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FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Vera Brittain: Feminism and Pacifism in Post-War Britain

Cristina Sánchez Sánchez

Antonio Rodríguez Celada

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Tutor: Antonio R. Celada

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* as an example of war narrative to establish the importance of the female voice in the complete treatment of a story, as well as the importance of a feminist and pacifist ideology in a modern world. Vera Brittain thus becomes a relevant figure in these fields, considering several aspects of her life: her autobiography, her experience as a V.A.D. nurse in World War I, the loss of a brother, a friend and her fiancé to it, and her role as an author and politic activist.

KEYWORDS: Vera Brittain, World War I, England, feminism, pacifism, literature, poetry, autobiography

RESUMEN

Este trabajo utiliza el libro *Testament of Youth* de Vera Brittain como ejemplo de narrativa de guerra para establecer la importancia de la voz femenina en el tratamiento completo de una historia, así como la importancia de una ideología feminista y pacifista en una sociedad moderna. Vera Brittain se convierte en una figura relevante en estos campos al tener en cuenta varios aspectos de su vida: sus datos autobiográficos, su experiencia como enfermera voluntaria en el frente en la Primera Guerra Mundial; la pérdida de su hermano, su amigo y su prometido en la misma, y sus vivencias como autora y activista política.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Vera Brittain, Primera Guerra Mundial, Inglaterra, feminismo, pacifismo, literatura, poesía, autobiografía

Introduction

According to UNESCO, the number of women in higher education has undergone an unprecedented growth since 1970. It has also been observed that the rate of female students in higher levels of education is directly linked with national wealth: in the majority of affluent countries, “female students clearly outnumber men at the tertiary level” (Chien). Thus, it becomes imperative for the institutions to progressively introduce their life testimonies into the educational syllabus, previously centered only in male figures and their achievements. Although in recent years significant female figures have been acknowledged for their own merits, it is clear that most of them are still overlooked in certain issues traditionally considered as male territory, such as war. The aim of this paper is to explore why women's testimonies are essential to comprehend the whole story of humankind by focusing on the figure of Vera Brittain and what World War I meant for her and her contemporaries.

1. The perception of war.

During a period of four years, from 1914 to 1918, English literature underwent great changes. World War I or the Great War, as it was known until the beginning of the Second World War, had a profound impact on humanity and led to significant changes in several different areas, from the disappearance of empires such as the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman, to advances in the naval and aeronautical industry; which in turn transformed thousands of people's lives. It is logical then to conclude that people's ways of thinking and writing also evolved from an eminently aesthetic view of literature, to a consciousness-raising endeavour.

When the war first erupted, it was regarded as an opportunity to assert Britain's current position as a global power due to its superiority in technology, economy and politics. Young men were encouraged to take part in battle and society proudly acclaimed all patriotic demonstrations. These young men were anxious to participate in the war effort, and were filled with expectations of honour and glory. War was idealised as fighting for a just cause, and the soldier as a romantic figure, like the hero in courtly literature. This heroic figure with which the soldier was identified was an ideal of manhood and his behaviour in battle was honourable and humble, thus making the battlefield the best place to measure up and prove oneself.

But this initial optimism did not last long. The combatants were soon faced with hunger, cold, rats and poor sanitary conditions, apart from a machine-based type of combat that greatly differed to the mettle and closeness of hand to hand combat. The people at home were apprised of the conditions they suffered, and more often than not lost sons, brothers, husbands and fathers to them. The horror of war made literature, and poetry in particular, a necessity to deal with the maelstrom of emotions stirred by this situation and furthermore, a weapon to position themselves against the senselessness of the conflict. As Gabriel Insausti points out:

En efecto puede describirse, parafraseando a Blake, como el tránsito de inocencia a experiencia: el conflicto trajo consigo el derrumbe definitivo de un ideal ético caracterizado por una noción heroica de la guerra, una previsible exaltación patriótica y una confianza en la superioridad moral propia (198).

2. Great War Poets: from aesthetic to compromise.

Several poets were also attracted by the romantic perception of war. They constitute what we nowadays call “the Great War Poets”. All of them took part in the war in one way or another, but there is a great difference in the message transmitted by their writings depending on several factors, the main one being their survival of the war. Their writings

are very similar at the beginning of the war, every single one full up with enthusiasm and patriotism. However, as the war takes its course, these poets fall prey to the horrors of the trench. They watch friends die and comprehend the pointlessness of it all. They realise that the heirs to the Renaissance, the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment are serving as cannon fodder and bloodying their hands in an apparently never-ending conflict in which there is no glory or honour to be won.

Some of the Great War Poets died in battle and became part of the staggeringly high death counts. The phrase “interrupted speeches” could be applied to their work, as we can observe they either had not reached their full potential, had not realised the futility of the massacre in which they were involved, or both.

On the other hand, the poets who survive suffered a radical shift in the way they portray the war scenario and their emotional experiences within it. Although physical injuries were common, perhaps the most significant ones were of an emotional nature. Shell shock was the term used specifically in World War I that described the soldiers' reaction to traumatic events in battle in a general manner, whether the causes were body wounds or alterations of demeanour. Shell shock was further defined in following wars (such as World War II and the Vietnam War) and the term fell into disuse. Nowadays, this kind of emotional ailment is classified under the terminology PTSD, or Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. It is fair to say then that war had a profound impact on the spirit of the times, on every possible level. And quoting again from Insausti:

La circunstancia de la guerra fue una constricción añadida: para obtener cierto eco en el ánimo del lector, la poesía estaba obligada a hacerse cargo de la experiencia humana, y en 1918 esta experiencia era, en gran medida, la de la guerra (405).

The pre-war literary trend of Georgian poetry, mainly romantic and escapist in its nature, was awfully equipped to deal with the situation. War poetry represented a clear contrast to it, and considered mud, illness and blood apt subjects to be discussed in poems. Poetry

in the Great War period is not only aesthetic, but serves a purpose: war poetry is in fact closer to news than to a means of escape. The Great War Poets removed the blindfolds of the people who read their war accounts because as Insausti pointedly wonders,

¿Podía confiar en la justicia de su causa el público que leería en *Goodbye to All That* cómo los británicos se desembarazaban de los prisioneros alemanes o incurrían en las mismas atrocidades -violación, mutilación, tortura- que se reprochaban al enemigo? ¿Podían hacerlo los que conociesen en *Three Soldiers* cómo los oficiales aliados propagaban la aritmética de la venganza entre sus hombres, difundiendo la idea de que "a más prisioneros, menos comida? (202)

3. A female perspective on war and war literature

Having described the chasm between pre-war and post-war attitudes and literature, we must now turn our gazes to the women. They were even more changed by the Great War than their male counterparts, if such a thing can be properly measured. The post-war environment produces a more independent woman, a woman who is beginning to rid herself of society's expectations of her traditional role.

Perhaps one of the women who best symbolises this pattern is Vera Brittain. She was a young woman who despite her father's initial objections studied English Literature at Oxford. She went on to be a Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) nurse for almost the entire duration of World War I. Her fiancé Roland Leighton, her brother Edward and two close friends were all killed in action, and after several years of drafts and attempts, she wrote *Testament of Youth*, a heartfelt account of her experiences in wartime. The figure of Vera Brittain serves us perfectly as an example of a woman's perception not only because of her sex but also because of the sensibility and directness of her work.

4. A room of Vera's own¹

Vera's is neither the first nor the only detailed account of war given by a woman. In fact, there was a clear trend of war narrative during the war and in the years since, which preoccupied Vera as to the relevance of her book. However, as Mark Bostridge concludes in the Introduction to *Testament of Youth*,

[the book] remains the most eloquent and moving expression of the suffering and bereavement inflicted by the 1914-1918 conflict, as well as offering generally reliable testimony of a VAD serving with the British army overseas, together with a host of other aspects of the social conditions of the war as experienced by the English middle-classes ... Furthermore, the book contributes to the “wider story of women's emancipation in England” (xii).

The importance of women's war narrative lies in their contribution to a wider scope of experiences. In her 2009 TED talk, reputed Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie² warns us of the danger of the single story, stating that people's stories (how they are told, who tells them, when they are told, etc.) are really dependent on power, and that power can make it the definite story of that particular people. This power, in 1914 and before, had been the sole domain of men. With very few exceptions, literature and art in general had been a representation of the male gaze. As Indian author Tutun Mukherjee³ describes:

The denial of education to women, the male exclusivity in the print culture, the tendency to 'vulgarize' and 'devalue' oral culture (generally the female domain), the separation of the private and the public space have all served to confine women to certain genres and restrict or erase their presence in others (4).

¹ Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is perhaps the best feminist manifesto despite of (or thanks to) its succinctness. The book highlights the importance for women to have enough social and economic independence. I took the liberty of playing with the title to illustrate Vera's own circumstances.

² Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-) is a Nigerian writer. She studied in the University of Nigeria before moving to the US. She received her Bachelor's degree from Eastern Connecticut State University, with the distinction of *summa cum laude* in 2001. She went on to receive her Master's degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University in 2003, and a Master of Arts degree in African Studies from Yale University. She was receiving a lot of academic interest before she became popular after being featured in Beyoncé's *Flawless*.

³ Tutun Mukherjee is a professor at Centre for Comparative Literature and joint professor at the Centre for Women's Studies and the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Hyderabad in India. She has translated and edited eleven volumes of plays, short stories, novellas and criticism. One of these volumes is *Staging Resistance*, which deals with plays written by women about women.

And Virginia Woolf reiterates:

... it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. 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 (74).

But a book dealing with war written by a woman completely defies the norm: is it important because it is about war or can we ignore it because it is written by a woman and therefore inconsequential?

Much has been said about the Great War Poets. However, most writers tend to focus on the male figure and overlook the perspective of women, writers or not, which lends literature and history a definite bias. It appears that the most important stories are those told by men, specifically by men who fought in the war and survived to write them. Whereas we cannot demean their experiences, we have to consider the female viewpoint as just as important as that of the male. In doing so, we fully grasp their reality. This only-male point of view is eroded when the number of female writers starts to grow, and women write about issues which had been otherwise ignored and devalued. In Adichie's words, "it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person."

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* plays a substantial role in understanding the importance of Vera's life's testimony in the history of women writers. Woolf relates in this book that she was astonished to discover that while women were the object of thousands and thousands of pieces of writing, the vast majority of them were written by men: "Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?" (28).

She goes on to describe the living conditions of women in different periods of

history, noting that there were several similarities between them that prevented them from writing their stories. These she sums up in the necessity for a room of one's own. This room symbolises the economic ability to have leisure time to dedicate to writing and a space where the woman writer could feel at peace and at ease and have no worries about interruptions. However, women had not been afforded these conditions, and if they had them they usually did not make use of them in order to put their life or minds on paper. They felt they had not anything to say as important as men's words and were too concerned about the harsh criticism their work would receive only because of their gender.

Before 1914, society still had an eminently Victorian lifestyle. Women were born, raised and educated only enough to be brides, wives and mothers. Their whole life was dependent on their husbands, and they put their needs before anyone else's. This was not only society's idiosyncrasy, but also one given by law: women were, after marriage, legally inexistent. Married women were not recognised as a separate legal being from their husbands and therefore had few legal rights. Thus, the “room of their own” was in most cases non-existent: they occupied their time with the management of the household and the raising of their children, which was no small task. Moreover, women were educated just to the point of literacy and not much else, as it was perceived that being a learned woman or “bluestocking” was undesirable in a wife. Furthermore, as Britain declares, young women considered universities an “unnecessary prolongation of useless and distasteful studies” (18)

Woolf offers us a glimpse into the proper occupations for women in this period:

... I had made my living by cadging odd jobs from newspapers, by reporting a donkey show here or a wedding there; I had earned a few pounds by addressing envelopes, reading to old ladies, making artificial flowers, teaching the alphabet to small children in a kindergarten. Such were the chief occupations that were open to women before 1918 (39).

As we concluded before, war shaped the post-war woman. The traditional role of women in wartime was waiting. Women were supposed to wait at home hoping that the men in their lives would come back unscathed. They were also supposed to care for those who remained behind, while giving the appearance of utter calmness and contentment in the accomplishment of this task. There is a great and significant change in this role during and after World War I. By going to war as a V.A.D., Vera Brittain obtains a first-person exposure to the killing fields and her views are dramatically different to those of the Great War Poets. She argued that having nursed in six hospitals gave her a wider picture of the conflict than that of the soldier relegated to a specific corner of the battlefield.

With the creation in 1903 of the Women's Social and Political Union by Emmeline Pankhurst⁴, women started organising themselves to campaign for women's suffrage in order to achieve full political equality. The suffragette movement was at an impasse during the years of the war, with the members focusing on war efforts and taking on traditional male roles. However, women kept lobbying for their rights and in 1918 eventually achieved the right to stand for election and in 1928 the right to vote on equal terms with men.

5. Post-war Britain

After the War, the world had changed tremendously for women: they had more freedom and independence and new job opportunities. Men, in Siegfried Sassoon's words, were "none of [them] the same". War had ravaged the male population: the majority were dead,

⁴ Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) was the leader of the British suffragette movement. Her militant tactics such as smashing windows and assaulting police officers were very criticised at the time. In 1903, she founded the Women's Social and Political Union, a suffragette organisation. Pankhurst called a halt to the militancy during the years of World War I, and urged women to help in the war effort. After the war, she transformed the WSPU into the Women's Party and dedicated her efforts to achieve women's suffrage in equal terms to men's. However, she died weeks before this came about in the month of July 1928.

and those who came back did so with tremendous physical and mental health problems. Women took it upon themselves to having their voices heard. War gave women the opportunity to show they could do what they had always claimed. But they had to learn to live with ghosts of what could have been, and this encouraged them to demand a radical change in people's worldview. Virginia Nicholson⁵ relates in her book how the ghost of war haunted Vera:

¿Cómo se podía vivir siendo testigo de estas muertes violentas y humillantes que erosionada con crueldad el humano afán de felicidad? Un miércoles por la mañana, unos meses después de la muerte de Roland, Vera se encontró de repente disfrutando de la belleza de un manantial de agua cristalina bajo un cielo azul salpicado de nubes. “Entonces recordé: Roland está muerto y no le estoy siendo fiel; resulta perverso y cruel que siquiera por un momento me alegre de estar viva” (35).

Although *Testament of Youth* should not be seen mainly as a love story, it is undeniable that the bond between Roland Leighton and Vera Brittain made for heartbreakingly sweet and beautiful poetry. One example of this is *Villanelle*, a poem written in the heart of battle in the spring of 1915, months before Roland's death in December 1915:

Violets from Plug Street Wood,
Sweet, I send you oversea.
(It is strange they should be blue,
Blue, when his soaked blood was red,
For they grew around his head:
It is strange they should be blue.)
Think what they have meant to me—
Life and hope and Love and You
(and you did not see them grow
Where his mangled body lay
Hiding horrors from the day;
Sweetest, it was better so.)

Violets from oversea,
To your dear, far, forgetting land
These I send in memory
Knowing you will understand

⁵ Virginia Nicholson (1955-) is the great-niece of Virginia Woolf. Her father wrote Woolf's biography and her mother edited her diaries. She studied English Literature at King's College in Cambridge and went on to write about the Bloomsbury Group and the life of women after World War I and World War II. *Singled Out*, the book from which I took the quote, is her third book, and relates how the lack of men shaped the post-war woman.

Vera on her part wrote “Perhaps” (1916), a passionate elegy dedicated to him:

Perhaps some day the sun will shine again,
And I shall see that still the skies are blue,
And feel once more I do not live in vain,
Although bereft of You.

Perhaps the golden meadows at my feet
Will make the sunny hours of spring seem gay,
And I shall find the white May-blossoms sweet,
Though You have passed away.

Perhaps the summer woods will shimmer bright,
And crimson roses once again be fair,
And autumn harvest fields a rich delight,
Although You are not there.

Perhaps some day I shall not shrink in pain
To see the passing of the dying year,
And listen to Christmas songs again,
Although You cannot hear.'

But though kind Time may many joys renew,
There is one greatest joy I shall not know
Again, because my heart for loss of You
Was broken, long ago.

6. Post-war Vera: pacifism and feminism

Vera Brittain continued her life with the tremendous burden of having lost a brother, two close friends and the love of her life. She eventually married political scientist George Catlin and had two children. Vera's figure as a writer and activist merged: she campaigned for equal rights for women in the workplace and within marriage, and became a fervent advocate of pacifism as a result of her participation in the Great War.

For a while, she felt that an armed force could be justified in order to end a conflict. She was thoroughly disenchanted with this idea as years passed and no real solution was found. In 1934 she wrote an article calling for a ‘real peace crusade’ and in 1936, with the threat of another war looming on the horizon, she rejected war in an absolute manner,

becoming member of the Peace Pledge Union. Brittain dedicated her efforts to speaking publicly for peace and she was quite popular at it, as her views were expressed in a simple and concise manner. In her Peace Pledge Union speeches she also stated that “the struggle against war, which is the final and most vicious expression of force, is fundamentally inseparable from feminism”. Her aim was to make people aware of what was happening (a principle she shared with the Great War Poets), and to this end she created from 1940 to 1946 a fortnightly publication called *Letter to Peace-Lovers* in which she made public information she could glean about anti-war efforts. Moreover, she took part in food relief campaigns and other undertakings focused on alleviating the suffering of the most affected by World War II, who are not the people that usually initiate it, as Richard B. Miller observes:

Further, as [Niebuhr] would emphasise in the 1940s, typical approaches to war fail to apprehend the recurring fact of war, namely, widespread suffering of the innocent. "It is not the mighty, the guides and leaders of nations and churches, who suffer most in [wars]," Niebuhr observes, "but the humble, little people who have had little to do with the framing of great policies (129).

Vera Brittain was not idle after the war that changed her life. She dedicated her days and her writings to feminist and pacifist endeavours, most of which are still relevant nowadays.

7. *Testament of Youth's* imprint today

The 2014 movie screen adaptation of Vera Brittain's most remarkable work, *Testament of Youth*, transports the spectator through the story in meticulous detail, and creates a very realistic portrayal of the influence of war in the lives of normal people. It makes it easy to understand the undercurrents of emotion when one is faced with great obstacles, and the different ways people choose to deal with them. The depiction of Vera is as complex as herself: she is determined but cautious and possesses an admirable strength. It takes a

remarkable person to endure such great losses. In a way, she feels guilty about her brother's death, and also powerless. At one point she says to Winnifred Holtby, "I saved my brother's life over there, you know, in France. But the war still got him". She thinks of war as something that overpowers people and destroys everything it touches and eventually war becomes the linchpin of her life and work.

Conclusion

Vera Brittain's book is a perfect example of the relationship between the war as an abstract idea and the dramatic impact on ordinary people. Her figure as nurse, author and political activist stands out in the field of war literature, feminism and pacifism among her contemporaries. Brittain's account of the conflict is not only a means to perceive and understand the changes in men and women that war brought about but also a powerful testimony which stresses the horrors of war. As Woolf states, "life for both sexes [...] is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength". We should not forget our tragic past: the suffering of previous generations remains as an intense warning to our collective memory. History tends to repeat itself with baffling accuracy. Perhaps a book cannot prevent war, but it may change the attitude of a whole generation.

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