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Sexual disorder and social policy

British women's prose writing of the First World War and its concern with the social status of women and gender relations

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INTRODUCTION

The First World War was a first in many respects: a large number of countries participated; the range and extent of the battles were unprecedented; it prompted a surge of new technology and transformed the concept of war. It undoubtedly changed the outlook of humans on the world. It is also said to have changed the outlook of man on women: it is often described as a turning point for feminism and the struggle for women's rights, mainly because British women were granted the vote with the Representation of the People Bill in 1918. However, many more factors played a part in the establishment of women's social status during and after the war, such as their involvement in the professional and economic sphere as well as the political one, but also their role in the war itself and dominant gender norms. While the war created the image of the woman worker and showed women's professional capabilities to be on a par with men's, the changes in women's social status were small-scale, mostly limited to a small group of women and dependent on the intersections of various social factors. Instead of becoming a turning point for women's rights, the war caused anxiety about the disturbance of traditional gender norms, resulting in social policy attempting to re-establish traditional pre-war gender norms during and after the war by thrusting women back into the domestic sphere.

The wartime achievements of British women were thus largely ignored, and the same is true for their literary works about the war. Women writers faced many obstacles and disadvantages, both material and immaterial, and not the least of those obstacles is the constant devaluation of their writing by the primarily masculine literary establishment: even today, the immediate image that comes to mind when one thinks of a war narrative is one of trenches filled with soldiers, bombs and gunfire – one of male pain, male action and male sacrifice. However, women's war writing portrays not only trench narratives, but also the female pain, action and sacrifice that are often forgotten. In addition, women's war writing is also a valuable source for reflections on the gender relations during and after the war. This thesis combines those two levels of gender relations both inside and outside literature in order to answer the following research question: how does British women's prose writing of the First World War depict and reflect on the social status of women and gender relations?

This research question includes some restrictions. The literature this thesis will discuss must, of course, be written by British female authors who have experienced the First World War first-hand in order to ensure a historically correct portrayal of women's social status and gender relations. However, the works do not have to be published during the war: such a restriction would severely limit the possible body of works and by including works published in the post-war years, it is also possible to research how the war affected women's social status and gender relations not only for the length of but also after its duration. Although poetry as a literary form was of great importance and widely used during the First World War, this thesis will only discuss prose writing: due to its importance and frequency, poetry

has already been widely researched and elucidated, whereas analyses of prose writing are much less common. Taking these restrictions into account, this thesis will analyse two case studies, namely Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, published in 1918, and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, published in 1933. These two works were chosen because, in spite of the fact that they were both written by white, middle- and upper-class women, they show certain differences: West's novel is fictional, deals with experiences at the home front which is a domain mainly characterised as feminine, and focuses on a more traditionally female and passive experience of war; Brittain's work is a non-fictional autobiography, deals with experiences both at the home front and the Western Front, and recounts a more traditionally male and active experience of war. It must be emphasised, however, that these studies will not accurately represent the abundance of experiences of women during the First World War, not only because of their number but also because a large group of women could not write or be published because of their social and material circumstances. Therefore, these two case studies as well as most British women's prose writing of this period was written by white, middle- or upper-class women whose experiences should not be generalised.

The thesis is two-jointed: the first part elaborates on the relevant background; the second part discusses and analyses the two case studies. The part on the relevant background provides information on British women's social status during and after the First World War, the situation of British women writers in the early twentieth century as described by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, and British women's writing of the First World War. The second part then entails an analysis of Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, each preceded by an introduction of the author and supported by academic publications. Finally, the two case studies will be compared to one another and linked to the relevant background in a concluding chapter.

BACKGROUND

Women and the First World War

When one speaks of the Great War, the immediate image that comes to mind is usually one of trenches filled with soldiers, bombs and gunfire: a picture filled with men, male pain, male action and male sacrifice. Often forgotten is the pain, action and sacrifice of women – different, but not less important. While the men in their lives joined the army and fought at the front, women made valuable contributions at the so-called home front as well as at the front lines, even though the home front was traditionally considered feminine and the battle zones masculine. In the words of Grayzel, "the bias of those who write military history" is that they "consider what happens on battlefields to be paramount", and that furthermore "the fact of their exclusion from combatant status made women seemingly easy to ignore" (Grayzel 118). The following chapter will, after providing a background of the status of British women at the start of the war, discuss their experiences and contributions during the war and the subsequent changes to their social status as well as the effects and consequences of the war on the status of British women in the post-war period. It must be emphasised, however, that there is no single wartime experience of *the* British woman: many factors play a part in shaping experiences, not least social factors such as class, race and age. While this chapter will sketch an overview of women's contributions and experiences, it by no means claims to be exhaustive and comprehensive.

At the beginning of the war and the subsequent mass mobilisation, traditional notions of femininity were thriving. Women were seen to belong in the domestic sphere as mothers, caregivers, sexual temptations and overall the weaker sex. Masculinity, and especially soldierly masculinity, on the other hand, was emphatically idealised. Despite the prevailing domestic image of women, a third of the British women were already working before the war (Pyecroft 699), even though women's work was seen as less valuable than men's and therefore deserving of lower pay. According to Pyecroft, women in the workplace were affected by "two separate but interrelated issues" (Pyecroft 700): the first, as mentioned before, "the belief that women were unsuited for wage-paying work" and therefore deserved lower wages, and the second, "the threat that their lower wages presented to male workers", which resulted in male hostility towards woman workers. The first decade of the twentieth century was also marked by the women's suffrage movement, which strived for women's emancipation and political rights and had been active since the mid-nineteenth century through organisations such as the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the Women's Freedom League and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) (Grayzel 102). However, the outbreak of war in 1914 "disrupted the suffrage movement in its entirety at a moment when women seemed very close to receiving the vote" (Grayzel 102). Women were at the time allowed to attend facilities of higher education, but it was not very common: in 1914, only 2.900 women attended universities and university

colleges in England and Wales, which is less than 0.2 per cent of the female population in the age group twenty to twenty-four (Park 152). In short, while women's rights were an issue that received a lot of attention, most women complied with the expectations society laid upon them and remained at home instead of working or attending university.

In the early war months, women's most prominent role in the war was sending their male family members off to war: the soldiers' duty was to defend their country at the front, while the women's duty was to send them off with "confidence, resolution and seemingly unquestioned support of the war effort" (Grayzel 9). This image of women firmly sending men off to war was reproduced massively in propaganda: "wartime media (…) called upon women specifically [to] service and sacrifice" in various ways, from lending soldiers emotional support to recruiting new soldiers and tending to the wounded and the bereaved (Grayzel 10). These expectations for women are effectively summarised in the following rather well-known propaganda image:

*Figure 1: British propaganda poster dating from 1914. It depicts two women and a child in the domestic sphere, waving off soldiers on their way to the front. (*British Library*)*

Despite its apparent passiveness, this duty was officially considered on a par with men's: it held a great significance and was seen as self-sacrificial. The images of women portrayed in propaganda were often "defiant and powerful" (Grayzel 10) and sometimes even personifications of the nation or concepts such as Liberty, Victory or Justice, but they also usually reinforced the idea that women belonged in the domestic sphere. Other kinds of propaganda showed "the brutalised, naked bodies of women" (Grayzel 17) as a testament to the barbarity of the Germans in order to "enlist male sympathy and action" (Grayzel 20). Propaganda enlisting the help of women to recruit soldiers resulted in actions such

as the white feather campaign, in which women handed out white feathers to men out of uniform as a symbol of cowardice in order to shame them into joining the army.

Higher public visibility of women was not only a result of propaganda and media: it was also caused by women "join[ing] the labour market to an unprecedented extent and t[aking] on previously more or less exclusively male professions and jobs" (Hämmerle, Überegger & Bader-Zaar 2). The results of mass mobilisation included a shortage of labour forces in Britain, which caused an increased amount of women to become employed in a wide range of occupations. Women's paid employment in Britain increased by 400.000 within the first year of the war (Grayzel 27) and the number of women working full-time rose by 1.3 million or 22% during the war, a fact which received much more attention than the six million women already working before the war (Pyecoft 704). Most women worked out of economic necessity, to maintain their household while the men were at the front, but also out of patriotism: the War Service for Women campaign from 1915 caused over 50.000 women to start working (Pyecroft 703). Many traditionally female jobs were hit by austerity measures, such as domestic service and dressmaking, which caused women to shift towards other jobs such as delivery services and window washing, and often also factory work – especially in munition factories – and nursing (Pyecroft 702). This shift allowed women to not only work in more diverse sectors, it also allowed them to perform more waged and skilled work and for married women with children to work as well. The employment of women during the war was not uncontroversial: female employment posed the question of pay. Grayzel puts the situation like this: "If women earned less than men for the same job, they undercut male employment. On the other hand, paying men and women equally seemed far too radical and, some argued, unfair since male workers were undoubtedly superior." (Grayzel 30). This situation caused hostility from male workers towards female workers as it had before the war, but the increase of women workers amplified the concern and caused "equal pay for equal work" to emerge as a constant topic of discussion in order to eliminate the threat to male workers when they returned from the war (Pyecroft 703). One proposed solution for this problem was the "dilution of labour" (Pyecroft 704): jobs were divided into several segments, each capable of being completed by an unskilled and often female worker under the supervision of a skilled male worker. However, this strengthened the perception that women could only handle minor, unskilled tasks under male leadership. Another problem was the concern with health and morality (Grayzel 35): people feared that working affected women's reproductive capabilities, reproduction still being considered the primary task of a woman. As a solution, Britain commissioned factory inspectors and welfare supervisors to monitor the working conditions and to serve as moral guardians.

A very popular profession for women during the war was nursing: it was considered a job which required self-sacrifice and heroism, and was a way for women to travel to the front and experience the devastating effects of war in a way that resembles the traditionally male soldiering experience. While

this image of nurses was admired and often depicted in propaganda, nursing also had a flip side: societies were suspicious of nurses' morals and behaviour after they had worked in such intimate contact to male bodies (Grayzel 41). Nurses were still subservient to male doctors and drew on their allegedly natural capabilities of caring and nurturing: while still very important work, it did not directly challenge gender roles in any way (Grayzel 37). Linda S. Beeber in her article "To Be One of the Boys: Aftershocks of the World War I Nursing Experience" analyses personal accounts of nurses and argues that nurses being thrust into the unfamiliar world of men at war increased awareness of conflicts between autonomous professional practice and the "good woman" image. She describes nurses as a fusion of "womanly cleanliness, order, peace, and skill and yet a woman who had been to the battlefront" (Beeber 33), who were "symbol[s] of feminine gentility and nurturing" but "experienced events that were atypical for women of her time". This contrast, which also relates to society's split view of nurses as heroic and self-sacrificial as well as morally ambiguous, created conflict for some nurses and provoked questions about identity. The "ideal of the good woman-nurse" (Beeber 37) ascribed feminine qualities as well as technical skill to nurses, but still placed them under the subordination of a male doctor. However, confrontations with suffering and crises caused nurses to act more independently and decisively, resulting in them "[seeing] themselves as collaborators with physicians, a role sharply differentiated from that of the obsequious good woman" (Beeber 40). While nurses' early accounts of service show hope that their efforts would be considered equally important as those of soldiers, they later show that they were often passed over in favour of male officers when it came to food, lodging and travel arrangements. While nurses were highly valued during the war, their experience brought them in touch with "a differentness, a world where autonomy was demanded and could be provided, where one's existence could be endangered in the same way as a man's (…) [but] where equal work and danger did not mean equal status" (Beeber 42).

As mentioned above, the increased employment of women sparked a concern for their moral behaviour. At the start of the war, they were "called upon to be the embodiment of perfect, traditional morality as they sent their men off to fight" (Grayzel 62). During the war, many changes threatened that image: women's appearances changed – they wore shorter skirts and shorter hair so that those would not obstruct their work – and so did their social behaviour – they started drinking and smoking more than before, which were considered "male" vices. The image of perfect morality made way for an image of more emboldened women (Grayzel 63), women who were almost masculinised. The crisis of the "war babies" (Grayzel 65) – an increase in illegitimacy rates during the war – and the upsetting of traditional gender arrangements due to wartime mobilisation were also cause for concern. While men were away at the front, women took their place as heads of the household – but this was only temporary: the emphasis on marriage and motherhood as the ultimate course of life for women remained, as well as a double standard on sexuality. Despite, or perhaps because of, the many changes in the image of

women, "discourses on motherhood and allegedly female roles and tasks such as devotion, self-abandonment, love, and care for others prevailed or were even reaffirmed during wartime" (Hämmerle, Überegger & Bader-Zaar 3).

Women's exclusion from military service allowed them to protest against the war, and more precisely "the war-induced economic and social conditions, such as insufficient food and fuel supplies, rising prices, inadequate wages or a combination of all three" (Grayzel 79). Grayzel defines three aspects of feminism that feminist pacifist arguments are based on: "the international solidarity that existed among women and feminism's commitment to internationalism", "its appeal to women as mothers and caregivers who were therefore inherently opposed to war", and "the existence of women's oppression and their lack of basic political and social rights" (Grayzel 80). The international solidarity in the first aspect should not be considered absolute: while solidarity did stretch beyond boundaries, it was not all-inclusive or unconditional. This urge to protest contributed to the formation of organisations such as the Women's Peace Crusade (WPC): this particular organisation was "a direct response to the introduction of conscription in 1916" (Grayzel 84) and organised numerous anti-conscription activities. Pacifism and anti-war activity were generally considered "dangerous to their wartime nations" (Grayzel 85) and pacifist activists were prosecuted accordingly.

Apart from female pacifists, the war brought forth female heroines as well. Heroines generally had a double function: they served as "gendered embodiments of the finest qualities of a 'race' or a national identity, as role models to bolster morale and mobilise the nation for the war effort" and they underscored "the 'barbarous' and 'uncivilised' nature of the enemy" (Fell 108). Heroines were usually known for their activities at the front lines and were therefore often "discussed in terms normally reserved for male combatants" (Fell 108): what qualifies women for the status of heroine in the first place seems to be the exhibition of certain male characteristics such as courage, devotion and tenacity. However, while these characteristics were greatly admired in war heroines, they also sparked a "desire to 're-feminise' women who were active at or near the front" (Fell 109) in an attempt to compensate for their perceived masculinity. This approach was successful when heroine-martyrs were concerned, women who died during the war, but not for heroines who survived the war and had to maintain their public image in the post-war years: female heroism was appreciated insofar it was necessary and could be exploited in propaganda, but it essentially conflicted with the image of women as domestic creatures. Therefore, as Fell summarises aptly, "If during the war female heroines on the front line played a vital role in the propaganda messages (…) after the war, in a pronatalist climate that encouraged women to return to the domestic sphere, their status as war veterans was generally less welcome." (Fell 123).

The war was expected to be a turning point for women: it created the new image of the woman worker, who worked as hard as a man, and showed women's capabilities as equal to men, which caused great optimism for changes in women's social status after the war. As Britain's minister of munitions

praised the efforts of women workers in 1916: "Where is the man who would now deny the civil rights which she has earned by her hard work?" (qtd. in Pyecroft 699). Despite the many changes that took place during the war, significant improvements in the lives of women were not prominent – if any, they largely depended on the intersections of social factors, such as class, ethnicity, age, war experience and loss, and were not universal for the female gender (Grayzel 101). The end of the war and the subsequent demobilisation displaced most waged women workers from their wartime occupations so much so that by the fall of 1919, nearly 750.000 women had lost their jobs (Pyecroft 708), and by 1921, the percentage of women in the labour force was two per cent lower than in 1911 (Grayzel 106). The demobilisation also caused a shift in the kind of work available for women: many women returned to domestic service, since alternative work was much harder to find than during the war (Grayzel 107). However, women's employment in the tertiary sector, especially in professions such as social work, banking and commerce, increased substantially (Grayzel 109). The general consensus in the popular press media was that women who continued to work after the war were selfish and greedy, and were depriving men – especially war veterans – of work (Grayzel 107).

In terms of political rights, the involvement of the war in the granting of the women's vote in 1918 is controversial but probable. The Representation of the People Bill, which was passed in the House of Commons in 1917 and in the House of Lords in 1918, allowed the vote for women (Grayzel 103), but that vote was heavily restricted: it only allowed most women over thirty years old to vote and it benefited mainly the middle- and upper-class. Women, though not entirely satisfied with this result, were willing to compromise because they believed more reform would soon follow and they were cautious to cause "a public stink" during the war (Grayzel 103). Feminists "sought to use their war service and patriotic nationalism as evidence of their qualifications for the full rights of citizenship", but their arguments may not have convinced many not already sympathetic to their cause (Grayzel 106). The after-war period showed an increase in divorce and a decline in birth rates (Grayzel 110), symptoms of more female independence. Even so, women were still regarded as the primary caregivers with as their most essential functions marriage and motherhood. In the words of Pyecroft, "British society may have been changed by the war, yet its notions of women's roles in the home and work remained constant." (Pyecroft 710). The ideal of "proper spheres" (Pyecroft 710), which was challenged during the war, returned to its pre-war state and pushed women back into the domestic sphere. Hämmerle, Überegger and Bader-Zaar confirm this: "women's war efforts did not cause a profound change of the hegemonic gender order or long-term improvements to the status of women, even though they might have been of great importance for the contemporaries themselves" and in the end "dichotomous and hierarchically constructed concepts of femininity and masculinity prevailed" (Hämmerle, Überegger & Bader-Zaar 3).

A possible explanation for this continuity in spite of everything is the theory of the "double helix": first proposed by Margaret R. and Patrice L.-R. Higonnet, it combines traditional views on femininity and masculinity and reasons that the masculinity of the soldiers was valued over the contributions of women, and even though women could be seen to rise above the preconceived image of the domestic creature, they remained subordinated to men, which made a subversion of the gender hierarchy impossible. This theory is often criticised for its lack of complexity and attention to ambivalence and ambiguities, but it remains relevant when analysing gender relations in this particular period. While it seems that the gender hierarchy was unshakable even by the war, the masculine image of the soldier was actually rendered fragile: the events and consequences of the war threatened the ideal in many ways, most notably through the phenomenon of "war hysterics", otherwise known as shell-shock. Symptoms of war hysteria were "severe trembling, dizziness, amnesia, and verbal and bodily dysfunctions such as problems with sitting, standing, walking, and speaking as well as tics, paralysis, and other factors and forms of behavioural disorganisation" (Köhne 72). These symptoms were, as revealed by texts written by military physicians, considered signs of "male softness, anti-heroism, weakness, lack of character, cowardice, and even so-called 'inner desertion'" (Köhne 73). In contrast to the strong soldier as a symbol of masculinity, the "hysterical men" were symbols of "defeated masculinity" and subverted the idealised image of the soldier (Köhne 73), and their hysterical behaviour was even "transformed into a, symbolically speaking, 'feminine' condition" which "implied that masculinity was in crisis" (Köhne 73-74). While the image of the masculine soldier was indeed threatened by the phenomenon of war hysteria, it remained upright and instead diverted attention to the traditionally feminine traits attributed to hysteria as such, making it a feminine condition which affected men instead of a masculine condition that did not comply with traditional masculinity.

In short, the war was not as much of a turning point women as it was expected to be. Women achieved new political and social rights, yet they lost economic ground and were effectively thrust back into the home. Although the image of women was altered in terms of their appearance and was riddled with concern for their "vices" and sexuality, the notion of "womanhood" remained largely unchanged: women were seen as domestic creatures meant for marriage and motherhood, not employment or politics. It is, however, "difficult to evaluate the extent to which the political, social and cultural conditions of the immediate post-war years and indeed of the 1920s themselves were due to the war" (Grayzel 117) and it is ill-advised to attempt to generalise women's experiences.

The situation of women writers in the early twentieth century

This chapter will investigate the situation of women writers in the early twentieth century by discussing two cornerstone works, namely Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Woolf was a British writer and was alive during the First World

War. *A Room of One's Own* is one of the most well-known works written about women writers in the early twentieth century: it was first published in 1929, takes the form of a literary essay rather than an academic article, and deals with the obstacles women writers face in the patriarchal society of the post-war years. Although the essay discusses the situation in the years after the war, it is also relevant when investigating the circumstances for women writers during the war itself, as the issues Woolf discusses existed during the war as well. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* was first published in 1979 and formed an early landmark of feminist literary criticism. Gilbert and Gubar examine British women writers of the nineteenth century, placing their period of research before the First World War. However, their findings are still relevant for the investigation of women writers in the early twentieth century because the situation of women and women writers had not radically changed, as seen in the previous chapter: women were still confined to the domestic sphere and were not encouraged to work, even if that work was writing.

In *A Room of One's* Own, Woolf distinguishes two types of obstacles pertaining to the production of literature, namely material and immaterial ones. The material obstacles are already apparent in the title of the work: Woolf considers a room of one's own a necessity for a woman writer. That is not the only requirement, however: in Woolf's own words, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 2154). She also shows that education is important for a writer, but that women do not receive an education on a par with men's and are kept out of men's educational facilities[1]. Woolf argues that material as well as immaterial circumstances are generally against literature being produced, whether by men or women: "dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down" and "accentuating all these difficulties and making them harder to bear is the world's notorious indifference" (Woolf 2180). However, material circumstances weigh down heavier on women than men: women rarely have their own space or money, while men often do. The same goes for immaterial difficulties: male writers face the "world's notorious indifference"; women writers face "not indifference but hostility" (Woolf 2181). Women writers were actively discouraged from writing and anything they produced was automatically considered inferior to the writings of men. As a result, "her mind must have been strained and her vitality lowered by the need of opposing this, disproving that" (Woolf 2182), while the mind of an artist must, in Woolf's opinion, be without obstacle. The necessity of an artist's free mind is debatable, but Woolf's idea comes close

[1] In her book-length essay *Three Guineas*, which was first published in 1938, Woolf expands on the issue of education for women. The essay starts out as a response to a man's letter in which he asks Woolf how, in her opinion, to prevent war. This question makes Woolf reflect on her position as the daughter of an educated man and therefore a woman of the "educated" class as well as on the relation between gender and violence, which "has always been the man's habit, not the woman's" (Woolf *Three* Guineas 13). She expresses criticisms on the patriarchal structures of education and the professional system as well as on their exclusion of women, which she argues perpetuate fascist ideologies, and she opposes them to feminism, which relates to pacifism and justice.

to the psychological phenomenon of stereotype threat, a concept developed by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson in 1995. Their theory claims that "the mere knowledge that one might be targeted by negative stereotypes (negative beliefs and expectations about one's group) can create a psychological burden that prevents ethnic minority students from performing up to their potential on tests of intellectual ability" (Schmader, Hall & Croft 447). Although the concept was originally developed for ethnic minorities in an academic context, it could be applied to women as well, and in this case women writers of the early twentieth century: the mere knowledge that one might be targeted by the negative beliefs and expectations about women's abilities creates a psychological burden which, in Woolf's words, lowers the vitality of the women writer in question.

Another immaterial obstacle women writers face is the relative lack of tradition behind them: literature was male not only because of the male authors and their works, but also because of the forms developed only by those male authors. Because of the lack of a female tradition, there are no female literary forms, and "there is no reason to think that the form of the epic or of the poetic play suits a woman" (Woolf 2194). Only the novel is a form which Woolf considers new enough: "all the older forms of literature were hardened and set by the time by the time [the woman] became a writer" but "the novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands" (Woolf 2194).

Woolf also touches on the reception of women's writing: because literature corresponds to reality, patriarchal values are "inevitably transferred from life to fiction" (Woolf 2192) and literature that deals with traditionally masculine matters is valued over literature about women. This is the reason why men's writing about the First World War was considered more relevant than women's, and why literature dealing with a more traditionally male experience of the war was considered more relevant than literature dealing with a more traditionally female experience. When men are valued over women in real life, the same is true in literature:

> This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists.
>
> (Woolf 2192)

In their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar focus on immaterial obstacles faced by woman writers of the nineteenth century. Like Woolf, they discuss the lack of a female literary tradition, basing their theory on Harold Bloom's notion of "anxiety of influence", a "fear that [the author] is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings" (Gilbert & Gubar 46) from which the dynamics of literary history arise. However, Gilbert and Gubar find that "Bloom's model of literary history is

intensely (and even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal" (Gilbert & Gubar 47) and propose that instead of an anxiety of influence, the nineteenth century woman writer is subject to an "anxiety of authorship – a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (Gilbert & Gubar 49). Instead of struggling only with the imitation and emulation of precursors, women writers must also struggle against the effects of patriarchal socialisation, beginning with searching for female precursors in order to establish a female literary tradition. However, they also argue that the patriarchal socialisation women – whether writers or not – were subjected to literally made them sick, confirming the self-fulfilling prophecy of patriarchal culture "assum[ing] mental exercises would have dire consequences [for women in particular]" (Gilbert & Gubar 55). Women writers would be "evidently infected or sickened by just the feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and inferiority that their education in 'femininity' almost seems to have been designed to induce" (Gilbert & Gubar 60).

This once again reminds of the phenomenon of stereotype threat: education in "femininity" brings awareness of the beliefs and expectations attached to womanhood, namely that women are not fit to write because they are no good at it. Because of the psychological burden this awareness creates, women writers become "infected or sickened", resulting in yet another obstacle to be overcome. Nineteenth century woman writers dealt with this in different ways: they could act apologetically and adopt a "kind of modest, 'sensible', and self-deprecatory misogyny" (Gilbert & Gubar 62); they could refuse to be apologetic and be considered monstrous or mad; they could adopt a male pseudonym; or they could surrender to the perceived inferiority of women and write in the "lesser" genres or write exclusively about female experiences. However, women writers also attempted to revise male genres, "using them to record their own dreams and their own stories in disguise", thereby "achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards" (Gilbert & Gubar 73). Those dreams and stories in disguise form a hidden or "secret message" (Gilbert & Gubar 75) in women's writing, namely a conscious or unconscious rejection of the values and assumptions of patriarchy, hidden in a confirmation of those same values and assumptions. The "madwoman" in the title of the book refers to the "mad double" of the female author, who "dramatize[s] [her] own self-division, [her] desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them" (Gilbert & Gubar 78).

Neither Woolf nor Gilbert and Gubar discuss how the factor of gender intersects with other factors of identity such as class or race. Woolf's essay does concern the "poverty" of women, but of women as a group – it does not take into account that some women are considerably poorer than others. However, as it does consider poverty an obstruction to the production of literature, it can be assumed that, the higher the degree of poverty, the more insurmountable an obstruction it forms. Lower class women are disadvantaged by lack of money, but also by lack of an own space and of uninterrupted

time. The words "dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down" (Woolf 2180) are even more true for lower class women than middle or upper-class women: more people will interrupt seeing as they have less space for themselves; money must be made more urgently and in a more time-consuming manner; health will more easily break down because of inferior living conditions. Woolf does not refer to the issue of race, but the stereotype threat her idea corresponds to doubly applies to women of colour – in fact, the psychological phenomenon was first accurately developed in relation to ethnicity. Women of colour are subject to stereotypes about women, but also about people of colour and women of colour in particular. Therefore, their psychological burden would be even heavier than that of white women writers, worsening feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. Their anxiety of authorship becomes even more radical than the anxiety of white women writers: not only do they not have a lack of tradition of female writers behind them, but also of writers of colour and female writers of colour.

Women's writing of the First World War

As women's experiences of the First World War are often ignored, so is women's writing about the First World War. As Catherine Reilly says in the introduction of her anthology of women war poets:

> We know of the male agony of the trenches from the poetry of soldiers like Sassoon and Owen. We know little in poetry of what that agony and its millions of deaths meant to the millions of English women who had to endure them – to learn to survive survival.
>
> (Reilly xv)

Reilly's anthology focusses on poetry and bereavement, but women's writing of the war is diverse and plenty. However, in spite of their contemporary popularity, "few of these women's stories (…) still remain in print or feature in the public perception as the twenty-first century begins" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 106): historical perceptions of the war focus more on the traditionally male "trench experience", even though it "was one encountered by less than half the population" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 3) and therefore unrepresentative of the wartime experience. The following chapter will discuss popular literary forms used by women and recurrent themes in their writing, such as their participation in the war, ideologies, bereavement, memory and the traumatised male.

While this thesis will focus on women's prose writing, the importance of poetry as a literary form for women's war writing must be stressed. It was one of the most popular forms of war literature, and particularly women's war literature, because of several reasons: it was accessible to British women but also widely read and easily reproducible. Additionally, "volumes of poetry were perceived as good reading to bring or send to the soldiers at the front – small volumes could fit into a pocket, unlike a bulky Victorian novel, and poems could be read in short bursts" (Bell 413). In addition, poems were

published in "the newspapers and journals of the period" (Reilly xxxiii). Poetry was not only popular because of its convenient form, however: it is also powerfully allusive and poets use it to "refer to larger cultural traditions of which they claim to be a part" such as the "public civilian culture of English War" (Vincent Sherry qtd. in Bell 413). Yet, while poetry was one of the most popular literary forms for women, it is not the only one: women often wrote novels as well. As Woolf says, "the women poets precede the women novelists" (Woolf 2188), but it was "easier [for women] to write prose and fiction than to write poetry or a play" (Woolf 2188) because less concentration was required for it, and therefore less uninterrupted space and time. Woolf argues that the novel was a natural form for middle-class women writers because "all the literary training that a woman had (…) was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion" (Woolf 2189), which she considers central to the novel. The novel also had the advantage of being a relatively new literary form, at the time, which made it more easily adaptable for women writers than poetry: "the novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands" to "provid[e] some new vehicle, not necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her" (Woolf 2194). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel was increasingly recognised as an art form. As women were identified with the genre of the novel, that recognition "placed a spotlight on the woman as artist" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 134), a role which had previously been almost exclusively male. Alongside fiction, many works of non-fiction were produced by women: they often used personal records of experience, such as diaries or letters, as a basis for published texts.

The First World War is famously tied to the beginning of literary modernism: as Smith says, "the legacy of the war became central to the creation of modernist thought" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 72) and "the first World War was literary in a way unmatched by other conflicts" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 19). This connection between the war and modernism caused "problems for defining a female modernism" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 72), however, since women were so often excluded from the war. Nevertheless, women writers were important in the development of modernist writing: "like men, women experiment[ed] with different literary styles as they struggle[d] to find ways adequately to record their experiences, often altering their perspectives in accordance with the tone of war" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 19) but their "status as women ma[de] them metaphoric foreigners in the male-dominated literary landscape, searching for new ways to express their experience and identity" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 161). This revision of conventions evolved in the literary modernism known today. A prime example of literary modernism developing in women's war writing can be found in the writing of female nurses at the front: they often came from middle or upper class families and had been ill prepared by their social and cultural backgrounds for the harsh experience of wartime hospitals. As Smith says, "many of the incidents they decided to record defied expression using conventional language and form", but "whole other private writers turned to their literary heritage to find ways to express the unspeakable, these women sought alternative narrative strategies and non-

mimetic linguistic experiments to convey their experience" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 71). Conventional language and form proved inadequate in the face of their wartime experiences, and this failure of conventions prompted experimentation. Experimental or modernist characteristics found in nurses' writings include "aesthetic self-consciousness, fragmentation, paradox and uncertainty, dehumanisation, sense of crisis and an engagement with issues of sexuality" as well as "experiments with language and form" (Smith *The Second* Battlefield 72).

Bell's article on "Women's Politics, Poetry, and the Feminist Historiography of the Great War" discusses recurring themes found in British women's poetry of the First World War and how women sought legitimacy for their wartime experiences through literature. While Bell focuses on poetry, it can be assumed that similar themes recur in prose literature, which this thesis will further investigate in the following case studies. One integral theme Bell discusses are the connections between the home and the front. As Bell says, "much of the historiography of the Great War has emphasized dislocation between the 'home front' and the Western Front" (Bell 413) and the Western Front was considered "a producer of meaning and authentic experience" (Bell 412) in contrast to the ignorant and uncomprehending home front. Women's writing did not merely represent women on the home front as ignorant and "other" to war, however: "women writers who had been to the front lines of battle also sought to draw a distinction between their experiences on the Western Front and those of women in England, in order to privilege their accounts" (Bell 415). The more traditionally male wartime experience was still valued over a more traditionally female experience and was perceived to be more authentic, and the difference between those two types of experiences was emphasised. But, as Bell notes, such an emphasis "denies the cultural, social, and political worth of women's actions at home" (Bell 416). Most often, the participation of women in the war was depicted through images of female wartime heroism, which was fundamentally different from the more common male heroism because women were excluded from combat, but also because "they did not have the same relationship to the traditions of heroism based on chivalric ideals and the Passion of Christ, which (…) were the models of heroic male suffering in battle" (Bell 417). Women writers "instead focused on women's sacrifices, their patriotism, and their service to the nation" (Bell 417), but also emphasised youth and beauty and overall femininity.

Female wartime heroism was always contextualised in traditional feminine virtues, and it is therefore no coincidence that volunteer nurses were the most hailed among women during the war. Nurses performed a nurturing role which corresponded with the traditional gender role of women as caregivers, and sentimental images of nurses in propaganda and literature in turn reinforced the traditional gender boundaries. Nurses were often "presumed to be dreaming about [their absent men]" (Bell 419), which served to "[neutralise] unease about young women caring for the bodies of wounded men" (Bell 419). This unease was a result of the relationship between female nurse and male patient

breaking down the boundaries between sexes: the relationship "seemed to demonstrate the new ascendancy of women over men" (Bell 420) as nurses held power over the vulnerable bodies of wounded men. Wounded soldiers – especially victims of shell-shock – were at risk of being feminised, adding to the threat of a reversal of the pre-war gender hierarchy and the idea that pre-war masculinity was in crisis. The power of nurses lay also in their survival, but women writers mostly avoided this topic in favour of emphasising the dangers they faced at the front. However, an underlying theme in much women's poetry was survivor's guilt and guilt for their safety which came at the expense of men's lives.

Less common than depicting the heroism of nurses was the celebration of the heroism of female industrial workers such as those in munitions factories: they "were not and could not be perceived as the sentimental heroines of the war in the way that nurses were" (Bell 422) because they did not volunteer but were paid, and because they were subjected to "class prejudices concerning the supposed selfishness and licentiousness of the working classes and working class women in particular" (Bell 422) as well as the idea that they were "betraying the nature of their sex" (Bell 423). The labour of munitions workers did not have the feminine connotation of nursing and female munitions workers were therefore not celebrated, but seen as a "necessary wartime evil" (Bell 424). Those perceptions were reflected in the wartime poetry of women, which revealed the class conflicts complicating the "portrayal of a unified female heroism" (Bell 424): women poets' usual "laudatory attitude to female labour" was "complicated by fear that claims to female moral superiority were being undermined by the behaviour of working-class women" (Bell 424).

Women's war poetry – and by extent, women's war literature – was also a platform for more explicit political ideologies. Literature often carried nationalist, patriotist or pacifist ideologies along with feminist sentiments: "women writers came from a wide variety of political backgrounds, and their poetic representation of women's active civic participation in many ways continued pre-war debates over women's suffrage" (Bell 427). Nationalist literature "presents women's wartime role as fulfilling the demands of the newly militarised state [and] echoes the propaganda images" (Bell 428) and often depicts heroic figures for the purpose of appealing to the people's patriotism, targeting potential army recruits and shaming those who do not answer that appeal. Pacifist literature on the other hand focuses on a "belief in essential gender roles" and depicts women as "natural opponents of war" (Bell 430) due to their nature as caregivers. This association of pacifism with the feminine is not restricted to women: male pacifists are "often represented as asexual or homosexual", as if they had "the soul of a woman in the body of a man" (Hartman 536), thereby "challeng[ing] conventional thinking about masculinity and bravery at an important cultural moment" (Hartman 548). Male characters created by women writers during the First World War often were not only ascribed pacifist views, but also articulated feminist politics in order to "recapitulate the heady struggle for women's rights a few years prior to the war"

(Hartman 547) and "keep alive the spirit of the reform movements" (Hartman 548). Both nationalist and pacifist literature praised women's war work and used it to justify feminist demands, but the fact remains that women and women writers did not speak in one voice during the war, but rather in a myriad of voices which at times oppose each other.

What most women writers did have in common was shared experiences of grief and loss, which was considered "the most elemental unifying element between women" (Bell 432). That "bereavement gave women the moral authority both to criticize the conduct or concept of war, and to have a voice in how the war would be remembered in the post-war years" (Bell 435). Women became guardians of memory and their post-war literature helped to shape how the war would be remembered: written texts are "*lieux de memoire*" or "sites of memory" (Smith "How to Remember" 302) wherein the collective and cultural memory are stored, which was also the case for women's post-war literature. But, as Smith quotes Marianne Hirsch, "what a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony" (Hirsch & Smith qtd. in Smith "How to Remember" 302). Those issues of power and hegemony cause the trench experience to be regarded as "the most symbolic one of the war" (Smith "How to Remember" 303) and female experiences to be ignored. Literature by women "offers alternative ways of remembering" (Smith "How to Remember" 302): their experiences are different than those of male authors, which "may impact on the way they help to construct cultural memory" (Smith "How to Remember" 303). In short, "women's history [is a] counterhistory that restores forgotten stories to the historical record" (Hirsch & Smith qtd. in Smith "How to Remember" 314). Common sentiments about the end of the war and the armistice in women's literature are mixed feelings: not only joy and relief, but loss, scepticism, pessimism and uncertainty were apparent in their writing. Post-war literature in many cases reveals an underlying theme of disillusionment which often relates to pacifist ideals and the "all-important question of memory, of how to remember" (Smith "How to Remember" 304) is often posed. The two things most remembered about the war remain what Hirsch calls "the primary 'male' myth of experience of the war" and "the consequent bereavement of the population" (Smith "How to Remember" 306), once again a binary of traditionally male and female experiences.

Alongside bereavement and the absence of a generation of men, another consequence of the war often discussed in literature is the impact on survivors, especially in the form of psychological injuries and traumas such as shell-shock. Literature has helped to shape the memory of traumas, but MacCallum-Stewart argues that those traumas have been shaped "into regimented patterns that do not do justice to the multifaceted experiences of war" (MacCallum-Stewart 78). She discusses the mythologisation of the First World War through "a gradual movement throughout the twentieth century away from military history and towards personal and literary representations [which] points to the fact that, in the popular mind, it is often poetry and literature, not history, that defines 'the truth' of the war"

(MacCallum-Stewart 79). Female authors and critics have been instrumental to this movement because "female authors often privilege issues of social behaviour and responses to conflict, rather than the action itself" (MacCallum-Stewart 79). In writing about the war, this means that women often write about the effects and consequences of the war rather than the battlefield, and those effects and consequences usually come in the form of the traumatised male rather than men strengthened by war, which were commonly depicted in early post-war fiction but were eventually "dropped from popular consciousness" (MacCallum-Stewart 81).

The depiction of the male neurasthenic is marked by a "repetition of ideas and tropes [that seem] to suggest these literary texts are useful for understanding the wartime experience" but are also "governed by current beliefs" (MacCallum-Stewart 80), meaning that post-war writing about the war is not necessarily historically accurate. Repeated ideas and tropes about the traumatised male were, for example, links between "breakdown, literary output and homosocial/sexual bonds" (MacCallum-Stewart 80). Shell-shock was considered a literary disease because it was seen to affect sensitive, vulnerable, upper-class men – the same type of men which stereotypically produced literature. From that idea followed the notion that shell-shock had bereaved the world of men who were destined for greater things by shattering their potential and creativity, as well as an association of the traumatised and wounded soldier with feminine behaviour. Literature, especially between 1920 and 1930, was concerned with reintegrating the traumatised male into society: the trauma was accepted as a foible and even used creatively, but without necessarily dwelling on the war itself. This relatively positive depiction of trauma and recovery was gradually replaced by a more negative emphasis on shock and loss: this War Books Controversy was prompted by the publication of several books between 1928 and 1933 which later were recognised as the canonical works of the First World War. The graphic style and consistency in the narratives, as many of the writers had been active at the Western Front, caused the war images depicted in the canonical war books to be "recognised as the definitive representations of war, forcing out other texts with a different tale to tell" (MacCallum-Stewart 83).

Women's literature about the First World War "was deeply affected by the prewar women's movement, especially the struggle for female suffrage" (Claire Tylee qtd. in Hartman 538). Women used the themes apparent in their war literature – such as their wartime work, patriotism, pacifism and bereavement – "to assert their own claims to a post-war expansion of citizenship" (Bell 435) in "a period in which citizenship was increasingly tied to participation in the war" (Bell 437). They demanded recognition for their wartime contributions in their writing and used them as justification for expanded notions of female citizenship which constituted a place for women in British political and economic spheres, continuing the pre-war effort of the suffragette movement. Expanded notions of female citizenship were not the only motivation to write about the war, however: women also produced

literature as *lieux de memoire* or sites of memory which helped shape how the war would be remembered in the future.

CASE STUDIES

Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918)

Introduction

Rebecca West, pseudonym for Cicily Isabel Andrews (née Fairfield), was born on the twenty-first of December, 1892 in London. She was educated at George Watson's Ladies' College in Edinburgh in 1902 and later trained as an actress in London. From 1911 onwards, West became interested in journalism. She had left-wing sympathies and often contributed to leftist publications, such as the socialist newspaper the *Clarion*, resulting in a reputation as a feminist and advocate of women's suffrage. She published novels as well, but they never received as much attention as her social and cultural pieces during her lifetime, only being rediscovered within the feminist literary movement at the end of the twentieth century. West had a son with novelist H.G. Wells but never married him, instead marrying banker Henry Maxwell Andrews in 1930, some seven years after the end of her ten-year-long love affair with Wells. She was created a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1959. She died at the age of ninety on the fifteenth of March, 1983, in London.

West's oeuvre consists of social and cultural non-fiction texts as well as novels. Perhaps some of her most well-known works are her non-fiction book that came out of her experience of attending the Nürnberg trials after the Second World War, titled *The Meaning of Treason* (1949), and her collection of reports on the Nürnberg trials, titled *A Train of Powder* (1955). Her modernist novel *The Return of the Soldier*, published in 1918, was the only novel written by a woman about the First World War that was published during the war itself instead of in the post-war period. The novel deals with the return of a shell-shocked soldier, Chris Baldry, and the effects of the war on him, the people around him and everyday life, and is told from the perspective of Chris's female cousin Jenny. There is a focus on the phenomenon of shell-shock and psychological trauma, but other than most novels published at the time it shows optimism and depicts war trauma as curable by psychoanalysis. The story is more distanced from the war itself than Brittain's *Testament of Youth*: it takes place entirely at the home front and it focuses more on the effect of Chris's return on the female characters than on the war and Chris's experience. This is, of course, one of the reasons why it is an interesting novel to discuss in this thesis: it focuses mainly on the experience of women, and combined with Brittain's novel, the discussion will include viewpoints both at the Western Front and at the home front.

The Return of the Soldier*: analysis*

For a novel about the return of a soldier traumatised by the war, the actual war is remarkably absent in *The Return of the Soldier*: the entire novel takes place at the home front and, more particularly, in a domestic sphere which actively shuts the war out of its "little globe of ease" (West 3), its "impregnable

fort of a gracious life" (West 48). Moreover, the only character who was actively involved in the war has lost all memory of it. As Kavka puts it, the novel is "about masculinity, yet the proper male protagonist is for all intents and purposes missing from the text" and "about war trauma, yet the traumatic event which causes the protagonist's shell-shock is not represented" (Kavka 152). Although the experience of war is not included in the novel, the war as a whole remains essential to it: in the words of Smith, "[it] is used as a focus around which social, political and psychological debates may be built; debates which might appear foreign in a traditional 'woman's novel'" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 171). In fact, West's use of the "woman's novel", as Smith puts it, enables her to approach the war from a different angle, namely from the perspective of a female narrator and in a primarily "female" or domestic setting. At the same time, "West's text provides a good example of how the 'woman's novel' can be innovatory despite being 'sentimental', by foregrounding a number of modernist narrative experiments in a particularly successful way" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 171), such as the stream of consciousness nature of the narrative, Jenny as an unreliable, modernist narrator and what Smith calls a "female Imagism". The latter means that West "uses images to elucidate the states of mind of the main characters" (Gledhill qtd. in Smith *The Second Battlefield* 176-177) but that her Imagism is subtly different from but equally valuable as the male equivalent. For example, she uses domestic imagery to describe certain situations or things: during their first encounter, she describes Margaret to be as repulsive as "a good glove that has dropped down behind a bed in a hotel and has lain undisturbed for a day or two" (West 7) and afterwards she likens her to "a spreading stain on the fabric of [their] life" (West 12). *The Return of the Soldier* is therefore not only modernist, but "female modernist": the unreliable narrator is female and the entire novel is therefore represented through the perspective of a woman whose "secondary status is emphasised by her position on the margins of the action" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 174). However, "by acknowledging that this perspective is as valid as that of the male, West is able to offer a feminist alternative to more masculine modernisms" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 174).

A prominent theme in *The Return of the Soldier* is that of the traumatised male. As the novel was published during the war, it depicted trauma relatively positively, as opposed to the tendency in later literature to dwell on the war itself as well as the shock and loss it caused. The figure of the traumatised male is represented by Chris, who – before his return – fulfilled the role of a male breadwinner who provides for and protects the women under his care, namely his wife Kitty and his cousin Jenny. This arrangement is reminiscent of the Victorian age, when traditional gender roles such as these were even stronger a social obligation than during the slightly more "progressive" Edwardian age: after all, "supporting a family was a sign of true success within the male sex" (Appell). Chris's masculinity is amplified by its contrast to the femininity and dependence of these women: their lives revolve around him and "[he], or at least the thought of him, mediates each relationship amongst the

women" so much so that "nothing is said between them which does not refer to or recall Chris" (Kavka 153). Additionally, Jenny says that "nothing could ever really become a part of [their] life until it had been referred to Chris's attention" (West 5) to the point that things seem to become meaningless in Chris's absence. They wish for his return "disregarding the national interest and everything else except the keen prehensile gesture of [their] hearts towards him" (West 2), conforming to the essentialist idea that women are inherently somewhat pacifist due to their nature as caregivers. Their pre-war situation is one of belonging to a world revolving around what Kavka calls "the epitome of English maleness" (Kavka 153).

However, shell-shock and war trauma effectively break down this maleness: the war renders the masculine image of the soldier fragile, as shell-shock or war hysteria was considered an illness of "male softness, anti-heroism, weakness, lack of character, cowardice, and even so-called 'inner desertion'" (Köhne 73). The traumatised male then becomes a symbol of defeated masculinity, and the same is true of Chris: "the wartime story represented by Chris – mobilization, shell-shock, dazed return – encapsulates the basic story of World War I", a story of "men return[ing] from the war as figures of broken masculinity, embodying the breakdown of a domestic culture centered on the 'amazing goodness' of English maleness" (Kavka 153). This breakdown is represented in the novel by the moment when Margaret brings Jenny and Kitty the news of Chris's illness: "with the cry, 'Chris is ill' ([West 10]), she is announcing the shattering of this expensive, carefully tended world which revolves around the epitome of English maleness" (Kavka 153). It takes "only a second for the compact insolence of the moment to penetrate" (West 10) the world of Baldry Court, but it changes the lives of Jenny and Kitty irrevocably. From the moment Chris returns, he is only described as masculine when he is out of view or when the description pertains to a memory of him. When Chris first returns to Baldry Court Jenny hears his "great male voice" (West 18) outside the house; Margaret recalls that "he possessed in great measure the loveliness of young men" (West 41) during their time on Monkey Island; and as Jenny imagines touching Chris's hands, she "felt his rough male texture" (West 53). In other words, "Chris's masculinity exists fantasmatically for the women and passes as a spark between their desiring bodies, but in his own person he is no better than a shell of a man" (Kavka 155). By preferring Margaret to Jenny and Kitty, he also breaks the pre-war contract establishing his role of breadwinner: while Jenny and Kitty's world keeps revolving around him, he has left it. This is symbolised by the two crystal balls: Chris chooses the one showing Margaret, causing "his sleeve [to catch] the other one and [send] it down to crash in a thousand pieces on the floor", and Jenny reacts by thinking "no one weeps for the shattering of [their] world" (West 55). The novel also portrays "the shell-shocked soldier as a figure for masculine sentimentality; Chris escapes the traditional masculine role of soldier by sealing himself in an amnesia that is also a sentimental love story" (Bonikowski 530). This sentimentality further feminises Chris's character: at first, Kitty is in denial about Chris's amnesia, instead believing it "is all a blind" and that

"[Chris is] pretending" (West 25) in order to keep a mistress, because that would "[mean] that Chris is a man like other men" (West 24). This notion of a "shell" of a man as the result of shell-shock is quite interesting: as Kavka says, "it is tempting to claim that the rhetorical force of the term 'shell-shock' for the popular mind lay in its power to articulate metaphorically the effect of war on masculinity" – "the notion of a 'shell' thus expresses not the precipitating cause of war trauma – exploding bombs – but rather its effects – men and the very masculine order emptied of their centers and centrality" (Kavka 155). In short, "'shell-shock' effects a powerful linguistic condensation between the inarticulable traumatic moments at the front and their broader social effects" (Kavka 155). In that sense, shell-shock truly erodes masculinity from within, and since a lack of masculinity is automatically considered feminine, shell-shock was viewed as a femininization of the soldier. Masculinity is, then, exposed as a construction which is easily hollowed-out and broken down.

Male trauma is not the only kind of trauma depicted in the novel, however: alongside the "male", international trauma of the First World War, there is a more domestic and therefore "female" trauma, namely the death of a child. While Chris is affected by both, Kitty is another character in the novel who is visibly affected by one of those traumas, the memory of which is brought closer to the surface by Chris's return. Kitty shows many of the same symptoms of shock that Chris does: she "seems unable to cope with her husband's amnesia, a shocking event that reasserts for her the trauma of Oliver's death" and "[her] detachment and short temper more closely resemble the state of being haunted by recurrent traumatic memories" (Pulsifer 38). For instance, when Chris is reunited with Margaret, Kitty "shrilly we[eps]" (West 49) and "lay[s] about like a broken doll, face downward on a sofa, with one limp arm dangling on the floor" (West 50). She also refuses to leave the house when Jenny invites her on a walk, instead staying "stretched on her pillows, holding a review of her underclothing" and "look[ing] wanly at the frail, luminous silks" (West 51). When the true cause of her trauma, Oliver's death, is brought up, she "shiver[s] and look[s] cold, as she always d[oes] at the memory of her unique contact with death" (West 69). When she enters the nursery again at the end of the novel, the effects of her trauma and the prolonged surfacing of it show in her appearance: "the poise of her head ha[s] lost its pride, the shadows under her eyes [a]re black like the marks of blows, and all her loveliness [i]s diverted into the expression of grief" (West 73). As Pulsifer says, "Kitty's apparent irritability and numbness can be read as her own traumatic symptoms, which are analogous to Chris's own" (Pulsifer 38): Kitty's trauma is deliberately placed next to Chris's to bring out similarities between the two. In fact, Chris's trauma, which "effectively has no origin or content, his only symptom being an amnesia that erases the last fifteen years of his life" (Bonikowski 515), is treated as a given and Kitty's trauma, which is described more elaborately, is most often ignored. The fact that Kitty's trauma is often disregarded or trivialised reveals unequal responses to male and female trauma: trauma is trivialised "when the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child)" because "[they] may find that the most

traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality" (Judith Lewis Herman qtd. in Pulsifer 38). In other words, the devaluation of the setting of the trauma – in this case the domestic sphere – devaluates the trauma itself. However, as West exposes these unequal responses to different kinds of trauma, she "suggests that women's experiences are as legitimate as men's" (Pulsifer 38). Moreover, the true cause of Chris's amnesia is revealed not to be the war, but instead the more domestic trauma: "The violent war event which precipitated Chris's amnesia (…) [is] not the event of the trauma itself but the breakdown of Chris's defences against the 'proper' trauma, the death of a child." (Kavka 159). The experience of the war served to bring the memory and the trauma of Oliver's death to the surface, which Chris has not sufficiently processed but instead repressed in order to meet the requirements of traditional masculinity. This strengthens the comparison between the traumas of Chris and Kitty: the true origin of both traumas is Oliver's death, and in both cases the trauma is brought to the surface by the war. Chris's true trauma is thus not the shell-shock or "male hysteria", but rather a repressed, pre-existing hysteria that was covered up by the construction of masculinity.

This suggestion that women's experiences are as legitimate as men's is not made explicit: in order to truly investigate Kitty's trauma, the reader needs to see through the biased narration of the text. Jenny is highly critical of Kitty's elitism, classism, materialism and narcissism, but that criticism may stem from her jealousy over Chris. Jenny's unreliability becomes especially clear in her representation of Margaret: she describes Margaret as follows during her first appearance.

> Well, she was not so bad. Her body was long and round and shapely, and with a noble squareness of the shoulders; her fair hair curdled diffidently about a good brow; her gray eyes, though they were remote, as if anything worth looking at in her life had kept a long way off, were full of tenderness; and though she was slender, there was something about her of the wholesome, endearing heaviness of the ox or the trusted big dog. Yet she was bad enough. She was repulsively furred with neglect and poverty, as even a good glove that has dropped down behind a bed in a hotel and has lain undisturbed for a day or two is repulsive when the chambermaid retrieves it from the dust and fluff.
>
> (West 7)

The way Jenny describes Margaret may initially seem somewhat positive, but her choice of words reveal a certain condescension. By saying "she [i]s not so bad", Jenny immediately implies that she is not so good either; and by comparing her to an ox or a dog Jenny establishes even more their difference in class. And indeed, "she [i]s bad enough": Margaret's lower class is basis enough for repulsion, showing that Jenny is guilty of the same elitism that she condemns Kitty for. In fact, Kitty's as well as Jenny's

prejudice leads them to believe that Margaret is lying about Chris's situation, causing them both to "smile triumphantly at the spectacle of a fellow-creature occupied in baseness" (West 8). However, the fact that Kitty joins Jenny in her prejudice distances Jenny from that very prejudice:

> It was, strangely enough, only when I looked at Kitty and marked how her brightly colored prettiness arched over this plain criminal as though she were a splendid bird of prey and this her sluggish insect food that I felt the moment degrading. Kitty was, I felt, being a little too clever over it.
>
> (West 8)

The same happens moments later: Jenny rejects Margaret's statement that Chris is ill by "push[ing] [Margaret's] purse away from [her] with [her] toe", meanwhile thinking how she "hate[s] her as the rich hate the poor as insect things" (West 10), but as soon as Kitty voices her disbelief and dismay, Jenny reproaches her in shame and tries to reconcile the situation. Afterwards, she "ha[s] forgotten that [she] ever disbelieved her" (West 12) and, after Chris's return but before seeing Margaret again, describes her as "kind and sweet" and "the greatest dear in the world" (West 34). Influenced by Chris's tale of Monkey Island and his obvious adoration for Margaret, Jenny's view of her changes: at first she admits Margaret's kindness and sweetness but maintains that "she is [not] beautiful" but "seamed and scored and ravaged by squalid circumstances" (West 35), but later Jenny also becomes aware of Margaret's outward beauty, as can be seen in the following quote.

> (…) I said to myself, 'If she really were like that, solemn and beatified!' and my eyes turned to look despairingly on her ugliness. But she really was like that. She had responded to my irrelevant murmur of adoration by just such a solemn and beatified appearance as I had imagined. Her grave eyes were upturned, her worn hands lay palm upward on her knees, as though to receive the love of which her radiance was an emanation.
>
> (West 38)

This description shows that although Margaret's outward appearance has not physically changed – she still has "worn hands" – she appears radiant in her adoration for Chris, which is elicited by Jenny's "irrelevant murmur". However, Margaret's radiance is not permanent: as Mr. Grey returns from his garden, "she snatche[s] [Jenny's] exaltation from [her] by suddenly turning dull" (West 38), after which Jenny attempts to "recall her to ease and beauty" (West 40) by prompting her to talk about Chris. Still, Jenny remains fixated on Margaret's lack of physical beauty: "surely," she thinks, "[Margaret] must see that [Baldry Court] [i]s no place for beauty that had not been mellowed, but lacerated, by time, that no one accustomed to live here could help wincing at such external dinginess as hers" (West 45). The fact

that she considers Margaret "physically offensive to [their] atmosphere" and "a cancerous blot on the fair world" (West 46) proves that Jenny is guilty of the same superficiality, materialism and elitism that she criticises Kitty for. Jenny even admits that "[she] [i]s physically so jealous of Margaret that it [i]s making [her] ill" and that consequently, "[her] mind refuse[s] to consider the situation any longer and turn[s] to the perception of material things" (West 47) such as the fineness of Baldry Court, but also, in contrast, Margaret's physical "ugliness".

It is clear that "Jenny's characterizations and descriptions are dappled by her jealousy and bias" (Pulsifer 42), and the negative light Kitty is presented in must be critically examined. Despite Jenny's biased narration, Kitty's trauma is subtly described and validated throughout the novel. Although Kitty represses the memories of her son and the knowledge of his death, her trauma "manifests in her incessant returns to the nursery" (Pulsifer 47), "which is kept in all respects as though there were still a child in the house" (West 1). Kitty keeps "revisiting her dead" (West 2), but these visitations are not entirely voluntary: Kitty "wish[es] Chris would [not] have it kept as a nursery when there [is] no chance [of another child]" (West 2), but "because of Chris's implicit control over the home, Kitty cannot choose how to negotiate her traumatic memories" (Pulsifer 47). This is an important difference between the experiences of trauma of men and women: while men are usually able to process trauma on their own terms, women are still subject to the power of men. The nursery is even explicitly brought into comparison with the war: "Why ha[s] modern life brought forth these horrors, which ma[kes] the old tragedies seem no more than nursery-shows?" (West 23). Although the nursery is used here as a decidedly atraumatic place, it recalls the domestic trauma linked to the nursery of Baldry Court. Frank's letter also "names and validates Kitty's 'shock' at the discovery of her husband's amnesia", which "echoes and parallels Margaret's grave identification of Chris's trauma: 'Shell-shock.'" (Pulsifer 49): he tells Jenny to prepare Kitty for the "terrible shock" of Chris's amnesia and to convey to her his "deepest sympathy", calling Chris's shell-shock a "horror of warfare" (West 17). *The Return of the Soldier* then includes two types of trauma, according to Pulsifer: "Kitty's, caused by an exceptional event that lingers in the domestic sphere, and Chris's, caused by the multiple and ongoing horrors of international war" (Pulsifer 49). While these two forms of traumatic experience are seemingly caused by wildly different and incomparable events, they both result in "analogous records of traumatic shock, suggesting that men's and women's experiences of trauma are of equal importance" (Pulsifer 49). However, as discussed, the true origin of Chris's trauma is not the war, but rather the death of his son: therefore, the two types of trauma proposed by Pulsifer are not so different in nature. Instead, they differ in effect: Chris repressed Oliver's death until it was brought up by the war, resulting in amnesia and a return to a time before war and before he married Oliver's mother; Kitty was not able to process Oliver's death on her own terms but is instead caught in the urge to revisit the nursery. Kitty's trauma is also brought up by the war – or by the effect of the war on Chris and his trauma – but not because it had

been repressed: rather, Chris's amnesia leaves her alone in her grief for their son, whom he does not even remember. The different effects of the same trauma on Chris and Kitty can be explained by the gender differences in how trauma is processed: while Chris's emotion and grief is restricted by the gender norms pertaining to traditional masculinity and therefore repressed, Kitty is not allowed to process her grief on her own terms because, as a woman, she is subject to the authority of her husband.

By showing Kitty's trauma to be on a par with and similar to Chris's, *The Return of the Soldier* gives a voice to the female sufferers of trauma and female witnesses of the First World War: it reveals an "alternate history of a traumatic period through voices silenced by dominant discourses", namely what Rizzuto calls the "age of Empire" as well as "uneven gender and class arrangements at home" (Rizzuto 8). This thesis will not go into detail about the imperialist aspect of West's novel, but the novel suggests that both imperialism as well as issues of class and gender are in danger of being minimalised or forgotten about amidst the trauma of the war. In other words, it is "a counter-representation of British history [which] suggests that in the midst of its contemporaneous moment of international conflict, the nation is in danger of producing and perpetuating historical amnesia", meaning that "imperial policies and uneven gendering and class structures subtending the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are social, political, and economic traumas that remain obscured when the state and the nation are literally and figurately under attack" (Rizzuto 9-10). This relates to Hirsch idea that "what a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony" (Hirsch & Smith qtd. in Smith "How to Remember 302): issues of gender relations and the social status of women are, precisely because they are "female" issues, inferior to more traditionally "male" issues such as the war. West tries to expose this masculinist way of remembering and to prevent this collective amnesia by adopting a role as a "guardian of memory", a role which is often adopted by women writers in their post-war literature in order to help shape how the war would be remembered. West's novel, however, was published before the end of the war, and the difference with post-war literature lies in the fact that she is not trying to secure a collective memory of the war as a historical event, but that she is rather trying to illuminate a life which may be influenced by the war, but from which the war itself is absent. West instead focuses on the lives of women and "precariously assembl[es] fragments of history from marginal and minority perspectives" in order to "expos[e] European masculinist norming and normative practices of witnessing" (Rizzuto 10). The danger of collective amnesia is represented by the amnesia of Chris: his memory loss takes him back to a time before change, before the crisis of imperialism, suffrage movements and the tumultuous Edwardian age. In Chris's memory, "Monkey Island [is] the locus of the real or historically verifiable [but] the novel simultaneously intimates that the island is the site of colonial and patriarchal fantasy (Rizzuto 14). Moreover, both Chris's amnesia and the danger of a collective amnesia are caused by issues of masculinity: Chris's amnesia is caused by the repression of emotion prescribed by traditional gender norms; the danger of a collective amnesia is caused by the

power linked to "masculine" issues and the subsequent inferiority of "feminine" issues. Instead of unproblematically idealising the past, the novel criticises the problematic modernist narrative of loss and idyllic restoration of the past, however paradoxically, by enacting it: as Rizzuto puts it, "to restore a time without conflict is to inaugurate this time in the future, while paradoxically signifying it as recapturing the past" (Rizzuto 13). This reversal of cause and effect "misinterprets a fiction as history" (Rizzuto 13): the perceived history of Monkey Island is fictionalised through its idealisation. In revealing the idealised past of Monkey Island – a return to the Victorian age and a time before change – to be a fiction, West condemns the idea that the Victorian age was an idyllic period in time preferable to the Edwardian age and calls attention to the dangers of such escapism.

The character of Margaret belongs to that memory of a time before change: "recycled fictions and art of the past shape her as a reactionary, patriarchal ideal of the late Victorian period, the epitome of feminine modesty and chastity" (Rizzuto 19). When Chris tells Jenny of Monkey Island, he presents Margaret as "charity and love itself" (West 28), but his description of her is radically different from the one initially given by Jenny:

> As she sat in the punt while he ferried himself across it was no longer visible that her fair hair curled differently and that its rather wandering parting was a little on one side; that her straight brows, which were a little darker than her hair, were nearly always contracted in a frown of conscientious speculation; that her mouth and chin were noble, yet as delicate as flowers; that her shoulders were slightly hunched because her young body, like a lily-stem, found it difficult to manage its own tallness. She was then just a girl in white who lifted a white face or drooped a dull-gold head. (…) That he loved her in this twilight, which obscured all the physical details which he adored, seemed to guarantee that theirs was a changeless love which would persist if she were old or maimed or disfigured.
>
> (West 29)

While Chris's description of Margaret contains many of the same elements as Jenny's – such as her shoulders, hair, brow and tallness – it is much more flattering: for example, he compares Margaret to flowers and a lily-stem instead of an ox or a dog. Of course, Chris's description is as biased as Jenny's, but it is influenced by affection rather than class prejudice. While Margaret represents the lower-middle class for Kitty and initially for Jenny, she is presented as the ideal Victorian woman in Chris's memory: she behaves shyly, "silently and obediently" (West 31); her "white dress" (West 27) signifies her innocence and purity and although she has "an accurate mind"; she is no competition for the male intellect because "when she picks up facts she kind of gives them a motherly hug" (West 28); and she takes care of her father, displaying her nurturing qualities. This idea of Margaret as the ideal Victorian

woman continues after Chris's tale of Monkey Island: she provides "constant attention" to her husband's weak chest, cheerfully and unironically saying "it all help[s] to pass the time" (West 44), and takes care to leave him dinner when she will not be home. She takes her duties as a wife very seriously: she did not even read Chris's letters until she received the telegram saying he was wounded because she "thought it was against [her] duty as a wife" (West 45). Alongside the dutiful wife, Margaret embodies motherhood: as she moves through the nursery, "it [i]s so apparent that she was a mother that [Jenny] could not imagine how I was that [she] had not always known it" (West 70). In addition, Jenny imagines Margaret as representing the soul:

> I suppose that the subject of our tragedy, written in spiritual terms, was that in kitty [Chris] had turned from the type of woman that makes the body conqueror of the soul and in me the type that mediates between the soul and the body and makes them run even and unhasty like a well-matched pair of carriage horses, and had given himself to a woman whose bleak habit it was to champion the soul against the body.
>
> (West 54)

This insight is debatable if Jenny's unreliability is considered, but the fact that Margaret is perceived to embody the soul rather than the body adds to the image of the soulful, caring, nurturing woman. The same idea is reinforced when Jenny comes across Margaret and Chris in the woods: "the woman has gathered the soul of the man into her soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quiet for a little time" (West 58). Jenny considers this "a great thing for a woman to do":

> That is a great thing for a woman to do. I know there are things at least as great for those women whose independent spirits can ride fearlessly and with interest outside the home park of their personal relationships, but independence is not the occupation of most of us. What we desire is greatness such as this, which had given sleep to the beloved.
>
> (West 58)

This passage clearly shows Jenny's rather traditional views on gender: while she values independent women, she asserts that most women are dependent and that there is greatness in that dependence and the role of women as caregivers and nurturers. This is also the moment Jenny finds meaning behind Margaret's lack of physical beauty: "there should not be one intimation of the beauty of suave flesh to distract [Chris] from the message of her soul" (West 59).

Coupled with "the epitome of English maleness" (Kavka 153) found in Chris, Margaret's character shows the way "the lower-middle-class female body operates as the site of a fetishistic reaction, the production of the upper-middle-class male's erotic investment and denigration at once"

(Rizzuto 20). But Margaret turns out to be more of a symbol than an actual character: she is rendered transcendent and inanimate instead of material, gendered and classed. Like the Margaret Chris sees in the crystal ball, "she is transfigured in the light of eternity", while the Jenny and Kitty in the other crystal ball "ha[ve] suffered no transformation, for [they] are as [they] are, and there is nothing more to [them]" (West 55). The "drive to symbolize results not only in failure, but in ideological violence", leading to "the disappearance of woman" (Rizzuto 21): Margaret even literally disappears "as [Chris] sp[eaks]", her "body melting into nothingness" (West 33) because his speech attempts turn her into a symbol.

Margaret's dilemma over whether to cure Chris or not stems from a conflicting urge to cure his mental illness and therefore fulfilling her role as caregiver, or to let him be happy in ignorance, therefore continuing in her role of the ideal Victorian woman in an idealised past. In the end, however, the need to return Chris to his masculinity wins out:

> (…) [Margaret] had forgotten that it is the first concern of love to safeguard the dignity of the beloved, so that neither God in his skies nor the boy peering through the hedge should find in all time one possibility for contempt, and had handed him the trivial toy of happiness. We had been utterly negligent of his future, blasphemously careless of the divine essential of his soul. For if we left him in his magic circle there would come a time when his delusion turned to a senile idiocy; when his joy at the sight of Margaret disgusted the flesh because his smiling mouth was slack with age; when one's eyes no longer followed him caressingly as he went down to look for the first primroses in the wood, but flitted here and there defensively to see that nobody was noticing the doddering old man. (…) He who was as a flag flying from our tower would become a queer-shaped patch of eccentricity on the country-side, the full-mannered music of his being would become a witless piping in the bushes. He would not be quite a man.
>
> (West 75)

Withholding the cure in favour of Chris's happiness would result in him becoming a happy and sentimental eccentricity in the absence of the "divine essential of his soul", namely his masculinity. And indeed, Chris's masculinity returns after Margaret shows him his son's toys: "he walked not loose-limbed like a boy, as he had done that very afternoon, but with the soldier's hard tread upon the heel" (West 76), and he looks "every inch a soldier" (West 77). Traditional gender roles and boundaries as well as class boundaries are thus re-established at the end of the novel: "Chris's cure sends him back to the war to face his death like a real soldier, a real man" while "the upper-class women are sealed again inside their beautiful estate" and "the lower-class woman is cast outside their world" (Bonikowski 531). This restabilisation of gender norms and restoration to the pre-war traditional order reflects the way the

war destabilised gender norms and boundaries by allowing women to further participate in the economic and political spheres, but the post-war period restored the traditional order by thrusting women back into the domestic sphere.

In *The Return of the Soldier*, West uses the form of the "woman's novel" and "female" modernist techniques to show the outdatedness of the idealised Victorian past and the gender roles and norms belonging to it. The male trauma depicted in the novel hollows out the construction of traditional masculinity, resulting in a breakdown of the Victorian arrangement previously held in Baldry Court, namely that of the male breadwinner who provides for and protects the women under his care. However, when seeing through Jenny's biased narration and observing that the male trauma of shell-shock is placed next to the "female", domestic trauma of the death of a child, they appear to be rather similar: the traumas of both Chris and Kitty originate from the death of their son, but the perceived difference lies in the way gender norms influenced the processing of that trauma. While women can process trauma only under the authority of men and not on their own terms, men are subjected to norms of masculinity and fall prey to an amnesia which allows them to escape from a time of trauma and change to an idealised but fictionalised past and reinforces traditional gender norms and the gendered power hierarchy of the Victorian age. However, at the end of the novel, the idealised past is erased and traditional gender norms are returned to the present: Chris's masculinity and the pre-war Victorian arrangement of Baldry Court are restored.

Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933)

Introduction

Vera Brittain was born to a middle-class family in December 1893 in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire. She grew up in large, typically Edwardian houses in Macclesfield and Buxton, Derbyshire. Although her family was well-off – Thomas Brittain, the pater familias, was a paper manufacturer – they were not particularly cultured and did not own many books, but they did provide a solid education for Brittain and her brother. Brittain went to a boarding school in Surrey where her mother's sister was joint headmistress, while her brother Edward went to a public school in Uppingham, Leicestershire. Brittain's parents expected her to stay at home after she left school in 1912 until she found a suitable husband, but Brittain dreamed of going to Oxford, a notion which was opposed by her father but supported by her brother. She was eventually allowed to take the Oxford examinations, which she did in March 1914, and she was awarded an exhibition to attend Somerville College. A year later, however, she abandoned her studies in favour of joining the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) to become a nurse. She served as a nurse in London, Malta and close to the front in France: instead of fitting the traditional image of the woman waiting at the home front, Brittain experienced the devastating effects of the war in a way more closely related to soldier's experiences. She was close to the centre of the action, even if there seemed to be no immediate danger to hospitals: there was an agreement that hospitals should not be shelled, but after Brittain had left, Germans nonetheless bombed the hospital where she had been working. However, Brittain also suffered the effects of the war in the traditionally female way: her brother, her fiancé Roland Leighton and several close friends were killed, a loss of most of the men in her life that relates to the way Britain seemed to have lost an entire generation of men. This caused the term "surplus women" (Bailey 1987: 43) to come into use, a problem which Brittain frequently mentions in her writing: women now greatly outnumbered men and many women would never marry and would instead become spinsters, unable to fulfil what were considered the primary functions of women at the time, namely marriage and motherhood. After the war, Brittain continued her education but changed her field of study from English to History, graduated in 1921 and later developed a career as a prolific lecturer, journalist and writer. In 1925, she married academic George Caitlin, with whom she had two children, and moved with him to the United States of America. This move did not last very long, and Brittain returned to Britain in 1926. Brittain is notorious for her pacifism and her activism within the peace movement from the 1930s onwards, so much so that she was chairman of the Peace Pledge Union (PPU) from 1949 until 1951 and became involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. She died in 1970 at the age of seventy-six.

Brittain's oeuvre consists of twenty-nine books of diverse genres: it includes novels, poetry, biography, autobiography and other non-fiction. Her first novels, *The Dark Tide* (1923) and *Not Without Honour* (1925) received little attention from both critics and the public. Her journalism had more

success: in the 1920s she wrote for the feminist journal *Time and Tide*. Her most well-known work remains undoubtedly *Testament of Youth* (1933), a memoir or "autobiographical study" covering the years between 1900 and 1925, which will be discussed as a case study in the following chapter. *Testament of Youth* tells Brittain's own, personal story of the pre-war period, the war itself and the years following it, and concerns her struggle for education, her relationship with her brother Edward and her fiancé Roland and their part in the war, her training and work as a VAD nurse, the war's effects of disillusionment and rebuilding her life in the after-war period. The book is partly based on Brittain's own diaries: in the foreword, she describes how she at first meant to write a novel but failed to uphold a sort of objectivity. She then tried to write about her own experiences with all names fictionalised, but failed in this as well. In the end, she wrote "the exact truth as [she] saw and see[s] it about both [her]self and other people, since a book of this kind has no value unless it is honest" (Brittain 1933: xxvi). She also maintains that "the mature properties of 'emotion remembered in tranquillity' have not been [her] object" because that would be "too easy, too comfortable [a] relapse into forgetfulness which is responsible for history's most grievous repetitions" (Brittain 1933: xxvi): she wants to impress the First World War on the collective memory through her literature. *Testament of Youth* is followed by *Testament of Friendship* (1940), in which Brittain relays the story of her friend and colleague Winnifred Holtby, and a second part of her own memoir, *Testament of Experience* (1957), which covers the years between 1925 and 1950.

Testament of Youth*: analysis*

The genre of the autobiography was a popular one in the post-war years, and although Brittain had first wanted to fictionalise her wartime experience in a novel, she ultimately deemed the genre unsuitable for her message. In the foreword to *Testament of Youth*, she admits that "[her] original idea was that of a long novel" but as she planned it, "it turned out to be a hopeless failure" because "[she] found the people and the events about which [she] was writing were still too real to be made the subjects of an imaginative, detached reconstruction" (Brittain xxv-xxvi). Publishing parts of her wartime diary proved insufficient as well, as "the diary ended too soon to give a complete picture" and "the fictitious names created a false atmosphere and made the whole thing seem spurious" (Brittain xxvi). Thus *Testament of Youth* became an autobiography in which Brittain "ha[s] tried to write the exact truth as [she] saw and see[s] it about both [her]self and other people" (Brittain xxvi): alongside Brittain's retrospective narration it includes – for documentary value and modernist aesthetic – letters, diary entries and poems written during the narrated events. This documentary value is important for Brittain, as she attempts to become a "guardian of memory" and help shape how the war would be remembered: she asserts that "a book of this kind has no value unless it is honest" (Brittain xxvi). Largely due to that honesty, *Testament of Youth* became part of the War Books Controversy: written between 1920 and 1930, it presents the

war in a negative light with an emphasis on shock and loss, as opposed to the initial and more positive depiction.

Brittain was not alone in assessing the genre of autobiography to be the ideal way of expressing and sharing her wartime experiences: trench autobiographies had become immensely popular by the end of the 1920s and "the preponderance of first-hand battlefield memoirs was nearly guaranteed by the mutual reinforcement of popular and critical fashion" (Schwarz 237). However, autobiographies from beyond the trenches and away from the front lines were not a guaranteed commercial success: they "remained primarily in the shadows, published privately or by lesser known presses, and receiving little or no critical acclaim", and "since these were often the works of women who were not permitted to fight, but could only gain indirect experience of the war either through volunteer work, nursing, or correspondence, the rather predictable division between the trench autobiography and other autobiographical forms had also become a very pronounced division of gender" (Schwarz 237). The literary voices of men were given priority over those of women and contributed to the primarily masculine image of the war still prevalent today, even though soldiers' autobiographies did not usually focus on masculinity and the "myth of the lost generation" (Schwarz 237). Trench autobiographies consist of description rather than plot and "[call] forth [their] authenticity through a succession of realistic details" (Schwarz 238), which is done "at the expense of drama, characterization, plot development, and analysis" (Evelyn Cobley paraphr. in Schwarz 238) and usually result in a passive, observing narrator.

Brittain's *Testament of Youth* was a reaction to the popular, masculine trench literature and to Brittain's own anxiety that "historical perceptions of the war would subordinate women's experience" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 105). As Smith says, the book "argue[s] against what Brittain perceived to be the negative presentation of women in many of the popular men's stories and cast an alternative version of the experience of war for the mass market" (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 106):

> Despite being a woman's story, it deals sympathetically with the men's war and laments the combatant/non-combatant divide set up by such varying experience. At the same time, however, Brittain's book, by its very difference, may retrospectively serve to illustrate the extent to which trench-culture has come to dominate the creation of the popular mythology of war.
>
> (Smith *The Second Battlefield* 106)

Testament of Youth, then, is different from the type of trench autobiography previously discussed: it "not only defies the usual equation between World War I autobiography and trench narrative by insisting on another (female) perspective, but also demonstrates in its self-conscious construction that autobiography is neither immediate reality nor objective fact" (Schwarz 240). Instead of a passive and

observing narrator, the scope of the authorial subjectivity extends beyond the experiencing "I" and reveals a tension between the experiencing "I" and "the fictionalizing 'eye' of the author'" (Schwarz 240). For example, in a letter to Roland she writes that she "think[s] the days are over of sheltered physical comfort and unruffeled [sic] peace of mind" and that she "do[es not] think they will ever come again" (Brittain 117), and afterwards the narrating "I" adds that she "thought rightly, for they never did; and the profound shock of their initial departure left [her] as helpless and bewildered as a child abandoned on the alien shores of some illimitable sea" (Brittain 118). Additionally, as Parkins mentions, "given the historical – and persistent – ideological positioning of women and the feminine as 'private' entities, witnessing as a moment that underscores the public incorporation of personal experience, and thus challenges the gendered binary of public and private, is crucial to a feminist theorization of remembrance" (Parkins 96). Like many other female authors, Brittain "privilege[s] issues of social behaviour and responses to conflict, rather than the action itself" (MacCallum-Stewart 79): this shows in the fact that her autobiography stretches from the pre-war years until 1925, and does not only cover the four-year long duration of the war itself. Brittain focuses on writing about the effects and consequences of the war rather than only events on the battlefield.

However, this defiance of the equation between World War I autobiography and trench narrative did not come without effort: *Testament of Youth* arose in a literary but almost exclusively masculine context. Combined with the popularity of trench literature and the corresponding devaluation of more feminine narratives and Brittain's lack of contact with and knowledge of female war writing, this situation resulted in "an anxiety of influence which for most women was not easily escaped" (Schwarz 241). Instead of the "anxiety of influence" that Schwarz describes, perhaps the term "anxiety of authorship" would be more accurate, since Brittain did not only struggle with the imitation and emulation of precursors, but also the effects of patriarchal socialisation, such as the lack (of knowledge) of a female tradition of wartime literature. The influence of the masculine context wherein *Testament of Youth* was conceived is noticeable in the fact that Brittain does not exclusively offer a female perspective of the war, but also includes, through correspondence and poetry, a male perspective: as Schwarz says, "Brittain's epigrammatic pattern overwhelmingly suggests that she is attempting to strike a balance between the perspectives of male and female, combatant and non-combatant, past and present" (Schwarz 249).

Not only does Brittain include the voices of the men close to her, her own wartime experience can also be considered in a way "masculine": her narrative is similar to those of the young soldiers of her generation and social class in that she attended university, enlisted as an active participant of the war (in Brittain's case as a VAD, as women were excluded from combat), experienced the horrors of war and trauma, and came home disillusioned and irrevocably changed by the war. Albrinck's article on "Borderline Women: Gender Confusion in Vera Brittain's and Evadne Price's War Narratives"

discusses how Brittain "constructs [her] gendered identit[y] as [a negotiation] between the Official British discourse of gender during World War I (…) and [her] own lived experience", but also "with the official discourse of gender in postwar Brittain" (Albrinck 272) since the book deals not only with the war, but extends its temporal scope as far as 1925. During "the social chaos of wartime", gender-appropriate behaviours were defined through propaganda and social policy which drew attention to and promoted the traditional gendered roles in society: as Margaret Higonnet explains, "war must be understood as a gendering activity, one that ritually marks the gender of all members in a society, whether or not they are combatants" (Margaret Higonnet et al. qtd. in Albrinck 272). As a result, "images of heroism [also] take on gendered forms" (Albrinck 274): heroes and heroines must comply with traditional gender roles in order to be considered heroic and patriotic, which meant that female heroism came in the forms of "the patriotic mother and the dutiful nurse" (Albrinck 274). However, acceptable gender relations shifted as the war went on, for instance when women were approved for foreign service as nurses in 1914, therefore entering the masculine sphere of the Western Front, and when women at the home front left the domestic sphere to enter into the public sphere and participate in economics and politics. These shifts caused social anxiety and concern for women's morality, and even if women met the demands for female heroism, the value of their wartime activities was not absolute but relative to men's and therefore always remained less important, as described by the theory of the "double helix", which asserts that a subversion of the gender hierarchy is impossible. The subordination of women's experiences to those of men was re-established by official discourse after the war, along with the importance of motherhood and nursing and the impermanence of women's wartime advances: the war was "represented as a sexual disorder; peace thus implie[d] a return to 'traditional gender relationships, the familiar and natural order of families, men in public roles, women at home'" (Joan Scott qtd. in Albrinck 276).

In *Testament of Youth*, Brittain witnesses the effect of this social policy of the war and the post-war years on the status of women and poses a challenge to the official discourse devaluating women's roles during and after the war: "using first person narration (…) [she] speak[s] from the border of official and resistant discourse, using an acceptable female narrator (nurse/VAD) as a way to gain authority, and then pointing up the falseness of wartime rhetoric from within" (Albrinck 279). Brittain marks her "spokeswoman (…) according to the dominant codes of femininity" (Albrinck 279) in order to be recognised by dominant discourse. Even as she depicts herself as independent, feminist and eager for higher education, she often mentions her feminine appearance, her "youth and childish chocolate-box prettiness" (Brittain 186) and her love for delicate clothing and her disdain for the traditional clothing of the pre-war years which "wrap[s] up [her] comely adolescent body in woollen combinations, black cashmere stockings, 'liberty' bodice, dark stockinette knickers, flannel petticoat and often, in addition, a long-sleeved, high-necked, knitted woollen 'spencer'" (Brittain 19). Like the works of many female

writers, *Testament of Youth* shows Brittain's pacifist ideology, but unlike most of those works it does not adopt the common reasoning that women are natural opponents of war because of their essential gender role as caregivers and nurturers. Nevertheless, Brittain does not explicitly go against the sentimental image of the nurse as the nurturer and the epitome of femininity: nurses were often "presumed to be dreaming about [their absent men]" (Bell 419), and Brittain notes that it is "always Roland whom [she] [i]s nursing by proxy" (Brittain 143).

During and after the war, however, Brittain crosses from her established femininity into more masculine terrain: "[her] location and [her] duties force [her] to live li[fe] on many borders – between home and front, soldier and civilian, masculine and feminine behaviour" (Albrinck 280). Brittain often crosses those borders: for example, as she is working in the Étaples hospital, her father calls her home to care for her mother, saying it is "[her] duty to leave France immediately and return to Kensington" (Brittain 385). Brittain is "half-frantic with the misery of conflicting obligations" (Brittain 386), but eventually she decides to ask for leave to return home, even though she has previously expressed her disdain for "parents who had been brought up by their own forbears to regard young women as perpetually at the disposal of husbands or fathers" (Brittain 234). Her brother writes her that he "can well understand how exasperating it must be for [her] to have to go home now… when [she] ha[s] just been in the eddying backwater of the sternest fights this War has known" (Brittain 387). When Brittain arrives back in England, she finds it "quite inexplicable that the older generation, which had merely looked on at the War, should break under the strain so much more quickly than those (…) who had faced death or horror at first hand for months on end" (Brittain 390). She feels estranged from the daily life of English citizens, which seems irreconcilable with the life at the front: "from a world in which life or death, victory or defeat, national survival or national extinction, had been the sole issues, [she] returned to a society where no one discussed anything but the price of butter" (Brittain 392). Brittain's experiencing "I", in accordance with the dominant ideology, considers the Western Front "a producer of meaning and authentic experience" (Bell 412) and she "emphasi[ses] dislocation between the 'home front' and the Western Front" (Bell 413). She values the latter, as the more traditionally male experience of war, over the more traditionally female one of staying at home. However, Brittain's narrating "eye" admits that she has learnt since then: she "realise[s] how completely [she] under-estimated the effect upon the civilian population of year upon year of diminishing hope, diminishing food, diminishing light, diminishing heat, of waiting and waiting for news which was nearly always bad when it came" (Brittain 391).

As a result of her wartime experiences, she feels different from women who did not nurse during the war: "As an unmarried upper-middle-class woman, her knowledge of the male body is highly unusual." (Albrinck 283). The fact that she has worked in such close contact with male bodies sets her apart from the women who remained at home, but also brings along the question of morality, as it did

not fit with the ideal of purity and virginity of the unmarried woman. Brittain also crosses the boundaries between feminine and masculine behaviour by being unable to follow the traditional feminine script of grief after Roland's death:

> No doubt [the other VADs] would have understood a sentimental, dependent sorrow, with hair-stroking at bedtime and hand-holdings in the dark, but they were not unnaturally baffled by an aloof, rigid grief, which abhorred their sympathy, detested their collective gigglings and prattlings, and hated them most of all for being alive when Roland was dead.
>
> (Brittain 221)

As Albrinck says, Brittain's "expression of grief for her dead lover divides her even from her fellow nurses" (Albrinck 283). It does the same for her relationship with one of her few female friends, Mina: some time after Roland's death, she meets with Brittain to inform her that she is "selfish, insincere, ambitious, and therefore no longer deserving of her affection", adding that Brittain "never really cared for Roland; [she] only wanted to marry him out of ambition" because "if [she] really loved him [she could not] possibly have behaved in the way [she did] in the past few weeks" (Brittain 20). Mina, too, is put off by Brittain's unusual expression of grief which does not conform to the traditionally feminine script, interprets it wrongly and subsequently ends her friendship with Brittain.

As an author, Brittain also crosses established gender boundaries: she "break[s] the mold of femininity and align[s] [her]sel[f] with war veterans (…) simply by speaking" (Albrink 280). She defies the middle and upper-middle class conventions of female silence and tells her story at "the risk of offending all those who believe that a personal story should be kept private, however great its public significance and however wide its general application" (Brittain xxvi). Even so, she recognises that her voice would only be heard and condoned if it echoed the authoritative voices of the war, namely those of men and especially soldiers – this is one of the advantages, apart from documentary value, of including letters and poems of Roland, Edward, Victor and Geoffrey in her autobiography. Brittain's thoughts on and observations of the war do echo the male voices she includes in her book: for instance, when she challenges the civilian perspective on the war by saying that "the causes of war are always falsely represented; its honour is dishonest and its glory meretricious" (Brittain 264), she gains authority because of Roland's earlier statement that young men are killed "for nothing more tangible than Honour or their Country's Glory or another's Lust of Power" (Brittain 174). Brittain also insists on a discontinuity between the time before and during the war as opposed to the post-war years:

> Although I still am, comparatively speaking, a young woman, I feel, looking back upon the past, that it had been immeasurably long, for in the twenty years that have vanished since I left school, I have had – like many, I suspect, of my War generation

> contemporaries – two quite separate lives, two sets of circumstances and of personal relationships. Between the first life that ended with Edward's death in 1918, and the second that began with Winifred's companionship in 1920, no links remain except Roland's family and my parents; they alone can remember the world that revolved for me round Edward, round Roland, round Victor and Geoffrey. Of those others upon whom my deepest affections now rest – Winifred, my husband, my children – not one knew even by name a single contemporary who counted for me in the life before 1918. For a time I felt forlorn, even bitter, because they could not share my memories, but now I have grown accustomed to revisiting that past world alone.
>
> (Brittain 453-454)

Brittain feels that she has lived two lives, one before 1918 and one after 1920, which are distinguished not only in time but also by the company she keeps. This position of discontinuity "might usefully be read as a way for her to forge new time, to struggle against the gender relations she finds so destructive – the post-war years are a time, for example, in which she participates in the women's movement and is hyper-attentive to patriarchal relations in her own personal life" (Parkins 113). Despite "the eager feminism of [her] pre-war girlhood and the effervescent fierceness with which [she is] to wage post-war literary battles in the cause of women" (Brittain 369), the war has quite overshadowed Brittain's feminist ideology, so much so that the passing of the Representation of the People Bill by the House of Lords and other achievements of the woman's movement passed without her notice. With Edward's death, the last male voice prominent in *Testament of Youth* disappears, and the parts of the book dealing with the post-war years do not echo male voices in the way the previous parts do – instead, Brittain focuses more on her situation as a woman in a post-war society, the women's movement and patriarchal relations.

Brittain's alignment with war veterans is also a result of their similar wartime experiences: *Testament of Youth* "mimicked male representations of the war; for in effect, Brittain's status as participant in the war forced her to confront trauma in the same fashion as male soldiers-writers" (Badenhausen 423), namely by writing a book as "an attempt to reenact traumatic events as a way of understanding them and recovering from their devastating effects" (Badenhausen 424). This complies with Jonathan Shay's assertions about victims of PTSD that they must enact a "communalization of the trauma" and that they must be "able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening" (Jonathan Shay qtd. in Badenhausen 423). Brittain likens her experience as a VAD nurse and, plainly, a woman to those of the soldiers at the front: for instance, she "characteri[ses] her service as an explicit tribute to male sacrifice" (Badenhausen 429). She does not mind the "aches and pains" resulting from her work as a nurse, because they "[appear] to [her] solely as satisfactory tributes to [her] love for Roland" (Brittain

142). She also describes circumstances in which she and other nurses endure burdens similar to those of soldiers: even as early as her service in London, she is "at last beginning to understand just a little what winter meant to the men in the trenches" (Brittain 183). As she travels abroad and encounters more direct threats to her safety, this understanding grows. She shows that nursing is not without its dangers: the threat of enemy submarines, torpedoes and disease characterise Brittain's journey to Malta, and the Étaples hospital is demolished by bombs only a few weeks after her departure – after weeks of air-raids which caused the nurses' "teeth [to chatter] with sheer terror as [they] groped [their] way to [their] individual huts in response" (Brittain 381).

The social chaos of war, its effect on gender boundaries and Brittain's own wartime experience do influence her feelings about her own gender identity. At some point during the post-war part of her autobiography, Brittain describes herself as seemingly growing a beard: "A dark shadow seemed to lie across my chin; was I beginning to grow a beard, like a witch?" (Brittain 443). Albrinck interprets Brittain's "beard" as a metaphor for a terrifying gender ambiguity, but emphasises that Brittain does not describe it as a man's beard, but as the beard of a witch, an "unnatural woman" (Albrinck 284): this signifies that Brittain does not consider herself masculine as such, but that her experience lies in between those of the women who remained and the men who have returned. While the idea of gender ambiguity seems consistent in interpretations of Brittain's beard, the interpretations differ slightly: for example, McClellan mentions that "Susan Leonardi (…) recognises that Brittain's simile, 'like a witch', acts to obscure her real fear of becoming overly masculinised through her academic studies" (McClellan 131). In Leonardi's interpretation, "witch" is only a cover for academic masculinity, not a compromise between traditional male and female wartime experiences.

Brittain's gender ambiguity results in post-war society not accepting her because she does not conform to the acceptable norms of femininity. In the following fragment, Brittain reflects on the gendered double standard after the war and her own situation at Oxford:

> (…) I realise now that the college authorities had been, according to their lights, thoroughly generous. (Had I been an ex-service man, their concessions would have seemed obvious enough, and were, indeed, granted to every male who wanted to take advantage of them, but Oxford women (…) were never officially regarded as 'patriots' whatever their service might have been.) They had kept my exhibition for me for four years; they had undertaken, since I was so excessively 'over-standing' for Honours, a special procedure on my behalf to enable me to take an Honours Degree at all; they had even tolerated my inauspicious change of School. But they could not add the final graciousness and make me feel welcome.
>
> (Brittain 435-436)

Because she "finds herself excluded from any living community following the war, she tries to create a community by resurrecting the dead" and "the repeated citation of her departed companion's words, then, helps to construct a community, overcome trauma, and mourn" (Badenhausen 429). In this light, Badenhausen interprets Brittain's "beard" as a visualisation of "her estrangement from her companions at an all-women's college at Oxford" (Badenhausen 434). Her non-conformity to traditional gender norms outs itself in a general feeling of unease and alienation with regards to what she considered normal and familiar in the pre-war years: for Brittain, "the domestic space bec[omes] its own battleground to be managed and survived" (Badenhausen 435), as exemplified by Brittain's comment that "ordinary household sounds bec[o]me a torment" (Brittain 121).

> The clock, marking off each hour of dread, struck into the immobility of tension with the shattering effect of a thunderclap. Every ring at the door suggested a telegram, every phone call a long-distance message giving bad news. With some of us the effect of this prolonged apprehension still lingers on; even now I cannot work comfortably in a room from which it is possible to hear the front-door bell.
>
> (Brittain 121)

Testament of Youth still focuses, next to Brittain's active participation in the war, on the more traditionally female experience of the war: as Dorothy Goldman says, women – and especially women writers – in the war must "perform a different and complex double function; they were actors in their own war *and* spectators of the soldiers' war" (Dorothy Goldman qtd. in Badenhausen 422). Brittain is not only a traumatised nurse – an actor – but also a mourner of the dead – a spectator. In fact, her active participation in the war is a result of her status as a spectator: her anxiety about her loved ones and her mourning of them results in a state of melancholia and causes her to "[retreat] from the social world and [engage] in a variety of masochistic behaviours in an attempt to share the suffering of her male counterparts" (Badenhausen 423). For example, when she volunteers to mend socks in between her university work, she "gratefully accept[s] the somewhat prosaic alternative to [her] heroic visions" and she "fe[els] that [she] ha[s] advanced at least one step nearer to Roland and the war. She later enlists as a VAD, and when asked if she "underst[ands] what a probationer's work in hospital really mean[s]", she replies that she "shall hate it, but [she] will be all the more ready to do it on that account" (Brittain 132). In her diary, she elaborates that her reasons also have to do with Roland: "He has to face far worse things than any sight or act I could come across; he can bear it – and so can I." (Brittain 132). After Roland's death, Brittain applies for service in France, placing herself even closer to the action to be closer to and share the suffering of her brother. As Brittain herself says: "Truly, the War had made masochists of us all." (Brittain 132).

In an article on "Feminist Witnessing and Social Difference: The Trauma of Heterosexual Otherness in Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*", Parkins discusses heterosexuality as "an ideological system that depends on – even as it attempts to subsume – gendered social difference" (Parkins 99) in *Testament of Youth*. Parkins "see[s] the memoir as an exemplary account not only of the trauma of war, but of the trauma of gendered social difference" (Parkins 100): during the war, Brittain is burdened with the feeling that her and Roland's wartime experiences are "incommensurable" (Parkins 100), which results in what Parkins calls a "trauma of unknowing the lover". Brittain experiences anxiety about the way the war divides men and women and renders their experiences vastly different and alien to each other, which results in an even wider gap between the sexes, a "fear that the War would come between [them] – as indeed, with time, the War always did, putting a barrier of indescribable experience between men and the women whom they loved" (Brittain 122). While Clare Tylee argues that the inability of women to fully understand the trench experience contributed to the trauma of war for men in combat, Parkins adds that the reverse is also true: she "propos[es] that this trauma of incomprehension was a foundational part of *women*'s experience of wartime trauma, as well" (Parkins 103). In this view, an "epistolary quarrel" (Brittain 189) between Brittain and Roland serves as the traumatic centre of the book. Their quarrel begins as a letter of Roland's "call[s] attention to the radical incommensurability of their war experiences that Brittain herself was beginning to recognize" (Parkins 103) by using "hyper-masculine, aggressively physical terms" (Parkins 104) to describe himself:

> I feel a barbarian, a wild man of the woods, stiff, narrowed, practical, an incipient martinet perhaps – not at all the kind of person who would be associated with prizes on Speech Day, or poetry, or dilettante classicism.
>
> (Brittain 191-192)

He distances himself from Brittain through gendered terms, whereas the basis of their relationship lay in their similarities, such as their feminist sympathies and literary interest, not their differences. During their courtship, Brittain notes that she "never think[s] of him as a man or boy, as older or younger, taller or shorter than [she is], but always of him as a mind in tune with [hers], in which many of the notes are quite different from [hers] but are all in the same key" (Brittain 83). Their relationship was an unconventional one in the sense that it did not entail an imbalance of power such as the one conventional relationships implied at the time. This shows in their reluctance to become engaged and in their decision not to purchase an engagement ring:

> For the remainder of the journey to Buxton we argued on this topic [of an engagement] almost to the point of quarrelling. I even told him, I remember, that he had spoilt everything by being so definite, for we both felt thoroughly bad-tempered over the situation into which an elderly, censorious society appeared to have manoeuvred us.

> We did not want our relationship, with its thrilling, indefinite glamour, shaped and moulded into an acknowledged category; we disliked the possibility of its being labelled with a description regarded as 'correct' by the social editor of *The Times*. Most of all, perhaps, we hated the thought of its shy, tender, absorbing progress being 'up' for discussion by relatives and acquaintances.
>
> (Brittain 157)

Yet even as they are newly engaged and slightly angry at the situation, Brittain fears their separation by the war:

> Still inwardly annoyed at having to label ourselves 'engaged', Roland and I were a little angry with each other all the time; the belief that demonstrative affection was expected of us made us both reticent, restless and perverse. Roland, indeed, for the first twenty-four hours seemed to hold himself deliberately aloof from me; five months of active service had intensified him in some ruthless, baffling quality which before had only been there in embryo, and his characteristic air of regarding himself as above the ordinary seemed to have grown. Uneasily I recalled my desperate fear lest he should have changed, lest the War should come between us and thrust me out of his consciousness and his life.
>
> (Brittain 161)

Brittain replies to Roland's display of masculinity with a letter that shows frustration at this reminder of the incommensurability of their war experiences and the fact that "the letter from Roland has functioned to traumatically recall Brittain to the fictions and ideals of masculine self-presence that structure the gender relations she has half-forgotten she deplores" (Parkins 105). She feels ill-at-ease by witnessing Roland's show of masculine otherness, and although their epistolary quarrel is resolved, her anxiety is resurrected when she learns that, while dying, Roland made no mention of her or his family:

> The growing certainty that he had left no message for us to remember seemed so cruel, so baffling. (…) it seemed as though he had gone down to the grave consciously indifferent to all of us who loved him so much. (…) I knew I had learnt all that there was to know, and that in his last hour I had been quite forgotten.
>
> (Brittain 218)

She is once again confronted with the war's division between the Western Front and the home front as well as the incommensurability of their experiences.

Education and feminism are important topics in *Testament of Youth*: as a young girl in the pre-war years, Brittain dreams of attending Oxford University and works hard to achieve that goal, not only by studying for her entrance exams but also by laboriously convincing her family to allow their daughter to receive higher education alongside their son. The struggle against her parents' traditional gender norms leaves her feeling trapped in her provincial home village:

> Each fresh refusal to spend another penny on my education (though the cost of my music lessons, and of the expensive new piano which was ungrudgingly bought for me to practise on, would have paid for nearly a year at Oxford) plunged me into further depths of gloom; I felt trammelled and trapped, and after a few months at home I hated Buxton, in spite of its austere beauty of its peaks and dales and the health-giving air which induced so many rheumatic invalids to live hopefully in its hotels and take its waters, which a detestation that I have never since felt for any set of circumstances.
>
> (Brittain 37)

In those pre-war years, she unwaveringly sees higher education for women as empowering and a feminist goal: "initially, she s[ees] the women's colleges as a means to intellectual, financial and personal independence" (McClellan 123) and a liberation from the oppressing, traditional gender norms of Buxton, where the "families were typical of the kind that still inhabit small country towns; the wives 'kept house', and the husbands occupied themselves" (Brittain 15). She violently opposes being "turned into an entirely ornamental young lady" (Brittain 18) and the provincialism which holds "contempt for intelligence, suspicion and fear of independent thought" (Brittain 39). However, Brittain's attitude towards academia changes during and after the war: she describes it as "shrewish, stifling and unnatural" (McClellan 122), "a secluded life of scholastic vegetation" (Brittain 118-119) and "infinitely remote from everything that count[s]" (Brittain 124). This change of attitude is obvious in Brittain's published diaries, but less so in *Testament of Youth* – instead, Brittain paints a "much more cynical image of herself and Somerville" (McClellan 125) in retrospect.

Despite Brittain's change in attitude towards academia, she does attend Oxford after her wartime service and witnesses the effects of the war on women's higher education and Oxbridge: during the war, more female students were admitted to compensate for the lack of male ones, but "many women students and lecturers left university to pursue war work" (McClellan 127), as Brittain did. Both of those courses of action – remaining at university to become a teacher or going to war as a VAD or WREN – "represented competing injunctions for femininity", as McClellan explains:

> On the one hand, teaching and nursing were viewed as 'natural' professions for women since they grew out of women's assumed nurturing tendencies. On the other hand, both could just as likely be seen as masculine. Staying in university meant women were

> taking on masculine roles as public intellectuals and professionals while engaging in the home front meant they were playing active rather than passive parts in the war effort.
>
> (McClellan 129)

Brittain, too, was "forced to choose between two competing gendered identities – teacher or nurse –" and consequently, "she was constantly suffering from an identity conflict" (McClellan 133). She chose the path of active war service and enlisted as a nurse and afterwards tried her hand at academia, yet "Brittain was ultimately unable to reconcile the two gendered professional identities available to her as a young woman at the beginning of the twentieth century" because "both academe and nursing seemed too constricting to her, locking her into contrastingly damaging ideals of femininity" (McClellan 136). In the end, therefore, Brittain became neither a nurse nor a teacher: "instead, she found a middle ground by creating a new path as a League of Nations Union lecturer and pacifist" (McClellan 136).

As much as Brittain comments on her feminist ideology and her own situation as a woman before, during and after the First World War, her feminism is not without blind spots. As Joannou notes in her article titled "Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* Revisited", the book is "coloured by the specific anxieties and concerns of Brittain's social class to the detriment of women of other classes" and it "effaces other versions of war experience which may contest its own representations" (Joannou 48). True to the context of first-wave political feminism, Brittain lacks the notions of collectivity and sisterhood characteristic of second-wave feminism: she focuses on the story of her own (upper-middle) class but still claims to speak for all women, and "although she frequently claimed she was an ardent feminist, Brittain was quite open about not actually liking *women*" (McClellan 132). Brittain "is strongly critical of particular aspects of patriarchy, for example the lack of access to higher education available to women with academic abilities, but she does not criticise the class system, nor does she recognise the inter-relationship between patriarchal and class-based forms of oppression" such as "the curious double standard which Brittain displays in criticising the sexual behaviour of her family servants while at the same time welcoming the postwar freedom in sexual matters among her own class" (Joannou 66). For instance, she describes her mother's maids as a "rag-tag and bob-tail selection of girls", of which "the first turned out to be several months pregnant" and "the second was an amateur prostitute who painted her face ten years before lipstick began to acquire its present fashionable respectability" (Brittain 392). It appears that Brittain criticises servants' behaviour but otherwise mostly ignores them. Additionally, Brittain generally does not seem to like associating with other women: she "does not view a desire for emotional closeness to other women as an essential component of her feminist conviction" (Joannou 57). At St. Monica's she had few friends – only Mina and Betty, of which only the latter is regularly mentioned, though without much depth. As previously discussed, Brittain

also feels distant from other VADs, especially after Roland's death. When she returns to Oxford after the war, she "f[inds] it easy – and preferable – to avoid contact with the other students, whose very names [she] hardly kn[ows]" (Brittain 437). Indeed, Brittain seems to have a general distaste for female companionship: as she writes in her diary, she holds "a man in preference to a woman as most women annoy [her]" (Brittain 67). The only exception to this rule seems to be Winifred Holtby, although Brittain severely disliked her after their first meeting: she regarded Winifred, as secretary of the Debating Society, as responsible for her humiliation at a debate. However, when Brittain falls ill, Winifred comes to visit her and they discuss their wartime experiences and their writing aspirations. Thus began "an association that in thirteen years has never been broken and never spoilt, and to-day remains as intimate as ever" (Brittain 453). The reason why Brittain opens up to Winifred probably lies – as it did with Roland – in their similarities: Winifred served in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) and was also an aspirant writer and a feminist.

Testament of Youth challenges the gender boundaries of the pre-war through post-war periods both in its content, but also by its very existence. It defies the equation of wartime literature and trench narratives by introducing a more traditionally female narrative into the canon of war literature and not abiding by traditional conventions of female silence, especially on subjects not contained in the domestic sphere. However, the book constantly mediates between masculinity and femininity in a way that blurs gender boundaries and opposes a binary: it is a feminist statement conceived in an almost exclusively masculine literary context, and in order to gain authority it includes male as well as female perspectives. However, Brittain also shows how these seemingly different perspectives and experiences are similar and not always clear-cut: as a VAD nurse at the front, her wartime experience lies in between those of the soldiers at the Western front and the women who remained at the home front. On the one hand, she is separated from her male acquaintances because of her gender and all it implies in social policy, such as exclusion from combat, a subsequent incommensurability of experience and her status as a spectator of men's war. On the other hand, she is also separated from other women by her experience as a nurse and at the front, which constitutes her status as an actor in her own war, as well as her general dislike for women's companionship. This intermediary status results for Brittain in an anxiety caused by a feeling of gender ambiguity which reflects the way the post-war society views her. Brittain finds a way out of the gendered identities post-war society imposes upon her by creating her own career and processing her trauma of war by communalising it in her autobiography, establishing herself as a "guardian of memory".

COMPARISON AND CONCLUSION

When comparing West's *The Return of the Soldier* and Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, the most immediately recognisable differences are those in genre and period of publication. While *The Return of the Soldier* is a short, entirely fictional novel published during the war in 1918, *Testament of Youth* is a lengthy autobiography published in 1933. Moreover, the latter discusses Brittain's life not only during the war, but also during the pre-war and post war years up to 1925. The different periods of publication are relevant because they influence the way the war is depicted: West's novel shows optimism and takes a rather positive perspective on the war and its consequences, whereas Brittain's autobiography is one of the canonical war books part of the War Books Controversy. These initially controversial books are now considered canonical and formative, but at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s they were revolutionary in the way that they depicted the war in a more negative light, with an emphasis on horror, trauma, grief and disillusionment, whereas before it was not uncommon for light-heartedness and even comedy to appear in war narratives. In a way, it is also the convention of realism in non-fiction that influences that negative view of the war, as it does not smooth over the unpleasant parts and resents the war as Brittain experienced it, horror and trauma included. Typical for the period encompassing both the publication of *The Return of the Soldier* and *Testament of Youth* is the use of modernist techniques, such as West's "female Imagism" and unreliable narrator and Brittain's inclusion of letters and diary entries in her autobiography. However, both books focus on the effect of the war and social issues rather than action on the battlefield, which is typical for books about the war written by women: this is obvious for West's novel, but Brittain's book, too, is more descriptive of thoughts, feelings and people than action. Still, Brittain shows relatively more action than West and her writing is more similar to male narratives than West's.

Another significant difference between the two books is their setting: West's novel takes place entirely in a domestic setting – a more traditionally feminine space – while Brittain's autobiography ventures as far as the front lines in France – a more traditionally male space. As a consequence, the war is almost entirely absent in *The Return of the Soldier*, only becoming visible through its influence on that domestic setting and the characters within. Contrastingly, almost everything in *Testament of Youth* seems to revolve around the war, and the things that do not are often pushed to the background and ignored. These two approaches each have their own purpose: West's domestic setting reveals the way it is often unjustly devalued because it is "outside the realm of socially validated reality" (Judith Lewis Herman qtd. in Pulsifer 38), but Brittain's feminism is more straightforward and explicit. This again might relate to the distinction between fiction and non-fiction: fiction better lends itself to metaphor and analysis, while non-fiction pieces such as autobiographies are rarely so metaphorical and often more explicit about the topics they deal with. The larger goal of both books and their different approaches, however, is the same: they both aim to show that women's (wartime) experiences are as

legitimate as men's and they both show women as "performing a different and complex double function" as "actors in their own war *and* spectators of the soldiers' war" (Dorothy Goldman qtd. in Badenhausen 422).

An interesting contrast tied to this issue is the evolution of the characters. In West's novel, the initial situation of a Victorian arrangement with female angels in the house whose lives revolve around the male breadwinner is deconstructed by the war, which hollows out and exposes the construct of masculinity. The social chaos of wartime blurs the traditional gender boundaries and renders the gender roles and norms of the idealised Victorian past outdated. However, those gender boundaries are re-established at the end of the novel: the women are thrust back into the domestic sphere, reflecting the situation of British women immediately after the war. The war thus pushes the characters in *The Return of the Soldier* from their initial traditional and conservative living situation into a more unconventional and progressive one – however unwillingly – and after the war, their living situation reverts to the traditionality and conservatism of its pre-war state. In *Testament of Youth*, the opposite happens: before the war, Brittain is concerned with feminist issues such as women's suffrage and education, but she ignores those issues during the war. Instead, her ideas are more conservative and she conforms to the accepted gendered role of the nurturing and caring nurse who tends to wounded soldiers whilst thinking of her own sweetheart. During the post-war years, however, she again participates in the women's movement and pays attention to patriarchal relations. Contrary to West's characters, Brittain's initial progressive mentality weakens during wartime, during which she conforms more to traditional gender roles, and after the war she resurrects her feminist ideals and her progressive mentality. However, like West, Brittain also refers to the way the social chaos of wartime disturbs traditional gender norms and the post-war social policy attempts to restore those norms by thrusting women back into the domestic sphere. She explicitly discusses how the post-war society rejects women who were in service during the war because of their non-conformance to traditional gender roles and their perceived moral deterioration. This post-war social policy causes Brittain some anxiety about her own gender ambiguity, which is represented in her idea that she is growing a beard. The different depictions of gender ambiguity in the two books relate to their depiction of the war. West depicts the war rather positively and trauma as curable, and therefore the gender ambiguity it causes is resolved at the end of the novel, when Chris's masculinity returns alongside his memory. Brittain, on the other hand, depicts the war in a decidedly negative light and therefore also presents the effects of it in the post-war years as a long-term condition instead of a curable one.

Curable or not, both books discuss male trauma as well as female trauma. West's novel emphasises masculinity, how it is affected by the war and how that influences the domestic situation, but it also deals with female trauma in a subtler way. Brittain's autobiography focuses more on how the war influences specific men – rather than a representation of masculinity in a character – in her life as

well as herself. The trauma in both books is concerned with death and grief: in *The Return of the Soldier*, the death of a child is brought up by the war but otherwise does not have a direct relation to it; in *Testament of Youth*, the deaths of Brittain's loved ones are a direct result of the war. This corresponds with the presence of the war in the books: as mentioned before, the war is nearly absent in West's novel, while it is emphatically present in Brittain's book. In the end, the trauma in both books is somewhat resolved: Chris's memory returns and Kitty is consequently no longer alone with her grief; Brittain processes her grief by writing her autobiography and moves on through her marriage. Both books liken the wartime experiences and traumas of men and women to one another, but they also depict the war as a divider of the sexes: in West's novel, the war divides Chris and Kitty through his amnesia; in Brittain's autobiography, it divides Brittain and Roland through the incommensurability of their wartime experiences. However, in Brittain's book, that incommensurability seems to come with a masculinisation of Roland by the war, whereas in West's novel, the war has hollowed out Chris's masculinity and exposed it as a construct. Like Brittain, the war pushes Roland from a progressive mentality into a more conservative one. Chris, on the other hand, follows the aforementioned character evolution in West's novel: the war transforms him from the traditional Victorian male breadwinner to a traumatised male who does not conform to traditional gender norms, and the cure of his amnesia reverts him to his traditionally masculine position of the pre-war years.

The Return of the Soldier and *Testament of Youth* are both concerned with the formation and preservation of memory. West gives a voice to female sufferers of trauma and female witnesses of the First World War, revealing an alternate history and a fear of a collective or historical amnesia which prioritises a masculinist way of remembering, as represented by Chris's amnesia: because cultural and collective memory are tied to issues of power and hegemony, she fears that issues of gender and feminism are ignored in favour of the historical event of war. By narrating her novel from a female perspective, which is a minority perspective in literature, she sheds a light on a traditionally female wartime experience in order to expose "European masculinist norming and the normative practices of witnessing" (Rizzuto 10). The same kind of collective amnesia is hinted at in Brittain's autobiography: Brittain herself is guilty of forgetting about and ignoring issues of gender and feminism during the war, instead indulging in the same masculinist norming criticised by West. During the war, Brittain considers the wartime experiences of women who remain at home inferior and the Western Front a "producer of meaning and aesthetic experience" (Bell 412), even though the narrating "I" admits that she was ignorant of the effect of the war on people at home at the time. However, Brittain also offers an alternative version of wartime experience in her book by challenging the equation of literature about the First World War and trench narratives. She includes male voices from the trenches to gain authority for her own female voice which recounts her wartime experiences as a woman, but which also enables her to act as a "guardian of memory". This way, she can influence the cultural memory with her

alternative history of the First World War, a task which – considering the impact of the canonical war books and the War Books Controversy – she has successfully completed.

Of course, the case studies discussed in this thesis are not enough to represent the entire body of British women's prose writing of the First World War, not in the least because both authors are white, middle- or upper-class women. Therefore, the noted observations and analyses should not be extended to or generalised for the entire body of British women's prose writing of the First World War. Still, the similarities between the two case studies are interesting and the books include several topics and themes that are frequent in British women's writing of the First World War, such as modernism, bereavement, trauma, a dislocation between the Western front and the home front, the role of women during the war, female wartime experiences and the influence of the war on gender relations. Relying on the comparison between the case studies, it seems that traditional gender relations are disrupted by the "sexual disorder" (Joan Scott qtd. in Albrinck 276) of the war, creating a social chaos and resulting in a concern for the masculinisation of women as well as the feminisation of men, especially sufferers of trauma. Consequently, social policy during and after the war promotes traditional gender relations in various ways, resulting in a setback in the fight for women's rights and a decline for the social status of women, who are thrust back into the domestic sphere. As both authors of the case studies are feminist writers, they condemn the post-war social policy implicitly or explicitly and aim to show that women's experiences and achievements are as legitimate as men's.

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ABSTRACT

De Eerste Wereldoorlog wordt vaak beschouwd als een keerpunt voor feminisme en vrouwenrechten, vooral omdat landen zoals Groot-Brittannië in de nasleep ervan stemrecht voor vrouwen invoerden. Meer factoren speelden echter een rol bij het bepalen van de sociale status van Britse vrouwen tijdens en na de oorlog, zoals hun betrokkenheid in professionele, economische en politieke zaken, maar ook hun rol tijdens de oorlog zelf en dominante gendernormen. Hoewel de oorlog het beeld van de werkvrouw creëerde en toonde dat de capaciteiten van vrouwen gelijkwaardig zijn aan die van mannen, bleven veranderingen voor de sociale status van vrouwen kleinschalig, gelimiteerd tot een kleine groep en afhankelijk van de intersectie van verschillende sociale factoren. In plaats van een keerpunt voor vrouwenrechten werd de oorlog een bron van onrust over de verstoring van traditionele gendernormen. Dat resulteerde in een sociaal beleid dat probeerde de traditionele vooroorlogse gendernormen te herstellen tijdens en na de oorlog door vrouwen terug in de huiselijke sfeer te stoten.

De oorlogsdaden van Britse vrouwen werden dus grotendeels genegeerd, en hetzelfde gold voor hun literaire werken over de oorlog. Vrouwelijke schrijvers werden geconfronteerd met materiële en immateriële obstakels, en niet de minste daarvan is de devaluatie van hun werk door de overwegend mannelijke literaire orde: tot vandaag bestaat het onmiddellijke beeld van een oorlogsverhaal uit soldaten, loopgraven en bommen – mannelijke pijn, actie en zelfopoffering. Vrouwenliteratuur over de oorlog bevat echter niet alleen verhalen uit de loopgraven, maar ook de vaak vergeten vrouwelijke pijn, actie en zelfopoffering. Ook is die vrouwenliteratuur een waardevolle bron voor reflectie over genderrelaties tijdens en na de oorlog. Deze thesis combineert die twee levels van genderrelaties zowel binnen als buiten literatuur om een antwoord te formuleren op de volgende onderzoeksvraag: hoe beschrijven en beschouwen prozawerken van Britse vrouwen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog de sociale status van vrouwen en genderrelaties?

Het antwoord op die vraag is tweeledig. Het eerste deel verstrekt achtergrondinformatie over de sociale status van Britse vrouwen tijdens en na de Eerste Wereldoorlog, de situatie van Britse schrijfsters in het begin van de twintigste eeuw en de oorlogsliteratuur van Britse vrouwen. Het tweede deel behandelt de casusstudies, namelijk Rebecca Wests *The Return of the Soldier* en Vera Brittains *Testament of Youth*. Daarna vergelijkt een concluderend hoofdstuk die twee werken en linkt ze aan de achtergrond. Hoewel twee casusstudies niet genoeg zijn om generaliserende conclusies te vormen, bevatten ze wel interessante gelijkenissen en thema's die vaak voorkomen in oorlogsliteratuur van Britse schrijfsters, zoals modernisme, verlies, trauma, een ontwrichting tussen het westerse front en het thuisfront, de rollen en ervaringen van vrouwen tijdens de oorlog en de invloed van de oorlog op genderrelaties. Zo blijkt dat de seksuele wanorde van de oorlog de traditionele genderrelaties verstoort, wat resulteert in sociale chaos en een bezorgdheid om de vermannelijking van vrouwen en de vervrouwelijking van mannen, vooral bij trauma. Bijgevolg probeerde het sociale beleid tijdens en na

de oorlog traditionele genderrelaties opnieuw in te voeren, wat resulteerde in een achteruitstelling van vrouwenrechten en de sociale status van vrouwen.