

***The Stone Carvers* by Jane Urquhart as a Historical Fiction.**

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Abstract: This paper entitled *The Stone Carvers* by Jane Urquhart as a Historical Fiction, in which the author shows the historical perspective of the novel that helps in knowing the historical past. The novel focus on the historical events of First World War along with the fictional town of Shoneval in Ontario. The devastation of the World War I and the construction of the Vimy Ridge in France to commemorate the war veterans re portrayed with evidence from history. Jane Urquhart is an internationally acclaimed Canadian author of seven award winning novels, three poetry books and enormous short stories. This work for study in which the victims of war who lost their loved ones and those who survived physically imputed involved in the construction of the monument. the hard work of the carvers without and selfishness made history to the nation and the whole world. The characters Father Gstyr, Walter Allward are fictionalized by the writer from real history. The Vimy Ridge battle and the memorial construction glorifies the nation's history. Urquhart blends history with fiction to read the work in a historical way and to understand the actual history.

Key words: memorial, war, pain, history, sacrifice.

Historical fiction is one of the sub-genres of literature, which takes the readers to the past where the actual event took place. The historical fiction gives details of the action of the real state mixed with the author's imagination to fill the gaps. The characters will be taken from real people of life to make the fiction a more real one. The genre of historical fiction emerged from Sir Walter Scott. This historical fiction has various categories as Biographical Historical Fiction, Historical Series and Epics, Historical Mysteries and Thrillers, Historical Romance, Historical Adventures and Historical Fantasy.

The history helps in narrating the past incidents even after generations. It is invented from the stains of the past in the written form. As Ankersmit observes it as, "the historical text is a substitute for the absent past" (220). The narrator of the historical text reports. Camus in his *The Plague* states it as, "His business is only to say: "This is what happened", when he knows that is actually did happen, that is closely affected the life of a whole populace, and that there are thousands of eyewitnesses who can appraise in their hearts the truth of what he writes" (6).

Jane Urquhart is a Canadian novelist and poet born in Geraldton, Ontario, Canada. Her father is a mining engineer and her mother belonged to the Irish peasant family. Her works include, *The Whirlpool*, *Away*, *The Underpainter*, *A Map of Glass*, *Sanctuary Line*, *The Night Stages*. Her family's heritage has a deep impact on her writings. Her mother's Irish ancestors migrated to Canada in the mid nineteenth century during the Great Potato Famine. They also witnessed the trials of World War I and World War II. Urquhart's works typically concerned with the immigration, war, memory and sufferings due to the catastrophe, the conflicts between private narratives and official history.

Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* (2001), is about three generations of Canadian family beginning from nineteenth century as wood carvers and the emigration to follow the disastrous wars of the new land. The novel negotiates their grief and explore the human need to live, keeping all the sufferings hidden in the mind to remember sometime with pain. This novel is divided into three parts as the ancestral life in the nineteenth century and the pre- and post-war lives of the grandchildren. The monument constructed to memorialize the soldiers who dedicated their lives in the Great War makes the central historical light for the art work. The memorial not only records the history but also gives evidence of the war and the place for Canada in the alien land France.

Jane Urquhart shows the hardships of the soldiers and other commons during the time of war and aftermath. The war affects the people both physically and mentally. The soldiers sometimes lose their lives in the battlefield and sometimes lose their limbs to carry the pain throughout their life. The people who stay back home holds the pain of loss in the mind and burst out remembering them. Urquhart fictionalize the Canadian artist Walter Allward from real history who designed the Great Memorial for making history for the nation. There are similarities in the different experiences of the character that created the events and the Canadian history.

Urquhart in *The Stone Carvers* refers the Battle of Verdun in which many people got affected and carries the fragments of catastrophe along with them. she mentions it with the character Monsieur Recouvrier as, "Verdun... carried in his body fragments of the catastrophe of the battle of Verdun (325). When Monsieur shares this painful history, it is important to note the battle which gives a minor history for the nation. Many carries their history of the battle in Verdun, which recorded in the mind of the victims and survivors to other places they travel. When a victim takes up the roaming to other places the painful history also travels

along with them. the trauma of the war would be recorded from the words of these victims by even the writers of other countries too.

The Battle of Vimy Ridge fought between 9 to 12 April 1917. Four division of Canadian soldiers attacked with unity to capture Vimy from the hands of France. The Corps used various war techniques to capture Vimy and surrounding area in northern France. This battle during the First World War marks a historical success with the death of three thousand five hundred and ninety-eight men and ten thousand six hundred and two casualties and also wounded seven thousand and four soldiers.

The historical incident is brought in front of the readers by Urquhart. The Battle of Vimy Ridge of 1917, in which they take control of Vimy over France by using various war strategies. Many were missed without any evidence and those who survived the war carries the mental and physical scars along with them to undergo throughout their life. “And the casualties were huge, overwhelming, though in the end the Canadians had taken the ridge... Vimy Ridge” (230). It was a great victory for the Canadians with profound lose of human lives and money.

The historical Battle of Vimy in which men of different countries fought. In *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart portrays a character Giorgio Vigamonti, friend of Tilman. Giorgio an Italian from Canada, also participated in the war against France. His contribution to the welfare of Canada marks a special note for the history of Canada. Giorgio survived the war as he tells that he fought in the war and got promoted to Corporeal and escaped death. Urquhart states as: “Giorgio escaped death as he got promoted from private rank to corporeal, and he was considered neither missing nor dead to promoted for staying alive” (288).

After the war many people lost their shelter and starve in the streets and stays in the tunnels and trenches. The suffering is found all the time as during the war to stay and cook in open air and after war the same happens in different angle. Even though the battle saw a huge lose it is regarding as “our great victory” (306) and a monument is going to be built in France. The monuments are always built to maintain a historical view of certain incidents as to recall after generations. The public memorial for mourning as Jay Winter states that, “[c]ommemoration was a universal preoccupation after the 1914-1918 war. The need to bring the dead home, to put the dead to rest, symbolically or physically, was pervasive” (28) was built in memory of the war veterans.

The monument of Vimy Ridge battle stands as a historical record to the world that Urquhart portrays in her novel. The Canadian sculpture Walter Seymour Allward was one who behind the construction of the memorial. This is the man who designed the “statue of Sir Oliver Mowat, the Alexander Bell Memorial, the memorial to the Boer War” (266). All this memorials glow holding the history of the nation. Allward very eagerly indulge in the designing and construction of the memorial even though he did not participate in the particular war.

Allward thinks of the memorial as giving life to the dead and missing in the battle. Allan Hepburn in his *Beautiful Mourning* commends of Allward’s vision of monument as, “consecrated to the memory of those soldiers who went missing in battle. Although their bodies were blown up and scattered throughout northern France, they live on as names inscribed on the monument. Art gives these anonymous disappeared men a portal to posterity” (49).

When the government goes in discussion of the monument, Allward thinks of its design as, “the huge twin pillars commemorating those who spoke French and those who spoke English, the allegorical figures with downcast or uplifted faces, and in the valley beneath the work of art, the flesh and bones and blood of the dead stirring in the mud. And then the dead themselves emerged. . . pleading for a memorial to the disappeared, the vanished ones” (267). Allward fictionalize the incident as the dead people emerge from the blooded soil to pleads to built a memorial for them.

The Vimy Ridge Memorial shows the patriotism and reworks the event to mark a milestone in the history of the nation. According to John Pierce in his “Constructing Memory: The Vimy Memorial” states, “The historical reality of the battle has been reworked and reinterpreted in a conscious attempt to give purpose and meaning to an event that came to symbolize Canada’s coming of age as a nation” (5). In 1920s when the Canadian government decided to construct the memorial and the selection of place went in debate.

After such a vast discussion in 1922, France gifted 100-hectre land for the memorial to Canada. Even though the memorial is in France the whole authority of the memorial is in the control of Canada. Canada aided for the construction, its maintenance and ownership. Murdoch in *The Vimy Pilgrimage: July 1936* says, “This sacred soil of Vimy was not alien soil but would be forever Canadian” (33). The Canadians proudly writes in their nation’s

history of this memorial in an alien land. France also histories the land gifted by them for Canada.

The Vimy Ridge memorial in which the carvers without any sort of discrimination regarding countries carved the stone figures of “66,000 dead young men” (337). Urquhart glorifies the monument in the land of France:

The memorial was to be built in France, at the site of the great 1917 battle of Vimy Ridge, won with huge losses by the Canadians who had lived for weeks in tunnels they had carved themselves out of the chalky soil before bursting out of these tunnels on April 9 into a hell of mud and shrapnel. It was to stand near the Ypres salient on the crest of Hill 62, looking across the Douai Plain toward the coveted coal fields in the east and what were once lush fields belonging to peasant farmers to the west. After the war the French in an act of reckless gratitude, had given one hundred hectares of the battleground to Canada in perpetuity, one hundred hectares of landscape that looked like it had been victimized by a terrible disease boiling through the earth’s system to its surface. (268)

The memorial built by the Canadian government in France to capture the sacrifice of the soldiers in the Vimy battle in April 1917. Allward took seven years to build his historical monument and unveiled on 26th July 1936 by King Edward VIII accompanied by President Albert Lebrun of France and over 5000 people including 6,200 Canadian veterans and their families. The long distance between the Vimy and Canadians did not stop them from visiting and mourning for their loved ones. They visited the memorial to repeat the history which is an unchanged one.

Urquhart mentions about the fictional town of Shoneval and Father Gstyr who comes in missionary and constructed a church and launched a bell named ‘Gabriel Bell’. When analysing there is no man named father Gstyr but she indirectly refers the church in Formosa, Ontario. Rev. Gaspar Motago, a Jesuit missionary visited the place in January 1853 and named it as Formosa in real history. Urquhart used it in her novel in a different way of expressing the fact in the fiction.

The Irish Potato Famine began in 1845 in Ireland is also called as the ‘Great Hunger.’ By this famine the Irish people were forced to emigrate to other neighbouring countries for survival. This great famine ruined the country a lot and changed the whole history of the

nation upside down. A new history is originated by the changed political and cultural landscape leading the people to starve and die.

To portray the novel a more historical one Urquhart mentions of the potato famine in which her ancestors survived. Her character Eamon shares about his father who was born in the post-famine time and survived near the Cummerragh river as “saved his antecedents from certain starvation during the famine” (154). Their scope for future is of great question and travelled in the “overcrowded ship, and had sailed for Quebec, carrying the impossible fields, lakes, and mountains in his mind when he did so” (154). They sailed to this strange land Canada to survive the hardships here too. Soon they were forced to adopt to the new land and to witness the growth in their life.

The literary work of art documents the historical events as narratives to form the fictional approach of history. Christopher Morash in *Writing the Irish Famine* says,

to treat literary texts as yet another form of historical document with the (often dubious) potential yield individual nuggets of fact... facts which, in any case, can only be acknowledged by an ostensibly empirical historiographic practice when confirmed by other, non-literary sources. Instead, we can look to literary texts as highly developed formulations of those metanarratives which both make particular actions possible, and retrospectively justify them. (28)

Jane Urquhart draws the attention of the readers by presenting the past incidents in this novel. The past haunts in the mind of the people whenever they remember about it in the present. The dead are already under the soil but they live forever in the mind of the people by this historical representation. The historical fiction with the trauma experience of the writer presents a realistic view in parallel with history.

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