

**“Without methods”:
Three Female Authors Visiting the Western Front**

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This essay focuses on May Sinclair’s *A Journal of Impressions of Belgium* (1914), Mary Roberts Rinehart’s *Kings, Queens and Pawns: An American Woman at the Front* (1915), and Edith Wharton’s *Fighting France, from Dunkerque to Belfort* (1915) and examines how these writers reflected and negotiated in their writing their status as eyewitnesses to the First World War. In a male dominated world, the presence of women writers at the front was unusual. These three authors wrote about their condition as “other” in a world that had been traditionally secluded for them, and had to negotiate the strategies they would resort to in order to portray the conflict.

Keywords: eyewitness accounts; literary journalism; war reportage; May Sinclair; Edith Wharton; Mary R. Rinehart, World War I literature.

In the early months of the Great War, numerous journalists and writers visited the Western Front and the surrounding areas to later on publish their eyewitness accounts on the conflict. This period was marked by a fierce censorship that forced journalists to compete with each other to get scoops on life in the war zone. Among the travellers who visited the Western Front in 1914 and 1915, we can find men and women of different and varied backgrounds: free-lance and adventurous young men from neutral nations, British men of letters too old to fight but still willing to contribute to the war effort, well-known American correspondents who had achieved the status of celebrities in

previous conflicts, and daring women who, challenging the conventions of the period, embarked on an individual adventure and broke into traditionally forbidden territories for them.

Although the presence of women writers at the front was unusual, several women authors managed to access the “forbidden zone” to later publish their war reports in well-known publications of the period. Traditional criticism on First World War literature has focused on the texts produced by male writers, particularly on the literature created by those who fought in the conflict. This perspective has been attributed to the fact that women’s writing was “inevitably less significant as an expression of the experience of war since only men had actually fought”.¹ This argument has been constantly challenged since Sandra Gilbert published in 1983, “Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women and the Great War”. Several studies that followed Gilbert’s essay have given considerable evidence that women – both at the Home Front and out of their experiences near the firing line– also wrote widely on the war.²

These studies have mainly focused on women’s fictional responses to the war. Yet, several women journalists or well-known literary writers wrote first-hand accounts from the war zone. These have been rendered rather invisible, not only in literary criticism but also in studies related to journalism during the First World War. Studies on war journalism such as Philip Knightley’s influential *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam, the War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth Maker* (1975) and Mary Mander’s *Pen and Sword: American War Correspondents 1898-1975* (2010) have focused on the history of war male correspondents, overlooking women’s accounts. Similarly, those studies exclusively devoted to the journalism produced during the First World War, such as Emmet Crozier’s *American Reporters on the Western Front* (1959) or Martin Farrar’s *News from the Front: War Correspondents on the Western Front 1914-18* (1998), have likewise ignored women’s contributions to this field.

Those women who became direct witnesses of the war moved beyond a purely propagandistic perspective and their presence in the territories of war gave them literary legitimacy and a valid point of observation that is worth considering. During their time in the war zone, women were aware of the exceptionality of their presence in a quintessentially male space. Some men –war reporters who might have felt disturbed by

the presence of women in a historical “male” preserve—questioned and often ridiculed the women they encountered. The American war correspondent Alexander Powell was one of them. In the first chapter of his book *Fighting in Flanders* (1914), he was highly critical, even disdainful, towards the role of the woman reporter. Among the different correspondents that he encountered, he describes “a young and slender and very beautiful English girl whose name, as a novelist and playwright, is known on both sides of the Atlantic”.³ Powell’s focus is on the physical attributes of the woman correspondent, highlighting her most lady-like attributes: her youth, her figure, and her beauty. Furthermore, instead of showing amazement at her presence, his tone adopts a patronising and mocking attitude:

She had arrived in Belgium wearing a London tailor's idea of what constituted a suitable costume for a war correspondent She explained that she brought the sleeping-bag because she understood that war correspondents always slept in the field. As most of the fields in that part of Flanders were just then under several inches of water as a result of the autumn rains, a folding canoe would have been more useful.⁴

Powell observed F. Tennyson Jesse’s inadequate war correspondent kit, giving evidence of one of the difficulties that these pioneer women had to face: they did not know how to properly dress in the war zones.⁵

Women travelling to the war zone and writing about their experiences were forced to cope not only with psychological and artistic limitations of having to encroach upon a rhetorical territory that has historically been a male preserve. As Dorothy Goldman, Judith Hattaway, and Jane Gledhill have explained in *Women Writers and the Great War* (1995), women’s war experience was “novel, challenging, and more varied than that of men. Without methods, they often did not know the appropriate response to their new circumstance”.⁶ In this article I will explore how three of these women authors wrote about their condition as “other” in a world that had been traditionally out of bounds for them. I will examine May Sinclair’s *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (1914), Mary Roberts Rinehart’s *Kings, Queens and Pawns: An American Woman at the Front* (1915), and Edith Wharton’s *Fighting France, from Dunkerque to Belfort* (1915), showing how these writers reflected and negotiated in their writing their status

as eyewitnesses of the war and looking at some of the means they resorted to in order to portray this exceptional experience.

The Importance of Being an Eyewitness

In order to understand the presence and attitudes of these women in the territories of war one must consider how journalism perceived exceptional reports written by women in the period. By the second half of the nineteenth century newspapers started to become less politically and started to focus on striking or exceptional events.⁷ People were interested in what is known today as “human interest stories . . . amusing, moving, or unusual episodes, incidents or experiences in ordinary people’s lives”.⁸ This reorientation of priorities greatly facilitated women’s entrance into the field of journalism: if an astonishing feat caused sensation when performed by a man, it was twice as interesting to the public when the same deed was carried out by a woman.

Sinclair, Wharton, and Rinehart benefited from this interest in women’s adventure stories. The three were among the few civilian women who entered the war zone without being involved in nursing duties, but they became eyewitnesses of the war for dissimilar reasons. The American writer Edith Wharton (1862-1937) supported the Allied cause from the very beginning. Wharton, a well-known figure celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic when the war broke out, had established her permanent residence in France in 1907, and when the war started she made the French cause her own. Alan Price summarises in “Wharton Mobilizes Artists to Aid the War Homeless” (2003) Wharton’s attitude towards the conflict: “No other artist did so much to alleviate the suffering among the refugees from Belgium and the occupied provinces of northern France or was able to enlist such a variety of fellow artists in such a broad range of projects to raise money for the war homeless”.⁹ Wharton created an American committee in France to raise funds to help the Belgian refugees and she also founded the “Edith Wharton Committees” in the United States that organised fund-raising campaigns to subsidise her major war charities. These charities would provide food, employment, medical attention, and classes for children in France. By the end of 1914, she had raised nearly one hundred thousand dollars; and by the end of the first year of the war, her American Hostels had assisted more than nine thousand refugees, served two hundred and thirty-five thousand meals, given nearly five thousand garments, and provided medical attention to eight thousand people.¹⁰

Wharton considered her war writing as a tool in the service of the Allied cause. Hermione Lee has remarked that “she decided from the start that her war writing (poetry and fiction included) should become part of her war-work”.¹¹ In early 1915, the French Red Cross asked Wharton to “report on the needs of some military hospitals near the front”.¹² Sponsored by this institution and helped by her influential connections in the French government, she became one of the very few foreigners to be allowed into “the forbidden zone”, an exceptional circumstance that Wharton used to inform her American readers of the desperate condition of hospitals and second-line ambulances near the battlefield. She then suggested the French diplomat Jules Cambon and her own American editor, Charles Scribner, “to make other trips to the front, and recount [her] experiences in a series of magazine articles”.¹³ Edith Wharton, who had always been a passionate traveller, took this opportunity to tour in her own car the length of the Western Front. Between February and August 1915, she undertook five extensive trips, which resulted in four serialised articles for *Scribner's Magazine*, similar to other travelogues she produced, such as *A Motor-flight through France* (1908) or *In Morocco* (1920). These articles, together with two additional essays, “The Look of Paris” and “The Tone of France”, would later be gathered into *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort*.

Her American compatriot, Mary Roberts Rinehart (1879-1958), was a well-known author in America during her time, primarily for her works of crime fiction such as *The Circular Staircase* (1908). However, the interest that Rinehart's war reports aroused made her achieve the status of national celebrity. As opposed to Wharton, Rinehart did not get involved in the war as a consequence of her political or emotional implication; she was simply an American who wanted to take the opportunity to witness a unique event in world history. Rinehart was one of the major contributors to *The Saturday Evening Post*, a newspaper that sold around two million copies per week in 1913 and which had an audience of around ten million readers.¹⁴ The author had been a curious woman with a developed sense of adventure since she was very young, and she often regretted not being able to see the things that were happening in the world.¹⁵ For this reason, when the conflict in Europe broke out, she knew from the very beginning that she “wanted to go to the war”.¹⁶

Rinehart spent some time trying to convince her editor of *The Saturday Evening Post*, George Lorimer, to send her to Europe. Although reluctant at first, he soon

realised the potential interest that the unusual story of an American woman at the front would have for American readers.¹⁷ Rinehart was not the first woman that Lorimer had sent to cover the conflict: at the end of 1914 he had asked Corra Harris to spend a few weeks in London covering the war from a woman's perspective. Harris also went to France and tried to visit Soissons, "within the range of the enemy cannon",¹⁸ but did not succeed in her attempt. Rinehart, on her part, convinced Lorimer that she would succeed in entering the theatres of war and, after promising him that her reports would be exclusively written for the *Post*, finally left for Europe in January 1915, on board the *Arabic*, which was "later sunk by a German submarine".¹⁹ The American journalist was therefore aware that she "had to put herself in a position to accomplish things women had not previously accomplished".²⁰ Her trip aroused the interest of the American press, with photographers gathered around her house in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, on the day of her departure.

A few months before Rinehart's trip to Europe, May Sinclair (1863-1946) visited Belgium as a member of an ambulance unit. Sinclair was one of the most well-known British women writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She had published a number of successful novels, as well as essays on avant-garde poetry, philosophical works based on German idealism, poetry, political pamphlets, translation, and journalism. She was also notable for her involvement in the suffragist campaign as a member of the Woman's Freedom League, and was an enthusiastic supporter of the war, as shown in her signing of the Author's Manifesto in September 1914.²¹

In September 1914, she crossed the English Channel with the Flying Ambulance Corps. A middle-aged woman writer, with no medical or driving skills to offer, Sinclair was an unlikely presence in an ambulance unit. But Dr. Munro had invited her to join them on account of her fame as a writer and of her generous donations to the corps. Despite her feelings of apprehension lest she would not make any active contribution to the corps, Sinclair (aged 51) saw the war "as her last chance for adventure".²² Sinclair spent two weeks and a half in Belgium acting as a sort of secretary and reporter for the unit. Her main role was to write reports for the press which might help raise funds for the corps and support the war effort in Britain and other countries. But her "adventure" in the war zone would not last long. After some painful attempts on her part to be rendered useful, she was requested to return to Britain. Her exclusion shocked and humiliated her, and in *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*, published almost a year

after her trip to Belgium, she revisited her disheartening experience with Munro's Ambulance Corps.

According to Suzanne Raitt, Sinclair felt that “the war had irreparably altered both her own consciousness and the world in which she lived”²³. Despite this transformation, Sinclair's strong support of the British cause continued throughout the whole conflict. In addition to *A Journal of Impressions*, May Sinclair published six novels that are set in the war zone or in which the conflict is part of the plot. Her commitment to the war effort would also make her reject pacifism. In 1917 she told the Irish poet Katharine Hinkson that she had remained a war supporter because, in her own words, pacifism was “the worst conceivable treachery to the men who've fought & died since 1914 & to their wives & mothers & children”.²⁴

The authors were well aware of the appeal that their presence in the theatre of war would have for newspaper readers back home. Prior to the beginning of her French war experience, Wharton had highlighted to her editor at *Scribner's Magazine* that she was going to visit areas that no other civilians had been permitted to visit,²⁵ and she does not ever let the reader lose sight of this fact. On her first expedition to the front she inspected a number of makeshift hospitals in and around Verdun, from where the civilian population had been evacuated. In *Fighting France* she explains that the object of her journey was to get to some of the “second-line ambulances beyond the town”, and she is quick to point out that there were no women nurses in any of these dressing stations.²⁶ Thus, Wharton stresses the significance of her presence there.

In May 1915, Wharton was offered a unique opportunity to visit the trenches and observation posts in Lorraine and the Vosges. While she was touring the battlefields near Nancy, the author found herself one morning “launched into the unknown” (57). After a long ride into the wooded hills the author arrived at a “black village” (58), one of the camps to which the soldiers retired to rest after completing their shifts in the frontline trenches. The soldiers gathered around her car and they are surprised and pleased to see her there, “for few visitors climb to this point” (ibid.) The soldiers' “pleasure at the sight of new faces was presently expressed in a large ‘*Vive l'Amerique!*’” (ibid.). Her reference to the soldiers' pleasant faces, added to the manner in which she claims they looked at her, obliquely hints at the unusualness of her presence at this remote point.

In *Kings, Queens and Pawns: An American Woman at the Front* Mary Roberts Rinehart follows a parallel strategy to the one employed by Wharton, highlighting the implications of her presence in the war territories. The title is already an indication of how the author advertises the singularity of the account that follows. She acknowledges being the only woman in the war zone on many occasions in her narrative. Although she includes a chapter called “The Women at the Front”, references to other women are scarce. Rinehart starts her story by describing the journey that took her from England to France. At this early point in her story, she already announces that “there were no other women on board” (8) She writes that she was surrounded by officers of the British Army and some Indian soldiers, but not a single female figure appears on the scene. She singles herself as the other, the exotic element among a crowd of men.

On another occasion, this time in Dunkirk, during one of her first real contacts with the war, she describes another situation in which she stands out as the only woman. While she was having dinner with some officers, an unexpected night raid took place and the author was about to lose her nerves. But in spite of her rising panic, Rinehart determined to stay in her place. As she explains in her narrative, “I wanted to go to the cellar or to crawl into the office safe. But I felt that, as the only woman and as the only American about, I held the reputation of America and of my sex in my hands” (52). Indeed, she was the only woman and the only American at the scene and she felt that she needed to come out of this ordeal with her self-esteem intact. The author uses the night raid as yet another opportunity to stress the singularity of her presence in the war zone. She seems to be the only American and the only woman to witness the recorded event. Further on, in Chapter X, Rinehart parallels Wharton when she is about to penetrate the Belgian lines around L.²⁷: she makes clear that she “was the only woman who had been so near the front, for out [there] there are no nurses” (64-65). If not even female nurses were allowed in the area, no doubt could be left in the reader’s mind that Rinehart’s presence in the war zone was a truly remarkable fact.

As opposed to Rinehart and Wharton, Sinclair describes her presence in the war zone in a radically different manner. This may be attributed to the circumstances under which she travelled to the front. As Laurel Forster has explained, although the journal was written from within the battle zone, it is narrated from the perspective of an outsider in the war experience.²⁸ Whereas the two American writers entered the war zone on an individual enterprise, Sinclair went to Belgium as a member of an ambulance unit

which included other four—younger—women. The other women in the corps had either driving skills or nursing experience,²⁹ and were therefore capable of actively contributing to the war cause. Sinclair's presence in the *zone des armées*, on the other hand, implied “merely” reporting for British readers on general conditions in Belgium. Sinclair felt from the start an alien element within the group, something she acknowledges at the very beginning of *A Journal of Impressions*: “I don't know where I come in” (4). Constant comparisons with the other women in the unit punctuate her writing so that her “journal of impressions” is marked by feelings of competition among the women in the ambulance unit, and Sinclair's increasing sense of not fitting in.

When she joined the Flying Ambulance Corps, Sinclair had expected to enter the battlefield to pick up the wounded, but in *A Journal of Impressions* this expectation is frustrated again and again. On the third day of her stay in Belgium, Sinclair reports that the ambulance car was sent to Aalst, where a confrontation was taking place between the German troops and a Belgian patrol. Because the excursion was dangerous, Dr. Munro decided not to bring in any of the female members of the corps, a fact that prompts Sinclair to declare: “Of all the things that can happen to a woman on a field ambulance, the worst is to stay behind” (36). In her text Sinclair also reflects how the rest of the women were equally “disgusted with their fate” (*ibid.*). A second chance arose again that day when Munro sent another ambulance to the scene of fighting, but even though this time two women were included in the adventure, Sinclair was once again left behind.

In her diary entrance of 1 October 1914, Sinclair acknowledges that she nourished “an insane ambition” (1915: 89): to go out in the Field Ambulance as an *ambulancière*. Geneviève Brassard has alleged that this recognition reveals the true and secret purpose of Sinclair's trip to Belgium (and is also the underlying theme of *A Journal of Impressions*): “She's playing the part of the reporter when she truly wants to be one of the rescuers, driving ambulances under shell-fire and bringing wounded to safety”.³⁰ As Teresa Gómez Reus has argued in “Racing to the Front: Auto-mobility and Competing Narratives of Women in the First World War” (2013), the field ambulance “constitutes an object of desire, a magic threshold and a talisman against feelings of mortification and inadequacy”.³¹ Like in Arnold van Gennep's rite of passage, Gómez Reus asserts “climbing into this risk-laden machine would allow the neophyte Sinclair to travel into the wilderness, be tested and then return triumphant and be reassimilated

into her community. Yet, this highly coveted in-between space remains agonizingly off limits for her".³²

Sinclair constantly attempted to go out in the field ambulance and constantly failed to achieve her objective. Of particular relevance is Sinclair's incident with Elsie Knocker on 10 October 1914. The members of the ambulance unit had spent that day and the previous one assisting the wounded in the Belgian village of Melle, when at the end of the day it was announced to them that there were "no French or Belgian wounded left, but that two wounded Germans were still lying over there among the turnips" (211). Knocker, Janet McNeill, and Sinclair did not want to leave the German soldiers behind and the three women finally convinced an Army Medical Officer to allow them to go in to assist the wounded, Sinclair included. However, when the British author attempted to get in the ambulance she was violently pushed out of the ambulance by Knocker, who Sinclair recalls saying to her: "You can't come. You'll take the place of a wounded man" (214). From Knocker's point of view, being no nurse, Sinclair's presence in the field made no sense.

The humiliated British writer defines this event as "the most revolting thing that had happened to me in a life filled with incidents that I have no desire to repeat" (ibid.). Her initial emotion and her gratitude towards that Belgian Medical Officer suddenly vanish after being shamefully deprived of the opportunity of going in the ambulance that would rescue the German soldiers. Three days after this episode, Sinclair was subtly excluded from the corps with the excuse that she had to go back to England to raise more funds for the Ambulance unit. She did not manage to acquire the experiences she had expected to attain in the war zone and she felt that she had been incapable of proving her worth. On the contrary, being "so near the action and yet so useless turns her into a pathetic and pitiful figure".³³ Sinclair turned into a frustrated visitor to the war zone who nourished a personal or patriotic desire to play a more active role in the conflict, and was incapable of doing so.

Negotiating with the Visual Experience

As I anticipated at the beginning of this essay, women who wrote about the war often lacked methods to describe their war experience. These women had crossed the threshold of their familiar world and had entered the "symbolic and spatial area of transition".³⁴ Therefore, the assurance of having seen with one's own eyes played a key

role in the portrayal of their experience in that unknown world and also in their attempt to endow their texts with a stamp of authenticity.

Rinehart makes very frequent use of the words “I have seen” in *Kings, Queens and Pawns*. The formula is repeated more than twenty times in the course of her narrative, and she always uses it in a distinctly martial context. Thus, she claims to have seen “British regiments at ease” (106), “various artillery duels” (116), the “flat and muddy battlefield” (118) in which the men had fought during the Battle of Ypres, or “a number of anti-aircraft stations at the front” (129) which, she insists, she has seen “in action” (ibid.). Rinehart seeks rhetorically and visually to enter a territory that had traditionally been restricted to those who had experienced or witnessed actual combat. The author, in spite of being a non-combatant and a woman, is nonetheless able to *see* aspects of the Great War that the overwhelming majority of civilians –let alone women– would never get to see for themselves.

The importance of the women’s visual experience is also stressed by the members of the military that she encountered. One morning, after having visited the trenches in Belgium, Rinehart was having lunch with some of the combatants when Captain F.³⁵ asked her to inform America of what she had seen:

You have seen to-night a part of what is happening to our country . . . You have seen what the invading hosts of Germany have made us suffer. But you have seen more than that. You have seen that the Belgian Army still exists; that it is still fighting and will continue to fight . . . Tell America, tell the world, that destroyed, injured as she is, Belgium lives and will rise again, greater than before! (79)

The emphasis on the act of seeing brings out the fact that the author had been granted the opportunity of observing things that no other reporters had been allowed to see. She was a privileged observer of the destructive consequences of the war and she was invited to explain her American audience what her eyes had seen. The Captain insists that she should take advantage of her unique position in order to promote the Belgian cause, presenting it as an invaded but still fighting and resisting nation. He begs her to inform the world about the things that she has witnessed and to denounce the Belgian plight. But he also wants her to paint a particular portrait of the Belgian people.

The three authors had nothing but their own individual experiences and their own literary resources to fall back on in their endeavour to write about the war. The trips the three female authors took to the war zone may be interpreted as a *bildungs* experience that triggered in them conflicting emotions. Edith Wharton and Mary Roberts Rinehart travelled through different war zones and give evidence in their narratives of the havoc that the conflict had wreaked among the civilian population: the ruined and deserted villages and towns, the empty convents, or the depopulated landscapes. They also came across images of the wreckage left by the battles: the sinister fields covered with crosses, and the hospitals crowded with wounded and maimed combatants. However, the most significant fact is that the two women got a visual impression of the war in a way very few other civilians had done: both of them visited the first-line trenches, had the opportunity of getting a fleeting glimpse of the German enemy, and had the chance of experiencing the disturbing emotions produced by the labyrinths of the trenches. Both of them had to deal with the challenges of representing this war which Edith Wharton qualified as “the greatest of paradoxes” (24).

In “War is the Greatest of Paradoxes: May Sinclair and Edith Wharton at the Front” (2008), Geneviève Brassard reflects on the conflicting emotions that are depicted in *Fighting France*. She argues that the themes of Wharton’s text focus on the author’s “key perceptions such as horrors at the devastation wrought by war, and excitement at traveling to the front”.³⁶ Wharton’s overall perception, Brassard contends, “can be described as a view that finds war paradoxical in its uncanny juxtaposition of exhilaration and horror”.³⁷ This idea has also been discussed by Julie Olin-Ammentorp, who maintains that it is precisely in the juxtaposition between the “unremittingly realistic and horrible on the one hand, the reassuringly romantic, on the other” where the central tension of *Fighting France* resides.³⁸ Wharton’s expressions of the horror of the war are particularly vivid in her descriptions of the destroyed towns she encountered everywhere on her journey. Teresa Gómez Reus and Peter Lauber have explored the manner in which the American author conveyed her impressions of the havoc that the war was causing through anthropomorphised images of “murdered houses” and decapitated churches, which, according to these critics, are the true protagonists of her narrative.³⁹ In Gerbéviller, which had become “the martyr town” (Wharton 2010: 45) after the brief German occupation in August 1914, she was appalled by the sight of the ravaged houses and gardens, and she fell back on biblical images⁴⁰ to do justice to the

scene: “Her ruins seem to have been simultaneously vomited up from the depths and hurled down from the skies, as though she had perished in some monstrous clash of earthquake and tornado” (Wharton 2010: 45).

However, besides Wharton’s descriptions of the destruction the war was causing in French architecture and ways of life, feelings of genuine excitement are also found in her narrative. On 15 August 1915, during her visit to the reconquered territories of Alsace, she acknowledges how being granted access to a corner of the front which had “hitherto been inaccessible, even to highly placed French officials”, aroused in her “a special sense of excitement” (87). During her first day at the trenches, on 17 May 1915, Wharton had the opportunity of catching a glimpse of the otherwise undetectable German enemy. At first the indiscernible opponent awoke in her an acute feeling of the uncanny. The American author felt for a minute “the sense of an all-pervading invisible power of evil, a saturation of the whole landscape with some hidden vitriol of hate” (62). This eerie sense of peril was relieved when she finally managed to catch sight of a dead German. Wharton was given the opportunity to look through a peephole and she “at last” (ibid.) saw the hitherto invisible German enemy: “It was almost a relief to find it was after all a tangible enemy hidden over there across the meadow” (ibid.). Seeing the dead body of the German opponent mitigated her uncanny sensations.

Wharton occasionally manifests in her text a feeling of bewilderment as a result of the disorientation she suffered in the war zone. William Merrill Decker has pointed out in “Americans in Europe from Henry James to the Present” (2009) that for a traveller so familiar with the European continent, Wharton’s visit to the front “articulates moments of profound disorientation”.⁴¹ On her first trip to Argonne, the author and her companion, Walter Berry, travelled on a route that “lay exactly in the track of the August [1914] invasion” (Wharton 2010: 37). They found it impossible to find their way “for the names and distances on the milestones have all been effaced, the sign-posts thrown down and the enamelled *plaques* on the houses at the entrance to the villages removed” (38). The author experienced a feeling of dislocation; despite the fact of being “within sixty or seventy miles of Paris” (ibid.) there was no landmark that could help her guess at her whereabouts (ibid.). She tried to find her way by asking the soldiers they encountered, but the answer was always the same: “We don’t know—we don’t belong here” (ibid.). Wharton thus experienced a strangely paradoxical sensation:

she was only a few dozen miles east of the French metropolis, yet the war had completely turned this familiar land into an unfamiliar and mystifying region.

Of particular poignancy is the sense of dislocation she experienced in her descent to the trenches during her visit to Alsace in August 1915. Wharton was led through a dark and very narrow tunnel in almost “pitch blackness” (99) and her response to this event mixes pure factual reporting and the author’s subjective attitude towards this experience. Wharton initially sets the scene to situate her readers: “The spot where we stood was raked on all sides by the enemy’s lines and the nearest trenches were only a few yards away” (100) and thereupon brings in her sense of bewilderment within the maze of the trenches: “But of all this nothing was really perceptible or comprehensible to me” (ibid.). When Wharton finally comes out of the trenches, she acknowledges that she “only knew [she] had come out of a black labyrinth” but she does not “understand where [they] were, or what it was all about” (ibid.). In contrast with many other war correspondents who reflected ruefully on their limited vision in areas surrounding the battlefield, Wharton was allowed to visit the frontline trenches. She therefore could experience the confusion and eerie tensions provoked by the severely restricted field of vision in a particularly dangerous spot. She entered the same zone as the combatants and experienced a similar uncanny dislocation as the one experienced by soldiers who, as Modris Eksteins has explained, easily became disoriented in the mazes of the trenches.⁴² Wharton had triumphantly entered spaces which had traditionally been out of bounds to women (just as they were to most civilian men during the First World War) and her ambivalent response to these experiences gives evidence of the ambivalent, confusing, and misleading sensations that her war journeys caused in her.

Mary Roberts Rinehart’s response to her war experience in *Kings, Queens and Pawns* similarly results in the representation of war as a great paradox. Just like Wharton, Rinehart was granted access to the first-line trenches, and exultantly reflects on the exceptionality of her achievement. Rinehart’s enthusiastic response, however, contrasts noticeably with the feelings of revulsion that accompany her observations of the horrific conditions of life in the trenches and the areas surrounding the war zone. Rinehart recorded her visit to the Third Division Headquarters of the Belgian Army. Upon her arrival at the Belgian Headquarters, she acknowledges that although she had travelled a long distance “to do the thing [she] was doing”, her “enthusiasm for it had

died” (101). At this point in her journey, Rinehart had already seen much of the destruction that the war had caused among the civilian population; she consequently could not continue writing in the same naïve and enthusiastic tone she had employed at the beginning of her trip. Notwithstanding this loss of enthusiasm, her narrative shows how the closer she got to the first firing line, the more she recovered her initial curiosity and sense of adventure. As they approached this zone, “for quite ten minutes”, she claims, “my heart raced madly” (110).

As Rinehart advances in the narrative towards the lines of fire, she welds together images of beauty and horror in her endeavour to depict the conditions under which the conflict was being fought out. She describes the magnesium flares the Germans were using to light up No Man’s land bursting in the night sky as “miraculously beautiful, silent and horrible” (107). Furthermore, when she finally reaches the first-line trenches and sees the conditions under which the Belgian soldiers are living, Rinehart introduces attributes that have since acquired canonical status in the writings about the First World War: “Many people have written about the trenches—the mud, the odours, the inhumanity of compelling men to live under such foul conditions. Nothing they have said can be too strong. Under the best conditions the life is ghastly, horrible, impossible [...]. The contrast between the condition of the men in the trenches and the beauty of the scenery was appalling” (123). The idyllic picture of the inundated fields in the Yser valley she contemplated that night from a semi-shielded position stands in violent opposition to the excruciating conditions of life in the trenches, the unbearable odours, the mud, the damp, and the coldness of the night. The beauty is turned into something “appalling”, and Rinehart acknowledges that “any lingering belief I may have had in the grandeur and glory of war died that night beside that silver lake—died of an odour, and will never live again” (124). Rinehart anticipates in this passage the loss of idealism that pervades the classical texts of the post-war period.

Despite all these excruciating episodes, Rinehart remained unfaltering in her quest to get as close to the lines of fire as they would allow her. The American journalist was granted permission to enter No Man’s Land along an exposed passageway that jutted into the flooded land that separated the German and the Belgian armies. As a result of a misunderstanding, the author was taken to an outpost located halfway to the German trenches.⁴³ This event allowed her to go further and see more of the war than most civilians had done up to that point—and even “rather more war” than

she initially had expected (127). Her recollections of this episode once again contain a juxtaposition of clashing images: “There was nothing lacking. There was the beauty of the moonlit waters, there was the tragedy of the destroyed houses and the church, and there was the horror of unburied bodies. [...] There was heroism, too” (128). The beautiful, the tragic, the horrific, and the heroic coalesce in Rinehart’s narrative to help her give shape to an experience that was very hard to take in, and even harder to transmit to others.

Nonetheless, Rinehart seems elated by her unexpected achievement. Although the author recalls being frightened, she considers that “the excursion was worth all the risk, and more” (ibid.). Rinehart triumphantly came out of this cold night with a “glow of exultation” (131): she had not only been in the first-line trenches, but she had also entered the forbidden—and highly dangerous—No Man’s Land; she had seen and sensed the tragic human dimension of this war and, although the images of desolation had made her feel “heartsick” (133), she felt that her trip had been worthwhile. Furthermore, the journalist felt that that night’s experience had produced a profound change in her. Modris Eksteins reflects in *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (1989) how the frontline soldier was convinced that he had been transformed in a very fundamental way after experiencing battle.⁴⁴ Rinehart seems to feel that she had undergone an analogous transformation. On her way back to the Headquarters, after such an eventful night, she describes how “the officers were seeing again the destruction of their own country through [her] shocked eyes” (133). The author creates the impression in this concluding episode that her eyes reflected the experience she had undergone in a manner that only those who have been close to the perils of death in the first firing line—namely soldiers—could truly appreciate. Rinehart thus positions herself as an insider in the war experience, one of the few “elected” people who had seen and therefore could understand the horrific dimensions of this inscrutable war.

Rinehart was not the only woman who was transformed by the war. Although the British author May Sinclair never underwent a transformation resulting from direct contact with the firing line, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* also reflects conflicting and life-changing emotions, but of a very different kind to those of Wharton and Rinehart. Marginalised, humiliated, and unable to have her longed for war experience, May Sinclair was compelled to give a fresh orientation to her personal war

narrative. Since *A Journal of Impressions* was published, Sinclair's text has been considered a very unusual and unique form of war writing. In a review that appeared in *The North American Review* as early as November 1915, *A Journal of Impressions* is declared "the most genuine and vital piece of writing that has come from the war area".⁴⁵ Its genuineness resides in the psychological, subjective, and highly personal tone that Sinclair adopts in her narrative.⁴⁶

Sinclair was constantly kept well away from the line of fire, and was therefore unable to write factual reports on what actual combat looked like. The author constantly questions her own authorial position and even her role as a journalist reporting on life behind the lines, because, as she herself acknowledges, she was not "a journalist any more than she was a trained nurse" (15). Consequently, she turned to expressing her inner psyche⁴⁷ and to focus on the "psychology of war".⁴⁸ This was not new to Sinclair, who before the war had already been experimenting with modernist techniques of narration concerned with the inner lives of her characters before the war.⁴⁹ The title of her book, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*, is self-explanatory, but in case there was any doubt she makes it perfectly clear in the opening lines of her introduction to the book: "This is a 'Journal of Impressions,' and it is nothing more" (i). According to Geneviève Brassard the whole introductory passage "suggests not only the self-deprecation of a woman who felt out of place yet irresistibly drawn to the theatre of war, but also the personal and subjective nature of the text" (Brassard 2008: 7).

Sinclair's shift away from events in the combat zone and towards the psychological effects that her very limited war experience was having upon herself has led Samuel Hynes to classify the text as a pioneer of the literature of war writing. You can observe in it many formal features found, later on, in the literature of combatants: "The first is its prose style, which is bare, direct, exact, and unmetaphorical. [...] The second is its structure, which is the formal expression of the same point: there is no order in war except chronology, event followed by event without evident reason. These are both points of exclusion; they will turn up again and again, as men try to describe the Battle of the Somme, or the 1918 retreat. It is interesting that the first writer to achieve that style and structure should have been a woman".⁵⁰ Evidently, Sinclair's text portrays a different experience to that of other women writers, let alone of combatants. As opposed to the accounts written by Rinehart and Wharton, the content of *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* was not empowering; this was not only due to Sinclair's

limited war experience, but also as a consequence of the marginalization that Sinclair suffered from the other women in the corps. As Laurel Forster has explained, she felt displaced not only as a result of her own position as a non-combatant, but also to the “strangeness of being a [mature] woman at war, amongst an ambulance crew unusually made up of a large number of [young] women”⁵¹ (Forster 2008: 234-235). Thus, *A Journal of Impressions* became, as Rebecca West characterised it, “a record of humiliations”.⁵²

Together with *Fighting France* and *Kings, Queens and Pawns*, Sinclair’s journal gives evidence of the inner tensions of an exceptional era in which three women dealt with the rare chance of becoming eyewitnesses of a cataclysmic world event. The First World War represented for them the opportunity of a life-time, and each of them resorted to her own singular style and methods to convey their experience. Wharton and Rinehart enthusiastically wrote about their successful experience in the war zone but they also came to terms with the loss of innocence that a direct confrontation with the crude realities of war brought along. Sinclair, on the other hand, channelled her feelings and expectations into a journal that initially gave expression to her excitement, and later on to her sense of frustration. The three texts show the unusual experience on the margin of three women that inspired unusual and non-canonical styles of war writing. It is precisely in the undetermined nature of their writing that the richness of these narratives resides: the three authors moved away from the pre-established literary conventions that many of their male colleagues were still adhering to during the first years of the First World War.

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¹ Barlow, *The Great War*, 26.

² Cardinal, *Women's Writing*; Gallagher, *The World Wars*; Higonnet, *Behind the Lines, Lines of Fire*, Marlow, *The Virago Book of Women*; Tate, *Women, Men and the Great War*; Tylee, *The Great War*; Smith, *The Second Battlefield*.

³ Powell, *Fighting in Flanders*, 4. F. Tennyson Jesse describes a similar event to the one described by Alexander Powell in an article at *Collier's Magazine* published in November 1914, what leads us to conclude that the British women he describes is Jesse herself. [Source: http://www.greatwardifferent.com/Great_War/Antwerp_Colliers/Antwerp2.htm accessed January 2011].

⁴ Powell, *Fighting in Flanders*, 4.

⁵ Sinclair and Rinehart also portray their own difficulties to find a suitable outfit to move around the war zone (Rinehart 1915: 151; Sinclair 1915: 17). Philip Gibbs, makes a similar observation about the women's clothes when he joins Dr. Munro's ambulance corps. At that point, the women have already solved their uniforms, appearing "very practically dressed in khaki coats and breeches" (Gibbs 1916: 176). Further discussion on these negotiations on how to dress up for war and its consequences has been carried out in Aránzazu Usandizaga and Andrew Monnickendam's volume: *Dressing up for War: Transformations of Gender and Genre in the Discourse and Literature of War* (2001). As Susan R. Grayzel argues in "Women, Uniforms and National Service", the adopting of khaki by several women was a controverted issue that divided the Home Front (146-149).

⁶ Goldman, Hattaway, and Gledhill, 17.

⁷ Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism*, 98.

⁸ Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism*, 101.

⁹ Price, "Wharton Mobilizes", 219.

¹⁰ Price, "Wharton Mobilizes", 223-225.

¹¹ Lee, *Edith Wharton*, 457.

¹² Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 352.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Cohn, *Improbable Fiction*, 67.

¹⁵ Rinehart, *My Story*, 80.

¹⁶ Rinehart, *My Story*, 146.

¹⁷ Cohn, *Improbable Fiction*, 78.

¹⁸ Talmadge, *Corra Harris*, 76.

¹⁹ Rinehart, *Kings, Queens, and Pawns*, 20.

²⁰ Rinehart, *Kings, Queens, and Pawns*, 80.

²¹ The Author's manifesto was signed by fifty-four well-known British writers in order to support the British effort in the war. Authors such as Sir James M. Barrie, Arnold Bennett, G.K. Chesterton, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, Thomas Hardy, or John Masefield signed the document, which was published in *The Times* and the *New York Tribune* on 18 September 1914.

²² Raitt, "May Sinclair".

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Sinclair in Raitt, "May Sinclair". Terry Phillips has widely discussed in "The Self in Conflict: May Sinclair and the Great War", Sinclair's enthusiastic support of the war and the way it influenced her writing.

²⁵ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 352.

²⁶ Wharton, *Fighting France*, 35.

²⁷ The names of many of the locations have been censored by Rinehart.

²⁸ Forster, "Women and War Zones", 231.

²⁹ The first unit of Dr. Munro's Flying Ambulance Corps was composed by Bert Bloxham, Marie Chisholm, Dorothe Feilding, Helen Gleason, Elsie Knocker, Dr. Reese, Dr. Shaw, May Sinclair, Rev. Fremlin Streatfeild, Robert Streatfeild, and Tom Worsfold (Atkinson 2010:39).

³⁰ Brassard, "War is...", 10.

³¹ Gómez Reus, "Racing to the Front...", 115.

³² Gómez Reus, "Racing to the Front...", 114-115.

³³ Brassard, "War is..." 11.

³⁴ Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 14.

³⁵ Most names have been censored in Rinehart's account.

³⁶ Brassard, "War is...", 12.

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- ³⁷ Brassard, "War is...", 13.
- ³⁸ Olin-Ammentorp, *Edith Wharton's...*, 31.
- ³⁹ Gómez Reus and Lauber, "In a Literary...", 207-210.
- ⁴⁰ Bird Wright, *Edith Wharton's. Travel Writing*, 92.
- ⁴¹ Decker, "Americans in Europe", 132.
- ⁴² Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 150.
- ⁴³ Rinehart discovered after her visit to the frontline trenches that it had never been part of the original plan to take her that far and that the Belgian officer that had given the order had made a blunder.
- ⁴⁴ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 212.
- ⁴⁵ "A Journal of Impressions in Belgium by May Sinclair". *The North American Review*, Vol. 202 (720) (November 1915), pp. 779-781.
- ⁴⁶ Tylee, *The Great War...*, 30, 131-132; Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 92-94; Buck, "British Women's...", 101; Forster, "Women and War Zones", 231-234.
- ⁴⁷ Wilson, "She in her Armour", 188.
- ⁴⁸ Buck, "British Women's...", 101.
- ⁴⁹ Wilson, "She in her Armour", 188.
- ⁵⁰ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 95
- ⁵¹ Forster, "Women and War Zones", 234-235.
- ⁵² West in Brassard, "War is the Greatest...", 10.