

**A CROWD IN THE VOICE:  
WWI DIARIES OF BRITAIN AND WOOLF**

**A CROWD IN THE VOICE:  
FIRST WORLD WAR DIARIES OF VERA BRITTAIN  
AND VIRGINIA WOOLF**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examine the sections of Vera Brittain's diary and Virginia Woolf's diary that were written during the First World War. My study identifies the extent to which each diarist succeeds in expressing herself within a culture which is dominated by masculine values of patriarchy and militarism. An initial premise from which the study arises is that men and women may respond differently within a given context and that women's responses to war have often been suppressed or overlooked within a male-dominated context.

To analyze the war-time diaries I have divided the research into three areas: the diarist's relationship to social structures, the diarist's interpretation and use of the dominant language, and the diarist's relationship to the diary as a vehicle for self-expression. Brittain's and Woolf's backgrounds and literary ambitions are factors which determine each woman's attempt to find her own voice.

From the analyses I conclude that Vera Brittain is the less able to understand and write honestly about her war experience as she is drawn into the masculine perspective and becomes dependent upon it in her grief. Virginia Woolf attempts to define her individuality and her writing by removing herself from the war and masculine ideology. However, in so doing she writes self-consciously and constructs voices which may or may not be authentic, because they define themselves in opposition to the prevailing values and literary traditions.

Each diary reveals the tension between the diarist and the dominant culture, and exposes the existence of a feminine voice.

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## INTRODUCTION:

### Patriarchy, Language, and the Diary Genre

The failure to see the different reality of women's lives and to hear the differences in their voices stems in part from the assumption that there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation. By positing instead two different modes, we arrive at a more complex rendition of human experience which sees the truth of separation and attachment in the lives of women and men and recognizes how these truths are carried by different modes of language and thought.  
(Gilligan 173-174)

In spite of a cultural bias towards a single voice, the diaries of women reveal the possibility of "two different modes" of thought. During the First World War, a single discourse dominated the cultural consciousness, and yet the writing of women in this period suggests that another vision of reality, although suppressed, existed outside of what was publicly espoused. The section of Vera Brittain's diary dated 1913-1917 and the section of Virginia Woolf's diary dated 1915-1919 provide the basis for a study which seeks to identify the tensions which confront Brittain and Woolf as they attempt to articulate their own personal experiences during the war.

The diaries mentioned above are of particular interest for a study of

women's voices. The societal values and the literary traditions which underpin the Great War epitomize patriarchy and therefore clearly delineate a system of beliefs which is integral to understanding the position of these two writers both inside and outside the system. Claire Tylee identifies "the heroic pageantry of war", the dominant ideology, as one based on "a sense of national and racial superiority ... It was such dominant cultural beliefs which formed the very fabric of social reality" (Tylee 46). Also, the two women represent a range of experiences: where Vera Brittain was actively involved as a V.A.D. nurse, Virginia Woolf remained insulated from the immediacy of the war. Vera Brittain's subjectivity permeates her writing, whereas Virginia Woolf's comparative objectivity gives her a critical distance from which to contemplate the connection between the war experience and the female writer. Finally, the diary genre is particularly instructive for this study because the diarist's remarks may be little affected by the demands of public discourse. More importantly, readers, who are themselves distant from the diarist, may be able to see what the diarist cannot: the degree to which she has in fact freed herself from the constraints of the popular voice.

The study of the individual voice may be approached by identifying the individual's relationship to the cultural context, the dominant language system, and the diary as a means of self-expression. Through such an analysis of the two diaries, one can better understand the ways in which each woman copes with the

war and the means by which each tries to render her experiences and attitudes during this time period. Issues concerning self-knowledge, identity and honesty are connected to the development of the feminine voice and perspective as they are revealed in the war-time diaries of Brittain and Woolf.

The individual voices of the two writers arise from their reactions and responses to their society and therefore they must, first of all, be understood within the cultural context of the First World War. The masculine values of the patriarchy have constructed the cultural myths from which Brittain and Woolf consciously and unconsciously try to disentangle their own perceptions of truth. While a rebellion against the moral and rhetorical structures of the Edwardian era and the war has been recognized in the works of many male writers, the works of female writers must be considered from outside this gender-enclosed system, because, regardless of whether they share a sense of marginalization with certain male writers, they also are alienated by virtue of the fact that they are women.

Secondly, this thesis will defend the contention that women, by virtue of their sex, are doubly removed from those resources which allow them to understand and authenticate their experiences and perspectives. Feminist theories of language will establish the critical framework within which the linguistic qualities of the diaries will be analyzed.

Thirdly, the thesis will focus on the diary as a genre. The diarist's relationship

with her diary either fosters or impedes her relationship with "truth" and "reality" and permits different degrees of public and private exposure. Examining the type and purpose of Brittain's and Woolf's diaries will offer another way of understanding the frequent discrepancy between what they say and what they mean.

The cultural and literary context for the two diaries is identified by Anthea Trodd: "The Edwardian insistence on the identification of literature with the national and imperial spirit" marks this period as one in which "the voice of the masculine ruling class was particularly dominant in the culture" (Trodd 6). By recognizing the inherent connection between patriarchal values and war-time values, one can more completely understand the voice of "the masculine ruling class" and its aggressive nature. Samuel Hynes lists those values which tend to dominate in war time and those values which are considered secondary in a patriarchal construct:

It is the nature of war to diminish every value except war itself and the values war requires: patriotism, discipline, obedience, endurance. Other values, which in time of peace would be thought civilized - freedom of thought, tolerance, a broad and generous receptiveness to culture - these will be devalued, because they are unwarlike. (Hynes 57)

This polarization of values has often been used by war-time researchers to explain both the enthusiasm for (or at least the unconditional acceptance of) the war by

the majority, and the disillusionment about, and rejection of, what had been so forcefully espoused by the Establishment. Malcolm Bradbury's essay in *Tensions and Transitions* lists numerous texts written by men between 1922 and 1926:

[Many of them] reveal a double identity; they show us both the prewar Modernist excitements and the postwar confusions and miseries, the Futurist promise and the fragments that we shore against our ruins. They both separate and bridge the two eras of Modernism. (Irwin, Kinkead-Weekes, Lee 5)

Rupert Brooke, a product of the ideology which has often been held responsible for the war, also perpetuated it: "The values he had apparently died for, Honour and Nobleness, had already been established for his generation by their education and childhood reading about 'the adventure of Empire'." His "idealisation as both a mythical Greek hero and national Christian martyr" was most firmly entrenched, especially after he died on St. George's Day, 1915, in the Dardanelles (Tylee 78). This movement in war-time consciousness towards myth, "towards fiction", is what Paul Fussell believes developed alongside British "verbal delicacy", which established "an atmosphere of euphemism as rigorous and impenetrable as language and literature skilfully used could make it" (Fussell 175). In other words, much of the war-time rhetoric and literary aesthetic was propaganda designed to perpetuate militaristic values - patriarchal values.

That many men were struggling with the masculine mythology and ideology of war is a given. However, the value system which rejected the pre-war values

and became the ideology of the post-war era is, I believe, another masculine construct: the opposite side to the binary equation which defines a masculine paradigm. For instance, those who had fought in the trenches believed that the war had created two distinct Britains: "The Fighting Forces, meaning literally the soldiers and sailors who had fought, as opposed to garrison and line-of-communication troops, and the Rest, including the Government" (Graves & Hodge in Fussell 89). Sassoon clearly identifies the polarization of *men* in post-war Britain: "The man who really endured the War at its worst was everlastingly differentiated from everyone except his fellow soldiers" (Fussell 90). While survivors of the trenches had become disillusioned with the Romantic version of war, they established themselves as an elite group. Other men could not possibly understand the truth of war: the knowledge of the binary oppositions between "us" and "them", between life and death. Those men too young to have been involved felt the need to wage a war with their elders - their school authorities and their governments. Christopher Isherwood writes of his contemporaries in the middle of the 1920's:

Like most of my generation, I was obsessed by a complex of terrors and longings connected with the idea 'War.' 'War,' in this purely neurotic sense, meant The Test. The test of your courage, your maturity, of your sexual prowess. 'Are you really a Man?' (Fussell 110)

Women do not fit into this definition of the self which determined the post-war

consciousness. They had not shared the trench experience. The binary opposition which was thought to encompass women is specious because it implies that women were within the construct, when they were, by nature, precluded from it.

The idea that the belief systems and social structures of a culture are constructions, rather than inherent designs of nature, is fundamental to the theses of both Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, and Samuel Hynes' *A War Imagined*. Both texts reveal how the ideology of the ruling class in Britain permeated the society and created what we have traditionally believed to be the pre-war and post-war consciousnesses. Fussell writes:

Logically there is no reason why the English language could not perfectly well render the actuality of trench warfare ... The problem was less one of 'language' than of gentility and optimism; it was less a problem of 'linguistics' than of rhetoric....We have made *unspeakable* mean indescribable: it really means *nasty*. (Fussell 169-170)

While many men involved in the war were left "speechless" by their experiences - that is, they were unable to describe their experiences within the traditional rhetoric - their confusion was considered legitimate, and the language they did employ was accepted as an expression of protest. By the word "protest", I mean their language was a response to an accepted norm even as it claimed to represent a "new" way of describing reality. However, as noted in the introduction to *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*:

The authentic voice and the intensity of moral conflict to be found in the finest works of a poet like Wilfred Owen created a new set of touchstones for the literature of war; because those who gave voice to the experience of the trenches were so imbued with the classics, they became keepers of a new canon. And despite the fact that their writings exposed the mythical quality of received notions of masculinity, they could not help creating fresh myths that were also identifiably masculine. (13)

One of the "cruxes of the war", described by Paul Fussell as "the collision between events and the language available - or thought appropriate - to describe them" (169), suggests that anti-war literature resulted from a clash between what actually happened in war and what militaristic rhetoric claimed war was all about. The dominant ideology and its corollary create the tension of opposites which determines the structure of patriarchy: a system based on conflict and hierarchy.

Samuel Hynes also describes the dissenting men's voices in terms of the established voice. Hynes writes of two rhetorics: "one was present from the war's beginning. The other kind emerged only as articulate men experienced the trench world, and tried to record what they had seen there. And women saw the damaged men returning from that world, and experienced loss and grief" (Hynes 114). Hynes groups women with those men who returned from the trenches and employed an "anti-rhetorical way of rendering war", and yet the soldiers were explicit in their belief that no one who had not seen what they had seen could

possibly understand or describe the experience as they could. This contradiction, which exposes a tendency to misrepresent women's responses to the war, is not surprising when one seeks to understand women within a system of cultural and rhetorical beliefs designed for and by men. In such a context, women's war experiences are considered secondary to those of the men, and many of their experiences remain unexpressed; according to Hynes, writers of this era could employ either the traditional rhetoric or the new anti-rhetoric, two sides of the same coin. If, however, women and men "are positioned differently in patriarchal order and this in itself makes it possible to speak of women and men as 'inhabiting different worlds'(Bernard, 1973)" (Spender 78), then women's true voices cannot be circumscribed by the parameters Hynes identifies.

The divisiveness within the culture, and consequently the antagonistic views which arise when two value systems clash, naturally lead to the superior/inferior and ally/enemy mentality which is fundamental to the values of the military and to those of the patriarchy: "Much of the strength of men's literature of war derives from the tensions between patriotism and criticism" (Higonnet *et al.* 15). Therefore, those men who opposed Edwardian values and the government which they blamed for the war, were really not rejecting the patriarchy, but rather helping to define its inherent structure; their vision was a confrontational response to the existing system rather than an abdication from the whole notion of conflict.

Following this line of argument, Dale Spender's statement illuminates how patriarchy is defined by binary opposites, and how women are *outside* of this equation:

In a patriarchal society [women] make sense of the world by dividing it into male/female, right/wrong, superior/inferior and while we continue to divide the world according to these man-made rules we contribute to our own muted state. Our oppression 'makes sense' because of the reality we have had imposed upon us. (Spender 189)

The premise that reality is constructed gives rise to the premise that there can be more than one reality. This definition of patriarchy, and the recognition of the power of patriarchal mythologies, support the development of my argument concerning Brittain and Woolf and their conscious and unconscious relationships with these constructs.

While this study is concerned with what Brittain and Woolf were experiencing during war, how they were expressing themselves and what may be concluded about their self-awareness and the emergence of their voices, it does not intend to reach any conclusions by grouping their voices with those of the contemporary male writers. Such a reading of Brittain's and Woolf's diaries would depend upon what Geoffrey Leech calls the "male and minus male" order of language. It would, in fact, undermine the integrity of this study because, given the semantic rules of our language, it would negate the possibility of revealing the

voices of Brittain and Woolf, measuring and analyzing them in a system which impedes their self-expression. Julia Stanley supports Leech when she writes that, in language constructed by and for the patriarchy, semantic space is nonexistent for females. "For women who do not wish to be compared to men there is 'nowhere to go' in the language" (Spender 21). Therefore, to uncover the "space" or to hear the silent and/or suppressed women's voices, I cannot compare their writing with that of men, even though I must identify qualities of the symbolic system of the dominant literary aesthetic in order to recognize where and how the meanings of the diaries may be understood.

Brittain's and Woolf's use of the language available to them to describe their experiences and formulate their own visions of reality, will illuminate the extent to which each is able to express herself within the dominant language system. The following critique is based on a perspective which approaches the literature of women "first of all as a clue to how [women] live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative" (Rich 35). Specifically, the choice of words and their connotations becomes relevant to this study if we believe, as do Dale Spender, Adrienne Rich, Virginia Woolf and many other feminist theorists, that the connotations which come to dominate cultural perceptions of words are determined by, and are

representative of, the perspective of the male sex.<sup>1</sup> If so, how can women write what they mean, and where can they find the words which will truly express their ideas to others? The problem "lies not in the words but in the semantic rule which governs their positive or negative connotations" (Spender 29).

Dale Spender's thesis in *Man Made Language* is that we are born into a symbolic order which is patriarchal, and that the language, "the rules for meaning", are constructs which define that order (Spender 3-4). As a result, all words, "regardless of their origin - which are associated with females - acquire negative connotations, because this a fundamental semantic 'rule' in a society which constructs male supremacy" (Spender 18):

Men have not supplied meanings which undermine their power, diminish their prestige, or detract from their image. Intentionally or otherwise they have formulated a semantic rule which posits themselves as central and positive, as the norm, and they have classified the world from that reference point, constructing a symbolic system which represents patriarchal order. (Spender 58)

Likewise, Virginia Woolf writes that men and women inhabit different "rooms" and that "the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room" (*Room* 87). While I accept Spender's thesis that men have constructed a superior/inferior relationship between men and women through the semantics of

the language, I am not interested in outlining the oppression of women through language. Rather, I am interested in tracing the language dilemma facing Brittain and Woolf during the war by studying their word choices and looking for the "silences" which result when the words and their accepted meanings appear incompatible.

The diary genre as a forum for each writer's self expression is a final discussion point of this thesis. Robert A. Fothergill, in *Private Chronicles*, outlines the questions that are important to an analysis of the diaries of Brittain and Woolf:

what kind of reader is presupposed here? what sort of response is the presentation calculated to elicit? to what extent does the diary-persona try to impose a controlled impression of himself, instead of simply allowing an impression to be formed? to what extent is the diary-monologue a performance in a role? At the same time another set of questions arises as to the effects upon individual self-projection of prevailing conventions of style. (Fothergill 96)

These questions are integral to a study of the voices within the diaries because they identify the self-imposed constraints upon the authors and therefore illuminate each writer's self-image, self-awareness and self-denial.

Since the diary is thought to be a personal genre because it encourages its author to reveal the dailiness of her life or to reflect on her life, one would expect to better understand Brittain and Woolf from reading their diaries. This is not

altogether true, because the diary is a self-conscious construction and therefore it may lead its author to be disingenuous:

Granted, for many of us privacy is often more comfortable and less challenging. But even when we are scrawling in a diary, selfhood may be said to be something we *describe*. We may reveal more shameful facts about ourselves, but that is not the same thing as being real. (Trautmann Banks xiv)

The way in which Brittain and Woolf relate to their diaries is, however, pertinent to this thesis because it exposes the extent to which each diarist is honest, both with herself, and with a perceived audience. The "lies" and the "truth" with which Brittain and Woolf are consciously and unconsciously engaged help readers to understand the relationships between the diarists' private and public discourse.

Through studying the two diaries within the cultural context, through identifying the ways in which each woman internalizes and interprets the dominant language and the rhetoric of war, and through recognizing the image of self which each writer believes and constructs for herself, I will explore the possibility that a more complete understanding of Brittain's and Woolf's relationship with the war may be realized. Such a relationship between the female diarist and the public consciousness will contribute, perhaps, to a more complete acknowledgment of the war's effects on all of its participants. While Paul Fussell's study of the war and modern memory depicts the impact of war on the male consciousness, "the memory he wants to create of soldiers as the tragic victims of war, can survive

only if we imagine war as impinging on no one but soldiers" (Hanley 31). The emergence of a female voice during war-time illustrates not only how women responded to war, but consequently how they perceived themselves as individuals within a society obsessed with masculinity. To use Virginia Woolf's own words, "when a subject is highly controversial - and any question about sex is that - one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold" (*A Room of One's Own* 4).

## CHAPTER TWO:

### The War-time Diary of Vera Brittain

I only know that the strange, irresistible, yet beautiful shadows of greater things, which have puzzled yet fascinated me for so long, shape themselves into a world not of this one, but in it, since I am in it, in which visions and imaginations & ideals become sometimes more real than the everyday world.  
(Vera Brittain's diary, 1911, D1, memorandum from 1910)

This passage expresses the enthusiasm of an idealistic, sensitive and ambitious eighteen-year-old, in marked contrast to the despondent tone of Vera Brittain's war-time writing a few years later. Comparing the passage above to Brittain's war diary accentuates the war's profound impact on her life, and brings readers closer, perhaps, to understanding fully the horrors she experienced. The deaths of her fiancé, Roland Leighton, her two close friends, Geoffrey Thurlow and Victor Richardson, and finally her beloved brother, Edward, during the war, left Brittain emotionally traumatized. However, while Brittain's mental and emotional state was drastically altered by the war, certain social tensions she faced while writing as a V.A.D. nurse, are similar to those found in the diary accounts she wrote when she was a provincial middle-class girl. Despite the change in her circumstances between 1911 and 1915, Brittain's diary, throughout, reveals the anxiety she felt

because of her personal struggle with the social norms. The "shadows" which Brittain found "irresistible", yet slightly taboo, were constantly forcing their way into her consciousness and causing her to construct a reality which was "sometimes more real than the everyday world." Can one dismiss Brittain's "reality" as the indulgent fantasy of a naive young woman, or is the inclination to dismiss her "reality" indicative of the patriarchal system's response to dissent? Does her writing reveal that there existed a discrepancy between the social and linguistic norms and the experiences of the female writer? Her anxious and cautious feelings about her own "visions and imaginations" illustrate, I believe, a woman's view of herself and her own mind in a culture which defined male experiences and perspectives as the norm. Within a patriarchal society, which Brittain's clearly was, "to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way *is* in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination" (Rich 43).

To understand Vera Brittain's response to the war, one must understand her response to her society: how her social role constructed one vision of who she was and what she believed, and how that same role denied her "imagination", her own perception of reality. Considering that Brittain was the pampered daughter of a middle-class mill owner, she was unusually aware of, and sensitive to, the personal and political subordination of her sex; however,

[f]or all her developing feminist consciousness and her forcefully expressed desire to escape from the provincial society in which she had been raised, she remained entrammelled by that society's conventional ideas of class, politics and nationalism. (Berry & Bostridge 61)

Sharon Ouditt outlines the classist nature of the Voluntary Aid Detachment which Brittain, at the age of twenty, joined in August 1915. Since the V.A.D. only accepted "ladies" of higher class and education, Vera entered into a service which was based on a prescribed system of beliefs. The V.A.D.'s uniform "had a certain mystique - it was a prize, a symbol of one's coming of age, of having entered the Symbolic Order" (Ouditt 18). While Brittain was inspired by what she labels "truth" or "the stern labour for love's sake", which she believed was to be found in nursing (March 26, 1915), I believe she did not consider that this form of "feminine piety ... implied deference to masculinity, militarism and the patriarchal nation state" (Ouditt 7). While Brittain needed to believe that her duties and those of her loved ones were supporting a just cause, her conscience questioned the "truth" behind militaristic values. When Roland expressed his cynicism about the war effort to Vera in a letter, she wrote in her diary, "I wonder if he really thinks that, & if he would agree with my non-militarism now. I am not sure that I agree with myself in all I said to him" (April 25, 1915). Brittain's confusion remains unresolved in her diary throughout 1913-1917. She is representative of

her "class, background and education" in her acceptance of the "shallow patriotism" of the war (Berry & Bostridge 61), yet on August 4, 1915, she writes:

Whatever the papers may say, the majority of us have passed beyond our blatant loud-voiced 'patriotism'...and are quiet & resolute, weary but still tenacious, confident of the issue and determined that come what may, it *shall* be.

Although Brittain may not believe she has found the "truth", she has accepted the idea that a greater force can, and will, determine the way for her.

Consequently, Brittain's diary between 1913 and 1917 is riven with tension: tension between the values and systems of the majority and those of the individual; and between Vera Brittain's searching for herself, and her alienation from herself. The conflict within Brittain cannot be demarcated by the pre-war/post-war division, yet it develops chronologically against the cultural perspectives such a division connotes. By looking particularly at the passages in the diaries which relate to the deaths of those she loved, the reader can recognize the gaps between Brittain's emotions, her ability to recognize these emotions, and her ability to express these emotions through her writing. I posit that her difficulties arise because, in her grief, she resorted to the prevailing masculine ideologies for support and in so doing distanced her self from herself. This dependency initiated a process of repression, culminating in the desensitization of her emotions.

To begin an analysis of Brittain's war-time diary and how it reveals a voice at odds with tradition, I will return to the first discussion point outlined in the introduction of this thesis: the influence of the cultural myths upon which Vera Brittain's perceptions of reality and her modes of expression are constructed. The mythical grandeur with which society had been conditioned to describe, and imagine, the War, is evident throughout the diary. The chivalric ideal, which is laden with masculine values, impedes Brittain's ability to offer her own view of the war experience. However, while her writing in this diary conforms to the dominant masculine values which underpin the prevailing literary aesthetic, her writing also reveals a contradictory voice. Adopting the "appropriate" words to describe Roland's death, Brittain imbued his death with chivalric qualities. She wrote that Edward and Victor looked "grave with sorrow - like courtiers without a king", while remembering that she used to call Roland "Sir Galahad" (301). In spite of such elegiac language, there is a tension in Brittain. She confessed: "If anyone had told me that I should ever cry openly before two lieutenants of the British Army I should not have believed it" (301). Because the soldiers are thought to be the embodiment of noble virtue, and their deaths ennobling, her weeping is "inappropriate", even in front of her brother and close friend. Similarly, remarks from a Colonel and a Chaplain hurt her "more than anything" and again reveal the disparity between the mythology of militarism and the reality of human loss. One said "The Boy was wonderfully brave", and the other that Roland had died "after a very gallant fight" (303). Brittain wanted to believe in the mythology and comfort herself through the support of traditional beliefs, yet

she was unable to reconcile her feelings and the ideology, and this compounded her grief.

For Brittain, the ideology is problematic: because she wanted to subscribe to the system of beliefs which justified the death of her fiance, she did not confront the death on her own terms. She wrote that, after learning more details of his death, she did not "so much see him lying amid a heap of fallen soldiers with his white face upturned to the glory of the Eastern sky, and the Archangel in the heavens with his wings spread protectingly over them" as she saw the "small room in a Hospital, and a bed with all that remains of Him lying upon it" (302). Brittain's acknowledgement that there are two interpretations, the real and the ideal, is significant because she began to rely on the idealized version to comfort herself, and in so doing became detached from her own emotions. The belief that it is noble and honourable to die fighting for one's country is a sentiment which her earlier writings question<sup>2</sup>, but which was deployed increasingly often after Roland's death. The language she used to insulate herself from grief was inadequate; the tension in the poem she included in her diary alerts readers to a second voice. She wrote:

O gentle child, beautiful as thou wert,  
 Why didst thou brave the trodden paths of men  
 Too soon, and with weak hands though mighty heart  
 Dare the unpastured Dragon in his den? (302)

She adopted society's mythical rhetoric but it is apparent that she did not subscribe to its values: if she believed fighting in war is its own reward, she would not have needed to ask why Roland went to war.

After Roland's death, Brittain embraced another masculinist myth - that the world is hierarchical by nature - in order to distance herself from the actuality of her grief. Hierarchy, Anne Wilson Schaef says, is a masculine construct which promotes inequity by its design (Schaef 104). Before Roland's death, Brittain was disdainful of the hierarchical designs which governed her culture. She said she anticipated the pleasure of "wearing such a[n engagement] ring. But my best self refutes this instinct, for it recognizes the custom as a survival of those days when woman was the possession of man, and the ring was the token of this. It is the symbol of the old inequality & therefore hateful to me" (Aug. 23. 1915). After Roland's death, however, Brittain fell back on the traditional belief in hierarchy and the moral absolutism which hierarchy supports. Roland, through a "hero's death", became, for her, one of the spiritual elite. Her references to Roland as "Him" suggest that she revered him before God, and she prayed "not to God but to Him" that she will "turn to Him [Roland], just as the Mohammedans always turn to Mecca at sunrise" (Jan. 25,26, 1916). She also contemplated Roland's existence and his death in terms of Maeterlinck's *Predestines*. She wondered whether "that infinitely sad look in his eyes" was a sign that he was indeed a chosen one (January 1916). Brittain began to feel that "if there be a God or Fate (call it what you will) It is after all not infallible & that this [Roland's death] was one of Its mistakes" (Jan. 26,27, 1916).

Likewise, in the temporal domain, she raised him to a position above other men. She wrote:

For when one thinks of His strong honourable character, his influence, immense & pure, over all ranks of men, his school record, his Army record, his prizes, his poems, the many who adored him, & the fullness & crowdedness of the life that was so very brief, viewed in this light does it not seem wonderful that this Perfect thing was allowed to exist at all, rather than that it was not permitted to last? (Jan. 26,27/16)

The hyperbolic depiction indicates that in order to justify Roland's death to herself, she relied on the classist precepts which she had earlier disparaged<sup>3</sup>. For Brittain, his death can best be understood as the inevitable consequence of his unparalleled greatness. Significantly, in this instance, Brittain also assumed the existence of a third level in the hierarchy which places women beneath men (who are in turn beneath Roland). Quoting the Bible, she wrote: "Blessed art thou among women' applies both to [Mrs. Leighton] for having made Him happen & to me for having gained His love" (Jan. 26-27, 1916). The man, her writing implies, defines their worth. Brittain continued the hierarchical order by placing herself and Roland's mother, because they had been graced by "His" presence, above other women.

This reverence for Roland is more than just the adulation often bestowed by the bereaved on the deceased; it is evidence of her need to believe that Roland's sacrifice was the ultimate human achievement. Ironically, the moral

absolutism on which she depended for support eroded her self-worth and compounded her confusion. Carol Gilligan contends that women define themselves differently from the way men define themselves. She claims that, because women focus on particulars and individual situations, they do not organize their thoughts and beliefs according to the moral absolutes which govern the behaviour of men.<sup>4</sup> What society considers to be the "good" woman is one who subordinates her own autonomy and power to what has been deemed her "moral" role. I believe that Brittain's feelings of inadequacy, arising from her idealization of Roland's death and her own participation in the war, illustrate what Gilligan describes as "the conflict between compassion and autonomy, between virtue and power - which the feminine voice struggles to resolve in its effort to reclaim the self and to solve the moral problem in such a way that no one is hurt" (Gilligan 71). By serving in the war effort, Brittain felt she would come closer to Roland - the "ideal". She wrote: "But now, at any rate, I can say His poems to myself, say the War Sonnets of Rupert Brooke, without feeling afraid of them, without feeling so bitterly unworthy that I dare not face the thought & meaning of them" (April 18, 1916). She believed she could "do nothing better than to act as He has acted, right up to the end" (Jan. 25-26, 1916). In her grief, her time of emotional weakness and confusion, Brittain relied upon a system of beliefs that caused her to question her own worth: a system that promotes

hierarchy and absolutism. In believing that she may find "truth" as a nurse (March 26, 1915), she supported the notion that one "right" way *should* be sought and may be found, even though, as mentioned above, her vision of "truth" in this context may have been different from that of the patriarchy which defined her occupation. The tension within Brittain reveals her as in conflict with two spheres: a public one and a private one.

The mythologies and myth-making on which Brittain grew to depend - the chivalric rhetoric and hierarchical social structures - are the means by which she sought to cope with her war experiences. This gives rise to two paradoxes: firstly, the myths she used are male constructions and, by definition, as a woman her path to self-knowledge is obstructed; secondly, because she resorted to the myths she had already discounted, she blocked her own avenues to genuine expression, and thus obstructed her own growth. Brittain's inability to separate illusion and reality eroded her sense of self. On Wednesday January 26, 1916, just after Roland's death, she wrote:

But heroism means something infinitely greater & finer, if less practical, than just avoiding blame, & doing one's exact stereotyped duty & no more - & "heroism in the abstract" was His ideal. But during the night - & I scarcely think in the after-time I shall quite be able to describe just what sufferings have been mine during these dreadful nights, I thought of the Heroism, whether touched with recklessness or not, that caused Him to go out in front of the line into the bright moonlight & led to the sacrifice of all that meant so

much in the world, all that was so exceptional and brilliant & fine. And I looked out of the ward window to the tall church-spire & to the dark banks of clouds with rifts between them of bright moonlit sky, & cried in the bitterness of my heart "Dearest - oh Dearest! Why did you?"

Her consistently linear style is disrupted as her memories, sense impressions and emotions run together. Readers see, over the course of a few moments, the fragility of the peace of mind the myths have given her. The fragmented thoughts suggest that her belief in the heroic cannot keep her emotions buried.

A second dimension which, I believe, further impeded Brittain's understanding and recording of her experiences during the war because it marginalized her on the basis of her sex, is that of language. As stated in the introduction, many men involved in the war were also questioning the mythologies which are at the root of many of the conflicts and uncertainties present in Vera Brittain's writing. Because, as Dale Spender argues, the semantic meanings of words are determined by the patriarchy, and because the voice of the patriarchy is particularly strong in war-time rhetoric, Brittain's language was already imbued with meanings which she may or may not have intended. Men also write using prescribed connotations; however, when the connotations are constructed by male culture, they create meaning by dividing the world into "positive-masculine" and "negative-feminine". "All words - regardless of their origin - which are associated

with females acquire negative connotations, because this is a fundamental semantic 'rule' in a society which constructs male supremacy" (Spender 18). This division between the sexes leaves women writers at a disadvantage: not only are the same words, when applied to them, indicative of inferiority, but the words always define women in contrast to men. Women become the "minus male". The following linguistic analysis will identify particular words from the war-time diary which reveal Vera's confusion and sense of dislocation in the world she attempts to describe.

Vera Brittain identifies the inferior status of her sex, and the discrepancy between language and "truth" which perpetuates women's inferiority, in her relationship with her father. Although she was the eldest child, Vera always felt that she did not "count" as a "sensible human being" in her father's eyes. She wrote:

he has nothing but contempt for me & my knowledge, just as he has at heart for all women, because he believes them for some unknown reason to be inferior to him, & for all learning, because it hasn't seemed necessary to him & he has never felt any desire towards it. (Nov.15, 1913)

Arthur Brittain's staunch middle-class conservatism opposed Vera's desire to attend Oxford and believed that his daughter should, Vera suggested, act as a "sensible" girl: she should take care of her parents and spoil herself with the petty indulgences of her class<sup>5</sup>. For Vera, to be "sensible" would require her to engage

her senses - to fulfill her potential as a self-supporting individual; the word "sensible" as her father might have used it when describing a young woman, however, connotes the "dull level of respectable mediocrity" where one is sheltered by Mother and Daddy (Nov. 15, 1913). Clearly a "sensible" man and a "sensible" woman have little in common. Vera lamented: "[B]ut oh! how hopeless it is to make anyone see by a few inadequate words what one has gradually proved to be truth through months of thought & hard striving" (Nov. 15, 1913). In Vera's struggle to find "truth" one senses her frustration as she recognized the "dogmas of superstition & worn-out incorrect doctrine"(Nov.15, 1913) which would impede her self-development. Unfortunately she could not articulate her own sense of justice within her contemporary social context.

The word "woman", itself, engaged Vera and her thwarted lover, Bertram Spafford, in a heated dispute over its meaning. Spafford, hurt by Vera's rejection, retaliated by telling her that her ambition would be the cause of her folly. He remarked that she should "learn to be a woman as he could not see that [she] was acting like a woman at all at present". Vera responded: "'But I suppose you think that because a person wishes to stand alone, to develop her intellect & make her will strong, she is not a true woman,' I burst forth angrily. 'You don't *know*.'" (July 4, 1914). Spafford, the son of a wealthy Buxton family, articulated his society's underlying belief in the role of the "woman". Clearly the ideas associated with his,

and society's, view of women were of passivity, subordination and acceptance. The perpetuation of this view of womanhood was as useful to the state during a period where unquestioned support was needed to bolster the cause, as were the many images of the Virgin which appeared during wartime. Paul Fussell writes of the soldiers' need to internalize the image of the Virgin Mary, both for motherly solace, and for an idealistic sense of purpose. "Her permanence is a measure of the significance which myth, with an urgency born of the most touching need, attached to her" (Fussell 135). While Fussell notes the construction of a view of womanhood which was ever-present during the war, he does not consider the impact of this myth on women themselves. Although such a consideration is outside the scope of his study, the recording of a male definition of womanhood without the female perspective is representative of what Dale Spender criticizes. Spender refers to the term "motherhood" to illustrate how one connotation will continue to be associated with the word while others will be disallowed. She claims that certain possible meanings of "motherhood" never become widely circulated because they do not coincide with the meaning which best serves the patriarchy: motherhood is a nurturing and self-sacrificing obligation women have to their families. Therefore women who experience feelings unlike those defined by the language attached to "motherhood" see themselves as anomalies; they feel inadequate and alienated. In Vera's diary directly following her recounting of the

argument quoted above, she wrote: "He has done me a great wrong, though partly my inability to express well what I felt so deeply may be a good deal responsible for the impression I left"(July 4, 1914). Here one notes Brittain's struggle to articulate her ideas, her frustration at the inadequacy of her response, and her apology for the misunderstanding. Within this kind of language system, a *Times* writer could unabashedly describe "Surplus Women" as those women who would not be able to find men to marry after the war. While, presumably, this was an acceptable way to describe women during the early part of this century, present-day readers acknowledge that "*surplus* has strong emotional connotations, too: to be a surplus woman was to be redundant, left-over, superfluous. More than a million women were in post-war society's eyes" (Hynes 380).

Although Vera recognized some of the societal forces which prohibit women's development, she was, nonetheless, a product of her class and education and often unwittingly promoted the attitudes towards women which surface in language and which undermine women's potential self-expression. When thinking of her own personal situation, Vera recognized the narrow-mindedness of her society: on October 21, 1913, she wrote that if she were merely interested in pursuing the arts acceptable for an accomplished provincial lady, everyone would think her studies perfectly "natural"; however, since she wants to study at Oxford, Buxton sees her as "'eccentric', 'ridiculous', a 'strong-minded woman'". When appraising Mrs.

Harrison, a Buxton woman whom Vera admired, Vera bestowed labels which conform to the same language system which condemned her goal of an Oxford education. Mocking her society's sexist attitudes towards strong-minded women, she identified Mrs. Harrison's capacity for both "good & evil", yet the "strength" "firmness" "uprightness" and "unyielding, unforgiving vigilance" in Mrs. Harrison's countenance were what Vera called "evil" (Nov. 17, 1913). However, she disparaged the "pride" and "self-assurance" of Miss Rose at Somerville and found her much easier to respect once she saw her "so-called weaker qualities" (Feb. 10, 1915). Also, in her entry on April 14, 1915, Vera reaffirmed the negative connotation of the term "aggressive" when it was applied to women, by using it in this way herself. While Vera desired to be respected for the qualities her society labeled "masculine", she defined respectability in other women according to the traditional "feminine" qualities.<sup>6</sup>

The very words which condemn women take on positive connotations when applied to men in general, and Roland in particular. For instance, Roland's desire to go to war for his country was in part "vanity" (used three times - March 19, 1915), and the air about him, which Vera found so attractive, was one "of arrogance - that self-confident assurance of being something above the ordinary" (August 22, 1915). In contrast, Vera used the word "vanity" to describe her own cruel use of her feminine attractiveness to attain a more desirable dinner partner

(Jan.8, 1913). Where a woman's "vanity" takes on the negative connotations of sexual exploitation and trickery, a man's "vanity" is an admirable expression of confidence in his self-image. The "cloak of apparent egotism" (Sept. 22, 1915) which Roland adopted as an officer was as acceptable to Vera as the "dignity" of the Headmaster at Uppingham, "in spite of his contempt for women" (July 11, 1914). Vera admired the "composed" officer's wife, Mrs. La Page, who behaved "as an English girl should". She said goodbye to her husband by shaking hands, making no sign, but turning away "feeling as if the sun had gone out for ever" (Aug. 8, 1915). Because "composure" and the "resistance" (Jan. 31,1916) to indulgent emotion defined acceptable femininity, they encouraged women to be passive and thus denied them the opportunity to achieve a full appreciation or realization of their potential as individuals.

The connection between word-connotations and gender becomes particularly instructive when one begins to recognize its pervasiveness in the rhetoric of war. Throughout the diary, the words "courage" and "bravery" are indicative of the connotative values of positive-assertive male and negative-passive female. Roland's letter (included in Vera's entry on May 3rd, 1915) expresses what the war propaganda had led the males to believe was "courage": "there is danger up there, & daring, & calculated courage that is [true] heroism." Likewise, Vera's account of the war news on April 24, 1915, reveals another dimension of the word

"courage" when she described the active and aggressive qualities of the men in battle. Although the Germans "have broken another rule of the Hague Convention & have used bombs made of asphyxiating gas...they have also fought with a courage & fury never surpassed in the war". Here "courage" is not associated with nobility or righteousness, but rather with the supremacy of force. Vera was both proud and afraid of Roland's desire to fight. She wrote: "His is no bravado courage, proclaiming what it shrinks from performing. I believe he almost delights in danger - in the vigour & exuberance of it" (Oct.1, 1915). The "real courage" which Vera identified in Roland was outside her experience: it was both enigmatic and unattainable for her.

Because women could not partake in the "grandeur" of the battlefield, courage for them had to hold a different meaning. Unlike the assertive, affirmative action of men, courage for women meant the quiet acceptance and endurance of conditions beyond their control.<sup>7</sup> Waiting and wondering about Roland's condition at the front, Vera had to resign herself to the completion of tasks which, to her, appeared meaningless: "realizing that if I could not feel interested in my work I must do it without feeling interested. Such is the only form of courage I can practise" (March 22, 1915). The docile acceptance of the horrors of war led even those convinced of their duty into great emotional turmoil as they tried to repress rather than assert their pent-up fears. "Oh! it is terrible to love

someone like this. I try to be brave & calm, but I can't. It hurts me so ... and he in danger, my darling - ", Vera confided in her diary on September 26, 1915. She recognized the denial of emotion in other women, yet she believed in the womanly version of "courage" which her culture had been teaching her. She wrote of Roland's mother, Marie Connor Leighton: "When I realise the deep anguish that *will* express itself in these letters of hers, courageously as she tries to hide it, I feel a weak & cowardly person beside her" (June 20, 1915). After Roland's death Vera wrote: "I am crushed - altogether crushed, by life - I have no power of resistance left, no courage - not even any desire for courage" (Jan.30,31, 1916). Trying to console Vera, the Colonel and the Chaplain used the terms "bravery" and "fight" synonymously, assuring her that by being in the fight he was, by definition, being brave (Jan.2, 1916), yet Captain Adshead advised Vera to "be brave, just as though he were by your side now" (Jan.25,26, 1916). For men, bravery was achievable, tangible, because it could be realized through death. For Vera and for Mrs. Leighton, and presumably for other women, courage and bravery were repressions of sorrow and denials of feelings.

The rhetoric of the war subtly diminished women's war experiences and made women unable to confront their emotions in a meaningful, healthy way. The gender-based connotations of the word "courage" are inherently hierarchal: the courage women show is contingent upon the courage men show in going to

war. Arising from this emphasis on the primacy of the man's courage is a corollary which marginalizes women: since the courageous man is the aggressive combatant, the man who is less aggressive, who is the "loser", is the "minus-male". Because women are not able to be like the courageous male, they too are "minus-males". As Vera became more immersed in the war propaganda she lost her critical frame of reference and gradually became the dependent female. She wrote: "if he [Roland] can face death, let me show that I can face the fear of death, and work steadfastly with a tormented mind, as thousands of my country women are brave enough to do" (March 21, 1915). Vera's bravery was a function of Roland's actual participation on the battlefield. After writing at length about her Mother's fears for her brother Edward as he leaves for the Front, Vera ended the diary entry with, "It is very difficult here [Oxford] to write about the war, as there is so much work to do that I never have time to read the papers" (Nov.27, 1914). While Edward's departure consumed much of her attention in the diary entry, she did not recognize its place in the war experience. Her remark that any important information was to be found in the newspapers, is indicative of women's acceptance of their secondary role in the cultural experience. Incorporated into the male explanation of the way the world operates, women were made confused and uncomfortable. On October 1, 1914, Vera wrote that Roland's "longing to take part in the war" filled her with "a kind of inexplicable mute despair".

However, in response to his letter, she "could have written emotion & passion into [her] answer, but instead made it express tranquility, even in complaints of women's enforced inactivity in the military part of war. There are some feelings which we [women] dare not begin to show."

Vera's denial of her own sorrow and anxiety, as she attempted to maintain the "courage" which was expected of her, led her to a weakened psychological state. In this state, she found it difficult to make sense of her own experiences, and began to rely on others for self-definition. Vera rebuked herself as "weak and cowardly" when she envisioned life with Roland and denied her "share in the Universal Sorrow. After all it was only right that [she] should suffer too" (March 19, 1915). Consistently adopting an appropriate response to the war caused Vera to distance herself from the actuality of her own experiences. The regurgitation of propagandistic rhetoric fills her diary entry on March 29, 1915. Her lengthy declaration begins, "All that man *must* have is that compelling force - the soul's impulse of growth, which is called enthusiasm, aspiration, idealism...", and considers the challenges of overcoming weakness, discovering Eternal Life and searching for Truth. With Truth, Vera wrote, "that vast complex Being I call my soul will grow, & be strong, supreme over circumstances & suffering & Time & Age & Death - & by it the whole Universe shall rise." Directly following this grand statement, Vera concluded: "I wonder if I have really learnt something, by

these thoughts which the great new element in my life has stirred in me. If I have learnt anything it is love of Roland Leighton that has taught it to me."

Suppressing her sorrow and accepting the war propaganda which was embodied in her idealized vision of Roland, Vera forgot her earlier feminist convictions. The sonnets of Rupert Brooke reminded Vera of Roland (May 21, 1915) and she believed their "prophetic note".<sup>8</sup> She questioned her once-revered *The Story of an African Farm* because she "didn't believe Olive Schreiner really meant 'no one knew what it had lived & worked for'"; whereas Francis Thompson, her new literary interest, endorses the concept of heroism and patriotism (June 26, 1915). Vera briefly caught a reflection of her inner self beneath the exterior her culture had constructed for her:

I felt too tired to move, and so sad, & I sat thinking how things might be if Roland and I were married, and how they are, alas! now. Almost unconsciously I acted Lyndall, for I sat gazing into the glass, not because it was the glass, but just because it happened to be in front of me. I thought & thought, and then suddenly becoming conscious saw in the glass my own reflection without the veil of self-consciousness which usually prevents one from getting a clear idea of one's self. I found myself looking into the soul in my eyes, & then I started, for it seemed to be not I but my own Sorrow that was looking me in the face with so straight & grave a gaze. There was something almost uncanny about those eyes, and I got up feeling suddenly cold all over, and was not thereafter inclined to look into the glass again. It was as though I had seen a ghost. (Sept. 1915)

This fear of self-confrontation, a fear which had grown from the gulf between the myths and the language around her, and her own view of reality, intensified. At Oxford after the war, Vera had what may be labelled a nervous breakdown. She was unable to enter rooms with mirrors at all, for fear of what she would see in them. The disfigurement of herself, which resembled "an incipient beard", could be a symptom of "survivor's guilt" (Berry & Bostridge, 139). "Such a state of mind is nearly intolerable', the historian Jay Winter has written, 'because it is infused with a burden of guilt which makes life a type of walking death, or which requires total identification with the dead who continue to live inside the survivor.'" (Berry & Bostridge, 140). While Jean Kennard supports the idea that Vera's "beard" reflected her guilt in her "adoption of a traditionally male life", she finds more problematic the fact that Vera herself associated her beard with witches rather than with males (Kennard 154). I also believe that there was another dimension to Vera's suffering, besides the guilt she may have felt "in seizing the intellectual and professional opportunities that could no longer be taken by her dead male contemporaries" (Berry & Bostridge, 140). Her fear of self-confrontation, I posit, stemmed from the gradual erosion and repression of her mental and emotional make-up. The myths, the language and the imposed systems of beliefs confused Vera because the "reality" they constructed for her did not truly coincide with the "reality" she perceived herself. Unable to declare her

student status at Oxford admirable, given the visions of "womanhood" which the war conditioned her to accept, she placed herself in yet another patriarchal construct, one which marginalizes women and deems them "unnatural" - witches. The "visions, imaginations, & ideals" which defined her individuality before the war, were shattered, and consequently her sense of self was fractured.

The third and final area of consideration I would like to address in seeking to uncover the "truth" about Brittain's war experience and her attempts to record it, is the nature of diary writing itself. Diaries and journals, according to Claire Tylee, "unwittingly exemplify the precise nature of the mental barriers set up to women's independent thought and awareness, and especially to their comprehension of those very barriers" (Tylee 52). Brittain's pre-war diary has qualities which are representative of the typical Victorian convention of diary writing. Its "accomplished fluency" (Fothergill 34) is evident in the unedited state of the original. She did give a "detailed picture of life within the Victorian social fabric, and reflect contemporary attitudes and values with great fidelity" (Fothergill 34). At other points in the diary the "sober ruminations" (Fothergill 34) on topics such as "Truth" and religion, also reverberate with Victorian moralizing.<sup>9</sup> Although much in the diary may appear to conform to the contemporary diary tradition, the diary can be seen, from its outset, to reveal her independent thinking and personal analyses of the world. Increasingly, as her

experiences during the war came to deepen her emotional involvement with her own text, the diary took on an "autobiographical consciousness"...the sense that one is living a *Life*, that an organic story links one's days together and makes them significant and interesting" (Fothergill 153).

The "autobiographical consciousness" present in Britain's war-time diary creates another layer of myth-making: it raises the possibility that the diary is more a construction of the life she wished to lead, than a depiction of the life she felt she was leading. On May 5, 1915, after receiving a letter from Maurice Ellinger, a family friend, she wrote: "He asked me why I had not done any writing lately. I said I had done a little. But in my heart I said 'Life's too real just now.' In fact all my creativeness at present goes into this diary & into my letters to Roland." Before Roland's death, when Vera was able to achieve a critical perspective, she understood that her writings about Roland were her own constructions. She wrote:

Roland and the Hospital seem both to be growing mythical. I can visualize Roland's features even less than I could before, and he is such a brilliant, incomprehensible & elusive person that unless he sends letters to emphasize his humanity, he tends to become quite an abstraction. (Oct. 9, 1915)

While the diary alerted her to her own propensity to fictionalize reality, it also perpetuated a creative process which changed her perceptions of reality. On April

20, 1915, Vera wrote: "On reading parts of my diary from the beginning of the year...it struck me as curious how very little I said about Roland during last term, though he was in my mind so much. I think I loved him then, but it was nothing to what I do now." After receiving letters from Roland at the Front, Vera wrote: "I dare not think too vividly of him just now. I don't think even when he was here for the last time I realised how much I love him as I have realised it since he went to France" (April 13, 1915). Initially, Vera was able to deconstruct her own writings, and identify her propensity to fictionalize; yet, as the war progressed, and, as argued above, particularly after Roland's death, her writings show a marked lack of such objectivity.

For all her proclamations of love for Roland in her letters and in her diary, she was unable to speak to him openly in person. On a London train, Vera felt "embarrassment & [engaged in] intermittent sparring" while with Roland. To communicate with him, she gave Roland a letter she had written to him when he first went to the Front: "With him there beside me it was so difficult to believe that I could ever have brought myself to put it" (Aug. 21, 1915). The apparent disparity between Vera's actual relationship with Roland and her relationship with the *idea* of Roland illustrates Vera's growing confusion between what was real and what she perceived to be real. Dorothy Goldman identifies this merging of "truth" with imagination in much of the writing of war-time women.<sup>10</sup> In this sense,

Brittain can be associated with the contemporary women writers Woolf and Mansfield refer to as "artists whose creative energy has gone chiefly into the maintenance of myths about themselves and about those they love. To become aware of the creation of a myth is to lose faith in it" (Showalter 247). More imaginative than a typical Victorian diary, this diary is of a type which, according to Anais Nin, allows its author to construct and interpret experience; it is a "form of self-deception, 'a dream, a myth, an endless story' an escape from inner restlessness and from the distress caused by experiences which at times are merely hinted at" (Aronson 4). Anais Nin consciously used her diary "to transform reality through the exercise of imagination - not to escape or distort it, but to fulfil it" (Fothergill 185). One cannot but wonder about the extent to which Brittain's construction of reality was a controlled, deliberate process. Rather, was it more a manifestation of her subconscious desires? <sup>11</sup> The myth-making element of Brittain's diary created another layer of illusion which further confounded her efforts to better understand herself.

The "autobiographical consciousness" of the diary also raises questions concerning the supposed audience and the writer's persona. On June 25, 1915, Brittain wrote that she had been re-reading the correspondence between herself and Roland, and that what she had collected would make "first-rate material ... for an autobiographical novel." Although Brittain's vision of a future public

readership for her diary may have contributed to her propensity to fictionalize, I believe that the notion of a future audience was not tangible enough to function as a vehicle for her emotional recovery. Because Vera was isolated from Roland and Edward and others during the war, her diary, and the letters she included, became her companion and witness to her incorporeal love relationship. Roland's presence may have been "ephemeral", but his letters and her writing to and about him, were very real:

Yet I must go on trying to work - thinking that he may never read the letter I have so loved writing to him, or that the one I have received from him may be the last. I wrote him a long one to-day telling him much the same things as I have been writing just now. How I love writing to him! (April 20, 1915)

The way in which Brittain's letters and diaries are constructed around Roland is similar to the way in which Katherine Mansfield's diary is constructed around her dead brother "Chummie" who was killed in 1915.<sup>12</sup> Writing to and about her idealized lover, Brittain attempted to define herself: "The chief joy I have now is to write to him; I feel I am writing to someone who is my very own, who will understand me as I understand myself" (April 13, 1915). After his death, Roland became the object of worship Vera had always desired.<sup>13</sup> Her "very own" idol provided Vera with a measure against which she could determine her own "courage", virtue and worthiness. Setting such unrealistically high expectations for

herself, she denied herself the opportunity to grieve for Roland, to indulge in her anger and sorrow and to come to terms with his death and the ultimate futility which she knew, at heart, to be its cause.<sup>14</sup> Roland's aura, which pervades her diary, affected Vera's perception of herself and forced her to adopt a persona: as Roland's fiancée she became passive, subservient and dutiful to the cause for which he fought and died.

All of the constructs discussed above - the patriarchal system, the "man-made" language and the genre of the diary, obstructed Brittain's independent thinking and compromised her perceptions of herself. The repercussions of this loss of identity and voice will be discussed in the conclusion, following the next chapter of the thesis concerning the war-time diary of Virginia Woolf.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### The Diary of Virginia Woolf, 1915-1919

A study of Virginia Woolf's responses to the war, as seen in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume One, 1915-1919* edited by Anne Olivier Bell, reveals a marked contrast to Vera Brittain's "reflection" in her war-time diary. Such a difference is not surprising: one would expect that two women of such different social backgrounds and with such different experiences during the war would naturally have different perspectives. What is particularly interesting about the diaries of these two women, however, is that they reveal a development in the ability of women to respond independently and honestly to the war experience.

Where Brittain responded to the war by sublimating her identity to "the cause", Woolf used the war to help her to shape her identity.<sup>15</sup> For Woolf, the Great War was a concrete example of the incompatibility between ideology and actual experience. During the war she was becoming increasingly aware of the disparity between society's rules and the way one could choose to interpret or disregard those rules. On the one hand, the educated men of Bloomsbury reminded her of all the "liabilities of being a woman: being restricted, being

dependent, being considered inferior" (Rose 73); on the other hand, she recognized the sterility which patriarchy and tradition perpetuates, and the creative freedom which women, those outside of the system, could explore.

Although her vision is less explicitly stated in the war-time diary than in her post-war prose, the diary voices her solution to the dilemma of war, and concomitantly to the dilemma facing herself as a woman within the social context. The variety of voices in the diary of 1913-1919 reveals Woolf's struggle to find a "truthful" way of representing her experiences. She is aware of the social and linguistic forces which suppress her voice, and she is experimenting with different ideas and techniques in an attempt to free it. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf articulates what her diary writing illustrates: "It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only?" (88).

To compare Virginia Woolf's diary with that of Vera Brittain, I will return to the three main discussion points upon which this thesis is constructed: the writer's relationship to the social context of patriarchy and war, the differences between the writer's words and the linguistic norms of the patriarchy, and the diary as a vehicle for self-expression. The following passage from the diary provides an instructive position from which to begin my analysis of Woolf's diary

writing because it illustrates Woolf's relationship to each of the three points of discussion:

I think patriotism is a base emotion. By this I mean (I am writing in haste, expecting Flora to dinner) that they played a national Anthem, & a Hymn, & all I could feel was the entire absence of emotion in myself & everyone else. If the British spoke openly about W.C's, & copulation, then they might be stirred by universal emotions. As it is, an appeal to feel together is hopelessly muddled by intervening greatcoats & fur coats. I begin to loathe my kind ... (Jan. 3, 1915)

Unlike Britain, Woolf "loathes" the patriotism and false value system upon which the war is based. Where Britain may attribute the "absence of emotion" to silent suffering or dutiful reverence for authority, Woolf criticizes the animalistic egotism of human nature which creates war and which perpetuates its inanities. While she observes the response of the people from an outsider's perspective, she also feels the emotional sterility to which, she believes, the culture has succumbed. She subverts the images popularly associated with "patriotism", "greatcoats" and "furcoats" by emphasizing their emptiness. "W.C's [water closets]" and "copulation" are more human than the traditional symbols of British ascendancy. The aside, "(I am writing in haste, expecting Flora to dinner)", dismisses the importance of war, while it also implies that she is writing for an audience which may be interested in her observations at the concert. Here Woolf allows her readers to hear her cynicism and to realize that her lack of commentary on the

war throughout the diary is also an intentional disregard for the war and its masculine values, rather than a lack of emotional or intellectual involvement in its issues. The diary reveals the constructedness of her silence and consequently allows the reader to understand her views: war is not only a futile endeavour but also a masculine construct; its underlying values are irrelevant to women. Where Brittain's diary reveals an unresolved tension between the writer's personal experiences and her society's values, Woolf's diary reveals the writer's awareness and exploitation of this gap between the private and the public modes of thought.

Although Virginia Woolf's upbringing and social position were different from Vera Brittain's, Virginia's family situation, like Vera's, made her aware of the falsehoods and inequities that the patriarchy entrenched. Virginia's father, Leslie Stephen, a notable man of letters, allowed his daughter full access to his library and encouraged her writing from an early age; yet he, like Vera's father, did not extend the opportunities of formal education to Virginia as he did to his sons. According to Phyllis Rose, Stephen viewed women as "emotional wastebaskets" whose chief purpose was to nurture men and provide them with the emotional support they needed to further their more intellectual pursuits.<sup>16</sup> Although Virginia's upbringing provided her with intellectual stimulation, she was able to sympathize with women who had been sheltered and left to face life in relative ignorance. In the diary she speaks of her new servant, "the daughter of a

Colonel": "I am sure her brain is full of illusions, poor creature; & I shouldn't be surprised at anything. The only question is, how she contrives to exist" (Jan. 29, 1915). Being exposed to her brothers' Cambridge friends, the Bloomsbury circle, reminded Virginia that, as a woman, she was limited both in formal education and life experience. Also, a deep resentment and distaste for her half-brothers, Gerald and George Duckworth, made her suspicious of the upper-middle class late-Victorian society they represented. Since they had both sexually abused her, she viewed them, especially George, as products of the grotesque and false "world of fashion" (Rose 24). Throughout Virginia's life, she believed that in "politics, literature and sex, men sought to dominate, and such reflections made her poignantly aware, once again, of her Duckworth half-brothers" (King 290). Her father's egotism, her exclusion from academia, her victimization through the exploitative nature of class and privilege, were the foundation of Virginia's cynicism towards the patriarchy and the militaristic values it fosters. On October 14, 1917 she writes:

Saturday was entirely given over to the military. We are safe again, &, so they say for ever...I waited in a great square, surrounded by barrack buildings, & was reminded of a Cambridge college - soldiers crossing, coming out of staircases, & going into others; but gravel & no grass. A disagreeable impression of control & senseless determination. A great boarhound, emblem of military dignity I suppose, strolled across by himself.

Woolf's comments on the military, or on the issues of the war, are few in the diary, but when she does comment directly, she often reveals her resentment through irony, tinged with sarcasm.

The pre-war portions of Vera Brittain's diary reveal similar resentments since she was also questioning the patriarchy. Brittain, however, due to her class and her close relationships with soldiers, became drawn into the war and confused by its attendant values. The differences between Brittain's and Woolf's war-time diary writing stems, to a great extent, from their circumstances. Woolf herself identifies the type of lifestyle which she feels is essential for an artist - luxuries which Vera Brittain was unable to enjoy during the war: time to write, freedom from responsibility, and money.<sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf, older, financially independent, and married to a man who was unable to enlist, could remain detached from the idea of war. Before the outbreak of war, Woolf recognized herself as an outsider,<sup>18</sup> and the war deepened her sense of exclusion from a world which was, to her, "senseless". Although some researchers have indicated that Woolf's interest in the war was negligible and that her diary makes little significant mention of the war,<sup>19</sup> I believe this marked lack of commentary in the diary is deliberate and not simply the result of her circumstances. While Samuel Hynes believes Woolf's ironic tone when discussing the war is flippant, I would argue that she, like most people, felt that "[war] was clearly deeply disturbing" (Hynes 4)

Woolf's diary brings the external world and her personal life together in a way that underscores the insignificance and irrelevance of those issues which the patriarchy had deemed of utmost importance. However, by showing them as irrelevant, she is not suggesting that they are not disturbing. The war, as presented in her diary, is distressing because it denies creative and life-affirming feminine values and espouses the masculine values which will, she believes, lead to sterility and death. Her diary illustrates her belief that women must "withdraw from the influence of all patriarchal institutions and of all male intimates, arguing that women could best help men prevent war by being as little like them as possible" (Hanley 139).

Woolf, therefore, removes herself from the social context which she feels is responsible for war. Unlike Brittain, who embraces many of the myths associated with heroism, Woolf believes that

war, perversely, did perform a lasting service to women in destroying the romance of chivalry. This, a tragic loss to those who had learned to live only by its codes, was a radical innovation to those who sought a new angle on the relationship between men, women and war. (Ouditt 201)

With disdain, Woolf writes of "tales of military stupidity" which Philip Woolf relays to her over lunch (Jan. 4, 1915). Later she comments on the strangeness of seeing a cavalry officer reading a book, since he would be "unused to reading books, I should think" (Dec. 14, 1917). In a similar voice she writes of the

"Belgians downstairs...playing cards with some friends, & talk - talk - talk- while their country is destroyed. After all, they have nothing else to do - " (Jan. 5, 1915). As an outsider, and as an intellectual, Woolf feels that the war is not only pointless, but that it entrenches ignorance in those who are attracted to its glamour. In a less ironic voice, she displays sympathy for the average citizen who is influenced by war propaganda. On May 4, 1918, Woolf describes an ex-Superintendent of Police:

Hodson came to lunch. A soldier now, though by profession a civil servant. A hard, straightforward man, all about him seeming as close cropped as his head. A man of average gifts, I suppose, & thus a sample of what the world does to human beings. He has no special gift or fortune to palliate life. In this light I thought him rather sad; so grim, unpretending, & taking what comes as if it were anyhow good enough for him. He didn't like the war, but joined 'as a duty'.... But there was no trace of heroism in this: mere 'such is life'.

Although she adopts different voices, her opinion about the "preposterous masculine fiction" of war, remains invariable.<sup>20</sup>

A detached observer, Woolf, unlike Brittain, is able to trace the roots of war propaganda and criticize the hierarchical absolutism which is its base. While Brittain's diary reveals a tension between her own ideas about "truth" and the "truth" espoused by the establishment, it also reveals that she is unable to recognize the premise that absolutes are, themselves, man-made constructions.

In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf articulates her belief that "truth" can not be defined and that values and one's sense of "reality" constantly shift.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, her diary writing attests to her belief that "truth" is not something which should be sought or which can be found. On November 21, 1918, she writes of "Ditcher", a "prophet" of the lower classes:

[He] knows the truth; he knows what the brain is made of; & he has no use for the 'middle class idealism' which cherishes doubts about some matters, & preaches liberty, toleration, & other humbug; for Ditcher knows the truth.

While this prophet's views attack those of the patriarchy, he does, nonetheless, proclaim a vision of what is "right". Virginia Woolf feels that such an assertion is absurd; she recognizes that all absolutes are unnatural structures which attempt, unsuccessfully, to deny the natural fluidity of experience. While Britain wrestles with the dominant ideology, her diary reveals that she is not able to consciously adopt an alternate view of reality during the war. On the other hand, Woolf's rejection of traditional beliefs, particularly those which promote the idea of "progress", causes her to feel cynicism about both war and peace: people "will soon forget all about the war...[and they] shall settle down again neither better nor worse" (Oct. 30, 1918). The fact that these same sentiments appear in a letter to Vanessa Bell on November 13, 1918, indicates that her comment cannot be disregarded as a flippant remark.<sup>22</sup> To Woolf, war is an outward demonstration of

the sordidness of human nature.

The identification of an alternative perspective on the world in Woolf's diary and post-war prose does reveal, I believe, her philosophical differences from Vera Brittain. Woolf's diary-writing, like her fiction, "is not concerned with access to, or ability to wield, political power. She is concerned rather with 'how to live differently' and how to render that difference in literary terms" (Ouditt 202). Following the war, Vera Brittain's increasingly pacifist writings, her involvement in the Peace Pledge Union, and her desire to educate future generations with *Testament of Youth* (1933) reveal how she experienced and recovered from the war. Woolf, meanwhile, declares herself a Fabian in 1915, but she remains cynical about the effectiveness of political action. After attending a meeting, she writes: "the idea that these frail webspinners can affect the destiny of nations seems to me fantastic" (Jan. 23, 1915). Woolf's critical perspective is the source of her clarity of vision and also of her complicated sense of self:

It seems to me more & more clear that the only honest people are the artists, & that these social reformers & philanthropists get so out of hand, & harbour so many discreditable desires under the disguise of loving their kind, that in the end there's more to find fault with in them than in us. But if I were one of them? (July 19, 1919)

Conscious of her society's artificiality, Woolf is always ready to condemn it and consequently she is more inclined to find fault with the dominant ideologies.

She writes of the "terrible grip Xtianity still has", as it causes Mrs. Langston to become "rigid & bigoted at once, as if God himself had her in his grasp. That I believe is still the chief enemy - the fear of God" (July 9, 1918). Of the literary "ideology", she has to say of Milton that he is "the first of the masculinists" who never "lived or knew men & women; except for the peevish personalities about marriage & the woman's duties" (Sept. 10, 1918). Hierarchical structures, whether in politics or literature, are, to Woolf, barriers to self-expression. Not only does she "loathe any dominion of one over another; any leadership, any imposition of the will", but she is "outraged" by the literary practices which have come to dominate and hinder the development of women writers (March 19, 1919). Being outside the war, and also outside the mainstream, Woolf can identify the man-made rules which subjugate her as a woman and as a writer, and can work to free herself from them.

While Vera Brittain's thinking becomes subsumed by the cultural myths, Virginia Woolf gains control over her life by recognizing the imposed "reality" around her, as myth. Woolf comments that "life seen without illusion is a ghastly affair" (Nov. 10, 1917). In the adversity of war, Woolf writes poetically of the fiction of life:

When L.[eonard] pulled the curtains this morning, practically no light came in; there was a kind of greyish confusion outside - soft swirling incessant snow...in this House of

Trouble, the pipes burst; or got choked; or the roof split  
 asunder...I daresay we shall be swept out of our beds tonight.  
 Its a queer winter - the worst I ever knew, & suitable for the  
 war & all the rest of it. (Jan. 22, 1915)

In other entries, she mixes images of aeroplanes with butterflies sporting "red spots on their necks - some parasite" (Aug. 21, 1917), and "gun fire" with "thunder"(Sept. 5, 1917). The "mythical" quality of the war pervades her life. Undeniably she is removed from the immediacy of the battle and the grief which many, including Brittain, suffered; however, I believe that Woolf recognizes the personal injustices which arise from an acceptance of a single cultural consciousness of war. Her writing indicates that the experiences encountered during war cannot be accounted for within any definable ideology, but that these experiences indicate that war has many different effects on each individual psyche.

On February 1, 1915, she describes life in London:

In St James Street there was a terrific explosion; people came running out of Clubs; stopped still & gazed about them. But there was no Zeppelin or aeroplane - only, I suppose, a very large tyre burst. But it is really an instinct with me, & most people, I suppose, to turn any sudden noise, or dark object in the sky into an explosion, or a German aeroplane. And it always seems utterly impossible that one should be hurt.<sup>23</sup>

The collective experience of war depends heavily on the fiction of war: the idea of "war" consumes the people and their responses become predictable, devoid of meaning. The individual's response to war, however, stems from a desire to find

personal wholeness within a fractured and senseless context. Britain denies herself this self-knowledge by clinging to the cultural myths of war propaganda. Woolf, on the other hand, comes to better understand what is important to her as she stands aside and evaluates the war. She takes her experience with, for instance, the air raids, and explores its meaning to herself on a personal level. Peace to her means that "never again in all our lives need we dread the moonlight" (Oct. 18, 1918).

Viewing the war as a "fiction", Woolf is quick to draw attention to the false nature of its rhetoric. Joanne Trautmann Banks, in her introduction to *Congenial Spirits: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, traces Woolf's "ambivalent" and "distrustful" feelings towards words in general: "'All good and evil comes from words,' she said [36]. Again: 'I am always trying to get behind words' [54]." Facetiously, in the diary, Woolf comments on the Government's attempts to pacify the people during an impending strike by the trade union movement: "The Government make a show of courageous determination. We are on war rations, & told to be brave & good" (Sept. 28, 1919). Here hypocrisy and falsehood taint the words "courageous", "brave" and "good", which the war rhetoric has used to bolster support for "the cause". Where an analysis of Britain's war-time diary writing reveals the incongruity between the rhetoric and Britain's interpretation of the rhetoric, Woolf's writing identifies the way in which the rhetoric utilizes the power

of connotation. She is then able to use the rhetoric ironically to draw attention to the manipulative nature of language.

At other times, Woolf explicitly condemns the values represented in the rhetoric: "I feel as if the human race had no character at all - sought for nothing, believed in nothing, & fought only from a dreary sense of duty" (Jan. 15, 1915). Woolf's understanding of the word "duty" is very different from Vera Brittain's. Yet Vera's confusion over such a term indicates that she also cannot truly accept all that the word connotes, even though she has been told that she should. When confronting her sorrow, she questions whether it was "Heroism" - *more* than "stereotyped duty" - or "rashness" which led to Roland's death. Virginia Woolf allows herself to think and write what Vera Brittain is considering during her introspective moments. Would not Brittain's response to the war rhetoric fall into what Woolf identifies in "some women[:] that unnatural repressions have forced [them] into unnatural assertions" (June 24, 1918)? While Woolf uses the word "unnatural" to mean untruthful to one's self, no doubt "assertions" like the following, would be considered "unnatural" for a woman of her time:

If one didn't feel that politics are an elaborate game got up to keep a pack of men trained for that sport in condition, one might be dismal; one sometimes is dismal; sometimes I try to worry out what some of the phrases we're ruled by mean. I doubt whether most people even do that. Liberty, for instance. (April 13, 1918)

Birth and circumstances may protect Virginia Woolf from the immediacy of the war, but her choice to remain detached from war stems from her philosophical, rather than from her social, position.

Of Woolf's conscious and unconscious attempts to free her voice from the rhetorical and literary traditions of patriarchy, Dorothy Goldman notes:

In Woolf's diaries 'the war' is presented through interwoven incidents and observations; it takes different rhythms and different voices; it follows the flow of day-to-day experience; it has no single intention...Rather the diaries suggest the war's disruptive effect and the difficulty of discerning patterns of change or progress. (Goldman 17)

Similarly, Quentin Bell finds the diaries full of "uncalculating sincerity". However, he feels that the entries are often too spontaneous to give "an entirely true picture of their author" (Bell 45). Although the diaries are no doubt full of idiosyncrasies, I believe that Woolf also consciously plays with language and writing techniques in order to express not only her own relationship with war, but her views on war, the patriarchy and women.

Because Woolf is defining herself against her contemporary cultural milieu and experimenting with a variety of voices, her diary is eclectic: it reveals a writer who is processing her life and coming to terms with her literary talent. As such, the diary alternates between voices which manipulate the war experience for literary purposes, and voices which freely express Woolf's reactions to daily events.

She may have believed that the "spontaneous composition [of the diary] helped to give her more pondered works greater force and directness" (Bell 44-45), but the diary also, I contend, reveals a working out of some techniques which she employs later in her fiction. The combination of spontaneous representation and constructed representation affords one the opportunity to analyze the extent to which Woolf's response is controlled by the social and linguistic norms around her.

Woolf deliberately uses silence in order to displace war from its position of importance. Using this device, she can draw ironic attention to the war, but underscore its irrelevance in the larger scheme of life, particularly in the lives of women. The diary indicates a similar "narrative indifference to conventional masculine pieties" which Sharon Ouditt observes in *Jacob's Room*: "the war appears at the end not as a resolution nor a justification, but simply as shocking by virtue of its irrelevance to the female gaze" (Ouditt 178). Many times throughout the diary, Woolf's indifference to the war is emphasized by her lack of commentary, her terse observations and her pairing of war images with other images which trivialize war. For instance, Woolf often mentions relatively major war news, but does not comment on its significance or insignificance to her. January 1, 1915, she writes that the "Formidable has been sunk in the channel", but she does not expand. One wonders whether or not it is credible for such a

piece of information to filter into her writing, without causing her to ponder its importance. Her silence provokes questions, and her indifference appears purposeful rather than spontaneous. The nonchalant tone of voice she uses when describing an air raid in London is also curious. She describes sleeping in the kitchen with the servants as if in a "picture of slum life". After one "thud" they return to bed, and in the morning they find that this noise "came from the explosion of bombs at Kew. Nine people, I think[,] killed." Woolf does not comment on the loss of life or the horror of the raids. The only thing she mentions is the servants complaining (Jan. 29, 1918). On another occasion she writes about her birthday: Leonard "brought up breakfast, with a paper which announced a naval victory (we have sunk a German battle ship) & a square brown parcel, with *The Abbot* in it - a lovely first edition - So I had a very merry & pleasing morning" (Jan. 25, 1915). One wonders why she mentions the naval victory in conjunction with the pleasantries she enjoys. By implying that she also finds the victory "pleasing", she raises questions about her pacifism. The remark is incongruous: by juxtaposing the two "presents", she deflates the relative importance of the military victory. Her aside is designed to remind her reader both of the war, and of its irrelevance to her. The curt presentation of tragic war news is fully realized on December 3, 1917, when she devotes one line of a long entry, on the following day, to the war death of Leonard's brother: "On Sunday

we heard of Cecil's death, & Philip's wounds". Readers could assume that Woolf is avoiding the news. For one living in London during wartime, and coming into contact with war tragedies on a regular basis, her lack of commentary and her casual dismissal of major events are alarming. I suggest that Woolf constructs a voice of indifference in order to present an alternative view of the war. The war, like "waterpipes & soldiers" (Jan. 27, 1915), is presented as a trivial, conversational gambit.

Another voice which Woolf adopts in 1917, when she resumes her diary after her nervous breakdown, speaks of war, as she experiences it around her, in a very terse manner. Although these entries are "sparse" and representative of a recovering mind, "drained of the energy essential to record daily events in any extended, descriptive manner" (King 242), they also reinforce her view of war: war, stripped of its rhetoric and propaganda, recedes into the patterns of the average citizen's daily life. She describes the visual reminders that war is pervasive, yet she does not comment on the idea of war or make value judgements about what she describes. For example she writes: "German prisoners working in the field by Dod's Hill. laughing with the soldier, & woman passing" (Aug. 6, 1917). On Aug. 31, 1917: "I saw a herd of cows on the top of the down driven by a soldier & a man on a large black horse. Very odd sight." Again: "German prisoners stacking corn at the back of the house. They whistle a great

deal, much more complete tunes than our work men. A great brown jug for their tea" (Sept. 10, 1917). These highly visual representations occur frequently in the diary, and are in part, I believe, writing exercises since her later fiction reveals her interest in "attempting to introduce pictorial techniques into language" (King 301). As well, Woolf sketches these concrete depictions of war to focus attention on the individuals involved and on their daily experiences. As a result, the values associated with the "idea" of war are viewed as evil distortions of "reality". Woolf's entry on August 27, 1918 articulates what her sparse portrayals are meant to reveal:

Now I confess that I have half forgotten what I meant to say about the German prisoners; Milton & life. I think it was that ? (all I can remember now (Friday, Aug. 30th) is that the existence of life in another human being is as difficult to realise as a play of Shakespeare when the book is shut. This occurred to me when I saw Adrian talking to the tall German prisoner. By rights they should have been killing each other. The reason why it is easy to kill another person must be that one's imagination is too sluggish to conceive what his life means to him - the infinite possibilities of a succession of days which are furled in him, & have already been spent. However, I forget how this was to go on. The prisoner, who looks very lean & hopeless, seemed to like talking; I met him later & we smiled, but the sentry was not there.

This passage illustrates Woolf's mind at work as she integrates her immediate responses with her developed views about patriarchy (Milton), art (Shakespeare's plays), and life (the "lean & hopeless" prisoner). While her voice appears to be

disjointed, one cannot mistake her critical attitude towards the concept of war and the system which promotes it.

The fluidity of the writing in the diary is, I contend, another technique Woolf employs not only to criticize traditional thinking, but to offer an alternative to traditional literary practices. Although her style may suggest a free expression of her thoughts, it is also a conscious construction of a feminine voice: one that does not strive to convince a reader of a pre-determined value system.<sup>24</sup> Yet while she attempts to render her thoughts as she experiences them, she also uses this seemingly spontaneous approach to draw attention to the ignorance and injustices she sees around her. Her style may appear open, but her meaning is definite. For instance, her despondent thoughts about the human race and its "dreary sense of duty" to the war, are immediately followed by, "I began to treat my corn" (Jan. 15, 1915). Then, on January 30, 1915, she writes of the servant who behaves "as a Colonel's daughter very well might" and who functions dutifully but in relative ignorance. Again she interjects, "My corn is cured", just after her description of this servant. Do thoughts of human folly remind her of minor physical nuisances? Though it is difficult to know whether these pairings are conscious or unconscious constructions, they clearly indicate her attitude towards war and those who accept its values. Again, she draws attention to the war, but trivializes it by recording it in the same context as her corn.

Similarly, she comments on the "sordidness" of the masses as they celebrate peace, by associating the occasion with "drooping smoke". On November 11, 1918, she writes:

A very cloudy still day, the smoke toppling over heavily towards the east; & that too wearing for a moment a look of something floating, waving, drooping. We looked out of the window: saw the housepainter give one look at the sky & go on with his job; the old man toddling along the street carrying a bag out [of] which a large loaf protruded, closely followed by his mongrel dog. So far neither bells nor flags, but the wailing of sirens & intermittent guns.

The following day, Woolf opens her entry: "We should have done well, I think, to be satisfied with the aspect of peace; how the rooks flew slowly in circles, & the smoke drooped"; and continues to express her "disillusionment" with the peace celebrations in London. The triggering of thoughts through associations within the individual's psyche becomes more important in Virginia Woolf's writing as she develops the "Stream of Consciousness" technique in her later novels. Are passages like these in her diary indicative of her desire to experiment with different ways to render experience, or are they truly examples of the operations of her own mind? In either case, the relationships between these seemingly incongruous images clearly convey the writer's disdain for the cultural consciousness associated with the war. While meaning may be derived from the association between random thoughts and environmental stimuli, meaning can be

created through pairing images and ideas in order to emphasize a particular perspective.

The diary reflections on the peace celebrations and the settlement indicate more clearly that Woolf is consciously constructing a voice through which to criticize the patriarchy. Like much of her post-war writing, the diary, I believe, exposes "the series of false constructs and dangerous values that produced one war and that underpinned the same social system that was heading relentlessly towards another". Woolf relies "on the symbolism of women's alterity": a way of thinking and rendering experience which would "dismantle a linear, hierarchical, competitive system that was predicated on the repression of women and women's values" (Ouditt 170-171). Again, Woolf's voice of indifference criticizes the establishment and its attempts to herd the masses, not only through war but in peace. She begins four different entries by remarking on the peace, yet employs a tone of insensibility in each case: "In public affairs, I see I've forgotten to say that peace was signed" (July 12, 1919), "One ought to say something about Peace day, I suppose, though whether it's worth taking a new nib for that purpose I don't know" (July 19, 1919), "Perhaps I will finish the account of the peace celebrations. What herd animals we are after all - even the most disillusioned" (July 20, 1919), and "Well, the peace at any rate is over" (July 24, 1919). Rather than openly state her views about the peace, the repetition of her lack of interest reveals the

implicit criticism in her writing. Woolf admits feeling "a little mean at writing so lugubriously; since we're all supposed to keep up the belief that we're glad & enjoying ourselves" (July 19, 1919).

Curiously, Woolf's constructed voice purports to be unconcerned with the peace settlement, but in other diary entries and in letters, she indicates that she is both personally and philosophically relieved and excited by the prospect of peace.<sup>25</sup> Although her apparent indifference may be an attempt to distance herself from the "docile herds' whom [she] describe[s] on Peace day" (Oct. 7, 1919), ironically, she is defining herself by entering into the system and evaluating her position on war and peace within the social and rhetorical contexts which she criticizes. If Woolf's diary entries about peace in July of 1919 represent the "repetition and dailiness" which, according to Jane Marcus, are "the principles of a female aesthetic which is based on process, rather than finished works of art" (Marcus 14), it also reveals how this female aesthetic is more of a construction than a natural expression of experience.

The recognition that Woolf's diary writing is a conscious construction is crucial because it reveals how Woolf is searching for a style which is outside the literary norms. She may be striving to find a different voice, but, in so doing, she is deferring to male traditions by acknowledging them, and attempting to avoid them. Because women are raised within the masculine language system, any

expression outside of this system requires a great conscious effort. The rules for meaning which the patriarchy has defined are "not natural", but they "have a habit of becoming self-validating and self-perpetuating, regardless of any misapprehensions on which they may have initially been based" (Spender 3). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf also acknowledges the difficulties for women writers who have "such a lack of tradition, such a scarcity and inadequacy of tools", unique to them. She feels that only Jane Austen and Emily Bronte "were deaf to that persistent voice", the masculine voice of tradition. Woolf's diary reveals that she is aware of the "persistent voice" and that she wants to find another way of rendering her experiences. I believe, however, that in undermining the patriarchal values and rhetoric, and in seeking to develop a feminine method of writing, she is often constructing alternative voices rather than allowing her own voice to emerge. While these different voices are useful to Woolf as a developing artist, they are problematic for one who is trying to determine whether or not she has a genuine response to the War.

The diary format in the case of Virginia Woolf does not express a more "truthful" account of its author than other types of writing. James King writes that "glimpses of Virginia's inner life are best seen by reading the diary in conjunction with her letters to close friends" (King 224), while Joanne Trautmann Banks contends that "Virginia lives in her letters" since "we *inhabit* our selfhood" in

letters more than in diaries (Banks xiv). Even so, the diary reveals the extent to which the writer herself believes she is writing "truthfully". Therefore Woolf's own view of the purpose of her diary and its effectiveness as a vehicle through which she may depict life, will show her capacity to recognize the freedom of, and constraints upon, her own voice. The diary illustrates the process which, Phyllis Rose contends, describes Virginia Woolf's relationship to her own art; by the thirties, claims Rose, "both fact and poetry had become for Woolf escapes from personality, from the self" (Rose 213).

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf expresses her view that an artist must achieve a "state of mind in which one could continue [to write] without effort because nothing is required to be held back" (*Room* 97). In other words, the artist must free herself from her underlying feelings of bitterness or grief, for instance, because they cause her to write too subjectively. Furthermore, the artist should strive for the liberated state of androgyny: "one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman" (*Room* 104). Although Woolf's diary writing is a conscious indulgence of the subjective voice, one of Woolf's purposes in writing the diary is to help her to develop the objectivity she feels is essential for the production of great art. On April 20, 1919, she confides to her diary: "I might in the course of time learn what it is that

one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously & scrupulously, in fiction." On December 28, 1919, she evaluates her diary as if it is a construct totally detached from its author: "I've enjoyed reading the past years diary, & shall keep it up. I'm amused to find how its[sic] grown a person, with almost a face of its own." The identity in the diary is, to Woolf, a persona which emerges over time and which provides her with amusement and subject-matter for future writing.

Woolf's relationship to her own diary is instructive because it exposes her fragile sense of self; when Woolf writes: "I haven't an inner life" (Nov. 22, 1917), she reveals her fear of evaluating her multiple voices and her autobiographical fictional characters and understanding them in relation to herself. This particular diary also shows Woolf's inner struggle because it marks a period in her life in which her personal self becomes public. During this period, her first two novels, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, were published. The anxiety created by the fear of public censure of her first novel in particular, was partially responsible for her breakdown, which began in February, 1915.<sup>26</sup> In *The Voyage Out*, the protagonist mirrors many of Woolf's personal conflicts and her fate is delirium and death:

The novel reveals that for a woman of her temperament the real danger is not to accept the fate that would seem to be imposed on her - that is, to submit, to be passive and

masochistic in her relations with men - but to desire independence so fiercely, to fear so strongly the loss of her painfully acquired identity, that any intimacy becomes impossible. (Rose 73-74)

The diary genre allows readers to see Woolf's fear of her own multifaceted and problematical personality. When she views herself from a distance, either in retrospect or from the public eye, she is unable to confront her own fragile identity.

Woolf's description of what she would like her diary to resemble illustrates the tension between her need to express herself, and her fear of public criticism. She wants the diary to "embrace any thing, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind", and yet she is concerned that it not be "slovenly", "slack & untidy" (April 20, 1919). She is unable to "let the pen write without guidance", even though she delights in the haphazardness that produces new insights. Woolf's attitude towards the diary reinforces the idea that her diary is a conscious construction which reflects "the aloofness of a work of art" (April 20, 1919). Although she is aware that she is controlling the writing in her diary, she also believes that "all writing, even this unpremeditated scribbling, has its form, which one learns" (Oct. 7, 1919). Writing, even of a personal and informal nature, has, for Woolf, a life of its own. It becomes detached from its author, and it expresses ideas and experiences which may be unlike the author's perceived view of life at

the time of writing. By separating herself from the writing, Woolf protects herself from herself and from the public. She can deny ownership for the life as it presents itself in the diary, preserving the boundary between herself and her audience.

Woolf's diary achieves a critical distance from its author; because it is comprised of many voices, it presents an ambiguous portrait of its author and allows the author to evade the responsibility which accompanies critical statements based on careful, premeditated thinking. Woolf may have strong beliefs about the patriarchy, but she is not altogether comfortable voicing them at this point in her life. Even the tone in *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929, projects a consciousness of male supremacy. According to Adrienne Rich:

[it reveals] a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is *willing* herself to be calm, detached...[because] she is acutely conscious - as she always was - of being overheard by men. (Rich 37)

By creating a diary which takes on its own identity, she relieves herself of the responsibility of facing her own anger and of facing the attacks that may arise because she is a woman speaking her mind. Her "notion that leaving the business of civilization entirely to men produces wars, although she would not articulate it fully - some would say stridently, until *Three Guineas*, written on the verge of World War II" (Rose 107), is evident but ambiguous in the war-time diary.

## CONCLUSION:

### Identity and the Feminine Voice

Although the First World War diaries of Vera Brittain and Virginia Woolf reveal two very different personalities and war experiences, they uncover a tendency which is common to them as women writing in a male-dominated culture. Where the male post-war writer finds himself in relation to his fellows, either through a shared war experience or a shared quest for identity, the female post-war writer is isolated from others, and, more importantly, from herself.

Elaine Showalter describes women's writing of the post-war era:

[T]he fiction of this generation seems oddly impersonal and renunciatory at the same time that it is openly and insistently female. The female aesthetic was to become another form of self-annihilation for women writers, rather than a way of self-realization. One detects in this generation clear and disturbing signs of retreat; retreat from the ego, retreat from the physical experience of women, retreat from the material world, retreat into separate rooms and separate cities. Under the banner of the female aesthetic marched the army of the secession. (240)

Showalter's statement informs a reading of the diaries of both Brittain and Woolf since she identifies the two sides of the "female aesthetic" which are applicable to the two women. While Vera Brittain's writing becomes "impersonal and renunciatory" as she becomes distanced from her own values and emotions,

Virginia Woolf's writing is "openly and insistently female" as she strives for new approaches to writing about one's experiences. Both diaries, however, illustrate the "retreat" which Showalter feels is at the heart of women's post-war writing.

In Brittain's diary, the "retreat from the ego" begins to show itself immediately after Roland's death. After quarrelling with a friend over lunch, she laments her isolation:

All the people that count are out of reach, except on very rare occasions. Fancy being one's self once a month! Charming prospect of keeping one's personality at that rate. Oh! the separating effect of this War - not only by death but by all the circumstances it has affected. I am so terribly lonely. (March 23, 1916)

Brittain is isolated on two levels: she misses the company of loved ones but, more importantly, she identifies the root of her problem. Because she has, since Roland's death, been relying more heavily on myths, she has lost her sense of her own self. In her isolation she becomes more dependent upon her loved ones to give her definition. A year later, after hearing of Geoffrey's death, she decides to leave Malta, return to Britain and devote herself to the blinded Victor "if he wishes it" (May 1/17). Brittain relinquishes control over her life and reverts to the type of feminine role she earlier despised. Adopting this stereotypical role she attempts to give her life definition even as she loses her own integrity.

While Virginia Woolf suffers from a frail ego,<sup>27</sup> she is aware of her own

anxieties and consciously escapes her inner turmoil by creating an alternative world, a fictional world. She comments on writing and the relationship of reality, fiction and the author when describing Leonard and his frustration with his work: "L was melancholy...All I can do is unsay all I have said; & to say what I really mean. Its a bad habit writing novels - it falsifies life, I think" (Jan. 19, 1915). Woolf does not believe that the author can write "truth", but less clear is the extent to which she believes the author "lies". In the diary, Woolf often uses voices which represent the different ways in which women "lie" in order to gain and maintain power in a male-dominated culture. Her use of irony, silence, flippancy, and complex image patterns, reveals her underlying cynicism. Because women have had to construct voices in order to seduce or coerce those in power to act on their behalf, "[h]onesty in women has not been considered important. We have been depicted as generically whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating. And we have been rewarded for lying" (Rich 186). "We have been required to tell different lies at different times, depending on what the men of the time needed to hear" (Rich 188). Woolf's multiple voices in the diary obscure our understanding of her, but they also reveal her propensity to play with language and thus create personae which voice her opinions, while they dissociate themselves from their creator. The letters of Virginia Woolf may tell us more about her personality than the diary,<sup>28</sup> but the diary captures the difficulty Woolf has writing honestly in

the cultural context, even though she is using a personal forum.

The diaries of Brittain and Woolf do present the "retreat" from the self as they articulate their experiences during the war, but they also reflect each woman's desire to control her circumstances and the varying degrees of success each has expressing this need. On October 5, 1915, Brittain describes the idea she has for a play:

There is to be a girl in it more or less like me, a young soldier very like Roland, & a doctor. The setting is to be topical but the keynote of the plot is to be the psychology of the mind of the girl, who is thrown into trouble & confusion when two alternatives both of them pleasant, are open to her, & who, only when the opportunity for choosing seems to be over, deliberately makes her choice - makes it with a sudden revelation of how she ought to have chosen all along.

Given the circumstances of war, she is unable to orchestrate the events of her real-life situation. What is interesting in her drama, is that she does not envision being with Roland, but rather having the ability to choose a direction for herself. Once again Brittain experiences her individualism and self-assurance vicariously in a constructed fantasy:

[Even] after the war was over, [and] she realized that her knowledge of [Roland] - if not her feelings for him - had been insubstantial[,] [s]he blurs this in *Testament of Youth*, to create a portrayal of star-crossed young love. This story of youthful love is poignant, but it is a perception of her experience that bears the marks of an entrapment in the traditions of the war narrative as much as it does of her feelings for Roland himself. (Gorham 80)

Woolf's personal desire is voiced more overtly at one point in the diary:

"My writing now delights me solely because I love writing & don't, honestly, care a hang what anyone says" (Jan. 16, 1915). While Woolf's writing is her own personal creation and should not be influenced by the views of others, she feels the need to state this point defensively. In so doing, she represents the female writer whom she later describes in *A Room of One's Own*:

The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her [female writer's] case not indifference but hostility. The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw, "Write? What's the good of your writing?" (52)

Woolf's strident assertion about her need to write bespeaks her "consciousness of the taboo" facing her as a female writer:

[The weight of this taboo] seemed to press heavily on the women who disobeyed it, and some form of apology, though tinged with irony, occurs in almost all of the women poets, as well as in many prose writers, whether avowed feminists or not, as an urgent, perhaps propitiating, preface to their speech. (Spender 194-195)

During the war, Woolf, unlike Brittain, is aware of her personal needs, she recognizes how the patriarchy inhibits her potential as a woman, and she directs her frustration at the cause. "Ironically, in the very act of rebelling against male control, Woolf defers to male power" (Spender 203-204).

Being less involved in the war than Vera Brittain, Woolf is able to recognize

her oppression by, and her conformity with the patriarchy and how this affects her writing. In a reaction to literary traditions she withdraws from the mainstream to develop her own voice. *Orlando* (1928) is representative of Woolf's decision to write from the margin; it presents "the female erotic, an eternal language of desire and creativity that remains stable as patriarchal language changes with the times" (Marcus 10). Brittain, on the other hand, reveals, to a greater extent, the "self-annihilation" which Showalter feels is prevalent in the post-war female literary aesthetic. Because she was drawn into the world of men during war-time she is less able to cope or determine her own voice in the post-war world.<sup>29</sup> More than a decade later, Brittain's "retreat from the ego" is striking in *Chronicle of Friendship: Vera Brittain's Diary of the Thirties*. While her war-time diary expresses her own constructed vision of what is going on around her, the later diary mainly lists the events of her daily life; the diarist does not intrude on the diary: her opinions, her values and her feelings are not described, leaving more untold than told. For instance, there are entries about the weather, the social functions she attends, the people she contacts, where she has tea, and what she is reading or writing. The dispassionate entries cause one to wonder: why write a diary account which is superficial? If the superficiality is deliberate, from whom is she hiding her feelings and why? If it is a subconscious repression, it demands further analysis. Given the apparently determined lack of introspection, could Brittain's

attainment of a professional life in "the man's world", have stifled her opportunities for self knowledge? Brittain's writing in *Chronicle of Friendship* illustrates what Showalter asserts:

The distinction between consciousness and experience was an important determinant of the direction modernist women's writing took. The Victorian world had been sexually polarized by experience; the normal lives of men and women had scarcely overlapped. By 1910, however, advanced women like Dorothy Richardson could move freely in social atmospheres previously closed to them; they could enjoy a masculine range of sexual and professional experiences. But the possession of quantitatively more experience did not lead to picaresque or even naturalistic fiction. Instead women writers found the world sexually polarized in psychological terms. (Showalter 257)

While Brittain has gained experience in the male realm, she cannot write like the men and her interest in following their traditions compounds the separation she has from her feelings. In 1929 Woolf recognizes what Brittain does not:

Do what she will a woman cannot find in them [the finest works of our greatest living writers (male)] that fountain of perpetual life which the critics assure her is there. It is not only that they celebrate male virtues, enforce male values and describe the world of men; it is that the emotion with which these books are permeated is to a woman incomprehensible. (*Room* 102)

In order to see how Brittain attempts to employ the techniques of the prevailing post-war literary aesthetic, and then to see how she is unable to express herself within these masculine constructs, I will give a brief outline of the kinds of

writing which are representative of this aesthetic. Paul Fussell notes the cynicism which is central to the writing: "As it grows politically conscious, literary discourse naturally takes on the rhetorical characteristics of postwar political adversary proceedings" (Fussell 109). This cynical and adversarial strain reveals itself in the contemporary poetry, which is characterized by "hard representation, antiromanticism, impersonality and super-positioning." It represents human life as "decultured, nakedly split between mechanism and passion" (Irwin 20). While the prevailing literary aesthetic represents the artist's attempt to make sense of the world, or in this particular time to show the nonsensical post-war world, it offers the artist a means by which she may find definition and identity. Brittain's description of the deaths of her father and Winifred Holtby most vividly reveals the gap between the rhetoric she employs and her emotional experience. In her entry on August 5, 1935, Brittain includes her husband's vivid description of her father's corpse: it was "'tremendously swollen, like an Epstein figure' and the face 'black and red and swollen like the bruised face of a prize-fighter'. The eyes were closed and no expression was perceptible, but there was no actual damage as from a fall or violence." Also Brittain writes in detail about the corpse of Winifred: "Her features, now, had the stillness and colour of a beautiful wax-work - the wax-work of a nun or a bride; her lips were just parted in a tiny fixed smile; she looked altogether happy & serene as a statue is serene, but the life & light of her

had gone clean away..."(Sept. 30, 1935). Brittain writes as if she is "dehumanizing ... human subjects" (Irwin 19), objectifying experience and dividing life and death. I feel that Brittain is using this type of description not to comment on the meaninglessness of life in post-war culture, but rather to create a buffer between herself and the experience. Seeing dead people enables Brittain to describe their physical properties accurately; in so doing, she achieves a measure of control because the words distance her from the visceral quality of the experience. Her interest in the bodies is more in keeping with the astute observer than the bereaved daughter or friend. Reflecting over Winifred's corpse she feels that Winifred is "more completely gone & extinguished than those who died in the War, except perhaps Victor, whom [she] saw dead, whereas the others merely ceased to write" (Sept. 30, 1935). Here Brittain appears to be on the brink of a crucial insight: she recognizes that her understanding of the war-time deaths, particularly Roland's, was never complete.<sup>30</sup> Now, sitting before a corpse, her emotional response is limited because she has so often channelled her emotions into elaborate constructions. Her diary writing and the mythology she depends on to give the deaths import deny her the necessary exposure to the finality of death. Her fascination with the stark, physical realities of these deaths is not indicative of the conventional post-war voice, but is rather a substitute for emotional release.

The passages describing death are not completely incomprehensible at such

times, but when they are persistent throughout the records of the events, they signal an underlying motive. Clearly Brittain wishes to remain detached from the events through description of physical qualities and interest in intellectual ideas, yet she does express emotion about her father's death through description of the landscape:

I sat in the window & looked out at the river shining in the beautiful sun and the osiers dipping into the water, and thought and thought. I had been feeling that I should always hate the river henceforward, after loving it so much and liking to live near it, and hate having to see it; but its loveliness & peace that morning made me feel that instead I would try to think of it as a place that had brought Father the rest and release that he desired. (Aug. 7, 1935)

Is Brittain repressing her anxieties about her father's death? Readers may suspect that the strong emotions she claims to feel for the river are a displacement of her feelings for her father, and his suicide. As this description leads to thoughts of her father, she begins to intellectualize the emotional experience. Vera's tendency to distance herself from her anguish by sublimating her identity to the power of the natural world can be traced back to the period in her life directly following Roland's death. She writes that "the beauty of sunrise" or "a glimpse of very pure sky behind bare tree-branches, takes me for a minute out of myself" (Jan. 1916).<sup>31</sup> Feeling that she is "out of [herself]", Vera experiences the freedom from the constraints which society has placed upon her as a daughter, nurse, or grieving

lover. Directly following this thought, she considers the same question she and Roland often discussed earlier in their relationship: whether or not one may be conscious of the natural world after death. By seeing herself within the landscape, and thus as part of a whole, she is able to bring together her emotional impulses and her reason: "although I have often wished I was dead, it seems so unfair that I should be left to enjoy these things, & he not" (Jan. 1916). Feeling isolated and alone after Roland's death, Vera finds emotional direction from her contact with the natural environment. Unable to rely on other people, because they often leave her, she attaches herself to natural forces, like the river in the case of her father, and she looks to these forces for her emotional guidance. The concrete helps Vera to think and confront her sorrow on an abstract level; perhaps she has learnt to do so after the trauma she suffered through the war, or perhaps this too is a subconscious mechanism. Her own post-war voice seems hidden beneath the realistic depictions of death and, as it struggles beneath that rhetoric, it is displaced and eludes even herself.

To understand the extent to which Brittain and Woolf freely express themselves within a culture defined by patriarchy and the militaristic values of war, one must consider the extent to which they can find "truth" and identify "lies" within this context. In times of war in particular, women "have been forced to lie, for survival, to men" (Rich 189). Women have had to silence their views on war,

uphold the values of the military, and repress the grief of their own losses for the sake of the combatants and the country as a whole. Consequently, in "lying to others we end up lying to ourselves. We deny the importance of an event, or a person, and thus deprive ourselves of a part of our lives. Or we use one piece of the past or present to screen out another. Thus we lose faith even with our own lives" (Rich 188). While Vera Brittain's struggle to find her voice is hindered, I believe, by the lies she lives during war-time, Virginia Woolf's struggle to express herself is more related to the notion of "truth". Woolf recognizes that truth is about complexities, she is fearful of the complexities of her own inner being, and she searches for a method of rendering the complexities around her. Ultimately, Woolf writes of the impossibility of the contemporary woman writer to "tell the truth" about herself:

The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful - and yet they are very difficult to define. Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. (Woolf quoted in Barker-Sandbrook 156)

## NOTES

1. In *Behind the Lines: Gender and Two World Wars*, Margaret Higonnet and Patrice Higonnet outline how, in male-dominated societies, the activities of men are awarded greater status because they are performed by males: "The image of the double helix allows us to see that, although the roles of men and women vary greatly from culture to culture, their relationship is in some sense constant. If men gather and women fish, gathering will be thought more important than fishing; in another society where men fish and women gather, fishing will be more prestigious. The actual nature of the social activity is not as critical as the cultural perception of its relative value in a gender-linked structure of subordination"(34). This "cultural perception" of male superiority filters into language and creates the connotations which arise when gender is discussed.
2. On August 21, 1914 Brittain's skepticism of the military pursuits is evident. When she hears that Roland has not been accepted for service in the army, she writes: "I am glad because I did not want that brilliant intellect to be wasted, & that most promising career to be spoilt at its outset."
3. Vera's diary entry on Sunday February 15, 1914 proclaims her exasperation with her father's classist prejudices. She writes: "Oh, God! What is religion? Is it the evidence of birth & artificial polish, the obsequious submission to the patronage of wealth, of the conventional parson, dear to the heart of Daddy & his like? Or is it a fervent soul-striving, an aspiration towards the best we know, common to humanity, irrespective of the trifling accidents of birth & wealth?"
4. On August 21, 1915, Vera debates in her diary the "Military discipline" which Roland has mentioned in his letters. She writes: "the shooting of sentries who go to sleep on duty & are described in the casualty list as 'Died'... makes me feel sick to hear about...no man can quite understand what it means to a woman, who knows the trouble & pain the production of an individual costs, to hear of this light destruction of a human creature for what may be simply the result of physical overstrain. But I suppose it might have such serious consequences that this cruel stringency is imperative."
5. Arthur Brittain gave Vera a large allowance with which to buy clothes and he was willing to supplement this allowance to ensure that Vera was "well turned-out", as indicated in Vera's diary entry on March 22, 1913. (Vera Brittain Papers, D1)

6. Jean Kennard in *Vera Brittain & Winifred Holtby: A Working Partnership*, outlines Vera's definition of "the ideal type of woman" from the diary. Vera believes her to be one who is "purely concerned with intellect, without losing any atom of her womanliness and feminine attractiveness". "She might have been 'an excellent wife and really the ideal and equal companion of some brilliant man.' In seeing Miss Hayes Robinson as an exception, Brittain expresses a typically nineteenth-century view of female intellectual endeavour as antithetical to truly feminine characteristics"(Kennard 151).

7. Samuel Hynes in *A War Imagined* addresses the woman's role and her passivity during the war: the idea of women being the brave supporters at home who let their men go off to war "was repeated again and again, in novels and poems, in speeches and letters to the editor, right to the end of the war. It is not, of course, really a role at all: it offers women only passivity in a time of action - to let go and wait, and to be, in the sociologist's term, 'unoccupied'"(Hynes 92).

8. Claire Tylee in *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*, also identifies the change in Vera's literary inspirations: "Official war-propaganda, heightened by the poetry of Rupert Brooke, replaced Olive Schreiner's writing as the dominant construction of her reality. Instead of continuing to see herself as a powerful rebel like Lyndall, or identifying with Schreiner's public support for conscientious objectors, Vera Brittain subordinated her own identity in hero-worship of Roland Leighton"(Tylee 65).

9. In 1913-1914 Vera was inspired by the teachings of Mr. Ward, a new curate in Fairfield. His enthusiastic and unorthodox teachings often fuelled Vera's entries on such topics as "duty", "virtue", and "faith". For example she writes: "Convention has an atrophying & enervating effect, & we can only progress & achieve by breaking away from it. We must live in company with an ideal of immortality & must form our own Utopia - whether it be of this world or of the unknown world to come doesn't much matter - towards which we must strive"(Jan. 25, 1914).

10. Dorothy Goldman in *Woman and World War 1*, writes: "Because their wartime experiences were unique, women felt the need to record, to provide an accurate and reliable account; but equally they needed to understand their experiences and to interpret them, to discover the significance of the experience imaginatively. And so we get emphasis on truth, experience and memory, alongside the perceived need to write stories, novels and poems"(p 10).

11. Fothergill writes that some diarists "have been relatively unaware of the process [fictionalizing] and would have believed that they were expressing themselves

'naturally'"(185).

12. "Chummie, dead, belongs completely to her. Unlike a living friend to whom she might write a letter, he has no other existence beyond his responsiveness to her. His readiness to understand is fluid, taking the complementary shape of her need to express...the convention seems to persist whereby she is communicating to an idealized sympathetic responsiveness that has passed beyond the possibility of change, a consciousness with a distinct identity yet not alien"(Fothergill 124).

13. On July 4, 1914, Vera tells Bertrand Spafford that her "ideal at present was something to worship." She believes she "knew [she] worshipped"(August 22, 1915) Roland Leighton before his death, and continues to worship him, as argued above, after his death.

14. By the time Vera writes *Testament of Youth*, 1933, she has started to see herself as a pacifist and re-evaluates the positions she holds in her war diary concerning the legitimacy of the war's cause. In *Testament of Youth* she refutes the militaristic values about which she was so ambivalent in her war diary.

15. James King in *Virginia Woolf*, 1994, writes: "In a subtle way, the war in Europe would gradually become for Virginia the outward metaphor for the inner war she continued to face - and fight"(219,220).

16. In *Virginia Woolf: A Woman of Letters*, Phyllis Rose claims that Woolf associated egotism with men because of her father (p 19). Leslie Stephen may have encouraged the young Virginia to write, but he may have been fulfilling his own egotistical desire to see his daughter imitate him. In Virginia's *A Writer's Diary*, she writes that if her father's life had been extended, it "would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing; no books; - inconceivable"(Rose xviii). Stephen's interest in Virginia's intellectual pursuits did not extend beyond his enjoyment of her precocious behaviour.

17. "In insisting that women needed money and a room of their own in which to write, Virginia Woolf was claiming for women writers the same material conditions for writing that prevailed for many men. She was claiming time: time in which they were not automatically available to men; time in which they were not required to service other healthy adult human beings; time in which they were not required to assume the responsibility for males of caring for and the nurturing of the young, the old and the

sick; time which they did not have to pay for their economic dependence"(Spender 223).

18. "Her exclusion from the university made her realize the liabilities and the benefits of being a woman, and in coming to terms with her exclusion, she came to terms with her own identity"(Rose 35).

19. Joanne Trautmann Banks, the editor of *Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf*, comments that Virginia was "scarcely aware of it [the war]" between 1912 and 1915 (74). Introducing the letters of 1915-1918, Banks' comment about Woolf's involvement in the war was that it "had meant little beyond the threat of conscription for her family and friends, most of whom were conscientious objectors"(86).

20. In a letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, dated Sunday, January 23, 1916, Woolf clearly states the opinion of war which underpins her voices of protest throughout the diary: "I become steadily more feminist, owing to the Times, which I read at breakfast and wonder how this preposterous masculine fiction [the war] keeps going a day longer - without some vigorous young woman pulling us together and marching through it - Do you see any sense in it?"

21. "I had been foolish to ask my professor to furnish me with 'indisputable proofs' of this or that in his argument about women. Even if one could state the value of any one gift at the moment, those values will change; in a century's time very possibly they will have changed completely. Moreover, in a hundred years, I thought, reaching my own doorstep, women will have ceased to be the protected sex" (*A Room of One's Own* 40).

22. To Vanessa on Wednesday, November 13, 1918, Virginia describes the effects of the Armistice on the people of London: "The London poor, half drunk and very sentimental or completely stolid with their hideous voices and clothes and bad teeth, make one doubt whether any decent life will ever be possible, or whether it matters if we're at war or at peace."

23. As noted in footnote by the editor of the diary, this scene was used in *Mrs. Dalloway*. A "violent explosion" on a London street brings the people together as they look for the cause. Woolf takes the image from the public consciousness to the personal consciousness of Septimus Smith: "And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree. Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing

together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose?" (14-16).

24. Phyllis Rose outlines psychologist David McClelland's "formulation of masculine and feminine traits": "a preference for assertion, for the clearcut and unambiguous, a tendency to impose definite structure and definite limits, characterizes the male personality, while the female concerns itself more with context, prefers to draw no rigid boundaries between inner and outer, abhors the definite as a limitation"(Rose 101). Rose does not offer this definition as "truth" but rather as a definition which characterizes early twentieth-century novels and presents the sexual issues concerning writing of which Virginia Woolf was aware.

25. On November 21, 1918, Woolf writes in her diary: "I am overwhelmed with things that I ought to have written about; peace dropped like a great stone into my pool, & the eddies are still rippling out to the further bank." Also, in a letter to Vanessa Bell on November 11, 1918, Woolf admits to "being glad that [Vanessa's] precious imp will be born into a moderately reasonable world"(Banks 103).

26. "Much of Virginia's anguish must have come from the realization that she had at long last gone public: she had written a book which would not only subject her to the whims of the reviewers but also describe - if in a muted form - many of the anxieties at the core of her being"(King 224).

27. In the introduction to *Congenial Spirits: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Joanne Trautmann Banks describes Virginia's fragile self-image: "Virginia Woolf was never confident for long about who she was. She was frightened that the centre of her personality would not hold: 'how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia' ([letter]2460)."

28. Joanne Trautmann Banks argues that the letters allow one to understand Woolf better than the diaries because they are written to reflect her friends' advantages, and in so doing they mirror Woolf's own identity and allow her to create an identity for herself (Introduction xi-xiv).

29. Deborah Gorham in *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life* supports the notion that while Vera Brittain's post war reflections recognize "the evil use to which her youthful ignorance and idealism had been put", her understanding of the constructs behind the idea of war remained limited: "In her own subsequent analysis of the way in which her limited pre-war experience had made her vulnerable, she dwelt on her acceptance of England's moral superiority and on her overly ready adherence to conventional definitions of duty, honour and heroism ... but there was an additional factor that Brittain herself did not perceive, then, or later: namely, the way in which the war caused her to subdue her feminist sentiments and to retreat to some extent into an acceptance of conventional definitions of masculinity and femininity" (81).

30. In 1921 when Vera and Winifred go to tour Italy and France, Vera is emotionally confused over her visit to Roland's grave: "Standing beside Roland's carefully tended grave with its little garden of late-flowering marigolds, Vera found her pent-up emotion stifled by the prosaic incongruity of his final resting place, and late that night, in their Paris hotel, 'I picked a quarrel with Winifred over some futile trifle, and went to bed in a fury of tears'"(Berry & Bostridge 164). Vera is unable to approach Roland's death with the objectivity she knows is crucial for her own recovery. Instead she tries to hide her unwillingness to let go of Roland, in her emotional outburst with Winifred.

31. From an entry entitled "January" which has been inserted between January 23, and January 25, 1916, in *Chronicle of Youth*.

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