War Short Guide

War by Marguerite Duras

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Contents

Characters

The one consistent character throughout the work is the narrator, Duras herself. She emerges as someone deeply involved in the war as well as a highly emotional person. The contradictions in her personality are evident in her reflections on the past: "How could I have written this thing I still can't put a name to, and that appalls me when I reread it?" The close association between violence and eroticism in her life is marked in the novel, as well as the rapport between love and destruction, evident in her relationship with her husband, whom she nurses back to life and then leaves. The ambiguity of her relationship with Rabier reflects the same conflicts. In the third part, she appears as Therese. She comments: "The person who tortures the informer is me. So also is the one who feels like making love to Ter, the member of the Militia." Although committed to justice, she nevertheless has a deep attraction to life and to freedom.

It is in studying her relationships with the various male personalities that her own character emerges more clearly.

The men in the first part, Robert L., her husband, and D., a friend of her husband's whom she comes to love, are shadowy figures. The reader sees them only through the eyes of the narrator, and they say very little. Yet they are very much part of the story. In the tradition of the new novel, they have no names. The narrator speaks of Robert L.'s "special grace here below, of his own peculiar grace which carried him through the camps — the intelligence, the love, the reading, the politics, and all the inexpressible things of all the days; that grace peculiar to him but made up equally of the despair of all." He is also described as dark and hidden; he is a writer and published a book on what he had experienced in Germany. When she tells him that she wants to divorce him, he does not ask the reasons, nor does she tell him. She concludes, "At the name of Robert L., I weep. I still weep. I shall weep all my life."

In the second anecdote, Rabier is introduced as the German soldier who is interested in her, and yet who wants information on the resistance movement in which her husband participated. He is more clearly delineated than Robert L. or D. In fact, Duras published the story "because of the description of Rabier, and of his illusion that a person may exist solely as a dispenser of reward and punishment."

Rabier has arrested her husband; he is always extremely polite but mysterious. Duras can never quite get it out of her head that this man must be a madman. Yet he is an intellectual, interested in French intellectuals, artists, and authors, and he enlisted in the Gestapo because he could not buy an art shop. Encouraged by Francois Morland (Francois Mitterand), she continues to see him, never quite sure if she or her friends will be arrested and killed. In the beginning, her relationship with him was one of fear, as she says, "daily, awful, overwhelming fear." Later, it was one of "the same fear . . . but a fear that sometimes turns into relish at having settled that he must die." In the end, what was typical of Rabier was the money he had invested in first editions, "his gentlemanly manner, his faith in Nazi Germany, his cheap kindnesses, his forgetfulness, his rashness and perhaps also his attachment to me. Me through whom he was to die."

Two contrasting traitors dominate the third section of the book. The anonymous informer despised by Therese and her companions complements the forthright Ter of the militia. The. informer is probably less guilty than many others, but he refuses to confess, even under the torture and humiliation. Therese "realizes for the first time that in a man's body there are layers almost impossible to pierce. Tier upon tier of deep truths difficult to reach."

On the other hand, Therese and D. have a soft spot for the twenty-threeyear-old Ter, a handsome young man, who has wasted his life: "He hasn't a thought in his head, only desires; he's got a body made for pleasure, riotous living, fighting, girls." He wants a gun, not especially to kill Resistance members, but because "it impresses people." He is a man who loves life, and even if he were to be killed, he would not lose a moment to live. He lives in perpetual childhood, where "ideas are in short supply, and where the mystique of the leader is the only form of ideology and excuses crime."

One of the most compelling portraits is that of Aurelia Steiner, the little Jewish girl saved by an older woman who grows very fond of her. Her initials and her age have been embroidered into her dress. She has a cat and frequently talks to it. She hums a Jewish song, while she imagines the destination of someone, perhaps her parents. The sounds of gusts of wind in the forest parallel the bombers in the sky, which fly over the house where she is hidden. Aurelia has dark blue eyes that represent unfathomable darkness. She represents what the French title of the entire work evokes: suffering.

Social Concerns/Themes

The three short narratives that constitute this book were composed as a diary in 1944, during World War II.

Duras says that she does not remember writing them, although she recognizes the handwriting as being her own. The first and longest dramatically tells the story of her activities in the French Resistance and her fear that her husband might be dead. In it she captures the anguish of all women waiting for someone to return from combat or prison. The ring of the telephone is an omen of bad news. Women wait anxiously at train stations for men to return from liberated camps. The Allies are advancing, but the Nazis often kill prisoners rather than allowing them to be liberated. Anxiously her thoughts turn to her husband while her feet take her through Paris. She is sure of the worst. Then one day he is brought back, at death's door. She nurses him through a long and difficult illness, from which he eventually recovers.

One day she tells him she plans to divorce him to have a child by another man, a friend of his. This surprise announcement illustrates the emotional strains produced by war, and the breakdown of marriages caused by these upheavals.

The second story, "Monsieur X, Here Called Rabier," addresses the ambiguous relationships between the French and the Germans during the Occupation. The author has come to know Rabier while trying to make contact with her husband. Rabier, however, is a mystery to her. She does not know whether he intends to kill her or whether he is serious in offering her food and other items that were difficult to obtain during this period. After the Liberation, the situation changes. The author testifies twice at Rabier's trial, once against him, and once for him.

The Judge does not understand the conflicting testimony, and the dilemma is never resolved.

The third part consists of three short anecdotes, relating to war trials and to the uncertainty they produce. The final anecdote in this part, which Duras declares to be fiction, recounts the story of a little seven-year-old Jewish girl, Aurelia Steiner, who was protected by a Gentile woman when her parents were deported. Although the child survives, one can surmise that her parents were killed. Thus the whole Jewish question and the Holo caust comes to life through the child.

These moving war memoirs confirm a theme that appears frequently in Duras's work. In an interview with the newspaper Liberation in 1990, Duras lists as her first fear, Hitler. She notes that she is also afraid of German youth who have not learned the truth about their country and the power of Hitler.

In addition, she lists the abuses of the Gulag and all dictatorships — Stalin, Ceausescu, and others. It is no doubt that she published War in 1985 consisting of memoirs from 1944 to address these issues.

Yet war is not the only theme that dominates the book. Its French title La Douleur (Suffering) reveals further themes of deep emotion: love and eroticism, as well as despair and revenge.

A woman's relations with many men appear against a background of violence and cruelty. In the beginning, her relationships heighten feelings of despair on a personal level, where so many people will never again see their loved ones. The reactions of the French after the Liberation show the compulsion for vengeance and the desire to bring all offenders to justice, an attempt which so often gives rise to further injustices and strange paradoxes.

Techniques/Related Titles

Although War was published in 1985, it makes use of 1944 texts. Thus one finds the Duras of two periods.

There is a plot in the classical tradition, since these anecdotes are based on personal memoirs. Yet the characteristics of Duras's more mature works are also present: simple syntax, abstractions, lack of transitions, and startling juxtapositions. The final anecdote, "Aurelia Paris" is particularly striking in its musicality and use of dialogue.

The role of interior monologue is important throughout the book and is especially evident in the first part.

Duras's prose is intense, often ironic and always passionate. Like her other works, this one is also written in a distilled, haunting style, difficult to capture in translation, but skillfully rendered by Barbara Bray, who has translated other Duras novels.

Adaptations

Duras reworked "Aurelia Paris" for the stage. Gerard Desarthe gave a marvelous reading of it for two weeks in the Petite Salle of the Theatre du RondPoint in Paris in January 1984.

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