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The Bodies, Minds, Desires and Scorn of Britain's "Stepdaughters of War"

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THE BODIES, MINDS, DESIRES, AND SCORN
OF BRITAIN'S "STEPDAUGHTERS OF WAR"

by

ALEXANDRA JEAN LIGHTLE

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in
satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The Bodies, Minds, Desires, and Scorn Of Britain's "Stepdaughters of War"

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This thesis revolves around Evadne Price's novel, *Not So Quiet... Stepdaughters of War*, published in 1930 under the pen name Helen Zenna Smith. The book delves into the inner life of a young female driver, Helen, in a voluntary ambulance corps in France during World War I. Throughout the novel the reader is witness to the hardships of young women who left their sheltered drawing rooms only to be plunged into the apocalyptic landscape of the Western Front. They were ill informed as to what they were volunteering for and they struggled desperately to cope with the heretofore unimagined carnage. Four themes recur throughout the text: the physical effects of the war on both women and men's bodies; the gradual deterioration of their mental and emotional states; their new exposure to intimate relationships without any sexual education; and finally their disillusionment with their parents' generation and the belligerence that was endemic on the home front. By conducting a thorough analysis of *Not So Quiet...* and comparing it to other accounts produced by women about individual war experiences, this study seeks to contextualize these traumatic experiences and how they helped dismantle the traditional 19th and early 20th century British social mores.

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Introduction

Upon the centenary of the First World War, with all of its veterans deceased, now is the time to take stock of what we know about this generation who sacrificed their youth to the cataclysm of war. Not only the men who fought in the trenches, but also the women who undertook completely new challenges in order to be of service to their country. One of the toughest job sectors open to women then was serving in medical units near the front lines. *Not So Quiet... Stepdaughters of War*, a novel by Evadne Price, published under the pen name of Helen Zenna Smith, focuses in particular on the experience of female ambulance drivers on the Western Front. It is the purpose of this study to examine how this text creates a microcosmical portrait of British society during war, and its place within the larger canonical narrative of World War I.

The Great War was a defining moment in history; it brought an end to the long 19th century, served as a violent coronation for the 20th, and oversaw the death of four out of five great European empires. The one that survived, Great Britain, did not do so unscathed. The war had a profound impact on the people of the British Isles, and is still very much present in daily life there. It is tangibly observable through memorials that appear in nearly every town, filled with lists of the dead, and the poppy pins that adorn lapels everywhere in November. But it can also be seen culturally through the poetry, prose and art that the war produced. It was a clear marker in British history because everyday values and societal standards were radically changed in a very brief time span. Between the years of 1914–1918, the people of Edwardian Britain underwent a war of sheer destruction and horror the likes of which had never been seen or experienced before. It was the first time the citizens of modern Great Britain had had to band

together to defend the home front, while an army of volunteer and conscripted civilians fought overseas. There was a new level of democratization amongst the classes with the granting of suffrage for all men over 21 and property owning women over 30, a growing prominence of socialists, and shared experiences that crossed class boundaries. There weren't any aspects of society that were left untouched. All the rules had to be adapted.

Perhaps one of the most profound changes was the entrance of women into the public and military work force. Sandra M. Gilbert writes:

As nurses, as mistresses, as munitions workers, bus drivers, or soldiers in the "land army," even as wives and mothers, these formerly subservient creatures began to loom malevolently larger, until it was possible for a visitor to London to observe in 1918 that "England was a world of women — women in uniforms [...]"¹

This was the first opportunity for upper and middle class women to leave the privacy of the drawing room, the traditional female space, and enter into the male dominated public sphere.

Working class women had the chance to earn wages that were heretofore only available to men.

Sandi Cooper argues that the First World War was one of the greatest factors in shaping western ideas of social order in the twentieth century:

World War I was a profound shock. Its length, its ferocity, its appetite for human sacrifice, and its absurd expectation that masculine notions of honor could confront machine guns forever ended the mythology of chivalric warfare. [...] Total war meant total social trauma. [...] Hoary prescriptions of what 'normal' women did in 'normal' society evaporated; without warning women were declared fit for every public activity and, at the end, required to 'return to normalcy.'²

¹ Sandra M. Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War," In *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. Ed. Margaret R. Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Wietz. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987), 200.

² Sandi E. Cooper, "Women in War and Peace, 1914-1945," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, Ed. Susan Mosher Stuard, Merry E. Wiesner, Renate Bridenthal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 440,441.

Despite the somewhat successful attempts to shoo women back into the homes to make way for the men returning from war who needed work, the doors of the drawing rooms to the outside world had been unlocked and things could never be the same again.

The summer before the war is often seen, both metaphorically and literally, as the last summer of innocence. Paul Fussell writes, “Out of the world of summer 1914, marched a unique generation. It believed in Progress and Art and in no way doubted the benignity even of technology. The word *machine* was not yet invariably coupled with the word *gun*.”³ J.B. Priestly argues that this wasn’t actually a golden era, but is easily mistaken for one when reminiscing because, “When it dined and wined, laughed and made love, it had not yet caught a glimpse of the terrible stone face this world can wear.”⁴

Much like a troubled adult yearning for the relative simplicity of childhood, by the end of the war much of the nation yearned for the time before the shadow of modern warfare had been cast upon society. Britons could still remember the bright entrance of the 20th century, when the United Kingdom was the most powerful country in the world. When compared with the considerable darkness the Great War had wrought, the Edwardian Era looked especially incandescent.

Perhaps one of the greater shocks of the war was how rapidly things escalated. This was the first total war. It touched every single Briton in one way or another, and many of them answered the call to arms enthusiastically. Millions of men and women rushed forward to “do their bit,” during the first months of war, creating an jingoistic atmosphere of solidarity. The

³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 14.

⁴ J.B. Priestley, *The Edwardians*, (New York: Harper & Row. 1970). Pg 57.

naiveté of the untrained youths who yearned to earn glory and honor in war was soon knocked out of them. With this disillusionment came the death of a certain kind of cheerful innocence, which, in retrospect, seemed to be an overlying feature of Edwardian society.

Women were especially hard hit by this loss as they had in no way been prepared for what was to come unlike their brothers, many of whom had at least participated in some sort of paramilitary group while in school. Pre-war standards did not require women for anything beyond bearing children and maintaining the home. In Clare Leighton's biography of her Edwardian mother, Marie Connor Leighton, she recalls her saying; "I disapprove of education for women. Never forget that a blue stocking is a woman who has failed in her sex [...] A woman is meant for marriage and once she is married she has lost all chance to pursue her career."⁵ For young women before the war, the ultimate goal was to be as attractive, charming, and gracious as possible so as to obtain a suitable husband. Priestley writes of females who came from the middle classes:

Some of the girls might be sent to boarding school [...] but most of them were educated rather sketchily somewhere in the neighborhood, and then stayed at home, helping Mummy in the garden, taking the dogs out for a walk, and making sure that exciting new young man saw them at the tennis club.⁶

Ideally, youth is beautiful because it is a period when hope is at its zenith and the pursuit of happiness seems to be the main priority. It is the only time in life where rampant emotions are forgivable, if not entirely socially acceptable. Edwardian England was, for well-off young women just out of adolescence, a sort of emotional playground. These women had no

⁵ Clare Leighton, *Tempestuous Petticoat: The Story of an Invincible Edwardian*, (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1947), 194.

⁶ Priestley, *The Edwardians*, 98.

responsibilities but to be young and to (hopefully sooner rather than later) find an acceptable mate. It was, perhaps, a mentally stifling sort of life, but certainly not a physically unpleasant one. For many it was a very happy time certainly. However, like all other aspects of life, the war eviscerated this world where life consisted of dresses and hats, daily calls, dances and balls, dinner parties, garden parties, tennis and tea, and the theater— one pleasant diversion after another.

When women began serving in medical units at the front, they didn't have time to care about such superfluous luxuries or affectations that had defined womanhood in Edwardian England. Modesty had no place in the ambulances or field hospitals. Refinement was useless on the dark roads between the railway stations and the hospital camps. Cleanliness was a comfort of the past. These trappings of innocent femininity were torn down to reveal the coldness of the world. Coarseness became the order of the day. It was a world of vulgarity and obscenities, a world unknown.

It was the sad irony that the very ideals of a better world that had inspired young men and women to serve were, in the end, destroyed by the war. Those who survived had spent each day of those four years living from moment to moment, with no thought of consequences or the future, because you never knew how long it was until your luck was up. It is this world that is the setting for the convoy of ambulance drivers in Evadne Price's *Not So Quiet...*

Not So Quiet...

This novel is the story of Helen Z. Smith, a twenty-one year old British woman who is serving in a voluntary ambulance corps near the front lines of the Western Front during World

War I.⁷ Helen hails from Wimbledon Common, an upper-middle class suburb of London. Her family moved there after her father made money as a jam manufacturer and transplanted his family to a more stylish neighborhood. Her mother is something of a social climber, always competing against her neighbor and societal rival, Mrs. Evans-Mawnington. Helen has a sister one year younger than her, Trix, who works as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse on the Western Front, as well as a younger brother, Bertie, who enlisted and was in training before being sent to France. The novel opens on a group of six upper/middle class women serving in the ambulance corps with Helen, stationed “Somewhere in France.” Volunteers all, their average age is only twenty three. There is Georgina Toshington, known as Tosh, who, as the niece of an earl, brings a certain social standing to the reputation of their convoy. It is to her that Helen is the most attached. Another roommate, Skinny, is the only child of a high-ranking employee of the War Office, and is the object of Tosh’s constant ire. There is Etta Potter, a good-natured girl and virgin war bride who is “totally devoid of nerves or imagination.”⁸ Bertrina Farmer is called The B.F., which she assumes are for her initials, but to the others it stands for “bloody fool.”⁹ Finally there is The Bug, Helen’s other close companion, who is something of a mystery to the others. She is a mostly silent girl when surrounded by others, but opens up some when alone with Helen, usually only to speak of her hatred of the world. In charge of this group and the rest

⁷ Because Evadne Price’s pen name is the same as her protagonist’s name, I will be using Price’s real name when discussing her role as author, but using Smith in the citations. Helen is also sometimes called by one of two nicknames, Nellie and Smithy, by both supporting characters and some academic sources, in which case I will use the name that originally appears in the text.

⁸ Helen Zenna Smith, *Not So Quiet... Stepdaughters of War*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1930), 22.

⁹ Jane Marcus, "Afterword," in *Not So Quiet... Stepdaughters of War*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1989), 282.

of their convoy is a woman who is referred to as Commandment, but is also known as Mrs. Bitch amongst the drivers. Her main purview seems to lie in coming up with strenuous chores to issue as punishment for perceived minor rule breaking.

These women, previously strangers to hard work, are now hardened to arduous labor and extreme danger. Convoys are certainly the most dangerous as well as the most horrifying experiences for these women. Nightly they come into contact with the mangled bodies of men. During an air raid Tosh and The Bug are both killed. These two deaths signify an end for Helen, and she decides herself finished with the war. She gives away the remainder of her kit and returns to England. Not wanting to return home immediately, Helen spends the evening at an inn, where she unceremoniously loses her virginity to a fresh faced youth named Robin, who is about to embark for France for his first time. He leaves early next morning and she intends to never to see him again.

She finally returns to her parents, who initially assume she is home on some sort of sick leave, as she spends weeks in her bed. Eventually her mother confronts her about returning to service, and Helen is forced to admit that she has resigned and refuses to go back. Her mother is horrified, thinking only of the ramifications to herself. For if Helen is seen as a shirker it would be very damaging to her social standing as a patriotic mother of three children on active service, especially in the eyes of Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, whose only child, Roy, is also serving at the front. To the dismay of both mothers, Helen and Roy fall in love and become engaged while Roy is home on leave. For the first time since before the war began Helen is finally happy. But it is very short-lived.

Helen receives a clandestine call from Trix saying she is in London and that it is urgent that they meet up immediately and in complete secrecy. Helen meets her at a friend's flat and Trix announces she's pregnant. There is no hope of the father marrying her, because the father could be any of three men, of whom two were already dead. She needs £100 for an abortion. There is only one way for Helen to get the money. She goes to her wealthy Aunt Helen (who is childless and therefore uses her nieces and nephew as her source of war glory), and informs her that she's re-enlisting but needs £100 for the new uniform, kit, etc. Aunt Helen is thrilled that Helen has changed her mind, and hands over a check right away with no questions asked. Helen promptly gives the money to her sister, who goes alone to get the procedure done.

Helen is heartbroken that her sister is in such a position simply because of her family and society's standards, and lashes back by signing up as a cook's assistant in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (W.A.A.C.), an organization geared towards women of the lower classes. It is a last blow of humiliation for her ultra patriotic and class-conscious parents and aunt. When Helen returns to the front, we find a person who has shut down emotionally. She works on as she should, a model worker in fact, but that is because she is nothing more than a drone now. She no longer feels joy, fear or sadness. She informs the reader placidly that Trix had been killed during an air raid after she returned to France, and her brother Bertie was vaporized by a shell on his first day at the front. Not even the news of her fiancé's ghastly injuries moves her; he has been blinded, has had a leg amputated, and his genitals have been blown off. He writes her a letter freeing her from her promise to him, as he can never be a proper husband. She responds perfunctorily telling him she doesn't care, and inside she truly doesn't. The story ends with an air raid that forces her and her new working class companions to take cover in trenches. By the end

of the evening she is the sole survivor, and the story ends without any note of hope, only the death of her soul.

A publisher who was originally looking for a female spoof of the famous German novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, to be called “All Quaint on the Western Front,” approached Evadne Price to write this novel.¹⁰ However, when Price read Erich Maria Remarque’s novel she felt a parody would be a completely inappropriate reaction to the power of his writing. So she set out to write what she felt was a more suitable response, that is, a sort of mirror image of Remarque’s protagonist Paul Baumer; Helen is of the opposite sex as well as on the opposite side of the front. Although *Not So Quiet...* is fictional, Price based the story on the diaries (which have since been lost) of Winifred Young, who served at the front as an ambulance driver.¹¹ Price writes in the first person, and the fact that the author’s penname and the protagonist’s names are the same lends a level of continuity to the biographical nature. Despite the fact that Price never served at the front during the war, she is able to create a narrative that captures so many aspects of the war and its effects. Jane Marcus writes:

Not So Quiet...’s ‘heteroglossia,’ in [Mikhail] Bakhtin’s terms, its multivoicedness, comes from Evadne Price’s extraordinary ability to hear and read the popular experience of the horror of this particular war, popular revulsion at the destruction of a whole generation of European youth, male and female alike.”¹²

This book brings to light many different aspects of the war and how they permeated into British society through the lens of a young upper-middle class woman. It belongs to the catalogue of war memoirs that focus upon the disillusionment suffered by both sexes who served

¹⁰ Marcus, “Afterword,” 266.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 267.

at the front. These kinds of texts flooded the literary market about ten years after the Armistice in 1918. They reveal a changing society clinging to old hypocrisies, while trying to play catch up with the brave new world the war had created. In her study of Vera Brittain's seminal war autobiography, *Testament of Youth*, Lynne Layton writes:

[C]ase histories have an important place in history, for they permit us to focus on the gradual processes of questioning and commitment and can thus correct our tendency to simplify and modernize the historically varied manifestations of a movement such as feminism.¹³

Books like Brittain and Price's, along with other novels such as Irene Rathbone's *We That Were Young*, Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone*, and Rebecca West's *Return of the Soldier*, give the reader a personalized version of history from a female point of view. They present portraits of an inner battle that was taking place for individual women within a wider historical spectrum. Despite its classification of fiction, its themes are as true to life as many other war narratives from the time. Hayden White asserts that traditional historic practices are limiting as they do not acknowledge the importance of writing about what was "real," but only what is known to be true:

A simply true account of the world based on what the documentary record permits one to talk about what happened in it at particular times and places can provide knowledge of only a very small portion of what 'reality' consists of. [...] The real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be.¹⁴

Thus, the inclusion of some fiction in an historical account does not necessarily lower the work's credibility or relevance, as the suppositions of historical fiction are typically based on factual

¹³ Lynne Layton, "Vera Brittain's Testament(s)." *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. Ed. Margaret R. Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Wietz. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987), 70.

¹⁴ Hayden White, "Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality." *Rethinking History*; June/September 2005, Vol. 9, Issue 2/3, 147.

truths. The style employed in *Not So Quiet...* makes it possible for readers to identify with the characters, within the context of emotion and empathy, creating a different level of experience as compared to depersonalized military facts and figures. By using fiction that is rooted in fact to delve deeper into the trauma of war, Price is able to reach audiences in a way that the impersonal language traditionally employed in methodical historical works that focus on objectivity instead of personal experience cannot.

This study will examine the major themes of *Not So Quiet...* and how the text explores various aspects of existence for women on the Western Front. It evaluates effects on the individual when faced with the absence of physical comfort, trauma to the mind/emotions, heightened sexual knowledge and activity, and how these intersected with social constructions such as gender and class differentiation, while also placing these themes within the wider context of British society during the First World War.

War and Physicality

The most immediate indicator of a well brought up young woman was her appearance. Before the war she was pampered in relative comfort, making it easier to devote oneself to grooming. At the front, however, personal hygiene soon went by the wayside. Women dreamed of soaking in a warm tub surrounded by the familiar sweet smells of soaps, salts, and powders that adorned their bathrooms back at home, eating meals expertly prepared, relaxing with a novel in an overstuffed armchair. This is no wonder, as their new responsibilities took a huge toll in a short amount of time. An article that appeared in the magazine *Nursing Times*, gives the following warning to prospective recruits thinking of joining up in the medical corps:

Anyone intending to volunteer for active service should spend a 'thought-hour' of self-examination and see if she can answer such questions as these. Are you ready to give up many of the personal comforts which, upon the present time, you may have looked upon as mere necessities, but which will become impossible luxuries? Are you prepared to face damp and cold so intense and persistent that some days you will seriously doubt if undressing will be possible? And when this difficulty has been overcome and you have tucked yourself under as many covers as you can stand, you begin to wonder if you will ever be able to get up and dress when the morning comes! Your hot water bag becomes cold in a very short time, your tent walls and bed covers are soon covered with frost, and you are lucky if your discomfort is not made worse by chilblains which are 'punishing' you dreadfully for having covered them up and tried to make them warm. The cold may be so intense that your hands are blue and numb, but the work has to be done and sometimes you will have to check tears of real suffering and do your duty.¹⁵

Had Helen and her compatriots read this caveat perhaps they would have thought twice about volunteering for such physically debilitating jobs.

In Helen's ambulance convoy, the women live within a dichotomy of the chaos of war and the discipline of the military. Helen's ambulance unit begins every morning with roll call at 07:30, when the drivers are expected to present themselves in clean, unwrinkled uniforms, with brushed and dressed hair, despite the fact that they have had as little as two hours of sleep. After roll call they have until 09:00 for breakfast, or for those too exhausted to eat, an extra hour of sleep. The women then change into overalls and have until 11:00 to clean out and service their ambulances from the night before, a gruesome task. In the back they face, "Pools of stale vomit from the poor wretches we have carried the night before, corners the sitters have turned into temporary lavatories for all purposes, blood and mud and vermin and the stale stench of stinking trench feet and gangrenous wounds."¹⁶ They are expected to understand the mechanical aspects of the ambulance as well, and are responsible for maintaining all facets of the vehicles' smooth

¹⁵ Yvonne McEwen, *It's a Long Way to Tipperary: British and Irish Nurses in the Great War*, (Dunfermline, Scotland: Cualann, 2006), 170.

¹⁶ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 59.

running. Before the war, it was unthinkable for a woman to drive much less comprehend the complicated inner workings of a car. Veteran ambulance driver Josephine Tennant explained:

[Y]ou had to keep your car in running order. Had to do all the daily jobs you see, I mean filling up and oiling and greasing and this and that. To swing those cars— there were no self-starters— was extremely hard work and it took a bit of getting used to give it the right sort of flick you see. Tyres were the great trouble you see in those days tyres went down at the drop of a hat you know [...] and I'm not exaggerating, when I say I've had at least three punctures a day.¹⁷

Laura Doan argues that the new labor expectations of these women, combined with caring for the men they ferried every night created tasks that were “distinctly cross gendered:”

While the work required physical strength and a “masculine” aptitude for mechanical work, drivers also needed to be exceptionally gentle and attentive in carrying wounded soldiers on stretchers. Thus the job required an odd admixture of rudimentary nursing skills combined with the technical expertise of motoring maintenance and driving skill.¹⁸

After an inspection of their vehicles by Commandment, Helen and the drivers change back into their uniforms, have lunch, and then perform chores around their base camp. During this time they are also on-call for duties such as running errands, transporting doctors or nurses, driving to the cemetery for funerals, evacuations, etc. Each woman adds her name to a list on a chalkboard, and after she has returned from her task, erases her name and adds it to the bottom of the list, in an ever-circulating round of chores, not to mention any of the extra punishments that Commandment so often gave. After dinner at 17:00 the rest of the evening was reserved for convoys, which could take all night, depending on the amount of wounded coming in, as well as the weather. The drivers, carrying a certain amount of stretcher cases and sitters, drove along

¹⁷ Josephine Tennant, "Podcast 30: Women's War Service," *IMW Voices of the First World War* (Imperial War Museums , October 19, 2014).

¹⁸ Laura Doan, "Topsy-Turvydom: Gender Inversion, Sapphism, and the Great War." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2006): Project MUSE.
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/glq/summary/v012/12.4doan.html>, 527.

roads in very poor condition, so that potholes and skidding were impossible to avoid, searching desperately for landmarks to guide them to the hospital tents that failed to give any semblance of concern for efficient navigation. The women also drove with their lights dimmed or completely off, in case of an air raid.

There were no fixed hours for rest. It was not uncommon to work a twenty-hour day multiple times a week, as remembered by Tennant:

The idea was that women were to take over and free men for other jobs. They had done all the driving up to then and they had always been two to an ambulance and we were one to an ambulance, so there were times when we did the work of two men at one time when there was a German advance. Things were so bad that we drove day and night for 48 hours and only stopped for two hours in our beds during that time.¹⁹

Denied the curative properties of a good night's sleep, women serving at the front were never in good health. Yvonne McEwen explains:

Although there were cases of nurses breaking down under the strain of war, it was the conditions in which they lived and worked that affected them most. Their physical ill health was caused by tuberculosis, bronchitis, pneumonia, heart disease, arthritis and injury, which, since 1914, had been the most common causes of long-term sickness and retirement from the military nursing service.²⁰

Like nurses, ambulance drivers were required to adapt extraordinarily quickly to their new physically demanding work. Illnesses that may have been minor at home became chronic with lack of rest. Their faces were cut to pieces by the winds that slashed through the open-air front seat of the ambulance. Their hands and fingers were covered in cuts and chilblains, which very often became infected, as Gladys Stanford relates about her time as a VAD:

[I]f you got the slightest prick it always went septic. If you knew you had pricked yourself you had to soak the scratch in your off duty time in disinfectant. In the rush of caring for the wounded there was not time in a hospital to look after the minor ailments

¹⁹ Tennant, *Voices of the First World War*.

²⁰ McEwen, *Tipperary*, 178.

of a nurse, but in their rundown condition— with too much work, too little sleep, and precious little time to snatch a meal before they were too exhausted to eat it— the nurses' minor ailments often turned into major ones.²¹

Vera Brittain reflected that if nurses had been given some of the rights to which many workers back home were entitled, the physical toll might have been more tolerable:

We all acquired puffy hands, chapped faces, chilblains and swollen ankles, but we seldom actually went sick, somehow managing to remain on duty with colds, bilious attacks, neuralgia, septic fingers, and incipient influenza. It never occurred to us that we should have been happier, healthier, and altogether more competent if the hours of work had been shorter, the hostel life more private and comfortable, the rule against sitting down in the wards relaxed, and off-duty time known in advance when the work was normal.²²

The women doing this work were from upper middle class backgrounds. They were raised to value delicacy over fatiguing work. It was unfortunately ironic that these gentlewomen were used to do the most vulgar of work. Helen is baffled by these conditions:

It astounds me why the powers-that-be at the London headquarters stipulate that refined women of decent education are essential for this ambulance work. Why should they want this class to do the work of strong navvies on the cars, in addition to the work of scullery maids under conditions no professional scullery maid would tolerate for a day?²³

She comes to a depressing conclusion that they have created their own mess:

Possibly this is because this is the only class that suffers in silence, that scorns to carry tales. We are such cowards. We dare not face being called “cowards” and “slackers” which we certainly shall be if we complain. What did we think we came out to France for? ...A holiday? Don't we realise there is a war on? ...So we say nothing. Poor fools, we deserve all we get.²⁴

²¹ Lyn Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land: Nurses on the Western Front* (London: Penguin, 1993), 176-177.

²² Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*. (New York: Penguin 1933), 210.

²³ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 50.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

A gentle woman learned early on to suffer in silence. It was not about what she wants but what was expected of her.

On top of the ruthless work schedule, these women were fed very poorly. While Vera Brittain was working at Camberwell Hospital in London her letters to her parents were of a different nature than letters to the men she knew at the front:

Most of my letters home were more human, not to say school girlish, in content. Their insistent suggestions that my family should keep me supplied with sweets and biscuits, or should come to London and take me out to tea, are reminders of the immense part played by meals in the meditations of ardent young patriots during the war.²⁵

Food was not plentiful during the war, especially during the last two years. Because V.A.D.s were volunteers, they did not receive normal army rations like their female counterparts in the W.A.A.C. Add a careless cook to poor quality food, and it could become almost inedible, as was the case for Helen's ambulance troop: "Not only is the food badly cooked, but it is actually dirty. One is liable to find hair-combings in the greasy gravy, bits of plate leavings from the day before and an odd hairpin."²⁶ Because they came from wealthy backgrounds, these women were able to receive care packages containing provisions sent from home, on which they mostly survived. These often consisted of Bovril (a salty meat extract that could be used in teas, soups, or eaten with bread or crackers), chocolate, occasionally some potted beef, and cigarettes ostensibly to give out to the soldiers, but were actually chain smoked by the women. With such a poor diet, these women were certainly not getting the sustenance they needed to maintain their stamina.

Early in the novel the reader is informed that these women have not had their garments off for nine days, nor have they bathed all over in four weeks. The only thing that they have had

²⁵ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 214.

²⁶ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 51.

time for is a short scrub from the waist up, if one was willing to brave the icy water, which was all that was made available to them. At the very beginning of the novel, Tosh cuts her hair off in order to find some relief from the lice that plagued the women. The B.F. is horrified at this transgression of physical norms: “Oh Tosh how *can* you? Short hair’s terribly unfeminine. I wouldn’t cut my hair off for anything.”²⁷ Tosh’s answer is as blunt as her new haircut: “No, you vain little scut, you’d rather crawl.” As she continues chopping her hair she invites the others to inspect the nest of lice that was once attached to her head. As Marcus points out, in 1929, the year the novel was written, there were still taboos around writing about women’s bodies, but the descriptions of the infestation of lice was “an arresting and shocking substitute.”²⁸ Tosh’s vividness did not disgust the other women as it may have once: “A few weeks ago we should have vomited. But after cleaning the inside of an ambulance it would take more than a few lice to make our gorges rise.”²⁹ Although their stomachs have hardened, they do not all rush to emulate Tosh’s rather sensible to solution to habitual lice infestation.

Helen considers it for herself as she watches Tosh but decides she had better not because, “It would definitely put the tin hat on the womanliness. It would also spoil Mother’s pet story of myself and my sister Trix— of how, a wee fair head and a wee dark head, lately released from the tortures of curl-papers, we used to walk demurely to Sunday school while Mother waved from the front gate.”³⁰ In her study of the home front as its presented in *Not So Quiet...*, Celia M. Kingsbury writes, “The image of the wee curly heads is central to both the novel’s irony and it’s

²⁷ Ibid., 14.

²⁸ Marcus, “Afterword,” 268.

²⁹ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 14.

³⁰ Ibid.

pathos. Smithy and Trix have been groomed, figuratively and literally, to conform to a very specific set of criteria: upper-middle-class British ‘femininity.’”³¹ Although common sense would be to seek relief from the lice, the rules of society have been so ingrained in these women, that they dare not lose this bastion of feminine beauty. Although her hair was a source of torture when she was a child, as it was now, she still won’t cut it off, because she feels obligated to keep at least some feminine qualities for her mother’s sake.

Eventually, when her spirit is more downtrodden, she finally makes the plunge:

I cannot bear the filth and worry any longer. What Mother will say I do not dare contemplate, but as I will probably never get leave it seems futile to worry. I get The Bug’s scissors and begin to snip. [...] The deed is done. I burn my hair in the chamber and examine myself in the mirror. Not bad. Makes me look about sixteen. Something quite pleasant about the feel of short hair. Boyish.³²

She is desexualizing her body, and with it comes release from some of the many chores of female appearance. It is not for these women to pretty themselves up in order to snare a husband. They are too busy saving their once potential husbands lives, so that those men may be sent back to the front to repeat the entire cruel cycle again. Their socially created ideals of gender cannot be adhered to when there is mass carnage to be cleaned up.

These conditions are all in severe contrast with the work expected of Helen when, later in the novel, she returns to France as an assistant cook in the W.A.C.C. Her new unit is made up mostly of recruits from the working classes. The work required of Helen is not nearly as taxing as before. Assistant cooks had a much more stable schedule than ambulance drivers. Everything

³¹ Celia M. Kingsbury, “Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front in Helen Zenna Smith’s *Not So Quiet... Stepdaughters of War*.” *War and Words: Horror and Heroism in the Literature of Warfare*. Ed. Sara Munson Deats, Lagretta Tallent Lenker, and Merry G. Perry. Lanham: Lexington, 2004, 239.

³² Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 147.

about her life is regulated, and everyday is the same. Despite the large gap in classes, Helen gets on perfectly well with her three closest companions, nicknamed; Misery, Blimey, and Cheery. However, these women don't think of the work as sacrifice, for they are getting paid wages they could have never dreamed of in pre-war Britain. Cheery and Blimey both agree that "it's a jolly good war, and they hope it goes on forever. [...] They both derive from large families living in two small rooms in a crowded slum district, and they still revel in the luxury of having a bed to themselves."³³ For the first time these women have a chance to pamper themselves, something that was only available to their upper class counterparts in the past. They discover the joys of personal cleanliness (Blimey had never cleaned her teeth before joining up).³⁴ They also are earning wages that are entirely their own. As Sandra Gilbert writes:

[D]espite the massive tragedy that the war represented for an entire generation of young men — and for their grieving wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters— it also represented [women's] first rupture with a socioeconomic history that had heretofore denied most women chances at first-class jobs and pay.³⁵

These women could afford to buy new fashionable clothes, and dressed much smarter than they ever could have before the war. They had their uniforms provided and received army rations. And perhaps, most significantly, these women were spared the nightly horror show of maimed men.

In addition to all the changes happening to their own bodies, women working in medical capacities on the Western Front also had to cope with the sight of mauled male bodies. They had

³³ Ibid., 218.

³⁴ Ibid., 219

³⁵ Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart," 204

gone from a society that didn't even allow an unmarried woman to be alone with men outside of the family, to handling naked men whose bodies were in pieces. As Trudi Tate posits:

Perhaps the most enduring image of the Great War is of the male body in fragments— an image in which war technology and notions of the human body intersect in horrible new ways. [...] Sexual difference disappears in the face of modern weaponry; all human bodies become mangled flesh and blood.³⁶

When reading WWI narratives, many readers find that they must step away from the text for a moment in an attempt to clear from their minds the vivid pictures writers have painted of what war technology is capable of doing to bodies. For example, in a particularly macabre scene Helen imagines her mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington are out on an ambulance run with her:

See that man they are fitting into the bottom slot. He is coughing badly. No, not pneumonia. Not tuberculosis. Nothing so picturesque [...] He is coughing up clots of pinky-green filth. Only his lungs, Mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington. He is coughing well to-night. That is gas. You've heard of gas, haven't you? It burns and shrivels the lungs to... to the mess you see on the ambulance floor there. ³⁷

Such evocative scenes abound in the war narratives of women serving in medical units. The fragmented text reflects the wreckage of men that they handled. In times of peace, these women would have likely been introduced to the male anatomy in an altogether more natural and intimate setting. However, handling smashed and ruined bodies of men created a surrealistic understanding of how men's bodies functioned when broken. American nurse Mary Borden writes of her experiences:

³⁶ Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 78, 85.

³⁷ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 92-93. "The gas was designed to asphyxiate the enemy but not before it produced severe irritation of the eyes, nose and throat. As it settled in the lungs it produced a lethal build-up of fluid, and caused corrosion of the tissues. Eventually this would lead to men coughing up and vomiting blood. In the final throws [sic] of their agonising death, men felt severe constriction of their chests, followed by frantic struggles for breath. It was a harrowing, frightening and traumatic way to die." McEwen, *Tipperary* 94-95

There are no men here, so why should I be a woman? There are heads and knees and mangled testicles. There are chests with holes as big as your fist, and pulpy thighs; shapeless; and stumps where legs once were fastened. There are eyes— eyes of sick dogs, sick cats, blind eyes, eyes of delirium; and mouths that cannot articulate; and parts of faces— the nose gone, or the jaw. There are these things, but no men; so how could I be a woman here and not die of it?³⁸

Women, the submissive gender before the war, were now doing active work on the males' passive bodies in a complete role reversal, and in order to deal with such a sweeping change, gender had to be put on the back burner for the duration. The pronouns remain in women's texts, but they do not treat the subjects as men, simply as wounds to be tended.

We experiment with his bones, his muscles, his sinews, his blood. We dig into the yawning mouths of his wounds. Helpless openings, they let us into the secret places of his body. We plunge deep into his body. We make discoveries within his body. To the shame of the havoc of his limbs we add the insult of our curiosity and the curse of our purpose, the purpose to remake him.³⁹

When Vera Brittain looked back on her experience during a particularly bad push, she didn't remember the men as people; she remembered them as the debris that scattered the hospital huts:

Pictures came back to me of myself standing in a newly created circle of hell during the "emergency" of March 22, 1918, and gazing, half hypnotized, at the disheveled beds, the stretchers on the floor, the scattered boots and piles of muddy khaki, the brown blankets turned back from smashed limbs bound to splints by filthy blood-stained bandages. Beneath each stinking wad of sodden wool and gauze an obscene horror waited for me[.]⁴⁰

So shocking was the butchery that modern war was capable of inflicting on the human body that it dehumanized victims. Young men in the prime of their lives had their bodies eviscerated. Laura Doan writes:

Only when watching men being loaded "like fragile and precious parcels" does [F. Tennyson Jesse, a journalist for *Vogue* visiting France] convey her unease: "And

³⁸ Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (London: Hesperus Limited, 1929), 44.

³⁹ Ibid. 80.

⁴⁰ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 410.

suddenly it seemed to me there was something profoundly shocking about the sight of a man lying flat and *helpless*, shoved here and there. ... It was a thing wrong in essence. ... I got an odd feeling that there was something unnatural about the mere posture.” Her outrage is directed not at the masculinizing effects of war on women, but at the unnaturalness of a war that emasculates men.⁴¹

The weapons of the war enfeebled men, and turned them into quivering lumps of flesh that had to be put back together piecemeal. Claire Elise Tudall, a VAD ambulance nurse serving in London, was likewise astonished at the physical devastation. There was one case in particular that haunted her for the rest of her life:

It was night, and in the dim light I thought his face was covered with a black cloth. But as he came nearer, I was horrified to realize that the whole lower half of his face had been completely blown off and what had appeared to be a black cloth was a huge gaping hole. [...] It was the most frightful sight, because he couldn't be covered up at all.⁴²

Women had to find a way to reconcile their disgust at handling the sickening sight of slaughtered bodies with their will to carry on. Things like class and gender codes, loyalty, patriotism, duty, all lost their significance in the smashed faces of those lingering between life and death. The physical wretchedness of war service, in conjunction with the always close to hand mangled bodies, became forceful catalysts for mental anguish that could not always be repressed.

War and Temperament

Throughout the novel, Price bombards the reader with an attack upon the senses, making use of vivid language, which does not seek to cover up the calamity of war. As Jane Marcus argues:

[T]his brilliant novel overturn[s] the stereotypes of “male” writing and “female” writing by writing from the subject position of the masculinized woman... the genius of *Not So Quiet*... lies in its unswervingly truthful reportage of a war that was both crude and

⁴¹ Doan, “Topsy-Turvydom,” 530.

⁴² MacDonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land*, 172.

emotionally melodramatic, its prose style revealing the death of the feminine sentence, or at least exposing the myth that writing comes from gender rather than experience.⁴³

The language is evidence of the transgressions of boundaries that the war brought upon society, especially that of feminine culture. Helen uses language that moves beyond traditional feminine use due to its graphic nature and content, and by doing so, illustrates the loss of femininity many women faced during the war.

“The smell? Disgusting, isn’t it? Sweaty socks and feet swollen to twice their size... purple, blue, red... big black blisters filled with yellow matter. [...] My conversation is daily growing less refined. Spew and vomit and sweat... I had forgotten these words are not used in the best drawing-rooms on Wimbledon Common.”⁴⁴

Few women at that time had been exposed to the kind of brutal imagery that modern warfare has wrought. Once they became accustomed to the idea of mass destruction, they became almost blasé about the carnage around them. Handling bodies with innards spilling out are simply messes to be cleaned up. Mary Borden writes about unintentionally pulling out part of a man’s brain, but she and the orderly are not horrified, only practical:

When the dresser came back I said: ‘His brain came off on the bandage.’ ‘Where have you put it?’ ‘I put it in the pail under the table.’ ‘It’s only one half of his brain,’ he said staring into the man’s skull. ‘The rest is here.’⁴⁵

Because innocence was a defining trait of femininity, clearly the loss of it is a directly correlated to the loss of traditional feminine behavior and mores. Laurie Kaplan writes of women’s response to this change:

As witnesses to mutilation and death, women used language that remains “untempered by the womanly virtues of gentleness, patience, and sympathy;” these writers replaced “conventional symbolic or metaphoric suggestions with explicit vocabularies that

⁴³ Marcus, “Afterword,” 261.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 93-94

⁴⁵ Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*, 94.

intertwine the colloquial and formal” [...] Thus, their bluntly clinical accounts depend on de-sexed “unwomanly” language [...] ⁴⁶

Words like blood, spurting, clots, filth, and spew are examples of a kind of masculinized vocabulary. It is clinical and evokes ghastly images. The marring of men becomes a daily feature of their lives, so the language of maiming integrates itself to become part of their daily vocabulary as well. Kaplan writes;

As women in the field confronted the ghastliness of war wounds, their language changed radically. Women working in the medical field in particular began to express for themselves, and then for a larger reading public the context of their experience [...] With an obvious intent to shock their readers, women writers of the Great War used the language of trauma to assert the primacy and validity of their war experiences to a world that felt that ladies should not discuss matters of the body and the flesh. ⁴⁷

The disgust that is reflected in Helen’s language throughout the novel is evidence of underlying degenerating emotion:

I am not the type that breeds warriors. I am the type that should have stayed home, that shrinks from blood and filth, and is completely devoid of pluck. In other words, I am a coward. ...A rank coward. I have no guts. [...] I have schooled myself to stop fainting at the sight of blood. I have schooled myself not to vomit at the smell of wounds and stale blood, but view these sad bodies with professional calm I shall never be able to do. I may be helping to alleviate the sufferings of wretched men, but commonsense rises up and insists that the necessity should have never arisen. I become savage at the futility. ⁴⁸

Thrown into a world like the one she and her counterparts inhabited, there is little room for happy sentiments to bloom. Instead of dancing with young men, they were now charged with conveying their mutilated bodies across dark roads in a foreign country at night while the front line was only miles away. How can one be cheery when one is overworked and surrounded only

⁴⁶ Laurie Kaplan, “Deformities of the Great War: The Narratives of Mary Borden and Helen Zenna Smith.” *Women and Language*, Vol.27, No.2. Pg. 39.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 89-90.

by death and destruction? As the narrative moves forward the reader bears witness to Helen's shell shock, the deterioration of her feelings, until at last we experience her emotional death.

Initially, Helen and her compatriots are weary and downhearted, but not yet defeated. If the war taught those out in the thick of it anything, it was of the elusiveness of a future. They lived for ephemeral moments of happiness that served as a sort of condolence for the possible death sentence cast upon their heads, such as when tea and cigarettes are for once plentiful; "We cheer up. After all, we are young and easily cheered up."⁴⁹ However, this youthful optimism is steadily pounded out of them. There are only a few positive emotions left in Helen's heart at this point, the most important being her close relationship with her sister, Trix; "I do not exaggerate when I say I would die for her. She is closer to me than anyone on earth."⁵⁰ But this sisterly love is not quite enough to combat the depressing emotions that were continuously breeding in such an atmosphere.

Helen undergoes intense anxiety during the convoys. She fears the sight of the wounded men. She is frightened of the ones who go mad. The ones who die along the way also terrify her. "Tears tear at my heart... awful tears that rack me, but must not rise to my eyes, for they will freeze on my cheeks and stick my eyelids together until I cannot see to drive. Even the solace of pitying tears is denied me."⁵¹ She retreats inside of herself during the convoys, searching in vain for ways to cope, to keep going. During one convoy she is transporting a man who has gone insane and begins screaming in the back of her ambulance. Helen forces herself to reflect upon her coming-out dance to distract herself from the highly upsetting sound:

⁴⁹ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 54.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁵¹ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 102.

My hair up for the first time... *oh God, a scream this time...* my hair up in little rolls at the back... *another scream—the madman has started, the madman has started. I was afraid of him. He'll start them all screaming...* Thirty-one little rolls like fat little sausages. A professional hairdresser came in and did them— took nearly two hours to do them while Trix and Mother watched, and Sarah came in to peep.⁵²

It is not enough, however. On a freezing night in an open-air cab, she cannot summon the mental strength to drown out the horrific present with scenes of her idyllic past. Brittain writes: “[M]ost of us, at that stage, possessed a kind of psychological shutter which we firmly closed own upon our recollection of the daily agony whenever there was time to think.”⁵³ But on this particular night for Helen, her own shutter seemed to be frozen, like the rest of her body.

During a later convoy, happening underneath an air raid, Helen is completely removed from herself in an out-of-body experience:

I am watching myself from a distance, suspended in mid-air over the radiator front. Look, that's Nellie Smith sitting there— that white blob of a face with terrified eyes, that's Nellie Smith. [...] Quite calm. You wouldn't think she was dying of fear— wondering how long one can live when one's heart has ceased to beat at the thought of having to drive an ambulance of wounded through a rain of dropping bombs.⁵⁴

Next to her is another driver who is joking, unafraid, smoking a cigarette, like “one of the heroines the papers write about,” and at the sight of her Helen begins to laugh.⁵⁵ But her laughter is unnatural, hysterical. She looks to the moon, which is large in the sky:

Somewhere where there isn't war lovers are walking beneath it, softly beautified by its rays. A lover's moon, not a moon to enable men in aeroplanes to drop bombs straight and sure. There must be some mistake. That's why Nellie Smith is laughing.⁵⁶

⁵² Ibid., 98-99.

⁵³ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 384.

⁵⁴ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 152-153.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 152.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 153.

A.B. Baker also recalls being laughing in terror during a bombardment:

Some [bombs] fell into the adjoining cemetery, coffins and dead men were blown from their graves. Into those graves limbs of living men and fragments of shattered dead men were flung. Our N.C.O. shouted: 'Quick, girls, quick! The dugouts.' In the shelter and comparative safety of one of them, I found myself laughing hysterically, and crying: 'The quick and the dead; the quick and the dead.'⁵⁷

Vera Brittain experienced this fear as well: "For a moment my sword of Damocles, the ever-brooding panic, came perilously near to descending on my head. And then, unexpectedly, I laughed, and the danger disappeared."⁵⁸ In the surreal setting of war, so much has changed about these women, that even their involuntary reactions to fear have been dislocated. Like the craters they pounded in the earth, the shells were also ravishing the landscape of these women's minds.

Just before Helen succumbs completely to fear, a stretcher-bearer offers her a swig of brandy from a flask, and she is pulled back down into herself, into reality. Her ambulance is loaded up. Next to her is a sitter who had just survived an 18-hour bombardment and still had the pluck to make jokes in the face of danger. However, Helen is very near panicking again. Her mouth and lips go dry as she wonders what it is exactly that she fears. She decides it isn't death; rather it's the dying. "I have seen men die so dreadfully. Oh, God, if there is a God, let me die swiftly and mercifully. Let me be here one second not thinking of dying, and the next..."⁵⁹ Even in her great fear, her supplication to God is still qualified with "if there is." Not only is she more scared than she has ever been (and had it not been for the war, she probably would have never experiences such a level of fear), she is denied the comfort of the unquestioning faith she had

⁵⁷ Baker, A.B. "The Story of a W.A.C.C.," *On the Front Lines: True World War I Stories*, Ed. C.B. Purdom, (London: Constable, 1997), 397.

⁵⁸ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 410.

⁵⁹ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 156.

been raised with. She has seen too much suffering. A.B. Baker underwent a similar disillusionment with faith, in the form of her curate:

I remember I was sick, I said my prayers; I thought of Mother. I wished that I were home. A few days later I had a letter from our curate. In it he talked about war as noble discipline. He said it purged men of selfishness, and by its pity and terror brought men nearer to God. I felt sick for a second time. He put with his letter a printed Prayer for Victory, and told me to say it every night. I remembered that my prayer in the dug-out had been just this said over and over again: 'O God stop this war; stop it, and let me go home.' At home the curate had been rather a hero of mine. He wasn't my hero anymore.⁶⁰

One more time Helen entreats God, if there is a God, to let a bomb fall on Commandant's ambulance in front of her, instead of her own. This time, her prayer is answered, but in a perverse way. A bomb does drop on the ambulance ahead, but it was not Commandment driving, it was Tosh, searching for The Bug. Helen pulled over and rushed to her friend's body that was thrown from the ambulance. While Helen is holding her, Tosh bleeds out from a shrapnel wound, and mutters her last words— "Oh, Christ!" Helen cries, but she is also laughing again. And this time, more hysterically than ever.

I am laughing, laughing, laughing, laughing... but I am not amused [...] Tosh the brave, the splendid, the great-hearted. Tosh is dead. And I, the coward, the funk, the white-livered... I am alive. It is funny. It is the funniest joke I've ever heard. [...] I am still laughing when, after roll-call, they come in search of the missing ambulances.⁶¹

That same evening The Bug meets her own end. She had been unraveling for weeks, drawing more and more inwards. The strain of seeing maimed men and being worked nearly to death, plus the punishments Commandment seemed so intent on piling upon her, The Bug began to have periodic bouts of madness. She had screaming fits after midnight convoys, waking in the middle of the night screaming about men with no faces, and once tried to run away in her

⁶⁰ Baker, "The Story of a W.A.C.C.," 397.

⁶¹ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 160-161.

ambulance. Tosh managed to catch her up and bring her back. She received a shot from a doctor and slept through three convoys. When she awoke somewhat refreshed, Commandant was only incensed at what she somehow considered to be The Bug's laziness, rather than realizing she was losing her grip on sanity. A few nights later Commandment spitefully sends The Bug out to deliver a parcel instead of letting her rest. When she still hadn't returned after several hours, Tosh and Helen realize something is wrong. They go out immediately to search for her. They find an abandoned ambulance, but do not find The Bug before the whistle is blown for convoy duty at the same time an air raid signal is sounded. The next morning The Bug's body is found at the foot of a rocky hillside.

Although the official report stated The Bug's cause of death was accidental (reporting that she had lost her way in the dark, despite the moon having been bright that evening), Helen knew she was driven to suicide. Yvonne McEwen writes of the effect the trauma had upon many women by the last year of the war:

It is not surprising that, in 1918, higher instances of debility, nervous debility, neurasthenia and conditions such as 'Exhaustion Psychosis' were diagnosed in nurses. Despite coping with the hardship of their physical surroundings, some nurses could no longer endure the sight of so much human suffering[...].⁶²

How would it look to those back home if they knew a well educated girl committed suicide because the conditions she was expected to endure had ultimately driven her mad. It would certainly have stripped some of the glamour off of the "glorious" war work of England's plucky little heroines, as well as provide a blow to the morale of the citizens back home.

Increasingly, the emotions that rule Helen are hatred and anger. She is full of loathing for Commandment, whom she considers directly responsible for the death of The Bug and Tosh. If

⁶² McEwen, *Tipperary*, 176.

Commandment had allowed The Bug some much needed rest, she may not have had a nervous breakdown. If The Bug had not lost her mind, Tosh would not have been out searching for her, something that Commandment, being in charge, should have been doing herself. This anger awakens within her primal urges, the type of which she has never felt before: “One of these day I will murder her slowly and reverently and very painfully. I will take lots of time over it.”⁶³ She glories in the imagined violence. Because of her proximity to death, Helen fantasizes about completely abandoning her feminine passivity and taking on the role of vengeful killer. Her hatred becomes intensified almost to madness:

I, in the hours after the midnight convoy, sitting thinking things that are best not thought... my fingers tight against Commandment’s thick, red throat, gloating in the ebbing strength of the squat, healthy body until I am sick and faint with murderous longing.”⁶⁴

If it hadn’t been for the war, Helen wouldn’t have had any exposure to any kind violent imagery to accompany these feelings. Prior to the war, when a woman wrote about longings, it was typically referring to romantic yearnings for men. Helen flips this amorous imagery on its head with her pining for murder instead of love. Marcus argues that:

When we compare this murderous prose with the gentle, pacifist tone of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, we can make the argument that because of the gender reversals demanded by war, Erich Maria Remarque has produced a *woman’s novel* and Helen Zenna Smith a *man’s novel*. The *subject positions* of the writers, not their *gender*, produce different forms of *écriture féminine* and *écriture masculine*.⁶⁵

Helen’s rage against Commandment pushes her into a mindset of disgust and brutality, feelings that were previously believed to be the province of men.

⁶³ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 162.

⁶⁵ Marcus, “Afterword,” 279.

Apart from her furor, Helen fears that she is on the very brink of losing her mind. Each night she sees before her a procession of maimed men. “I fear them, these silent men, for I am afraid they will stay with me all my life, shutting out beauty till the day I die.”⁶⁶ Helen is shell shocked, much like The Bug. It is no longer the actual maimed men who scream in the back of her ambulance that frighten her. It’s the silent parade of them that will not let her sleep at night. Trudi Tate explains that the trauma of war didn’t only manifest itself in men who had been in battle, but in anyone who bore witness to its destruction:

Civilians exposed to violence and terror, whether public and shared [...] or individual and private [...] can suffer from serious traumatic symptoms. Direct experience of pain, loss of autonomy, and fear of mutilation or death can produce mental disturbance, often expressed in the body, for many years afterwards.⁶⁷

Helen decides to leave the horror of the front. When she first sees the cliffs of England, she is not elated, as she always expected she would be: “I am flat. Old. I am twenty-one and as old as the hills. Emotion-dry. The war has drained me dry of feeling. Something has gone from me that will never return. I do not want to go home.”⁶⁸ Her home, where she had known such innocence and sweetness is no longer welcoming. It is now just a painful reminder that she can never go back to the way she was. After three weeks at home, she still thinks she’s dreaming every morning when she wakes up in her own room, and weeps with relief when she remembers she really is back in England.

With the arrival of Roy Evans-Mawnington on leave from the Front, Helen comes the closest she ever does to regaining some sense of happiness and security. She quickly falls in love

⁶⁶ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 163.

⁶⁷ Tate, *Modernism*, 15.

⁶⁸ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 169.

with him, because they had shared an innocent past and both were witness to the deathly distortion of the present, providing them both with someone to cling to in such a chaotic time. She is happy, against so many odds, and her repeated observation of these feelings is only how unexpected they are to her:

Queer that I should be so thrilled at the prospect of going out with Roy [...] Queer sitting in a pink-shaded restaurant alone with Roy [...] Queer to have Roy, suddenly grown-up, smoothing up and down the back of my head, now and again caressing my ears [...] Queer to be kissed by Roy [...] I've always loved Roy. Queer that I've just discovered it.⁶⁹

The sensations that Roy arouses in her seem completely foreign. Emotions that may have felt natural to her pre-war self now seem remarkable. Love is the only thing that can soothe her disturbed mind, and reawaken within her the stirrings of the femininity that she had abandoned during her first night of driving an ambulance.

When she and Roy declare their love for one another and Helen cries with joy. It is worth noting how twisted her emotional reactions have come; she laughs in time of great fear and distress, and she is now crying at an exhilarating moment. All in a rush, feelings of elation have returned to her. "God, how happy I am! 'I'm happy! I'm happy! I'm happy!' He thinks it's beautiful to hear anyone say that."⁷⁰ Helen's emotions echo Vera Brittain's when she realized she was in love with her doomed fiancé, Roland Leighton:

The previous night I had become ecstatically conscious that I loved him; on that New Year's Eve I realised that he, too, loved me, and the knowledge that had been an unutterable joy so long as any part of the evening remained became an anguish that no words could describe as soon as we had to say good-bye. [...] I wrote [...] that I would gladly give all that I had lived and hoped for during my few years of conscious ambition,

⁶⁹ Ibid., 188, 190.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 191.

not for the first time, to astonish the world by some brilliant achievement, but to one day call a child of Roland's my own.⁷¹

Helen and Roy spend the cab ride home planning their future home and family together:

Oh, the fun and peace and cleanness of the life we plan after the war, Roy and I. Oh, the sweetness of the playmate I have surprisingly found I love. Happy, happy taxi-ride that ends in finding ourselves at Father's doorstep before we realize we have left central London behind.⁷²

Like Brittain putting aside all her pre-war ambitions in the name of love, Helen is putting aside the ghosts of the war that had been threatening to engulf her. However, her and Roy's fantasy of their future life together, living in peaceful beauty, is destined to be unrealized. Even in her newly formed bubble of happiness back in England, Helen can't escape the effects of the war.

When Helen goes to see Trix before her abortion she is overcome with anguish; very much opposite the way she had felt just the night before when she had seen Roy off at the train station. Reality's smack in the face knocks all hope out of her for good. "Despair swamps me like a tidal wave— to recede and leave me petrified with a numbing coldness. I shall never be warm again."⁷³ Trix, who was symbolic of true and pure love for Helen, has fallen so low that Helen must do as she earlier said she would; die for her sister. However, this death would not be of her body, but of her soul. She knows she must sacrifice herself in a manner she has dreaded and resisted ever since her return to England; she must go back to France. Returning to the front is the only way to convince their Aunt Helen to give her the large sum of money needed for Trix's abortion. On the way to see her, Helen reflects on her surrender. Her last positive emotion is thankfulness that she had at least known happiness for a short time:

⁷¹ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 118.

⁷² Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 193.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 202.

...for fatalistically I know now I shall never mean the words again [...] 'I'm happy! I'm happy!...' I should have known. There is no lasting happiness for this stricken generation of mine. Happiness for the old ones, happiness to come for the young ones, but nothing for the race apart from whom youth has been snatched before it learned to play at youth. How sad is the sadness of a sunny summer morning when hope has died!⁷⁴

Five days later, when Helen meets Trix at the train station to see her back off to France, Trix's face is white and prematurely lined for a nineteen year old. She is very distracted, with nothing to say because "nothing seems to matter."⁷⁵ Helen understands all too well: "As the train goes out of the station my last emotion goes with it. Nothing will ever stir me again. I am dry. Worn out. Finished."⁷⁶ This same sort of dejection hung over Britain after the death of Roland. She wrote in her diary:

I wonder [...] if ever, ever I shall get over this feeling of blank hopelessness... Resistance requires an energy which I haven't any of— and to try and acquire it just to face bravely a world that has ceased to interest me... hardly seems worthwhile.⁷⁷

Extreme emotional turmoil, with highs followed by steep drops down, had dried up these women's emotions. It was if they were only allowed so much expenditure of feeling before it stopped renewing and repairing itself.

When Helen takes up her position as assistant cook back in France, she has turned into an automaton:

My body is healthy, my mind is negative. I have no love or hate for anyone. Long ago I ceased to love Roy; long ago I ceased to hate my mother. Both processes were gradual. I am content to drift along in the present. The past has gone; I have no future... I want no

⁷⁴ Ibid., 203.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 212.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 212-213.

⁷⁷ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 254.

future. With this mental atrophy my physical fear has vanished, for fear cannot exist when one is indifferent to life.⁷⁸

When at the end of yet another air raid all of her fellow W.A.A.C.s are killed or wounded, but she was left unharmed, a soldier tells her that she wasn't meant to die that night. Helen begins laughing, but this time it's not out of hysterical fear. It's at the tragic absurdity that all of Helen's companions in the trench all had dreams, desires, and plans for after the war, and Helen, who had given up on life and had nothing to live for, was the one to survive. It sounds like a cruel joke. This gives weight to Kaplan's argument that, "The Great War proved to women at the Front the modernist idea that God is dead, that the universe is indifferent to personal suffering."⁷⁹

After this final tragedy, Helen's spirit completely dies inside her. The narration switches from first to third, taking on the tone of a eulogy:

Her soul died under a radiant silver moon in the spring of 1918 on the side of a blood-spattered trench. Around her lay the mangled dead and the dying. Her body was untouched, her heart beat calmly, the blood coursed as ever through her veins. But looking deep into those emotionless eyes one wondered if they had suffered much before the soul had left them. Her face held an expression of resignation, as though she had ceased to hope that the end might come.⁸⁰

In all ways but corporal, the girl we met at the beginning of the book has died.

War and Sexuality

One day, during an unexpected lull, the women are given a few free hours and Tosh and Helen go for a walk so as to be out of earshot should Commandment decide to cut their break short and blow the whistle for duty. While walking they bump into an old friend of Tosh's, an

⁷⁸ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 216-217.

⁷⁹ Kaplan, "Deformities of the Great War," 42.

⁸⁰ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 239.

officer called Chump, and his fellow officer, Captain Bayton. Walking out alone, much less interacting with their male peers was not something women at the time had ever been allowed to do. As Margaret Ellis, who worked at No. 26 General Hospital, in Camiers relates:

Of course in normal times or even at home we would never have dreamed of ‘picking a man up,’ as they used to call it, because we were very well brought-up girls, but out there it seemed the natural thing to do. [...] We knew perfectly well that every time we went to Paris-Plage we would meet someone. Of course, you’d never have dared if you’d been on your own, but if there were two of you and two of them it seemed quite safe, even if it wasn’t quite proper.⁸¹

The two officers are on their way to see a concert being performed by a camp of German prisoners of war. They invite Tosh and Helen along, who gladly accept the chance for some stolen moments of gaiety. When they arrive they are led into a cage around which all the prisoners stand, so that the audience is on display with no recourse for privacy. It is a strange form of role reversal to have those who are free placed in a cage rather than the actual prisoners. Because they are on full display, Tosh and Helen find themselves under unrelenting male gazes— something they had never experienced with “proper” young gentlemen before the war. Helen is made extremely uncomfortable; “Once I dreamed I was traveling in an Underground carriage minus a stitch of clothing; I felt exactly now as I did then. Naked and exceedingly ashamed.”⁸² Wounded men have no energy or strength to admire female ambulance drivers, but Tosh and Helen are a spectacle for these female-starved Germans. Tosh covertly translates what the prisoners have to say on their appearances, without letting their male companions know they were anymore the wiser. The prisoners comment on the women’s bust size and faces, and declare

⁸¹ MacDonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land*, 200.

⁸² Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 142.

that although Englishwomen are not as fine as their German counterparts, if it came to it, Tosh and Helen would still be tolerable sexual partners.

Helen is embarrassed by being thrust into a feminine role she had forgotten— that of a sexual symbol. Only when Tosh begins speaking without censorship does Helen feel calm again, allowing herself to be amused. As Lyn MacDonald wrote: “If you couldn’t laugh you were finished. At home, in the field and in the trenches, the laughter and the comradeship were the only things that made it possible to carry on at all.”⁸³ Tosh serves to bring a sort of comic mood upon the scene that cuts away at the nervous sexual tension. Although they had to sit under the hungry male gazes, they subvert the situation by refusing to be passive objects of speculation.

After the show the two men escort Tosh and Helen back to camp, and Captain Bayton stops and kisses Helen along the way:

It was not a Platonic kiss either. When I ticked him off he said: “Have a heart, old dear, I’m going up the line to-morrow. I’ll probably be dead mutton before I get a chance to kiss another girl.” So I let him kiss me again. I have never looked at it in that light before. “I wish we could spend the night together,” he whispered just before we parted. I was just about to ask if he thought the remark worthy of a gentleman when it struck me as being silly. Silly to accuse a man of being ungentlemanly when he is practically sentenced to death. Instead I kissed him of my own free will and wished him a speedy “Blighty.” To my astonishment I wasn’t in the least shocked by his proposal. How one’s outlook changes!⁸⁴

It is telling that Helen’s first reaction to his suggestion of their sleeping together was to reprove him for his supposedly rude behavior. The diffidence she had had drilled into her from birth was still there in the form of a sort of instinct. However, like so many aspects of her femininity, this

⁸³ Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land*, 245.

⁸⁴ Smith, *Not So Quiet* 145.

false modesty was shed with alacrity. She realizes her learned aversion to any kind of sexual advance was repressive and had no place at the front, where tomorrow was never guaranteed.

A.B. Baker recalled a similar scene during her time on the front. Before she left, she made a nebulous promise to her father that she would be “good.” At the beginning of March 1918, she became fond of a sergeant named John, who had been already wounded several times. He was being sent back to the front, and asked Baker to join him on a walk a few hours before he was to leave.

The guns rumbled in the north, and the ground shook slightly beneath us. [...] He said he was afraid— more afraid than he ever had been in his life. He made me promise to write to his mother if anything happened to him. When I promised he said that I was a ‘dear kid.’ I was very near crying. He asked me if he could kiss me. I said, ‘Yes.’ He kissed me many times and held me very tight. He held me so tight that he hurt me and frightened me. His whole body was shaking. I felt for him as I had never felt for any man before. I know now that it wasn’t love. It was just the need to comfort him a little. [...] Before he need have done, he took me back into the town, saying: ‘This won’t do. You shouldn’t get so sorry for a chap. It’s risky for you. You’re only a kid.’ It was not till later that I realized how decent John had been. [...] He was killed before March was out.⁸⁵

Like Helen, Baker realized that the best way to comfort the wretched men heading towards the carnage of the battlefield was not with gentle and chaste feminine words, but by letting them relish in physical and sexual contact, making their hearts beat faster with desire instead of fear. How better to feel alive when death is beckoning in the distance? When everything is put into a perspective of life and death, it is worthless to try to preserve such absurd illusions of virginal femininity. It is with this attitude that Helen loses her virginity.

Upon disembarking in England, Helen decides she needs some time to herself before facing her family. She spends the night at an inn in Folkestone instead of going immediately to

⁸⁵ Baker, “The Story of a W.A.C.C.,” 399.

London. Her mind is filled with dreadful questions about her life, particularly whether she will ever have a suitor who hasn't been mentally or physically wounded by war:

Shall I ever know a lover who is young and untouched by war, who has not gazed on what I have gazed upon? Shall I ever know a lover whose eyes reflect my image without the shadow of war rising between us? A lover in whose arms I shall forget the maimed men who pass before me in the endless parade in the darkness before the dawn when I think and think and think because the procession will not let me sleep?⁸⁶

While pondering this over a cup of coffee in the inn's lounge Helen is approached by a fresh-faced young officer. She can tell immediately that he has not been out to France, for his uniform is too clean and his bright cheery face does not yet reflect the horrors of war. It is the man she had been hoping for. He opens the conversation by saying they both seem lonely and introduces himself as Robin. He asks her for some advice for a first timer in France. But Helen refuses to talk of war with him. There is no need; she is sick of it, and he will see it for himself soon enough. He asks her to dance and he displays a joviality that Helen thought had been lost forever.

He is so gay, so full of life, this boy who is holding me closely in his arms [...] Dance, dance, dance, go on dancing...press me against your breast... talk, talk, talk, go on talking... yes, daringly drop a kiss on top of my cropped head in full view of the shocked old lady with the lorgnettes... laugh, laugh, laugh, go on laughing... yes, I will drink more champagne with you, I will smile when you smile... I will press your hand when you press mine under the table... yes, I will dance with you again till I forget I have seen you at the end of the ghostly procession that has crossed the Channel with me.⁸⁷

At the end of the evening Robin and Helen walk back to their rooms, which are both conveniently on the same floor. At her door Robin kisses her gently, then passionately, and then asks her whether he might come in her room, telling her that "He'll be good, honestly— well,

⁸⁶ Smith, *Not So Quiet* 164.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 171-172.

just as good as I want him to be...”⁸⁸ The part of her that would have once closely guarded her virginity no longer exists. Like Captain Bayton, Helen seeks to feel alive in the arms of a lover. She sleeps with Robin, “not only because he was whole and strong-limbed, not only because his body was young and beautiful, not only because his laughing blue eyes reflected my image without the shadow of war rising to blot me out... but because I saw him between me and the dance orchestra ending a shadow procession of cruelly-maimed men.”⁸⁹

In the morning while he prepares to leave, Robin admits he feels like a cad for having to run out so soon. He asks Helen if he was her first lover, and whether she was a bit in love with him. He mistakes Helen’s surrendering of her virginity as an act of love, and she says nothing to dissuade him from that fantasy. Marcus argues, “Helen’s one night stand with Robin when she returns to England seems to spring from her acquired ‘masculinity’[.]”⁹⁰ Robin’s naive and romantic view of their sexual encounter reflects traditional femininity, while Helen’s one-night stand is reminiscent of a masculine playboy type. She sees in Robin the kind of wholeness and jollity that had been nearly eradicated from her memory by the horrors of war. In vain, she seeks to soothe her war-maimed mind in sex with such an innocent man.

When Helen receives that terrible call from her sister Trix, she learns how very desperate situation is. Trix’s only option to avoid complete humiliation is abortion, but she cannot raise the £100 required all alone. It was not unheard of for women to fall pregnant on the Western Front. While there were legal forms of birth control, it wasn’t really spoken of, and those young women who required chaperones to go anywhere before the war would certainly have never gotten a

⁸⁸ Ibid., 173.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 173-174.

⁹⁰ Marcus, “Afterword,” 281.

chance to speak to a chemist or doctor about them. Condoms were fairly easy for men to obtain, but as Patricia Knight writes in her study on abortion in the 19th and early 20th centuries:

Female methods of contraception were even more expensive and complicated [...] Accurate information on birth control was difficult to acquire [...]. By the 1880s sponges, soluble pessaries, rubber diaphragms and syringes were sold by chemists, but success was not guaranteed unless two methods were combined. Spermicidal solutions for use with sponges or syringes had to be mixed by the woman herself, using quinine and other ingredients in a process resembling a chemical experiment.⁹¹

All of the equipment a woman needed to prepare for safe sex wasn't in easy supply at the front.

Besides, with the unpredictable schedules of the hospitals, it would have been difficult to coordinate the timing of the prep work with opportunities to be alone with a sexual partner. Trix attempts to explain what drove her to such reckless behavior:

I wouldn't care if we were being paid for it— but we're giving our youth and the good times we ought to be having free of charge; we're like kids when we get loose— pity our games aren't as harmless... but I've gotten to the stage of wondering what's wrong with my appearance if a sub doesn't ask me to sleep with him— that's what the war's done for me— pretty isn't it? Here to-day and gone tomorrow, that's what they tell you, and it's true, it's true, people dying all round you. Makes you determined to get a bit of enjoyment out of life while you're alive to take it— you're not alive very long nowadays if you're young are you? *Are you?*⁹²

When life may be snuffed out at any time without warning, the penalties of unprotected sex seem vague and improbable compared to the stolen moments of pleasure in the present.

Trix's despondency brings her to the threshold of insanity and she tells her sister that the only thing that kept her from jumping overboard on the way over from France was the thought of Helen and the help that she would be able to bestow. The strain and despair of such a situation

⁹¹ Patricia Knight, "Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England." *History Workshop* 4 (1977) *JSTOR*. Web. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288122>, 59.

⁹² Smith, *Not So Quiet* 199-200.

was indeed enough to drive a woman to madness. As part of her duties in France, A.B. Baker came across many girls in the same situation, but one in particular stuck with her:

In the 'office' I had, as part of my work, to translate into English letters written in French. [...] A number of these were from the parents of French girls who were with child. At first, this seemed very terrible to me. [...] Sometimes, one of these girls would come to the office, alone or with her parents. One was H  l  ne. She came alone, at midday, when I was in sole charge. She was frantic. She said her father would kill her: she said that she would kill herself. She implored me to help her find the man. She would kill him when she found him, if he would not marry her. Suddenly her rage left her. She sobbed like a child. She refused to tell me anything but her Christian name, and went away. For weeks the sound of her sobbing haunted me. I never knew what became of her.⁹³

Like H  l  ne did to Baker, Trix's desperate franticness shocked Helen so deeply that any hope for happiness that she had came crashing down.

Patricia Knight writes, "Though there was probably a good deal of discreet middle-class abortion, indicated by the extensive sale of the more expensive abortion remedies, contemporaries persisted in seeing abortion as a working-class phenomenon."⁹⁴ Kingsbury also argues that women's attempting to take control of their own reproductive systems was seen as a practice of only the lower classes, and for this reason created such a level of despair for middle-class Trix:

Trix's dilemma exists because her parents, her class, willfully bury the truth of the war under words and images of propaganda. 'England's splendid daughters' do not forget themselves completely. Only working-class women succumb to passion, to the heat of the moment. [...] Class expectations take precedence over human needs and human desires.⁹⁵

The sad fact is that if she had been born into a poorer family, she might not have needed to be so frantic at the prospect of a premarital baby during wartime.

⁹³ Baker, "The Story of a W.A.C.C.," 398.

⁹⁴ Knight, "Women and Abortion," 58.

⁹⁵ Kingsbury, "Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front," 246.

In the Smith household they had had a maid before the war who fell pregnant and was promptly turned out. However, when their current maid has also fallen pregnant, the scandal is tempered by the fact that she is being cared for by a socially acceptable league devoted to supporting the mothers of “war babies.” In only a matter of years, the social taboo of pregnancy before marriage became, at best, a patriotic act, as Cooper writes:

In some instances, out-of-wedlock births were encouraged, and waiting periods abolished prior to military marriages, while soldiers were encouraged to start babies. [...] [Swedish social reformer Ellen] Key, realizing that motherhood would be a matter of great interest to the state, warned women that they must “*resolutely resist mass production of children*” and not permit the highest instincts to become perverted for military ends.⁹⁶

At worst, war babies were a necessary evil. Baker writes; “It shocked me most that my superiors should be shocked so little. [...] They looked upon it as natural and normal, a necessary nuisance of war. [...] Never once did I hear an expression of pity or sorrow or indignation.”⁹⁷ After all, with the tremendous amount of men dying, there needed to be a replacement of cannon fodder. But this war baby option was not available to upper/middle class women. The pain this hypocrisy caused proved to be soul crushing for both Smith sisters.

It wasn’t just the social consequences a pregnant woman had to worry about, because abortion was illegal and therefore not carefully regulated. Young women could easily be exhorted for large sums of money, which may explain the high price of £100 that Trix required. A V.A.D. would likely have a better chance of getting a larger sum of money than her W.A.A.C. counterpart, which could lead to price gouging. It was also a highly dangerous process, as the hygiene and skill of an abortionist had no way of being guaranteed.

⁹⁶ Cooper, “Women in War and Peace, 1914–1945,” 446

⁹⁷ Baker, “The Story of a W.A.C.C.,” 398

Use of knitting needles and other implements was more likely to require assistance from abortionists and therefore to be more expensive, and the results were likely to be more traumatic and painful. [...] The numerous women who resorted to abortion frequently had to face illness and sometimes death. Abortion, especially by use of instruments, was often painful and dangerous.⁹⁸

In return for their adherence to the prescribed feminine roles, young women should have been compensated with the pleasures of youthful courtship and love. Instead, they are denied such joys and yet are expected to maintain their feminine virtue for the contemptible reward of death, maimed bodies, and distorted minds.

Sex, pregnancy, and abortions are not the only taboo sexual subjects in the plot of *Not So Quiet...* It also deals lesbianism, although not in a very explicit or favorable light. Both Jane Marcus and Gay Wachman argue that Price's depiction of lesbianism is a reaction to and rewriting of the protagonist in Radclyffe Hall's novel, *The Well of Loneliness*.⁹⁹ Hall, an upper-middle class self identified sexual invert, was groundbreaking in the fact that she lived and wrote in a world where the rigidities of society did not allow for a lexicon of different kinds of inversion, leaving the subject to only be referred to vaguely or metaphorically. Through the character of aristocratic Stephen Gordon, Hall explores identity, belief, and emotion for a sexual invert, such as she saw herself.¹⁰⁰ Growing up, Stephen rejected the trappings of femininity, much to her mother's chagrin. When World War I breaks out, she joins an ambulance corps at the front, where she falls in love Mary Llewellyn, a younger, poorer, immature member of the

⁹⁸ Knight, "Women and Abortion," 60.

⁹⁹ Marcus, "Afterword," 285-287; Gay Wachman, *Lesbian Empire: Radical Crosswriting in the Twenties* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 167-171.

¹⁰⁰ A woman with a male first name wasn't particularly remarkable at the time, especially among the upper classes. However, in this case it was reappropriated to reflect the sexual inversion of the central character.

corps. Stephen shows her special favor, letting Mary ride with her every night. Stephen's principles demand that she maintains self-control over her romantic feelings for Mary, much as a proper gentleman would. However, when Mary declares her love for Stephen and her acceptance of Stephen's inversion, it initiates the consummation of their physical love. Stephen is awarded the Croix de Guerre and leaves the ambulance corps a hero at the end of the war. She and Mary decide to leave British society behind and move to more liberal Paris to be together, however the story ultimately ends with Stephen sacrificing her own happiness, when she pushes Mary into the arms of a man in order for Mary to have a chance at a respectable life. Stephen becomes a martyr to her own sense of honor and the plight of the sexual invert. Wachman argues:

The insuperable flaw in Hall's courageous attempt to change her culture's attitude to inversion is her assumption that she can erase homophobia in isolation from racism, classism misogyny, and their basis in economics. [...] The intensity of Hall's need to identify with the patriarchy made her blind to the facts that she was the patriarchy's Other because she was a woman, and a sexually active woman, and a lesbian.¹⁰¹

As if to combat Hall's positive representation of masculine women as sexual inverts,

Price chose to write a mannish woman as the oppressor of lesbians. Jenny Gould asserts:

During the First World War people drew links, either consciously or unconsciously, between displays of militarism and masculine women, feminism, and lesbianism. [...] This association of lesbianism with feminism (and with masculinity and militarism in women) must have affected both relationships between women and the public's view of such relationships. [...] Women who display "symptoms of lesbianism (an inclination to dress up in masculine clothes, to drill, to shoot) were considered not only distasteful but abnormal and in need of medical help. Any attacks on them were thus fully justified."¹⁰²

Laura Doan describes a stereotype of certain women in the war that was often parodied in the popular comedic magazine, *Punch*:

¹⁰¹ Wachman, *Lesbian Empire*, 28.

¹⁰² Jenny Gould, "Women's Military Services in First World War Britain," *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. Ed. Margaret R. Higsonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins (Wietz. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987),121.

[T]he English upper-class woman, whose economic independence enabled her to step outside certain bourgeois conventions. [...] Physically energetic, resourceful in problem solving, and knowledgeable of all things mechanical, this sporty breed of action women in their sensible clothing exudes brazen self-assurance [.]¹⁰³

This description certainly describes Tosh, but make no mention of any sexual inversion, differentiating it from Stephen. In order to rewrite sexual inversion, Price had to create a different body type to represent lesbianism. Wachman describes how Price took positive aspects of Hall's protagonist and gave it to the lead persecutor of the lesbian of the group:

Stephen Gordon's role as informal leader of the drivers is taken by [Tosh] who is the niece of an earl, almost as aristocratic as Radclyffe Hall's friend, the ambulance unit leader Toupie Lowther; Lowther, who was bulky and tall and lesbian and whose father was the sixth Earl of Lonsdale, was clearly a model of sorts for both Tosh and Stephen Gordon. Tosh is a carnivalesque figure who encompasses the power of both genders and is idolized by all the young women[.]¹⁰⁴

In comparison to this upper class, robust body that Tosh possesses, there is Skinny, whose appearance is described as sickly, unhealthy, and corpse-like:

Her face is yellow with the skin stretched tightly across the high cheekbones and there are queer bags under her eyes. [...] When Skinny is asleep her rather large mouth pinches up tightly and greyly, and she is irresistibly like a photograph a gardener of ours showed me once of his mother, taken in the coffin after death.¹⁰⁵

It is Skinny who is the lesbian of the group. By making her so unattractive Marcus argues, "Evadne Price effectively rewrites the lesbian body at war to rob it of the healthy romantic glow with which Radclyffe Hall had surrounded it [...]." ¹⁰⁶

It is during a farewell party for The B.F. (Bertrina Farmer/The Bloody Fool) that the tensions between Tosh and Skinny come to a head. When it is Skinny's turn to make a speech,

¹⁰³ Doan, "Topsy-Turvydom," 519.

¹⁰⁴ Wachman, *Lesbian Empire*, 169.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, *Not So Quiet* 21.

¹⁰⁶ Marcus, "Afterword," 286.

Tosh deliberately snubs her by picking up a magazine and turning her back on the group. It is this act that finally breaks Skinny, and she flares up and begins asserting her rights to be in the room despite what Tosh thinks. When Tosh continues to shun her, Skinny becomes enraged and accuses Tosh of trying to get her moved out of their room. The B.F. contradicts Skinny, saying she had overheard Skinny and another driver named Frost asking Commandment if they could be placed in a room together. This piece of information causes The Bug and Helen to share a knowing glance but they say nothing. Skinny replies to The B.F., saying;

So would you if you had rotten things thought about you... I hate people with dirty minds [...] you don't know what she said to me last week. She thinks I'm a something [...] And I say she's a horrible, bad-minded liar, if she thinks things like that about me. And she does think them or she wouldn't have insinuated what she did to me last week.¹⁰⁷

The B.F. speculates that Tosh must have called her a flirt, but Skinny tells her that's just what she did *not* say. Skinny never says outright that she is accused of being a lesbian, though she continuously implies it. Helen and The Bug seem to understand, but The B.F. and Etta seem clueless.

When Tosh refuses to apologize, Skinny physically attacks her with a kind of blind rage, foaming around the mouth, screaming and cursing while Helen and The Bug attempt to pull her away. Skinny's hysteria does not strike a sympathetic chord with Helen and the others, rather:

It fills us with a sort of shame instead of pity; it is so primitive and unrestrained [...] She uses vile language, not like Tosh's good-natured swear words that always sound characteristic of Tosh and therefore exactly 'right,' but low, shameful, foul somehow. I want to hide my head under the Army blankets.¹⁰⁸

It would seem that Helen's shame comes not from Skinny's behavior *per se*, but because of the perceived reason for the behavior, her sexuality. Indeed, Skinny is heartily disliked by Helen,

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *Not So Quiet* 110-111.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 112-113.

though she is not as blatant about it as Tosh chooses to be. However, it is not until she realizes what it was Tosh probably said that Helen is disgusted with Skinny, and with Frost as well.

When she returns from funeral duty the next day she is intercepted by Tosh warning her that Commandment wants to question her about the night before, and that Helen isn't to say anything. Helen enters Commandment's office with a steely reserve and maintains her assertion that she knows nothing and that she had been half asleep through it all. Throughout Commandment's questioning of her, Skinny and Frost are present in the office. "[Frost] is red-eyed and red-nosed, a revolting spectacle. Skinny is weeping for effect; I note that at a glance."¹⁰⁹ She still feels no sympathy for them; her silence is out of loyalty to Tosh. However, she cannot hide her embarrassment of the subject when Commandment asks her what it was that Tosh said to make Skinny attack her: "The expected query is unexpected, somehow. I go scarlet. I can feel the blood dyeing my neck, my face, even my hands...I do not know what Tosh said to Skinny, but Commandment will never believe me. I can surmise what I choose, but I definitely don't know."¹¹⁰ Perhaps even if she did know for sure what Tosh had said she would be too embarrassed to repeat it, for it seems that she is suffering from what Wachman calls lesbian panic; she is repulsed by lesbianism yet also strongly attracted to the masculine Tosh. She leaves Commandment's office with more punishments than she could ever complete, but without giving into any of her demands.

After relating her story to Tosh, Helen suggests that maybe they're wrong for staying silent; "We ought to tell Commandment. Carrying tales is rotten, but there are some tales that

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 121-122.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 123.

ought to be carried... and you can carry that honour business too far..."¹¹¹ However, Tosh insists they mustn't let Commandment find out. Tosh claims her dislike of Skinny was personal, not moral, and that she regrets ever having told Skinny what she knew in the first place. "Personal dislike's a queer thing. I've always loathed that girl, and I let out at her just because I loathed her. Her morals don't affect me one way or the other. You couldn't shock me if you tried."¹¹² Perhaps Tosh is not shocked by Skinny's sexual orientation, but she nevertheless uses it as a weapon against her. Tosh claims that if it were up to her when choosing drivers, "It would be 'Are you a first-class driver?' not 'Are you a first-class virgin?' The biggest harlot or the biggest saint..."¹¹³ And this is where the general feeling of homophobia becomes a little vague.

Wachman writes:

[T]he representation of lesbianism is disquietingly lesbophobic, in spite in its interesting ambivalence; Skinny's death's-head conveys an unmistakable bigotry. But how is the reader to categorize the irresistibly comforting, aristocratically vulgar, lesbophobic and lesbian, maternal and monstrous, masculine and feminine life force and death force that is Tosh?¹¹⁴

Helen has seen the horrors that men are capable of inflicting upon each other. She has had her innocence of sexual knowledge stripped away, she idolizes a dichotomously gendered woman, and yet she is still morally against lesbianism. It may be that Price was writing from a homophobic perspective. However, the fact that it is even included in the plot, despite its context, is significant because it is a reflection of the rising prevalence of texts addressing homosexuality during and after the war, despite popular opinion against the topic.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 125.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 126.

¹¹⁴ Wachman, *Lesbian Empire*, 171.

War and Respectability

Helen's first night driving an ambulance was so shocking that she declared she was ready to go home right away, that she couldn't cut it out at the front. Tosh laughs at her, saying;

You'll never have the pluck to crawl home and admit you're ordinary flesh and blood. Can't you hear them? 'Well, back *already*? You didn't stay *long*, did you?' No, Smithy, you're one of England's Splendid Daughters, proud to do their bit for the dear old flag, and one of England's Splendid Daughters you'll stay until you crock up or find some other decent excuse to go home covered in glory. It takes nerve to carry on here, but it takes twice as much to go home to flag-crazy mothers and fathers...¹¹⁵

Women in this type of service were in a unique position compared to their male counterparts, in that it didn't require a "Blighty" wound to get one back home. Women who had volunteered always had the option of leaving voluntarily. Men did not, and faced the death penalty if they chose to go AWOL, which made their options fairly clear-cut. For women, the penalties were more abstract. Yes, women had a right to leave, but the question is what would they face if they did? The domestic consequences had to be considered. After seeing the truth of the front, could they return to a society possessed by a jingoistic fever?

Those at home could not know the truth of the horrors just across the English Channel. The young people at the front found it difficult to tell them, and instead wrote letters full of cheery lies:

The only kind of letter home they expect, the only kind they want, the only kind they will have. Tell them that you hate it, tell them you fear it...tell them that all the ideals and beliefs you ever had have crashed about your gun-deafened ears— that you don't believe in God or them or the infallibility of England or anything but bloody war and wounds and foul smells and smutty stories and smoke and bombs and lice and filth and noise, noise, noise [...] Tell them these things; and they will reply on pale mauve deckle edge paper calling you a silly hysterical little girl— "You always were inclined to exaggerate

¹¹⁵ Smith, *Not So Quiet* 13.

darling.” [...] England is proud of her brave daughters. Almost as proud as Father and Mother.¹¹⁶

Many people in Britain still had delusionary images of young men and women on the adventure of a lifetime at the front, and reveled in the fact that they raised such honor bound and dutiful children, all the while remaining ignorant of the true horrors they rushed to send their children off to face. Those left behind could vicariously bask in the glory and excitement of those serving at the front. Susan Grayzel argues:

Since it offered them a status equivalent to the soldier, motherhood provided a means by which to target and unify *all* women, to make them feel that they, too, had an essential part to play in supporting the war. By linking women with mothers and men with soldiers, wartime rhetoric stressed that “naturalness of these normative categories, thus conveniently eclipsing other kinds of masculinity and femininity.”¹¹⁷

This is certainly the case with Helen’s mother, who finds the war a perfect pretense for an upper-middle class woman to flaunt her place in society. She heads committees left and right, recruits young men into the army, and of course has given all three of her children to the cause for Britain. The war created a paradoxical role for mothers; it became part of their expected duty to willingly offer up their children for sacrifice, when they had spent their lives up until then trying to keep those children safe. To ease the burden of sacrifice, women were praised for their bravery on the home front and mothers were held in the highest regard. One example of this can be observed through a blatantly propagandistic music hall song performed by Ernest Pike:

There’s no VC for you,¹¹⁸
but your duty you do.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 30-31.

¹¹⁷ Susan Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During The First World War*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina, 1999, 2.

¹¹⁸ Victoria Cross, Britain’s highest military decoration.

And you're nonetheless heroes,
Praise women who wait.
For men there's the danger and peril of war,
A shot may soon settle their fate.
But what of the anguish, the sorrow, and care
That comes to the women who wait?
Women who wait, women who wait,
They don't write your name on the scroll of the great.
For your fighting is done far away from the guns.
God knows that it's fighting for women who wait.¹¹⁹

It is in this framework of thinking that Helen's mother is able to triumph over her social rival, Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, because she has three children to give to England, while the latter only had one. Kingsbury writes:

The wife of a retired jam manufacturer, Mrs. Smith has laboriously climbed the social ladder into the upper-middle class. Becoming a part of the machinery of war— chairing committees, speaking at recruiting meetings— offers opportunities for further advancement by placing Mrs. Smith in the public eye, by getting her name in the papers. Her sentimentality serves her well here and gives way only occasionally to questions of taste and acceptability. Seeing her children fully involved in the war effort is her ticket to full social acceptance.¹²⁰

It doesn't matter how her children feel about it, Mrs. Smith chooses to sacrifice them in order to secure her own social position. One night Helen's mind weaves in and out, thinking of her mother gloating about her triumphant patriotism and compares it to her own cruel reality:

Mrs. Evans-Mawnington scowling, furious-mouthed, jealous... Mother smug, saccharine-sweet...shelves of mangled bodies...filthy smells of gangrenous wounds...shell-ragged, shell-shocked men... men shrieking like wild beasts inside the ambulance until they drown the sound of the engine... "*Nellie loves to be really in it*" — no God to pray to because you know there isn't a God— how shall I carry on? ... "*Proud*

¹¹⁹ Ernest Pike, "Women Who Wait," *Oh! It's a Lovely War Vol. 3: Original Sound Recordings from the First World War 1914-1918*, CD41 Recordings, 1914. <http://itunes.com>

¹²⁰ Kingsbury, "Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front," 238.

to do her bit for the old flag.” Oh, Christ! Oh, Christ! ... I’m only twenty-one and nobody cares because I’ve been pitchforked into hell.¹²¹

The juxtaposition of her mother’s imagined triumphant bragging and the ghastly sights Helen sees on a daily basis provides a stark contrast of how far removed the youth who served in the war were from their elders back home. Helen does not love it, and she isn’t at all proud of her work.

Jane Marcus writes that the subtitle of this novel, *Stepdaughters of War*;

[P]roblematizes the relation of the family to martial values, war is not the father, but the mother, and not a real mother, but a wicked stepmother. The stepdaughter is a Cinderella of the battlefield, sweeping up the ashes and cinders, the blood and vomit of her wounded prince. But no fairy godmother comes to rescue her.¹²²

By playing imaginary tour-guide through the hell that is her nightly experience, Helen seeks to punish those bloodthirsty wicked stepmother figures that she cannot attack in real life. She is furious, and she wishes to inflict the nightmare she was flung into back upon its creators.

Spare a glance for my last stretcher, ... that gibbering, unbelievable, unbandaged thing, a wagging lump of raw flesh on a neck, that was a face a short time ago Mother and Mrs. Evan-Mawnington [...] We can’t tell it’s age, but the whimpering moans sound young, somehow. Like the fretful whimpers of a sick little child... a tortured little child... puzzled whimpers. Who is he? For all you know Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, he is your Roy [...] Why do you turn away? That’s only liquid fire. You’ve heard of liquid fire? Oh, yes, I remember your letter... “*I hear we’ve started to use liquid fire, too. That will teach those Germans. I hope we use lots and lots of it.*” Yes, you wrote that. You were glad to some new fiendish torture had been invented [...] You were delighted to think some German mother’s son was going to have the skin stripped from his poor face by liquid fire...¹²³

¹²¹ Smith, *Not So Quiet* 33.

¹²² Marcus, “Afterword,” 275.

¹²³ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 94-95.

Helen does not believe in victory at any cost; she sees that there are no winners in war, just the terrible price of human lives. Vera Brittain had a similar reaction to those at home who gloried in the use of such gruesome weapons:

We have heaps of gassed cases at present who came in a day or two ago [...] I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a Holy War, and the orators who talk so much about going on no matter how long the War lasts and what it may mean, could see the poor things burnt and blistered, all over with great mustard-coloured suppurating blisters, with blind eyes—sometimes temporally [sic], sometimes permanently— all sticky and stuck together, and always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying that their throats are closing and they know they will choke [...] and yet people persist in saying that God made the War, when there are such inventions of the Devil about.¹²⁴

With the fervor of those supporting a righteous crusade, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington cajoled and bullied their children into giving up their rights to cheerfulness, youth, and innocence— something that every mother is supposed to want for her child— in exchange for unimaginable scenes of death and gore. Kingsbury writes:

The hypocrisy of both parents becomes clear when the function of the family— the nurturing of its young— falls prey to self-aggrandizement. War propaganda consistently encourages patriotic parents to cease protecting their children and virtually to force them into military service. Once again the desire to conform, to gain social status, informs the patriotic plea.¹²⁵

These mothers didn't stop to think about the consequences. They didn't anticipate the revolutions that would sweep cultures, governments, economies, and militaries off their feet.

Then again, how could they? There had never been tragedy on that scale before. Tate writes:

In Britain, almost no one who was touched by the Great War had any reliable information about it. Causality figures were misrepresented; defeats were presented as victories; atrocity stories were invented; accounts of real suffering were censored; opposition to the war was suppressed.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 395.

¹²⁵ Kingsbury, "Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front," 241.

¹²⁶ Tate, *Modernism*, 43.

If only these mothers had been able to create an environment where their children felt comfortable enough to speak honestly about what they saw; one where nothing came before the safety of one's family, not even the British Empire. Instead they became vulture-like, feeding off the supposed glory of war. Kaplan argues that mothers were seen to be at fault by their daughters because they "refused to acknowledge that they would face a time of drastic change. Smith condemns the mothers' blasé acceptance of nineteenth century ideas about their twentieth century daughters."¹²⁷ Helen concludes her imaginary tour for her mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, mocking them in their hypocrisy:

Don't go, unless you want me to excuse you while you retch your insides out as I so often do. There are stretchers and stretchers you haven't seen yet. ... Men with hopeless dying eyes who don't want to die... men with hopeless living eyes who don't want to live. Wait, wait, I have so much, so much to show you before you return to your committees and your recruiting meetings, before you add to your bag of recruits... those young recruits you enroll so proudly with your patriotic speeches, [...] your white feathers, your insults, your lies... any bloody lie to secure a fresh victim. What? You cannot stick it any longer? [...] I didn't think you'd stay. But I've got to stay, haven't I? [...] You've got me out here, and you'll keep me out here. You've got me haloed. I am one of the Splendid Young Women who are winning the War.¹²⁸

Instead of being trapped by social expectations of female docility, she has become trapped by a violent wave of patriotism at any cost.

When Helen finally returns home she keeps herself in near isolation for three weeks. Her mother is shocked at her behavior and attempts to confront Helen about it:

What's the matter with me? Once I was a sweet girl, happy and interested in local things, now I'm bitter and snappy and sarcastic and with a tongue like an adder, yes, and not above swearing, either, actually *swearing*. Goodness knows where I picked up such language, certainly not at home...¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Kaplan, "Deformities of the Great War," 41.

¹²⁸ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 96.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

What is the matter with Helen is war. War changed her priorities. She could no longer let herself play a willingly ignorant feminine role after seeing up close the devastation of death. There is no glory after such gore. Kingsbury writes that Helen has finally decided to stand up to the blind patriotism of her mother: “Nellie [...] will not budge. She knows that the words— war words—are lies, and she will have no part of them; she knows that she is expected to play their war games, but she has seen too much death and destruction to care.”¹³⁰

When A.B. Baker returned home from her time on the front her family, “wanted to treat me as a sort of heroine. Their talk hurt me, even Daddy’s. They praised me for all the wrong things. When I tried to tell them what the War had taught me; they were hurt in their turn.”¹³¹ Like Baker, Helen rejects everything to do with supposed heroics of war, and finally decides to let her mother know. She tells her mother she has burned her uniform and sold her kit and has no intention of ever going back to France. Her mother is horrified, and her first reaction is to think of her own image, and how she will look to public.

I think it’s the most disgraceful thing I’ve ever encountered [...] You, a strong woman, determined to slack at home instead of doing your bit, shaming your own mother before everybody, your own mother, who is working night and day until she is nearly dropping. Just think of how Mrs. Evans-Mawnington will crow over me now, and Roy with a wound-stripe. And any of these people at the recruiting meetings can stand up and say ‘and what about your own family?’ That’s going to be nice for me, isn’t it? Surely you can at least get a cushy job in England if you won’t go back to France?¹³²

In the spectrum of disgraceful things, Helen’s refusal to return to war really isn’t that extraordinary. Her mother’s melodrama seems naively pathetic. She tries to avail upon Helen’s sense of loyalty to her parents, but the part of Helen that would have once yielded to this is gone.

¹³⁰ Kingsbury, “Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front,” 243.

¹³¹ Baker, “The Story of a W.A.C.C.,” 401.

¹³² Smith, *Not So Quiet* 183.

Helen now knows that her mother does not have her very best interest at heart. She tries once, in vain, to explain to her mother how it was for her in France:

‘I am a coward, mother.’ I lean forward and catch her hand to try to make her understand. ‘Mother, you don’t know what it’s like out there driving the ambulances full of torn men— torn to bits with shrapnel— sometimes they die on the way...’ She pulls herself away. ‘At least they have died doing their duty,’ she says. She goes out weeping.¹³³

Helen’s one attempt at speaking honestly to her mother is futile. Her mother will not hear what she does not want to. Wachman writes;

Evadne Price highlights the vicarious aggression of the women on the home front who shamed young men and women like Helen and Roy Evans-Mawnington into volunteering to die. The characterization of Mrs. Smith contributes to the postwar demonization of women of her generation[.]¹³⁴

Helen has decided to no longer play up to pretense. Not even her Aunt Helen’s bullying and threats to remove her from her will, nor her father’s cutting off her allowance can move Helen to change her mind. Her mother begins telling people that Helen is very ill, and even has the doctor come every few days to keep up appearances. If it had not been for Trix’s abortion, Helen might never have given into her family’s pressures to continue “doing her bit.” However, she is forced to pander to Aunt Helen’s sense of patriotic duty by visiting the canteen where her aunt waits tables for war workers. Helen watches her with a cold and critical eye.

She certainly is the last word in incompetence. She mixes up each order systematically, and has to make return journeys for things she has forgotten in practically every instance [...] She flutters aimlessly to and fro like a foolish hen [...] Vague old fool. Why doesn’t she devote herself to the small jobs of her home [...] then she could release one of her competent maids to wait on the war workers; but, of course, that would not be spectacular enough for a red-hot patriot such as Aunt Helen. What a godsend the war is, coming just as Spiritualism was beginning to bore her!¹³⁵

¹³³ Ibid., 185.

¹³⁴ Wachman, *Lesbian Empire*, 168.

¹³⁵ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 207-208.

Indeed Helen has a point. It would be entirely more efficient if her aunt just stayed out of way in a realm where she has never had any business. Her aunt is the possessor of a small fortune so she has never had to wait tables, nor does she have any sense of method for doing so. Many incompetent middle-class women were determined to do their bit as publicly as possible, whether by working in canteens, visiting hospitals, organizing recruiting rallies, having tea parties for officers who have been wounded or are home on leave, and so on. This, coupled with their lack of self-awareness, meant that they made nuisances of themselves rather than being useful. Lyn MacDonald writes:

At least the hospitals in France were spared the visitations of well-meaning ladies who dutifully visited wounded soldiers in their local hospitals. Many were elderly; many wore themselves out with the effort. All of them believed they were 'doing good' but their visits were often as much of a trial to the objects of their beneficence as they were themselves.¹³⁶

In her diary Enid Bagnold describes a few types of women who came to visit soldiers in hospital:

There is the lady who comes in to tea and, sitting down at the only unlaid table, cries, "Nurse! I have no knife or plate or cup; and I prefer a glass of boiling water to tea. And would you mind sewing this button on my glove?" There is the lady who comes in and asks the table at large: "I wonder if any one knows General Biggens? I once met him...." Or: "You've been in Gallipoli? Did you run across my young cousin, a lieutenant in the...? Well, he was only there two days or so, I suppose...." exactly as though she was talking about Cairo in the season.¹³⁷

Helen understands that the war is just another way for women like her aunt and mother to socially flaunt themselves. This display of self-indulgent ineptitude makes Helen's pill all the more bitter to swallow when it comes time to ask her aunt for money. She tells Aunt Helen that her lectures on doing one's duty had sunk in, and that Helen was ready to rejoin the war effort.

¹³⁶ Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land*, 207.

¹³⁷ Enid Bagnold, *A Diary Without Dates* (London: William Heinemann, 1918), 26.

Her aunt sees this as a huge personal victory, as Helen knew she would. “She smiles [...] a positively arch smile [...] all eagerness now is Aunt Helen, almost running in case the prey may escape even now. She opens her cheque-book with a flourish.”¹³⁸ She is willing to ask no questions as long as she is able to feast on the glory of her young ones. Kingsbury writes:

More than the horror of war here, the sense of betrayal is the source of both women’s cynicism. Trix and Helen have been duped into joining up, into “doing their bit.” When the magnitude of the lies becomes apparent, the whole structure of British society becomes suspect; there is nothing left to believe in[.]¹³⁹

However, Helen has one last blow to inflict on her parents and her aunt. She joins the working class W.A.A.C., which is nowhere near as prestigious as being a V.A.D. She enlists as a domestic worker, “the last claw of the cat before it is put in the sack and drowned!”¹⁴⁰ This time when she returns to France, no one from her family is there to see their “little heroine” off.

While it antagonizes her mother and aunt, Helen’s joining of the W.A.A.C.s does not stop them in their quest for vicarious glory. Her mother writes to Helen’s Unit Administrator, requesting that Helen be given a commission because of her previous work in the convoy. Her Unit Administrator is surprised Helen never mentioned any previous experience, or that she was the one who held the famous Georgina Toshington as she died, or that she had not sought promotion. But Helen will not play into her mother’s plans. She stubbornly stays put in her inglorious job as a cook’s assistant. By the time she learns of Roy’s injuries, she is already numb to the world. The Unit Administrator tries to console her by informing her Roy has been awarded

¹³⁸ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 209.

¹³⁹ Kingsbury, “Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front,” 237.

¹⁴⁰ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 211.

the Military Cross, and that should be a consolation to Helen. The only sign of reaction to the news she shows is, “His mother will be pleased about the M.C., ma’am.”¹⁴¹

Helen receives letters from her mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, which both revel in the glory of Roy’s medal despite the morbid consequences. Her mother’s very first lines show exactly where her priorities are: “Isn’t it wonderful that Roy has had the M.C.? Wonderful and sad. Our poor blinded hero. And my little girlie is to marry him and be his eyes.”¹⁴² She goes on to write;

I think a quiet wedding, don’t you? As soon as he is strong enough. Just a few relations and friends by the hospital bedside. Perhaps, a reporter, for your example ought to do a few of these appalling creatures good who have refused to marry their wounded heroes. [...] Darling, what an inestimable privilege you have, marrying one of England’s disabled heroes, devoting your life to his service!¹⁴³

Three times her mother uses the word hero in her letter. Not once does she mention Roy’s blown off leg and genitals. She expects her daughter to set an example, when she can’t even bring herself to mention the more gruesome aspect of Roy’s injuries, only a vague mention of disability. Just as she reveled in her daughter’s active war service, now she is ready to bask in her future son-in-law’s supposed glory without stopping to consider his quality of life, or Helen’s quality of life as his spouse for that matter. Her mother didn’t want to know the truth about the convoy, and she will not want to know the truth of what it really means to dedicate one’s life to a mutilated “hero.”

Mrs. Evans-Mawnington’s letter takes on a very self-sacrificial tone. Only once does she mention Roy’s progress, saying, “He is, of course, a trifle depressed, but that will wear off once

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 225.

¹⁴² Ibid., 228.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 228-229.

he is out of hospital and has been decorated.”¹⁴⁴ Surely an understatement if ever there was one. Losing your sight, leg, and sexual organs is bound to leave one more than a “trifle depressed.” His mother acts as though an investiture should be a panacea for Roy’s spirits, because it that’s what is for her. She writes;

It is a terrible calamity, but I refuse to weep for my son. I gave him to his country, my only son, he was all I had to give—the widow’s mite—but I would give him again if the call arose. I am proud of his blindness and his disability. The sight of him will be an object lesson to the men who have allowed others to fight their battles for them. If the sight of his blindness shames one of the cowards then he has not suffered vainly [...] No, Helen, I hold my head proudly, as befits the English mother of an English soldier, and I thank God for blessing me among all women for mothering a hero, an M.C.¹⁴⁵

It goes against natural instinct for a mother to sacrifice a child, and perhaps even more unnatural for a mother to willingly do it again if given the chance. It is a bloodthirsty kind of selfishness. However, “Medals can be ‘swanked’ and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington has only this one source of glory.”¹⁴⁶ All Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington ultimately care about are examples and status: the example Helen and Roy will set for their peers who have chosen to safeguard their lives by staying at home, and the fact that they now have a set of trophy heroes to parade in society, so all might see their selfishness disguised as sacrifice. Indeed, these ladies push Roy and Helen too far, and eventually their viciousness causes them to lose both of their children in *One Woman’s Freedom*.¹⁴⁷

There is a character in the novel that would have made Mrs. Smith, Aunt Helen, and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington burst with pride; Bertrina Farmer, aka The B.F., who is an anomaly among

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 230.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 230-231.

¹⁴⁶ Kingsbury, “Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front,” 244.

¹⁴⁷ The sequel to *Not So Quiet...*, picks up the story the day of the signing of the armistice, and Helen and Roy are unhappily married and living back in Wimbledon Common.

the other women. The B.F., who's father is a motor manufacturer, is "pretty and soft and plump;"

Her definition of a true lady is one who is ignorant of the simplest domestic details to the point of imbecility. She insisted on helplessly inquiring the first day she came over *however* one knew when water had reached boiling point. The servants at home had always boiled the family water, she said.¹⁴⁸

The B.F. came to the front, thinking handsome officers would surround her, and the whole thing would be like one grand party away from home. She is disappointed however, at the complete lack of opportunities for flirting or fun at the front. She alone in the group still clings to the "proper" behavior of an Edwardian lady. The B.F. is the embodiment of a sort of English feminine ideal; she is beautiful, naive, graciously mannered, and patriotic. In the reality of war, The B.F. also becomes a portrait of the less attractive qualities that develop out of the pursuit of an impossible model: vanity, frivolity, selfishness, and blindness. She is like a girl from one of the many propagandistic music hall songs of the war:

We've watched you playing cricket, and every kind of game,
At football, golf, and polo you men have made your name.
But now your country calls you to play your part in war
And no matter what befalls you, we shall love you all the more.
So come and join the forces as your fathers did before.
Oh, we don't want to lose you, but we think you ought to go.
For your King and your Country both need you so.
We shall want you and miss you, but with all our might and main,
We shall cheer you, thank you, kiss you when you comeback again!¹⁴⁹

It was the duty of pretty young women to serve their country by serving their men. Kingsbury writes that, "women too [were] recruited, often by the suggestion that doing war service [was] a

¹⁴⁸ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 23, 24.

¹⁴⁹ Helen Clark, "Your King and Country Want You, Oh! It's a Lovely War Vol. 1: Original Sound Recordings from the First World War 1914-1918, CD41 Recordings, 1914.
<http://itunes.com2>

good way to meet men.”¹⁵⁰ For The B.F., “It seems such a waste of a well-cut uniform to be in a place where the men are too wounded or too harassed to regard women as other than cogs in the great machinery, and the women are too worn out to care whether they do or not.”¹⁵¹ However, she remains blindly patriotic, and although the war hasn’t cracked up to be what she thought, she is still a fervent member of the doing-one’s-bit cult.

Kingsbury writes; “Early in the novel, Helen sees The B.F. as a “harmless ass,” but as the effects of war become more intense, she and the other drivers realize that in The B.F. lies the foundation for another generation of “flag wagers.”¹⁵² Another driver, Edwards, gets engaged to an Australian soldier who has lost a leg. She is relieved because he is out of the fighting forever, and she declares no child of hers will ever become a soldier. Any negative reaction to the war and those who were waging it was seen by The B.F. as unpatriotic, and therefore in need of gentle reprimanding. However, Edwards sees through her pretty manners for what she really is:

You’re the most dangerous type of fool there is. Someone ought to collect women like you in a big hall and drop a bomb... wipe you out...before you can do any more damage... a whacking big one. You’re a true chip of the old block... the pig-headed, sentimental, brainless old block that got us out here... patriotic speeches... ‘fighting for world freedom.’ ...I don’t know what we’re fighting for... who does? But it isn’t for world freedom. Nothing so pretty.¹⁵³

Clearly, Edwards is of a same mind as Helen; their dislike of The B.F. stems from the fact that in the face of uncomfortable truths she puts up a shield made of sweet platitudes that cannot be dented.

¹⁵⁰ Kingsbury, “Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front,” 242.

¹⁵¹ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 25.

¹⁵² Kingsbury, “Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front,” 247.

¹⁵³ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 56.

The B.F. is the first of the group to leave the convoy. She claims it is because she is sick, but no one believes her. They know it is because she is bored with the war. The B.F. expected to be a heroine and have some fun while doing so. But of course, the type of fun she is looking for is not to be found among the war weary at the front. However, she will return to England covered in glory, for she has not let the war change her and will still revel in the old ways of society. In her farewell speech, The Bug wishes her:

[A]ll the luck that she can't help having [...] Life will give her its best gifts generously, with both hands. She has youth, money, beauty. I envy her all of those, but most of all I envy her genuine love of conventional things—the little things of life that make for happiness. Good luck, B.F., and happiness. The B.F.'s of this world are to be envied.¹⁵⁴

Indeed, complacency and ignorance can seem enviable to those with terribly troubled minds.

That she is one of very few to maintain a positive attitude after seeing the things they had proves her to be quite the anomaly at the front, even though most people back home expected that she was the norm.

Helen receives a letter from The B.F. when she is back in England. What begins as a sort of condolence letter soon becomes a chance for The B.F. to aggrandize herself. She asks Helen if she saw a certain newspaper article about Tosh where The B.F. was interviewed because she had been “her *inseparable* friend in the dear old convoy.”¹⁵⁵ She tells Helen that she has landed an “adorable” job driving around a colonel. She also inquires about when Helen will return to war work, because “One must do one's bit; it's done, isn't it?”¹⁵⁶ Kingsbury writes, “The B.F.'s belief that “you can do your bit just a patriotically in an amusing place where there are amusing

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 106.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 178.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 179.

officers” reveals the hypocritical nature of her patriotism and the danger of it being passed on to an unwitting generation of children.”¹⁵⁷

The B.F. urges Helen to meet up with her so they can chat about the old convoy, and because she’s “just aching to know the details of poor, dear Tosh’s sad death. It must have been too thrilling, though very, very tragic.”¹⁵⁸ The B.F. is full of blood lust all dressed up as a pretty little “lassie in khaki.” To *ache* to know the details of a tragedy that nearly caused Helen to lose her mind, and to think of it as anything beyond tragic, especially to call it *thrilling*, illustrates how The B.F. treats death as a patriotic vicissitude. In a way, she is worse than Helen’s mother or aunt, because she has actually seen the horrors, and yet is still happy to play up to false expectations of patriotic womanhood. Kingsbury argues that this determined ignoring of the tragedy of the war “speaks to the power of propaganda layered over the need to be socially accepted.”¹⁵⁹ The B.F. isn’t so eager for details of the other death; she only reserves a small mention about The Bug’s death in a postscript, calling it “rather sad.” Of course, though, The Bug did not have any status in society, and there wasn’t any glamour with which The B.F. could cloak herself in this case.

When Helen goes to see her aunt at the canteen, she runs into The B.F. who embraces her and introduces Helen to her friends as the person who was with the famous Georgina Toshington when she died. This allows The B.F. a considerable amount of smugness over her companions; it supports her unspoken claim to authority because she had gone out and “done her bit” better than any of the others, and had been friends with a higher class of English Heroine. Now Helen no

¹⁵⁷ Kingsbury, “Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front,” 248.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 179.

¹⁵⁹ Kingsbury, “Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front,” 248.

longer finds The B.F. to be amusing, only a sickeningly willing participant in prolonging the charnel of the trenches. In a social sense, The B.F. is certainly a war profiteer, like Mrs. Smith, but Helen has been forever ruined by it.

When meditating on the highly misinformed picture those at home had of the women at the front “doing their bit,” Helen reflects that, “The world seems determined to see nothing but a horrible, high-spirited, perpetual brightness in us.”¹⁶⁰ That is the image of the ideal patriotic woman prior to the war. And there was nothing to dispel the myth back home, as the horrible truth could not be told. The kind of language required to express the horrors could not be written to their families back home. No one wrote about how all of their feminine virtues and innocence had been discarded upon their first nights on duty. Back home, however, women doing war work were being applauded for their tenacity and courage in popular culture, as evinced by the song, “Women of Britain,” recorded by George Baker in 1915:

Yes, the girls know how to toil, boys,
Helping Tommy and Jack Tar.¹⁶¹
They have got a move on quickly,
Our flag, their guiding star.
What should we have done without them?
For each has filled a place.
Just like the boys,
They’re fighting for England and our race.
Let us send this grateful message,
To the girls throughout the land,
We all thank you for your courage
That has helped us make the stand.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 135.

¹⁶¹ Slang for British soldiers and sailors, respectively.

¹⁶² George Baker, “Women of Britain,” *Oh! It’s a Lovely War Vol. 3: Original Sound Recordings from the First World War 1914-1918*, CD41 Recordings, 1915. <http://itunes.com>

The propagandist lyrics are full of hollow praises that gloss over the true misery of life for those at the front. “Stripped of the pretty-pretty, ‘gay-lasses-in-khaki’ touch, war is a beastly, boring business. Pure, unadulterated hell.”¹⁶³ Even when confronted with the truth, many on the home front clung to their romantic ideals of war. In the abstract, the war was being fought for King and Country; in Helen’s reality it was all for Father and Mother. She was sacrificed to their aggrandizing delusions, supported by young women like The B.F., who did their best to perpetuate the false image of England’s Splendid Daughters.

CONCLUSION

Helen worries about what will become of the women whose femininity was destroyed by the war. She fears that the older generation, who have no idea of the realities of war, will demand that these women resume their pre-war roles, something that seems impossible after all she has seen.

I see in the years to come old men in their easy chairs fiercely reviling us for lacking the sweetness and softness of our mothers and their mothers before them; chiding us for language that is not the language of gentlewomen; accusing us of barnyard morals when we use love as a drug for forgetfulness because we have acquired the habit of taking what we can from life while we are alive to take... clearly do I see all of these things. But what I do not see is pity or understanding for the war-shocked woman who sacrificed her youth while age looked on and applauded and encored. Will they show us mercy, these arm-chair critics, once our uniforms are frayed and the romance of the war woman is no longer a romance? I see much, but this I do not see.¹⁶⁴

Those hallmarks of femininity, “sweetness and softness,” have been taken away, as had the innocent language of gentlewomen. Sexual prudery was made redundant. Women had seen enough horrors to haunt them for many lifetimes, terror they were in no way prepared for. In

¹⁶³ Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 136.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 166.

their attempt to redefine their views of life in the face of war, they were met with the disapproval of their elders. Sadly, those who demanded femininity had helped to create the war that stripped these young women of it in the first place. These women were damned if they did, damned if they didn't.

Sandi Cooper writes: "Modern war, more than class struggle, revolution, charismatic leadership, or any other vehicle of historical change, fashioned the contours of the Euro-American social order in the twentieth century and opened a new era of gender awareness."¹⁶⁵ However, this new knowledge came at a high cost for women at the front: their own physical deterioration was accompanied the contorted bodies of the men they handled; they suffered from severe shock and anxiety, often leading them to utter despondency; the virginal veil was lifted from their eyes exposing them to a world of both hetero and homo sexuality, as well as the potential dangerous consequences of unprotected sex mixed with a mindset of "live as if there's no tomorrow"; they were also forced to come to terms with their disillusionment about King and Country, and maintaining respect for one's elders who were doing their part to perpetuate one bloodbath after another. The society they had set out to defend now seemed to value a "little patch of ground that hath in it no profit but the name," more than their own sons and daughters.¹⁶⁶ Kingsbury writes:

Bleak, even in relation to male-authored war novels, *Not So Quiet* reveals not only the hypocritical nature of warmongering, but also the alienating effects of insisting on the Lie, even in the face of shellshock, mutilation, and death. The generation of the Great War is often referred to as the Lost Generation, and Smithy is certainly lost by the end of the novel. Unable to believe in any of the powers that have sent her to war, Smithy

¹⁶⁵ Cooper, "Women in War and Peace, 1914-1945," 441.

¹⁶⁶ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 4.4.2-3, 85.

succumbs to the alienation and despair that came to characterize much of the twentieth century.¹⁶⁷

This unprecedented war dismantled the importance of the formalities of femininity for women like Helen. Like their frayed uniforms, those women who experienced war in this way are no longer fresh, new, and “well-cut.” One’s gender, race, nationality, or sexuality didn’t matter on the Western Front the way they had mattered back home; the bombs made no such distinctions and were capable of wreaking the same kind of havoc on the bodies and minds of any who experienced it.

¹⁶⁷ Kingsbury, “Propaganda, Militarism, and the Home Front,” 249.

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