

*No Woman's Land? Women's Writings and Historical
Representation in World War I*

By

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For Alexandre, my brave Greek
hero, I write this and other thousand
love letters.

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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in wars, either directly or indirectly, has been the study object of war narratives since the Classical Age. This M.A. research aims to analyze women's significant role to the construction of cultural memory and how women's representations have evolved, from myth, since Homer until the early twentieth century, when the First War was declared, to the assumption of "silent victims" in wartime, and, finally, to the condition of proactive members of a much-dreamed society with equal opportunities for everyone. This thesis addresses, more specifically, how women war narratives of the First World War reflect upon the war trauma, which brought equally disastrous consequences for women, men and children and how the War contributed to the reconfiguration of women's social roles.

Keywords: Women and War Studies, English Literature, The First World War.

RESUMO

A participação das mulheres em guerras, direta e indiretamente, tem sido objeto de estudo de narrativas de guerra desde a Antigüidade Clássica. A presente pesquisa busca analisar o papel significativo das mulheres na construção da memória cultural, e a evolução das representações femininas, desde a instância do mito, de Homero até o início do século XX, quando a Primeira Guerra foi declarada, para a presumida condição de “vítimas silenciosas” para chegar, enfim, à situação de membros proativos de uma sociedade igualitária. Esta dissertação aponta, mais especificamente, para como as narrativas femininas da Primeira Guerra abordam o trauma da guerra, que afetou em igual escala mulheres, homens e crianças e como a Primeira Guerra Mundial abriu terreno para a reconfiguração de papéis sociais femininos.

Palavras-chave: Narrativas femininas de guerra, Literatura Inglesa, Primeira Guerra Mundial.

INTRODUCTION

The choices made by both Allies and Central Powers in World War I brought the equally disastrous consequences of mass death, physical and psychological wounds, as well as much material damage. How to describe the psychological damage is a task that women writers performed in their narratives on World War I. The proximity of the trenches at the front to the soldiers' homes was a notable feature of that war, and so we may suppose that some of the women left at home were closer and more sympathetic to the feelings of the men on the battlefield than has been thought. Women and men were bound together in the zigzags of the trenches and there seems to have been effective communication between combatants and non-combatants. The closeness between them was due to writing. Many miles set them apart, but, at the same time, connected them.

One of the aspects that called my attention to women's vision of the war was that, for a long time, women's writings on the First World War have been misunderstood as "inauthentic" and "unrealistic." This is mostly due to the fact that, by 1914 and until late 1918, women did not do military service. Much of the testimony about the Great war has been "dictated" by male reports, or soldier's accounts, in which men claimed exclusiveness: the combatant's voice was more "authentic" or "realistic" than the civilian's. Margaret Higonnet points out that many of the letters written by women in wartime were censored and/or confiscated; feminist newspapers often appeared blank and other forms of suppression took place; for example, Marcelle Capy's collection of journalism, in Higonnet's *Lines of Fire: Women War Writers of World War I*, was not allowed to be reprinted. Unfortunately, most women's writings on the war were seen as leading to misconceptions or simply disregarded by the time they were written.

This circumstance is no doubt due to the fact that the “soldier’s voice” prevailed in the depiction of the Great War, and men’s claim of authenticity of wartime experience has long prevented the publishing or reading of women’s books. As Higonnet puts it:

Earlier historians’ and critics’ omission of women’s war experiences correspond to a belief that the record of the Great War was an exclusively masculine, veteran’s preserve, and that women therefore did not write about the war. We continue to encounter the thesis that women’s domestic condition, their lack of education, and their education in femininity prevented them from recording their experiences or reactions to public events, especially to “war”, understood to be a male domain. Until very recently, few women’s poems and stories were reprinted; their work was not mentioned in bibliographies devoted to the war; official archives gathered testimony almost exclusively from men. (xxii)

The lack of consistency in the written discourse of the First War, reinforced by male-dominant logic, focused on the war experience as an exclusively male realm and left no space for other historical representations of war written by women. One-sided reports by the so-called “soldier’s voice”, or men soldiers’ recollections of wartime experience, was far from being mediative; on the contrary, it banished women and their writings to a place outside “the lines of fire.”

It is important to note the social roles that women were expected to perform in the early part of the twentieth century, when the war took place. An iconic image discussed by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, sheds some light on how women were usually portrayed in that period. It is a Christian reference, to the statue of the Virgin Mary, originally placed on top of the tower of the Basilica at Albert.

The figure was known as *La Notre Dame de Brebières*, commonly referred to as “The Golden Virgin” and more popularly known as “The Lady of the Limp.” Fussell describes it:

a figure, called Notre Dame des Brebières, [that] originally held the infant Christ in outstretched arms above her; but now the whole statue was bent down below the horizontal, giving the effect of a mother about to throw her child – in disgust? in sacrifice? – into the debris-littered street below. To Colonel Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary of the War Committee, it was ‘a most pathetic sight’ (40-41).

This iconic reference suggests how merciful, caring, nurturing, and pure women were expected to be in association with the Virgin. On the other hand, the figure of the mother of Jesus leaning over to one side may be interpreted as the painful feeling of mothers having to let go of their sons (sometimes under-aged) in favor of war—an act of sacrifice, certainly, which could easily be perceived with pity. The colonel’s remark, rather than contemptuous, may be read as his feeling of sympathy towards all those women who were unwillingly abandoned by their sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers, whose fate would likely be a tragic one.

Despite the general feeling of hopelessness, many women remained diligent and their social roles evolved in ways unexpected by their societies. Some were political activists, such as Alexandra Kollontai, Marcelle Capy, or Rebecca West. Others took part directly in war, like Katherine Hodges North, who enlisted in 1916 as an ambulance driver. Many others, like Vera Brittain, served as a nurse in the war and used her writing to describe the horror of losing loved ones and sharing the feelings of having her life completely shattered by the war. In *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, Santanu Das refers to women as being “silent witnesses.” The author alludes

to Brittain's writing to her fiancé Roland Leighton in the trenches, addressing Brittain's feelings as "the fraught relation to traumatic witnessing and the limits of empathy: in the awareness of the incommensurability and absoluteness of physical pain" (Das 177).

Higonnet claims that "If the war marked ruptures in women's roles, it also marked ruptures in the ways they wrote" (xxx). The unique point of view in women's writing is of great importance to the cultural memory of the war. Many women had to join the workforce in order to replace men who were drafted into military service. The ideological line that used to divide the battlefield from the home front was no longer a clear one. In this sense, the First War may be said to have subverted traditional and archetypal gender roles and added much to the evolution of women's social roles.

I intend in this thesis to study Rebecca West's novel *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Vera Brittain's autobiography *Testament of Youth* (1933), and Pat Barker's contemporary novel *Regeneration* (1991), writings that shed light on women's understanding of the war, particularly the psychological descriptions of the impact of war on the lives of all those involved. In order to help my reader understand the evolution of women's historical representation, I will assess two of the distinguishing features of women's war writing in World War I: first, the emphasis on the psychological impact of war especially as it is portrayed by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*, i.e., the distress of women as silent witnesses, as represented by the character Clarissa Dalloway, and by active witnesses, such as Vera Brittain, in her autobiography; second, women's views on war, given that it is a universal experience of human collapse, as suggested by Woolf's character Septimus, Rebecca West's protagonist Chris Baldry, and Pat Barker's "historical" characters. Part One of this thesis is devoted to the study of women's views of war; in Part Two, I intend to explore the approximations of Literature and World War I. My choice of these

novels is due not only to their aesthetic value, especially as it is expressed by their innovation in language and point of view, but mainly because these novels have in common the historical representation of the evolution of British women's social roles, largely perpetrated by the First war and its effects on the English society.

The study of *how* these women writings may help clarify the development of women's social and historical representation, starting with the First War, will be based on a combination of literary, historical, and cultural factors. The intrinsic relation between historical and literary narratives is expressed by Hayden White: "How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian's subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation." (White, *Tropics of Discourse* 85). This is the point where literary and historical narratives meet: both may be permeated by fiction and both may be read as legitimate ways of providing historical evidence.

Feelings of victimization, despair, helplessness and displacement that Vera Brittain, Kathleen Isherwood, and Susan Owen shared are shown in Pat Barker's novel about the war, *Regeneration* (1991). One of the characters, Dr. William Rivers, is a distinguished neurologist (his patients consist mostly of shell-shocked soldiers) who studies nerve regeneration. By the end of his experiments, he comes to a final conclusion on the regeneration of the minds of both women and men:

This reinforced Rivers's view that it was prolonged strain, immobility and helplessness that did the damage, and not the sudden shocks or bizarre horrors that the patients themselves were inclined to point to as the explanation for their condition. That would help to account for the greater prevalence of anxiety neuroses and hysterical disorders in women

in peacetime, since their relatively more confined lives gave them fewer opportunities of reacting to stress in active and constructive ways. Any explanation of war neurosis must account for the fact that this apparently intensely masculine life of war and danger and hardship produced in men the same disorders that women suffered from in peace. (222)

Here is the point where the experiences of men and women in World War I are interrelated, a point where the “trenches” of psychological stress, hysterical disorders, and war neuroses come together. The exploitation of the psychological impact of war is recurrent in women’s contemporary and post-war narrative and, at the same time, contributes to a more dialectical or, in the words of Hayden White, “diatactical discourse”, since women’s historical representation and narratives allows the cultural memory of WWI to be able to absorb other discourses. More importantly, this quote does not take for granted the amount of damage done by the war to women.

The innovative aspect of Barker’s psychological approach to historical characters like William Rivers, as well as the English poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, appear in her novel in order to make explicit the impact war had on people’s minds and psychological make-up. Through fictionalized dialogues between these and other “real-life” characters, Barker plays with the intersection of historical and literary narratives. Imagination, here, is the key to re-create, or to “regenerate” historical validation. In his article “The Moral of the Historical Story: Textual Differences in Fact and Fiction”, Kalle Pihlainen refers specifically to the imaginative aspect in fact and fiction: “Imaginative identification is under strong referential constraint indeed in the composition of historical narratives, yet, at the same time, the use of imagination is essential to a narrative’s ability to generate interest and to create truth-likeness.” (8). The critic revisits White’s theory of “narrative-as-metaphor” and emphasizes that the

system of signification should be the referential in historical narratives. Like historian-narrators, historical novelists mediate between fact and fiction, thus granting place to the use of imagination. The implications of imagination to the narrative's ability to convey verisimilitude is specifically useful to the study of Barker's novel, a narrative of historical realism that employs fictionalized conversations between characters based on real people.

The evolution of women's social roles during wartime is explained by Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig in *Women and Children First: The Fiction of Two World Wars*: "From a feminist point of view, in sociological terms, the wars provide the most obvious contradictions of certain assumptions about women's innate incapacities. There is still room for a great deal of fiction on this subject" (292). In literary settings, that would include the understanding of war through women's writings, and not only from an ideologically-set, "canonical" model of men narratives. Sociological grounds refer mainly to women's insertion in war-related activities: political activists, Red Cross volunteers, ambulance drivers, spies, journalists, and munitions workers, for instance. The insertion of women into the labor force turned out to be an economically profitable enterprise. A new role was generated, that of the independent wage-earning women. According to Cadogan and Craig, this became a reason for bitter rivalry between women and returning men soldiers:

Many of these women *had* to earn their own livelihood, for they had few opportunities of finding husbands who might support them. The 1921 census showed a 1,700,000 surplus of women over men as a result of the slaughter of the war years. As well as providing a focus for the resentment of returning soldiers the so-called superfluous woman was also the unfortunate subject of articles in the popular press.

Circumstances had denied her the traditional role of wife and mother.
(133)

Concurrently, with the right to vote and greater career opportunities, postwar Europe was also harassed by economic depression and unemployment. Apart from hopelessness, many women lost material goods as well. Higonet reminds us that, after leaving her French house in the Belgian frontier, Isabelle Rimbaud, feeling pressed by the advance of German forces, had to bid “farewell to her ‘precious relics’ – books in leather bindings, silver and papers (...) but she was careful to preserve a portrait of her brother Arthur Rimbaud” (245). Most of these women contested long-established traditions and claimed their rights both to having well-paid careers and also being single mothers. Sexual and moral values came into question.

Curiously, from the psychological perspective, the difficulty of dealing with the death of a husband was reported by some women as being paralleled to the inconvenience caused in their lives by the return of their men. In her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier*, published in 1918, Rebecca West narrates the struggle of a woman who has to cope with her husband’s return from the war who, affected by shell-shock, has removed her completely from memory. Chris Baldry’s return, as a matter of fact, would be a distressful experience in the lives of three women – his wife, a cousin and an ex-lover. Cadogan and Craig have described the plot very adequately as “a complex little parable with clinical overtones: both moral and psycho-analytical issues are at the centre of its theme” (52).

The different roles played by women during wartime are valuable for the collective memory, of which war narratives are a significant part. Women’s approach to the psychological impact of the war evolves through a particular viewpoint. Their political writings, journalism, testimonials and autobiographies, among other narrative

genres, are types of the many particular contributions women have to offer. Higonnet warns us that most women's writings of World War I reveal an attempt "to incorporate women into the picture and to locate their suffering. Often...concealed and silent" (xxxiii). This is what happens to Clarissa Dalloway, who lives an intense psychological drama, in Woolf's novel, but is unable to display it due to social conventions. Higonnet points out that most women also felt in a position to recount men's drama: "In part because of women's symbolic roles as the mourners for the men lost and as nurses for the injured and ill, women were charged with the tasks of remembering and recovery...They continued to sing the laments for the young men who died" (xxxiii). As they report on psychological impacts, male frailty and vulnerability are emphasized, as with Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The changes from an apparently indifferent or helpless attitude to a conscientious, *engagé* discourse somehow seems to set women alongside the soldier-writers when it comes to a critical position on the war. The factors mentioned above shed light on women's legacy to war narratives and to a definition of their active role in the war. The evolution of women's social roles, along with their response to the deaths of male relatives and lovers, often caused a change in their attitude, from despair to optimism.

PART ONE – Women’s Views of War

“In the pathway of the sun,
In the footsteps of the breeze,
Where the world and sky are one,
He shall ride the silver seas,
He shall cut the glittering wave.
I shall sit at home, and rock;
Rise, to heed a neighbor's knock;
Brew my tea, and snip my thread;
Bleach the linen for my bed.
They will call him brave.”

Dorothy Parker, “Penelope”

1.1. WOMEN IN WAR: MYTH AND HISTORY

Mythically, women war narratives have been associated with the complex weaving of the Greek *moiras*, women weavers who did not just thread plots but also fate. In Greek mythology, three primeval entities were associated with Fate, *Moirai*, who lived in a hidden cave. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, they were three sisters and their mother was *Nyx*, Night, one of the eldest powers of the universe. Other versions read that they are the daughters of Zeus and Themis. Grave and silent, the *Moiras* inflicted fear on mortal men and had the gods' respect, for they were in charge of every human's fate. Clotho was the weaver. Her name comes from *klothein* (cloth): "to thread and to keep the spin whirling." Apparently, she was the least elderly of the three. Sitting on the floor, she carefully drew out and twisted into the threads of every creature's fate, as soon as they were born. Love, friendship, family, encounters – they were all threaded by her. After she finished her job, she transferred the work to the hands of Lachesis, the mediator. Her name is a derivation of the verb *lankhanein* : "luck or to draw luck". She examined everything cautiously and decided the best time when all the things should take place. Later, the threads were handed to Atropos, the reaper. The name is derived from *troopoo*, "turn". She was the one who never turned back on her decisions; inflexible. She evaluated every life and determined, with justice, the day when a person would die, by cutting the thread made by her two other sisters. Apparently she was the eldest sister, dressed in purple and black, and carried a sickle or scissors. (69-81).

The idea of a *Moirai* acting on the fate of all mortals evolved in many ways. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, the thread is associated with human life. Most of the time, fate-related entities are represented by feminine images, once the job of threading, warping, and weaving was delegated to women. The Hellenic influence allowed other women entities to be associated with fate, in different cultures and societies. What is possibly

the first literary reference to feminine images of war (the mention of the Amazons) appears in the *Iliad*, the inaugurating war narrative by Homer. The Amazons, also known as a tribe of women warriors, were referred to by Herodotus, in the fifth century BCE, as the *Sauromatae* from Scythia, “a society where women hunt on horseback alongside men, often wear men’s clothing, and even fight in wars.” (*The Histories* 117). They fought against several male heroes, namely, Bellerophontes, the young Priam, Heracles, and Achilles.

In *Women in Greek Myth*, Mary R. Lefkowitz acknowledges the Greek historian’s words and mentions the discrepancy between the roles performed by the Amazons and those expected from women in Ancient Greece: “Women did not hunt or go to war; women’s initiation rites did not involve exposure to physical danger; women nursed their children and stayed at home.” (4). Such thesis suggests the contradiction between myths preventing women from direct participation in the battlefields, largely reinforced by the Greek patriarchal society and, it may be inferred, some possible intent by women to subvert that idea. The etymological implications of the term Amazons imply an idea of counteraction to what was imposed on those women in the first place: a version, according to which the Amazons’ right breast was removed, explained as *a-*, *mazos* (no- breast), followed by a neglect of matriarchal duties like breastfeeding.

Another reading of the myth of the Amazons inspired German composer Richard Wagner to create the opera “Die Walküre”, based on a supposed equivalence between the Greek women warriors and the Valkyries from Old Norse mythology. In the opera, specifically in the Third Act, the Valkyries are portrayed as women entities who would ride on their winged horses across the battlefields to transport the dead warriors to *Walhalla*, where they would find joy and eternal life. It was a duty those

women performed with dramatic joy because it empowered them with the important task of rewarding heroes for their bravery.

A similar task is conducted, again in the *Iliad*, by the goddess Thetis towards her heroic son, Achilles. In Book One, he implores his mother to intervene in favor of the Trojans, aware of her significant influence over Zeus. The father of the gods acquiesces in Thetis's plea on behalf of her son. The goddess's high *status* in the Olympus is explained by Laura M. Slatkin, in *The Power of Thetis: Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad*, as follows:

No complaint is made against Thetis herself; no mention is made of her less-than-Olympian status; no question is raised as to the appropriateness of her involvement in, as it were, the strategy of the war – in the way, for example, that Aphrodite's participation on behalf of Aeneas calls for caustic humor at her expense. How is the poem's audience to make sense of Thetis's extraordinary authority? It claims a divine consent – and consensus – that is significantly tacit. (54)

The passage stresses Thetis's high standing in the Olympus, possibly over other gods and even her warrior son who, however invincible, is himself a demi-god and, therefore, a mortal. Also, it makes Thetis's intervention in the war more evident. Given the mortal condition of her son, she develops a caring attitude that confers on her a far more important role than is apparent.

A question remains: why does Achilles address his request to Zeus through his mother and not directly? He certainly makes a prayer directly to Zeus in Book Sixteen, in favor of Patroklos. Nevertheless, Achilles preference for his mother's mediation ascribes Thetis another major role: that of intermediary between soldiers in the battlefield and the gods. Slatkin ponders that "it can be no trivial service that is recalled

in exchange for reversing the course of the war, with drastic results that Zeus can anticipate.” (64). Moreover, Zeus’s willingness to assent to Thetis’s request enhances her privileged position as a female divinity. Her powerful role is exerted in relation to both mortals (her son) and the gods (Zeus). In addition, her task as a mediatrix can also be read as that of a peacemaker, moderating agent in times of war. As Slatkin concludes:

The most general, but most telling, statement of Thetis’s power is expressed by the formula “ward off destruction.” The ability to ward off destruction within the *Iliad* is shared exclusively by Achilles, Apollo, and Zeus. Although others are put in a position to do so and make the attempt, only these three have the power to “ward off destruction,” to be efficacious in restoring order to the world of the poem. (65-66)

Her skill to confer with Zeus in order to reach a settlement during the Trojan War empowers Thetis with a decisive function over the resolution of that conflict. Her performance is as important, if not more significant, than that played by the warriors in the battlefields. She may be left in a place “outside the line of fire” but she certainly has an unparalleled position between mortals and gods in the war epic.

In *The Odyssey*, we may find another piece of evidence of women’s mythical participation in wars; this time expressed by Penelope’s controversial, and no less important function, in the *Odyssey*.

Odysseus’s wife was obviously not a divine entity, but the kind of power she exercises during her husband’s absence, due to the war, makes her an even more intriguing character. She is the Queen of Ithaca, who is capable of evading the expectations imposed by her own family by developing a cunning maneuver to put off her suitors. Although Penelope was an aristocrat, it was common, in Mycenaean

societies, to see queens perform house chores, such as washing clothes, making bread and olive oil, looking after children, and weaving. Nonetheless, there are several maids in the *Megaron*. In *The World of Odysseus* (New York: New York Review Books, 1982), M.I. Finley clarifies that: “Denied the right to a heroic way of life, to feats of prowess, competitive games, and leadership in organized activity of any kind, women worked, regardless of class. With her maids, Nausicaa, daughter of the Phaeacian king, did the household laundry. Queen Penelope found in her weaving the trick with which to hold off the suitors. Her stratagem, however, of undoing at night what she had woven in the day, repeated without detection for three full years until one of her maids revealed the secret, suggests that her labor was not exactly indispensable. The women of the aristocracy, like their men, possessed all the necessary work skills, and they used them more often. Nevertheless, their real role was managerial. The house was their domain, the cooking and washing, the cleaning and the clothes-making.” (70).

Historically, she would have to wield to the idea of returning to her father’s house while her husband was not around. Instead, she chooses to remain at her house at all costs. Sue Blundell confirms the nobility of Penelope’s feat but poses a valid question concerning the ambiguous meaning of Penelope’s actions, in *Women in Ancient Greece*:

Penelope certainly emerges as a clever and determined woman, who is quite capable of evading the pressures placed on her both by the suitors and by her own family. But in order to achieve this she employs the weapons traditionally associated with females; the deceptive use of weaving and of words is typical of the behaviour ascribed to women in the *Odyssey*, and it lends Penelope a shady and ambiguous character not unlike the one accorded to Helen. (55)

The passage stresses Penelope's equivocal plan to undo her weaving at night for the sake of keeping the suitors around her for over three years (Finley 70). The obscurity of her plot is compared to Helen's adultery, which seems to be an overstatement. It is important to note that, before leaving for war, Odysseus had given his wife full powers over the palace at Ithaca. Keeping the household is a job his wife does legitimately and proudly and reveals her sense of personal duty. More important, guarding the home gives her control over the property and the serving-maids.

Her failure to remarry is counterbalanced by the power she wields in the palace. The negotiation of power roles between Odysseus and Penelope appears as a challenging issue, much more provocative a questioning than her shadowy inability to deal satisfactorily with her suitors. Blundell reminds us that:

This model of gender relations is in some ways quite different from anything which can be derived from the later literature of the Classical Age, in which the spheres of activity of male and female are seen as fundamentally distinct. In the Homeric world, where political power is rooted in the royal household, the boundary between the domestic and the political, between the private and the public, is not nearly so rigid. The roles of men and women overlap, and it is for this reason that a woman can come close – in the absence of her husband – to the exercise of political power. (57)

It may be assumed that Penelope's role played in the narrative surpasses the domestic realm; by insisting on remaining in the palace, and doing her best to keep it running, she plays a leading role as the provider for her own home, something unprecedented in historical terms and largely perpetrated by the Trojan war scenario. By emphasizing the inversion of male and female roles, war narratives have, throughout history, focused on

the universal experience of human collapse, i.e., where the lives of men and women can be equally affected during wartime and their social roles, especially the ones delegated to women, evenly redefined. In the four novels analyzed by this thesis, the inversion of male and female roles may be observed: In West's novel *The Return of the Soldier* (the three women would become breadwinners, not Chris), in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (Septimus's emasculation and Miss Kilman's masculinization), in Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (character Vera goes to the battlefield in search of her fiancé, not vice-versa), and, more vividly, in Barker's *Regeneration*, when Dr. Rivers treats his patients in a maternal way.

1.1.1. BRITISH WOMEN AND WWI WRITING

British history abounds with references to women warriors, starting from the female goddess Britannia, a Roman variation of warrior Athena, and whom the kingdom was named after.

London's Imperial War Museum held an exhibition entitled "Women and War", from 15 October 2003 until 18 April 2004. In a section called "Biogbites – The Lives of Remarkable Women" the first reference to women warriors was, like this chapter, to the Greek: the long outline of women who played an outstanding role in wartime was headed by the tribe of women warriors known as the Amazons. The online exhibition is available at the Imperial War Museum website. My comments on the outline of women who played an outstanding role in British History of Warfare were based on notes I took at the Imperial War Museum website.

The sequence was immediately followed by Boudicca, or the Celtic Queen Boadicea, who fought against the Roman invasion of England, alongside her daughters,

from 60-61 CE. The timeline forwards to the early fifteenth century and mentions a woman leader who fought *against* the British, Joan of Arc. Her motivation for battling against the English domination, in the Siege of Orléans, extensive to entire France, was reported to have come from voices of Catholic saints. Joan, who did not kill a single soldier in combat, was trialed and burnt at the stake by the Inquisition, in 1431. Of the subsequent British women mentioned in the museum's archives I find worthy of mention is Queen Elizabeth I and her encouragement to the British forces during the combat that defeated the Spanish Armada, in 1588. Next appears Hannah Snell, or the first British woman soldier, who joined the British Marines to fight in India in the mid eighteenth century. Although she disguised herself as a man and adopted a male name – James Gray – she disclosed her true identity as she returned to England in 1750, and gained public recognition for her bravery. Also posing as a man, “James Barry” was the first qualified woman doctor in England and her assistance to the military troops, especially during the Crimean War (1854-6), granted her the admiration of the Duke of Wellington. During the same war, another woman made history among British nurses, Florence Nightingale. Soldiers who were nursed by Nightingale addressed her as “The Lady of the Lamp.” She became famous for opening a nurses’ training school in London after the Crimean War and receiving the Order of Merit in 1907, an award that had never before been given to a woman. She died before the First War broke out, in 1910. Also military doctors, Elsie Inglis and Louisa Garrett Anderson were militant suffragettes. Not only did they have brilliant skills to help those in combat, they also inspired other women to become fully-trained nurses. The former got Winston Churchill’s recognition for her work and the latter managed a London hospital entirely staffed by women. Their example inspired Vera Brittain (one of the women authors

contemplated by this research) to serve as a VAD nurse in Britain, France and Malta and write her autobiographical work *Testament of Youth* in 1933.

By the time the First War broke out in England, women were supposed to behave compassionately at the same time as they were thought to be undesirable as direct participants in the war. Fussell, in his seminal work *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), quotes the recollection of the First War soldier J. B. Priestley, who “hailed with relief” that war was a “wholly masculine way of life uncomplicated by Woman” (274) This passage suggests that, for one thing, women were also unwanted in wartime, seen as “complicators.” Note the capital W in Woman, also, woman for women, the abstraction reinforcing the essentialism or stereotype regarding women. It may also be inferred that, ironically, a traditional role played by men was being reclaimed: that the men in the battlefields should be protecting these women in the first place.

Associations with war women’s *pathos* were often made through the large amounts of Madonnas and crucifixes, in public as well as in private places. Higonnet (1999) points out that, as mothers, many women “became identified with the *mater dolorosa*” (Introduction xxxi) in the first decade of the twentieth century. Although the *mater dolorosa* theme is not contemplated by all the novels studied in this thesis, it seems to be approached more emphatically by Brittain’s autobiographical writings as a V.A.D. nurse, a wartime occupation which brought men and women closely linked. According to Fussell, “In a few cases the image dripped blood or spoke words of prophecy concerning the duration of the war” (132). This more dramatic example demonstrates that, in an act of desperation, most people would place their hopes of a peaceful resolution to war in women, as if all the sacrifice undergone by this specific type of representation of women, i.e., as compassionate mothers, could eradicate war.

Western European Catholics report that the apparition of the Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal, began on 13 May 1917. According to the belief, the first prophecy of Fatima revealed the end of the First War, in 1918, a year after a figure of “Our Lady” appeared to three local children in a rural area.

Paradoxically, traditional and archetypal gender roles appear to have been subverted by the First War, which contributed to the evolution of women’s social roles. On one hand, men, had their emotional frailty and susceptibility to psychological collapse revealed in women’s war writings, as they are described in West’s novel *The Return of the Soldier* and in Barker’s novel *Regeneration*. On the other hand, some women started working as political activists, Red Cross volunteers, ambulance drivers, journalists and munitions workers, just to name a few examples from women’s testimonials. Others evolved from the condition of silent witnesses to that of active thinkers, such as Vera Brittain in her autobiography, *Testament of Youth*, and Virginia Woolf, in her novel *Mrs Dalloway*. The literary writings by Woolf, Brittain, West, and Barker are imbued with precise and latent historical meaning and play a significant role in the construction of the cultural memory of World War I.

In Barker’s contemporary fiction *Regeneration* (1991), psychological implications are suggested, especially with respect to the writer’s mentioning of interpolated male and female roles. Male combatants sent to Craiglockart hospital for psychiatric treatment had, above all, a hard time displacing and sharing the terrible emotional experiences that they underwent in war, mostly because in the Army “[t]hey’d been trained to identify emotional repression as the essence of manliness. Men who broke down, or cried, or admitted to feeling fear, were sissies, weaklings, failures. Not *men*” (48). However, the relationships between soldiers, based mainly on comradeship, as well as the doctor-patient contacts described in Barker’s narrative,

suggest the interposition of male and female behavior in those men. Dr. Rivers' care and compassion for Prior, for instance, is defined as a feminine attitude and represents, in the doctor's words, "One of the paradoxes of the war – one of the many – was that this most brutal of conflicts should set up a relationship between officers and men that was...domestic. Caring. As Layard would undoubtedly have said, maternal" (107). Note the ellipsis that precedes the word "domestic", a sign of hesitation, and the adjective "Caring" in an isolated position between two periods, as if something shameful was being declared. The most compelling word appears in the end, proffered by another voice, a distant one. Santanu Das explains that:

It is a great irony that the world's first industrial war, which brutalized the male body on such an enormous scale, also nurtured the most intense of human bonds...A very different order of male experience, one that accommodated fear, vulnerability, support and physical tenderness, sprang up in its place. (136)

Despite the presumed disparity between men's and women's emotional attitudes, the novel reveals how both roles intercalate in some of the patients at Craiglockart. Siegfried Sassoon is admired by Rivers for "His love for his men. The need he had to *prove* his courage. By any *rational* standard, he'd already proved it, over and over again, but then the need wasn't altogether rational" (Barker 118). A feeling like Sassoon's love for the training of his men would be emotionally understood but never rationally explained by Rivers. The reasons why most men soldiers experienced emotional susceptibility are, in the words of Das:

Because war places sexuality on a continuum of emotions such as vulnerability, helplessness, fear and the universal need to be loved and cared for: in the meeting of 'lips', the erotics of greed are overwhelmed

by the reassurances of affection. Rather than celebrating...the gay love of the trenches, it should be read in the context of imminent mutilation and mortality. (135)

In Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), the convergences and divergences of the lives of two characters, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren-Smith, may also be accounted for by the traumatic impact of wartime experience. She seems to relish the feeling of being alive and dreads the idea of dying, while he is constantly appalled by the sensation of being bound to life and not having the right to forsake it. Yet, both characters are brought together by the feeling of fear, a recurrent psychological consequence of the war experience. After having witnessed the cruelty of the war, they put life and death into perspective. While having to deal with the aftermath of war, they feel, however, that their lives are pointless and the strokes of the clock appear to be a kind of doom they both have to face. Before this happens, though, both characters live parallel lives, marked by the postwar psychological impact of uncertainty towards the future; mostly towards the coming hours. Clarissa's perspectives on war are overlooked by her husband's political views and she feels disturbed by not being able to display her opinions, or her feeling of existential fear, at her party, intimidated by social conventions. Big Ben's tolling is frightening for it will always be a warning for a great change, either life or death. Their experience of wartime impact is that of fear and despair. No one can tell what the future will be like or if there will be one at all.

The implications of this wartime drama, portrayed in vivid details in Woolf's novel, illustrate my point that literary writings may convey as much historical authenticity as historical narratives, insofar as emotional and personal experience is also valid from the historical point of view, although it is not susceptible to traditional historical analysis. In an article entitled "Micro-history: Two or Three Things I Know

About” (2006), Carlo Ginzburg questions the so-called “reality claim” made by traditional omniscient historian-narrators. The same issue has been addressed simultaneously by Luiz Costa Lima in an article entitled “On the Writing of History” (2006), in which he advocates the use of epistemological questionings towards a clearer distinction between *res facta* and *res ficta*, and he refers specifically to Carlo Ginzburg’s theoretical constructions as a valid model to approach both historical and literary discourses (419). Ginzburg argues that historical narratives represent only one among many other possible ways of assessing historical events, and he mentions specifically Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust as examples of literary novelists whose writings may bear historical evidence. (265)

The traditional paradigm of historical narratives, criticized by Ginzburg, raises another valuable question for my research: what is “historical authenticity” as it is expressed by women writings? A possible answer appears in Hayden White’s *Tropics of Discourse* (1978). The third chapter of this book, entitled “Historical Text as Literary Artifact” leads me to think that women’s perceptions of war, as they are expressed in women’s war writings of the First World War, may as well have contributed with “truths” and “fantasies”, and that their fictional accounts can be read as valid from a certain historical point of view.

Not only have women’s social roles evolved since the First War but some change in women’s attitude may also be triggered by that tragic event, especially regarding the rise of women’s optimism towards the construction of a society with equal opportunities. After losing her brother to war, Katherine Mansfield seems to speak on behalf of these women and writes a dramatic entry, in her *Journal*, where she manifests her inspiring hope for a better future life:

I think I have known for a long time that life was over for me, but I never realized it or acknowledged it till my brother died. Yes, though he is lying in the middle of a little wood in France and I am still walking upright and feeling the sun and the wind from the sea, I am just as much dead as he is...Then why don't I commit suicide? Because I feel I have a duty to perform to the lovely time when we were both alive. (qtd. in Cadogan and Craig 158)

Mansfield's writing, in this passage, reveals what is perhaps the main reason why women tell war stories: they weave their stories, their narratives, in order to survive, or to keep living, in a world left by their men. The classic example of a woman's narrative of survival is the *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights'* female protagonist, Scheherazade, for whom the act of telling stories was the only way of keeping alive – or, at least, putting off her fate.

1.2. RES FACTA VS. RES FICTA

Parallels between literary and historical studies have been advocated by postmodern theorists. The two lines of narrative -- literature and history -- that used to converge up until the nineteenth century have been reclaimed by postmodern criticism. Despite the contemporary divergence claimed by a few critics, the long-dated encounter appears to raise valid discussion: is it possible to write about reality in factual terms?

Concerning literary and historical studies, postmodern critic Linda Hutcheon argues in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* that:

They [history and fiction] have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (105)

Having made this statement, Hutcheon puts into check the objectiveness of historical accounts and the validation of theories claimed in favor of historical truth, as was believed by Nietzsche, for instance. The reference here is to one of Nietzsche's early writings entitled *Untimely Meditations*, published by the author as four short works, between 1873 and 1876. In the second study presented in that work, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," written in 1874, the philosopher discusses the historian's duty to strive for objectivity. About a hundred years later, Hayden White would attack the German philosopher's premise in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978), in the chapter called "Interpretation in History", stating that Nietzsche "denied that the value of history lay in the disclosure of facts previously

unknown or in the generalization that might be produced by reflection on the facts.” (White 53). Although Nietzsche’s questionings are valuable for the sake of metahistorical studies, the element that joins both literature and history -- language -- is subjective and, therefore, open to numberless interpretations. What could be misread as literary “interferences” in the historical text, and vice-versa, may be interpreted nowadays as a result of the many possibilities conveyed by intertextuality. Later in the same book, Hutcheon goes beyond Nietzsche’s postulates and coins the term “historiographic metafiction” to address the kind of novel that “problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialect here – just unresolved contradiction.” (106).

As a matter of fact, arguments over this issue go back to Aristotle, according to whom historians and poets were given different tasks: the former would speak about what happened, whereas the latter expressed what could or might happen. Particulars were delegated to historians, and were to be written in linear succession. Universals belonged to the poet’s realm and dealt with different unities. The passing of times would prove these theories wrong: as societies evolved, so did the impossibility of intersecting both lines of study. The contradiction appears to be dissolved by what Hutcheon defines as “sociology”:

History and fiction have always been notoriously porous genres ... At various times both have included in their elastic boundaries such forms as the travel tale and various versions of what we now call sociology. It is not surprising that there would be overlappings of concern and even mutual influences between the two genres. (106)

By “mutual influences” it may be understood that writing about historical events does not necessarily dismiss fiction; in the same token, fiction writing may reveal some

extent of historical accuracy. Hutcheon used the phrase “porous genres” appropriately, because it is not the same as to say that there is a gap between history and fiction; instead, it suggests the complementariness between them.

One example of the mutual cooperation between literary and historical studies is the discovery of the Trojan archeological site in the nineteenth century. Heinrich Schliemann’s endeavors were made substantially possible by his reading of Homer’s *Iliad*, a poem that tells us about the siege of Troy. The site found by the German archaeologist in Northwest Turkey matched very closely the fortresses of the city of Troy as described by Homer, the same city that was ransacked and later burnt by the Greek army. (Information on Heinrich Schliemann and further findings on the archaeological site of Troy came from the following documentary, available on DVD: *Troy – Myth or Reality?* Documentary. Eagle Media Productions Ltd, 2004). Recently, more excavations in the same area have shown that a large, lower town was found beneath the site explored by Schliemann. Therefore it does fit in with the idea of the Homeric legend. More importantly, the episode stresses the importance of interdisciplinary efforts towards the construction of knowledge.

The “unresolved contradiction” between fact and fiction has intrigued scholars in the humanities for thousands of years. Aristotle insisted on the theory of divergent universals; Nietzsche’s vindication of historical truth regenerated the debate, and contemporary Metahistorical critics have offered further solutions. One of them is Carlo Ginzburg, an Italian researcher who achieved notoriety for being the first historian to obtain the Vatican’s permission to access the Holy Inquisition’s files for investigation and historical analysis. With Giovanni Levi, Primo Levi’s cousin, they formed, in the late seventies, a group of Italian scholars who would later define the standards of the

microhistorical verve, focusing on issues that have been disregarded by traditional historical analysis as being of minor importance.

Modernist novels' innovation in point of view has, in great part, contributed to converging story and history. Ginzburg and Hutcheon state unanimously that in some novels by Faulkner, Woolf, Proust and Joyce, manipulation of a single point of view gives place to the multiplicity of voices, thus stressing the subjectivity that lies between story and history. Traditional omniscient historian-narrators, that used to prevail in nineteenth-century novels and, therefore, conveyed one-sided views, are replaced by a multitude of voices that allow pluralistic views to emerge. Hutcheon refers to historiographic metafiction as containing "not one single perspective but myriad voices, often not completely localizable in the textual universe." (160) and later suggests a kind of connection between the one look or "eye" imposed by traditional narratives in opposition to the Modernist "I's", which are subjective and pluralizing (161). This is true in relation to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*. Their views on the First War are portrayed by the plurality of voices, most of which are women's, and the coexistence of reports by soldiers and civilians allow readers to think of war experience in a more subjective way.

In the introductory chapter to *History, Rhetoric and Proof* (1999), Ginzburg counters the skeptical theses sustained by Nietzsche in his article "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", from *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983). Nietzsche's pragmatism misled him to assume, in the first place, that there was some "truth" to be found, or sought after, by historians. However, Ginzburg argues, the idea that historians may come up with something like "truth" or "proof" is rather unlikely and old fashioned: "the pretension of assessing truth is not only ephemeral but also illusory."(xxiii). The solution suggested by Ginzburg is to investigate the tensions

between narrative and documentation from a closer angle. His latest book, not yet translated into English, was published in Brazil under the title *O fio e os rastros: verdadeiro, falso, fictício*, in 2006, by Companhia das Letras. I refer respectively to the introduction and to the chapter entitled “*Micro-história: duas ou três coisas que sei a respeito.*” It is worth quoting this work for two main improvements on his attack to the historian’s burden of reporting the truth, as it has been delegated in the past: first, there is the recognition of the fictitious element as the inevitable thread with which historical narratives are woven (vii); second, is the notion that cultural memory plays a crucial role in the construction of historical knowledge (273).

In Brazil, Ginzburg’s work has gained appreciation by historians such as Luiz Costa Lima. In Lima’s article “On the Writing of History” (2006), Ginzburg is given credibility for suggesting a less empirical - - and also less ambitious - - theoretical model that may be applied to history and social sciences. (Lima’s seminal article has been published recently by UFMG’s University Press: Lima, Luiz Costa. “On the Writing of History.” (*Varia Historia* 22, 2006): 395-423). In other words, Ginzburg acknowledges the heterogeneity and complexity of history writing by refusing to approach it only by means of pure science, as most historical researchers used to do. Assuming that historiographical truth is objective appears to be, according to Lima, an impossible operation. Historical narratives are necessarily impregnated by verbal elements and, therefore, bear hermeneutical implications.

It is intriguing that much has been contested regarding historical truth and little has been said about historical imagination. Although the New Historicists previously mentioned seem to recognize the importance of the fictitious element for understanding of historical novels, it was only Finnish Metahistorian Kalle Pihlainen who explored the imaginative dimension that those novels may convey. Pihlainen investigates how the

distinction between fact and fiction, history and story may become difficult to see through clearly, arguing:

In a way this blurring of levels is understandable since the narrator of historical narratives is equated with the historian whose task it is to fashion the “story” level. It can easily appear that it is the function of the narrator to mediate between sources and fill in the gaps through assumption and an oftentimes liberal use of the imagination. (11)

The elucidation provided by this statement regards both the use of imagination and the power invested in the narrators of historical fiction. Historical narrators are susceptible to manipulate sources as well as to fictionalize the past. It may be inferred that the traditional dividing line between literary narrator and historian narrator is, in many cases, almost imperceptible.

Pihlainen adds that:

As a result of this dual role, historians as narrators can be said to stick to reconstructing the narrative, they cannot “see” the stories they tell in the unmediated way of fictional narrators, thus being unable to establish narrative truth on a linguistic basis in the same way. (12)

Reconstructing sounds like a relativistic reasoning towards the writing of fiction, for it implies that history is recreated by stories, and vice-versa. Historical narratives may be understood as an endless exercise of regenerating stories by making use of fact and fiction, shaped by language.

It is my hypothesis that, by creating imaginary dialogues between real-life characters such as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves, Pat Barker’s novel *Regeneration* (1993) reassesses past events through the imagination. What might have “really” happened to the lives of the three soldiers is speculated on and retold in

their imaginary conversations at Craiglockart psychiatric hospital; tentatively, their voices reconstruct the war experience they had and it is up to the reader to decide how much fact and how much fiction exist between the lines. *Regeneration* may, therefore, be read as an exercise of historical metafiction writing, where both fact and fiction concerning World War I are revisited through language and imagination.

The use of language became the ground for Hayden White's assumption of metahistory when he wrote *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978). From the implications of the "tropes" of discourse, White advances towards a more elaborate definition of metahistory, i.e., one that takes into consideration the unifying form of narrative and undermines the formal difference between historical and fictional accounts. Both forms resort to linguistic basis in order to convey meaning, and that is to say, according to White, that

Historiographical disputes will tend to turn, not only upon the matter of what are the facts, but also upon that of their meaning. But meaning, in turn, will be construed in terms of the possible modalities of natural language itself, and specifically in terms of the dominant tropological strategies by which unknown or unfamiliar phenomena are provided with meanings by different kinds of metaphorical appropriations. (72)

White takes into account the etymological implications of the word *tropic*: In Classical Greek it meant "turn", while in Classical Latin it referred to "metaphor" or "figure of speech". The concept of *discourse*, "quintessentially a mediative enterprise" (iv) is applied by White to the complexity of historical narratives, where interpretation plays a key role. Curiously, one of the Greek *Moiras*, Atropos, was named after *troopoo*. The eldest of the three sisters, she was in charge of cutting the thread made by the two others, and had the final word when it came to determining upon people's fates.

Because historical narratives rely on language, they may become partly shaped by verbal artifacts such as figures of speech, for instance, which invest them with subjectivity. Also, White understands historical narratives as extended metaphors, as symbolic structures that generate similitude between past events and story types within a given culture. Hence, his theory of the reader's impossibility of seeing facts without stories: "except through the coloration that the set of events in question gives to his perception of the world." (87).

White also points out that there can be no stories without plot, "by which to make of it a story of a particular kind." (63) His conception of "particular kinds" refers, as he explains, to Frye's "mythic plot structure", according to which the fictional element is inevitably present in discursive writing:

I would argue [that] histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of *mere* chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation which I have elsewhere called "emplotment." And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with "fictions" in general. (83)

White's reasoning on the history/story/plot operation is one of the most lucid explanation on how fact and fiction intermingle. Historical narratives appear as metaphors, as representations of events that *may* have happened. Once they are "emplotted" by chronicles, or stories, they give room to the rise of the fictional. As a consequence, the writing of history becomes an operation that resembles much that of fiction making.

Conversely, one may wonder to which extent fictional works are imbued with historical meaning. The choice to study literary, fictional works by Rebecca West, Vera Brittain, Virginia Woolf and Pat Barker relies on the basis that these women writings can be seen as partaking in the production of historical knowledge of the First War. Also, these fictional works, written by women, may help clarify how the war came as a “revolution” in terms of social roles performed by women in post-1914 England. Alongside “fiction,” these writings may also convey the new “reality” faced by British women as the war broke out. It is possible that the plots threaded by these women writers in their narratives also provided an idea of what their fate would be during and after wartime.

Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig share the belief that post WWI fiction written by women depicted the crucial impact that war had women’s lives and the social changes brought by the consequences of that world disaster:

All this was reflected in fiction: in several books which appeared in the 1920’s and 1930’s women characters were at odds with the society in which they lived. They repudiated long-established traditions, demanded interesting and well-paid careers (‘men’s jobs’), and occasionally claimed the right to become mothers even if they were not married. (134)

The women characters presented in fiction may be said to represent the “eyes” referring to women’s views on war, on society and themselves, and the “I’s”, concerning the subjectivity of women’s gaze in women’s modern fiction.

What the above-mentioned authors later elaborate as “retrospective attraction” (292) may be valid in relation to previous war narratives, mainly the *Iliad*. Women’s gaze in World War I went back in time and mirrored or sought inspiration in the bravery of the Amazons, in Thetis’s compassionate mediation in favor of her son, or in

Penelope's control of property and negotiation of roles with her husband as seen in the *Odyssey*. In either case, it is likely that women's WWI fiction is more interwoven with the historical representation of their social roles than has been thought.

1.3. THE NOVELS AND THE WAR

Rebecca West was born in London in 1892 under the name of Cicily Isabel Fairfield. Her interest in drama led her to study at the Royal Academy of Art, where she played the part of Rebecca West, the female heroine of a play by Henrik Ibsen, called *Rosmersholm* (1886). She and her two sisters were abandoned by their father and supported by their mother, Isabella, who struggled to become a successful pianist but was never recognized as such. Cicily adopted the pseudonym as she started her career as a feminist activist, and her publications appeared in feminist magazine *Freewoman* and socialist newspaper *Clarion*. She also wrote fiction and book reviews, including a critique of H.G. Wells, with whom she had a love affair. He never abandoned his marriage, though, and soon West would share the same fate as her mother, having to support their son almost entirely by herself. The long span of her career (she died in 1983) allowed her to witness, and write about, the major events in the twentieth century.

Her first and most acclaimed novel, *The Return of the Soldier*, was written in 1918, as the Great War ended. Despite the fact that the plot focuses on the veteran Chris Baldry's homecoming, after he suffers from shell-shock and amnesia, the wartime drama lived by the three women who inhabit his house (the wife, Kitty, his cousin Jenny, and a former lover, Margaret, who belongs to a lower social class) somehow overshadows Chris's long-expected return. In the intricacies of the three women's communal routine is woven the complexity of women's views on war, especially concerning the unexpected power they were given in expense of the tragic event.

In *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, Samuel Hynes calls the attention to the possibility that Chris may have lost his memory deliberately, in

an attempt to return to a pre-war past, compared to the “paradise” where love and peace prevailed:

The story of *Return of the Soldier* is of how Chris’s wife, with the help of a psychiatrist (one of the first, surely, in English fiction), compels him to leave that Eden by forcing memory upon him, and so returns him to the present reality of war, and to his proper social role as ‘the soldier’.”

(212)

The passage stresses the unwillingness of his return, and it was due to his tragic experience in the battlefields and his desire to restore his life back to his loving relationship with Margaret. Aided by a psychiatrist, his wife Kitty deprives him of the only thing the War has not destroyed in him: his happy past memories.

The soldier’s doubtful amnesia is eclipsed by the experience lived by Kitty during her husband’s absence: she has gained control of the house and the two women who had had a crucial meaning to the happiness in Chris’s past. In the fashion of Penelope, Kitty is invested with powers as war takes her husband away; his return seems to pose, at the very least, a kind of threat to the status she has achieved. It is no wonder that the novel ends with Chris’s return as a soldier, not as a husband.

As contradictory as it may sound, the same war that made Chris Baldry a victim of shell-shock disorder was the opportunity that made Kitty more powerful. Somehow the other two women seem to partake of her political power, however in smaller amounts. When asked by Kitty how Chris looked, his cousin Jenny (also the narrator of the story) replies: “‘Oh,’ – how could I say it? – ‘every inch of a soldier.’” (West 82) and Kitty reacts enigmatically by saying: “‘He’s cured!’ she whispered slowly. He’s cured!’” (82). The soldier lacks compassion but the husband is no longer desired by Kitty. About the same passage, Hynes has observed that:

Cured is a bitterly ironic word here; and so is *soldier*. A decent man has been cured of happiness and peace, which can have no place in a world at war; his cure is something that has been done to him, against his will, in order to return him to the reality of suffering and perhaps death. This view of the soldier as a victim is perhaps not surprising in a novel by an intelligent, radically thinking young woman in the last year of the war.

(213)

Although it is said that he is *cured*, Chris's drama ends up unresolved in the novel. It is worth mentioning that "cured" has been used in the place of "restored to his marriage"; "soldier" has been used, instead of "Chris". If war gave the three women living together in the country house the opportunity to exert their power, Chris would no longer have a room there. He might fit in the story as an ex-soldier, or as a victim, maybe, but never again as a "man" who had full charge of his property and emotional control of these women.

The subjectivity of women's views on war is brought to its peak in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Woolf, a Bloomsbury pacifist, established herself as an important novelist, influential essayist, reviewer, and feminist critic. *Mrs. Dalloway* was published in 1925, the same year as Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Kafka's *The Trial*. Hynes reminds us of other important works to emerge after the First War:

That output included Eliot's own *Waste Land*, as well as *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Façade*, and the post-war paintings of Nash and Lewis: the heart of what is usually thought of as English Modernism. And, said Eliot, "it had come to an end." (418)

Regarding the representation of the war in Woolf, Hynes acknowledges the importance of *Mrs. Dalloway* over *Jacob's Room* (1922), her first novel after World War I: "*Mrs. Dalloway* contains the war in a far more constant and insistent way than *Jacob's Room* does. The war is many minds during the novel's one ordinary day." (344). Also, in comparison with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), "*Mrs. Dalloway* "is located precisely in time and space – on a June day in 1923, and not simply in London but in Westminster, the centre of government of England and the Empire." (345).

In *Mrs. Dalloway* one sees the war through the eyes of a woman, Clarissa Dalloway, the wealthy housewife of a Member of Parliament and, therefore, the "least suspecting victim" to witness war experience... Not a male character, like Jacob Flanders, but a housewife, whose views on war, however, come very close, in terms of substance, to the intensity of an ex-soldier's drama, undergone by Septimus. The scene is precisely located within the twenty four hours of a London summer's day: "For it was in the middle of June." (Woolf 6) and specific places of the English capital are mentioned throughout the narrative. It is on Bond Street, for instance, that Clarissa perceives the gloomy atmosphere reflected on people's faces, viewed from inside a car:

Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors' shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire. (17)

Technology appears in the passage ("mathematical instrument"; "transmitting shocks in China") not only as a criticism to the application of science during wartime. They also allude to the female protagonist's desire to seize and measure the proportion of war's

impact on people's lives, with precision and exactness. There is also a direct reference to the greatest empire of the nineteenth century, whose stability in the twentieth century would soon be put at stake, starting from WWI.

This kind of "geographical" location of people's sorrow also called Hynes's attention, as a distinguishing feature of *Mrs. Dalloway*. He explains it as follows:

The war is in many minds during the novel's one ordinary day; Mrs Dalloway thinks of women whose sons were killed, the tutor Miss Kilman thinks of how the war ruined her career, bystanders watching as a royal car passes think of the dead, boys in uniform lay a wreath on the Cenotaph, in Westminster Abbey people shuffle past the tomb of the Unknown Warrior. (344-45)

It is worth mentioning that, like *The Return of the Soldier*, in *Mrs. Dalloway* war is located in the mind; as a matter of fact, Woolf expands the resonance of war in everyone's minds, including a housewife, a tutor, bystanders, boys and, later, the mind of a suicidal ex-soldier, Septimus Warren Smith. Woolf's novel addresses, according to Hutcheon, "the subjectivity and plurality that came as a result of The Modernist 'I's', or 'eyes'." (160-61). The postmodernist critic stresses this peculiar quality of the modernist experiment, in opposition to traditional narratives, later to be inherited by postmodernist fiction.

The two characters Clarissa and Septimus never meet physically. The closest they get to each other is on Bond Street, where the deep track of their existential thoughts is broken, respectively, by the backfire noise from a car (16-17). It is not until she throws her party that she hears his name and how he died, reminded by one of the party guests, as follows:

Lady Bradshaw (poor goose – one didn't dislike her) murmured how, "Just as we were starting, my husband was called up on the telephone, a very sad case. A young man (that is what Sir William is telling Mr. Dalloway) had killed himself. He had been in the army." Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought. (Woolf 179)

The news of an unknown man's suicide comes to Clarissa, while she is gathering friends for a celebration. Septimus's death has a kind of symbolic, as well as emotional entailment; from this point onwards, Clarissa partakes of the young man's pain. The complementariness of mirth and mourning, life and death, start to make sense to her and take her from the crowded party room to the deepest part of her mind, where her thoughts move restlessly.

The same episode is read by Hynes as part of the whole discussion on war presented by the novel:

But in fact the entire novel has been full of death, haunted by death and war as poor Septimus is haunted by his dead comrade Evans. War and death are there in the middle of everything because, in this world-after-the-war, they are part of reality. (345)

The lives of Clarissa and Septimus are woven together by a string of converging, silent thoughts on life and death, as well as by sounds (murmurs, car noises, and sirens). Their tragic fate was inevitably linked, as if by the weaving by the Greek *moiras*. It may be said that the narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway* is spun around the minds of *all* those affected – in order to locate the reality of postwar experience as precisely as possible.

Sounds bring Clarissa and Septimus together in postwar experience. It is also true that some "silent witnesses," such as Vera Brittain, lived their war life drama in

quietness and loneliness and yet just as vividly as the former. Brittain's autobiography *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*, published in 1933, encompasses wartime and postwar fictions and realities, as they were lived by a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse.

Brittain's historical discussion of the First War starts with the autobiographical claim of her work. One may argue to what extent the report of her war memories, as a consistent first person narrator, may convey verisimilitude. From the previous chapter, it may be noted, the debate concerning *res facta* and *res ficta* has deserved the attention of metahistorical and microhistorical critics, not to mention Hutcheon's remarks on the subjectivity made possible by the modernist novel, when "I" becomes "I's", a metaphorical reference to the plurality of voices, or "eyes" (160) that historiographic metafiction is composed of. When it comes to the case of Brittain's retrospective novel, however, it seems more sensible to refer to two "I's": the "narrating I" and the "experiencing I". Again, "fact" and "fiction" are being addressed: on one hand, autobiographical narrators claim to be self-conscious and to report their clear-cut memories; on the other, retrospective writing somehow "colors" the events after they were witnessed and, as it is suggested by the etymology of the term "autobiography", it is a "writing of the self," where one is subject to self-invention. Therefore, it seems more prudent to refer to Brittain's novel as an "autobiographically-inspired" fiction.

In fact, the narrator decides to write about the war and post-war period and, right on the preface to the book, there may be found room for autobiographical fiction. The narrator describes what the time between 1914 and 1925 "has meant to the men and women of my generation, the generation of those boys and girls who grew up just before the War broke out." (11) The individual evolves into the collective: the narrator

claims to speak on the behalf of her generation. More subjectivity appears in the subsequent passage:

I wanted to give too, if I could, an impression of the changes which that period brought about in the minds and lives of very different groups of individuals belonging to the large section of middle-class society from which my own family comes. (Brittain 11)

Note the relativity of the term “impression” and, less specifically, the place where they rest, “in the minds and lives”. Also, it may be observed how the collective experience quickly dissipates to the realm of the individual recollection: “groups of individuals” are limited to the “section of middle-class society” and narrowed down to her family, or the social circle from which her “own family comes.”

The reader may at first glance succumb to the preface’s appeal to truthfulness. Author and narrator seem to have made a kind of autobiographical pact. Brittain’s argument for reliability dismisses the possibility of being altered by a contemporary gaze, as it appears in the following passage:

In no other fashion, it seemed, could I carry out my endeavour to put the life of an ordinary individual into its niche in contemporary history, and thus illustrate the influence of world-wide events and movements upon the personal destinies of men and women. (12)

The narrator attempts to focus on a period for the sake of truth-telling. However, the emotion(s) caused by the impact of readdressing her past memories of the First War will certainly have an influence on the disclosure and expression of her *memoirs*. The very purpose of describing what the years 1914 until 1925 “has meant to the men and women of my generation” (11) suggests that an entire generation had been emotionally affected

by the events of 1924-1925. The emotional, subjective element leaves no room for such a thing as “perfect recollection.” She writes that:

I make no apology for the fact that some of these documents renew with fierce vividness the stark agonies of my generation in its early twenties. The mature properties of “emotion remembered in tranquility” have not been my object, which, at least in part, is to challenge that too easy, too comfortable relapse into forgetfulness which is responsible for history’s most grievous repetitions. (12)

This statement made me choose Brittain’s as the only autobiography among the other novels studied in this thesis: the subjectivity of the “stark-agonies” that haunted men and women during and after WWI are recalled by a narrator that struggles not to remember emotion in tranquility but claims her neutrality, “at least in part” (12), for the benefit of preserving the legacy of World War I’s cultural memory.

Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* describes the death of her fiancé, her best friend, and her only brother. Also, how the “stark agonies” she went through led her to work as a VAD nurse during the war and, after 1918, to write and campaign as a war pacifist. Among the woman writers studied in this thesis she is the only mentioned in the “Lives of Remarkable Women” section by the Imperial War Museum, in the 2003-2004 exhibition “Women and War.” Most certainly, she is the one who carries her country’s name in her own. Hynes compared her, as autobiographical writer, to Robert Graves’ *Goodbye to All That* (1929), and Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930):

All of these memoirs – Graves’s, Brittain’s and Sassoon’s – share that central point: their common subject is the power of the war to change individuals in radical ways. Each offers an earlier self, seen from a

distance in time, and seen primarily in one intense relationship – the individual’s relationship to war. (436)

The evolution of the “I”, Hynes explains, is part of what he calls “the Myth of War.” He relates the three-folded historical myth of war to the very structure of the modernist historical novel. He explains as follows: “It [the modernist historical novel] embodies the whole historical myth - - the world-before-the-war, the gap of the war itself, and the world-after-the-war - - in one intelligible story, and in a form that is appropriate to the Myth: a fragmented, elliptical, difficult form. That is to say, it is Modernist.” (433) His concept of Modernism matches the modernist view of history: “*Modernism* means many things, but it is most fundamentally the forms that post-war artists found for their sense of modern history: history seen as discontinuous, the past remote and unavailable, or available only as the ruins of itself, and the present a formless space emptied of values.” (433).

Brittain, as mentioned by Hynes, is the only woman “I” in this process of self-invention, writing about a woman’s self in *Testament of Youth*.

The myth of the First War influenced Brittain’s generation of writers, and the ones who would come after hers, to write about fictional representation of women and war in a specific historical context. In 1993, almost eighty years after the First war was declared, Pat Barker published her post WWI metafiction, *Regeneration*. It turns out to be a historical metafiction, whose narrative is constructed by an elastic thread that sews “reality” and “fiction” together. It is also a postmodern work, where subjectivism is constantly addressed and, in this particular case, invested with psychological nuances. Like *The Return of the Soldier*, memories are “manipulated,” here, by a psychiatrist who is based on the historical Dr. William Rivers, who treated Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, and Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockart psychiatric hospital, in Scotland. Unlike

West's novel, men's vulnerability, frailty, and repressed traumatic feelings are disclosed in attitudes that back in the early twentieth century would have been unexpected or even unaccepted by their fellow comrades.

The fictional re-creation of conversations of soldiers Sassoon, Owen, and Graves suggests another interesting point for reflection: as memories of the war they all experienced are recovered, it may be seen that the pre-war world they lived in tends to be evoked in an idyllic way, whereas the post-war world is defined as shattered and even impossible to cope with.

Barker's preoccupation on the many ways that the First War can be remembered, in *Regeneration*, caused the attempt to readdress historical facts by the re-telling of stories, also known as Thucydian technique. The reference, in this case, is Thucydides's book *History of the Peloponnesian War*, in which he develops a technique of reporting imaginary conversations, based on what might have been said by Athenians and Peloponnesians, given the historical context of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE). Curiously, this is exactly what Rivers's treatment method consists of, as it may be read in the following passage from the novel:

Rivers's treatment sometimes consisted simply of encouraging the patient to abandon his hopeless attempt to forget, and advising him to spend some part of every day remembering. Neither brooding on the experience, nor trying to pretend it had never happened. Usually, within a week or two of the patient's starting this treatment, the nightmares began to be less frequent and less terrifying. (Barker 26)

The healing process, as suggested by Rivers, implied the willingness to return to the moment in time when the traumatic feeling was initialized. It comes in the opposite direction of the ex-soldiers's entertaining talks, which tended to "glorify" the past. As

much as Dr. Rivers liked to entertain his patients with conversation, too, he aimed to contextualize the patient's pain, by looking back at the past war experience with lucidity and awareness.

For now, it is convincing enough that women's contemporary war fictional writings attempt to reactivate "the nightmare from which we are trying to awaken." The phrase alludes to Stephen Dedalus' famous statement "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.", on page 34 of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Dedalus refers to Ireland's Independence (1922) and the challenges posed by the search for national identity. It is relevant to this study insofar as it generates debate on the individual/collective historical encounter: Dedalus's individual search for identity is mixed up with his own country's. Furthermore, much has been said about the resemblances between Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *The Odyssey*, which is seen in this thesis as a post (Trojan) war narrative.

PART TWO – LITERATURE AND WORLD WAR I

“But how deceptive this semblance of normal life is; what extraordinary work this is for women and how extraordinarily they are doing it, is made manifest in a certain row of huts where the cordite is being pressed through wire mesh. This, in all the world, must be the place where war and grace are closest linked. Without, a strip of garden runs beside the huts, gay with shrubs and formal with a sundial. Within there is a group of girls that composes into so beautiful a picture that one remembers that the most glorious painting in the world, Velasquez’s “The Weavers,” shows women working just like this.”

Rebecca West, “Hands That War: The Cordite Makers”

2.1. REBECCA WEST'S *The Return of the Soldier*

West published *The Return of the Soldier* in 1918, the same year that the First World War ended. Although she described her experience of the war as passive (qtd. in Higonnet 122), her novel brings insight to the feeling of distress by non-combatants, more remarkably, women. The consequences of war affected society as a whole, as it is shown nowadays by historians such as Hobsbawm, who conceived the notion of “total war,” such as the following:

The monster of twentieth-century total war was not born full-sized. Nevertheless, from 1914 on, wars were unmistakably mass wars... Even in industrial societies so great a manpower mobilization puts enormous strains on the labour force, which is why modern mass wars both strengthened the powers of organized labour and produced a revolution in the employment of women outside the household: temporarily in the First World War, permanently in the Second World War. (*Age of Extremes* 44-45)

Not only does the statement reinforce the idea of the war effects on women, who willingly or not joined the labor force, it also relates women's job insertion from 1914, simultaneously with the First War. In addition to Hobsbawm's premise of mass labor mobilization, it is my assumption that the psychological impact of war was equally felt by all those involved in war, men, women, and children. The “monster” affected the lives of both civilians and non-civilians alike.

The idea of a tragedy that affected everyone's lives is present on the first page of West's novel. The narrative begins by describing the dead son's story and how Oliver's death affected Chris (his father), Kitty (his mother), and Jenny (his aunt and the

narrator), equally. Jenny describes how she and Kitty would constantly revisit the baby's bedroom, which remained intact after five years from his death, and the painful memories caused by this habit:

And along the mantelpiece, under the loved print of the snarling tiger, in attitudes that were at once angular and relaxed, as though they were ready for play at their master's pleasure, but found it hard to keep from drowsing in this warm weather, sat the Teddy Bear and the chimpanzee and the woolly white dog and the black cat with eyes that roll. Everything was there except Oliver. I turned away so that I might not spy on Kitty revisiting her dead. (4)

The description of the baby bedroom's animal *motif* suggests the image of an unanimated forest, whose inhabitants were suddenly abandoned by their keeper. It suggests that the experience of abandonment was felt by the entire family, who fell into a lethargic state afterwards.

The dead son's episode is presented in the first and in the last chapters, a landmark event that both prompts and interrupts the plot, suggesting a parallel between the dead baby and his wounded soldier father's homecoming. His appearance is pale and worn-out, and his mental state is affected by delusions and introspection, caused by the war. He somehow resembles a ghost. Chris Baldry's amnesia, coming as a symptom of shell-shock disorder, leaves him in a state of suspension, in a kind of *limbo*. He is unwilling to return to Baldry's Court and unable to go back to Monkey's Island Inn. Curiously, the idyllic place to where Chris desires to return for good had a special importance for the life of the explicit author. Verlyn Klinkenborg reveals, in the introductory chapter to the 2004 Random House edition of West's *The Return of the Soldier*, that "Her life had been enormously perplexed by her relationship with the

married [H.G.] Wells, with whom she used to visit the Monkey Island Inn.” (xx). Later in the narrative, Margaret, who had also lost her baby child, partakes of his drama and vaguely concludes that “they each had half a life.” (69).

In fact, Chris’s debilitated mental health comes as a shock to the three women in his life - - his wife, whom he no longer recognizes; his cousin, his ex-lover, Margaret, who still loves him (and vice-versa), and his cousin, who “suddenly was stunned with jealousy.” (56). The drama lived by these three women grows out of proportion as the psychiatrist, Dr. Anderson, intervenes in favor of recovering his patient’s “complete case of amnesia” (70) and leads a trial-like interrogation of Baldry’s pre-war life. Their confessions generate hostility but, rather than dividing the group of women, they promote reflection on the frailty and vulnerability of men. Jenny reveals the discrepancy of what was expected from a soldier in terms of social behavior, by early twentieth-century women, and what she actually witnesses based on her cousin’s misery. First, she compares the nightmares she had with her cousin on the battleground to the view of war she had from war films:

Of late I had had bad dreams about him. By nights I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of No-Man’s-Land, starting back here because he trod upon a hand, not even looking there because of the awfulness of an unburied head, and not till my dream was packed full of horror did I see him pitch forward on his knees as he reached safety, if it was that. For on the war-films I have seen men slip down as softly from the trench-parapet, and none but the grimmer philosophers could say that they had reached safety by their fall.” (6)

The film reference here, as Das clarifies, is

The Battle of the Somme (1916), watched by some 80 per cent of the adult population in Britain, introduced many of its audiences at once to cinema and war: it brought home the scale of the war's devastation through images of bombed landscapes, ruined buildings and killed and wounded men. (Das 230)

Either for education or propaganda, British authorities used films to construct a view of the First War. As much as the narrator seems impressed with the vividness of these film scenes, she comes across an even worse realization as she wakes up from her nightmares, which makes her change her views on war. She seems to speak for her British comrades as she ponders that:

And when I escaped into wakefulness it was only to lie stiff and think of stories I had heard in the boyish voice of the modern subaltern, which rings indomitable, yet has most of its gay notes flattened: "We were all of us in a barn one night, and a shell came along. My pal sang out, 'Help me, old man; I've got no legs!' and I had to answer, 'I can't, old man; I've got no hands!'" Well, such are the dreams of Englishwomen to-day.

(6)

What seems to be a joke at a first glance reveals itself as a nightmare of mutilation. The "dreams of Englishwomen" are, in fact, women's awakening to war's most tragic face - meaning their men would not necessarily return from war as heroes, if ever.

About the film passage in West's novel, Das calls our attention to the writer's choice of word "softly" in "on the war films I have seen men slip down softly from the trench parapet..." (6) It reveals, in his words, that "it was the palpable substantiality of the falling bodies that troubled the mind." (231), suggesting the author's familiarity with the frailty of men in the trenches and how her writing evokes "bodily senses,

particularly touch, [which] defined the texture of experience in the trenches and the hospitals, and how they inform and shape war writings.” (Das 230).

Hynes observes with admiration how the woman narrator “compose[s] her vision out of second-hand images, though she does so vividly.” (212), referring to the precision of details she used in order to describe the film, as well as to the views on war formulated by a woman of the time (Hynes 212).

In symbolic terms, the house where the three women live in represents a kind of “laboratory” from where they observe war and formulate their views of it. Through the complex psychological interplay, lived among the women living under the same roof, war is shown from the “home front.” For that reason, Chris’ amnesia may be interpreted as a creative device to reveal women’s views of war and to set aside the returning soldier’s tale of male narratives. Kitty, in Penelope’s fashion, has not abandoned the wealthy property built with her husband’s hard work while he went off to war. As the housekeeper, regardless of the three women’s dispute for Chris’s love, she is the one who exerts greater power in Baldry’s Court. Instead of procrastinating suitors, she handles the husband’s cousin and his mistress, with mastery over both.

Another mythic analogy can be made with Margaret, Chris’s ex-lover, and the only recollection his amnesia has not deleted. The way in which she rescues him from his nightmare may be compared to that of a Valkyre, who saves a soldier in a desperate attempt to withdraw him from the battleground and lead him towards a nearest version of the *Walhalla*. The narrator notes:

How her near presence had been known by Chris I do not understand, but there he was, running across the lawn as night after night I had seen him in my dreams running across No-Man’s-Land. I knew that so he would close his eyes as he ran; I knew that so he would pitch on his knees when

he reached safety. I assumed naturally that at Margaret's feet lay safety even before I saw her arms brace him under the armpits with a gesture that was not passionate, but rather the movement of one carrying a wounded man from under fire. (52)

Another point for reflection on the novel is that the war narrative is set *in medias res*. The story starts with Jenny recollecting the day his cousin headed to "Somewhere in France." (3) and she "recalled all that he did one morning just a year ago when he went to the front." (7). Frank Baldry, Chris's cousin, writes a letter to Jenny describing his meeting with the already amnesiac Chris at a hospital in Boulogne, referring to the city of Boulogne-sur-Mer, in Northern France, where the Battle of the Somme took place. The year they meet coincides with the Somme Offensive: "He turned very pale and asked what year this was. '1916,' I told him. He fell back in a fainting condition." (19).

In addition, Klinkenborg recalls an interesting fact about West's novel, in the Introduction chapter:

In October 1917, when she learned that *The Return of the Soldier* – her first novel – had been accepted for publication, Anthony [her son with Wells] was already three, incendiary bombs and aerial torpedoes were falling all around her, and West had been reading Tolstoy." (xvi)

The novel had been written by West during the bombings of the First War, approximately a year after the Battle of the Somme. West's interest in this battle is also referred to in the novel by the homonymous film she sees. The novel by Tolstoy, in analogy to the war, was likely to be the *War and Peace* series (1865-1869).

West's novel shares an important feature with *War and Peace*: their stories are set after the war has started, and no previous information, or historical background,

about the wars they refer to, is given to the reader. According to Ginzburg, the *in medias res* setting confers a unique value on the fictional representation of history. Speaking of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the statement is also valid in relation to West's novel:

In *War and Peace* ... all the events prior to the narration (from personal memories to the cultural memory of the Napoleonic Era) is assimilated and left behind, in order to enable readers to gain intimacy with the characters. Tolstoy leaps at filling in the gaps between fragmented, distorted clues of an event (a battle, for example), and the event itself.

(My translation)

Ginzburg's latest book has not yet been translated into English. In the Portuguese version it is translated as follows: "Em Guerra e paz... tudo o que precede o ato da narração (das recordações pessoais à memorialística da era napoleônica) é assimilado e deixado para trás a fim de permitir que o leitor entre numa relação de especial intimidade com os personagens, de participação imediata nas suas histórias. Tolstoy supera de um salto a brecha inevitável entre as pistas fragmentárias e distorcidas de um acontecimento (uma batalha, por exemplo) e o próprio acontecimento." (271). It is important to observe that Tolstoy's fictional account of the Napoleonic wars, more remarkably Austerlitz, followed by the final withdraw of French troops - - defeated by both the Army and the cold of Russia - - is retold by over a hundred real and fictitious characters. The time period between 1805 and 1820, when Russian forces, led by Czar Alexander I, fought the Napoleonic armies, is not replicated. Rather, it is reconstructed by means of imagination.

The raw material for Tolstoy's historical novel - - expansionism, dictatorship and aristocracy in early nineteenth-century Russia - - is filled with theoretical

digressions. In *The Return of the Soldier*, the reader may assess historical battles (here, the Battle of the Somme) through a multiplicity of voices. In the case of West's war narrative, the reader is exposed to the voices of three women inhabiting the same house.

War fictions seem to have a kind of peculiar advantage in relation to traditional historical accounts - - fragments of cultural memory may be recollected in the voices of fictional characters. Ginzburg sees in these narratives the very content of microhistory, as he explains further in his remarks on Tolstoy:

To this kind of leap, this kind of direct connection with reality is set (although not necessarily) on the ground of fiction: historians, who rely on traces, documents, are denied access. Historiographic frescoes, which convey the illusion of an extinct reality, sometimes in a mediocre fashion, tacitly deprive historians of a constructive limit. Microhistory takes the opposite direction: it accepts the limit by exploring gnosiologic implications and transforms them into a narrative element. (My translation)

In Portuguese the passage is translated as: “Mas esse salto, essa relação direta com a realidade, só pode se dar (ainda que não necessariamente) no terreno da ficção: ao historiador, que só dispõe de rastros, de documentos, a ele é por definição vedado. Os afrescos historiográficos que procuram comunicar ao leitor, com expedientes muitas vezes medíocres, a ilusão de uma realidade extinta, removem tacitamente esse limite construtivo do ofício do historiador. A micro-história escolhe o caminho oposto: aceita o limite explorando as suas implicações gnosiológicas e transformando-as num elemento narrativo.” (271).

A part of historical memory that has not been the main focus of traditional historical analysis - - women's views on war - - is carefully rescued, and fictionally

reconstructed, by Rebecca West's novel and, under the micro historical perspective, contributes to a broader understanding of the War. How women were affected by the War is, paired with the realization of men's susceptibility, an indicator of women's share in the history of the First War as protagonists. War and its affection on women, as they are described by a woman author who witnessed and wrote about the highlights of the twentieth century (born in 1892, died in 1983), somehow endow West's narrative with more credibility. Hobsbawm, who was born during the First War, in 1917, stresses that "For anyone of my age-group who has lived through all or most of the Short Twentieth Century this [to understand and explain the First and the Second World Wars] is inevitably an autobiographical endeavour." (*Age of Extremes* 44). Hobsbawm refers to the mass wars of the twentieth century, starting from the First War: "The monster of twentieth-century total war was not born full-sized. Nevertheless, from 1914 on, wars were unmistakably mass wars." (44). The recollection of the major events of the twentieth century, by men and women provide, in Hobsbawm's view, the definition of the parts they played in history, as well as of their own history. He states that:

We are talking about, amplifying (and correcting) our own memories. And we are talking as men and women of a particular time and place, involved, in various ways, in its history as actors in its dramas ... as observers of our times and, not least, as people whose views of the century have been formed by what we have come to see as its crucial events. We are part of this century. It is part of us. (iii)

War affected Chris's life and it would not have been different with the three women in his life. It may be said that the War became part of those women. West's narrative invites the reader to learn more from the part War played in women's lives,

written by a woman whose life and work have been indispensable to almost an entire century.

2.2. VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *Mrs. Dalloway*

Woolf's association with the First War has mainly derived from her two novels *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), as well as her non-fiction work *Three Guineas*, published in 1938. In the first mentioned novel, though, the intricacies of the war drama lived simultaneously by a housewife and an ex-combatant lead us to think of the First War as a universal human experience. As a feminist activist, Woolf saw in war a series of patriarchal values through which women were oppressed and, as a pacifist, she was radically opposed to war and wrote about the wounds that victimize women, especially. Susan Sontag explores Woolf's view of war as a man's realm, or, in her own words, "as a man's game," in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). I quote the following passage where Sontag refers specifically to *Three Guineas*: "Woolf's *Three Guineas*, appearing toward the close of nearly two decades of plangent denunciations of war, offered the originality (which made this the least well received of all her books) of focusing on what was regarded as too obvious or inapposite to be mentioned, much less brooded over: that war is a man's game – that the killing machine has a gender, and it is male." (5).

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the representation of women as victims may be observed particularly in relation to the characters Lucrezia Smith and Doris Kilman. The former, an Italian immigrant in England, feels deprived of the right to express her frustration and resentment at the war. The latter, a woman of high education but belonging to a lower social class, lost her job during war. This was possibly due to her German ancestry and, in addition to the subordination to her employer, Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, she refrains from sharing her opinions on war openly. In an article called "The Female Victims of the war in *Mrs. Dalloway*", Masami Usui describes Woolf's views of war and patriarchal oppression as follows:

The women who could do nothing but wait for their sons', husbands' and lovers' return are finally confronted with their deaths, yet have to continue to live with grief and pain. The war, therefore, embodies patriarchy, which oppresses women's true selves and deprives them of their voice. (152)

Note that, in addition to being a foreigner, Lucrezia is in charge of assisting her shell-shocked husband, which is twice as frustrating. Likewise, Kilman, after being "dismissed from school during war" (Woolf 12) works as a tutor to Elizabeth, whose mother sees her as "a brutal monster."

A mythical reference of women as victims, as Usui ponders, is vividly portrayed in *Clarissa*. Her identification with St. Margaret surpasses the realm of religious devotion. Usui explains that:

St. Margaret's in Mrs. Dalloway represents a dimension of women's history that has been ignored and forgotten within male-dominated history. St. Margaret's has been always in the shadow of Westminster Abbey as Clarissa is in the shadow of her husband. When Peter Walsh listens to St. Margaret's bells, he remembers Clarissa's voice "being the voice of the hostess" (74) and, at the same time, "reluctant to inflict its individuality" (74). Peter now discovers the reality of Clarissa's and understands her agony behind it. St. Margaret has played an important role throughout British history, a political "hostess" as is Clarissa. (154)

Although the bell toll is described as coming from St. Margaret's, it is more likely to have resonated from Big Ben. The clock tower, rising above Westminster Palace, is closely related to the British Empire, given its physical proximity to the British Houses

of Parliament. Also, its height may be read as a reinforcement of the hierarchy of power, a far more repressive symbol.

Victims are defined by the wounds they carry, and Woolf was keen to explore this detail as thoroughly as possible in the narrative. Although not necessarily affected by physical wounds, such as ex-soldiers who boast of their “honorable wounds”, women in wartime had silent wounds living deeply in their breasts. The word ‘wound’, from the Greek, *trauma*, as well as the themes of oppression and grief, were key elements to Woolf’s writing about the war, and their resonance possibly reveals the author’s desire to air them. In the article “Woolf’s Keen Sensitivity to War: Its Roots and Its Impact on Her Novels”, Bazin and Lauter associate the theme of wounds both to Woolf’s private life “The trauma of a series of deaths, first of immediate family and later of friends, coupled with the horror of two world wars had a similar impact on Woolf.”(18), and in relation to the characters in the novel:

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf demonstrates the cost of war not only through the suffering of Septimus and his wife but also through unhappy experiences of minor characters and through the memories and thoughts of all her characters. Woolf sets the tone of postwar English life in the first few pages of the novel. (18)

It seems reasonable that the wounds felt by Lucrezia and Kilman, whose countries of origin belong to the Axis, be paralleled. What is surprising about Woolf’s novel is the conversion on the lives of an ex-soldier and a wealthy housewife. Woolf’s technique of converging characters’ lives is described by herself in a diary entrance, from *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Vol II, 1920-1924*: “I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The

idea is that the caves shall connect, and each comes to daylight at the present moment.” (213).

This writing process is defined by Scott as “tunneling,” who reminds us that it is not until Clarissa’s party, or “the culmination of the plot” (lvi), that the trenches connecting Clarissa and Septimus are so dramatically shared. By the time the party occurs, Septimus has already committed suicide but, by contrast, Clarissa has never felt so alive, i.e., so deeply merged in the complexity of her thoughts on human existence. In an introductory chapter to the 2005 edition of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Scott points out that:

The party has a ghostly visitor in the form of Septimus Smith, and having heard of his death from the Bradshaws [one of whom was Septimus’ physician], Clarissa draws apart to accommodate him. She finds an affirmation of life from his throwing it away, her thoughts echoing his own feeling of the event. (Scott xxxv-lxviii)

Here is the point where the lives of Clarissa and Septimus are entrenched - - in the wounds that hurt both in silence, located in the mind, where the cost of war, that no one can precisely calculate, takes its toll.

Woolf’s literary achievement with *Mrs. Dalloway* has been acclaimed by critics such as Scott and Hynes who, respectively, paired her novel with the inventiveness of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and the poignancy of Eliot’s *The Wasteland*. Scott cites as an example “the hallucinatory dramas of the “Circe” brothel episode.” (liv) that, in Woolf’s novel, would be relived by different characters:

Septimus and Rezia Smith hear the repressive voice of proportion issuing from the mouth of the physician, Dr. Bradshaw. Septimus has hallucinatory episodes symptomatic of what we now call post-traumatic

stress disorder, and Peter Walsh has a dream sequence, with a discourse of its own, while snoozing in the park. (liv)

Hynes, on the other hand, enhances the historical vision of war in Woolf's novel, described in the same extent of vividness as in Eliot's poem:

Her subject was larger than a story of war; it was time, change, the irrevocability of loss, the ecstatic sharpness of the felt moment. But her novel is located in history, and like *The Wasteland* it has an historical vision. There was a time that was comfortable and happy, before war came with its cruelty and its madness, and ended all that. Now, in the world-after-the-war, the cruelty and madness remain; in the middle of the party, here's death. (345)

The passage elucidates how, in both novels, the modernist use of postwar subjective experiences conveys historical realism to the present moment. It illustrates, more importantly, the parallelism between literary and historical studies.

Literary experiment, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is parallel with the historical vision brought by the novel. Hutcheon recalls that: "Woolf and Joyce's experiments with limited, depth vision in narrative." (117). Again, Woolf and Joyce "exchange hats" - - it may be observed that, in modernist novels, history is re-created by means of self-consciousness and psychological realism, not necessarily by claims of objective reality.

Another aspect that has lured the curiosity of literary critics to *Mrs. Dalloway* is how it explores the theme of madness. Poole, for example, relates Septimus' condition to Woolf's personal experience of distress, in the article "We all put up with you Virginia: Irreceivable Wisdom about War": "Septimus's experience is one that Woolf knew all too well. So to show overt sympathy with the 'mad' Septimus Smith has something of the unsettling radicalness of the parable of the good Samaritan about it."

(82). Poole perhaps goes too far in stating that the character's drama was the same lived by the explicit author's. Sympathy, not necessarily empathy, is evoked by the character in relation to the other characters, mainly Rezia, Dr. Bradshaw, and, through the "tunneling" process, Clarissa. The latter and the ex-soldier have, in the words of Scott, a tunneling connection representing "the sane and the insane side by side." (Scott lx).

Concerning the psychological realism brought up by *Mrs. Dalloway*, Almeida's theory of "transgression" appears to be a more valid hypothesis than the speculations by the two above-mentioned critics. Having Woolf's essay "On Being Ill" as a basis for argumentation, she points out that Septimus and Clarissa "are already excluded from society through their 'illness,'" (Almeida 266). The author refers, respectively, to Septimus' shell-shock disorder and Clarissa's "apparently recovering from some mysterious ailment that is often mentioned throughout the novel - - 'she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness' (4)." which confined her to an attic room. Almeida establishes the connection between Gubar and Gilbert's article and Clarissa's withdrawal to an "attic-room" as "clearly evocative of the 'madwoman in the attic'" (264) and clarifies that "This is the room of a madwoman and also the cloister of a 'nun.' The repression of sexuality was for a long time one of the most common treatments for women's mental problems, a treatment that Clarissa apparently resents because it robs her of her woman's body, her *jouissance*." (265).

Septimus feels guilty in relation to his comrade's death (Evans), not to mention the frustration of being unable to give his wife a child. In Almeida's words, Clarissa's disappointment relies on the premise that she "feels entrapped in a marriage of convenience in which she is robbed of her sexuality and her identity, although she goes to great pains to convince herself (and especially others) that she is happy and fulfilled." (265) On the same page, Almeida explains that the housewife's partaking of the

soldier's pain is due to "a sense of fragmentation and loss of identity... symptoms of depressive and melancholic states that she shares with Septimus." (265) The author concludes that "While Septimus succumbs to his madness and kills himself, Clarissa tries to dispel her impulses to give in to illness by avoiding transgression of the symbolic and acting the role of the 'angel in the house.'" In this sense, the author assumes correctly that Septimus' suicide reveals his ability to transgress a kind of social order that Clarissa, on the other hand, has not been capable of, although one may argue that, in the end, Clarissa has committed her own kind of suicide, too. Almeida quotes the words of Emily Jensen to explain this kind of suicide, "one of the most common suicides for women, that respectable destruction of the self in the interest of the other." (qtd. in Almeida 269).

Yet, Clarissa's failure at transgressing may be accounted for her insertion in an upper-class society, according to which marriage is seen as a kind of social status. Class conflict appears constantly in the narrative, although it is certainly more emphasized between Clarissa and Miss Kilman, to whom Clarissa refers to as "a monster." The divergences between them may be accounted for by their different economical and marital status and, symbolically, the two women are mainly represented by their clothes and, by implication, their appearance. In this sense, Clarissa is defined as a woman who inherited values of high taste from her wealthy family, as follows:

"That is all," she repeated, pausing for a moment at the window of a glove shop where, before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves. And her old Uncle William used to say a lady is known by her shoes and her gloves. He had turned on his bed one morning in the middle of the War. He had said, "I have had enough." Gloves and shoes; she had a

passion for gloves; but her own daughter, her Elizabeth, cared not a straw for either of them. (Woolf 11)

It may be noted that Clarissa's upper-class values go back to a time before the war.

The following passage shows how Clarissa attacks her lower-class rival by describing her outfit. Again, there is a reference to the War, to the time when it took place:

Miss Kilman would do anything for the Russians, starved herself for the Austrians, but in private inflicted positive torture, so insensitive was she, dressed in a green mackintosh coat. Year in year out she wore that coat; she perspired; she was never in the room five minutes without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she was; how rich you were; how she lived in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be, all her soul rusted with that grievance sticking in it, her dismissal from school during the War – poor embittered unfortunate creature! (12)

The two women diverge in social class and looks, they nurture reciprocal feelings of rivalry but they have in common love for Elizabeth Dalloway. War deprives Kilman of her job at school but renders her the role of Elizabeth's private tutor. War would soon connect the two characters, as in another example of Woolf's "tunneling" process.

Clarissa describes Kilman's coat, constantly worn by her, as if it were some kind of uniform, or war's masculinization of women's bodies, the same war that coined the term "trench coat" and saw its wearing by women. This piece of information, which has become a kind of common-sensical allusion to World War I, turns out to have some validation: the trench-coat was designed in order to protect men fighting in the trenches from the cold. The Webster's dictionary entry confirms that: "It is a descendant of the

heavy serge coats worn by British, Canadian and French soldiers in World War I. Towards the Second World War, the trench coat became part of all enlisted men's and officer's kit, especially in the American forces: the US Army, US Army Air Corps, and the US Marine Corps." The "Image Gallery" in the Imperial War Museum's exhibition "Women and War" displays several WWI propaganda posters with women wearing trench coats, especially those belonging to Women's Royal Naval Service and Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

Concerning the First War and the change it brought to gender relations, it seems relevant to contrast, at this point, the masculinization of women's bodies (illustrated by character Miss Kilman) with the feminization of men's bodies (as in Septimus's mental disorder, which eventually made his body fragile and vulnerable). About Woolf's concerns for taste, texture and body, Das concludes that "the fabric of Woolf's prose becomes her critique.", followed by "The combination of pathos with repulsion, the involuntary flinching of young female bodies before what Brittain calls the 'jarringness' of even healed mutilation becomes very much part of the women's consciousness." (Das 184-85). Vera Brittain would spin her autobiography of the First War a few years after Woolf's novel, in 1933. Their narratives would be connected by similar threads, especially regarding how war inflicted psychological trauma and wounds on women.

2.3. VERA BRITAIN'S *Testament of Youth*

When Woolf read *Testament of Youth* for the first time, her impressions on Brittain's work and views on war seemed to cause her quite an impression. Karen Levenback recalls that: "Although she did not review it, Woolf read Brittain's war book with great eagerness ('extreme greed,' she said in her diary) and found it so 'moving' that she neglected other reading." (Levenback 115).

Writing consciously about the pain caused by the war to a woman may have even inspired Woolf to write "Professions for Women", the first working title for *Three Guineas* (1938), according to Levenback (115) and, somehow, helped Woolf cope with her own distress caused by the war, by writing about it. Levenback explains that:

Brittain's experience in writing her book anticipated Woolf's in that the pain caused by the war seemed not to be assuaged despite the passage of years and led to pain in writing about it, a circumstance that may explain why it took Woolf herself so long to confront her own experience of the war and to transform it to the stuff of fiction. (116-17)

Not only did the two women belong to the same friend's circle, they also had in common the fact of losing their loved ones to war: Woolf lost both her nephew Julian Bell, in Spain, 1937, and her friend Rupert Brooke, in April 1915. Levenback explains that:

Yet the Woolf's friends and colleagues in and around Bloomsbury (Vera Brittain, for example, and Rebecca West, Rose Macaulay, and Beatrice Webb), like the Woolf's themselves had played a part in the effort to keep the war and its experience alive in popular consciousness. (v-vi)

Brittain, as she recalls in her autobiography *Testament of Youth*, lost her fiancé, Roland Leighton, her brother, Edward Brittain, and her friend, Victor Richardson. The three men were educated at Uppingham School in Rutland. By the time they left school in the summer of 1914 they had become firm friends, dubbed by Roland's mother, Marie Leighton, 'The Three Musketeers.' Edward's connection with Roland would in some ways be strengthened by the beginning of Roland's relationship with Vera, though it is also clear that Edward was at first mildly jealous of his sister's involvement with his close friend. Linking them is Vera Brittain, passionate and intelligent, who gives up her studies in Somerville, Oxford, so that she can nurse in a military hospital. She served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse in London, Malta and France, from 1914 until 1918. After the war, she finished her studies in Oxford and made a postwar career as a writer, feminist and pacifist activist.

What Woolf and Brittain did not have in common would soon be reconciled after Woolf's reading of *Testament of Youth*, as Levenback explains:

For Vera Brittain, who had, like returning servicemen, seen the effects of the war on the front, there were no romanticized memories of combat. For Virginia Woolf, who experienced the war on the blacked-out streets of London, reading Brittain's *Testament of Youth* on 2 September 1933 "lit up a long passage." What Woolf found of special note was that Brittain "told in detail, without reserve, of the war" and that "these facts must be made known." (qtd. in Levenback 114)

One of the reasons that made Brittain's *Testament of Youth* a unique work, in terms of relevance to the cultural memory of England (it became a television serialization in 1978) was its innovative literary aspect: In *Women and World War I: The Written Response*, Dorothy Goldman reminds us that, prior to Brittain, "despair and

bitterness about the War were not emotions that were often expressed in women's fiction of this era." (138). Addressing questions concerning the reasons and the horror of the War and, particularly, what the boys who went to War had to suffer, made her work unique, in terms of relevance and interest among the British people. Goldman adds that: "One of the reasons for the success of *Testament of Youth* was that for the first time since the beginning of the War 19 years before, a woman had written 600 pages asking these kinds of questions over and over again." (138). Similarly to Woolf, the trauma and the wounds inflicted by war became part of Brittain's consciousness as a woman. Differently from Woolf, perhaps, Brittain acknowledges the universality of trauma that war caused to both women and men.

Another reason that may have led Vera Brittain to write *Testament of Youth* came with a letter she received from her fiancé, who was having a hard time fighting in the trenches of the First War, which asked the following question: "I wonder if your metamorphosis has been as complete as my own." (216). Roland's defying question had already been answered, just before the letter arrived, in a diary entry: "I feel I shall never be the same person again and wonder if, when the War does end, I shall have forgotten how to laugh." (Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth* 197).

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman refers to Brittain's experience as she writes of the "transformation of the subject who partakes of an apprenticeship in history through an apprentice in witnessing." (109-10), a recurrent feeling among British women who volunteered to work as V.A.D. nurses, a generation of young, upper-middle-class women who looked up to Florence Nightingale, the legendary nurse who became known as "the Lady of the Lamp", as well as Elsie Inglis and Louisa Garrett Anderson, both military doctors and militant suffragettes. Das compares and contrasts Brittain's "apprenticeship in history", which

goes unrecognized by her beloved, and Roland's transformative "direct participation" as follows:

For the First World War nurse, writing a journal, testament or memoir becomes a ritual in owning experience as much to oneself in the solitude of recollection as to the rest of the world: it is the record of a subjectivity whose trauma and effacement are simultaneously inherent in the act of bearing witness to another's wound, and ignored by a less than empathetic world. (Das 226)

It should be noted that recording trauma and effacement represented more than a nurse's "duty," it is also a significant part played by nurses on the recollection of cultural memory during wars. Another curiosity is that their writings are more resistant to censorship and deterioration, when compared to soldiers' reports from the battlefield.

For Vera Brittain and some of her contemporaries, nursing became a woman's experience of taking part in the male-dominated realm of the First War. From treating wounds to listening to injured soldiers' talks, First War nurses grasped the geographies of men's bodies and minds, something regarded as "improper" by most parents whose daughters were born between the late Victorian and early Edwardian ages. Nursing was the closest a woman could get to the battleground in those days; in Brittain's case, for instance, the only safe way to see Roland again. Two important points may be observed here: the inversion of male and female roles, as Vera went off to the battleground to see Roland, not vice-versa, as well as the evocation of the *mater dolorosa* theme: nurses having direct contact with the male bodies, assisting and healing their wounds, not to mention listening to their dramatic accounts of the War experience, and other stories that reinforced men's frailty - - which they would not likely share with other fellow soldiers, given the social conventions of Edwardian times.

V.A.D. nursing also allowed many women to evolve from tactile experience to the subjective activity of writing about the War, and Brittain's *Testament of Youth* may be regarded as one of its best examples. Das explains, in his introductory chapter, that:

The hand is a recurring trope in the memoirs of the nurses, being the usual point of contact with the injured male body. Hands dress wounds, clean instruments, habitually comfort, may even cause fresh pain, are often disgusted and in rare moments of leisure, the hand writes its varied life. (xxvi)

About women's having a hand in war, literary historians Gilbert and Gubar described war, in "Soldier's Heart: Literary men, Literary Women, and the Great War" as a "climatic episode in some battle of the sexes" (17), arguing that "women felt liberated, psychologically, financially, and even sexually." (18). It is important to add that such liberation came at a high cost, at the expense of psychological trauma and wounds of the women, similarly to Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as they were recorded in women's diaries, testimonials, and memoirs.

As to Brittain, the War cost her youth. At the age of nineteen, she reflects on the maturity she had quickly acquired in the War years, in contrast to the naiveté her diaries used to express, three years before. She writes in *Testament of Youth*:

By 1916, the optimistic ideals of earlier years had all disappeared from the title-page of my ingenuous journal; they were replaced by a four-line verse from the writings of Paul Verlaine which has always seemed to me to represent more precisely than any other poem the heavy sense of having lived so long and been through so much that descended upon the boys and girls of my generation after a year or two of war. (44)

The reference to Verlaine's sonnet seems to bring a key element to Brittain's decision to write a book. She quotes, on the same page, the last four verses from Verlaine's sonnet "Sagesse", written in 1881: "Oh, qu'as tu fait, toi que voilà / Pleurant sans cesse? / Dis, qu'as tu fait, toi que voilà / De ta jeunesse?" "Oh, what have you done, / You, who cried ceaselessly? / Tell me, what have you done, / What have you done about your youth?" (my translation.) Note how quickly the "metamorphosis" took place in Brittain's life, "after a year or two of war."

What may account for the title *Testament of Youth* is the thought Brittain kept that writing about the distress she and her contemporaries felt due to war it would probably have an impact on coming generations. She leaves a "testament" of a terrible incident that would more likely recede; yet, she acknowledges that, whatever may happen, it would never surpass the impact that the First War had on her generation of young women, who were deprived of the innocence of their youth. She explains that:

The annihilating future Armageddon, of which the terrors are so often portrayed in vivid language by League of Nations Union prophets, could not possibly, I think, cause the Bright Young People of to-day, with their imperturbable realism, their casual, intimate knowledge of sexual facts, their familiarity with the accumulated experiences of us their foredoomed predecessors, one-tenth of the physical and psychological shock that the Great War caused to the Modern Girl of 1914. (45)

Brittain relates the words "knowledge", "familiarity", and "experience" to the traumatic impact caused by the War. After having her innocence stolen from her, she sees herself performing a new social role, not necessarily a bad thing, but for which she had to pay a high price. The same price, perhaps, that women would later pay in World War II, although their direct participation in this event was a highlight for the creation women's

military roles. That is not the same as to say that it was less traumatic, though. The point here is, Britain seems to speak confidently about the reoccurrence of another war and its impact. History proved her right. As a result of the Treaty of Versailles (1919), The League of Nations, the international organization for world peace, was created, later to be known as The United Nations, in 1945, after the Second World War ended.

Britain's secondary motivation for writing her autobiographically-inspired book seems to be the urge of sharing, with the reader, her painful "initiation rite" of the War. It has been said by Elisabeth Porter, in "Women's Truth Narratives: The Power of Compassionate Listening", that women's narratives of wars have a crucial role in their overcoming traumatic pain caused by wars. She refers to "women's truth narratives" and defines the term, as well as its importance, as follows:

"Truth narratives" are stories about people's lives as they understand them. Others may interpret the "truth" of these "narratives" differently, but everyone has the right to tell her own story. This paper refers specifically to the truth narratives of women who have suffered personal pain during violent conflict, who have experienced the trauma of war—rape, loss of loved ones, maiming, and damaged self-dignity. For such women, as Gayatri Spivak expresses it, "autobiography is a wound where the blood of history does not dry." Truth narratives need to be told, or wounds fester and healing stultifies. (21)

"Truth" and "narratives" appear in quotation marks, given the subjectivity of the terms and the author's concern to convey both according to a woman's point of view. The author alludes to the "listener" community as it is formed by community members, classified as "peace builders", as well as public projects, sponsored both by governmental and non-governmental organizations, designed to bring comfort woman

war victims. She mentions as recent examples the “Healing Through Remembering” project, in Northern Ireland; the “Special Women Hearings” project, in South Africa, and the UNRISD (United Nations’ Research Institute for Social Development), with which Routledge Press has cooperated, in a project entitled “Routledge/UNRISD Research in Gender and Development.” Not only does the author acknowledge the seriousness of women’s personal pain, as in the four examples she lists, she also stresses the urgency in healing these wounds that, according to the quote by Spivak, cannot simply be healed by time. (qtd. in Porter 21).

Finally, it may be said that the metamorphosis experienced by Brittain, during the War years, seems to have helped build and reshape her narrative. Hynes alludes to how her views on War evolve with it. He compares a passage from her early diary, where she describes how her brother Edward was wounded in the Battle of the Somme, to the same episode, as it was rewritten in *Testament of Youth*, after the war and the author’s youth were over:

We could neither of us say much... but he smiled & seemed gayer & happier than he had been all through his leave. I think the splendid relief of having the great deed faced & over was uppermost in his mind then, rather than the memory of all he had been through on that day - - hereafter to be regarded as one of the greatest dates in history. (qtd. in Hynes 327)

If we take into consideration that her brother fought at the Somme since the first day of that battle, i.e., July 1 1916, it may be seen that seventeen years had passed when a mature woman and experienced nurse records, in *Testament of Youth*. The Battle of the Somme, led by British forces under the command of Sir Douglas Haig was, according to Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, described as “the largest

engagement fought since the beginnings of civilization.” (12) Fussell reports the disastrous figures: “Out of the 110,000 who attacked, 60,000 were killed or wounded on this one day, the record so far. Over 20,000 lay dead between the lines, and it was days before the wounded in No-Man’s-Land stopped crying out.” (13). The battle was ended: “On March 17, Bapaume - - one of the first-day objectives of the Somme jump-off, nine months before - - was finally captured.” (14). Brittain states the following:

Even then, neither of us could say much. He seemed – to my surprise... gayer and happier than he had been all through his leave. The relief of having the great dread faced and creditability over was uppermost in his mind just then; it was only later, as he gradually remembered all he had been through on July 1st, that Victor and Geoffrey and I realized that the Battle of the Somme had profoundly changed him and added ten years to his age. (282-83)

Note how the names of her two best friends, who also died at the War, are mentioned, suggesting that her views on the War evolved in cooperation with others. The original phrase “one of the greatest dates in history” is replaced by the acknowledgement of the physical stress that made her brother look older, similarly to what happened to Vera herself, whose youth had been stolen by the War. About the same passage, Hynes adds that: “The older Vera Brittain looks back across the years, no longer with pride but with pity.” (Hynes 435).

Pity, testimony, and trauma are built in the legacy transmitted by Brittain, in *Testament of Youth*, to the women of following generations. A mythical reference, to the Greek women weavers, may be noted in Brittain’s writing: it sounds as though she knew that war would inevitably reoccur and so would the fate of her women successors,

as if her account of pity and trauma would certainly resonate. Das writes about the historical implications of leaving such an inheritance:

Nursing and narration are integrally related in the project of reclaiming history as well as resisting its recurrence. At the core of each, in spite of the troubled and fractured ideology I have noted, is the impulse of preservation: just as the nurse sews up physical wounds and tries to save life, the narrator seeks to heal her mental wounds through the act of writing and preserve not just her subjectivity and experience but rather the memory and the knowledge of the cost of warfare. “Writing to expose wounds,” notes Higonnet, “is surely a first step toward healing wounds.” (Das 227; Higonnet xxxi)

It may be said that Brittain forecast the relevance of her testimony to the present and the future historical upcoming, and how they would affect other women, throughout different generations. And she handed it, in the fashion of a Greek *Moirai*, for other women writers to transmit it. Her hands meet ours as we read about her metamorphosis and try to understand our own.

2.4. PAT BARKER's *Regeneration*

The assumed importance of Brittain's writings as an inheritance to further generations turns out to be a valid hypothesis, if we consider that contemporary writers, such as Pat Barker, have perpetuated the tradition performed by Brittain and other writers, going far back in time to the Greek *moiras*. Not only does Barker provide a contemporary woman's gaze on the First War, *Regeneration* also offers particular exercise on the writing of history.

Like Brittain, she also wrote about 600 pages asking questions about what the boys who went to War had to suffer. *Regeneration* (1991) is Barker's first part of a trilogy of novels about the First World War, followed by *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995). The novel is the fictionalization of Siegfried Sassoon's stay in a mental hospital, Craiglockart, in 1917, shortly after he wrote "A Soldier's Declaration" protesting against the First War and its unnecessary extension. While he is treated by a psychiatrist, Dr. Rivers, whose methods were influenced both by Freudian views and Dr. Yealland's more "orthodox" approach, he meets patients Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen. After giving Owen valuable advice on his poem "Anthem for the Doomed Youth", Sassoon and Dr. Rivers become acquainted with Prior, another patient struck by post-traumatic stress disorder and homosexuality issues, complex themes to be explored by soldiers in the First War, when they were still seen as a threat to a fighting man's bravery and virility. Although Dr. Rivers' humanitarian attempts help Sassoon and the other inmates confront the trauma and pain that haunt them, it may be observed that the doctor's task consists of giving these patients proper care so as to assure their return to the battlefield.

Barker's use of intense imagination in order to reassess the past (of the First War) is, however, controversial, as far as it concerns historical narratives. In "The

Moral of the Historical Story: Textual Differences in Fact and Fiction”, Pihlainen explains that:

We are here reminded again of Hayden White’s exhortations that historians should make use of forms of narration that are common to contemporary literature; yet the idea that various viewpoints could be presented without assessment seems hostile to the task of historical narration. (10)

Note White’s explicit encouragement of fictional elements for the writing of history, especially in postmodern historical metafiction, which may be directly associated with *Regeneration*.

Nevertheless, Pihlainen ponders the importance of revisiting the past by means of imagination and seems to approach the essence of Barker’s metafictional exercise, as follows:

In taking liberties with focalization and attempting to leave out the authoritative voice of the historian-narrator, one possible way to counterbalance the one-sidedness of the perspectives provided by sources “speaking for themselves” could, of course, be through the introduction of fictional characters presenting alternative perspectives and opinions. (10)

The last two lines of the passage stress the use of many “I’s”, through which the past of the First War is observed in Barker’s fiction. Also contemporary is the concept that historical sources, which would traditionally “speak for themselves”, may do so in fiction.

It is a contemporary approach because this kind of debate has been prompted by Meta and Micro historians. Costa Lima reminds us of Barthes' assumption on *l'effet du reel* (1968), in De Certeau's *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (1975), as well as White and De Man. The Brazilian author refers, more specifically, to the cultural studies' debates of the seventies: "A distinção parece bastante forte para resistir, por um lado, ao questionamento epistemológico da historiografia, aguçado nos anos de 1970, quando Hayden White, que ataca diretamente aquela distinção, será especial objeto de atenção (e desprezo) dos historiadores, e, por outro, à variedade de enfoques da literatura, em que Paul de Man, com melhor repercussão, desempenhará o papel correspondente ao de White." (409). Lima is right to highlight the polemical nature of White's Metahistorical theory. However, White's ability to grasp the fictional technique used by contemporary writers of history is worth of admiration.

In the following passage there may be seen a kind of "prophecy" that would define current interdisciplinary debates, involving literary and historical studies. It also addresses the "fictionalization of history," a key element to Barker's writing about the War. White argues the following:

In my view, we experience the "fictionalization" of history as an "explanation" for the same reason that we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In both, we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably. (White, *Tropics of Discourse* 99)

A practical example of White's above-mentioned postulate is found in *Regeneration*, when the character Sassoon arrives at Craiglockart Hospital for psychiatric treatment, after having written his anti-WWI manifest, entitled "A Soldier's

Declaration.” The original document written by him (available at the U.S. Public Domain Organization website) matches the transcription made by Barker in her novel (3). The dialogue between Graves and Sassoon, supposedly right after the publication of the Manifest, is a fictional representation of the impact that the document might have had on his friend Graves, concerned with the reaction from local authorities.

Barker writes:

“What else could I do? After getting *this*.” Graves dug into his tunic pocket and produced a crumpled piece of paper. “A covering letter would have been nice.” “I wrote.” “No, you didn’t, Sass. You just sent me this. Couldn’t you at least have *talked* about it first?” “I thought I’d written.” They sat down, facing each other across a small table. Cold northern light streamed in through the high windows, draining Graves’s face of the little colour it had. “Sass, you’ve got to give this up.” (5-6)

The passage suggests that Graves bears a copy of “A Soldier’s Declaration”, possibly one that had been printed by local newspapers. It also implies that Graves disapproved of his friend’s way of protest, which was reported by Graves in his own autobiography, *Goodbye to All That* (1929). Also doubtful is their conversation further to the publication. It is important to note, however, that no matter how fictional this dialogue may have been, the document’s authenticity remain intact - - the original manifest, written by Sassoon, is available in the U.S. Public Domain website and viewers may access it free of charge. Fiction, here, has appeared simply for granting one of the many possible interpretations, an “illumination”, in White’s Words, we inhabit with Barker’s fiction.

Another elucidation appears when the character Dr. Rivers receives an envelope from his patient Siegfried (24), containing two of Sassoon's poems, "The General", and "To the Warmongers". The doctor's reaction, according to the narrative, is:

Rivers knew so little about poetry that he was almost embarrassed at the thought of having to comment on these. But then he reminded himself they'd been given to him as a therapist, not as a literary critic, and from that point of view they were certainly interesting, particularly the last.
(Barker 25)

Whether Sassoon wrote the poems as a kind of healing therapy and submitted them to his doctor may not be proved. The doctor's reading and appreciation of the poems, followed by his preference for "To the Warmongers" is an assumption. However, what is depicted in fiction does not alter Sassoon's compilation containing these and other poems - - the first compilation was originally published in 1919. Instead, Barker's fictional representation instigates the reader to think of what might have led Sassoon to write them, without changing a line of their content.

Barker's interplay of reality/ fiction does not dismiss in any respect the author's intent with the veracity of documents. The original medical report written by Dr. William Rivers, which allowed Sassoon to be readmitted to the Army, is the property of the Imperial War Museum's permanent archives - - the medical case sheet may be visualized in The Imperial War Museum's website. It is identical to Barker's transcription (71-2). In all the above-mentioned writings by Sassoon (the manifest and the two poems), as well as in the letter by Rivers, fidelity to the originals has been maintained by the fiction writer. In fact, a distinctive printing device warns the reader about the documents' authenticity: they are printed in the same font as the rest of the

text, except that it is one size smaller than the text containing the fictionalized conversations.

Multi-layered fictions and realities of the First War, which abound in Barker's prose, have attracted the attention of war scholars insofar as they address men's mythical view of war. Burns notes that :

Far more typical, however, were the attitudes of men who learned the bitter lessons of experience. In a recent novel on the war, *Regeneration* (1991), the historical character William Rivers, a psychiatrist who treats shell-shocked officers, muses on this gap between the Public School stories of glory and the reality: "Mobilization. The Great Adventure. They'd been *mobilized* into holes in the ground so constricted they could hardly move. (Burns, *Narratives of the Two World Wars* 23-24)

Through the use of fiction, war myths and emotions held by a whole generation of men, who fought from 1914-1918, are revisited by Barker. What is peculiar about this contemporary woman narrative is the emphasis on men's recurrent feelings of fear and despair, contrary to the values of masculine repression imposed upon those men. Feelings of vulnerability, largely expected from women, were to be found among soldiers and all the men involved in war activities, too. In the middle of the narrative, it may be seen that Dr. Rivers struggles against his compassionate impulses while assisting one of his patients, Prior. The doctor wonders:

He disliked the term 'male mother'. He thought he could remember disliking it even at the time. He distrusted the implication that nurturing, even when done by a man, remains female, as if the ability were in some way borrowed, or even stolen, from women – a sort of moral equivalent of the *couvade*. (107)

It should be reminded that Rivers' thoughts are tormented, on one hand, by an archetypal view of male behavior embodied by one of his man colleagues, Dr. Layard. On the other hand, his consideration of patients poses him more than an ethical dilemma, but a personal tendency to sympathize with the drama lived by his comrades in wartime.

River's lack of explanation for his deep commitment to the men who suffered in the trenches and sought help at Craiglockart culminates in a "reversed" self-image, according to which he might be acting like a WVAD nurse, not as a military doctor. His thoughts range from cowardice to sexual preferences, and he ponders whether his care for the men exceeds that expected by a male doctor. He says:

Worrying about socks, boots, blisters, food, hot drinks. And that perpetually harried expression of theirs. Rivers had only seen that look in one other place: in the public wards of hospitals, on the faces of women who were bringing up large families on very low incomes, women who, in their early thirties, could easily be taken for fifty or more. It was the look of people who are totally responsible for lives they have no power to save. (107)

I find worthy mentioning Rivers' vividness in portraying women wartime drama, not only in concern for his woman colleagues, WVAD nurses, but to the women who precociously lost their husbands to war and became the family's bread winner. More importantly, it reveals women's unconditional support for men in the battlefields, despite society's restrictions on their direct participation in war.

The importance of women's intervention in favor of soldiers can be seen in Classical Literature, mainly by Thetis, towards her son Achilles in the *Iliad*. One of the most elucidating attitudes of the mother goddess for her heroic son, however, has not

been mentioned in Chapter I intentionally. It may be found in Book XVIII and it illustrates more emphatically the inversion of men's and women's roles, just as Pat Barker's novel seems to address this topic more specifically than in the other three narratives.

The episode referred to is Achilles' sorrow for Patroclus' death. The depth of his grief is described in physical details. Fitzgerald's translation of the *Iliad* describes the pain felt by the most powerful of all Greek warriors as follows: "A black storm-cloud of pain shrouded Achilles./ On his bowed head he scattered dust and ash / in handfuls and befouled his beautiful face, / letting black ash sift on his fragrant chiton. / Then in the dust he stretched his giant length / and tore his hair with both hands." (*Il* 18. 22-27). It is so intense that it causes the women slaves to sympathize with their master's pain: "From the hut / the women who had been spoils of war to him / and to Patroclus flocked in haste around him, / crying loud in grief. All beat their breasts, / and trembling came upon their knees." (*Il* 18. 28-31). Next, Achilles weeps profusely, to the extent that his weeping may be heard by his mother, who dwells in the sea. Also moved by the great warrior's sorrow, Thetis's sisters, the Nereids, are compelled to join the mother goddess towards the Trojan shore, where her son is calling for help.

I quote the following lines from Fitzgerald's version: "And now Achilles gave a dreadful cry. Her ladyship / his mother heard him, in the depths offshore / lolling near her ancient father. Nymphs / were gathered round her, all the Nereids / who haunted the green chambers of the sea." (*Il* 18. 35-39). The spatial motion is important here: the cry resonates to the depths and the help comes ashore. These movements reinforce the idea of inversion, added to the great hero's vulnerability to pain, which leads him to cry for his mother's help. In the *Iliad*, the absurdity of such an inversion may be seen by a long listing of the Nereids' names (the list comprises ten lines), along with a reference to the

place they came from: “and other Nereids of the deep salt sea, / filling her glimmering silvery cave.” (*Il.* 18. 51-52). With great endeavor the women reach the Trojan surface, where the Myrmidon ships lied (*Il.* 18. 69-75). I quote the dramatic description of the mother’s meeting with her son: “Bending near / her groaning son, the gentle goddess wailed / and took his head between her hands in pity, / saying softly: ‘Child, why are you weeping? / What great sorrow came to you? / Speak out, do not conceal it.’” (*Il.* 18. 76-81).

After partaking in her son’s drama, the immortal mother must, at great pain, reveal her son’s tragic doom in the Trojan War, according to the following passage: “Letting a tear fall, Thetis said: ‘You’ll be / swift to meet your end, child, as you say: / your doom comes close on the heels of Hector’s own.’” (*Il.* 18. 107-9). Achilles accepts his fate, transcribed by Fitzgerald as “destiny”, from the original Greek word *moira*. Going back to the war and killing Hector, and, therefore, avenging Patroclus’ death, no matter if that cost him his life, is the only comfort that will come to Thetis’ son (emphasis given). It would make more sense to write “Peleus’ son”, for the remarkable men in Ancient Greece were referred to by patronimics. In this passage, however, given the proximity and the importance of the meeting between mother and son, I decided to refer to Achilles as “Thetis’ son.” Aware of her son’s fate, Thetis tells the Nereids to come back to the sea bosom, whereupon she goes up to Mount Olympus, where she will plead to Hephaestus to forge new armor for her son: “She rose at this and, turning from her son, / told her sisters Nereids: ‘Go down/ into the cool broad body of the sea / to the sea’s Ancient; visit Father’s hall, / and make all known to him. Meanwhile, I’ll visit / Olympus’ great height and the lord of crafts, / Hephaestus, hoping he will give me / new and shining armor for my son.’” *Il.* 18.138-144. Note the reverse of both roles and the importance of distances: the goddess mother intervenes in favor of her son once again,

and her mediation is contrasted by distance references, “go down”, “great height”, and other opposites, such as “Ancient” vs. “new and shining”, “sea” vs. “Olympus”.

In *Regeneration*, role inversion appears as Rivers behaves not as a male doctor, but as a mother. Those who are supposed to act like war heroes, for they survived a great part of the War, as brave soldiers do, urge their superiors for help, like children. While Prior yields to Rivers’ care, his lover, Sarah, struggles to maintain their home, as an ammunitions factory worker. Male and female roles are reversed, fictions and realities intermingle. In the gap between two extremes, history is regenerated: men disclose their frailty, women workers gain equal rights as men’s, and history’s “mobility”, using the term by Erich Auerbach, generates an evolution towards new directions for the humankind. He presents this concept in *Mimesis*, as he states that epochs and societies should be studied according to their own presuppositions. Historical events should not be only apprehended by abstract and general facts, in reality: “o material para tanto não deve ser procurado somente nas partes elevadas da sociedade e nas ações capitais ou públicas, mas também na arte, na economia, na cultura material e espiritual, nas profundezas do dia-a-dia e do povo, porque só lá pode ser apreendido o verdadeiramente peculiar, o que é intimamente móvel.” He concludes, on the same page that : “então é de se esperar que tais noções sejam também aplicadas à atualidade, de tal forma que também ela apareça como incomparavelmente peculiar, movimentada por forças internas e em constante desenvolvimento; quer dizer, como um pedaço de história, cujas profundezas quotidianas e cuja estrutura interna de conjunto se tornam interessantes, tanto no seu surgimento, quanto na sua direção evolutiva.” (Auerbach, *Mimesis* 395).

When seen by contemporary eyes, or I’s, the history of the First War does not appear as a frozen instance in time. What may be observed is that its history is made by

human experiences, recognizable by different generations in different times. There is a mimetic aspect to history, as Auerbach presupposed, that is perpetually regenerated. As inevitable as if it had been carefully treaded by a *Moirra*, but in contemporary days.

CONCLUSION

The distinguishing line from myth and history is not a clear one. Wars perpetuate throughout history and so do the social representations of women roles.

The epic where the last year of the Trojan War is described, the *Iliad*, dating from the late ninth to the eighth century BCE, based on oral tradition and conventionally attributed to a man author, abounds with references to women who have their historical representation evolved. Lefkowitz reminds us that “Since epics are made up of words, a commodity to which even Greek women had legal right, one must in any discussion of women’s role pay particular attention to what women say.” (Lefkowitz 26).

Homer ascribed important mythic and historical roles to women, respectively. Lefkowitz questions what the Trojan War would have been like without the presence of women. She ponders:

One might begin by asking what both epics, The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, would be like if there were no women in them. In the first place, neither story would have happened. The Trojan War would not have been fought, and Odysseus (assuming he had gone to Troy in the first place) would not have bothered to return home. (27)

Wars have helped reshaping women’s historical roles since the Classical Age, and some literary writings of the First War, especially those written by the women authors in this thesis, may help confirm that and contribute to a broader understanding of women’s essential part in the construction of the cultural memory of World War I.

One of the ways through which women’s social representation has evolved is due to their insertion in the workforce. Blundell warns us that this has taken place since

the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE), described mainly by Thucydides in *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Blundell argues that:

It is clear that in the fourth century there was still a stigma attached to the working woman; but the economic troubles which Athens experienced as a consequence of the Peloponnesian War and her subsequent loss of empire would have undoubtedly produced an increase in the number of women seeking employment, and some of them may, like Aristarchus's relatives, have been relatively well-born. (Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* 145)

The passage alludes to an Athenian man named Aristarchus who, according to Xenophon, had in his household nearly fourteen homeless female relatives, as a consequence of the Peloponnesian War. He would have encouraged them to start a wool-working business, which turned out to be profitable and personally rewarding for the working women and Aristarchus himself, who was later supported financially by those women living in his property. Thomas Martin, in *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times* (1996) reports that, after having made his plan to survive postwar financial crisis, Aristarchus would have befriended Socrates and asked for his advice: "The plan was a success, but the women complained that Aristarchus was now the only member of the household who ate without working. Socrates advised his friend to reply that the women should think of him as sheep did a guard dog-- he earned his share of the food by keeping away the wolves from the sheep." (167). Note the reconfiguration (by means of inversion) of social roles performed by men and women, largely perpetrated by the Peloponnesian war, in the fourth century BCE.

Greek warrior goddess Athena has been a source of inspiration for men and women in wartime ever since the Classical Age. By the time the First War broke out it

would not have been otherwise. In the literary works contemplated by this research the most intriguing reference to Athena may be found in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The character Miss Kilman, hated by Clarissa, the protagonist, is described in a way that may resemble Athena:

Odd it was, as Miss Kilman stood there (and stand she did, with the power and taciturnity of some prehistoric monster armoured for primeval warfare), how, second by second, the idea of her diminished, how hatred (which was for ideas, not people) crumbled, how she lost her malignity, her size, became second by second merely Miss Kilman, in a mackintosh, whom heavens knows Clarissa would have liked to help. (123)

Critics such as Scott have seen here an analogy to Britannia, the female symbol of the British Empire (Scott, Introduction lxvi). However, it must be taken into consideration that Britannia is herself a Roman variation of Athena. Besides, the goddess after whom the kingdom was named is more likely to appear in a seated position, with trident and helmet.

Note that the reference to the armored goddess Athena, whose various tasks in the Homeric epics included warfare, is associated with the woman who is in charge of instructing Clarissa's daughter, Elizabeth. Apart from having an in-depth historical background, "Her knowledge of modern history was thorough in the extreme." (Woolf 122) Miss Kilman is Elizabeth's tutor: "She did out of her meager income set aside so much for causes she believed in; whereas this woman did nothing, believed nothing; brought up her daughter – but here was Elizabeth, rather out of breath, the beautiful girl." (123) One of the reasons why Clarissa despises her is the possibility that her daughter's views might be influenced by Kilman, or taken forth by Elizabeth, whose taste for studies and interest for the history of her country may suggest an analogy to

Elizabeth I that surpasses the homonymic realm. The following passage refers to a lesson given by the tutor, about the War:

And she talked too about the war. After all, there were people who did not think the English invariably right. There were books. There were meetings. There were other points of view. Would Elizabeth like to come with her to listen to So-and-so? (a most extraordinary-looking old man).

Then Miss Kilman took her to some church in Kensington and they had tea with a clergyman. She had lent her books. Law, medicine, politics, all professions are open to women of your generation, said Kilman. But for herself, her career was absolutely ruined, and was it her fault? Good gracious, said Elizabeth, no. (127)

As the passage stresses the complicity between teacher and student, it may be inferred that the mother-daughter relationship was compromised. In terms of identity, Kilman was closer than Clarissa to Elizabeth, and the educational background she acquired with her tutor would make Elizabeth's history a more successful one, probably a doctor (133) in comparison with her tutor's, ostracized in postwar England for her German ancestry.

Another critic, Usui, has associated Miss Kilman with the feminists of the British suffrage movement, who opposed war and were mobilized "in peace groups in eleven European countries by 1915." (Usui 159). The critic describes Kilman as follows:

Kilman, as the most of the radical feminists against the war, has no social rank or status. She is, however, a highly educated woman. Women's higher education began to be reformed and encouraged with the establishment of Queen's College for women in London in 1848 and of Bedford College in London in 1849. (160)

It may be assumed, from this passage, that Elizabeth would inherit the cultural legacy of her teacher and, as a feminist doctor, do justice to her countrywomen's tradition as military suffragettes, pioneered by Elsie Inglis and Louisa Garrett Anderson, for instance.

Despite the scale of mass destruction, the First War brought unprecedented work opportunities for women. In *The First World War*, historian Keith Robbins reminds us about women's significant insertion in the workforce during the War years and presents figures that demonstrate how the number of employed women oscillated, in a comparative scale, from 1914 to the four coming years:

There were, for example, 125 women working at Woolwich Arsenal in 1914 and 25,000 in July 1917. Three and a quarter million British women were employed in July 1914 and a little under 5 million at the close of war – the expansion being most rapid in the middle years. In France by late 1918 half a million women were directly working in war industries and some 150,000 occupied secretarial and other ancillary positions in the army. Both of these figures represented a major change from the position in 1914. (Robbins 155)

Robbins highlights, however, that women's jobs were considered under-paid in comparison with men's. Women's lower wages generated social debate in England and they "led to awkward questions being asked about equal pay, which trade union officials found scarcely more congenial than their employers did." (161).

Although women's salaries were still far from being satisfactory, the figures shown by Robbins lead us to think that career opportunities for women were in a constant raise. More importantly, debates on equal income had been launched. Having

been granted possibilities of emancipation and self-support, postwar English women reveled in the idea of independence.

West approaches the idea of independence in *The Return of the Soldier*, as character Jenny engages in thoughts of self-maintenance, provided that her cousin Chris would no longer be able to support the three women financially. Jenny admires Margaret's example in helping Chris in every possible way and finds an inspiration for her own life in that. Jenny ponders that:

It means that the woman has gathered the soul of the man into her soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quite for a little time. That is a great thing for a woman to do. I know there are things at least as great for those women whose independent spirits can ride fearlessly and with interest outside the home park of their personal relationships." (62)

It is worth to mention the poetic description of the nobility of a woman's work in the passage. Also, the term "independent spirits" suggests an idea of humanitarian effort, rather than man/women rivalry, in wartime, when men's bodies were being constantly destroyed and could use the cooperation of women's bodies, as though they were taking shifts in war, in the experience of human collapse.

In fact, Higonnet emphasizes how women's writings on the First War seem to pay special attention to the body: "The intensely detailed observation of the destruction of the body is one of the hallmarks of women's testimony about war." (149). Although Higonnet's statement may be applied to women war writers in general, nurses, for practical reasons, were the one who remained closer to the wounded bodies of men who fought in the battlefields. In this sense, Vera Brittain's memoirs in *Testament of Youth* excel the sensitivity of her fellow women writers: Brittain's contact with men's exposed

flesh drew her a bit closer to their minds, too. Das warns that “While much attention has been paid to the war neuroses of the soldiers, the experience of the nurses may lead us to reconceptualise contemporary notions of trauma through moments of contact with the damaged body.” (31). The quote suggests her proximity to men’s neurosis and somehow highlights the importance of her writing for a better understanding of the pain felt by those men who, in the most part, chose to remain silent about their sorrow, due to social conventions, back in the first decade of the twentieth century. Nurses’ diaries carried not only medical records but an important share women had of the cultural memory of the First War.

Brittain’s autobiographical novel confirms men’s vulnerability to pain, the high price they had to pay for the War (the cost to their bodies and minds) and stresses the evolution of women’s awareness and the new social roles they were designed to. Higonnet adds that:

Many [women] understood that they stood at a historical crossroads, when women were entering into occupations from which they had previously been barred. This war differed from previous wars in the roles that were publicly accepted for women. That change is reflected in both the content and the style of women’s autobiographical writing, which reveals a consciousness that women’s roles deviated from the ‘home front’ domesticity to which ideology consigned them. (150)

The passage stresses how the ideological threshold that divided men and women was surpassed in the First War, and how soldiers and non-combatants started seeing each other as equals. It may be added that women’s conscious social status had a far more important role: that their work had as important a function as men’s claim of having participated in combat.

Contemporary women readers and writers, such as Pat Barker in *Regeneration*, look back in admiration to the key roles performed by those women in the early twentieth century, and their narratives of the First War persist in time and revitalize our memories of what it may have been like to live that terrible event in the flesh. Barker's novel shows, through its male characters - - and this is also true about West's female characters *The Return of the Soldier* - - the change that World War I brought to gender relations.

Levenback acknowledges the innovation brought by Barker's novel and reminds us of the legitimacy of writing about the pain that women experience in wartime, as she concludes that:

Still others (such as the groundbreaking works of Lynne Hanley and Pat Barker) blur the boundaries between biography, history, and literature altogether. And, because there are such obvious benefits to this approach, there is also a possibility that the absence of boundaries will deprive us of both the pleasure of and insight from tracing the sometimes circuitous, but always purposeful, route taken by Virginia Woolf in coming to terms with her own experience of the war. (v)

Regeneration, the term used in biology for the replacement of a damaged organ by formation of new tissue, acquires a similar meaning when applied to women's war narratives: that the evolving historical representation of women, amplified by the First War, helped us shape who we are today. And the tissue textiles they started weaving, it may be said, are now gently handed to the women writers of the twenty-first century to be redesigned once again, when war narratives are no longer "No Woman's Land."

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