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WOMEN AT WAR:  
WOMEN'S WRITING AND THE PERCEPTION OF GENDER PATTERNS DURING  
WORLD WAR I

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## Abstract

This thesis analyses the work of Nancy Cunard, Jessie Pope, and Vera Brittain to obtain knowledge about the perception of gender patterns during the First World War. It aims to provide an answer to what extent the Great War has contributed to the change in women's gender expectations in Britain. In doing so, the thesis discusses three authors who lived and wrote during the War. Each chapter discusses one author and three of her poems, and puts them in their socio-cultural context. The three chapters focus on the shift from women as passive actors before the War to gradually becoming more active actors after the War. The thesis concludes that although the War has made an important contribution to the changing perception of gender patterns, it should not be seen as a direct consequence of the war.

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## Introduction

### Women's Writing of the Great War Explained

The Great War played an important role in women's emancipation. In 1914 733,514 men were voluntarily enlisted to serve in the British Army, but in 1916 conscription was introduced with the Military Service Act ("Called") because nearly a million voluntarily subscriptions were still not enough to win the war, sending most of the British men between the ages of 18 and 41 to the front. It created another front at home as women had to pick up arms and fill the jobs that were left vacant by the men that went off to fight. This resulted in a rise of women working alongside men in factories and other professions that were traditionally assigned to men to keep the economy – and the guns – going. Nearly two million women replaced men, increasing the percentage of women in the workforce from 24 percent in July 1914 to nearly 37 percent by November 1918 ("Suffrage"). These women, for example the 'Munitionettes' who worked in the munition factories and produced 80 percent of munition (Airth-Kindree 80), gained a sense of unprecedented independence. When the men who did survive came back they were no longer satisfied doing chores that were previously traditionally assigned to women only. Women had seen the world beyond the household and the idea that they were only good enough to help out and be equal to men during the war, but then had to go back to their kitchens had something rather unfair and undeserved over it. Professor Susan R. Grayzel states that 'Since women lacked political rights, some women, including several prominent feminists who had worked for women's suffrage for years before the war, saw in it an opportunity to 'prove ourselves worthy of citizenship'' (Grayzel, *Women at*, par. 8). The war was an important factor in determining women's gender identity which could not be done away with overnight.

The outcome of this war to end all wars was not only victory over Germany, but also women's suffrage. Women aged over thirty gained suffrage through the Representation of the People Act of 1918 and in 1928 this was extended to all women over 21 through the Equal Franchise Act ("Women Get"). It marks a definite change in traditional gender roles, "the state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones; the collective attributes or traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as a result of one's sex" ("Gender"), of the early twentieth century. It is also reflected in women's writing, for example war-poetry by Nancy Cunard, Jessie Pope, and Vera Brittain. This thesis aims to explore that reflection of the shift in gender roles and gender politics, 'the assumptions underlying expectations regarding gender difference in a society'

(“Gender Politics”), in women’s writing of the First World War. This is done through the works of Nancy Cunard (1896-1965), Jessie Pope (1868-1941), and Vera Brittain (1893-1970) in light of theoretical information by Susan Grayzel, distinguished Professor of History at the University of Mississippi, and by means of putting them in their socio-cultural context. All three poets are women who distinguished themselves through their writing during the War, yet their position in society, outlook on life, and occupation during that time is also exactly that which separates them. Nancy Cunard was living in London during the Great War and experienced the bombings of London, the home-front, first-hand. This thesis will focus on the shift from the passive role of women and the domestic which translates to a chapter discussing Cunard’s “Zeppelin”, a longer poem called “Parallax”, and “Education”, to the more active women and the workplace, covering Jessie Pope and her jingoistic works focussing on “The Call”, “War Girls”, and “Socks”, ultimately leading to Vera Brittain who served as a nurse at the front and witnessed the traumas of the war first-hand. The death of her fiancée Roland Aubrey Leighton in the trenches in 1915 impacted her life and writing. Her chapter discusses the experiences of women at the front through her eyes as reflected in her works and how they are relevant as an example for and a reflection of the change in gender roles as a whole. The chapter will discuss and analyse “The Superfluous Woman”, “The Lament of the Demobilised”, and “Hospital Sanctuary”. It is structured in such a way so that the chapters themselves represent the shift from women starting out as being passive actors to gradually becoming more active. The thesis results in a conclusion if- and to what extent the Great War has contributed to the change in women’s gender expectations in Britain.

## Chapter I Women's Experiences of the Great War and the Domestic

## Nancy Cunard

An important and recurring image for comparison throughout this thesis is the traditional and Victorian image of women as 'Angel in the House'. This concept was introduced in Victorian England when Coventry Patmore published an ode to his wife in 1854. He describes her as the 'Victorian ideal of feminine self-sacrifice, submissiveness, and motherly devotion' (Weber 1). At first it was not a popular work that received much recognition, but Patmore continued working on it. It was during this time that his wife died, and as it was an ode to his wife the image transitioned from 'material body to metaphorical figure' (Weber 1). The 'Angel in the House' became standardized as the metaphor that 'produced a version of idealized femininity that reinforced an ideological barrier to women's labour, professional remuneration, public visibility, and political action' (Weber 2). It is this Victorian metaphor of idealized femininity and idealized biological gender roles that will be used for comparison of the author and her three works throughout the text.

Nancy Cunard was born the only child of Sir Bache Cunard (1851-1925) and the American California born Maud Burke (1872-1948) in Leicestershire on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 1896 (Cunard and Lucas 9). Born highly into the English upper class she had a fortunate upbringing in a house that at some point counted no less than forty servants. When war broke out Cunard was an eighteen-year old girl enjoying life like most girls her age with dances and, according to her biographer Anne Chisholm, seeking attention from 'the more unusual young men' (Cunard and Lucas 9). She married Sydney Fairbairn, who was a wounded soldier sent home on leave, in 1916, but the marriage did not last very long. Sydney wanted a life of peaceful normality after his service in the war, but Cunard's free spirit made it rather impossible and they decided to separate after a meagre two years of marriage, which was only fully finalised by 1925 (Cunard and Lucas 10). To Cunard this was not that big of a deal as being an heiress meant that she could afford to do whatever she wanted to and that she was not dependant on anyone. In that same year of 1916, Cunard was now 20 years of age, her first anthology came out in which she also first expresses her sceptic view on society which she found to be 'mechanistic, [and] undifferentiated' (Cunard and Lucas 10). The Great War was meant to be the war to end all wars, but as it turned out this war had made future wars inevitable through the Treaty of Versailles that left Germany bankrupt and humiliated. With the revolution in Russia in 1917 arose the possibility of revolution elsewhere and with that the 1920s became, as John Lucas describes in his introduction to *Poems of Nancy Cunard*, 'a time

for taking sides' (Cunard and Lucas 11) and Cunard hastened not to do so. These roaring twenties eventually resulted in the Wall Street Crash, but Cunard was still too much occupied regarding her social activities pursuing multiple affairs with multiple bachelors. Her lifestyle, however, caused her to gain new insights and a new sense of seriousness into her profession as a poet, which made her send one of her poems to the by then established Ezra Pound (1885-1972). He was not at all positive stating 'Damn it all, midnight is midnight, it is not "this midnight hour", [...] and [there are] lots and lots of words that do not add anything to the presentation, but tell the reader nothing he wouldn't know if you had left them out...' (Pound qtd. in Cunard and Lucas 12). She did however not give up and went on to subsidise her work herself which resulted in the publication of "Parallax", a longer poem written in 1923 of which two sequences will be discussed later, and which was published by the Hogarth Press in 1925 (Cunard and Lucas 13). By 1943 an old family friend called Edward Thompson suggested to bundle all her work to date and publish it in its entirety. Cunard's poems had gotten into his possession by the time he died in 1944 and they are now housed in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. She herself passed on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1965 after a life filled with drinking and smoking weighing only 26 kilos, and mentally and physically exhausted.

The *Poems of Nancy Cunard* from the Bodleian Library, and from which 2 out of the 3 poems that will be discussed here ("Adolescence" and "Parallax") are taken, consists of 35 poems in total. These are the poems that she would like to have seen preserved according to her biographer John Lucas, who in his acknowledgements of this anthology states that he has spent a great deal researching the Bodleian Library with his team, but only after permission was granted by Dorothy Thompson as Cunard's poems are part of the Thompson family papers. Hence finding a collection of her works, be it online or in print, has proven a near futile occupation as they are preserved so carefully. The poems "Adolescence", "Zeppelins", and "Parallax" will be discussed in chronological order and serve to highlight Cunard's position in society during the War as an illustration of the position of a group of women in society as a whole during that war.

"Adolescence" was written in 1915, which means that by then Nancy Cunard was 19 years of age and an adolescent herself. The first lines of the poem are as follows:

I am in years almost the century's child,  
 At grips with still the same uncertainty  
 That was attendant to me at the school.

The classics set before us, twenty voices

Took up enunciation, I was dumb— (lines 1-5)

These lines seem to depict the inner sentiments and insecurities of a young student. The words give no indication yet about any awareness of- and opinion on the War. “The classics set before us”, however, do give an indication of her unusual upper class status as classical education was primarily provided by public schools and boarding schools that charge very high fees (“Education”). Cunard indeed attended boarding school in France around which time she acquainted Ezra Pound. The latter was not afraid to point out the ‘dumbness’ she describes in line 5, and did not spare her in criticising the work she sent him for example by saying ‘Why, why the devil do you write in that obsolete dialect and with the cadences of the late Alfred Tennyson...’ (Cunard and Lucas 13). Different from the opening lines are the closing lines:

A year of riot grew, with carnivals,  
 Music and wine beneath the million lamps  
 That flanked the thresholds of advancing war.  
 There were no ruins yet; each hour was gold  
 That reddened in the fire of its adventure—  
 Then had I thought of aftermaths and stood  
 Uncertainly between the opened gates  
 Scanning the crossroads of a violent world. (lines 44-51)

1915 was the year that the first bombing raids were carried out on London. The bombs fell on Hull instead of London due to the weather, and as the raids were carried out by zeppelins the weather would make the bombings less accurate (Castle). Hence Cunard’s line 47 ‘There were no ruins yet; each hour was gold’. The 1917 bombings of London would prove to be successful and almost 300 people got killed (“Spotlights”). It is stated by her biographer in *Poems of Nancy Cunard* that Cunard was in London during that year so it is likely that she indeed witnessed those events and that they had an influence on her. Susan Grayzel states that although there were upper- and middle-class women who ‘found solace in the production of weapons to preserve their husbands’ lives or avenge their deaths’, but that women from these

parts of society were much more likely to join the voluntary aids like the Voluntary Aid Detachments which Vera Brittain, who is to be discussed in chapter 3, joined (Grayzel, *Women's* 11). This might explain why Cunard herself never actively joined the war-effort although she did marry a War-veteran called Sydney Fairbairn (1892-1943). It is speculated by Lucas that Cunard might have seen her marriage as her contribution to the war-effort as the marriage, as stated previously, only lasted two years. Reading "Adolescence" in isolation without knowledge of later poems would lead one to the conclusion that Nancy Cunard fits the stereotypical 'Angel in the House' image by Coventry Patmore. Susan Grayzel, on the other hand, states that joining the voluntary services as a woman was seen as 'a way, however small, contributing to the war effort and thus to their own men and nation at risk' (Grayzel, *Women's* 30). Cunard then, from that perspective, can be seen as unconventional because she refrained from aiding the nation and its men in an apparently traditional way. It leads to the discussion of the poem "Zeppelins" in which she takes a more active stand in her writing by directly responding to the events of the War.

"Zeppelins" as it appears in the anthology of women's poetry and verse of the first world war *Scars Upon My Heart* does not have an official publishing date. However, as Cunard draws from her own experience in the poem, of which a fragment will appear below, it is likely that it is written in either 1917 or 1918 after the bombings of London. The opening lines are as follows:

I saw the people climbing up the street  
 Maddened with war and strength and thought to kill;  
 And after followed Death, who held with skill  
 His torn rags royally, and stamped his feet. (lines 1-4)

The first line starts with 'I' followed by the past tense of see 'saw', which indicates that she is indeed drawing from and commenting on her recollection of the bombing raids as carried out by zeppelins. Death, written with capital D, is depicted as a matador holding up 'his torn rags royally' (Reilly 26) for the raging bull to run to which refers back to the people who are 'maddened with war and strength and thought to kill' (Reilly 26). The importance of these lines lies in the fact that they give information about her perception of these events. This perception can then be used in determining the perception of the group of women who did not join voluntary aid services at the front nor worked in the factories whilst being careful not to make gross generalisations. "Zeppelins" strikingly continues following the form of a

Shakespearean sonnet consisting of three quatrains followed by a couplet, but uses feminine rhyme. Feminine rhyme matches two syllables at the end of the sentence whereby the final syllable is often unstressed (Drachler and Terris 83) as the remainder of the sonnet shows:

The fires flamed up and burnt the serried town,  
Most where the sadder, poorer houses were;  
Death followed with proud feet and smiling stare,  
And the mad crows ran madly up and down.

...

And many died and hid in unfound places  
In the black ruins of the frenzied night;  
And Death still followed in his surplice, white  
And streaked in imitation of their fears.

...

But in the morning men began again  
To mock Death following in bitter pain. (lines 5-14)

It is evident that Nancy Cunard has now experienced the effects of war at the home front with which is meant 'The civilian life and population of a country which is engaged in military conflict elsewhere, regarded as another front in a consolidated war effort' ("Home"). She mourns the tragedy by describing these events through her writing, and as she financed her publications herself she actively gained a public voice.

"Parallax" the poem, not to be confused with the book *Parallax*, was written in 1923. The poem was originally published as a book by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press (Cunard and Lucas 13). Cunard's biographer Anne Chisholm says that the poem has 'powerful, sometimes obtrusive, links with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which had obviously had a profound effect on Cunard when it was published in 1922' (Cunard and Lucas 13). T.S. Eliot was not that pleased being linked to Cunard's work as he describes in a cancelled passage of *The Wasteland* where he, according to both Chisholm and Lucas, compares Cunard to an 'upper-class whore' – Fresca in the passage:

The Scandinavians bemused her wits,  
The Russians thrilled her to hysteric fits.

For such chaotic misch-masch potpourri

What are we to expect but poetry?

...

Not quite an adult, and still less a child,  
By fate misbred, by flattering friends beguiled,

Fresca's arrived (the Muses Nine declare)

To be a sort of can-can salonnière. (lines 1-13)

The poem's title, "Parallax", means a 'Difference or change in the apparent position or direction of an object as seen from two different points' ("Parallax"). This is of importance when reading lines 12-13 and lines 22-24:

And a pale sky with a sickle moon.

Thin winds undress the branch, it is October (lines 12-13)

...

The years are sewn together with thread of the same story:

Beauty picked in a field, shaped, recreated,

Sold and despatched to distant municipality-- (lines 22-24)

These lines depict the years of unrest following the War that were filled with anxieties and doubts regarding England's future. The revolution in Russia in 1917 gave rise to discussions elsewhere about the way states were governed. For England it meant the introduction of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920 (Cunard and Lucas 14). It is what Cunard seems to allude to when she writes 'a pale sky with a sickle moon', for the sickle is a symbol of communism. During the 1920s she was still very much occupied with adolescent frivolities, but she was working for the Communist cause by 1934. She expresses her discontent and doubts regarding society and the way it was governed with lines 22 to 24 by describing society as mechanistic, 'The years are sewn together with thread of the same story'; it never

changes.

It is not easy to determine the link between Nancy Cunard and the domestic spheres of the Great War, and the gender roles she does or does not portray. The complexity even dangerously invites to make gross generalisations. Fact is that she did not work in the munition factories or joined the V.A.D. which Susan Grayzel links to the middle- and upper-classes. Grayzel also states that, although women greatly contributed to the war-effort, 'much of this charitable work did not challenge any preconceived ideas about gender roles or actions' (Grayzel, *Women and*, par. 31). She continues by stating that the position of women as mothers was celebrated 'making motherhood compatible with other wartime activities' (Grayzel, *Women and*, par. 31). Nancy Cunard did marry a War veteran, but divorced him after two years and never got children. She also financed the publication of her work herself which gave her a public voice, and lived in both France as well as England. It is safe to say that she does not fit into the stereotypical image of the 'Angel of the House' as described by Coventry Patmore, but it cannot safely be stated whether her in a sense rebellious ways are a product of the War and its change in women's 'essential nature' (Grayzel, *Women's*, par. 8) or of her comfortable financial situation.

## Chapter II Women's Experiences of the Great War and the Workplace

## Jessie Pope

Jessie Pope was born the daughter of a merchant in Leicester in 1868 (Potter, par. 1). In the *Lady's Realm* she writes that she would 'never refuse[d] any work that was offered to her' (Potter, par. 2), an attitude shining through in her works that will be discussed later. Her estimated wealth at death was £2039 19s, which could be an indication of her prolific writing (Potter). She contributed a 170 poems to the magazine *Punch*, the magazine which she started writing for first, between 1902 and 1922 (Potter, par. 2). During the period between 1902 and 1922 she also produced numerous books including 'The Little Soldier Book (1907), *Babes and Birds* (1912), *The Adventures of Silversuit* (1912), *Three Jolly Anglers* (1913), *Tom, Dick and Harry: their Deeds and Misdeeds* (1914), and *Frolicsome Friends* (1915)' (Potter, par. 3).

The works that will be discussed here in light of the research question are "The Call", "War Girls", and "Socks". These poems serve as a reflection of women's experiences of the Great War and the workplace. It will be determined and questioned whether or not, and to what extent, the portrayed gender patterns differ from Coventry Patmore's idea of the 'Angel in the House'. In order to determine to what extent they actually differ from Patmore's idea, one has to be clear in what is meant with the broad term 'gender'. The Oxford English Dictionary refers to gender as to being 'The state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones; the collective attributes or traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as a result of one's sex' ("Gender"). Gender roles, together with gender stereotyping and gender expectations, are thus mainly a product of society together forming a person's or group's gender identity.

"The Call" was written in 1915 and is described by the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* as being one of Jessie Pope's "best-known [...] jingoistic war poems", meaning that it is effusively patriotic. It was published in the right-wing Daily Mail newspaper one of which purposes was to recruit men during the war (Potter, par. 5). The opening lines are as follows:

Who's for the trench—

Are you, my laddie?

Who'll follow French—

Will you, my laddie?

Who's fretting to begin,  
Who's going out to win?  
And who wants to save his skin—  
Do you, my laddie? (lines 1-8)

Its return to questioning the 'laddie' is rhetoric and seems to try to evoke a feeling of guilt in the hearts of men who have not yet signed up. The poem continues:

Who's for the khaki suit—  
Are you, my laddie?  
Who longs to charge and shoot—  
Do you, my laddie?  
Who's keen on getting fit,  
Who means to show his grit,  
And who'd rather wait a bit—  
Would you, my laddie?  
...  
Who'll earn the Empire's thanks—  
Will you, my laddie?  
Who'll swell the victor's ranks—  
Will you, my laddie?  
When that procession comes,  
Banners and rolling drums—  
Who'll stand and bite his thumbs—  
Will you, my laddie? (lines 9-24)

Especially the phrase 'Who'll earn the Empire's thanks – Will you, my laddie?' combined with the earlier phrase 'And who wants to save his skin – Do you my laddie?' suggests that

those men who do not participate in the War will not earn ‘the Empire’s thanks’ and in so doing will be cowards. Her active pro-patria stand regarding voice and tone in the poem itself the established gender roles seem to have been fixed: men are supposed to do their duty and go to fight in the war. This is underlined by a written appearance in *The Morning Post* of 16 August 1916 in which ‘a little mother’ writes that ‘Women are created for the purpose of giving life, and men to take it’ (“A Mother’s”). It does, however, not automatically mean that this poem reflects all Jessie Pope’s inner sentiments nor that she is conventional in her beliefs regarding gender roles herself.

A different sentiment from the view in “The Call” is expressed in her poem “War Girls”. “War Girls” was written in 1916 and gives a voice to women and girls taking over the jobs of their men whilst they serve at the war-front. It is also the year in which conscription was introduced in Britain. Through the Military Service Act of 1916 all single men between the ages of 18 and 41 were compelled to join the war. This Act eventually raised around 2,5 million soldiers (“Called”). Its significance is that it provides an indication of all the jobs that were now left vacant, jobs that women had to take on in order for society and the economy to keep on its feet. The poem starts as follows:

There’s the girl who clips your ticket for the train,  
 And the girl who speeds the lift from floor to floor,  
 There’s the girl who does a milk-round in the rain,  
 And the girl who calls for orders at your door.  
 Strong, sensible, and fit,  
 They’re out to show their grit,  
 And tackle jobs with energy and knack.  
 No longer caged and penned up,  
 They’re going to keep their end up  
 Till the khaki boys come marching back. (lines 1-10)

What is especially striking about the poem “War Girls” is the phrase ‘No longer caged and penned up’. It serves as a possible indication that previous ways of gender politics, “the assumptions underlying expectations regarding gender difference in a society”, have come to

an end now that the War has forced women to take on the jobs of their men (“Gender Politics”). As gender politics concerns itself with the debate about the assigned roles to men and women and how they relate to each other, it is not all that surprising for poems and their authors to react to contemporary anxieties relating those issues albeit inadvertently or not:

There’s the motor girl who drives a heavy van,  
There’s the butcher girl who brings your joint of meat,  
There’s the girl who cries ‘All fares, please!’ like a man,  
And the girl who whistles taxis up the street.  
Beneath each uniform  
Beats a heart that’s soft and warm,  
Though of canny mother-wit they show no lack;  
But a solemn statement this is,  
They’ve no time for love and kisses  
Till the khaki soldier boys come marching home. (lines 11-20)

‘The motor girl who drives a heavy van’, ‘the butcher girl who brings your joint of meat’, and ‘the girl who cries “All fares, please!” like a man’ brought along concerns from predominantly the male part of society that women were losing their femininity because women in these professions had stepped out of the domestic spheres (“Femininity”). In “War Girls” women are assigned masculine qualities coming forth from the poem as ‘Strong, sensible, and fit, [...] out to show their grit’ (5-6) allotting them a stereotypical male gender role, which is that of the soldiers at the war-front. Women, in the poem, start to behave like their male counterparts in those typical previously male-dominated functions, which makes it questionable whether it is a person’s sex that determines a job’s qualities and characteristics or the job itself. Although contemporary concerns that women replaced men as head of the household might have been valid at the time it is important to note that stereotyping women that way could easily lead to generalisations. Some women could perhaps biologically behave more ‘manlike’ than others, with which is meant that every human has his or her personal preferences regardless of an imposed gender identity by society. Not only did women carry out relatively ordinary jobs like clipping train-tickets, speeding lifts from floor to floor, or

‘call for orders at your door’, there were also those working in the factories, the so-called ‘Munitionettes’

By 1917, the year that Jessie Pope’s famous poem “Socks” was published, the number of women who had joined the workforce had steadily increased. In June of that year nearly 80 percent of all kinds of army materials, weaponry, ammunition, first aid materials and such, were produced by Munitionettes, a term first occurring in the tabloid magazine *Daily Sketch* in 1915 meaning “a young female worker in a munitions factory, esp. during the First World War (1914-18)”, meaning women working in factories for purposes of war (“Munitionettes”). Many of those women joined the workforce through the effective use of war propaganda, but it is also imaginable that there were those for whom it meant a welcome distraction like knitting for the motherly person that is described in the poem “Socks”. It talks about a woman knitting socks, and knitting being a rhythmical routine activity it allows her to ponder about the faith and well-being of her son. The poem starts with a stanza painting the picture introducing the ‘shining pens that dart and click’ (line 1) and the fact that it evokes one’s inner sentiments stating ‘Check the thoughts that cluster thick’ (Pope, *Poems*, l. 3). The poem continues with the rhythm of the knitting which is expressed through each last line of every stanza, for example by saying ‘Knit 2, catch 2, knit 1, turn’ (Pope, *Poems*, l. 12). It is a poignant picture that is being painted, namely the one so many could and can familiarize themselves with and one that is often forgotten: the woman or girl that is left behind waiting for the soldier to come home supporting them from far away. Not every girl or woman worked in the factories or took over jobs in previously male dominated sectors, like Jessie Pope herself. Pope possibly used her talent as a writer and poet to try to bring light and amusement in what was surely a turbulent and dark era. Although the portrayed gender role in ‘Socks’ is stereotypical of the time, a stay-at-home woman knitting socks, the tone is critical. The phrase ‘He was brave—well, so was I’ (Pope, *Poems*, l. 5) illustrates that the War’s brutalities were experienced at home as well as the front, but in a different form.

The portrayed gender roles in both “The Call” and “Socks” seem to be following the fixed image of the time as it was determined through gender politics. “The Call” can be seen as a pressing form of propaganda in that it conveys a message for all young men stating that they must take part in the War or else be seen as cowards. This is very typical of early twentieth century gender patterns that follow the conveyed image by Patmore. Through conscription men did not have a choice to stay at home and take on duties that might otherwise have been assigned to women. Its rhyme and verse together with the use of the constant returning rhetorical questions come across as satirical. This view is somewhat shared

by W.G. Bebbington, the author of *Famous Poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* who describes it as the War 'still [being] the Game' and that the distinction was still drawn between 'those lads who were playing it and those who were not' (Bebbington 88). "Socks" also portrays a somewhat stereotyped image, but with a second layer of perception. The first impression is that of a woman at home knitting socks for the individual at the front, but there is a second layer of thought that shines through through the rhythm of knitting. They are the woman's thoughts that express the difficulty of coping with worries, she wishes that 'that shout [of the paperboys] could be suppressed', but at the same time the poem conveys a message of hope 'He'll come out on top, somehow' which is a refreshing patch of light during an era that could be considered grim and brutal (Pope, *Poems*, l. 19). If the traditional role of women was seen as the woman who would occupy herself with domestic duties then "War Girls"'s distinct focus on women taking on jobs in previously male-dominated sectors differs from the norm. Important as well is that before 1918 women had no political rights ("Women Get") and many women saw working outside of the domestic spheres as 'an opportunity to prove ourselves worthy of citizenship' (Grayzel, *Women at*, par. 8). Gender perceptions changed and 'Examining women's wartime factory work across a wide comparative perspective reveals marked similarities in terms of new opportunities for waged and skilled work that was previously restricted to men, shifts from domestic to factory, and from rural to urban work' (Grayzel, *Women's*, par. 24). The First World War thus had a significant influence, but as soon as the men returned from the front women would return to their homes as well as much of the jobs that were created were directly linked to the War and with the War over those jobs disappeared. Gender roles had changed nevertheless and would continue to change throughout the rest of the twentieth century although women were still paid less for doing the same work as their male colleagues, but it was a start. Jessie Pope did not contribute to the war effort by joining the workforce, but through her writing which is either light, pressing, humorous, supportive, or otherwise using her talent to describe those who did.

## Chapter III Women's Experiences of the Great War at the Front

## Vera Brittain

Vera Mary Brittain (1893-1970) was born the eldest daughter of middle-class parents Arthur Brittain (1864-1935) and Edith Mary Bervon (1868-1948) (Bishop, par. 1). She had a little brother called Edward, who would later serve in the War and to whom she was very close. Although enjoying an upbringing that came from her parents' comfortable financial position, she would often clash with her traditional parental supervision. Her father was conventionally patriarchal and her mother fulfilled the traditional role as described in Coventry Patmore's 'Angel in the House', being 'a subservient wife and housekeeper' (Bishop, par. 2). Edward, who was blessed with a much calmer nature than his sister, would often console her when she had fallen out with her parents. She later went off to study English Literature at the University of Oxford where she was assigned to one of the women's colleges, Somerville, and it was around that time that Brittain had met Roland Aubrey Leighton (1895-1915), her future fiancée, and one of her brother's friends. Roland died in the trenches four months after she had accepted his marriage proposal (Bishop, par. 4). After Brittain and Leighton got engaged in 1915, she decided that her time to serve her country had come and she registered to become a nurse at the Voluntary Aid Detachment (Bishop, par. 4). Another mutual friend of Edward, Roland, and Vera was Victor Richardson (1895-1917), who stood by Vera in the months she was grieving Roland's death. In 1917 Victor got wounded in the battle of Vimy Ridge and got sent back to London to be nursed. Upon hearing this news, Victor had gotten blind in both eyes, Brittain went back to London intending to marry him and to care for him for the rest of his life, but he died a sudden death after two weeks. Unfortunately, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June of 1918, tragedy struck again with news that her brother Edward had died only a few months before the end of the war in November 1918. All these events impacted Vera Brittain greatly, and as shines through in the poems that will be discussed here, 'The Superfluous Woman', 'Lament of the Demobilised', and 'Hospital Sanctuary', she struggled to come to terms with what she had seen and experienced, but found a way to cope through her writing. The War not only had great personal impact, but it also disrupted the existing form of gender politics and with that the idea of gender roles that people were used to. Susan Grayzel describes that this phenomenon took place because 'it was seen as removing "rational" male heads of households and placing "irrational" women, however temporarily, in charge' (Grayzel, *Women and* 91). Mobilisation as in the case of Vera Brittain, according to Grayzel, 'provoked fears about immorality, vice and, as the war continued, about sustaining both military and

“home” fronts [because] the participant nations in the First World War linked sexual morality with the maintenance of morale’ (Grayzel, *Women and* 92). This was a problem because the image that was used in propaganda to keep morale high was that of men fighting in order to protect the women and children at home. It suggests that the mobilization of women was seen as a danger to the morale of men, and with that was seen indirectly as a threat to a possible victory.

Brittain’s poem ‘The Superfluous Woman’ was written in 1919. The key word in its title is ‘superfluous’, meaning ‘That is present in a greater quantity than is desired, permitted, or required for the purpose’ which points out the problem that women had to deal with after the war (“Superfluous”). The lack of men forced the traditional view on gender roles to be altered and taking the estimated female population from the figures of 1921 (Jefferies 3) and the number of men that died during- or from injuries as a consequence of the war being 956,703 (“Great”) it becomes clear that only circa one in ten women would be able to marry (Cable). It also means that the traditional view on women being the ‘Angel in the House’ had to be altered, not only because women had taken over jobs in previously male-dominated sectors during the war itself, but because there were no males left to be the head of the household. Whether society liked it or not, women had no other choice but to replace men:

Light fading where the chimneys cut the sky;  
 Footsteps that pass,  
 Nor tarry at my door.  
 And far away,  
 Behind the row of crosses, shadows black  
 Stretch out long arms before the smouldering sun.

But who will give me my children? (lines 15-21)

The fact that women had to replace men, however, did not stem from a happy occasion and for many women like Vera Brittain the post-war period was a sad and gloomy place with their new status something to be grieved rather than celebrated. Lines 15 to 21 describe this feeling of melancholy and from it arises a certain awareness that life does go on, but that at the same time it is impossible to let go of the past because it has an all to present influence in the future.

The darkness is described by the fading light as a result of the overshadowing chimneys, it is very much a depiction of everyday life with footsteps that pass like life itself. They do not tarry at her door because the people whose footsteps would have tarried at her door are now gone. She draws on that sentiment with lines 19 and 20 'Behind the row of crosses, shadows black Stretch out long arms before the smouldering sun' (Brittain, *The Superfluous*) indicating that the shadows of the crosses on the graves of all those men are now nothing more than long arm-like shadows reaching for the sun overshadowing the light. A striking feature of shadows is that they fade just like the memory of the people that once were, but the painful past is especially ever present in the line 'But who will give me my children?' (Brittain, *The Superfluous*). It is estimated that with the death of nearly a million men around two million women were not only not able to marry but could not have children as a result either. It left them with a feeling of being purposeless, and the notion of gender identity had to be redefined.

Vera Brittain was a nurse at the front of the War and the poem 'Lament of the Demobilised' should be seen in light of the welcome, or rather non-welcome, people from the front were greeted with when they returned home:

How others stayed behind and just got on -  
 Got on the better since we were away.  
 And we came home and found  
 They had achieved, and men revered their names,  
 But never mentioned ours;  
 And no-one talked heroics now, and we  
 Must just go back and start again once more.  
 'You threw four years into the melting-pot -  
 Did you indeed !' these others cry. 'Oh well,  
 The more fool you!'

And we're beginning to agree with them. (lines 5-15)

Important to note here is that in the lines 'And we came home and found They had achieved' (Brittain, *The Lament* 14) Brittain writes as if she were a man placing herself in the position

of the soldier coming home. By doing so she comments on her own position, one which so many women can relate to, and that it seems that not only soldiers, but also women at the front had been forgotten when they got back whilst the war could not have been won without any of them. Deborah D. Buffton in reviewing *Women and the First World War* by Susan Grayzel endorses this by stating that ‘In the commemoration after the War, women were rarely recognized in national monuments’ (Buffton, par. 8). During the pre-war time and during the war itself it was seen as the honourable thing to do to sign up and fight for the nation, but when the war was won and over ‘no-one talked heroics now, and we must just go back and start again once more’ (Brittain, *The Lament* 14); no one wanted to deal with soldiers and volunteers, and the perhaps painful aftermath that was felt in nearly every family as with conscription through the Military Service Act of 1916 that sent every man between the ages of 18 and 41 to the war an entire generation got wiped out. Their youth and innocence literally got killed and stolen from them. Susan Grayzel talks about the link between sexual morality and the maintenance of morale in participating nations and that rationality in the form of men in the household was replaced with irrationality in the form of women, but as there was a shortage of men, however, women converted to other options of having children albeit illegitimate through for example prostitution (Buffton, par. 6), and sexual morale as well as the morale of a nation itself became increasingly pressured. Vera Brittain in the last line of the poem mentions the collective ‘we’ that are beginning to agree with those at home saying that ‘You threw four years into the melting-pot’ followed by ‘The more fool you!’ (Brittain, *The Lament* 14). What stands out in light of the last line is that it captures the spirit of the poem which seems to be that of women remaining in the same parochialised position in society. This is explained and argued by Anna Kelsch in reviewing Grayzel’s *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* and by Susan Grayzel herself stating that ‘despite the apparent newness of some things, women remained fundamentally in the same position in terms of their relationship to men and to the state’ (Kelsch, par. 2).

In “Hospital Sanctuary” she talks about finding consolation as a nurse among soldiers who have witnessed the brutalities of war with their own eyes as well and the mutual understanding that flows from it:

When the sad days bring you the loss of all ambition,

And pride is gone that gave you strength to bear,

When dreams are shattered, and broken is all decision -

Turn you to these, dependent on your care. (lines 5-8)

With 'sad days' bringing 'loss of all ambition' from line 5 Brittain talks about the hopelessness of the situation: day in day out new casualties were brought in and day in day out more people would die. The victory over Germany can be seen as a Pyrrhic victory, 'Of, or resembling that of, Pyrrhus; esp. (of a victory, etc.) resembling the victory of Pyrrhus over the Romans at the battle of Asculum (279 b.c.), in which he defeated the Romans but suffered a great number of casualties; (hence) gained at too great a cost to be worthwhile' ("Pyrrhic"). Yes they had been victorious, but at the cost of nearly a million men in Britain alone leaving even more women bereft of a meaningful life, one which they thought had a purpose. Brittain also says that when all seems to be lost 'Turn you to these, dependent on your care' indicating that helping the wounded was not only aiding the war-effort or a welcome distraction, but also a gesture of love and affection during those cold and dark days when warmth and light seemed to be gone forever (Brittain, *Hospital*). It illustrates the point about finding consolation among kindred spirits as described in line 9:

They too have fathomed the depths of human anguish,

Seen all that counted flung like chaff away;

The dim abodes of pain wherein they languish

Offer that peace for which at last you pray. (lines 9-12)

Vera Brittain had lost all that she felt was dear to her: her future husband, her brother, and their friend Victor whom she thought to marry after the war was over. That is probably what she means with line 10, 'Seen all that counted flung like chaff away' (Brittain, *Hospital*) like the soldiers on the battlefield who saw their comrades being flung away like chaff. It is almost as if the wounded who 'Offer that peace for which at last you pray' drown out the screams of the anguished mind. The way that this fits into the picture of gender norms and the dissent thereof is that in field hospitals at the time women were stronger and took care of men in their hour of need rather than the other way around. To refer back to Grayzel's point about rationality and irrationality; it is, in this situation, men depending on the rationality of women.

'The Superfluous Woman', 'Lament of the Demobilised', and 'Hospital Sanctuary' all describe Vera Brittain's personal tragedies, but at the same time give a voice to the sentiment of what is left of her generation. Although the women at the front were the ones that were most pro-active about joining the war-effort they were also the ones that found themselves

forced into new gender roles the most when they came home. They had gotten, as 'The Superfluous Woman' describes, superfluous and together with 'Lament of the Demobilised' it describes how women from the front somehow had to find a new purpose in life now that the war was over. Grayzel sheds light on post-war frivolities which she links to a decline in sexual moral, and indeed there were fears of illegitimate children and the spread of diseases that went hand in hand with this type of levity regarding intimate relations, but as Vera Brittain describes herself in *The Testament of Youth* peace came as 'divine normality, the spring of life after the winter of death' (Brittain and Bostridge 428) and that these nocturnal activities were a result of 'the vain hope of recapturing the lost youth that the War had stolen' (Brittain and Bostridge 429) with the older generation not understanding 'that reckless sense of combined release and anti-climax' (Brittain and Bostridge 429) from those who were only in their twenties yet had experienced a lifetime. Yet, with the demise of an entire male generation the country felt itself in need of children so women were faced with having reached an impasse: on the one hand they had literally fought themselves free from traditional gender norms which the War had partially forced them into, but on the other hand society placed emphasis on their role as mothers due to the outcome of the War. Deborah D. Buffton from the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse illustrates this point by stating that with the head of the household being dead or fighting at the front 'women often found themselves in dire economic straits, which forced them to abandon their roles as full time mothers and homemakers to support themselves and their children' (Buffton, par. 4). Grayzel in *Women and the First World War* points it out as 'Ultimately, the effects of the war on women depended on "class, nation, region, ethnicity, age, war experience and loss"' (Grayzel, *Women and* 101).

## Conclusion

In trying to explain and to understand to what extent the Great War has contributed to the change in women's gender expectations in Britain it is important to note that every woman's perception and experience of the War and its function is different. One has to be aware that the complexity of each author as a representation of the role of a group of women in society could dangerously invite to make generalisations. However, it is possible to come to a solid conclusion through the analysis of the author and her works.

Chapter I discussed Nancy Cunard as the author reflecting women's experiences of the Great War and the domestic. Taking the domestic spheres of the War into consideration regarding the discussion of traditional gender roles and the possible dissent thereof could, all too easily lead to the stereotypical woman being celebrated for her biological function as a mother. The complexity in the case of Nancy Cunard lies in her atypical way of life, which is also the reason for her to be discussed. She saw flaws in society, and had the means to give a voice to them. She does, however, not clearly critique society in the works discussed like Jessie Pope or Vera Brittain do; it is merely her perception that she visualizes through her writing. It remains unknown whether her marriage to Sydney Fairbairn, the wounded veteran, was her idea of aiding the war-effort. If it was, it would be an indication of the preservation of traditional patterns of gender perception being in line with Coventry Patmore's 'Angel of the House' principle. With the marriage only lasting two years and Cunard unconventionally travelling from England to France, to Spain, and back, and publishing her own work, although it was not exceptionally good if one has to believe T.S. Eliot, invites to take on a perception of her life as being 'constant only in its constancy' (Cunard and Lucas 14). The War may not have meant a distinct dissent from the traditional domestic sphere for her personally, but she used her privileged background to try to make right in society what she considered wrong by financing her own publications. She gave a voice to sentiments that surely many women at the domestic home-front could agree with or at least found solace in.

Chapter II discussed Jessie Pope as the author reflecting women's experiences of the Great War and the workplace. Pope did not contribute to the war effort by joining the workforce herself, but by writing about it. The War proved an immense opportunity for women to show what they were capable of, and within the first year of hostilities 'the number of women in paid employment increased by 400.000 in Britain' mostly directly replacing their either absent or dead husbands (Grayzel, *Women's*, par. 3). These employment opportunities, in for example the munition factories, were created by the War. It meant that when the War

was over, these jobs would disappear because the end of the war had made them redundant, and in other cases men returning from the front would return to their previous jobs. It then becomes questionable whether the War directly caused a change in traditional gender patterns as employment opportunities in sectors previously male-dominated was only temporary. Susan Grayzel states that much of the work ‘did not challenge any preconceived ideas about gender roles or actions’ (Grayzel, *Women’s*, par. 31) because it was temporary, but it did spark strong reactions. The British government was particularly concerned with the sharp contrast between work in the factories opposed to ‘women’s allegedly more natural and equally important task of reproduction, literally ensuring a human supply of citizen soldiers for the nation’ (Grayzel, *Women’s*, par. 32). Jessie Pope’s discussed works serve as a reflection of these discrepancies in the change of gender politics regarding women. On the one hand the government wanted and needed women to join the workforce, but on the other hand they were concerned that these women would drift away from their more ‘natural’ function as mothers.

Chapter III discussed Vera Brittain as the author reflecting women’s experiences of the Great War at the front. “The Superfluous Woman”, “Lament of the Demobilized”, and “Hospital Sanctuary” shed light on this experience, but also reflect sentiments that surely women with a similar experience could identify with. The War had cost the lives of nearly a million men, which brought the war home as it was consequently felt in nearly every household. Brittain serves as a reflection of the group of women who were only in their twenties yet had experienced a lifetime. They found themselves without men and had gotten, in a way, superfluous. Women returning home from the front faced additional difficulties. In *The Testament of Youth* Brittain devotes an entire chapter called ‘Survivors not Wanted’, which describes that there was no place in society for them – survivors from the front – anymore. Many of them had been away from home for a considerable amount of time, and with the War over it was difficult to go back to a ‘normal’ life, but it was equally difficult for those at home to adapt as people from the front undoubtedly brought with them painful memories of extreme brutalities.

The overall conclusion is that the change from women as passive actors before the War to more active actors in society after the War is to be linked to the War, but must not be seen as a direct consequence of the War. The War has played the role of a double-edged sword. It gave women the opportunity and, sometimes even forced them, to experience jobs in sectors that were previously male-dominated, but that were left vacant by the men who went to the front. They were needed to keep the war and the economy going, which invited for a

change in the perspective of gender patterns, gender politics, and gender identity. On the other hand this new position that women started to play in society sparked the concern over their traditional and biological roles as mothers and as 'Angel of the House'. This concern, according to Grayzel, stems from the idea whereby it was seen as 'removing rational male heads of households and placing irrational women, however temporarily, in charge' (Grayzel, *Women and* 77). The idea did not match reality especially in the case of Vera Brittain as women at the front were in charge of taking care of wounded soldiers. The roles were turned, even, as men in their hour of need depended on the rationality of women. The three authors Nancy Cunard, Jessie Pope, and Vera Brittain show many differences, but many similarities as well. They were all women writing about their perception and experience of the War, and they all challenged traditional gender patterns in their own way. Analysing their work in light of their socio-cultural context has proven that women's gender identity and the possible change regarding its status is not a black and white topic. The vital role of women during the War concretely resulted in women getting the vote in 1918 through the "Representation of the People Act", but it only allowed women over 30 to vote which accumulates to a representation of only forty percent of the total population of British women ("Women Get"). The war to end all wars had made future wars inevitable both in the sense of actual warfare as well as in the sense of women's emancipation.

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