

The First World War and Women as the Victims of War Trauma in Virginia Woolf's Novels

Mahinur Aksehir-Uygur
Manisa Celal Bayar University, Turkey

Atalay Gunduz
Dokuz Eylul University, Turkey

Eda Burcu Cetinkaya
Manisa Celal Bayar University, Turkey

Abstract

For more than the obvious reasons, the First World War was a devastating experience for Europe. As the first war in history in which the death toll would be immense – due to the extensive use of weapons of mass destruction – it was a traumatic experience even for those who were not directly involved in the armed conflict. The dehumanization introduced by the war caused disillusionment regarding the ideals of enlightenment and the progress myth of the Modernity Project. One of the preeminent writers of the period, Virginia Woolf was among those writers who were deeply traumatized and disillusioned by the experience, even though she was not an active participant in the conflict. In her novels *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse* she offers a depiction of gender polarization and women as traumatized victims of the war. This paper, thus, aims to evaluate the First World War and the trauma and disillusionment caused by it as experienced by women through the novels of Virginia Woolf.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, disillusionment, war trauma, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*

“Not by the battle fires, the shrapnel are we haunted;
Who shall deliver us from the memory of these dead?”
Margaret Sackville

The Impact of the War

The Great War caused a significant increase in the number of patients that suffered from war hysteria, as observed in autobiographies such as *Good-bye to All That* by Robert Graves, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* by George Sherston, *Undertones of War* by Edmund Blunden, and *Instinct and the Unconscious* by W. H. R. Rivers. W. H. R. Rivers (1922), for instance, recounts a traumatic memory about an officer who, as the result of an explosion, fell on a German soldier that had been dead for days, his head penetrating the perforated torso of the dead soldier. This officer was subsequently haunted by the ensuing “persistent images of taste and smell” (p. 192). The war was a disaster for all the countries in Europe: Italy lost 600,000 soldiers, France lost 1.7 million, the British Empire lost 1 million, and Germany lost 2 million (Scardino Belzer, 2010, p. 17). As Jay Winter (2006) suggests in *Remembering War: The Great War Between Historical Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, many people essentially lost their minds as a result of horrific experiences (p. 280). As Wilfred Owen defines them, they were men “whose minds the dead have ravaged” (quoted in Winter, 2006, p. 280).

War neurosis and women

However, studies concerning war neurosis were mainly limited to men and not much research was conducted on war neurosis or war hysteria as experienced by women. The reason, as Claire M. Tylee (1990) suggests, is that war is still generally evaluated as an exclusively male zone (p. 7). However, this is misleading, as the accounts of war written by women such as Mary Borden’s *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), Evadne Price’s *Not So Quiet . . . : Stepdaughters of War* (1930) (written under the pseudonym Helen Zenna Smith), Irene Rathbone’s *We That Were Young* (1932), Sylvia Pankhurst’s *The Home Front* (1932), Storm Jameson’s *No Time Like the Present* (1933), and Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* (1933) suggest. Debra Rea Cohen (2001) proposes that women’s accounts of the Great War were highly tainted by the illusions and self-censorship that she calls “mental petticoats”; these, she proposes, were enabled by cultural myths and propaganda that tended to perceive the war as a necessary evil and a legitimate struggle for civilization (p. 37). In spite of it, women writers like Sylvia Pankhurst kept accounts of “the violently repressive militarism of the British state during the Great War and the working-class woman’s acute suffering under that state” (Buck, 2005, p. 105). As Buck (2005) further suggests, writers inspired by Pankhurst, such as Sheila Rowbotham, Chris Hannan and Pat Barker also wrote about the not so heroic aspects of the war (p. 105). Sarah Cole (2003) argues that Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* is a similar example in which the writer focuses on the “smashing up of [her] own youth by the War” and how “the early ideals of the War were all shattered, trampled into the mud which covered the bodies of those with whom I had shared them” (p. 176). Tylee (1990) also highlights Mildred Aldrich’s description of the first bomb that is dropped somewhere near her home:

For two hours we saw them rise, descend, explode. Then a little smoke would rise from one hamlet, then from another; then a tiny flame – hardly more than a spark – would be visible; and by dark the whole plain was on fire, lighting up Mareuil in the foreground, silent and untouched. There were long lines of grain-stacks and mills stretching along the plain. One by one they took fire, until, by ten o’clock, they stood like a procession of huge torches across my beloved panorama. (p. 23)

Writers such as Antonia White also fictionalized the aftermath of the war and the traumatic effects of the war through the characterization of Clara, who is haunted by wounded soldiers and experiences their pain and suffering over and over again through a delusional state of mind.

Therefore, although most of the women living in Europe did not play an active role in the war, they “found the war difficult to avoid” (Scardino Belzer, 2010, p. 1). The obvious reason for this reluctant involvement was that the effects of the Great War were not limited to the battlefield. Civilians were also targeted through air raids, and women were attacked, robbed, famished, raped and used as prostitutes and, because their families were being held hostage, some of them were forced to work as spies for the enemy (Tylee, 1990, p. 97). So these women were broken by the trauma of the war just as much as the fighting soldiers. They were haunted by a sense of helplessness and paralysis which “is crucial to the traumatic nature of war, since the victim cannot adequately retaliate, only withdraw upon himself” (Krockel, 2011, p. 33). If one were to judge by these personal accounts, the war was equally traumatic for men and women. They “suffered equally from the repression of their memories of traumatic experiences, and from a common vulnerability to the myths of imperialism” (Tylee, 1990, p. 187). As Evadne Price puts it in *Not So Quiet*, they were all “war-sick”, a “stricken generation”, “a race of men bodily maimed and of women mentally maimed” (quoted in Tylee, 1990, p. 189). Obviously, as Tylee (1990) suggests “[t]he mental scars, different, but cutting to the quick of sensibility, were also borne by women” (p. 249). Nevertheless, it is astonishing to see that women were mostly excluded from the making of history concerning the Great War.

Elaine Showalter (1993) focuses on the fact that, before the Great War, hysteria was broadly perceived as a female disease. Throughout the 19th century and the period that leads up to the start of the Great War, patients of hysteria were exclusively women. That is why she suggests that hysteria seen in men as a result of the war was called by several other names, such as war neurosis or shell shock. In her own words, “hysteria has been constructed as a pejorative term for femininity in a duality that relegated the more honorable masculine form to another category” (Showalter, 1993, p. 292). Showalter (1993) also suggests “shell shock was described as the product of womanish, homosexual, or childish impulses in men” (p. 323). So it is that women’s breakdowns were called hysteria and men’s shell shock or war neurosis. Showalter’s evaluation explains one reason why women are excluded from the narratives of history and war trauma. She also explains (1993) the reasons for the disregard concerning the traumatic effects of war on women, suggesting that first of all “women’s fears seemed less important” and that, with the emergence of the New Woman and “the passage of women’s suffrage in England and the United States, it was believed that female hysteria declined and even disappeared” (p. 326).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are outstanding feminist critics who argue that the war had a positive effect on the socialization of women. They suggest that war had a liberating effect on women because thanks to war women found a place for themselves in the public sphere, and thus it was a liberating experience for them. Gail Braybon's analysis also shows that women’s employment increased by millions in various areas, from industry to banking, during the war. Yet women lost their newfangled position right after the war ended, and they were sent back to domestic service while being forced to yield their well-paid jobs to men, adding to their trauma (Tylee, 1990, p. 11).

Another reason for this negligence is the cultural myth of the self-sacrificing, strong woman/mother that heals the wounds of the war. Scardino Belzer (2010) in a work in which she focuses on Italian women during the war, suggests that “[a]cross Europe, women who lived safely behind the lines participated actively in the war effort. Asked to boost morale, conserve goods, buy war bonds, and take care of everyday activities, women at the home front formed the “Other Army”, as Minister of Munitions Alfred Dallolio described them” (p. 45). Although women actively participated in the war as nurses, spies, as well as in many other roles, their contribution is seen as the one of a mother having to fight outside the domestic space for the sake of the domestic space. For many, a major female role was to prepare the way for men to be heroes (Scardino Belzer, 2010, p. 42). No matter what the reasons, women are generally absent in the making of history concerning the Great War, and this exclusion is only challenged after the 1970s, as Tylee (1990) suggests (p. 8–9). This is why this study focuses on this aspect of the effects of the war, especially through Virginia Woolf’s female characters that are victims of war neurosis.

Mrs Dalloway

Mrs Dalloway is set in 1923, five years after the end of the war but, as Woolf points out, the work has to do with the “shock of the War which cannot be forgotten” (quoted in Tylee, 1990, p. 150). Although Septimus is the outstanding figure representing war neurosis in the text, Clarissa Dalloway appears as the ignored victim of the very same trauma. Septimus was haunted by his experiences, Clarissa by fear, a sense of loss and helplessness. The constant emphasis on her cold, hard and lonely nature parallels Vera Brittain’s depiction of the “unfriended” victim of war trauma. Sarah Cole (2003) comments on Vera Brittain’s depiction of her experience of war as a nurse, indicating that:

Brittain depicts the tragedy as an experience that severs all the war’s generation from the rest of society, not so much setting women and men against one another as destroying an extremely close male community that also includes a select group of women. For Brittain, like so many combatant writers of the period, the war’s greatest abomination is its shattering of intimacy, an assault on personal ties that occurs in several keys. Most clearly, Brittain describes the terrible trauma when her beloved friends and relatives are killed in combat: “So incredible was our final separation”, she writes of the death of her brother, “that it made life itself seem unreal. I had never believed that I could actually go on living without that lovely companionship that had been at my service since childhood, that perfect relation” (*Testament*, 444). For Brittain, the death of her brother means the end of a flawless embodiment of friendship. Her language of perfect community recalls similar moments in the poetry of Owen and Sassoon, where idealized and all-important friendships are shattered by the war, and such killed intimacy provides the key to war alienation. (p. 176–7)

This account of Brittain’s sense of the loss of intimacy and alienation is especially echoed in the characterization of Clarissa Dalloway’s denial of sensationalism, which also parallels Mildred Aldrich’s account in *A Hilltop on the Marne* (1915):

By 10 August, with the planes still flying overhead, and with stern, silent groups of men walking past her hedge, accompanied by their women and leading children by the hand, she writes revealingly: ‘It has all been so thrilling that I find myself forgetting that it is tragic’. What she finds thrilling is not the blatant intoxication of war-fever but the idea of a people silently united . . . The apparent denial of sensationalism is what makes her account so compelling. (quoted in Tylee, 1990, p. 21)

As defined by Peter Walsh in the novel, this coldness and hardness is a symptom of “the death of the soul”.

Rezia is another “unfriended” woman in the novel. And she also perfectly fits the categorization offered by Scardino Belzer (2010) in her study of Italian women during the war, wherein she points out that the female identity changed in three steps during and after the war: “[t]he prewar feminine archetype praised the obedient wife whose life was restricted mostly to the home and family responsibilities: the *donna brava* (good woman) (p. 2); “[d]uring the Great War, she entered history, and a new prototype developed: the politically active female patriot sacrificing for victory—the *donna italiana* (Italian woman)” (p. 3); and lastly *donna fascista* (fascist woman) who accompanies Italy’s evolution towards a fascist state. Rezia is a great example of the second category. Scardino and Belzer (2010) further comment that

[a] *donna italiana* was supposedly willing to send a loved one to the front with a smile or deny children a filling meal. She had to reorder her priorities. For the war to succeed, it was necessary for her to see herself first as Italian, sacrificing for an Allied victory, and only second as female, sacrificing in an appropriately feminine manner. During the war, patriotism trumped gender as women’s predominant identity. (p. 3)

Rezia’s illusory perspective of Septimus’s situation, her denial of the destructive effects of war on him and her insistence of seeing him as a war hero rather than a victim is a sign of this. However, no matter how committed she seems to be, Woolf reveals the signs of her suffering, indicating that she is traumatized as much as Septimus himself.

For she could stand it no longer. Dr Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. Far rather would she that he were dead! she could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible; sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down; all were terrible. And he would not kill himself; and she could tell no one. 'Septimus has been working too hard' – that was all she could say to her own mother. To love makes one solitary, she thought. She could tell nobody, not even Septimus now, and looking back, she saw him sitting in his shabby overcoat alone, on the seat, hunched up, staring. And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now. She put on her lace collar. She put on her new hat and he never noticed; and he was happy without her. Nothing could make her happy without him! Nothing! He was selfish. So men are. For he was not ill. Dr Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him. She spread her hand before her. Look! her wedding ring slipped – she had grown so thin. It was she who suffered – but had nobody to tell. (Woolf, *Dalloway*, 2005 , p. 141)

So she is unfriended, with no one to talk to, alienated and traumatized by both the war and its effects on Septimus. Unfortunately, Septimus ends up committing suicide, although Lucrezia tries to prevent the unjustifiable treatment the doctors force him to accept. As Septimus hears the doctor trying to force him to rest, he thinks how he does not want to die: “(He sat on the sill). But he would wait till the last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot” (Woolf, *Dalloway*, 2005, pp. 221-2). After this procession of thoughts, Septimus jumps out the window right after the doctor walks inside the room.

The remarkable thing about Septimus's suicide, though, is Clarissa's response to it. She is told about the incident during her party, and that is precisely where the parallel experiences or the mental states of Clarissa and Septimus are highlighted: they are both victims of the trauma caused by the war.

Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. [. . .] Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. [. . .] Somehow it was her disaster – her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. [. . .] There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room. (Woolf, *Dalloway*, 2005, p. 243–5)

Clarissa identifies herself with Septimus although she has never met him before. She does not know him but at the same time he is very familiar. They have been sharing the same experiences, which is pointed out by the fact that they both place their emphasis on the heat of the sun.

To the Lighthouse

To the Lighthouse also portrays the mentality of the civilians who are not directly involved in the war but had to live under constant threat, which the sounds of the war do not let them forget. These sounds reach them like

the measured blows of hammers dulled on felt, which, with their repeated shocks still further loosened the shawl and cracked the tea-cups. Now and again some glass tinkled in the cupboard as if a giant voice had shrieked so loud in its agony that tumblers stood inside a cupboard vibrated too. Then again silence fell; and then, night after night, and sometimes in plain midday when the roses were bright and light turned on the wall its shape clearly there seemed to drop into this silence this indifference, this integrity, the thud of something falling. [A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]. (Woolf, *Lighthouse*, 2005, p. 342)

Beside this never-ending reminder of ongoing death and destruction that continually haunts Mrs. Ramsey, she also experiences the loss of Andrew Ramsey. So, just like Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsey suffers from the traumatic sense of loss, fear, helplessness and alienation. Before the war everybody liked her but after the war she became a different person, as is obvious from the following passage: “But dear, many things had changed since then (she shut the drawer); many families had lost their dearest. So she was dead; and Mr Andrew killed; and Miss Prue dead too, they said, with her first baby; but every one had lost

someone these years” (Woolf, *Lighthouse*, 2005, p. 344). In this sense, Mrs. Ramsey is another character that experiences the death of the soul. Besides, her devastation is projected onto the wrecked situation of the Ramsey home. Mrs. Ramsey is falling apart bit by bit just like the house which “was all damp in here; the plaster was falling. [. . .] gone mouldy too. And rats in all the attics. [. . .] The house was left; the house was deserted. It was left like a shell on a sand hill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it” (Woolf, *Lighthouse*, 2005, p. 344-5). Life had left Mrs Ramsey as well, and as Cam kept repeating her father’s words they “perished, each alone” (Woolf, *Lighthouse*, 2005, p. 364).

Jacob’s Room

Jacob’s Room, on the other hand, narrates the life of Jacob in fragmented episodes from his childhood to his death in war. The devastating effects of the war are revealed ironically through Jacob’s commitment to civilization and modernity, humanism and optimism. But Jacob is not the only foil to highlight the effects of the war. Betty Flanders’s state of mind is also revealed as terribly affected by war. Her perception of the sea, the waves and the sun are all used as a foreshadowing of the approaching disaster and, moreover, echo the trauma and disillusionment that she experiences. In the opening pages of the novel, “the salt gale blowing in Betty Flander’s bedroom window”, curiously makes her realize “the oppression of eternity” (Woolf, *Jacob*, 2005, p. 37). Vincent Sherry (2005) suggests that the wind blowing into Betty Flanders’s bedroom reminding her of the oppression of eternity is decidedly the wind of violence that blows as a result of the world war (p. 131). The wind blowing into the bedroom, an individual’s most personal space, is also the sign of the war affecting even the most personal aspects of people’s lives. Sherry (2005) goes on to argue that “Betty Flanders’s family name also calls up the site of the conflict’s most famous battlefield and mass grave” (p. 131–2). Although Woolf never clearly indicates that Betty Flanders is oppressed by the traumatic consequences of the war, she can obviously be thought to suffer from oppression, fear, helplessness, loneliness and loss as indicated in the following passage from the novel:

“The guns?” said Betty Flanders, half asleep, getting out of bed and going to the window, which was decorated with a fringe of dark leaves.

“Not at this distance,” she thought. “It is the sea.”

Again, far away, she heard the dull sound, as if nocturnal women were beating great carpets. There was Morty lost, and Seabrook dead; her sons fighting for their country. But were the chickens safe? Was that someone moving downstairs? Rebecca with the toothache? No. The nocturnal women were beating great carpets. Her hens shifted slightly on their perches. (Woolf, *Jacob*, 2005, p. 123)

She is not, however, the only one to suffer from the fear and the threat caused by the war as highlighted in *Jacob’s Room*. Some women are victims of a more direct impact:

But the red light was on the columns of the Parthenon, and the Greek women who were knitting their stockings and sometimes crying to a child to come and have the insects picked from its head were as jolly as sand–martins in the heat, quarrelling, scolding, suckling their babies, until the ships in the Piraeus fired their guns.

The sound spread itself flat, and then went tunneling its way with fitful explosions among the channels of the islands.

Darkness drops like a knife over Greece. (Woolf, *Jacob*, 2005, p. 123)

Greek women suckling their babies became unforeseen victims of the war, contributing thus to the fear and sense of loss that terrorized the whole continent.

Conclusion

Some scholars have suggested that women could not bear the terrible consequences of the war so they decided to ignore it. It was argued that women were indifferent to the war or just unable to comprehend it. However, the works studied herein make it patent that women experienced all of the troubles and devastation of the war, only in a different way: the sense of loss, lack, fear, and the compulsory forfeiture of sincerity. As pointed out in *Mrs Dalloway* (2005), all of these women suffered under “some venerable name; love, duty, self-sacrifice” (p. 192).

References

- Buck, C. (2005). British women's writing of the great war. In Vincent Sherry (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War* (85–112). Cambridge: Cambridge UP. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521821452.005>
- Cohen, D. R. (2001). Encoded enclosures: The wartime novels of Stella Benson. In Patrick J. Quinn and Steven Trout (Eds.), *Literature of the Great War reconsidered: Beyond modern memory* (37–54). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cole, S. (2003). *Modernism, male friendship and the first world war*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511485046>
- Krockel, C. (2011). *War Trauma and English modernism: T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230307759>
- Rivers, W. H. R. (1922). Repression of War Experience. In *Instinct and the unconscious: A contribution to a biological theory of the psycho-neuroses* (2nd ed.) (185–204). Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Scardino Belzer, A. (2010). *Women and the Great War: Femininity Under Fire in Italy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sherry, V. (2005). The Great War and Literary Modernism in England. In Vincent Sherry (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War* (pp. 113–140). Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Showalter, Elaine (1993). Hysteria, feminism, and gender. In Sander L. Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter. G.S. Rousseau and Elaine Showalter (Eds.), *Hysteria beyond Freud* (287–335). Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Tylee, Claire M. (1990). *The Great War and women's consciousness: Images of militarism and womanhood in women's writings, 1914–64*. London: Macmillan. Tylee, Claire M. (1990). The Great War and women's consciousness: Images of militarism and womanhood in women's writings, 1914–64. London: Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-20454-0>
- Winter, Jay (2006). *Remembering war: The Great War between historical memory and history in the twentieth century*. New Haven and London: Yale UP.
- Woolf, Virginia (2005). *Jacob's room*. In *Selected works of Virginia Woolf* (7–124). London: Wordsworth.
- Woolf, Virginia (2005). *Mrs. Dalloway*. In *Selected works of Virginia Woolf* (125–252). London: Wordsworth.
- Woolf, Virginia (2005). *To the lighthouse*. In *Selected works of Virginia Woolf* (253–392). London: Wordsworth.

Corresponding Author: Assist. Prof. Dr. Mahinur Aksehir-Uygur

Contact e-mail: mahinuraksehir@yahoo.com