

'My Mother Won the War': Patriotism and the First World War in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Scenes of Childhood (1981)

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**‘My Mother Won the War’: Patriotism and the First World War in Sylvia
Townsend Warner’s *Scenes of Childhood* (1981)**

The nineteen-thirties saw a preference on the part of a generation of writers born mainly after the high modernists for accessible narratives which could reach wide audiences, though that did not mean that they were unimpressed by predecessors like Woolf and Joyce, nor uninterested in modernist innovations or deviations from realist assumptions. Thus, many younger writers were keen to write short fiction pieces for periodicals, and many politically-active women writers were prolific in this mode, including Naomi Mitchison, Winifred Holtby and Sylvia Townsend Warner.¹ This extensive body of short fiction by women active in the thirties and after has received little attention, perhaps being assumed to be ephemeral, even when published in collections after initial periodical publication. The stories of Sylvia Townsend Warner are no exception: there is a modern selected edition, but without an introduction, plus a few substantial critical articles, discussion of the stories’ origins in the biography and some reviews.² This article will address this amnesia and add to the small critical literature on this genre in the period by focusing on three of Sylvia Townsend Warner’s short stories for *The New Yorker*, a magazine in which she published from the nineteen-thirties until the nineteen-seventies. It will also contextualise the part which the short story played in Warner’s writing career and link her neglected work in this form with some existing critical conversations about her work in other genres.

Sylvia Townsend Warner was born in 1893 and lived until 1978. Her first experience of work was a direct result of the First World War: in 1915 she joined a scheme for

'lady workers' to produce munitions at a Vickers shell works in London. This also led to her first (anonymous) publication, an essay called 'Behind the Firing Line' (Harman 1991: 30, 32; Tolhurst 2012: 14-15).³ After a period when she worked as a musicologist on a Carnegie-Trust funded edition of Tudor Church Music (1922-9), she became a professional writer with the publication of her first poetry collection, *The Espalier*, in 1925 and her first novel, *Lolly Willowes*, in 1926 (she also wrote her first two short stories at around the same time - Harman 1991: 61-3).

For the rest of her life she was a prolific author of novels, poetry, short fiction and essays. She has been, however, best remembered for her seven novels: *Lolly Willowes*, 1926, *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, 1927, *The True Heart*, 1929, *Summer Will Show*, 1936, *After The Death of Don Juan*, 1939, *The Corner that Held Them*, 1948 and *The Flint Anchor*, 1954. These novels cover a remarkable range of settings and periods (London and the Chilterns, a South Sea island in the modern period, 19th century Essex, Dorset and Paris in 1848, 17th century Spain, 14th century Norfolk, 19th century Norfolk) and tend each to offer something new (even though the last four are historical novels, they use quite different forms of that genre⁴). Until recently, a relatively small number of critics worked on Townsend Warner and these mainly on her novels, once they were so deservedly re-published by Virago during the 1970s. However, there has been a growth in critical interest since 2000 and the *MLA Bibliography* currently lists eighty-two articles and essays about her work (still mainly centred on the novels), many recent, and including nine essays in the first book wholly dedicated to Townsend Warner, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner, English Novelist 1893-1978* (Davies, Malcolm, Simons 2006). Practically all these critical explorations agree that her work has been strangely neglected, given its

originality, its subtlety, its (often oblique) topicality and its continuing ability to speak to contemporary critical concerns, particularly in a range of feminist enquiries. Also noted has been her work's capacity to confound the 'labelling' systems which help critics to navigate twentieth-century literature. Thus, observes David Malcolm 'Warner's work has often produced an unease among critics: she seems difficult to categorise and place' (Davies, Malcolm, Simons 2006: 145), while Eleanor Perenyi suggests that Warner was 'Feminist, Marxist, historical novelist, social comedian, teller of fairy tales – she was all these, and none of them to a degree that would ultimately define her' (cited in Davies, Malcolm, Simons 2006: 145). Gillian Beer says that Warner's writing 'abuts the Modernist: it uses surreal oppositions, nonsense strides, narrative fractures and shifting scales. It is nevertheless pellucid, determined and mischievous rather than allusive and indeterminate' (Davies, Malcolm, Simons 2006: ii-iii). Indeed, classification systems which imply a clear opposition between 'realist' and 'modernist' modes are particularly challenged by Warner: it is noticeable that critics are very much split about whether she is best considered as part of the modernist or realist traditions or a curious hybrid. Inspection of the MLA listing will discover a number of discussions which use or probe the words 'realist' or 'modernist' in relation to Warner's work – for example there is Janet Montefiore's 'Listening to Minna: Realism, Feminism and the Politics of Reading' (1991), while Jane Garrity's *Step-Daughters of England* explores Warner's modal indeterminacy: 'the cumulative effect of her individually accessible sentences is never one of transparency' (2003:148). Indeed, one of the few scholarly articles on Townsend Warner's short fiction - in fact on *Scenes of Childhood* itself - argues that these stories, despite an engagement with 'objects' which is often a marker of realism, draw on a modernist tradition of autobiography, particularly the work of Gertrude

Stein' (Kalata 2005). Kalata suggests that Warner's writing has 'simultaneous engagements with fact and fiction, realism and fantasy' and cites Elisabeth Maslen's view that Warner is always ' "sizing" up realism as a vehicle' and 'uses realism to trace protagonists' lives, but departs from it to evolve and refashion their identities' (Kalata 2005: 326). These are acute insights, though, as we shall see, in the short stories it is sometimes the reader rather than the protagonist who becomes aware of the refashioning, and in one instance a story produces meaning which may be read as almost the opposite to that arrived at by Kalata. Kalata also illuminatingly notes that both these techniques and the publication of this British author's stories in a US periodical tended to lead to a concentration on issues of national identity, including war, as part of the exploration of ideas of self. What this article can add to Kalata's discussion of how Warner opens up gaps between 'things', discourses of the self and figurings of national identity is a more particular focus on some of the stories in *Scenes of Childhood* which deal with the First World War, and an analysis of the part played by narration in the transformation of habitual *mentalitiés* through the opportunities it gives for radical re-readings. Two of the stories discussed focus on the narrator's mother, while the third includes both the narrator's mother and father as significant characters – a feature which may usefully relate these short stories to some of Jane Garrity's complex discussions of mothers, (step-) daughters and the interwar British 'national imaginary' in her work on Townsend Warner's novels.

Sylvia wrote her first story for *The New Yorker* to prove to an American friend that *The New Yorker* would never publish her. She subsequently published 150 stories in the magazine:

Apart from the distinction of being admitted to the New Yorker 'Club', the subsequent widening of her following in America and the fact that, by having a market, she had a motive to develop her talent as a short story writer, Sylvia's association with the magazine made her financially secure ... for the rest of her life. (Harman 1991: 145) ⁵

The short story gave Townsend Warner a highly flexible form which was entertaining enough for a wide readership, but capable of making acute political points about the nature of what may pass unexplored for normality (in an interview Sylvia linked her sense that her novels did not sell well partly for political reasons with the comment that 'I sell very well to the *New Yorker*. That is my only claim to be a bestseller' – Tolhurst 2012: 402). One should also note Harman's point about the financial importance of these stories – Warner's income from them was both steadier and greater than that from the novels which have dominated her critical reputation thus far. As this article will suggest, the short stories are also just as worthy of critical exploration as her novels. In a number of stories in *Scenes of Childhood*, Sylvia Townsend Warner deals in her own individual style with issues of patriotism and the build-up to the First World War. It is characteristic that these stories are amusing, whimsical and improvisatory at first sight, but that on further reading they throw a sharp and subversive light on Britain before and during this European cataclysm. Indeed, beneath the seeming improvisations are some surprising and robust narrative structures. Though some critics have explored ways in which Warner's fiction responds to the aftermaths of the Great War (see Esther Valls, Rita Kondrath, and above all Jane Garrity), none but Kristianne Kalata has looked at the short stories which are more directly about the War and patriotism. This article will therefore explore three stories about the First World War or the lead up to it: 'My Mother Won the War', 'How I left the Navy', and 'The Young Sailor'. All three indirectly ponder ideas of patriotism, conformity and resistance through the lenses of

situations on the 'Home Front', and all deploy the consciousness of a narrator who is one of Townsend Warner's regular *alter egos* in her *New Yorker* stories. They use a variety of techniques: two focus on the narrator's mother,⁶ while the third contains the narrator's mother and father among its characters, but focuses on the narrator herself and another character.⁷ Moreover, while the first two stories see their main characters caught up in a mass patriotic fervour (and subject to sharply ironic critiques), the third traces an incident in which an individual rejects a conformist path. The first two stories are much concerned with items of clothing which are clearly bound up in issues of nationality and gender, while the third centres on a social / institutional / religious event which also has implications for national identity. The first two stories date from the 1930s and 1940s ('My Mother Won the War', May 30th 1936, 'How I Left the Navy', May 4th, 1940), while the third is post-war ('The Young Sailor', 29th May 1954).⁸ It may be that the differing techniques and attitudes between the first two stories and the third are linked to their different periods of composition, though all three draw on the narrator's memories of the period between circa 1909 and 1918. All four were included in the posthumous collection, *Scenes of Childhood and Other Stories* (1981).

'My Mother Won the War' is a first-person narrative told in the persona of Sylvia as Edwardian / Georgian daughter, something shared by many of the stories in the collection. This 'I' is apparently a mere reporter of the events of the story, but her one unshakeable presumption is clear: that her mother was in the right. Indeed, the opening of the story makes it clear that from the speaker's point of view everyone else, worldwide, also shares this perspective, for:

I think it is pretty generally admitted that my mother won the last war. By generally admitted I do not mean officially recognised. Official recognition would have involved many difficulties. Admirals and Field-Marschals, for instance, who had spent their lives in the study of warfare, and panted into their sixties towards the happy day when those studies might be let loose in practice, might well have been piqued if the honours had been unpinned from them and fastened on a middle-aged civilian lady of the upper middle classes (125).

Typically of Sylvia's *New Yorker* stories, this paragraph is packed with passing ironies: the 'honours' of winning the war must be reserved for the elderly men who have been studying strategy for years of peace and who, though breathless themselves, cannot imagine anything more satisfying than putting their ideas into practice, though this will deprive many of breath utterly. However, the central truth can be revealed that really a middle-aged, upper-middle class civilian lady was the supreme architect of victory. Indeed, the mythical status of this reputation proves to the narrator's satisfaction that it must be true: 'It always seems to me a convincing testimony to my mother's part in the last war that the legend that the last war was won by somebody's mother is so widespread ... The fact that people get the mother wrong does not invalidate the archetypal truth' (125). Of course, there is no such legend, but in these two opening paragraphs we are rapidly immersed into the narrator's eccentric world-view, as is borne out by the date of her mother's total victory: 'My mother won the last war in November, 1914'.

Clearly this victory is not what most people mean by victory in the Great War, which had to be awaited for a further four years and found time for eight-and-a-half-million combat deaths across the nations fighting (Gilbert ii). The narrator's mother's victory might seem more local, and it concerns pyjama buttons, for she has joined the Red Cross to make pyjamas for wounded soldiers. The 'lady in charge' was a Mrs Moss-

Henry, who sets the narrator's mother to cutting out pyjama trousers. However, the next day the narrator's mother's cut-out pyjama trousers are returned to her, to her irritation, as inadequate, since they lack markings for where the button-hole and button are to be added:

My mother has a decisive mind, a mind that goes straight to essentials. She realised at once that, as the pyjama trousers were to be fastened by a cord passing through a slot, the addition of a button and button-hole halfway down the opening was redundant. The other cutter, one of those dull, faithful souls who can only do as they are told, repeated, 'That's what Mrs Moss-Henry said' (126).

Given the story's already strong construction of a highly partial viewpoint, this signals all-out war. Rational arguments about the necessity or otherwise of buttons are aired, but mainly with the aim of gaining the support of neutral bystanders:

Was it not an outrage, [my mother] asked, that our fighting men, who had gone so cheerfully and gallantly to the defence of their country, should, when they came all glorious with their wounds into the Red Cross hospitals, be insulted by being buttoned into their trousers like little boys? Had they not suffered enough for their country...? Must they, weak and in pain, be teased with buttoning and unbuttoning themselves? Many of them, she added, would be too weak to do up buttons anyway. (127)

Again, many ironies result from the narrator's support of her mother's partial viewpoint. The reader knows that men coming into the hospital will not be 'all glorious with their wounds' exactly and that they will already have suffered indignities which will make the question of pyjama-trouser buttons relatively trivial (though another level of irony may be that the narrator's mother in her determination to omit buttons on what must be the pyjamas' flies is showing ignorance of the masculine sphere, despite her willingness to launch all-out war on the issue). The controversy is taken to Red Cross Headquarters in London where the two protagonists finally reach a lady who was 'more of a specialist' in pyjamas (130). Disappointingly, the lady pronounces that: 'We quite appreciate your difficulties, and we will write to you

shortly'. Here the narrator's mother, refusing any outcome but unconditional surrender, makes her supreme tactical move:

They were moving away when my mother, with a great surge of indignation and another argument ... turned back towards the desk. The lady saw her coming, and held up her hand. 'For the present perhaps you had better leave the buttons off', she said. (130).

The humour and the power of the story come from that gap between what the narrator and her mother see as the central issue of the war and what the reader may decode from different possible perspectives. Really, the story is about naked power – the urge to vanquish, and the trouser-button positions are neither here nor there as far as the narrator's mother is concerned (though perhaps from the wounded soldiers' point of view there is a danger that the unbuttoned flies might indeed reveal the naked phallic power – or given their wounded and dependent status, its lack - the projection of which on a national scale is surely part of the motivation for the war⁹). Thus, after Mrs Moss-Henry has resigned from the Red Cross, so does the narrator's mother: 'There was no need to go on. She had won the war' (131). The story may suggest that the war which cost millions of lives was entered into on a not dissimilarly irrational basis, as a quest for utter domination rather than for any particular principle. Kalata argues rather differently that 'the story firmly establishes the way in which buttons – normally associated with the feminine, domestic activity of sewing – are positively crucial to the Great War' and concludes that 'Warner's mother does finally ... "win the war", and in describing how she does so, Warner ... juxtaposes what [Elizabeth] Frost calls "the consolation of common objects" against "the carnage of the Great War" in an effort to suggest that "domestic detail is life-affirming, in stark contrast to the hierarchy of organised violence" ' (333). Though I agree that the story shows how the war is underpinned by domestic activity on the home front, I do not think that the narrator's mother is seen in contrast to the

violence of the war; on the contrary, war has entered the domestic and feminine here, so that the pyjama buttons become a site for conflict and domination. The buttons offer no consolation of the ordinary but rather confirm that the actual bodies of the wounded soldiers are as much subject to the negligent power of the narrator's mother as they are to the nation-states which have brought Europe to this pass. The feminine here is not opposing war, but mirroring it, and neither mother nor daughter become aware of this: only the reader does.

'How I left the Navy' also finds entertaining but revealing ways of narrating the differences between 'normal' and more critical views of patriotism. The first-person narrator recalls one of her mother's habitual behaviours towards her as a child, which is violently disrupted for reasons which remain mysterious to her for many years afterwards and to readers until the very close of the story. The behaviour is to do with the seemingly everyday matter of how she is dressed as a child:

Early in my life my mother dedicated me to the British Navy – for the winter months that is, and as far as possible. I was a little girl, and at that date little girls in England had not attained to trousers. From the waist down, therefore, I remained a member of the general public, wearing above my long brown woollen legs a short knife-pleated skirt of blue serge. The British Navy began with a sturdy square-cut coat – a coat in which one might meet the battle and the breeze ... and called a reefer. On my head I wore a hat such as British sailors wear: a circular and flattened navy-blue bun supported on a stiff band about an inch wide. Round the band was a black silk ribbon... and emblazoned on the ribbon in gold letters was the name of one or other of His Majesty's ships of war: H.M.S *Formidable*, or H.M.S *Medusa*, or some such. (64).

Why her mother was so established in this proxy habit, the narrator cannot say for sure – but offers several explanations, in which the practical apparently predominate over the ideological:

It might have been from patriotic motives ... or [because] I had an experimental disposition and a strong inclination towards gutters, ditches, newly tarred gates, and excitable dogs with large paws. When I was costumed by the Admiralty, the wear and tear was not so noticeable (64-5).

It is certainly the case that 'sailor-suits' for children were commonly used as everyday wear from the 1840s till the 1920s, and in this respect the narrator and the narrator's mother differ from their counterparts in 'My Mother Won the War' through being part of a commonly-adopted habit. We know the exact date of the first child's sailor-suit, since it was created for the young Prince of Wales for a visit to Ireland on the Royal Yacht in 1846 (Miller, 83, plate 87; Marshall 201). Sometime after that date the sailor-suit became a common children's garment for the reasonably well-to-do – and was said to be 'suitable for either sex' by a nineteenth-century women's journal¹⁰ (Marshall 201). Sylvia herself certainly wore such a suit and there is a photograph of her in her sailor's cap, though sadly the name of the ship is not legible (Harman 328; plate 2)¹¹ Its capacity to absorb hard wear and patriotic motives undoubtedly were both parts of its appeal: Noreen Marshall, a fashion historian, suggests that 'the sailor suit was long lived, its eventual popularity perhaps easy to understand in an island with a long naval tradition' (26). However, Warner's story is dedicated to exposing this 'normality' to scrutiny.

During some years of childhood the narrator notes that the only change in her dress is in the gold lettering on her sailor's hat:

Even so, I grew out of my clothes, but I did not grow out of the British Navy... I wish I could remember the names of the various ships of the line to which I rated. There was H.M.S *Agamemnon* ... and some *Thunderbolts* and *Terribles* and *Tigers*. Nice names. I had no objection to them (65).

This paragraph again refers to an actual item of Royal Naval dress, the rating's cap, which from 1857 onwards had to bear the name of the ship on which a sailor served

in gold (Miller 145, plate 63). The phrase 'Nice names. I had no objection to them' will later be subject to several ironies.

This paragraph, which marks slight change but mainly on-going stability, concludes the story's setting up of the habitual world of the narrator's childhood. It is followed immediately by the startling interruption of that normality, but not by any explanation:

And then one day everything happened. I had come in from my afternoon walk, no dirtier than usual, and wearing my nautical clothes, and redolent of ocean breezes because I had carried back a little bag of shrimps for nursery tea ... And suddenly my mother shot out of the drawing room as though she had been shot from a gun. Her face was pale and her eyes were blazing and wrath had made her as uncommunicative as any high-explosive shell. There was a moment of impact in which it seemed to me that I was completely done for ... I felt the navy-blue bun snatched from my head. The elastic twanged over my ears and past my chin. And when I reopened my eyes I saw my mother rip the ribbon from the bun, cast them both on the floor, and stamp on them. (65)

The narrator puts this scene 'away among the other mysteries' (66) and for the rest of her childhood wears a beaver-felt hat. Ten years later narrator and mother pass a London store: 'Isn't that where you used to buy my sailor caps?'. 'Horrible, disgusting place!' replies her mother. Again the narrator tries to put some explanations in place for her mother's behaviour: perhaps the shop exploits its hat-makers? Perhaps the chair of the board of directors is dishonest? Or the store restaurant has served her mother with 'a discreditable curry'? But no, the explanation is finally told by her mother, though in an order which leaves the final revelation until the very last paragraph. A pious neighbour had to tell the mother the truth about a shift in the meaning of her daughter's sailor-hat that year: 'the ship on your cap wasn't used as a battleship any longer. It was moored somewhere or other and used as a hospital ship for sailors with venereal disease' (67). The narrator's mother does her best to

keep her dignity (before the hat-stamping frenzy in the privacy of her own home), responding: 'How fortunate that you should know so much about the seamy side of the Navy. I have always preferred to think of our battleships in mid-ocean, doing our business in the deep waters. I should not care to brood over the degradation of such a proud, clean thing as a battleship' (66-7).

Such then is the apparent final revelation, in typical short story sequence, of the awful mystery which has motivated the whole of the narrative and which finally makes sense of it all: British sailors suffer casualties in brothels as well as on the high seas. 'What a trick' – says the mother of the shop – 'to play on an innocent child' (67). However, this is actually a kind of joke-ending, amusingly but only partially concealing a much more radical act of closure and disclosure which has already taken place halfway through the narrative, but of which the narrator's mother remains oblivious. What the hat-stamping scene actually reveals – though neither the narrator as character nor her mother detect this meaning – is the real meaning of the Royal Navy and its 'proud clean' battleships and 'nice names' such as *Thunderbolt* and *Terrible*. The imagery used of her mother at this point of discovery reveals what the Navy is really for: 'as though she had been shot from a gun', 'blazing and wrath', 'as uncommunicative as any high-explosive shell', 'done for'. From the point of view of the narrator's mother, venereal disease – the seamy underside of the Navy - cannot be revealed to children, but there is nothing about its surface role which is unsuitable for association with children through their patriotic clothes. Unlike venereal disease, the pre-Great War Royal Navy's new technological potential after 1906 to fire large calibre (typically 12 inch) high-explosive shells over a distance of several miles for the purpose of causing enormous damage and death

even on heavily armoured enemy battleships - some 8,655 British and German sailors being killed at the Battle of Jutland in 1916 (Steel and Hart 425) - is entirely 'respectable' (though perhaps, as with the pyjama trousers in the first story discussed, there is actually a hinted-at association - which the narrator's mother cannot at all see - between sailors as habitués of brothels and the national patriotic projection of phallic power through 'shot and shell'). That the story was submitted for publication in 1940, as the Second World War began its opening stages, may suggest a particular context.

'The Young Sailor' continues a maritime theme, though in this case the title refers to an actual member of the Royal Navy. The story recalls an event which took place when the narrator was 'sixteen ... and not in a state of religious exaltation' (if the narrator's biography corresponds with her author's, this age would date the event to 1909). The event was confirmation into the Church of England: 'I was confirmed in St. Paul's, and I do not regret it' (90). As we shall see, the whole of this sentence turns out by the end of the story to have meanings not apparent at this first utterance. It may be helpful as a starting point to give an Anglican statement of the purpose of confirmation:

Confirmation marks the point in the Christian journey where those who have been baptised as children make a firm commitment to Christian discipleship.

Through prayer and the laying on of hands by a bishop, the Church also asks God to give those being confirmed power, through the Holy Spirit, to live the life of discipleship. (Church of England web-site)¹²

Two things are rapidly established about this confirmation: firstly that it does not stem from the deep involvement of the narrator's family in religious belief; secondly

that it is not an individual experience, but rather a collective confirmation on a large scale. The first situation is established by the casual approach to the occasion:

I had some conversations on theology with a clerical friend of my parents, a man of signal goodness of heart but without much dialectical address ... My father ascertained that I was acquainted with the Thirty-Nine Articles and knew the Church Catechism by heart ... My mother gave much anxious consideration to how I could possibly combine wearing a veil with spectacles (90).

Apart from the bathos of the last concern with the veil / spectacle combination, lack of seriousness is indicated by some tell-tale word choices ('some conversations', 'ascertained', 'acquainted', 'without much', 'and of course'). The second situation of a mass experience is stressed throughout:

The incompatibility of my veil and spectacles ... was ... a handicap shared by a number of other candidates, and anything like stagefright was abolished by my being one of such a number that all I had to do was to do as all the others did. (91)

Thereafter, the entirely appropriate word 'flock' is frequently used (five times, including derivatives). Thus all the parents sit separately (fleetinglly characterised as wolves?): 'they could not get in amongst us; they were not part of the flock' (91). The narrator, though, is firmly included: 'I had very powerfully the sensation of being one of a flock, in an exceedingly handsome fold. We were such a large flock (I daresay there were five hundred of us...)' (92). In fact, the mass nature of the event plays a key role in the narrator's recollection of confirmation. The narrator explicitly categorises the Confirmation as more a social than spiritual experience due to its size:

It is in school chapels that confirmation candidates have visions and see doves hovering with marked solicitude over particular heads – usually their own heads. With the best will in the world ... I could not anticipate such a distinguishing dove's being requisitioned for the ceremony...Flocking, I felt, was the main thing. (92)

Indeed, the narrator goes on further to emphasise how much she associates Anglican liturgy with social functions and conformity. The positive pastoral idea of the Christian community as a 'flock' is gradually being transformed by the narrator into a critical view of the unthinking 'herd':

Any specifically pious thoughts I had were all of security, continuity, and conformity, with musing awareness that in the Book of Common Prayer the service of Confirmation is followed by the Solemnization of Matrimony, and that, in turn, by the Visitation of the Sick and the Burial of the Dead. (92)

These rites listed in the Book of Common Prayer evoke in the narrator a vista of the rest of her life – and a vista of conformity. Note the ironic twist the paragraph gives the word 'pious', so that while apparently meaning 'thoughts of a religious nature', it really comes to mean here 'conventional' thoughts.

This turn to social rather than spiritual thinking about the experience is reinforced by her disappointment in the Bishop (a key figure in Anglican Confirmation since it is a sacrament which can only be administered by a Bishop): 'I judged that he looked meagre, and that his cassock should not have shown so much of his boots, and that these boots should not have been ... such plainly secular boots' (92). It is only at this stage – as the Bishop preaches a sermon on the text 'The Wages of Sin is Death' - that the young sailor enters the story by exiting St Paul's:

He was edging his way past the knees and among the feet and hassocks of the half-dozen or so candidates seated between him and the aisle. Though he was doing it carefully and considerately he could not do it silently, and his face wore that expression of contained, unwilling woe that designates the truebred Englishman when he knows he is making himself conspicuous. Once disentangled, however, he looked cheerful, and walked lightly and briskly down the aisle and eventually out of the building. (93)

The 'flock' and the Bishop 'behaved as though nothing had happened', but clearly this individual exit plays against the narrator's previous stress on the mass

experience. The young sailor has (being English) found it difficult to make an individual move, but he has persisted, and seems notably liberated as he exits.

This incident – marked out as central by the story-title – also leads to the final phase of the narrative in which the narrator and her parents discuss the meaning of the young sailor’s action: ‘afterwards my parents and I often discussed this strange incident, each of us, as usual, with his own theory’ (93). Thus her mother argues that the sailor had never intended to be confirmed, but was sight-seeing and had sat down and fallen asleep before the mass of confirmation candidates arrived. This theory she backs up with two powerful authorities:

A young sailor could sleep through anything; we had Shakespeare’s word for it, and Shakespeare was always right. So the young sailor slept on, peacefully as though upon the high and giddy mast ... Then ... the young sailor had woken, realized his peril, and got out just in time. Nelson would have been delighted – my mother rated Nelson only one below Shakespeare. (94)

Shakespeare had, of course, an authority based partly on his status as the representative of an essential Englishness, an iconic status often given a particularly patriotic spin in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Certainly, during the First World War Shakespeare was seen in this way:

British culture ... was presented by the wisdom of Shakespeare ... Public lectures were widely organized in 1916 to mark the three-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. These commemorations were often stridently patriotic in tone... [and] *The Times* ... produced a series of patriotic broadsheets for the trenches excerpted from the works of Shakespeare [and other authors] (Robb 131)

Nelson is clearly an icon of British naval heroism, but it seems to be taken for granted by the narrator’s mother that Shakespeare and Nelson seamlessly represent the highest national virtues. The linking of the two is partly just by association: the narrator’s mother recalls first Shakespeare’s *Henry VI, Part 2*, Act 3 Scene 3 (‘Wilt

thou upon the high and giddy mast / Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains / In cradle of the rude imperious surge ...?']') and then the topic of sailors conjures up Nelson. But it is also implied to be a quite 'normal' perception at the period to see nothing odd in relating so closely an admiral and a playwright as standing for the same set of national values. The story itself allows this association to be at least gently mocked by an implication that the link is an insufficiently rational one on the part of the narrator's mildly eccentric mother. Moreover, the narrator's father also casts doubt on multiple aspects of the narrator's mother's explanations of the young sailor:

My mother, he said, took Shakespeare too literally, and did not make allowance for speaking in character. A king might very well suppose that a wet sea-boy could sleep like a dormouse on the masthead during a storm ... but that was not to say that Shakespeare thought so himself. By my father's reading of the incident the young sailor has gone ... to St Paul's like any other of the candidates, only he had been insufficiently prepared – prepared for the length of the service. A call of nature had been too strong for him; he had gone out to find a public convenience and then felt too self-conscious to come in again. (94)

The implied reader is likely to find this more sophisticated critical reading of Shakespeare superior to that of the narrator's mother and this will probably reduce their faith in her reading of the young sailor. Even though her invocation of Shakespeare as authority for her interpretation might be thought to have little real evidential relevance, the reader is likely by this time to be thoroughly distracted from the mother's original main point about the young sailor's behaviour. In fact, and despite the narrator's father's equally digressive continuation of an argument about how to interpret Shakespeare's (or a king's) authority, his actual explanation itself shows a distinct register shift from the literary, cultural and heroic to the most basic of needs. The young sailor's alleged lack of preparation recalls the narrator's own somewhat casual preparation for confirmation (90), but shifts it from a matter of lack

of spiritual commitment to a matter of bodily preparation. Thus in the story so far, full participation in confirmation has been undermined first through the narrator's (and her parent's) casual approach, then by her rejection of the likelihood of any spiritual vision, and now by a third party's urgent physical imperative.

However, at the last paragraph of the story we reach the narrator's own reading of the young sailor, and through that her interpretation of the whole of her experience of confirmation. Indeed, it is noticeable that in the conclusion of this story so concerned with reading and interpreting, the question of interpreting texts is brought to the foreground by the father's discussion of whose voice we hear in a text and the explicit reference to 'my father's reading'. The narrator's own reading of the incident will cause us to re-read a number of her previous statements:

I considered both these theories ingenious but wrong. In my view, the young sailor decided that he did not care about being confirmed ... I did not add, for it is no use going into that sort of thing with even the most emancipated of parents ... that the young sailor's action had filled me with such admiration for his independent mind and such shame at my own sheepish conformity that though I went on being confirmed, I was to all intents and purposes unconscious of it.... A light had surprised me. A dove had descended where I was least expecting it. A profound spiritual experience had taken place ... I knew that I would follow the young sailor out. (94-5)

Here the earlier use of the word 'flock' is reinterpreted as 'sheepish conformity' as the sailor becomes a symbol of individual resistance. The sailor has become a kind of text (replacing the Bishop's text) which the parents and the narrator read (the parents through Shakespeare, the narrator more directly). Despite their different readings, none of these readers regard the fact that the sailor misses confirmation as of importance. However, their reactions are still to be distinguished. While remarking on her parent's 'emancipated' attitudes, the narrator still feels it would be 'no use'

explaining her own reading of the sailor. For she does have a 'profound spiritual experience' which contrasts strongly with her parents' laissez-faire attitude to confirmation; the implication seems to be that while her parents do not really believe deeply in confirmation, and by extension, in the rites of the Church of England, neither are they prepared to reject at least the outer social ritual of this national institution, the Established Church.

But, of course, the narrator's 'experience' is an ironic one. Firstly, she is so distracted by the sailor and her interpretation of his action that she is 'unconscious' of the rite of confirmation which she is undergoing. Thus though she is present, she is in another sense not really there at all – and since confirmation is regarded as conscious affirmation of faith by an adult ('marks the point where ... those who have been baptised as children make a firm commitment to Christian discipleship'), it might be said that she has not actually experienced confirmation. Secondly, she is aware that instead she has experienced an ironic confirmation (an unlooked for dove has descended) – a confirmation that she does not believe in confirmation nor in the values which she sees the Anglican Church as representing. She knows now that she will, in a metaphorical and long-term sense, 'follow the sailor out', will reject social and religious conventions for a more individual path. Thus the narrator's whole future is effected by this event so lightly undertaken, and her earlier summation of the experience can now be fully and retrospectively read by the reader with the force of individual meaning it has finally achieved for the narrator: 'I was confirmed in St. Paul's, and I do not regret it'. This story, like the two earlier narratives, focuses on the force of social habit, but where in 'My Mother Won the War' and 'How I Left the Navy' no character within the narrative ever sees the subversive ironies at work,

here the narrator achieves insight. It is perhaps ironic that this vision is the result of observing the behaviours of 'a young man wearing the uniform of a rating in the Royal Navy' (93), who surely in most situations would act as a protector of national, traditional and established values.

Jane Garrity discusses Warner's first novel *Lolly Willowes* very fully as part of her wide-ranging argument about the ways in which women are figured as part of a 'national imaginary' in interwar Britain:

British women were viewed primarily as mothers, not daughters, in the eyes of the State...chiefly valued as national assets because they could bear healthy white citizens, these select Englishwomen would both stabilize the imaginary borders of the nation and contribute to the expansion of its empire (2003: 1)

Even when staging 'critical resistance' to nationalism and imperialism, Garrity argues, (modernist) women's writing of the period also is nevertheless bound up with the hegemony of such national, imperial and racial narratives. It is indeed notable how important the figures of mother and daughter are in these three short stories about patriotism. Certainly, in the first two stories the mother, despite some individual eccentricity and considerable agency is, nevertheless, a figure who does indeed contribute to the dominant patriotic myths of 'Great Britain', while the narrator-daughter is also apparently obediently fulfilling her national duty in following her mother's lead. However, the daughter-narrator also opens up an alternative subversive reading of her mother for the reader, while still herself apparently continuing to conform. In the third story, this liberating escape from a matriarchal-seeming (but in fact patriarchal) domination is available not just to the reader but also to the daughter-narrator within the story.

These three stories are good examples of how some of Sylvia's *New Yorker* stories deal in her inimitable way with the patriotic atmosphere of Great Britain in the years before and during the First World War. They draw on the social and historical reality of that period, but radically transform this reality through narrative and linguistic creativity. Sylvia once claimed to her editor at the *New Yorker*, William Maxwell, 'I can always appease my craving for the improbable by recording with perfect truth my own childhood' (Harman 248). Sylvia Townsend Warner's work in this genre deserves wider reading and greater critical attention. This article has focused specifically on the theme of patriotism and conformity in her *New Yorker* stories to show some of the richness of her work for that periodical, the considerable coherence of which across stories is made visible in the posthumous collection, *Scenes of Childhood*. A broader consideration is that the short story was an important aspect of her *oeuvre* (both artistically and financially) and during her lifetime reached a larger and wider readership than her novels or poetry, but also shows interesting continuities with the novels at least. However, this broad (though, as *New Yorker* readers, also self-selected as sophisticated) readership does not seem to have necessitated any modification of her fictional critiques of nationalism or patriarchy, which remain, as in her longer fiction, simultaneously accessible and teasingly complex and indirect.

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¹ I have written elsewhere about Holtby's stories – see ' "Frustrated Spinsters" and "Morbid Degenerates"?: Women and Men in Winifred Holtby's *Truth is Not Sober* (1934) in *A Woman in Her Time: Winifred Holtby: Critical Essays*, ed. Lisa Regan, Newcastle, Scholar's Press, pp. 149-171, March 2010. I also have a forthcoming article which considers examples of short stories by each of these authors ('A Certain Amount of Instruction': Politics, Entertainment and Narration in the Interwar Short Stories of Winifred Holtby, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Naomi Mitchison, *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, forthcoming 2013). This shares a little material with the current essay (it discusses 'How I Left the Navy'), but there is less emphasis on historicising the stories and more stress on technical analysis of their narration.

² Kalata's article referred to above and John Simon's essay on her Kingdoms of Elfin stories, 'On the compositional genetics of the Kingdoms of Elfin together with a Note on Tortoises', in Gill Davies, David Malcolm and John Simon (eds), *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner, English Novelist 1893-1978*, Edwin Mellen Press: Lampeter, 2006, 45-60.

³ The essay is discussed by Rita Kondrath, as is Warner's long poem *Opus 7*, which also focuses on some after effects of the Great War.

⁴ See my 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Historical Novel 1936-1948' and David Malcolm's 'The Flint Anchor and the Conventions of Historical Fiction' in *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner, English Novelist 1893-1978*, Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006, 117-144, 145-162.

⁵ The biography gives further evidence of the importance of the *New Yorker* in Warner's career, as the frequent listings in Harman's index suggest.

⁶ Harman comments that for Sylvia there was something therapeutic about using autobiographical material in a number of her *New Yorker* stories and that 'this editing of painful episodes' (her

childhood relationship with her mother became difficult after her eight birthday) ‘was a healing process and one she was to apply liberally to her memories of her mother later on’ (190).

⁷ See *Scenes of Childhood and Other Stories*, 125-131, 64-67, 153-56 and 90-95.

⁸ Two other *Scenes of Childhood* first-world-war stories which I have not space to discuss here were also post-Second World War *New Yorker* stories: ‘Troublemaker’ (April 27th, 1946) and ‘Battles Long Ago’ (May 17, 1952). The *New Yorker* Digital Archive has proved invaluable in writing this article.

⁹ A short article (‘The Convalescent Blues in Frederick Cayley Robinson’s *Acts of Mercy*’, available from the Wellcome Library at <http://libraryblog.wellcome.ac.uk/libraryblog/2010/06/the-convalescent-blues-in-frederick-cayley-robinsons-acts-of-mercy/>, last accessed 8/1/12) by Jeffrey S. Reznik does indeed discuss lack of dignity and possible feminisation in relation to the British Army’s adoption from 1914 onwards of a standard blue convalescent uniform ‘which resembled ill-fitting pyjamas’. However, the pyjamas in the story seem to be those provided by voluntary activity rather than supplied according to the Army Council’s pattern (see Note 2 in Reznik’s article). Reznik’s monograph has a fuller discussion of the ‘Convalescent Blues’ and wider issues of how wounded soldiers were treated – see (2004) *Healing the Nation: Soldiers and the Culture of Caregiving in Britain During the Great War*.

¹⁰ The journal was *Myra’s Journal*, 1 August 1883 and the report quotes from the manufacturer’s advertising material.

¹¹ Harman says ‘Dressed in blue serge and wearing a sailor hat and the name of a warship, the little-black-haired girl bowled her hoop down the lanes between Harrow and Roxeth’ (7).

¹² This is of course a current statement of the view of Confirmation, rather than a statement relating to either the setting of the story in circa 1909, or its writing in 1954.