



THE ROLE OF A WOMAN DURING THE WAR IN “TESTAMENT OF YOUTH” BY VERA BRITAIN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines autobiographical features of Vera Brittain's novel "Testament of Youth" and how she, as a writer, approached the subject of war and the role a woman during war period. In her novel Brittain explores different attitudes to the problems of war and women, in particular, the WWI influenced much on the transition of a feminine role from passive to active. Some of most effective scenes in the novel deal with aftermath of war and the tolerance of a woman.

The literature of XX century inevitably reflects a wide range of responses to women's experiences, especially of home and family. Feminine identity is the key theme of the novel of the long nineteenth century, which records a questioning of society's assumptions about the appropriateness and availability of marriage, especially for middle-class women with aspirations to fulfill themselves in other ways. Fiction, above all, was a place where women could explore the intimate details of their emotions and social interactions, imagining new relationships and life choices, while also protesting against the injustices they saw around them. The extent to which they could express themselves freely without fear of censure, however, was another matter, as was the opportunity to make a lasting difference to the multiple difficulties which women faced, both in terms of their private domestic lives and their limited opportunities to work outside the home. The position of woman changed considerably at the beginning of the XX century. Woman gained more power both in family and

society, cause the outbreak of the WWI, big boom in economy and science, socio-political changes influenced significantly on the transformation of feminine identity. Logically, these shifts of gender power were reflected in literary writings of that period and Vera Brittain's *work of memorial in an age of war*, Testament of Youth was main example for it.

This article examines autobiographical features of Vera Brittain's novel "Testament of Youth" and how she, as a writer, approached the subject of war and the role a woman during war period. In her novel Brittain explores different attitudes to the problems of war and women, in particular, the WWI influenced much on the transition of a feminine role from passive to active. Some of most effective scenes in the novel deal with aftermath of war and the tolerance of a woman.

This work considers how Brittain presented the woman behavior during the WWI in her novel Testament of Youth, her contribution to the literature about the WWI,



revealing of autobiographical elements in the novel, identification of social transformation of female characters, classification of pre-, post war types of female characters in her novel.

There are quite a few approaches to study literary texts and one of these fields is biographical method that's a form of literary criticism that analyzes a writer's biography to reveal the connection between the writer's life and their works of literature. Biographical method is often related to historical - biographical criticism, a vital approach that "sees a literary text chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author's life and times". Furthermore, it may be an essential aspect of the historical approach. The biographical approach allows one to better understand elements within a piece, in addition, to relate works to authorial intention and audience. The idea behind biographical approach is that being aware of something concerning creator's life allows us to understand absolutely his or her work. It needs to be cited that biographical method isn't worried with retelling the writer's lifestyles; alternatively, it applies information from the author's existence to the interpretation of the work. The focus remains on the work of literature and the biographical information is pulled in most effective as a way of improving our information of the work. The belief of biographical criticism is that interpretation of a literary work ought to be primarily based on the information of the context in which the work was written.

Biographical method was contributed by several literary critics and scholars. Charles Augustine Sainte-Beuve and Hippolyte Taine were prominent representatives of this group of literary critics. Sainte-Beuve was principally interested in deterministic biographism, the attempt to explain the

personality of a writer as expressed in his writings by recourse to determining biographical factors. Sainte-Beuve attempts to explain the formation of literary personalities by three categories of determining factors: natural predispositions, education/intellectual socialization in a particular milieu, and historical (literary) context. His portraits consequently provide a detailed biographical account and a psychological characterization of the writers in question. The most important empirical source for this research is provided by private correspondence, diaries, and accounts of family and friends of the writer.

For Hippolyte Taine, understanding literature has far more to do with the writer's environment than it does with his literary learning. As popularized in his "Histoire de la Litterature Anglaise," the key to understanding can be found in analysis using "race, milieu et moment" in their original context where race relates to a cultural connection within the community; milieu is the writer's own peculiarities within that "race" or community and moment is the accumulation of experiences which draw the writer's work together. According to Hippolyte Taine, having established the factors that surround the artist and are responsible for his own vision, it is then possible to assess any work of art and draw accurate conclusions rather than a critic's own opinions. Theoretical basis of biographical criticism was analyzed by these two outstanding critics according to their categories above.

To sum up with the ideas which were mentioned above, works of literature are reflection of the author's life. Relatively, "Testament of Youth" by Vera Brittain includes biographical elements of writer's life experience. While reading the novel reader



can notice autobiography of author completely.

Vera Brittain was an English writer, feminist and pacifist, who wrote her bestselling "*Testament of Youth*" an account of her traumatic experiences during the First World War.

"Only, I felt, by some such attempt to write history in terms of personal life could I rescue something that might be of value, some element of truth and hope and usefulness, from the smashing up of my own youth by the war." (p11)

Vera Brittain wanted to go to university but her father believed that the main role of education was to prepare women for marriage. Her brother, Edward Brittain, introduced Vera to Roland Leighton, one of his friends. Leighton encouraged her to go to university and in 1914 her father relented and Vera was allowed to go to Somerville College. Unfortunately, The Great War frustrated the young girl's life.

"When the Great War broke out, it came to me not as a superlative tragedy, but as an interruption of the most exasperating kind to my personal plans." (p17)

After her brother and friends immediately applied for commissions in the British Army, she decided that she could not bear to remain at home doing nothing, so enrolled as a volunteer nurse. She documented her experiences as a nurse, in her "*Testament of Youth*". She portrayed how the young nurses worked long hours, in poor conditions. Despite the privations, Vera recounted how she engaged in her duties with great enthusiasm:

"Far from criticising our Olympian superiors, we tackled our daily duties with a devotional enthusiasm now rare amongst young women..." (p186) Although she was

able to get used to the low pay, long hours and difficult conditions, Vera Brittain admitted to being shocked at the state of some of the wounded men, and found it very testing to help treat men who were very badly injured.

"...Although the first dressing at which I assisted – a gangrenous leg wound, slimy and green and scarlet, with the bone laid bare – turned me sick and faint for a moment." (p211)

Each event, every place and all characters of the novel connected to the author's real experience. She reflected her doomed youth, tortured life and sorrowful love in her testament.

"There seemed to be nothing left in the world, for I felt that Roland had taken with him all my future and Edward all my past." (p190)

"How fortunate we were who still had hope I did not then realise; I could not know how soon the time would come when we should have no more hope, and yet be unable to die" (p137)

In addition, her observation in the war period, Vera Brittain wrote about her political and pacifist views in this autobiography.

"It is quite impossible to understand," I commented afterwards, 'how we can be such strong individualists, so insistent on the rights and claims of every human soul, and yet at the same time countenance (and if we are English, even take quite calmly) this wholesale murder, which if it were applied to animals or birds or indeed anything except men would fill us with a sickness and repulsion greater than we could endure."

In conclusion, taking the chunks and thoughts into consideration biographical approach is a vital aspect of literary criticism to make known the connection between the writer's life and their literary texts. As we



discussed above it creates a chance one to better understand elements within a work, in addition, to relate works to author's aim. Hence, information about Vera Brittain's biography can facilitate to realize the work thoroughly and to expose the creator's purpose.

World War One is visible enough for the horrific number of men who suffered in it, many of whom did not completely believe in or realize the causes they fought for. War literature presents the current reader with peoples' experiences from the period. Their views are essential in shaping our own opinions regarding war. In spite of the fact that war literature often distinguishes in its composition, many themes are coincident throughout the genre.

Testament of Youth by Vera Brittain portrays the theme of futility of war. Since the work is an autobiography by a British woman, it is noticeably different in its portrayal from other works of the period; the ideas that it presents on how war is pointless presents a human wide consciousness of its uselessness and asks the readers to question the human nature of announcing and fighting war. The First World War was dubbed 'the war to end all wars' but it did not cease all wars as the name might suggest, rather it solely set the pattern for new and even more mechanized killing.

Vera Brittain uses a matter-of-fact approach in her writing rather than romanticizing the injuries she witnessed. Vera Brittain destroys the false fade of the glory and honor of war after she learns of the death of her fiancé Roland. The loss of honor and glory is symbolized by Roland's returned belongings. Particularly, his badge, which would illustrate his honor and that of the army, was thickly covered with mud. He must have fallen on top of it, or perhaps one of the

people who brought him in trampled on it. This hints that the honor that the badge represents has been soiled by the war, the badge now symbolizes "the horror of war without its glory".

This is also ambivalent in the sense that she suggests he may have "fallen on top of it", rather than just describing how the war is honorable any more it also interprets that there was no glory in his death and that his death and that death and destruction is what the war truly symbolizes. Vera Brittain has altered the cliché of falling on one's sword to illustrate how the soldiers did not die traditional heroic deaths, but like her own fiancé died for no military benefit. Furthermore, her reference of the returned kit as "relics" suggests that this is all that is left of her fiancé after the death and decay of the war.

It represents her attitude towards the war, the return of the kit causes her realization of "all that France meant", that France meant death and destruction for both sides. It is however ambiguous as there is a level of conceit in "all that France meant". She surprisingly compares France, which is often seen as cultural and appealing, to death and destruction perhaps stressing the idea that civilization leans itself to war and that after this war is at end it will not be long until the next begins.

This is a clever if not relatively elaborate way to express her view on the futility of war, that no matter what they say this war will not end all wars, it is a futile loss of life. Killing removes all honor and glory from both country and men and there shall be no benefit to either side on "victory" or "loss" because both ironically mean death. The frankness in which she portrays these ideas is of high importance, but it also unnerved many of the original reviewers.



Testament of Youth was ‘the real book of the women of England’ and presents the strife of women during World War One. Vera Brittain is hesitant to use the word enemy, instead stating that the men had been ordered to fire against the advancing “Germans”. This reinforces the idea that the earth is fighting humanity. Both sides are experiencing terrible losses and appalling conditions. Vera Brittain describes how she “saw the hand of a man who’d been killed only that morning beginning to turn green and yellow” which demonstrates her use of imagery to graphically illustrate the horrors of war. The idea which author records is that the death itself is the enemy. If death itself is the enemy rather than the opposing side, the very fact that they are fighting is futile. There are no gains to either side, apart from the gain in numbers of death and casualties.

Brian Murdoch, the translator and author of the afterward suggests that the novel presents the war with the loss of human dignity and values. This reinforces the idea that the dehumanization of the soldiers is important in presenting the theme of futility of war. Vera Brittain concentrates profoundly upon the effects the war had at home through the themes of feminism and a prevailing sense of pacifism.

Despite this, Vera Brittain focused on the effects on society by the war. Vera Brittain grew up in provincial comfort in the north of England, into a family that did not want her to follow her academic aspirations and so her experiences prior to the war evidently contribute to her feminist and pacifist ideology. She links her ideas of feminism to pacifism. Her aspirations to gain an education and then to work towards the war effort she had to confront her own susceptibility as a younger woman to the glamour of war.

It became apparent that Brittain was ready to reject anything that identified war ‘with grey crossed, and supreme sacrifices, and red poppies blowing against a serene blue sky’. Testament of Youth focus heavily on the theme of futility of war and as suggested by other critical appreciations of the texts, the focus on the novel concentrates heavily on illustration war without glory, without heroism.

All in all, the work describes death as the real enemy within war. Vera Brittain focuses on the dismantling of the aide of an honorable and glorious war, and invokes her feminist and pacifist ideology (much of what she forms after her experiences of the war) to show this. The theme of brutality of war presents Brittain’s view on the futility of war.

Testament of Youth has been acclaimed as a classic for its description of the impact of World War I on the lives of women and the middle-class civilian population of Great Britain. The book shows how the impact extended into the postwar years. It is also considered a classic in feminist literature for its depiction of a woman's pioneering struggle to forge an independent career in a society only grudgingly tolerant of educated women.

Identification of social transformation of female characters, classification of pre-, post war types of a female character in Vera Brittain’s novel are analyzed below.

At the beginning of the war period the author describes Vera as a daughter who has little in common with other girls, refuses to play a traditional female role as a homemaker and caregiver, and has enthusiasm of to be a writer. Moreover, she claims the disadvantages of being woman:

“The disadvantages of being a woman have eaten like iron into my soul”.

During the war period the writer shows Vera as a nurse.



Vera Brittain worked as a young nurse, comforting and caring for the brave men of the war. Her brother, fiancé, and two friends were soldiers, and she supported them by maintaining a cheerful countenance and keeping up correspondences with each of them. Unfortunately, her fiancé, Roland Leighton, was injured early on in the war and had to be sent home, doomed never to obtain the war glory he sought, but safe. Though Roland was confined to a wheelchair, Vera was happy to care for him and they were soon married. Her parents and family friends were happy to see her finally settled so well and Vera was less rigid in her refusal to play a traditional female role as a homemaker and caregiver.

Serving as VAD nurse is an effort for Vera to contribute to the war in order to be closer to Roland; Possibility for comforting and caring for the brave men of the war; means for keeping up correspondences with her brother and fiancé; an outlet for coping with death and helping her forget her grief; argument for feminism.

Brittain was not filling the role of a modest lady smoothing pillows or a Madonna delivering the wounded. Brittain was in constant motion, “emptying bed-pans, washing greasy cups and spoons, and disposing of odoriferous dressings” as well as tending to “the nude body of an adult male”. She worked with wounds with “the butcher’s-shop appearance” that “many of the patients can’t bear to see” (211).

Furthermore, nursing was also a fairly dangerous occupation. On her way to Malta with her fellow nurses, Brittain expresses fears of submarine attacks. When she left, she was forced to travel by land because the risk of submarine bombings was too great. Later in the war, hospitals were even being targeted by the enemy and trenches were dug in the woods outside of the hospital where nurses

slept subsequent to a bombing at the hospital from which Brittain recently departed. As a nurse, Brittain was exposed to various debilitating diseases, which in repeated instances she contracted.

She expressed aftermath of the war in the lives of women as following:

“Women get all the dreariness of war, and none of its exhilaration”.

In the post war era readers can see Vera as a feminist. Vera conveys her expressions as below:

“The war was a phase of life which women’s experience did differ vastly from men’s and I make a puerile claim to equality of suffering and service when I maintain that any picture of the war years is incomplete which omits those aspects that mainly concern women...The women is still silent who by presenting the war in its true perspective in her own life, will illuminate its meaning afresh for its own generation”.

After such dreary, bloody days of this war Vera doesn’t see any change or attempt to improve women’s live though these women devoted all they have to help their men. As a result, Vera tried to protect women rights and became feminist.

After Roland’s death, it is not only Brittain’s feminism that comes into clearer view. Her experiences, particularly her view of war wounds, leads to an even stronger desire for nonviolence as well. This, combined with her attention to gender discrepancy, forms the bulk of the last third of Testament of Youth. Brittain remarks “truly the War had made masochists of us all” (Brittain 154). Brittain puts the reader through the devastating losses of her brother, fiancé, and close friends. She provides written correspondence between herself and her male friends to give the reader a sense of who they were and to show the relationship between these men and herself. Brittain spoke about



the war hopefully and clung to the prospect that it would be possible for the ones she loved to survive before gradually telling how everyone she knew in the war was killed.

Furthermore, by painting a clear description of her experience with grief and war wounds, she convinces the reader of the necessity for pacifism to prevent further loss and devastation.

Brittain's memoir *Testament of Youth* discusses a considerable number of ideas and philosophies that a reader could relate to. This memoir contains many strands of feminism, such as the idea of women working, attaining a higher education, and participating in World War I. This book is worthy because it contains radical ideas, at the time, concerning women, and war itself. She does not believe that the loss of life is worth winning a war.

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