

Crossing No Man's Land: Bridging the Gender Gap of World War I Through the Works of Vera Brittain

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Vera Brittain wrote in both her memoir and in a letter to her fiancé that, “women get all the dreariness of war and none of its exhilaration.”¹ She was just beginning her life as a student at Oxford when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in the summer of 1914, and at the time “the war at first seemed” to be “an infuriating personal interruption rather than [the] worldwide catastrophe” that it would eventually become.² Brittain soon interrupted her studies at Oxford by becoming a nurse and eventually became a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment for the duration of the war.³ Although she survived and went on to become a prolific writer, she lost many important people along the way. She was engaged to Roland Leighton in August 1915, but he was killed days before he was due to reunite with her on leave on Christmas Day 1915. She became closer to his school friend, Victor Richardson, and her brother’s fellow officer, Geoffrey Thurlow, but Geoffrey was killed in action in April 1917. She received news of Geoffrey’s death at the same time that she was informed that Victor was badly wounded and blinded, and he died in June of that same year. Finally, when she sent a poem to her brother, Edward Brittain, in June 1918, he was killed before he had the chance to read it.⁴

Throughout her memoir, *Testament of Youth*, Brittain referenced and utilized excerpts from the letters written between her, Edward, Roland, Victor, and Geoffrey, entries from the diary she kept during the war, and poems written by Roland as well as poems she published in *Verses of a V.A.D.* Brittain relied heavily on her own diary and letters during the writing process of her memoir, and used her “naïve quotations” from these sources “in order to give some idea of the effect of the war, with its stark disillusionments, its miseries unmitigated by polite disguise, upon the unsophisticated ingénue who grew up just before it broke out.”⁵ The question, however, that comes to the forefront is not a question of accuracy, but rather a question of integrity. Are there constant themes that bleed over from the source material into the memoir? Or are the themes that are apparent in the diary, letters, and poems transformed as Brittain exercised something she did not have during the time that the source material was written: hindsight?

¹ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), 104; “Letter to Roland on 1 October 1914,” in *Letters from a Lost Generation: First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends: Roland Leighton, Edward Brittain, Victor Richardson, and Geoffrey Thurlow*, Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, ed. (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2012).

² Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 93.

³ Frank Prochaska, “An Oxford Interlude,” *History Today* 65, no. 5 (2015): 20.

⁴ Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life* (Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 136.

⁵ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 45.

Through close reading, the themes that are apparent in the diary, letters, and poems are consistent with those that are expressed in the memoir. The themes that will be explored in this paper are the deification of the dead, the challenge of the traditional male ownership of the war story, and memory and writing. The combination of these three themes constitute the “feminist intertwining of personal, politics, culture, and history” that make Brittain’s contribution to the literature of World War I unique and important to add to a broader understanding of the Lost Generation.⁶

In Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*, he notes that war memoirs live on “the knife-edge” between fact and fiction, which gives World War I memoirs a unique mode of expression and assumes the quality of historical fact.⁷ There is an interesting debate about historical memory and what “memory has decided to preserve as significant,” and the memoirist has to battle the inevitable “questions of [the] reliability and accuracy” of their literary recollections.⁸ Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* is fictional, but Fussell notes that it is “[impossible to] ever satisfactorily [distinguish] a memoir from a first-person novel” such as Remarque’s.⁹ Scholars question the accuracy of memoirs and categorize them amongst fictional war writings such as poems and novels inspired by actual events. In fact, some even see the fictional writings as more successful than the non-fictional works, and Robert Kee notes that the “artists who re-create life rather than try to recapture it...prove [to be] the good historians in the end.”¹⁰ In this same vein, Remarque was not interested in creating an “accurate account of the experience and feelings of men in the trenches” so much as he was “interested in explaining away the emotional imbalance of a generation.”¹¹

⁶ Richard Badenhause, “Mourning through Memoir: Trauma, Testimony, and Community in Vera Brittain’s ‘Testament of Youth,’” *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no.4 (2003): 444; The primary source material for this paper are all writings attributed to Vera Brittain, with some collaborative exceptions and edited collections. The collection of letters was edited by Paul Bishop and Mark Bostridge, who write in their introduction that the preservation of the letters themselves came from Vera herself: both her brother and her fiancé sent back home her letters written to them for safekeeping during the war, and she very carefully stored the letters she received from them as well as those from Victor and Geoffrey. Berry and Bostridge, ed., *Letters from a Lost Generation*, xi-xii; Her war diary was edited by Alan Bishop, and included Vera’s own notes in the introduction. He emphasized that a lot of the editing and arranging of entries followed closely what Vera herself had arranged in her attempt to show the “cumulative effect of day-by-day suspense and anguish” that caused a “permanent quenching of youthful hope and energy” as compared to the hindsight inherent in the memoir. Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth: The War Diary, 1913-1917* (Phoenix, New York: Phoenix Press, 2003), 15; The poems and prose are edited by Mark Bostridge and he mentions his use of the Vera Brittain Archives at McMaster University in arranging his collection commemorating the 90th anniversary of the Armistice. Vera Brittain, *Because You Died: Poetry and Prose of the First World War and After* (London: Virago Press, 2008), xxxvi; Additionally, the poems published in *Because You Died* are also online, as Vera’s *Verses of a V.A.D.* are available to read in a free digital format. Lastly, in terms of the discussion of Vera Brittain, Roland Leighton, Edward Brittain, Victor Richardson, and Geoffrey Thurlow, I have decided to use just their first names. Vera wrote to her fiancé, her brother, and their two friends using their first names, as she was close to all of them. Using just their last name would add a sense of formality and distance that is not felt in reading Vera’s very personal writings, and I want to replicate the sense of intimacy and pain that comes so strongly in Vera’s own writings.

⁷ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 310.

⁸ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 312-13; Joyce A. Wood, “History and the Persistence of Memory: Observations on the World War I Memoirs of Vera Brittain,” *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (2002): 101.

⁹ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 310.

¹⁰ Quoted in Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 311.

¹¹ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989), 280.

Writers who possessed letters and diaries and other documents from the actual war period encountered difficulties in recounting the “precise flow of events” and in the case of Brittain, scholars wonder if her “memoir reflects her actual experience” or if it “is part of the ritual and myth that built up in the literary world in the late 1920s.”¹² The mythological nature of wartime literature was not unique to the post-World War I period, and the “outpouring of literature” after a war was a practice that occurred in the 19th century when writers would wax poetic on “an ancient set of beliefs about revelation, divine justice, and the nature of catastrophe.” This showed how writers used “[old] cultural traditions to express their anguish and their compassion” as they struggled to come to terms with their traumatic experiences.¹³

Vera Brittain’s memoir is autobiographical, but in a bookstore the categorization of *Testament of Youth* is unclear.¹⁴ Wood asks in her article if the memoir is “less reliable as an accurate rendition of the experience of volunteer nurses because it was so much a part of the literary fashion of the day.”¹⁵ That being said, women unfortunately are not always included in the scholarly discussion. *Testament of Youth* is just one example of female war literature, and Helen Zenna Smith’s *Not so Quiet* is another example of a female-driven narrative. Yet, Fussell omits Brittain and Smith in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, and this is because of “his valorization of physical experience, typically configured as male, over other encounters with the war that were in any way removed from the locale of the war front.”¹⁶ However, *The Great War and Modern Memory* was published in 1970, and over the last few decades this “narrow perspective” has expanded “the scope of what it means to be in war.” By including women in the war literature discussion, scholars are challenging what is typically a male-heavy topic.¹⁷

Scholars have pointed out that Brittain lacked the “patriotic fervor” that male combatants felt. Jean Pickering, in “On the Battlefield: Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*,” points out that “unlike Roland, Vera was not motivated by abstract notions of glory,” and she instead “[risks] her comfort, even her life, in support of a principle drawn ultimately from her own experience.”¹⁸ In “History and the Persistence of Memory: Observations on the World War I Memoirs of Vera Brittain,” Joyce Wood notes that “many young women like Vera Brittain were eager to do their part,” or perhaps were desperate to do something, anything, to combat the “[feelings] of personal failure, of worthlessness and waste.”¹⁹ In revisiting her letters and her diary, she immortalizes the experiences of the young men who died: in memorializing the men, “remembrance confers a kind of immortality on the dead,” as “[forgetting] them denies that they ever lived.”²⁰

The inclusion of women in the discussion of war literature as more than the “suffering wives and mothers, or callous parasites, or mercenary prostitutes” is paramount in order to more

¹² Joyce A. Wood, “History and the Persistence of Memory: Observations on the World War I Memoirs of Vera Brittain,” *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (2002): 102.

¹³ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 178.

¹⁴ I went into a bookstore with the intent of purchasing *Testament of Youth*, and I asked the clerk where a historical memoir would be located. We looked in the biography, non-fiction, and history sections, to no avail, even though an inventory search stated that a copy was in the store. I remembered that a copy I saw online was printed as a Penguin Classic, so I looked in the Classic Literature section and found *Testament of Youth* in that section even though the rest of the Classic Literature section contained fictional literature such as *Frankenstein*, Jane Austen works, and the like.

¹⁵ Wood, “History and the Persistence of Memory,” 101.

¹⁶ Badenhause, “Mourning through Memoir,” 421.

¹⁷ Badenhause, “Mourning through Memoir,” 422.

¹⁸ Jean Pickering, “On the Battlefield: Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*,” *Women’s Studies* 13, no.1 (1986): 80-81.

¹⁹ Wood, “History and the Persistence of Memory,” 104.

²⁰ Pickering, “On the Battlefield,” 83.

accurately represent “the whole generation of idealistic young women who...sacrificed as much as the men with far less recognition.”²¹ World War I was an event that anyone who experienced it, either as a soldier or a noncombatant, has a right to comment upon it. This is because “war was a human event, not a happening which affected one sex” over another, “a struggle shared by all men and women touched by the tragedy.” This feminist “intertwining” of “the personal with politics, culture, and history” enables the reader to apply the personalized war experience to the broader “physical and historical context” of a “[society] suffering under the burden of trauma” and to add nuance to the understanding of the effects of the war.²²

The traditional experience of the World War I soldier is another area of research that can be expanded with the inclusion of the female experience. Scholarship often deals with shell-shock and trauma, and much like the young men who signed up to be soldiers, the “dual roles” of “active participant (as nurse) and passive spectator (as mourner of the dead)...forced Brittain to wrestle...with the effects of trauma on her own psyche.” After her fiancé was killed, Brittain withdrew and “[engaged] in a variety of masochistic behaviors in an attempt to share the suffering of her male counterparts” and her apparent PTSD served “as the motive behind many of the rhetorical and narrative tactics” that Brittain employed in her memoir. *Testament of Youth* was her catharsis, the “[reenactment of] traumatic events” that was necessary in order to “[understand and recover] from their devastating effects.”²³ Brittain wrote a work not “on questions of tradition, nationality, history, or politics, but on the individual’s struggle in the face of this global catastrophe.”²⁴ She revisited and relied heavily on her wartime correspondences, and the use of these letters as main sources for *Testament of Youth* “not only challenges traditional male ownership of the war story” but also serves “to collapse the polarization of men and women, front and home, that has become a traditional trope of war.” This challenge of the male ownership of the war story allows for an account of the “non-male [and] non-combatant,” as well as showing her relationship with her male counterparts. The give-and-take exchange that we see between Brittain and her fiancé in particular helps scholars “negotiate what has become a no-man’s land of silence” that has developed “between the male and female” and ultimately the “combatant and non-combatant experiences of war.”²⁵ Closing the gap between the male and female experiences of war allows for a more varied and broader narrative.

Brittain’s experience of World War I as a woman does not need to be separate from the experience of the soldier, and *Testament of Youth* should not be seen as an exclusively female perspective, as she seamlessly weaved in the stories of the men she loved in her memoir. Her experience of war would not “exist apart from [their experiences],” and “when defined through connectedness rather than polarization.” In previous scholarship, the memorialization of the frontline soldier was at the expense of the female experience, but Brittain’s narrative is an inclusion rather than an exclusion of “women from the collective memory” of the war experience.²⁶ In addition to the female-male dichotomy, Brittain also avoids the divisive nature usually apparent between the home front and the war front, or between the civilian population and those on the

²¹ Pickering, “On the Battlefield,” 75. The “suffering wives and mothers” and “mercenary prostitutes” are noted as the depiction of women in the works of Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves, and Brittain’s work serves as a more accurate picture of the experience of these “idealistic young women.”

²² Badenhause, “Mourning through Memoir,” 442-443.

²³ Badenhause, “Mourning through Memoir,” 423-424.

²⁴ Badenhause, “Mourning through Memoir,” 442.

²⁵ Carol Acton, “Writing and Waiting: The First World War Correspondence between Vera Brittain and Roland Leighton,” *Gender & History* 11, no.1 (1999): 55.

²⁶ Acton, “Writing and Waiting,” 54, 80.

battlefield. Though she does not fight as a soldier, “the image of the battlefield shadows her entire autobiography.”²⁷ Brittain's “integration of the private with the public” makes for a narrative that is different than those of her male contemporaries. She is seen not just as a “representative of her generation of young women” but also a unique representative of the Lost Generation as a whole.²⁸

The ‘famous’ writings that were produced during World War I were mostly those written by men; thus, Vera’s contribution to the war literature cannot be overstated. Through her writings, she challenged what was traditionally thought of as a masculine space: war. She often commented on the “waste of life” that the war became, and inserted the female experience into the male narrative. Vera became more worried for Roland’s safety as well as his intellectual well-being as the war progressed, and feared the waste of life that occurred “even when people don’t die.”²⁹ She noted in her memoir that “the war kills other things besides physical life,” and she was afraid that Roland’s “individuality” was going to be “buried as the bodies are of those who lie beneath the trenches of Flanders.”³⁰ She could sense the “almost physical barrier of horror and dreadful experience” that threatened to grow between them, and the remedy to that barrier was the detailed correspondence that she kept with the young men.³¹

In an exhortatory letter to Roland, she insisted that he “mustn’t shrink from telling me the dreadful things you yourself experience” and that she would “feel very much hurt indeed if you were to try to shield me from things, instead of letting me share them.”³² This letter exemplified Vera’s desire to share the war experience with the young men who put their lives at risk, and her desire to validate the female experience of the war. Prior to the war, Vera’s desire for gender equality was already strong. Well before she became a devoted feminist and pacifist, her frustration with the treatment of women was apparent. In a letter written to Roland, she complained that the position of women was “intolerable” and that she was disadvantaged by “being born a woman,” her “determination to be independent” constantly “showered” with “scorn.”³³ The feminist undertone in her letters and diary was even stronger in her memoir, with the grievance that “what exhausts women in wartime is not the strenuous and unfamiliar tasks that fall upon them, nor even the hourly dread of death for husbands or lovers or brothers or sons;” rather, “it is the incessant conflict between personal and national claims which wears out their energy and breaks their spirit.”³⁴ Statements such as these were commonplace throughout Vera’s works, and although her feminism and pacifism were more urgent in tone in the memoir, it is evident that these viewpoints originated from the source material written during the war.

The connection drawn between the male and female experience was not only a result of the letters written between Vera and the young men, but also because of her tendency to compare the men’s experiences with her own. In her memoir, Vera recounted the first time she came face to face with a dying man during her work as a nurse. She wrote that the emotion she felt was “comparable to the feeling of shock and impotent pity that had seized Roland when he found the first dead man from his platoon at the bottom of the trench.”³⁵ During that same time period, the cold weather she and the other nurses had to slog through on their way to the hospital helped them

²⁷ Pickering, “On the Battlefield,” 76.

²⁸ Pickering, “On the Battlefield,” 84.

²⁹ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 220.

³⁰ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 218.

³¹ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 215.

³² “Letter to Roland, 13 May 1915,” *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

³³ “Letter to Roland, 1 September 1915,” *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

³⁴ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 422-423.

³⁵ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 176.

start to “understand just a little what winter meant to the men in the trenches.”³⁶ The experiences that Vera had allowed her to feel closer to the young men fighting, and she used language that compared the nursing experience to the soldier experience. In her memoir, she described the danger of sickness that followed the women, which would sometimes “cost the lives of young women” much like the men who sacrificed their lives in the trenches, and “the lack of ammunition,” meaning supplies in the context of nursing, affected the “attempt to hold positions with insufficient numbers.” When too many women got sick in the hospital, the “annihilation of our infantry with our own high-explosive shells” of disease could be compared to the men who were killed by friendly fire in the confusion and destruction of modern warfare.³⁷ Through the utilization of this military vernacular, Vera created a more explicit connection between the male and female experience than was common in contemporary war literature.

The camaraderie that developed between men fighting in the war, like the friendship between Edward and Geoffrey, was something common amongst soldiers. Through Vera’s writings, especially in her letter correspondences, she was able to become a part of that camaraderie. Vera comforted and was comforted in turn by the young men after Roland’s death, and by her brother following the tragic end of both Geoffrey’s and Victor’s lives in a short span of time. She noted in her memoir that when Edward was wounded and she anxiously waited for an update on his condition, she received sympathetic letters from Geoffrey and Victor and “the knowledge that they too were watching and waiting in similar anxiety” ensured that the “suspense” was not “overwhelming.”³⁸ Even in a dream in which she believed that she and Victor “suddenly got a letter each in Roland’s handwriting” in which “the letter said it was all a mistake that he was dead,” the shared grief and denial, though only a dream, was apparent.³⁹

Lastly, another traditionally male-owned experience from the war was the prevalence of survivor’s guilt. Vera exhibited survivor’s guilt in her memoir, and lamented that she “could not return to Somerville while those whom I loved best had sacrificed, and were sacrificing, everything that they cared for in the world.”⁴⁰ At this point she was already working as a nurse in the war effort and saw men who were horrifically injured and even died under her care, but she still felt guilty when she would remember that “Roland is dead and I am not keeping faith with him; it is mean and cruel, even for a second, to feel glad to be alive.”⁴¹ Sometimes she even felt that she had died, and walked around like a ghost, because of her emotional trauma and “appeared the ghost of the excited girl who went on leave — indeed, I felt as though I had gone down to death with Roland and been disinterred as somebody else.”⁴² She keenly felt the loss of the young men who were important to her, and like the men who survived the war, she could never truly get away from the battlefield. Her inability to distance herself from the battlefield, even as a noncombatant, was apparent in a poem for her brother, and she wrote that his “battle-wounds are scars upon my heart.”⁴³ This was the poem she wrote and sent to Edward right before he died, written to show him that she admired his courage and supported him.⁴⁴ However, since he died before he could read the poem, the poem was just another example of how Vera felt, and actually was, left behind.

³⁶ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 208.

³⁷ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 207.

³⁸ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 277.

³⁹ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 273.

⁴⁰ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 259.

⁴¹ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 241.

⁴² Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 245.

⁴³ “To My Brother (In Memory of July 1st, 1916),” *Because You Died*.

⁴⁴ Berry and Bostridge, ed., *Vera Brittain*, 135.

Another large aspect of Vera's writings was the deification of the dead, a tone that was unchanging throughout the sources. Even before the young men died, Vera expressed awe and was praiseworthy of their character, which was evident even from the first time that she met Roland: "I refused to be prospectively impressed by this person, but...I had not been with him for ten minutes before I realized that in maturity and sophistication he was infinitely superior of both Edward and myself."⁴⁵ When Vera visited his and Edward's school for their academic awards, this awe was only increased in magnitude, and although he was "arrogant [and] egotistic," his intellectual prowess was something only matched by Vera's own academic mind.⁴⁶ She did not condemn his early support and justification for joining the war effort, even though she admitted that his "only possible motive for going was heroism in the abstract, and that didn't seem a very logical reason for risking one's life."⁴⁷ Vera was unsure because of the potential danger, and even Roland admitted that there was "something horrible" about war, "yet very ennobling and very beautiful, something whose elemental reality raises it above the reach of all cold theorizing."⁴⁸ In fact, Vera seemed almost curious when she asked him one New Year's Eve if "he would like to be killed in action," to which Roland "answered quietly, 'Yes, I should; I don't want to die, but if I must, I should like to die that way.'⁴⁹ This part of the narrative in all of the sources highlighted the shared early attitudes of the men and women: that the war would end quickly in victory and glory.

Vera's attitude towards the glory and heroism of war quickly changed, although she tried to put up a brave front for the sake of the men who were fighting. Her attitude changed because she was kept well aware of what life was really like in France, through her detailed correspondences with the young men. In a letter from Roland a few months before his death, he described the trenches as a charnel house, challenging someone who "thinks war is a glorious thing" and who espoused "honor and praise and valor and love of country," to see the piles of shattered bones that littered the trenches. He also challenged them to "say that victory is worth the death of even one of these," and to "realize how grand and glorious a thing it is to have distilled all youth and joy and life" into this "fetid heap of hideous putrescence."⁵⁰ This was a stark departure from his laudatory exhortations and praise of the valor and glory of war that were common in his, as well as Vera's, earlier writings. Just six months prior to this letter from Roland, Vera wrote in a diary entry that she understood his reason for wanting to go to the Front was his "vague moral" faith in "the worship and indefinite pursuit of heroism in the abstract." She also noted that she understood this desire, and that if "[she] were a man [she] would want to go" as well.⁵¹

Vera felt pressured to contribute to the war effort, but she did not feel motivated by King and Country. Her motivation was more personal and tied to the men she loved. As mentioned before, this was seen even before Roland and the other men died, but was painfully evident when she was struggling to come to terms with their deaths. She believed that quitting nursing "would be defeat" and felt "that Roland, and whatever in the world stood for right and goodness, wanted [her] to remain at the hospital."⁵² Her duty was to keep fighting for his memory, and he deserved nothing less than the best effort possible from her. In a diary entry, she copied excerpts from letters she

⁴⁵ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 81.

⁴⁶ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 132.

⁴⁷ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 129.

⁴⁸ "1 October 1914," *Chronicle of Youth*.

⁴⁹ "31 December 1914," *Chronicle of Youth*.

⁵⁰ "Letter from Roland, 4 September 1915," *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

⁵¹ "19 March 1915," *Chronicle of Youth*.

⁵² Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 263.

received from the colonel and chaplain that were present at Roland's futile medical operation and death, which stated that he "was wonderfully brave" and gave "a gallant fight" before the end. His bravery and gallantry were inspirational, and she wrote that she could "wish to do nothing better than to act as he has acted, right up to the end."⁵³ This diary entry, however, was clearly Vera trying to make sense of his death, because in her memoir she admitted that his death was "so painful, so unnecessary, so grimly devoid of that heroic limelight which Roland had always regarded as ample compensation for those who were slain."⁵⁴ The full description of his death had not yet arrived in letter form to Vera and Roland's family, so at the time of writing the diary entry, Vera chose to believe, and did not have any information telling her otherwise, that he died in the heroic fashion that he had desired.

This does not mean that her memoir is inaccurate, but rather that her view of his death underwent a transformation because of hindsight. In the memoir she even wrote that she felt that she needed to "preserve the self which he loved and I have lost" and that despite "her weak times [she could be] strong again."⁵⁵ While writing the diary entry it was not that she was not cognizant of the folly and arrogance of young men like Roland, but rather that she was trying to keep moving forward for the sake of his memory. Just two months after his death, Vera wrote dramatically in a letter, "he was unconquerable" and so "the person he loved ought to be unconquerable, n'est-ce pas? Nations may fall, and religions may fail...but amid all these things, amid death and grief and disaster and danger...no one he loved must be unworthy of him."⁵⁶ This conviction stayed with her in the immediate aftermath of Roland's death, when she felt like she "still seems to belong to [Roland] just as much as when he was living, and though he is dead he still has more power over me than anyone who is alive."⁵⁷ However difficult her work was, she still owed him her best effort because that was what she believed he would have wanted her to do.

The deification of the dead was not something only Vera participated in: the other young men participated in the dialogue as well. In a letter to his sister, Edward said that when he was in front of Roland's grave at Louvencourt, he "prayed to whatever God there may be that I might live to be worthy of the friendship of the man whose grave was before me."⁵⁸ In the same vein, Victor wrote to Edward that he saw Roland as his "ideal" who never failed. He quoted the Bible while he referenced how wonderful Roland was, saying that "such things are too great and excellent for me: I cannot attain unto them."⁵⁹ Similarly, in a letter to Vera, Victor wrote that around the first anniversary of Roland's death "the glorious sunset" made him feel that Roland "would have been able to banish all my doubts and fears for the future."⁶⁰ In a style that echoed Victor's letters, after Geoffrey died, Vera wrote to Edward that "after Roland, [Geoffrey] was the straightest, soundest, most upright and idealistic person I have ever known" and that it was ironic that "the people we care for seem too splendid for this world, and so we lose them."⁶¹

This recurring motif of the 'ideal' appeared throughout her memoir, diary, letters, and poems, and even after both Roland and Geoffrey had died and "there is a shadow over everything," she still wrote in a letter that "the only way to repay even one little bit of debt to them is through the

⁵³ "2 January 1916," *Chronicle of Youth*.

⁵⁴ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 241.

⁵⁵ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 257.

⁵⁶ "Letter to Edward, 27 February 1916," *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

⁵⁷ "Letter to Edward, 19 April 1916," *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

⁵⁸ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 267.

⁵⁹ "Letter from Victor to Edward, 18 May 1916," *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

⁶⁰ "Letter from Victor to Vera, 26 December 1916," *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

⁶¹ "Letter to Edward, 4 May 1917," *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

one who remains.”⁶² However, that letter was written while Victor was still alive, although badly wounded and blinded. In her memoir published many years later, the same mood was still evident when Vera wrote that “the lover, the brother, the friends whom I had lost, had all in their different ways possessed courage” and that she hoped that the four of them “would not have died vainly after all.”⁶³ The idealization of the men, which seemed excessive at times, was stronger in the letters than in the memoir, but that was because the letters were often written as a comforting gesture, and so the desire to put the recently killed men on a pedestal was understandable.

It is important to note, however, that her war diary and collection of letters were published posthumously, and besides the memoir, the other important avenue that Vera used to memorialize the young men were the elegiac poems she wrote while she served as a V.A.D, which were originally published in 1918.⁶⁴ The language she used maintained the theme of the deification of the dead, and in her elegies for the young men who died she included verses that told of the “longings stirred by dear remembrance of the sad blue-grey that dwelt within your eyes, the even sway of your young god-like gait.”⁶⁵ Here, Geoffrey was described with a youthful swagger, which was similar to a verse that Vera wrote to commemorate her beloved younger brother, whom she described as “a fearless leader who laughed at Death” and was given “the fitting end of a gentle knight.”⁶⁶ This heroic light that Vera shed on the men she loved did not mean that her memories weakened over time, but that the light altered because of her later revelations.

One last moment worth noting was the exchange between Vera and her almost mother-in-law that Vera recounted in *Testament of Experience*. Marie Leighton came to Vera’s 1925 marriage to George Catlin. The bouquet Vera carried consisted of the same kind of roses that Roland had given to her, pink with a touch of orange, on New Years Eve of 1914, and Vera offered the bouquet to Marie to commemorate her eldest son. Years later, Vera found out that Marie “had kept the bouquet untouched for years, though the roses were brown and withered, and their leaves had crumbled to dust.”⁶⁷ Her wedding was a decade after Roland died, and the sanctity of his memory, the deification of his character, remained very much a presence in the minds of his mother and his former fiancée.

Throughout the memoir, Vera commented on the nature of her exercise in writing about her past and pulling from her recollected memories. Even in *Testament of Experience*, she wrote that her “endeavor” in writing the memoir in the first place was to “to find and convey this poetry by the creative treatment of actuality.”⁶⁸ This purpose was evident in the opening section of the memoir, in which she said that this “attempt to write history in terms of my personal life” was her aim in trying to “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.”⁶⁹ She hoped to turn her pain and suffering into something useful, rather than to allow the memories of the young men she loved to fade.

Even during the war, Vera was thinking about the potential repercussions the war would have on the rest of her life. In a diary entry from the end of 1914, she wrote in an almost prophetic manner that she wondered “if in days to come I should look back on that evening as the beginning

⁶² “Letter to Edward, 6 May 1917,” *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

⁶³ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 656-657.

⁶⁴ Berry and Bostridge, ed., *Vera Brittain*, 135.

⁶⁵ “In Memoriam: G.R.Y.T. (Killed in Action, April 23rd, 1917),” *Because You Died*.

⁶⁶ “That Which Remaineth (In Memory of Captain E.H. Brittain, MC),” *Because You Died*.

⁶⁷ Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, 18-19.

⁶⁸ Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, 13.

⁶⁹ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 11.

of the great glory of my life, or as an occasion which in silent remembrance I should forever mourn.”⁷⁰ This was regarding a particularly memorable New Year’s Eve spent with Roland, and it was clear that the memory ended up being one of silent remembrance, as was indicated by the bouquet of roses she carried in her wedding more than 10 years later. In a similar vein, even Roland had an idea of how important the letters and diary she wrote would be for recollecting her memories, as he wrote in a letter that she should “think how useful [your diary] may be one day” and when she found it, she might “read it through again and laugh a little over it and perhaps cry a little too, and in the end find it very useful to make a novel out of.”⁷¹ Both the diary entry and the letter from Roland highlighted Vera’s awareness that the war would be something she would not easily forget.

Vera and Roland’s war romance was impassioned but they actually did not spend that much time together in person. According to one of her biographers, Vera and Roland only spent a total of 17 days in each other’s company; thus, the majority of their relationship was built through their letter correspondence. In a way, then, it seemed at times that “the object of their love was becoming increasingly a figure of their imagination.”⁷² Vera reflected on this strange feeling, not only in her memoir, but even in a letter that she wrote to Roland immediately following the last time they were together. She wrote that even when Roland was still alive, she wondered if he was “just an imagined lover that I have created in my own mind to bring a little romance into my present rather dreary existence,” and that she worried that she had even started to forget what he looked like.⁷³ Additionally, she wrote in her letter to him, “when I get your letters I feel as though I know and understand you much better than when I meet and see the actual you. You yourself always puzzle me.”⁷⁴ She felt closer and more intimate with Roland when he was not with her while he was still alive, and even after he died, she felt that she was “never alone” while walking through London and felt that “Roland was with me everywhere, all about me and nearer, than he usually seemed in the flesh.”⁷⁵ It seemed that her memory of Roland, preserved in her writings, was much clearer and more tangible than he was in real life.

The barrage of bittersweet memories were strong in the months following Roland’s death, but were especially painful in the memoir. Vera wrote that when she thought of the first few weeks after he died, her memories were “a series of pictures, disconnected but crystal clear” that seemed to “unroll themselves like a kaleidoscope” that she recollected while she read through her diary and letters.⁷⁶ In a diary entry written just a few months after he died, she had “vivid memories” of Roland while she was half asleep and had just woken up. Her mind flashed through a Sunday morning when they “talked about [the] callousness” of feeling they had developed during the war, an afternoon when they sat “by the tennis lawn...and talked about a hereafter but found life itself too sweet to care much whether there was one or not,” an evening when they sat on a cliff and he put his head on her shoulder, and the last day they spent together “when the grief of the parting made us both almost irritable.” She then wrote that she felt her dreams for them had been “so unfulfilled” as the memories “came back so very vividly,” and she cried in her bed as she “felt unutterably lonely.”⁷⁷ However, by the time Vera wrote her memoir, she admitted that it had been

⁷⁰ “31 December 1914,” *Chronicle of Youth*.

⁷¹ “4 September 1915,” *Chronicle of Youth*; Excerpt from a letter from Roland, *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

⁷² Brittain, *Because You Died*, xix.

⁷³ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 226.

⁷⁴ “Letter to Roland, 29 August 1915,” *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

⁷⁵ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 225.

⁷⁶ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 239.

⁷⁷ “12 March 1916,” *Chronicle of Youth*.

“years now since I have been able to recall his face, and I know that, even in dreams, I shall never hear the sound of his voice again.”⁷⁸ Reading through her memoir, though, her lack of vivid memories was not apparent, since she used the letters and diary to reconstruct images of the young men she lost during the war.

Even before all of the young men had died, Vera expressed that she wished to write a book about their experiences. She wrote in a letter to her brother that “if the war spares me, it will be my one aim to immortalize in a book the story of us four, with the friendship of the Three Musketeers playing so large a part.”⁷⁹ However, in that same letter, she also wished that the war were over already: at this point it had been more than a year and a half and she and the men were “all so weary.”⁸⁰ She later wrote in her memoir that although she wanted to write a book, the letter was only written three months after Roland died, and “three months was too short a time for me to see personal events in their true perspective,” and it was seventeen years later that the book commemorating the Three Musketeers would be published.⁸¹ The memories of Roland, though fresh, were too painful for her to deal with and write a memoir so soon after he died, and she continued to face the memory of Roland and later the other young men throughout the remainder of the war and for many years after.

The assignation or rejection of memories attached to material objects also features as an example of memory in Vera’s writing. A touching detail that Vera described in her memoir was that a number of Roland’s letters that she kept, which were written “in beautiful handwriting on extremely expensive notepaper,” had “neither curled nor yellowed” even though some of them had been sitting in her home for more than 17 years.⁸² Her recollection of Roland was hazy and had changed after so long, but the physical remains of the letters, which stayed perfectly preserved, allowed her to return to his memory as she revisited the past and wrote her memoir. In contrast, material remains also represented pain and destruction to Vera. This was evident when the British forces sent Roland’s possessions back to his family, including the clothes he was wearing when killed. The clothes were covered in the filth of the trenches and Roland’s own blood, and for Vera it was nauseating to see the bottom of his shirt and jacket where a bullet had entered his stomach and blown out the back. Vera wrote in a letter to her brother that “all the sepulchers and catacombs of Rome could not make me realize mortality and decay and corruption as vividly as did the smell of those clothes,” and the oppressive nature of them were overwhelming to everyone who was in the same room as them. Roland’s mother exclaimed to her husband to throw the clothes away, as they smelled “of death” and were so far from representing Roland that “they even seem to detract from his memory.”⁸³ By getting rid of the bloody clothes, Roland’s family denied the connection of his memory to his painful end.

Throughout Vera’s writings was the feeling that the memories she had of the young men were different from how she perceived them while they were still alive. As she revisited the letters she had kept, she was especially struck by Victor. During the war, she “did not perceive the ingenuous childishness...his unmitigated kindness, his gift of consolation and his imaginative pity for the sorrows of others” and was astonished at these generous characteristics that were so evident in the

⁷⁸ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 187.

⁷⁹ The Three Musketeers was the affectionate nickname that Roland’s mother had christened him, Edward, and Victor, who were all friends in school before the war.

⁸⁰ “Letter to Edward, 8 March 1916,” *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

⁸¹ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 251.

⁸² Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 125.

⁸³ “Letter to Edward, 14 January 1916,” *Letters from a Lost Generation*.

writings of “a young man at an egotistical age.”⁸⁴ Additionally, after Victor was wounded in April 1917, Vera wrote that she would marry Victor as Geoffrey had also died and she had no one left she loved. Another reason for wanting to marry Victor was that Vera felt that “he always seems like the survival of a part of Roland; or rather, in his accurate, clear, and reverent memory of him, Roland seems to me to live still.” Her relationship with Victor revolved around Roland, as Victor and Edward were the other two of the Three Musketeers, and Victor at this point was the “only one (apart from Edward, who is different) left of the three men I loved.”⁸⁵ She lamented that she seemed to always be “waiting, watching, [in] suspense, mourning” and asked if there would “never be anything else in life? I am so weary of it all.” Even before Victor died, however, she wrote that she would “no longer expect things to go well” and “I don’t know that I even ask that they shall.” Instead she focused on keeping her head down and doing her part in the war in order to “be worthy of them, who die and suffer pain.”⁸⁶ In deifying the men, Vera used her memories to commemorate their courage and ensure that they did not die in vain.

The sentiment that the memories of the young men haunted her was more prominent in Vera’s diary than in the memoir, which was evident in the way she wrote about their legacies after they died. On the first anniversary of Roland’s death, Vera wrote that she wondered “where he is - and if he is at all; I wonder if he sees me writing this now.” She felt his presence weighing on her mind, and scoffed that “it is absurd to say that time makes one forget; I miss him as much now as ever I did.” Even at this point, she anticipated the “long empty years ahead” of her and how difficult it would be since he would no longer be around her.⁸⁷ Another time that she felt the memory of one of the men hanging heavily on her was after Geoffrey died. She realized that she had loved him, and when she got the letter from Edward informing her of his death, she “spent the rest of that day on the rocks, feeling all the time that I was not alone, but that Geoffrey was there and if I looked up I should see him standing beside me.”⁸⁸ These ghosts, though maybe not literal to Vera, were still oppressive enough in her mind to push her to write her memoir and to keep moving forward.

Her raw emotion and painful memories were also noticeable in the poems she wrote and published in *Verses of a V.A.D.* In one of her elegiac poems written for Roland, she wrote that “perhaps some day I shall not shrink in pain to see the passing of the dying year, and listen to the Christmas songs again although you cannot hear.”⁸⁹ In this poem she commented on how difficult Christmas and New Year’s Eve were, because those times represented some of her fondest memories of her fiancé. In another poem, she similarly reminisced on fond memories from a more carefree time of her youth, and wrote, “I hear your voices in the whispering trees, I see your footprints on each grassy track, your laughter echoes gaily down the breeze — but you will not come back.”⁹⁰ This poem was written to eulogize the young men, and was especially attached to the Three Musketeers.

In contrast, by the time she wrote the memoir, she felt more distant from the young men and revisiting their letters and her diary was the only way to fully reconnect. Through the end of the ‘20s and the beginning of the ‘30s, her “remembrance grew dim” and “a deeper and ever deeper darkness would cover the young men who” had once been her contemporaries and close friends. She also realized, that as time went on, “how completely everything that had hitherto made up my

⁸⁴ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 250.

⁸⁵ “1 May 1917,” *Chronicle of Youth*.

⁸⁶ “18 April 1917,” *Chronicle of Youth*.

⁸⁷ “23 December 1916,” *Chronicle of Youth*.

⁸⁸ “1 May 1917,” *Chronicle of Youth*.

⁸⁹ “Perhaps — (To R.A.L. Died of Wounds in France, December 23rd, 1915),” *Because You Died*.

⁹⁰ “To Them,” *Because You Died*.

life had vanished with Edward and Roland, with Victor and Geoffrey.” Though by the time of publication the war was long over, she still had to remind herself that “the dead were dead and would never return” and she needed to move through what she called her emotional paralysis.⁹¹ By the end of the war, she felt that she was emotionally paralyzed, “if not dead...which would not have happened if I had had one person left.” Roland’s death was traumatizing, but the piling on of Geoffrey’s, then Victor’s, and finally Edward’s death was too much and turned her “into an automaton.” She wrote that she “could have married Victor in memory of Roland, and Geoffrey in memory of Edward, but the war took even the second best.”⁹² There was nothing left for her at this point, but she realized she needed to write something in order to give them the commemoration they deserved. By revisiting her memories and working through “the years of frustration and grief and loss, of work and conflict and painful resurrection,” Vera was able to find her way “through their dark and devious ways to this new

In a review of Vera’s diary, which was first published in 1981, Catherine Dupré wrote that *Testament of Youth* “loses something in the retelling,” and similarly, Brian Masters wrote that the “immediate rather than recollected” nature of the diary makes the pain of Vera’s youth “more searing” than in the memoir. Additionally, Beryl Bainbridge wrote that she preferred the diary to memoir because it was “more immediate and less calculated.”⁹³ But in actuality, the diary, letters, and poems are complementary to the memoir. The raw immediacy of the material written prior to the memoir adds another dimension, but this does not make the early material more accurate or representative of the period than the later work.

The deification of the dead, the challenge of the male ownership of the war narrative, and Vera’s discussion of the importance of memory and its effect on writing are all themes that are inherent in each of her writings, but it is only with a reading of all of the sources together that one can get a fuller, more comprehensive understanding of her female experience of World War I. In a letter from her publisher Victor Gollancz, he wrote that after he read the manuscript for her memoir, he felt a sense of great admiration for this “book of great beauty, and even greater courage.”⁹⁴ *Testament of Youth* certainly is that, but read in conjunction with her letters, her diary, and her poems, it is so much more.

⁹¹ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 463.

⁹² Quoted in Berry and Bostridge, ed., *Vera Brittain*, 136.

⁹³ Excerpts from *London Review of Books*, *The Guardian*, and *The Daily Telegraph*, *Chronicle of Youth*, back flap.

⁹⁴ Berry and Bostridge, ed., *Vera Brittain*, 255.