

Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925 Study Guide

**Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the
Years 1900-1925 by Vera Brittain**

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Plot Summary

Testament of Youth by Vera Brittain is Vera Brittain's own story. She grows up in the British town of Buxton where she lives an upper middle class existence. She always wants to attend college but her father does not believe it is necessary for women to be educated. His views change after a visit from a respected family friend and Vera begins to prepare herself for Oxford in spite of the comments from other women in the town.

Vera chooses to attend Somerville College and just as she begins, World War I breaks out. Her brother Edward and his friend Roland postpone their studies, enlisting in the war effort instead. Vera completes one year and then becomes a Red Cross nurse of V.A.D. This is the occupation she holds throughout the war, not matter how disagreeable she finds the task. She and her prep school friend Betty serve in London and Malta together. Vera also serves in France and is assigned to London when the war ends.

The war means that Vera loses the people who are closest to her. Her fiance is killed, their friends Victor and Geoffrey, and finally her brother Edward die as a result of the fighting. These deaths profoundly affect Vera whose life becomes divided into two different segments but she makes the necessary adjustments.

After the war she returnesto Somerville to complete her studies, switching from English to history. She becomes close friends with another student, Winifred. They become roommates and close friends after finishing at Somerville. Both are writers, teachers and tutors. They book lecture on the League of Nations and go on to work for the organization. They travel through Europe together both on private vacations and for their work with the League of Nations. On their first trip, Vera finds the graves of those she lost during the war.

In the post-war part of the book, Vera explores the issues and views of the post-war period. She is interested in woman's rights and works for that cause. She and Winifred succeed in achieving the kind of life they want as Vera begins to struggle with the idea of choosing between the lifestyle she has attained and marriage to the man she calls G. He convinces her that she does not have to choose, that she can have both.

This interesting books explains the lives of professional women in the World War I era. It looks at the problems they face and the kinds of choices they have to make, especially with the war. It is very interesting reading and well worth the reader's time.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Vera views World War I as an interruption to her own personal plans. She introduces herself in this first chapter. Her father's family is from Staffordshire and are mostly businessmen and country gentlemen. Her mother is the daughter of a musician who has migrated to Stoke-on-Trent from Wales. Her parents meet when her father takes singing lessons from her maternal grandfather. Her parents live in Newcastle-under-Lyme in a little villa on Sidmouth Road.

Vera grows up in a middle class environment. She remembers her childhood as happy and uneventful, a household in which she and her brother Edward grow up in a house full of music. Vera reads whatever she can find to read when she is a child. She also writes for her own amusement.

The family moves to Buxton when Vera is eleven because there are good day schools for the children. At one point Vera is reprimanded by her mother and aunt for talking to her brother's friends. They believe that the sexes should remain separate. She does not travel much during her childhood and is sent to St. Monica's boarding school at Surrey at the age of thirteen. She is a good student doing work beyond her years and wants to attend college, but her father views women as ornamental.

Vera has two friends at St. Monica's. Mina remains friends with her until she becomes a nurse. Her relationship with Betty continues through the years. Vera is introduced to the feminist movement while at St. Monica's by a teacher, Mrs. Heath Jones, who also encourages the girls to read the newspaper. Most of these are clippings on current affairs but the girls are being encouraged to think on their own. Vera mentions some of the books and other readings that she does at the time and how they affect her.

Vera begins writing a diary after she is out of school and continues it through the beginning of the First World War. She comments on the differences between her and the London society girls that she attends school with.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Vera makes her debut in London as a provincial debutante in 1912. She attends a variety of dances and does the things that most debutantes do. She still wants to attend college but her father refuses. Vera wants more in life than what she has but she does not view marriage as a way to freedom. She is bored in Buxton during the two years before the war and does not like the provincialism. To her, the provincial views are petty.

Vera continues her writing, producing several novels, none of which are best sellers. Her brother Edward is musically inclined. A visit by a respected lawyer, a family friend, changes Vera's father's view on the education of women and Vera begins the education she so desperately wants. Her father agrees to send her to Oxford for one year and she departs for the Summer Meeting. She maintains contact with Sir John Marriott who recommends she enter Lady Margaret Hall, one of the Oxford women's colleges. She has already decided on Somerville, and tries to prepare herself for the examinations. Her brother convinces her to take the scholarship examinations. Vera then spends her time studying various subjects in preparations for the examinations. As a result of her hard work studying and her ambitions, she is subject to a lot of ridicule in her locality.

In March 1914, Vera goes to Oxford for the examinations. Her efforts earn her a college exhibition. All she has to do now is to pass the Oxford Senior. A classmate of her brother's named Roland comes to visit them. Roland and Vera spend much of the time together and they correspond after his visit ends. She attends her brother's final Speech Day because she wants to see Roland again. When she sees him, he is in his Officers' Training uniform. Roland, Edward and their friend Victor are going to a military camp after the term ends. Europe, at this time, is on the brink of World War I.

Vera sits for her examinations on July 20, two weeks before the war begins. In August her father tells her to forget about Oxford since the war has begun. Edward announces that he will not attend Oxford if Vera does not.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Vera mentions an entry in her diary from August 3, 1914 on war and how difficult it is to grasp the meaning of what is taking place. Edward arrives home since his military camp is disbanded telling them of trains full of troops. The towns people begin panic buying and stockpiling food. Vera knows that Edward could be called for home defense at any time. Edward needs his father's permission to join the military since he is underage and his father will not consent.

Vera gives up on Oxford and passes the exams for the First Aid and Home Nursing positions. Roland is refused a commission because of his poor eyesight and Edward finally receives his father's permission to apply for officers' training. Vera is thinking of Roland in a more romantic way now. She goes to Oxford in October while Roland, Victor and Edward are still trying to receive commissions.

At Oxford, Vera attends teas and makes some friends and becomes active in campus organizations, including the Oxford Society for Woman Suffrage. Edward arrives since he is doing his officer's training at Oxford, Roland has become a territorial second lieutenant. Edward completes his training by the end of November and departs for Sandgate. Vera passes her exams in Greek and goes home to visit her family and Edward gets leave to spend Christmas in Buxton. It will be the family's last Christmas together. She spends several days with relatives in London where she sees Roland and meets his mother. Roland later tells Vera that his mother finds her to be charming. After two days they have to part. Like many other young couples in love during the war, she wonders if she will ever see him again.

Vera returns to Oxford and soon receives a letter from Edward telling her has leave coming and will meet her. Soon Vera receives a letter from Roland saying that he is being sent to the front. Vera rushes to London to see him before he departs for France. They dine with her parents that night and after dinner, for the first time, discuss marriage.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

On March 31, 1915, Roland leaves for the front in France, sending Vera an amethyst brooch. They continue to write to one another. Vera returns to her studies at Oxford, trying to concentrate on her work. She begins to do volunteer work at the Devonshire Hospital and works at war time fund raisers during her vacation from Oxford. She returns to Oxford for her last semester intending to go into nursing when she finishes.

At Somerville she is in different housing since the woman's college is now using many of the facilities that had previously been used by the men. She continues to play her tennis matches and seeks comfort in the chapel and cathedral services. She plans to take a leave from Somerville to nurse until the end of the war, due to her love for Roland. Vera knows that she will not like what she will see in nursing but feels that if Roland can face the horrors of war, so can she.

Edward visits her near the end of the term and tells her that his regiments may soon be leaving for the front. Her discussions with Edward and her correspondence with Roland are concerned with how one faces death and the horrors of war. Most of her diary is concerned with her correspondence with Roland.

Vera successfully finishes her exams and returns to Buxton and begins her nursing training at Devonshire Hospital on June 27, 1915. The hospital is located one half-hour from her home in Buxton. During this time, she has a dream that Roland is killed in France. In the dream, she finds out that another man and not Roland has died.

Chapter 4, cont.

Chapter 4, cont. Summary and Analysis

Vera maintains her correspondence with Mina and Betty. She is to be a nurse in London and wants them to join her, but Mina is in an affair with an artist and not very eager. Vera is having problems with the new Head of Nursing at Devonshire. She continues her correspondence with Roland and their philosophical discussions and poetry. Her work keeps her from dwelling on the possibility of Roland's death, even though she wonders how she will react to such news.

Edward arrives in Buxton for a long leave. His unit may be sent to the Persian Gulf. In mid-August Roland returns to England for leave. Vera arranges for a long weekend off from the hospital so she can meet him. She makes the four hour train journey to London and meets him. While in London, she interviews at the 1st London General hospital. On the train ride to Buxton, Vera and Roland become officially engaged. When they have dinner with Victor and Edward in London, Edward hints that they should elope.

Vera and Roland travel to Lowestoft to his family estate on the east coast of England to tell his family of their official engagement. Roland's mother works in journalism and Vera likes to hear her stories. On Monday, Roland's mother accompanies them back to London. Neither Roland nor Vera want an engagement ring, much to his mother's dismay.

That evening, Vera takes the train back to Buxton alone. When she arrives home, she finds that Edward's unit is leaving for France and her parents have gone to say goodbye to him. It turns out, Edward does not go to France with his regiment.

Vera agonizes over Roland's fate after the high casualties of the Battle of Loos, looking through the newspapers for his name. She eventually receives a letter saying that his regiment was not involved in the battle.

Vera receives her appointment at 1st London General hospital and is to report on October 18. She learns that her friend Betty will be working at the same unit. Vera never again returns to Buxton.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Vera is working at the 1st London General Hospital and living in a small cubicle without even enough room for the few books she brings with her. The hostel is one and one half miles from the hospital and they often have to walk, carrying the suitcases with their uniforms and supplies. They work long hard hours and live in very uncomfortable accommodations.

Most of Vera's hospital work consists of supporting limbs and preparing dressing trays. She continues to write to Roland but her letters are shorter because of her lack of time. Her parents want her to return to Buxton. She refuses to return saying that she has an obligation to be where she is needed. She has her first quarrel with Roland at this time who does not respond to her letter, so after a month she writes a second letter to which he responds. The war is changing both of them but they eventually overcome their quarrel.

One day Vera collapses in the ward. The doctor orders a weekend sick leave for her. She takes the train to Lowestoft to stay with Roland's parents. Vera enjoys the long discussions she has with Roland's mother. His family moves to London soon after Vera leaves. Vera's parents are also preparing to leave Buxton for the Brighton area. Her father has retired after a business disagreement with his associates so there is nothing to keep them in Buxton.

Roland writes that he will have leave in December and they both hope that she will be able to take time off. She writes that she has leave coming and both their families are now located in the Brighton area.

In early December, Vera, Betty and Marjorie move into quarters right next to the hospital. Vera makes arrangements to delay her leave until Roland is in London. Edward and Victor will receive leave at the same time so they will all be able to be together. Her co-workers are teasing her about running off to get married. Roland's mother feels the same way. Vera begins to think of getting married and having a baby. She goes to Brighton to wait for Roland and learns that he dies on December 23, 1915.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Vera spends the week at her parents home in Brighton and returns to the hospital after her leave ends. She learns the details of Roland's death and tries to deal with them. She has a hard time at the hospital dealing with the condolences and is more irritable than usual. Vera no longer likes working at the hospital and it is evident in the quality of her work and her attitude.

Whenever Vera has time off from work, she goes to her family's home. She becomes closer to Victor and keeps in touch with Roland's family.

When Vera's night duty ends in February, she has to move back to the hostel and sharing a room with five other women. A few days later, she receives a letter from Edward saying that he is leaving for the front in France. She and her mother see him off and she receives his letters from the front. She knows what to expect from her correspondence with Roland. Vera finds that their friend Geoffrey has been injured at Ypres and goes to visit him as soon as she has time off. She continues to see him and they become friends.

Vera goes to Oxford to discuss her future at Somerville. She tells the Principal that she will not resume her studies until after the war. When Vera returns to London, she volunteers for the foreign service. Vera has decided not to renew her contract which ends in April and is looking for something else to do. After notifying the Matron of her decision, she changes her mind.

Both Vera and Betty contract German measles and are sent to the Fever Hospital where they remain for three weeks. Vera continues her correspondence with Victor, Geoffrey and Edward. Edward provides detailed descriptions of the places he is at. After leaving the Fever Hospital, Vera receives two weeks leave and goes to visit her parents.

At the beginning of July, the fighting has intensified and the hospital receives a lot of wounded. Vera knows that Edward is in the area of intense fighting and is very worried about it. She receives a letter from Edward saying that he has been wounded and hopes to return to England.

The wounded began to arrive and continue to for the next six weeks. Edward is one of the wounded treated at the hospital. Vera visits with him whenever she can.

In September, both Vera and Betty are called for foreign service.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Vera and Betty are assigned to duty in Malta. They sail on the Britannic on September 23, 1916. Vera is happy to be leaving because she has come to hate Camberwell. She worries quietly about German submarines during the voyage. She does not find out until later that the ship is actually chased by an enemy submarine.

Vera likes Malta, even though she and most of the others are sick from food poisoning when they arrive. She and Betty work at St. George's Hospital. There is a long delay in the mail and Vera worries about her friends and relatives since there are now bombing raids in England. Both Victor and Geoffrey are not fighting in France. She and Betty grow apart as Betty becomes a part of the tennis set and social scene while Vera prefers more solitary activities.

The hospital at Malta treats mostly the survivors of torpedo attacks. The Britannic is one of the ships that is sunk and Betty and Vera go to talk to one of the survivors.

The work in Malta is easier and Vera has more free time. She relaxes a little when Edward is in England taking officer's courses but she still worries about Victor and Geoffrey in France. She knows she will not see any of them until after the war. The submarine attacks are so bad that no one can leave Malta and there is talk of the hospital personnel being sent to Salonika.

She receives a cable saying that Victor is seriously wounded. It takes four days for her to find out that he will probably be blind. This is on April 9. Geoffrey is killed on April 23. One May 22, Vera begins the journey to England for a visit. She has to take a train through Italy and France and records the journey in her diary. There is shopping and sightseeing along the way and she arrives safely at her parents' home. Vera goes to visit Victor at the hospital and visits him daily. Edward also arrives home on leave. When they go to see Victor, they found that there has been a change for the worse. He is having bouts of delirium. He dies the next day.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Edward departs for France in June 1917. His baggage is lost in transit and he is assigned to a different regiment and immediately sent into battle. He is very agitated until he is returned to his own regiment at the end of July. Vera experiences her first bombing raid while she is in London. She goes to Devonshire House to ask for another nursing assignment, despite her parents pleas that she remain at home. Vera asks to be sent to France.

Vera arrives in France on August 3 and is assigned to a hospital in Etaples. There she shares a hut with a woman she calls red-haired S. Their camp is close enough to the fighting that Vera can hear the guns. Vera is assigned to the German prisoner ward. The work is not light as it had been in Malta since the men have very serious injuries. She works in the German prisoner ward for two months before being transferred to an English ward.

Vera likes Etaples because the V.A.D.s have more privacy regarding their personal lives than in the other places where she serves. During the heavy casualties of the battles, they have little time off. Correspondence from Edward indicates that he might be going to fight in Italy. When Edward goes on leave, Vera arranges for leave and they both go on leave. Vera has the flu and cannot go out until the end of her leave. When she returns to Etaples, she is assigned to a light surgical ward. This changes with the German offensive and they prepare to move their hospital camp.

When Vera receives news from her father that her mother is sick and in a nursing home, she asks for leave and is refused. She then asks to be released from her contract. She departs in April, for one month's leave.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Vera goes straight from the train station to the nursing home to visit her sick mother. She soon moves her mother back to her flat and cares for her. Letters from Etaples tells her that the camps have been bombed. The nurses are sleeping in the trenches. The fighting has intensified in Italy, but Vera does not tell her mother that both Vera and her father are very worried about Edward. They soon receive a telegram saying that Edward is dead and then letters with more details surrounding his death.

Vera wants more information of the circumstances surrounding her brother's death. She tracks down some of the people who were with him and are in hospitals and visits them to learn more of the details. Vera is very upset about her brother's death and draws many comparisons with the death of Roland. She stops being interested in the war and stops reading the causality lists.

During this time, Roland's mother helps Vera have a book of verse published. Vera is not sure what she wants to do. She does not want to return to Oxford and requests foreign service but finds that the rules have changed. She has broken her contract and has to prove herself again in home hospitals. The Red Cross assigns her to a civilian hospital which she calls St. Jude's.

At St. Jude's, Vera was lodged in a single room in the servants' quarters of a mansion. They cannot use the rest of the house even though it is vacant most of the time. At the hospital, the V.A.D.s are looked down upon by the nurses and given menial duties to perform. Things are so bad that Vera decides to quit St. Jude and look for an alternative position. She finds one at another hospital with a nurse she served with in France.

In October, she moves to Queen Alexandra's Hospital in Millbank. She has six months remaining on her contract. At this time the Germans are in retreat.

On November 11, 1918, people in London are celebrating claiming victory in the war. The war has ended.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Vera leaves Millbank in April, 1919. In the months after the Armistice, Vera spends a long of time thinking about whether or not she will return to Oxford. She spends much of the time in London with Hope Milroy. When she resumes her studies at Somerville, she considers switching to history and does. Vera is the only woman that has returned to resume her studies and to her tennis playing.

Her studies go well and she passes her examinations in Greek. She meets other students who have also had experiences during the war. For the first time, the school allows male-female intercollegiate debating which Vera, a feminist, feels is a step in the right direction. Vera at first does not get along with Winifred, who is the secretary of the Debating Society. Vera clashes with Winifred and receives an official apology from the Debating Society. Vera views Winifred as one of the girls who sat out the war in a classroom and who viewed her, Vera, as someone to make fun of. As a result of her experience, she never again mentions the War while at school. She and Winifred eventually become friends and continue to be friends for many years.

Vera views her life as being divided into two parts, before and after war. Oxford is part of both parts.

There are still rules at Oxford regarding the fraternization of males and females. For many of the people who had been involved in the War, these are difficult to adjust to.

Chapter 10, cont.

Chapter 10, cont. Summary and Analysis

Vera publishes articles and is active in literary activities. Even though she is reading in history and not English, she is still interested in English. She is already making notes for a novel she plans to write and has a short story published.

There is still discrimination between the sexes in 1919 but legislation promoting greater equality is being passed. This results in women being able to receive degrees from Oxford. This means that Vera will be able to receive a degree for her studies and leads to a debate over whether or not there should be stricter requirements and discipline for women. Vera becomes involved in this controversy. As a result of her writing, she and others meet the Queen and the Princess Mary.

The time approaches for Vera's finals. The first degree ceremony involving women takes place on October 14 and Vera is in attendance. Soon after, Vera and Winifred take their exams. Neither do as well as they had hoped. Vera does not earn the highest academic honors that she had hoped for. After finishing school, the two share a flat in London and continue their literary endeavors. In September, they spend six weeks traveling through Europe.

Vera has saved for the trip they take in 1921, hoping to find Edward's grave. They walk through many sites and finally find his grave and then go on with their trip through Italy. In Florence they meet Oswaldo Giacomini, a student at the University of Florence. He shows them around and talks to them about Italy. After traveling through Italy, they go to France and Vera sees the area of Etaples and other areas where there were battles. She finds Roland's grave.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

After returning from Italy, Vera is ill with jaundice. Vera has a small income from the shares of the family business she has received from her father. Both Vera and Winifred want careers as writers and each spend time with their respective parents after their trip. They correspond with one another and think of ways they can earn money while waiting to get into journalism and have their books published. Vera has some part time teaching and lecturing offers in addition to helping a student prepare for examinations at Oxford.

Both Winifred and Vera give lectures at St. Monica's. Vera even addresses the League of Nations. She feels that she has to lecture on Bolshevism and the Russian Revolution. Both women work on their books and other pieces whenever they can. Vera begins to teach at a South Kensington school and takes various odd jobs in tutoring. Vera finds her students interested in the Sinn Fein problems in Ireland.

Vera becomes an accomplished speaker on the League of Nations and makes several speeches a week for more than three years on the subject in and around London and the Midlands. In September 1923, Vera covers the Assembly as a journalist. She covers several of the sessions as a journalist. Italy is threatening to leave the League as a result of the dispute but they manage to settle their differences.

Vera and Winifred decide to pool their funds to travel through the Central European countries. They want to learn of the effect of the war in these countries.

Vera meets many people from every walk of life during her meetings for the League of Nations. Sir Percy Harris of the London County Council wants her to be his secretary but she cannot accept full time work because of her teaching commitment. Winifred becomes his secretary as he runs for office. He becomes a member of Parliament and holds that post for many years.

Chapter 11, cont.

Chapter 11, cont. Summary and Analysis

Vera and Winifred have late night visitors and schedules that take them away overnight. Their charlady quits, saying that they are of questionable character, and their landlady agrees, so they begin to look for a different flat and find one in Maida Vale. They also join a Liberal organization that they belong to until the end of 1924.

At this time Vera is not interested in getting married. Roland had been her big love and she cannot imagine another. She more or less accepts the fact that she will be a spinster and is dedicated to her career. There is still plenty of discrimination against women at this time with many married women being dismissed from their jobs. There are various equal rights kinds of legislation being considered.

Fascism is beginning to spread through Europe. Winifred and Vera continue covering the League of Nations meetings and sessions of Parliament. Vera is active in the Six Point Group and in women's rights movements. Both women continue their lectures, teaching and article writing and both finish their novels. Vera spends a year submitting her novel to various publishing houses and receiving rejection notices or advice on what to change. Winifred's book has already been accepted for publication and this is hard for Vera to accept.

Vera begins to work on a second novel that eventually is published. At this point she is beginning to believe that she is not wanted on the London literary scene. Eventually a publisher contacts her, has her revise her book and publishes it. *The Dark Tide*, which is about life at Oxford, draws some criticism from people at Oxford.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

In June 1923, Vera and Winifred travel to Oxford for a class reunion. Vera receives a card from a former male student inviting her to tea. Vera tears up the card and discards it. In August, she receives a package from her publisher with a note in the same handwriting as the card at Oxford.

At this point in her life, Vera is not interested in marriage or children. She says that she has achieved the kind of life that she has always wanted and does not want to change it. Vera continues to correspond with the man from New College Oxford. He soon writes that he will be coming to London for a long vacation in June and that he thinks that she is the student he knew as Virginia Dennison. Vera thinks of telling him that she does not want to see him.

When the man she calls G. arrives in London, Vera makes sure she is busy and out of the flat. He finds her and they go to tea and the theater. They go to Oxford for the weekend. Vera begins seriously thinking of marriage and they discuss marriage. They become engaged.

Winifred and Vera leave for several months in Geneva for their work with the League of Nations. After the meetings, they travel through numerous countries, including Germany, in conjunction with their work. After several months, they return to London in November.

Marrying G. means that Vera will have to let go of the past. She expresses her doubts to G. and he tries to reassure her. They will temporarily live and work in America. They plan a summer wedding and a honeymoon in South-Eastern Europe. They marry on June 27, 1925.

Characters

Vera Brittain

Vera Brittain is the author of the book and is the one who is telling her own story. She is the daughter of one of the owners of a paper mill, in which she is a stockholder. Vera attends day school in Buxton then is sent to St. Monica's boarding school at the age of thirteen. Her aunt is one of the teachers at the school and she often returns there to relax or to teach. She enters Somerville College at Oxford just as World War I begins and interrupts her studies to work as a nurse. Vera becomes engaged to Roland, a friend of her brother's while he is on leave from the war. Roland is killed on December 23, 1915, right before he is to come home on leave. Vera decides to continue with her work at the hospital and signs up for the foreign service. She and her friend Betty are sent to Malta. After Malta, Vera goes on to serve in France, where she first works in a ward of German prisoners. She then returns to work in England, where she is when the war ends. After the war ends, she completes her studies at Somerville and becomes close friends with Winifred. The two women share a flat, write, tutor and teach as well as work for the League of Nations. They travel together and Vera is a little upset when Winifred's novel is published before hers. Vera finally lets go of the past and marries G. on June 27, 1925.

Winifred Holtby

Winifred is a student at Somerville and secretary of the Debating Society and becomes a close friend of Vera's after the War. They do not get along at first but eventually come to understand one another. After finishing at Somerville, Winifred and Vera share apartments together and travel together. Winifred is also a writer and joins the Liberal organization with Vera and leaves at the same time. Winifred is also writing a novel that she finishes at the same time that Vera finishes her's. Like Vera, Winifred attends the meetings of the League of Nations in Geneva as well as sessions of Parliament. She is also active in the woman's rights movement. Winifred's book is accepted for publication before Vera's. In spite of this, the two women remain friends and Winifred supports Vera during her romance with G. and in her decision to marry him.

Roland

Roland is a classmate of Edward's at Uppingham who comes to visit Edward at Buxton. He meets Vera and they fall in love. His plans to attend Oxford are put aside by the outbreak of World War I. He is from Lowestoft on the east coast of England and on one of his leaves from combat, he and Vera become officially engaged. They spend what time they can together on leave. Roland is to meet Vera and their families in Brighton for Christmas, when he has a week's leave. He is killed in the fighting on December 23.

Edward

Edward is the younger brother of Vera. He is educated at Uppingham where he is a top student. During his early years, his biggest love is the violin and he composes music. He is due to go to Oxford when the war begins. He signs up for officer training and is eventually sent to the front in France where he is injured. He sustains a serious arm injury and is sent to the hospital where Vera is working. Eventually, he recovers and returns to duty. He is killed during fighting in Italy on June 15, 1918.

Victor

Victor, known as Tah, is a friend of both Edward and Roland. He is in the military and contracts and recovers from meningitis so he has light duty and frequent leaves. He returns to the front eventually and is shot in the head and blinded. He dies in a London hospital in June 1917.

Betty

Betty is a friend of Vera's from their days at St. Monica's. She also becomes a nurse and is assigned to the 1st London General Hospital. She is sent to the same hospital in Malta as Vera.

Geoffrey

Geoffrey is a friend of Edward's and Vera's. When he is injured, she visits him in the hospital and they become good friends. They correspond while he is at the front in France. He is killed on April 23, 1917.

Sister Hope Milroy

Hope Milroy is the name Vera gives to the Head Nurse at the hospital in Etaplis. Vera has a lot of respect for her and spends her free time with her. The sister is from a family of clerics and actors and actresses.

Sir John Marriott

Sir John Marriott is a lawyer and respected family friend of Vera's parents and changes her father's views on the education of women.

Rose Macaulay

Rose Macaulay is a Somerville graduate and a successful author. She gives Vera advice on how to get her novel published.



Objects/Places

Newcastle-under-Lyme

Newcastle-under-Lyme is the town where Vera is born.

Macclesfield

Macclesfield is where the Brittain family move when Vera is eighteen months old.

Buxton

Buxton is where the Brittan family move when Vera is eleven.

Oxford

Oxford is the location of Oxford University of which Somerville College is a part.

London

London is the capital of England.

Lowestoft

Lowestoft is on the east coast of England where Roland's family estate is located.

Brighton

Brighton is an area near London where both Roland's and Vera's families relocate to.

Malta

Malta is an island in the Mediterranean where Vera is assigned.

Italy

Italy, in Southern Europe, is where Vera travels through on her way to England.

France

France is the European country where the heavy fighting takes place and where Vera is assigned in August 1917.

Themes

Ambition

One of the most dominant themes in the book is that of ambition. Vera has her own ambitions in spite of the environment in which she grew up. She does not want to fit the mold of the provincial wife. She wants an education to help her fulfill her own ambitions. Vera wants to attend Oxford in spite of parental objections, which are finally overcome. When she begins, the war breaks out and she suspends her studies after the first year.

Vera decides she can best serve the war effort by becoming a Red Cross nurse. Even though she finds the work disagreeable, she is not a quitter and perseveres. Her ambition to succeed causes her to be successful in whatever she does, including completion of her studies after the war.

After Somerville, Vera sets her mind to becoming a successful journalist and novelist. She and Winifred have to support themselves while writing their novels. They become successful lecturers and work for the League of Nations. Within several years of the completion of her studies, Vera has achieved the lifestyle that she wanted. She then has to make the decision regarding marriage.

Vera's ambition causes her to make the choices that she makes and to be successful in whatever she does. She is willing to do the hard work required to achieve her goals.

Self-Sacrifice

Another underlying theme of the book is that of self-sacrifice. This is to be expected since a major part of the book is about life during the war. Everyone sacrifices during periods of war but Vera's sacrifices go beyond most because of her decision to become a Red Cross nurse. She gives up her comfortable existence to live in almost intolerable conditions to work as a nurse. For the most part the living conditions are poor and there is very little privacy as she often shares a room with five other girls. She works long, hard hours exposing her to disease and infections. She serves at the front and risks her life traveling to Malta. At many points, Vera comments on how much she hated nursing and the conditions that she lived and worked in but she felt an obligation to do her part to help the war effort.

The theme of self sacrifice extends to others in the book. Edward and Roland postpone their studies at Oxford in favor of officers training. In the end, they sacrifice their lives in the war since they die in the fighting.

Self-Fulfillment

Self-fulfillment is another theme of the book. Vera has her own ideas about the kind of life she wants from her teens on. She does not want the life of a provincial wife and does not want to do many of the things that are expected of a girl of her class and circumstances. Vera wants an education and a career and she makes her desires known at an early age. She does not want to fit the mold and play the role that her society expects of her.

Vera's quest for self-fulfillment carries her through the war. She does what she feels is best even if it is unpleasant and dangerous for her. She wants to be an independent woman who makes her own decisions. This continues through her post-war studies at Somerville and in her choice of a career. She wants to be a writer and journalist, independent and self-supporting, and she does she has to do to achieve this goal.

For most of Vera's post-war life covered by the book, she deals with the independence versus marriage issue. When she has achieved the career and life style that she wanted, she meets G. She struggles with the possibility of marriage and what it will mean in terms of her life style and career. If she had not achieved the self-fulfillment she wanted, she would not have taken the chance of marriage.

Style

Perspective

The book is obviously written from Vera's perspective since it is her story and she is the author. She uses the first person point of view to tell her story as she sees things through her own eyes and relates them to the reader. The use of the first person point of view confines the reader to events that happen in the presence of Vera but since it is Vera's story, this is appropriate for the book. Vera is relating her own experiences, explaining the issues she struggled with and how she made her decisions based on her own needs and desires.

The use of the third person would not have had the same impact on the reader as it would have made the book more story-like. Usually, the use of the third person allows the narrator to fill in the details and the background for the reader. The reader does not lose any relevant information with the use of the first person here. There is plenty of correspondence and dialogue that provides the reader with information and background details. The reader learns of these things as Vera does.

The perspective of the book is appropriate for the book and makes it more realistic for the reader. It is Vera telling Vera's story and Vera's views and opinions are part of Vera's story.

Tone

The tone of the book is more or less subjective. Vera is telling her own story. She is factual with the facts as she knows them but she also tells of her own likes and dislikes. When she is working in France she is at first assigned to a ward of German prisoners. She does her job and tends to them while commenting to herself that these are the same Germans that killed Roland and are trying to kill her brother.

Vera makes her own views known throughout the book, as she should since it is her own story that she is relating. She is a believer in woman's suffrage and woman's rights before it is popular and is obviously not objective about what she sees as the role of women in the society of her time. This kind of objectivity would be out of place in a book of this kind.

The tone of the book is appropriate for the book. The author is telling her story and writing of her own experiences. Her choices and decisions are based on her own views and it is appropriate for her to express what those views are. She explains her reasons without trying to force the reader to agree with her.

Structure

The structure of the book is simple. There are three parts with a total of twelve chapters. Part One concludes with Roland's death. Part Two deals with the period between Roland's and Edward's deaths and Part Three concerns Vera's life in the post-war period. The book is written in chronological order even though there are references to events in different time periods.

There is quite a bit of quotation from poetry and other literature throughout the book. Each chapter begins with the quotation of a passage, many of them lengthy. These usually go along with the theme of the chapter and many of the quotes come from the correspondence between Vera and Roland and Edward and others. The reader can skip many of these passages without there being any effect on the story.

There are also passages in German, Latin, French and Greek. Some are translated, some are not. The passages may slow the reader down but are not necessary to the action of the book. Even though there are some sections that slow the reader down, the reader can easily skip these sections without losing the gist of the story.

The structure works well for this book. The divisions of the book are based on the divisions that occurred in Vera's life. Her life is different in each of the three parts.

Quotes

When the Great War broke out, it came to me not as a superlative tragedy, but as an interruption of the most exasperating kind to my personal plans. (Chapter 1, p. 17)

Balked of the minor alleviation, I returned again and again to the major attack; the desire for a more eventful existence and a less restricted horizon had become an obsession, and it never occurred to me to count on marriage as a possible road to freedom. (Chapter 2, p. 53)

"It is impossible," I concluded, "to find any satisfaction in the thought of 25,000 slaughtered Germans, left to mutilation and decay; the destruction of men as though beasts, whether they be English, French, German or anything else, seems a crime to the whole march of civilisation." (Chapter 3, p. 97)

Truly the War had made masochists of us all. (Chapter 4, p. 154)

There seemed to be nothing left in the world, for I felt that Roland had taken with him all my future and Edward all my past. (Chapter 4, p. 190)

The next morning I had just finished dressing, and was putting the final touches to the pastel-blue crepe-de-Chine blouse, when the expected message came to say that I was wanted on the telephone. Believing that I was at last to hear the voice for which I had waited for twenty four hours, I dashed joyously into the corridor. But the message was not from Roland but from Clare; it was not to say that he had arrived home that morning, but to tell me that he had died of wounds at a Casualty Clearing Station on December 23rd. (Chapter 5, p. 236)

For a moment I have become conscious of the old joy in rain washed skies and scuttling, fleecy clouds, when suddenly I remember—Roland is dead and I am not keeping faith with him; it is mean and cruel, even for a second, to feel glad to be alive. (Chapter 6, p. 241)

The memory of my sunlit months in the Mediterranean during the War's worst period of miserable stagnation still causes a strange nostalgia to descend upon my spirit. For me, as for all the world, the War was a tragedy and avast stupidity, a waste of youth and of time; it betrayed my faith, mocked my love, and irremediably spoilt my career—yet Malta remains in my recollection as an interval of heaven, a short year of glamorous beauty and delight, in which, for the time being, I came to life again after Roland's death. (Chapter 7, p. 290)

When Edward went back to France in the last week of June 1917, I did not go with him to Victoria, for I had come superstitiously to believe that a railway station farewell was fatal to the prospect of meeting again. (Chapter 8, p. 362)



For the first time I realised, with all that full realisation meant, how completely everything that had hitherto made up my life had vanished with Edward and Roland, with Victor and Geoffrey. The War was over; a new age was beginning; but the dead were dead and would never return. (Chapter 9, p. 463)

So, when the text of the Treaty of Versailles was published in May, after I had returned to Oxford, I deliberately refrained from reading it; I was beginning already to suspect that my generation had been deceived, its young courage cynically exploited, its idealism betrayed, and I did not want to know the details of that betrayal. (Chapter 10, p. 470)

But then, I reflected, I have only a personal and not an historical memory; the Germans didn't really mean to kill Roland or Victor or Geoffrey, but they did intend to hold on to Alsace-Lorraine. (Chapter 10, p. 532)

From the moment that the War ended I had always known, and my parents had always tolerantly taken for granted, that after three years at Oxford and four of wartime adventure, my return to a position of subservient dependence at home would be tolerable neither for them nor for me. They understood now that freedom, however uncomfortable, and self-support, however hard to achieve, were the only conditions in which a feminist of the War generation—and, indeed, a post-Victorian woman of any generation—could do her work and maintain self-respect. (Chapter 11, p. 536)

In any case, it was impossible to remain very long preoccupied with the effect of the War upon one's own position when the opportunity of changing the position of all women, whether superfluous or otherwise, was to be seized for the first time in history. (Chapter 11, p. 580)

To marry would be to dissociate myself from that past, for marriage inevitably brought with it a future; a new future of intimate relationships such as I once believed I had permanently renounced. (Chapter 12, p. 651)

Topics for Discussion

Vera comments several times that she viewed the outbreak of World War I as a personal interruption in her life. What did she mean by this and in what way was it true?

Why does Vera decide to suspend her studies at Somerville College? Why does she go into nursing? What are her reasons?

After Roland's death, Vera decides to leave nursing, and then changes her mind. Why? Why didn't she return to her studies at Somerville at this time?

Why does Vera leave Malta? What reason does she give to the Red Cross? Do they accept her reason?

Vera says that her life was divided into two parts. Why? What divided her life? Who or what were a part of each part?

Vera had some income from her father's business but not much. What occupation did she want to go into? How did she earn an income?

Vera had problems regarding her decision to marry. What were those problems? Was she realistic in her views?