-morrow; that it was no more than your plain duty” (87–88). Similarly, for war veterans, combatant and noncombatant alike, those “who remained at hom[e] could never hope to understand the violent experience of the War” (Smith, “Experience” 181). However, Dorsy’s knowledge seems to resist both of these ideas and instead suggest that Great Britain can offer understanding, sympathy, and ultimately healing. More than that, Dorsy returns to Steven—

³ “Nothing can happen to you but I must know it.”

ostensibly knowing what he's done—with her wedding clothes in hand, still ready to have him, if he will only accept it.

Conclusion

Ultimately, “The Victim” is a hopeful story. Although it is dark, violent, and haunted, it is significant that at the end, Mr. Greathead’s counsel is to “Go on living” and “Marry Dorsy” (Sinclair 88). Surrounded by a broken, shattered Britain, “The Victim” both acknowledges the difficulty that noncombatants face in moving on as well as the necessity of it. Even those who experienced the war on a small scale were greatly affected by it, as Sinclair shows. Steven provides a voice for those noncombatants as he works through the trauma that he brings upon himself.

In the difficulty of shouldering guilt and moving past the trauma, Dorsy’s consistent presence and reassurances become doubly assuring. Take, for example, when Steven believes that Dorsy is seeing Mr. Greathead for the first time:⁴

Steven looked at Dorsy. She was staring at the phantasm with an innocent, wondering stare that had no fear in it at all. Then she looked at Steven. An uneasy, frightened, searching look, as though to make sure whether he had seen it.

That was her fear—that *he* should see it, that *he* should be frightened, that *he* should be haunted.

He moved closer and put his hand on her shoulder. He thought, perhaps, she might shrink from him because she knew that it *was* he who was haunted. But no, she put up her hand and held his, gazing up into his face and smiling.

Then, to his amazement, the phantasm smiled back at them; not with mockery, but with a strange and terrible sweetness. Its face lit up for one instant with a sudden, beautiful, shining light; then it was gone. (82)

⁴ Mr. Greathead never states that he and Dorsy talked separately from when Steven saw him, but it is one possible explanation within the short story for Dorsy’s knowledge of Steven’s actions and her calmness upon his appearance.

She can see the ghost as well; she knows what Steven has done. Perhaps Dorsy represents Great Britain generally, in a show of good will for the country on Sinclair's part—she is patriotic enough that it wouldn't be impossible. Perhaps Dorsy represents a country that is full of survivors from all sides of the war, from nursing to combat, from navy to air force. Either way, her presence shows Steven and those whom he represents that there is a path out of alienation that will allow them to be whole once more.

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