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Disillusionment in Evelyn Waugh's *Men at Arms*

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Keywords: -Depression -disillusionment Guy Crouchback -Halberdiers -Kut-al-Imara	Abstract This paper aims at exploring the leitmotif of, disillusionment in the military life of, the protagonist, Guy Crouchback, in <i>Men at Arms</i> Waugh's first volume of a war trilogy, <i>Sword of Honour</i> , which is based on his own experience of the Second World War. It is a grotesque black comedy on the scheme of a chivalric illusion, associated with severe loss of old battles and a series of anticlimactic military defeats where the British-Indian troops fought against the Turks in 1915-1916 at Kut-al-Imara, a small town in the south of Iraq.
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خبيبة الأمل في رواية إيفلين وا رجال مسلحون

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الكلمات الدالة: -	الخلاصة:
الاكتتاب خبيبة الأمل غي كراوتشباك هالبرديرز كوت العمارة	تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى استكشاف خبيبة الأمل في الحياة العسكرية للبطل غي كراوتشباك في رواية رجال وسلاح، المجلد الأول من ثلاثية الحرب (سيف الشرف) للكاتب البريطاني إيفلين وا، حيث تستند أحداث الرواية إلى تجربة وا الشخصية في الحرب العالمية الثانية. الرواية عبارة عن كوميديا سوداء حول الوهم الفردي، المرتبط بالخسارة لمعارك قديمة وسلسلة من الهزائم العسكرية المؤلمة حيث قاتلت القوات البريطانية الهندية ضد الأتراك في عام ١٩١٥-١٩١٦ في كوت الإمارة، بلدة صغيرة في جنوب العراق.
<u>معلومات البحث</u> <u>تاريخ البحث:</u> الاستلام: ٢٠٢٠/٥/١٩ القبول: ٢٠٢٠/٦/٢٠ التوفر على النت 2020/7/5	

Introduction

In 1939 *Men at Arms* opens in Italy where Guy Crouchback an English Catholic, the protagonist of the novel, is living in exile at his grandparent's castle --the Crouchback's Costello-- since he was eight when he was abandoned by, Virginia, his fashionable wife "of ancient lineage and they live happily ever after at Broome, the future clouded only by his tendency to put on more weight." (Gore Vidal 441).

Guy is the youngest and the sole survivor of three sons of the Crouchback family who was "until quite lately rich and numerous... now much reduced." (*MA* 9)¹. His mother has died and his father is over seventy. Angela, the eldest daughter in the family, is married to Arthur Box-Bender, a non-Catholic rude politician. Gervase is the second child who joined service during the First World War in the Irish Guards "and was picked off by a sniper his first day in France." (9). A year older than Guy is the odd Ivo, who disappeared at the age of twenty-six to be found a few months later in 1931 "barricaded alone in a lodging in Cricklewood where he was starving himself to death." (9). His death "seemed to Guy a horrible caricature of his own life, which at just that time was plunged in disaster." (9).

Disillusionment

In a castle where his grandparents established their family and enjoyed the marital happiness together in Italy, Guy is living alone and isolated. He is spiritually crippled and socially secluded, destroyed by his own deep wound. "Into that wasteland where his soul languished, he need not, could not, enter. He had no words to describe it... merely avoid.... It was as though eight years back he had suffered a tiny stroke of paralysis." (6). Cyril Connolly describes him as "a milder version of Ford Madox Ford's Tietjens." (Connolly 371). While in the *Time* editorial on 27 October 1952, Guy is described as "a familiar Waugh character...dramatically speaking, he is not a hero at all....World War II finds Guy a dispossessed man in every sense, abandoned by a feckless wife, deprived of spiritual zest by isolation." (Unsigned Review in *Time* 341-2).

It is worth mentioning that though Guy is armed with a few dry grains of faith but dominated by depression and alienation from humankind. "He was accepted and respected, but he was not *simpatico*." (*MA* 7). "Every other foreign resident and regular visitor -- some of them rather revolting characters -- is *simpatico*" to the people of Santa- Dulcinesi, where Guy lives. (David Wykes 171). "Guy alone was a stranger among them," (*MA* 7). That is why he feels sad and lonely. He makes sure that he is not a loved person in the Italian village. "Guy has no wish to persuade or convince or to share his opinions with anyone. Even in his religion, he felt no brotherhood." (8). He "is leading a solitary's existence near Genoa.... He suffers...from a malady Catholics term 'the arid heart.'" (Vidal 439). While Joseph Frank argues that:

Waugh's hero, Guy Crouchback, is what the French would call a *pauvre type* and the Americans a sad sack. Nothing had ever gone right for Guy: his family had lost most of its money, he had never been much at school, his wife had inexplicably gone off with another man, and even the uncritical Italians among whom he lived did not think him *simpatico*....The war, however, gives Guy a shot in the arm, and after some false starts he becomes an officer-candidate in the ...Halberdiers.

(Frank 46)

Subsequently, Guy finds the outbreak of the Second World War an opportunity to heal these wounds and reconnect to England with the hope of finding, in such an honourable fight, a means of mending his damaged spiritual faculties. Guy sets out on his quest; he leaves Italy for London; applies to many military units to join active service. Like Waugh, all his letters and requests are rejected, at the beginning, for being over-aged and physically unfit. Nevertheless, Guy keeps sending requests to people in charge in the War Office. "He had become a facile professional beggar" (MA 15), though his family objected him to join the army due to his physical non-fitness but he did not listen to them. Even his father tells him: "But I can't imagine you a soldier." (MA 27).

His depression ends when, finally, by chance, during a visit to his father at Matchet, he is introduced to Tickeridge, a major in the Halberdiers, who asks Guy to join his unit as a temporary officer in a special brigade they have formed of their own. Like Waugh, Guy is thrilled that he will finally be enlisted and become a soldier in a reputed unit like the Halberdiers, the dream which has become true for Guy and makes his chivalric illusions perfectly fulfilled. But unfortunately he did not know that his defensive personality would make his military service an experience of frustration, bitterness, and disillusionment.

Once enlisting with the Halberdiers, Guy finds the regiment and his new colleagues admirable and lovable; but his enthusiasm is soon shaken when Britain does not declare war on the Soviets, though they invaded Poland alongside Germany, nevertheless he likes to sacrifice himself for a greater cause through which he can achieve both meaning in life and the salvation of his soul. Therefore, he was determined to prove himself and to feel the Test of Manhood, by such an honourable service, as the most English people were believed to do. It is presented as a battle against what he sees as the two great post-Christian ideologies which have alienated him from modern society:

For eight years Guy, already set apart from his fellows by his own deep wound, that unstaunched, internal draining away of life and love, had been deprived of the loyalties which should have sustained him....He expected his country to go to war in a panic, for the wrong reasons or for no reason at all, with the wrong allies, in pitiful weakness. But now, splendidly, everything had become clear. The enemy at last was plain in view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off. It was the Modern Age in arms. Whatever the outcome there was a place for him in that battle. (MA, 4)

Guy, who was full of traditional ideas of nobility and illusion of chivalry, is depressed when all what he had in mind is completely discarded by his encounters with the realities of the soldier's life. Though he sees war as a crusade, but, his illusions of chivalry are already shattered when, before he leaves Italy, he visits the tomb of Sir Roger of Waybroke, who has a religious fascination for Guy, and prays for his safe journey back to England to enlist his military services. He associates Sir Roger, with the spiritual guidance of God, "Now, on his last day, he made straight for the tomb and ran his finger, as the fishermen did, along the knight's sword." (MA 5). Like the Italian peasants who visited and canonised the English knight, "brought him their troubles and touched his sword for luck." (5), Guy also runs his finger along the knight's sword, taking refuge in a self-deceiving rhetoric, "Sir Roger, pray for me... and for our endangered kingdom." (5). He deliberately stylizes himself into a typical knight-errant coming to the aid of his 'endangered kingdom'. At that time Sir Roger, the knight of Waybroke, never reached the second Crusades. "He left it for the second Crusade, sailed from Genoa and was shipwrecked on this coast...The Count gave him honourable burial and there he had lain through the centuries." (MA 5).

Consequently, from the beginning of Guy's quest, one can feel the disillusionment and failure of the mission of Guy Crouchback when we note how he "looks to ...Sir Roger of Waybroke, as his model. He envisions himself battling a league of new barbarians who have signaled unmistakably their animus to Western civilization with the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression treaty of 1939." (McCartney 94-5). Through this scene one can note that "The biggest twist of irony is that Guy's prayer to a thwarted crusader...is going to be overfilled...with frustration and thwarting quite equal to Sir Roger's, will bring him, too, to an unlikely sanctity" as Waykes remarks. (Waykes 172). While Christopher Derrick comes closer to the point in marking, that "Sir Roger de Waybroke's sacrifice fell rather flat: he died not at atheist hands before Jerusalem, but in the course of a dirty bit of local power -politics in Italy, into which accident and the pressure of events had deflected him." (Derrick 427). Consequently, through the sequences of events in Guy's life, one can note that Waugh tries to focus, as he is used to do, on:

...the conflict between civilization and barbarism is almost always conceived as a conflict between past and present, ancient and modern. Waugh's commitment is to the past, the classics, the age of heroes.... His fondness for the concept of chivalry and the chivalric virtues had been evident as early as the biography of Edmund Campion. " (Ian Littlewood 79-80).

Yet, at the beginning of his military life Guy feels happy and had great zeal. He realizes that he has experienced something he had missed in boyhood --a happy adolescence. But those happy days are soon disrupted when Guy's knee is badly injured while playing rugby with other officers. In spite of this incident, Guy still believes that "Those days of lameness, he realized much later, were his honeymoon, the full consummation of his love of the Royal Corps of Halberdiers."(MA 67)

The second trouble occurs when his military unit is sent to *Kut-al-Imara House* or Al Kut as it is known, a small town in Iraq east-south of Baghdad, where there was a disused boys' school. Through it the Halberdiers at Kut-al-Imara were all subjected to the pranks of the schoolboys' life-style. The following note put by Waugh at the end of this trilogy gives a hint of more depression in Guy's military life. The new camp in

Kut-al-Imara calls up huge and severe loss where there were tens-thousand of casualties in the First World War, at the hands of Turk-Arab army:

Kut-al Imara House: Or Kut-el-Amara, Kut-al Imara, or Al Kut, a small town on the east bank of the Tigris in Mesopotamia, formerly under the old Turkish Empire, now part of Iraq. It is a ludicrous that the school's name should refer to the site of a major British military disaster. In 1915-16, British and Indian troops under General Townshend, having captured the town, were besieged there. After nearly five months they capitulated. Many thousands of prisoners were marched across the desert and two thirds died on the way. Twenty-three thousand troops of a badly organized relieving force were also casualties. Britain's prestige as an imperial power was gravely weakened, though propaganda made the sufferings of Townshend's troops seem exemplary and heroic. (MA 671)

In Kut-al-Imara Guy experiences different kinds of misconduct and misadministration where until very recently, "...it seemed impossible that anything conducted by the Halberdiers could fall short of excellence. And to him now, as the train rolled through the cold and misty darkness....His knee was stiff and painful." (MA 74). Through the description of Kut-al-Imara, one can note that, Waugh reveals that this military mission is seen as a process of continual decline, and nothing is unquestionable to irony. The modern is ridiculed by contrast with the traditional, and even the attempts to maintain or restore the traditional in the face of change are also seen as ridiculous.

The new military camp of Kut-al-Imara reflects all elements of chaos, tardiness, miscommunication, insufficient food, useless and aimless orders, uncomfortable accommodations, even the officers in charge, like Major McKinney, Apthorpe, Ritchie-Hook and Ludovic, were far away from the Halberdier's professionalism. For instance Major McKinney, in charge of the training center, is disorganized and inefficient. In fact, they are qualified to be called clowns rather than officers. In such a camp, one can note that, all men are equal and the whole hierarchic structure of army life was offended; it becomes a symbol of that new world which Guy had enlisted to fight. As a boys' school, Kut-al-Imara, also enhances the school metaphor and reminds a boyish late adolescence in Guy's character, because he himself is much older than his new fellow temporary officers which makes him more sensitive to the feeling of being elderly among them.

There was no bugler at Kut-al-Imara and Sarum-Smith one day facetiously rang the school bell five minutes before parade. Major McKinney thought this a helpful innovation and gave orders to continue it. The curriculum followed the textbooks,

lesson by lesson, exercise by exercise, and the preparatory school way of life was completely re-created. They were to stay there until Easter—a whole term. (MA 99)

Therefore Kut-al-Imara represents the most important phase in Guy's disillusionment and his fellows where they feel betrayed. It is the site of Britain's most humiliating defeat in the First World War, where thousands of Englishmen surrendered to the Turks in 1916 and where the echo of defeat is still heard by the British people. The other series of reasons for Guy to be disappointed are the rooms of this building which are named after battles occurred during the First World War: *Passchendaele*, *Loos*, *Wipers* and *Anzac*. These names are not only references to a humiliating defeat of the First World War: "The sleeping quarters had plainly been the boys' dormitories. Each was named after a battle in the First War. His was *Passchendaele*. He passed the doors of *Loos*, *Wipers* (so spelt) and *Anzac*." (MA 78). Hence such references cast a pall over Crouchback's experience in the army, memory of the bloodshed of the First World War is broadened from the specific case of Gervase to the general case of some of the worst battles of that conflict.

Just like Kut-al-Imara, those battles were lost due to mistaken strategic orders leading to the loss of countless thousands of lives. Accordingly, it begins Crouchback's disillusionment with the army as an institution. "Thus Kut-al-Imara house itself speaks of the immovable bureaucracy, the confusion, the lack of focus that Waugh finds characteristic of the military establishment." (Katharyn W. Crabbe 151). The following paragraph reflects and concludes the drab, sterile, depressed and gloomy life of Guy Crouchback and his fellow in their new site at Kut-al-Imara:

The first week of February filled no dykes that year. Everything was hard and numb. Sometimes about midday there was a bleak glitter of sun; more often the skies were near and drab, darker than the snowbound download inshore, leaden and lightless on the seaward horizon. The laurels round Kut-al-Imara were sheathed in ice, the drive rutted in crisp snow. (MA 99)

Under such difficult situations and unqualified military leadership the troops get continuous upsets as they are moved in chaos from Kut-al-Imara to Dakar, and Sierra Leone in West Africa, Yugoslavia and to France and Italy embarking once and disembarking at another on ships which were bad in condition, for undesignated destination on frequently canceled orders due to mistaken intelligence. And although there was already some sense of disillusionment during his Halberdier training at Kut-al-Imara, it is upon his arrival on the Isle of Mugg, where he trains in secret with the commandos, Guy also realizes the lack of real brotherhood when the officers, having heard of the injury of one of them, are mainly concerned about getting the vacated room (254-7). He saw cowardice and the breakdown of order everywhere. It is something like the portrait and atmosphere at Llannaba School in Waugh's first novel *Decline and*

Fall. D. Marcel DeCoste states that in “*Men at Arms*’ rendering of the Marines at Kut-al-Imara House as unruly schoolboys may thus be read a reworking of the Llannaba Castle..., though in this less than strictly farcical wartime world.” (DeCoste, 2016, 166)

Men at Arms depicts the war against the ‘Modern Age’. Like Waugh, Guy comes to believe that no good will come from the Modern age, but more destruction and misery. He views the time of the Modern age with more pessimism. He condemns the Modern Age and its new principles that have distorted everything with the machinery of war, which is strengthened by its deadly inventions. Portraying most of the story’s events with a clear lack of battle scenes Waugh intends to emphasise the limited scope for military heroism in such a version of modern war. Bernard Bergonzi observes that “...the defeat and disillusion of Guy Crouchback seems to indicate the total collapse of Mr Waugh’s dominating myth; the modern world has triumphed...the novel is permeated by a disdain and bitterness that gives great strength to the prose.” (Bergonzi 423). It is as Joseph Heller concluded that:

Guy Crouchback is incurably a creature of inaction and ineptitude, a person of large sensibility and no will. He is used, abused and manipulated by almost every person he meets, a victimization that comes, after a while, to seem only just, since he does not appear capable of making any better use of himself. His only virtue is that he lacks vice....Yet, innocence in a man of forty is no longer innocence but stupidity. (Heller 443)

Like most of Waugh’s heroes, Guy is introduced as a young man thrown, without help, into a cruel world on his own to find himself among visible symbols of the passing established order. Though his military service offered him a new experience of war life, but he failed because he was not a successful soldier. He seems bare, immature and without psychological depth because he has no ability to analyze and understand neither himself nor the modern world he is living in. “Guy is not, in any sense, a modern man; and that is his problem, for he is bringing with him, into a modern world, the ideas and values of the 13th century.” B.W Wilson remarks. (Wilson 88). It is proved, at the end of the novel, that Guy is far from salvation or, at least, from true and active faith, as he was at the beginning. He is not more than a daydreamer, less of a man influenced by silly, romantic ideas of heroism and soldiership. In his study about Evelyn Waugh, Michael G. Brennan concludes that both Guy and Apthorpe are like Waugh. They are thirty-six in 1939, join the Halberdier at the same time, and both called ‘Uncle’ by newer warriors. Ultimately Apthorpe is introduced “as a fraud and ends up half mad in a military hospital.” Guy gives him a carafe of Whisky which Apthorpe hungrily drinks and dies. Because of this disgraceful event, Guy is posted to England out of the Halberdier; where his return marks a significant step from “idealism towards disillusioned maturity.” (Brennan, 2013, 110)

Conclusion

Finally, one can conclude that, Evelyn Waugh introduced *Men at Arms* to be just an opening part of a larger story encircling the entire period of the Second World War. His main purpose was not to describe the war or battle actions in detail, but to present the war period as a turning point in the British history, which meant a final disappearance of the old high-principled chivalry which was replaced by the aimless age of the common man and dominated by disillusionment. Therefore, Guy Crouchback's development in *Men at Arms*, from an enthusiastic crusader looking for his place in the battle to a frustrated officer rejected by the corps whom he loved, comprises the opening part of an existential drama in which Waugh is disappointed by the modern world and the post-war development. Having innocently failed as a Halberdier, Guy is well aware that the time of his juvenile infatuation with the army is beyond recovery. He is a more complex and developed version of Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust*. He realises the insufficiency of the gentlemanly ideal and is stripped of his romantic illusions, though he is as Frank Kermode argues that his "total disillusion is not despair; he had merely misunderstood the way of a fallen world...a world of derision in which the Faith survives precariously." (Kermode 446). While Curtis Bradford comes closer to the point in saying that Guy Crouchback is "a typical inhabitant of the Waste Land. All his ventures have failed --marriage, colonial farming, expatriate life in Italy, religion" (Bradford 377). Thus a continuous failure in his military life causes him to lose his captaincy and leads him to more disillusionment, and pushes him to sloth and drunkenness. Lastly, one comes to conclude that though Guy finds recurrent sustenance in the Halberdier spirit due to his deep love of tradition, but at the end he believes that the Halberdiers neither can recapture Jerusalem, nor defeat the modern age.

Notes:

1. All quotations in this research paper are from Evelyn Waugh, *Men at Arms*, is *Sword of Honour Trilogy*. London: Penguin Classics, 2001, and henceforth cited as (*MA*) with page numbers in the text.

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