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The Women's War: Separation, Trauma, and Guilt in Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*

As perhaps the most well-known World War I autobiography written by a woman, Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* documents the complex relationship that Brittain, along with many women, developed with the war and with the gender roles it reinforced. She investigates her own feelings of guilt brought about by her inability to share in or alleviate the horrific traumas endured by the male soldiers in combat, feelings she works through over the course of the autobiography. Her experiences during the war differed significantly from those suffered by the men, causing her to develop an "inferiority complex" (Brittain 104) that she struggled with during and immediately after the war. Despite her awareness of the war's creation of a gap between gender roles which constrains and negatively impacts women, the feminism that Brittain develops over the course of the war does not allow her to understand the larger complexities of gender roles brought about by the heteronormativity of the war. This lack of understanding further distances Brittain from her male contemporaries because she cannot see the impact these rigid gender norms have on them. Wartime society's heteronormative expectations for male and female roles not only consign women to empty roles within society, but also enforce stereotypical ideas about how men and women should behave, especially with regard to sexuality. Although certain critics have denounced what they view as Brittain's ambivalence toward war (Joannou and Tylee), the autobiography exhibits a keen awareness of the irony that

Brittain felt so desperate to occupy a significant and societally valued role in a war that she eventually comes to loathe, and which slaughters almost everyone she loves.

Testament of Youth charts Vera Brittain's life from her pre-war dreams of attending Oxford, to her experiences nursing wounded men at the front, to her traumatized reentry into civilian life. The beginning of the book focuses on Brittain's struggle to be accepted into Oxford. Upon achieving this goal, however, Brittain finds that societal values and gender roles have shifted. Scholarly and literary ambitions no longer seem as important; rather, the war and the role of the male soldier have come to dominate what is considered valuable within wartime society, despite the horror that combat entails. Brittain, a woman left unable to enter this male soldier role, feels guilt at her inability to make the same sacrifices as the men. She tries to make up for this failure by sacrificing as much as she can, inviting as much physical pain and endurance as possible. Although many women felt liberated by the war due to the opportunities it offered them beyond the domestic sphere, including war work in factories and nursing (Gilbert & Gubar 264), it also eliminated the (already unlikely) possibility for women to achieve societally acknowledged success in the same fields that men achieved it. While her male companions had supported the scholarly and literary goals she had shared with them, some, especially her fiancé Roland Leighton, are less supportive when her ambitions and theirs shift toward the more patriotic and militaristic. These are not as easily or as willingly shared; they are basically unshareable between men and women in this era, causing Brittain to wish to atone for what she comes to internalize as her own inadequacy and her own inability to share in the suffering of the men she loves. Throughout all of this, Brittain remains very cognizant of the irony of her position during war: desiring to occupy the role of the hero-soldier, despite and almost because of her knowledge of its dangers and agonies.

Brittain tells this story from her many different perspectives across different parts of her life. She incorporates excerpts from her own diary and letters, both written in the midst of the autobiography's events, while also adding her own commentary on her life written ten years after the war's end. This layering of temporalities allows Brittain to recount her own entrapment within the rigid gender roles during the war, while also providing self-aware analysis (from her position writing years after the war has ended) of these roles and her own part in upholding them. Over the course of the autobiography, Brittain relates the experience of losing her four closest companions, all of whom were soldiers in the war: her fiancé Roland Leighton, her brother Edward Brittain, and her two close friends Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurow. Brittain identifies very closely with these men, perhaps due to their shared pre-war desire to attend Oxford, but the war separates them by making the men soldiers and barring Brittain from this role. The war separates them once again, and finally, through each of the men's deaths. Within her autobiography, Brittain uses the letters these soldiers write to try to create a shared experience between herself and her male companions. In "Mourning through Memoir," Richard Badenhausem shows how Brittain bears witness to her male contemporaries through the text of *Testament of Youth*, as well as how she is able to allow them to bear witness to her own trauma by embedding them within the narrative itself. The inclusion of the letters that these men write to Brittain from the trenches creates a dialogue around her trauma in which the men with whom she identifies so closely can participate even after they are no longer alive.

Many critics have pointed out Brittain's ambivalence toward war, criticizing her for not being strong enough in the expression of her anti-war views in her autobiography despite her anti-war organizing and advocacy after the war (Joannou and Tylee). Many of these critics have shown this ambivalence to stem from Brittain's attachment to the men in the war, and her

difficulty in separating the war from the men (Stewart 39). Because she so loves her male companions and believes they have done great things in the war, she does not always show the war's full meaninglessness and horror. Brittain, however, does show an awareness of this ambivalence and these ironies, and the way that war's association with the glory and honor of the dead makes it more dangerous, and more necessary to work harder against it. Badenhausen's theory shows how Brittain actually uses her connection to and identification with the men in order to work through her own trauma, reliving her traumatic narrative while retroactively marking it as a shared event with the men.

In *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain provides an anatomy of the "inferiority complex" (Brittain 104) she develops as a result of the separation of men's and women's traumas and experiences during the war. She closely examines her own feelings of guilt and inadequacy as a woman trying to contribute to the war, as well as her repeated attempts to create her own version of the male soldier experience in order to assuage this guilt. In this way, she draws attention to the difficulties that women face during war that men do not, and the way in which war assigns worth through combat and then excludes women from it. Perhaps more importantly, Brittain shows the way in which she eventually uses her autobiography to work through this trauma of separation. Her initial attempt to do so, documented within the autobiography, involves repeatedly attempting to recreate the experience of the soldier without success. Through the act of writing her autobiography, however, Brittain creates "shared" experiences between herself and the soldiers, thereby helping to alleviate the trauma of separation brought about by the rigid gender roles during the war.

Patriotism above all else: Men's and Women's Shifting Values During the War

Clearly, the separation of men and women into different roles did not come about as a result of the war. Such separation existed before the war and continued to exist after it. Life before the war was very strict due to the Victorian ideas of morality and social correctness. For instance, in *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain describes the strict divisions between girls and boys in the pre-war era due to these Victorian moral codes. In one particular scene, Brittain tells the story of meeting her brother and his friends on the way into town. She describes the episode as very innocent and consisting of “pleasant ‘ragging’ across the low wall” of the boys’ schoolyard (Brittain 28). Brittain “felt no consciousness of guilt,” until she “was severely reprimanded for [her] naughtiness in thus publicly conversing with Edward’s companions” upon her return home by an aunt who was visiting the family (28). This episode illustrates the way in which Victorian attitudes about the propriety of girls and boys being alone together created an inevitable separation between the two. This pre-war separation of men and women due to concerns with propriety resurfaces during Brittain’s relationship with Roland Leighton. Throughout this relationship, Brittain complains about the way in which the two must be accompanied by a chaperone nearly every moment, so that true intimacy between them is impossible, even as Leighton is about to be sent to another country to fight a war. This separation exacerbates Brittain’s anxieties regarding her later, more severe separation from the men during the war.

Before the war, much of the separation of men and women occurs due to the lack of educational opportunities for women, coupled with the widely held belief that women were better suited to domestic activities than the work force. Brittain dedicates the first section of her autobiography to detailing the ways in which these beliefs about women’s education and work constrain her from being able to pursue her own goals of attending Oxford and becoming a

writer. She works incredibly hard, devoting nearly every waking moment to studying for the Oxford Entrance Exams and convincing her parents that an Oxford education could be suitable for a woman. Her brother, Edward, also feels constrained by his parents' gendered expectations for him. While Vera has to fight her parents in order to attend Oxford and avoid the hollow role society imposes on women, Edward must fight in order to pursue music, which his parents view as an inappropriate vocation for a man (though they constantly try to make Vera more interested in piano). After many months of ceaseless toil, Brittain is accepted to Oxford and her parents agree to let her attend. The First World War, however, interferes with her plans, shifting her values and making her dreams suddenly seem pointless. Ironically, Brittain's future as a scholar and writer is actually made more significant by war due to her lifelong devotion to studying the causes of the First World War and using her platform as a writer to voice her pacifist views. During the war, however, she is persuaded by the propaganda, and by the views of those around her, that contributing directly to the war effort is the only appropriate course of action. She works through these feelings of uselessness when she turns to pacifist activism after the war, finding a use for her scholarly and political ambitions while working toward the prevention of future war.

In a letter written to Brittain at the beginning of the war, Roland Leighton reveals this abrupt shift in values brought on by war. Despite his previous goals to attend Oxford and become a writer, Leighton feels that these have entirely lost their value in this new context. Now, the only thing that matters is his "obvious duty" (Brittain 103): that of becoming a soldier. Like the vast majority of young men at this time, Roland believes that to neglect this "duty" would be "cowardly." Rather, he "feel[s] that [he is] meant to take an active part in this War" (103). Leighton also writes that he doesn't believe himself capable, "in the circumstances" of war, of "endur[ing] a secluded life of scholastic vegetation" (103). The juxtaposition within this letter

between what participation in the war means to Roland and what pursuing his previous academic and literary goals means to him reveals the vast gap between the values that Roland now holds dear during war, and those he previously valued during peace time. Roland uses such words as *secluded*, *scholastic vegetation*, *shirking*, and *cowardly*, demonstrating the influence that the war propaganda and societal conceptions of masculinity have had on his life goals and on his perspective on the war. Leighton goes on to state that war, to him, is “a fascinating thing—something, if often horrible, yet very ennobling, very beautiful, something whose elemental reality raises it above the reach of all cold theorizing” (104). This language situates war as a kind of benchmark of masculinity, using it to measure whether one is “man enough” to endure its horrors. Although Brittain initially reacts against this letter from Leighton, particularly its condescending tone, over the next few months she begins to express similar sentiments. Even as she writes her autobiography, she seems to believe that war can be ennobling, but she views this as a reason to work harder against it due to its dangerous, seductive appeal.

Leighton’s claim that warfare’s “elemental reality raises it above the reach of all cold theorising” (Brittain 104) contrasts the war with academic life. Through this statement, Roland effectively excludes Vera Brittain, and any woman, from the possibility of fully understanding the male soldier’s war experience. In Roland’s mind, as in many soldiers’, no one who is not physically present in war’s “elemental reality” can fully comprehend it, because they can achieve no more than “cold theorising.” Leighton, by referring to academic life as “scholastic vegetation” and implying that active participation in the war is necessary to understand it and comment upon it, shows the way in which the male soldier’s experience becomes the most highly valued one in British war society, despite its dangers. Upon reading this letter, Vera Brittain, a student at Oxford at the time, feels that Leighton’s use of the phrase “‘scholastic vegetation,’ hurt just a

little” (104). She notes how such language “seemed so definitely to put [her] outside everything that now counted in life, as well as outside [Roland’s] own interests, and his own career.” She also “felt it altogether contrary to his professed feminism” (104). These feelings show a consciousness within Brittain that the war has changed the values that Roland and many other soldiers once held. The fact that she states that his letter placed her “outside everything that *now* counted” (104, emphasis added) illustrates that what now counts, in war, is very different from what counted before it. Her recognition that the changed values expressed by Leighton run “contrary to...feminism” also reveals her awareness that the glorification of war, when coupled with women’s inability to participate in it, has a negative impact on women. She goes on to qualify her criticism of Roland specifically, showing how Roland’s attitudes might be “contrary to...feminism---but then, so was the War; its effect on the women’s cause was quite dismaying” (104). Brittain takes a risk when she criticizes Leighton’s statements at this early stage in their relationship, before they had spent much time together and when their relationship mostly consisted of letters. Although Leighton retracts his statements, Brittain could not have known that he would, and her angry response to his letter shows the importance of her feminism to her even before her participation in the war.

In her reply to Roland’s letter, Brittain writes that ““Women get all the dreariness of war and none of the exhilaration”” (Brittain 104), thereby buying into the ideas Roland expresses that war can be “exhilarat[ing]” and “ennobling,” rather than showing how its violence and trauma bring irreparable damage to those who experience it. Brittain also notes in other areas that women get very little of the risk of war (99), but with this risk comes the “honor” that society places on those who suffer in the name of patriotic ideals. The fact that Vera Brittain sees war as possessing “exhilaration” also reveals the way in which propaganda and socially constructed

depictions of war as “exhilarati[ng]” distort the true image of war and its more disturbing aspects. Her sentiment that women are excluded from this “exhilaration,” on the other hand, reflects the exclusion of women from the aspects of war that society has placed value on or has deemed exciting. Brittain criticizes Leighton’s letter as anti-feminist, stating that combat, “which you say is the only thing that counts at present, is the one field in which women have made no progress—perhaps never will” (104). In this way, Brittain calls out Leighton’s valuing of male roles more highly than female roles, especially due to the fact that what he claims is the only important function to serve during wartime is one that is literally impossible for women to perform, thereby making it impossible for women to be considered of any use during war. Brittain then, however, begins to echo some of the feelings that Leighton expresses in his letter, claiming that she “sometimes feel[s] that work at Oxford, which will only bear fruit in the future and lacks the stimulus of direct connection with the War, will require a restraint [she is] scarcely capable of” (104). This sentence mirrors Roland’s feeling that he could not “endure a secluded life of scholastic vegetation” during the war, as it would require him to neglect his duty as well as to remain “inactive.” Inaction seems to be the most reprehensible possibility for men and women of the time. All of the men struggle to get into the Army, and to get sent to the front as quickly as possible, for fear that otherwise they will be kept from the war entirely and forced to remain inactive. Brittain comes to share these fears, and they can be seen within this letter, despite the fact that it was written so early in the war. After Roland writes to her in a way that suggests that the only way to be useful during the war is through active participation in combat, Brittain claims that she had developed, “like so many women in 1914, an inferiority complex” (104), one that stemmed from the fact that she, as a woman, could not attain as active a role within the war.

Brittain then remarks that “it is strange how what we [Brittain and Leighton] both so worked for should now seem worth so little” (Brittain 104). Again, the use of the word *now* shows the abruptness of the shift between peacetime and wartime values. The comment as a whole reflects Brittain’s uneasiness with such a shift, due to her recognition that these new values place her “outside everything that now counted,” when she has only just won her fight to achieve that which had counted before the war: her entrance into a prestigious college, a path normally reserved for men. Brittain’s sharp reply to Leighton’s militaristic letter is met with immediate apology, but Brittain recognizes through the letter the growing change within Roland due to both his exposure to the war, as well as the glorification of the soldier. Brittain undergoes a similar change. For instance, she writes that “certainly the War was already beginning to overshadow scholarship and ambition. But I was not ready, yet, to give in to it; I wanted very badly to be heroic—or at any rate to seem heroic to myself—so I tried hard to rationalise my grief” (133). In this way, Brittain attempts to exhibit the same values of bravery and stoicism as the men by facing an uncertain future without showing signs of fear. She also explains her own role within the war in terms of its parallels to Roland’s role when she states that “it was [her] part to face the possibility of a ruined future with the same courage that [Roland] is going to face death” (134). Thus, Brittain draws herself nearer to the valued role of the soldier, and nearer to the man she loves, by attempting to embody the same values in her life at Oxford that Roland does in his life at the front. Soon, this will not seem enough for her.

As Brittain continues her work at Oxford, she starts to become dissatisfied with it, viewing it as not the right task during war. She writes to Roland that academic life “is, for me at least, too soft a job...I want physical endurance; I should welcome the most wearying kinds of bodily toil” (Brittain 140). In this way, Brittain invites the type of trauma suffered by men onto

herself. She wants to suffer, not only as much as they do, but also in the same ways. Rather than the mental toil of academic work, she seeks out “*physical endurance*” and “*bodily toil*,” as the soldier’s struggles were of a more physical nature than anything Brittain could experience. She also writes that “active war-work [was very closely] associated in the public mind with the patriotic impulse which sent men into the Army” (140). This association, thus, exists not only within Brittain’s mind, but was placed there by a society looking for a way to allow women to participate in the war too. This expression of her desire for a different, more physical and more difficult type of work comes right before her decision to nurse wounded soldiers as a VAD.

Separation of Men’s and Women’s Traumatic Experiences

The impossibility for women to perform the same duties that men did at the front during the First World War also results in an impossibility for them to experience the same type of trauma. The men’s trauma consists of the threat of death and injury, as well as the dirty, extreme living conditions within the trenches. Women’s trauma, however, was far less likely to involve these types of threats to the body, and much more likely to include the “aftermath of battle,” while “the battle itself is absent, belonging...to the realm of speculation” (Schwarz 245). For instance, Brittain nurses soldiers after the battle is over for them, tending to the wounds created through combat but never actually encountering combat itself. Men’s experiences come to be valued more highly than women’s partially because they do involve contact with the most dangerous aspects of war, as well as the highest risks possible.

One scene that illustrates the vast separation between men’s and women’s wartime traumas occurs just after Roland’s death, when Vera Brittain is staying with the Leighton family, and Roland’s uniform is returned from the front. These returned clothes, including the very uniform in which Roland died, have a very powerful effect on both Vera and Mrs. Leighton.

Brittain writes that she “arrived at the cottage...to find [Roland’s] mother and sister standing in helpless distress in the midst of his returned kit” (Brittain 251). By situating herself and Roland’s mother and sister, the women in his life, at the scene of the return, Brittain identifies this as an exclusively female scene and a uniquely female trauma. The use of the word *helpless* to describe the women’s “distress” echoes Santanu Das’ comment that female war trauma (particularly that of nurses) often involves “witnessing and helplessness rather than...survival or any direct threat to life” (Das 248). The women, so far removed from the scene of the battle and of Roland’s death, are powerless to affect any change, and can only look on in horror at the battle’s “aftermath” (248) Not only are these women spatially removed from the landscape and activities of war, but they are also temporally removed, not receiving even a symbol of Roland or his death until long after he is gone.

This return of the uniform occurs about a month after Roland’s passing and brings the tragic news of his death back with renewed force. Brittain describes in visceral detail the garments returned to the Leighton family, including “the tunic torn back and front by the bullet, a khaki vest dark and stiff with blood, and a pair of blood-stained breeches slit open at the top by someone obviously in a violent hurry” (Brittain 251). These items, with their visible marks of violence and suffering, signify to Brittain the horror of the war through the particularity of Roland’s death. While Leighton experienced the actuality of these physical horrors, Brittain is left only with their signifiers in the form of these clothes, showing the great differences between men’s and women’s wartime traumas. These “gruesome rags,” however, bring Brittain closer to an understanding of the war than she had previously achieved, making her “realise, as [she] had never realized before, all that France really meant” (251).

Victoria Stewart claims that the returned uniform “stands as a metonym for Leighton’s corpse” (Stewart 41). Stewart calls this event “almost the most grim substitution; instead of Leighton himself, or indeed his dead body, Brittain is faced with his paltry remainders” (40). Through these clothes, Brittain comes to understand the gloom of death that hung over the trenches in France. She describes the clothes in a letter to Edward as possessing “the smell of graveyards and the Dead” (Brittain 252). She continues by claiming that even the mud that “covered them was not ordinary mud; it had not the usual clean pure smell of earth, but it was as though it were saturated with dead bodies—dead that had been dead a long, long time” (252). Brittain’s repetition of the word *dead* emphasizes the dark, dreadful nature of war and the losses that accompany it. As Stewart states, the returned uniform “brings death into the domestic sphere” (Stewart 41). The sharp contrast between this more protected “domestic sphere” and the death that “saturate[s]” the trenches penetrates Brittain’s consciousness not merely with the harsh knowledge of the grotesqueness of war, but also with the vast difference between that war and her own. She realizes, from the comfortable setting of the Leighton home, her own distance from the agony of those she loves. The actual scene of the returned uniform makes real for Brittain (as the recreation of the scene within the autobiography shows the reader) not only the separation from Roland through his gruesome death, but also the separation between herself and the living soldier Roland who had endured this reality so distinct from her own. Her sudden understanding of the horror of the war as experienced by Roland is made yet more horrible by her painful inability to share in or heal any of Roland’s pain.

At this point in the autobiography, only Roland and Geoffrey have actually been to the front. Edward and Victor experience various setbacks in their quests to reach the trenches. After the return of Roland’s uniform, Brittain writes to Edward that she is glad he was absent from this

scene because his absence spared him from being “overwhelmed by the horror of war without its glory” (Brittain 251). In fact, she wants to shield “anyone who may some day go to the front” from this profound knowledge of its hellishness (251). Thus, Brittain seeks to protect everyone who might fight in the war, hoping that they do not have the comfort they take in the notion of “glory” stripped away from them in the same way it is stripped away from her in this scene. In her letter, however, she does describe to Edward the war’s inhumanity as conveyed by the returned uniform, while being pleased that Edward is absent from the scene itself and thus not fully immersed in the discovery of this inhumanity. Ironically, she wants to protect Edward from this brutal reduction of Roland to a pile of bloody clothes and believes his absence from the scene of the returned uniform does protect him, even while she herself suffers from her own absence from the scene of Roland’s actual death and her inability to truly know his pain. This effort to protect Edward from the brutal truth shows a lack of recognition, on Vera’s part, of Edward’s own needs in processing Roland’s death. Rather than seeing the alignment between them, especially the way in which surviving a friend and being separated from that friend contribute to their trauma, Brittain tries to shield Edward from the brutal reality that might actually, ironically, help him to cope.

Brittain’s traumatic recognition of her own absence from the soldier’s reality drives her to try to create a simulation of the trauma of Roland’s last moments. She attempts to decipher how Roland was killed by analyzing his uniform, trying to “make up for not having been there” (Stewart 42). Through the combination of this process and letters from men in Roland’s company, she pieces together his final moments. Brittain’s analysis reveals her awareness of the irony inherent in her own attempts to resolve her wartime traumas. She shows how, in an effort to heal the trauma caused by her absence from Roland’s death, she tries to recreate the death

scene, simulating the trauma of presence. This simulation gives her more shared trauma and contact with Roland than she would otherwise have, but it comes even as she is in the act of realizing that Roland's experiences at the front are unshareable.

Edward and Victor experience a similar trauma through Roland's death. These two young men, who have not yet fought in the war, feel an enormous guilt at their separation from Roland, particularly their inability to sacrifice their lives alongside him. Upon seeing Victor and Edward after Roland's death, Brittain describes them as resembling "courtiers without a king" (Brittain 244). This description highlights their dependence on and love for Roland, which was at times even greater than Vera's. Their devastation and shame due to their absence from the front is also greater than Brittain's, because, as men, they are expected to fight in the war and shamed if they do not. Brittain writes that "the death of the friend that he most admired before he himself had even succeeded in getting to France, plunged Edward, as [she] learnt long afterwards, into bitter humiliation even less endurable than his grief for Roland's loss" (Brittain 245). The fact that Edward's "humiliation" is even greater than his "grief" reveals wartime society's powerful control over the guilt and shame of the war's youth. By both including the letter to Edward describing her experience receiving the uniform and also detailing Edward's and Victor's responses to Roland's death, Brittain writes this shared experience of loss with her brother and Victor into *Testament of Youth*. She draws attention to this shared trauma in her autobiography, revealing her attempt to work through the trauma of her separation from Roland by bringing herself closer to the other men in her life. However, the trauma can never be fully shared, and thus Brittain uses the text to align herself more closely with the men, even if she can never close the gap completely due to the distance that both the war and societal expectations put between them.

Much later in the book, after Edward's death, Brittain does not have this type of support from those around her, as all those on whom she would normally depend have died in the war. Brittain writes that, "after Edward was killed no wealth of affectionate detail" was provided by those who knew about his death (Brittain 439). Rather, the Brittain family received three letters, all of which merely indicated that he fought bravely and was shot in the head, dying instantly without pain. Unsatisfied with this account, Brittain tracks down a colonel in Edward's company who was wounded in the same battle and who had been in Edward's battalion since the start of the war. She writes that "though [she] dreaded more than death whatever [she] might be self-condemned to learn, [she] was driven and impelled by a remorseless determination to find out as much as [she] could" (Brittain 441). This quote illustrates, once again, Brittain's drive to recreate the events of a loved one's death in order to possess enough information to fight the trauma of not knowing how Edward died. The quote also reveals a recognition of the irony that Brittain invites the trauma of knowledge to combat the trauma of ignorance. She has "condemned" herself to something that she "dread[s] more than death," but she still cannot stop herself from searching for more information. She would rather share in the knowledge of his experience, even if remaining ignorant would be less painful.

When questioning the colonel about her brother's death, Brittain believes that he is not entirely truthful with her and that her curiosity makes him uncomfortable. She writes that, by that point in the war, "the colonels and company commanders... were so weary of writing gruesome details to sorrowing relatives, that the number of officers who were instantaneously and painlessly shot through the head or the heart passed far beyond the bounds of probability" (Brittain 442). Unlike most soldiers' relatives, including Brittain's own mother, Vera does not wish to accept the easy (but improbable) truth that her brother died painlessly and quickly.

Rather, she questions this too-easy end because she wants to help bear the real burden of whatever Edward's death was, and to know its reality no matter how horrible. She is only satisfied when the colonel's account is confirmed by other members of Edward's company. Brittain still does not trust the colonel, however, and believes he is hiding something, perhaps "some special act of heroism" on Edward's part. By the time she writes *Testament of Youth*, however, Brittain does not discover anything more of her brother's death from this colonel, or anyone else, and is forced to write that she "shall now never know" the truth about "Edward's part in the vital counter-attack on the Plateau" (444).

Women's Post-War Guilt

The vast differences between male and female trauma created a hierarchy that led many women to feel overwhelming guilt, both during and after the war (Das 244). Despite her attempts to align herself with the male combatants and emulate their sacrifices and hardships in her own life, Brittain cannot rid herself of the feeling that she owes a great deal to them, particularly to her close companions. Immediately after the war's conclusion, Brittain returns to her studies at Oxford. These dead companions haunt her, however, and plague her dreams. She has nightmares in which Roland and Edward return to her in her sleep. She also suffers from the persistent delusion that she is growing a beard and turning into a witch. In their biography of Vera Brittain, Mark Bostridge and Paul Berry have noted the gendered implications of this hallucination, stating that a possible explanation for the appearance of the beard and the feelings of horror that it generates within Brittain is the fact that, after the war, she is able to return to academic life and "seiz[e] the intellectual and professional opportunities that could no longer be taken by her dead male contemporaries" (Bostridge and Berry 139-140). The fact that this form of gendered survivor's guilt manifests itself as a delusion on Brittain's face which changes her appearance

also reflects the way in which Brittain feels changed by her experiences during the war and alienated from her female contemporaries due to it. Rather than enjoying her academic success, Brittain feels horrifying guilt when she finds success when her male companions found only death.

Brittain's delusions stem from her internal conflict between the satisfaction of pursuing her dream at Oxford, and the sense that this dream that she so longed for is incomplete without those with whom she once shared it. Her work at Oxford is injected with so much meaning, both from her childhood spent working toward this goal and from the war, which inspired her to study history in order to devote her life to preventing future wars. In another sense, however, this significance is stripped away from Brittain, because she cannot experience it fully in the midst of her post-war grief. Brittain wants to start a new life, but finds herself inescapably stuck in the old, repeatedly returning to it through traumatic memory in dreams and hallucinations. Brittain even voices a desire to have died with her male contemporaries, as she feels out of place and alone in this new post-war world (490). These internal conflicts come to a head when Nina, a friend Brittain met at Oxford, dies from illness after the war. Once again, Brittain survives the death of a close friend, this time a female friend who did not have any ties with the war. Nina's death comes as Brittain is planning a trip to visit her at Girton. This death bears a slight similarity to Roland's, as both died as Brittain was looking forward to visiting them after a period of absence. This repetition of her trauma outside of the context of war, and with a female friend rather than a male one, causes Brittain to feel unable to escape her previous trauma, while also bringing it into a new realm of her life. It is ironic that this death, unrelated to war in any way, would prompt Brittain's most difficult traumatic memories of the war. Brittain tries to distract herself from Nina's death with "tennis-parties" but the feeling that "death and loss" are

following her beyond the war fills her with a “sick” and disturbing feeling (Brittain 484). Brittain writes that, shortly after this incident, she “looked one evening into [her] bedroom glass and thought, with a sense of incommunicable horror, that [she] detected in [her] face the signs of some sinister and peculiar change” (484). The use of such words as *sinister*, *peculiar*, and *horror* reveal the traumatic residue the delusion brings up for Brittain, linking her once more to the deaths of her dearest companions. Also, the fact that such dark words are used to describe herself reveals the way in which Brittain feels that her own traumatic experiences during the war have marked her in a dark, troubling way as one who took part in this gruesome history. They mark her as separate from those who did not participate, especially her fellow Oxford students who were too young to play active roles in the war (488). Brittain then continues her description, stating that “a dark shadow seemed to lie across [her] chin,” asking herself “was I beginning to grow a beard, like a witch?” (484).

Brittain also spends some of her time at Oxford trying to understand why fate has allowed her to continue pursuing her goals, while cutting short the lives of those she loved. After the war’s end, Brittain decides to study history at Oxford rather than English, which she had been studying when the war broke out. Following the war, Brittain feels a strong need to find a sense of duty, and to make something useful out of this apparently pointless tragedy. She feels compelled to “understand how the whole calamity had happened, to [find out] why it had been possible for [her] and [her] contemporaries, through [their] own ignorance and others’ ingenuity, to be used, hypnotized and slaughtered” (Brittain 471). In this way, she gives purpose and meaning both to her recovery process, as well as to her trauma. This type of “call to duty,” in this case the call to learn more about the war’s causes and consequences in order to prevent future

wars, echoes back to the “call to duty” she felt to become a nurse and Roland felt to become a soldier, except that, this time, she attempts to prevent war rather than contribute to it.

Much of Brittain’s war-related guilt stems from the hierarchy between men’s and women’s war work, and the fact that women gained value only through their service to the male soldier’s fight. Brittain states that “apart from the demand for doctors and nurses, women in war seemed to be at a discount except as the appendages of soldiers” (195). These comments about the devaluation of women during war come before a scene in which Brittain finds a notice in the newspaper that reads: “Lady, *fiancé* killed, will gladly marry officer totally blinded or otherwise incapacitated by the War” (196). The inclusion of this notice shows the way in which women felt their value was so little during the war that they were willing to literally give themselves away to a man who had been able to contribute to the war effort, and who had lost something in the process. The notice starts with “*fiancé* killed,” showing how, in her grief, this woman sought to replace her dead *fiancé* with anyone who had been injured in the war, anyone to whom she could be useful. After Roland’s death, Brittain experiences a similar desire to replace Roland and to do so in a way that allows her to be useful to another soldier who suffered. Rather than accepting their losses and moving forward, both Brittain and the woman in the notice want to serve a purpose, and to do so with someone who could act as a stand-in for their dead *fiancés*. The fact that the notice in the newspaper states that the woman will marry any man injured in combat reveals one of the main avenues left available for women to contribute to the war: marriage and family. This woman is willing to devote her whole future, through marriage, to a man who has fought in the war, partially due to her inability to contribute in other ways to the war effort and the “inferiority complex” this creates. Many other women contributed to the war through their family by willingly sacrificing their sons as soldiers (Albrinck 274).

Although Brittain initially reacts with shock to this notice, it foreshadows some of her own future behavior. Years after reading this paper, Brittain's close friend Victor Richardson is blinded in the Battle of Arras. After overcoming her shock and sadness at this event, Brittain remembers the notice she saw in the newspaper years before. After years of being worn down by the war and by her own guilt at not being able to fight it, Brittain feels that it might be her duty to marry Victor, who, although a very close friend of hers, she had never before considered as a suitor or potential husband. She writes that "there was nothing left in life now but Edward and the wreckage of Victor" (Brittain 344). Although this sense of having "nothing left," and of needing to cling to her two remaining friends, in large part sets Brittain's mind to executing this plan, there is also a self-sacrificing aspect of the plan that appeals to her. When she recalls the notice in the newspaper about the woman who would marry an injured soldier, she writes that the only thing that "redeems [the notice] from utter sordidness" is the "element of self-sacrifice" (344). The fact that nursing "work was slack in Malta" (344), and Brittain was therefore not very much needed, informs her decision to leave to marry and help Victor, thereby illustrating her compulsion to make sacrifices for the war and those who risked their lives fighting it in any way available to her.

In a letter to Edward, Vera tries to insinuate these plans to offer marriage to Victor. She writes that "No one could realise better than I our responsibility towards him—not only because of our love for him, but because of his love for us, and the love felt for him by the one we loved and lost. I am not sure that this doesn't apply more to me than to any of you" (347). Although it cannot be denied that Vera Brittain, Victor Richardson, Roland Leighton, Geoffrey Thurow, and Edward Brittain were all very closely tied to one another through the love they shared for each other and the hardships they had collectively endured, Brittain's use of the word "responsibility,"

when coupled with her suggestion that this responsibility applies more to herself than to any of the men, reveals the underlying guilt that acts as at least partial motivation. The fact that Brittain believes herself to share a larger part of the responsibility towards Victor, along with her very framing of her plans in terms of “responsibility,” reveals her deep anxiety that she is not living up to her own responsibility in the way that the men are. She possesses this anxiety despite the fact that she is a nurse, the most common way for women to fulfill their “duty” to the war effort. This assertion on Vera’s part that she has the greatest claim of responsibility to help Victor, although clearly a manifestation of her inferiority complex, also neglects to consider Edward’s own claim to that responsibility as Victor’s oldest friend. She does not take into account Edward’s own feelings about his duty to Victor. Brittain also claims that her plan to marry Victor is a way to “pay...the debt” she owes to the dead (347). She writes that

[she] would be more glad than [she] can say to offer [Victor] a very close and life-long devotion if he would accept, and [she] cannot imagine that Roland, if he had known what was to be,...would be anything but glad too. Those two [Roland and Geoffrey] are beyond any aid of ours—they who have died; and the only way to pay even one little bit of the debt to them is through the one who remains.” (Brittain 347)

Brittain’s reference to “debt” owed to those who sacrificed their lives in the war sheds light on the feelings of “inferiority” and guilt felt by those who cannot participate in the war. The only thing that prevents Brittain from following through with her plan to marry Richardson is his sudden death shortly after she visits him in the hospital.

Ambivalence and Ironies in War

Throughout *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain oscillates between portraying the war as glorious and ennobling and portraying it as a horrific and pointless waste of life. Such oscillation

seems to stem from her inability to separate the war itself from those who fought and died in it. She wishes to preserve the memories of the dead soldiers in the best light, showing how they achieved great honor through war, while also seeking to show this same war in all of its meaningless depravity. Brittain's identification with the male soldiers and the complicated position from which she narrates her story of the war contribute to this oscillation, because she both desires to fulfill the soldier's role and to criticize its very existence. When she writes about her male companions, now dead, she tends to glorify their efforts in the war in some scenes and show the pointless waste of their lives in others. The fact that she has bought into the militaristic wartime values of patriotism, bravery, and sacrifice leads her to sometimes portray the war in a more positive light due to the role she believes it plays in allowing these qualities to flourish.

For instance, in the scene in which Edward receives the Military Cross for his conduct during the Battle of the Somme, she sets great store in Edward's achievement, and writes about earning a medal for combat as a significant honor. After quoting the letter that announced that Edward would receive the Military Cross, Brittain comments that "in 1916, it should be added, the M.C. meant a good deal; it was still a comparatively rare decoration, awarded only for acts of really conspicuous courage" (Brittain 287). This rush to inform the reader, right after the Military Cross is first mentioned, that, at the time of Edward's award, this honor still carried great significance and awarded only true bravery, shows the way in which Brittain is still held by the militaristic, patriotic values prevalent during the war. She feels that the reader must know that Edward was a great soldier, because she believes this reflects well on his character and allows one to remember him as noble and courageous. Brittain then presents a letter she wrote to her mother just after finding out that Edward had earned the M.C. She writes that it is "too unspeakably splendid," and recalls how Edward used to "point out...officer[s] who had the

Military Cross” with “reverence and awe” (287). Although Brittain writes about the great honor of receiving the Military Cross, she does note the “ironies of war” in that Edward, who never cared as much for the military, had earned a prestigious military award, while Roland, who “had been so definitely ‘after’ the Military Cross,...had gone unadorned to his grave” (287). In this way, although Brittain seeks to show the great honor capable of being attained through war, she also simultaneously notes the tragedy and absurdity of it.

She also writes of the tragedy of Roland’s death in terms that do not add any glory or honor to it, but rather reveal its pointless, awful nature. After describing the events of his death as told to her by members of his company, Brittain writes, “That was all. There was no more to learn. Not even a military purpose seemed to have been served by his death” (Brittain 243). Rather, he was killed performing the routine task of repairing wires. Brittain, who believes that battle can bring one honor and glory, has great difficulty coming to terms with the wastefulness of Roland’s death, the fact that it served no “military purpose” and showed no signs of bravery or heroism. She describes him as having been “shot like a rat in the dark,” a fate that completely contradicts his “proud,...confident” nature (243). Her use of this phrase, “shot like a rat in the dark,” reveals the fact that Brittain does recognize the potential for war to reduce a man to a fate that is subhuman, to turn him into an animal, and a lowly and insignificant one at that. It shows that she knows that war does not always bring glory, but she still believes it can, particularly through courage in battle. For this reason, she struggles to understand why Roland would have died in this way, without even entering actual combat as he would have wished. Also, the inclusion of the phrase “in the dark” reveals the fact that, in order for war to bring one glory, one’s actions must be seen and recognized. Glory comes less from the actual acts on the battlefield, and more from the recognition of such acts by society, the type of recognition given

to Edward through the Military Cross. Much of women's work during this period lacks this type of visibility and recognition, part of the reason it is not valued as much as men's.

Although many critics draw attention to this ambivalence that Brittain displays in her depictions of war, many neglect to analyze her own explanation of these shifting attitudes. In a scene in which Brittain describes the hope and determination she felt while listening to "The Last Post," she writes that as she "stood in honour of the dead who could neither protest nor complain, [she] was as ready for sacrifices and hardships as [she] had ever been in the early idealistic days" (Brittain 369). This scene occurs later on in the war, after Brittain has already suffered significant hardship, but she feels prepared, even obligated, to endure more. She feels that it is noble and right for her to do so, and she yearns for the heroism of the war. Immediately following this scene, Brittain includes her commentary from her standpoint writing many years later, stating that

since those years it has often been said by pacifists, . . . that war creates more criminals than heroes; that, far from developing noble qualities in those who take part in it, it brings out only the worst. If this were altogether true, the pacifist's aim would be, I think, much nearer of attainment than it is. Looking back upon the psychological processes of us who were very young sixteen years ago, it seems to me that his task—our task—is infinitely complicated by the fact that war, while it lasts, does produce heroism to a far greater extent than it brutalizes." (Brittain 370)

This passage, although it is more literally an argument from Brittain about why it is so difficult to eradicate war within society, could also be read as Brittain's own answer to the question of why she presents war in such an ambivalent manner throughout her autobiography. She believes that war truly does create heroes and bring nobility of character to the surface. She views war as

complicated and difficult to advocate against because it both “brutalizes” and “produce[s] heroism,” it both ennoble and corrupts; but, according to Brittain, it brings out more good qualities than bad in those who experience it. This focus on the characters of the individual participants, rather than the actual costs and benefits of war more generally, reflects one of the reasons behind Brittain’s ambivalence towards war: her inability to separate those she lost in the war from the war itself. She sees their characters (and possibly her own) as heightened through war; meanwhile, the war itself destroys these young men whose characters it apparently created. Although Brittain eventually creates a new life for herself, her life is also initially destroyed by the war. Brittain’s recognition of her own ambivalence, of the reasons behind it, and of the many ironies of war allows her to condemn war’s evils while still loving and admiring those who died in it.

Her story’s greatest irony, however, is one that Brittain misses, and one that does not occur within *Testament of Youth*’s pages. The fact that Edward Brittain, Vera’s brother and her closest companion after Roland’s death, struggled due to the same gender constraints that caused Vera’s traumatic separation from the men she loved, went largely unnoticed by the author. She notes the irony that her brother wishes to study music but is prohibited due to his parent’s desire for him to pursue scholarship, while she wishes to pursue scholarship but is prohibited due to her parent’s desire for her to stay home and practice piano and other “feminine” tasks. She sees how gender roles can be absurd in this way, but she does not think to probe further. While, throughout her life and especially throughout her autobiography, Brittain searches for any connection or piece of shared experience between herself and these men in order to heal her traumatic separation, she does not pick up on Edward’s similar struggles with the gender norms and

heteronormativity of his time. And, when confronted with this information, Vera Brittain does not even recognize the parallels between her struggles and his own.

Years after *Testament of Youth's* publication, Brittain hears once again from the wounded colonel she had questioned so long ago about Edward's death, Colonel Hudson. Brittain ended *Testament of Youth* without being satisfied that Hudson had told her the whole story of Edward's death. The colonel reaches out to Brittain after reading her autobiography and seeing how disappointed Brittain was in the lack of information he gave her regarding her brother's death. They meet again and, although there is no evidence of Brittain having kept a "record of their conversation," such a record can be found in Colonel Hudson's memoirs (Bostridge and Berry 130). The fact that Brittain did not record the conversation, despite the fact that she kept such detailed notes on her life in her diary, indicates the unease she felt around it. Hudson told Vera that Edward had been under investigation for charges of homosexuality shortly before his death. Although Hudson was instructed to keep this information to himself, he found an opportunity to insinuate to Edward that a private letter to another officer in the battalion had been confiscated. Edward was the only casualty in the battle that followed closely after this conversation between Edward and Hudson. Hudson feared that Edward committed suicide due to the possibility of a court martial, but Vera remained unconvinced. She states that "Colonel Hudson's disclosures had caused her 'some subsequent very distressful hours.' [Yet,] she had not been shocked by what he had told her about her brother's sexuality, 'and had in fact guessed it beforehand'" (Bostridge & Berry 131). This statement might be interpreted as simply indicating Brittain's knowledge of her brother's homosexuality, perhaps due to a recognition that he suffered from some gender constraints similar to those that caused her own pain and guilt. Her analysis of the reasons for Edward's homosexuality, however, indicates otherwise. She explains Edward's homosexuality

by pointing to “what he had been through, . . . [including] the loss in quick succession of all his friends combined with the strain of his daily life” (131). According to Brittain, these stresses had changed “his temperament,” making him homosexual (131). In this way, Brittain attributes Edward’s sexuality to his trauma rather than his nature, and thereby confines his struggles to the battlefield, neglecting to take notice of the very same societal forces that extend outside it that caused some of her own hardships. Brittain, who searches everywhere in *Testament of Youth* for links between herself and the men she loves, misses this connection with her brother and the shared constraints they faced in terms of gender roles.

Conclusion

In *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain analyzes the rigid gender roles enforced within a society bent on using male bodies and manipulating male and female ideals to power war. These rigid gender roles create a vast separation between men and women, each of whom seeks to contribute to the war through the avenues to which they have access. The separation between men’s and women’s wartime experiences and traumas creates a hierarchy between male and female war roles that results in the devaluation of women’s contributions to the war effort. Women themselves often undervalue the woman’s role, leading women like Vera Brittain to feel immense guilt and trauma at both their inability to participate in the war in the same way as the men, as well as their separation from them. Brittain is separated from the men in life due to her inability to share their experiences during the war, and then again through their deaths. To overcome these traumas, she attempts, during the war, to create her own version of the trauma that her male friends suffer. When writing her autobiography long after the war, Brittain is very aware of the irony of her attempts to resolve her trauma of absence through simulating the trauma of presence. Her awareness of the war’s ironies and the relationship between gender and

war helps her to see, and to portray in her autobiography, the war's absurdity. In this way, she is able to acknowledge the war's contradictions: its dignity and baseness, its glory and depravity, its limitations and freedoms. Brittain also acknowledges the irony that war places the most value on the soldier role, despite the horrors and brevity of soldiers' lives. Brittain, however, is blind to some of the more complicated consequences of the gender roles the war reinforces. For instance, her brother's struggle goes unseen at least partially due to her own ignorance of the ways in which heteronormativity affects how gender roles operate within the war. Brittain uses the writing of *Testament of Youth* itself to work through her trauma of separation from the men she loved by acknowledging and drawing more attention to the shared traumas between them. This allows her to use the men she lost to bear witness to her own traumatic narrative, and to bring them closer to her in memory in order to make her loss of them seem less permanent and the separation between them less vast and more bearable.

In this way, *Testament of Youth* reveals women's struggles during the First World War: the struggle to be valued, to avoid the crippling guilt that comes with the death of one's friends in an event in which one cannot participate, and to work through one's trauma after the war is over. Through *Testament of Youth*, Brittain details her own story as a woman living through the First World War. She provides a detailed analysis of the inferiority complex she developed as a result, even as she works through it via the actual writing of the text. Brittain's conception of the problems with gender roles during war is, however, limited by her own version of feminism and the blindnesses that accompany it. Brittain's feminism does not recognize the need to deconstruct gender roles, but rather seeks to allow women access to the privileges of the male role. This single-minded focus on granting women access to men's advantages blinds her to the problems with the heteronormative, rigid structure of gender roles as a whole, a structure that drives her

own brother's suffering from the war's heteronormativity. Despite its blind spots, her autobiography allows Vera Brittain to escape the trauma of her past, moving into a new future with a new life, a life she dedicates to advocating on behalf of causes she believes in, such as pacifism and feminism.

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