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Time is Dead. What Next?
Age and Gender in Modernism

Relatore
Prof.ssa Maria Maddalena Parlati

Laureando
Ana Carolina Dias Forgiarini
n° matr.1221396 / LTLLM

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Abstract

This dissertation presents as its main objective the analysis of the relation between the concepts of age and gender in Modernist literature through the observation of two works written in this period, Rose Macaulay's *Dangerous Ages* (1921) and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933). The analysis of these concepts and their connection is done in hopes of illuminating the realities faced by women who fit into the Modernist movement and period, which cooperates to broadening the horizons of what Modernism was and what it stood for. Starting from the attempt to find a definition or, at least, a description of what Modernism was and what were its main historical influences, characteristics and collaborators, it was noted that this movement's description has been, for reasons which are often also related to age and gender, limited to rather exclusive - albeit relevant – social groups. However, when expanding the perception of what the elements which formed this movement were, it is possible to include new names and groups in it, particularly female authors who can also be considered "middlebrow" authors, which was the case for Macaulay and Brittain.

Considering that one of the examined works is a memoir and the other is a work of fiction, the intersections regarding gendered views on age between the two works can offer insightful observations on this topic, provoking questions surrounding not only the previously mentioned age and gender and their touching points, but how these issues may affect women in different stages of life in the context of Modernist society and literature. In order to explore these questions, there was not only historical research and research on the definition of Modernism through the works of authors such as Peter Childs and Leigh Wilson, but also studies on the two authors' personal lives through their biographies and studies on the topic – by Alice Crawford about Rose Macaulay, and by Paul Berry, Mark Bostridge and Vera Brittain herself on her life, respectively -, besides studies on feminism and ageism through the reading of works by researchers such as Katherine Woodward and Cynthia Port, amongst others.

After the phases of historical and cultural analysis of the period followed by a brief study of the authors' lives and the consideration of gender and age issues, the third chapter of this dissertation specifically compares *Dangerous Ages* (1921) and *Testament of Youth* (1933) through Modernist lenses while considering all the preparatory research, exposing several parallels between one work and the other when it comes to the issues at

hand, highlighting this period's characteristic biases towards the youth and what it represented for women who lived in those years, closely observing the reinforced limitations women faced due to the combination of sexism and ageism. Ultimately, however biased towards the youth, the previously mentioned combination some way or another affected all ages and understanding that collaborates to having a wider and better comprehension of what the needs of different groups and their struggles are inside the broad terms of Modern and Modernist Womanhood.

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Introduction

This dissertation focuses on the analysis of the intersection between age and gender in Modernist literature, having as primary sources one novel and one memoir: *Dangerous Ages* (1921) by author Rose Macaulay and *Testament of Youth* (1933) by Vera Brittain. The first is a novel telling the story of the Hilary family, particularly its women, following their struggles with the pressures that surround every stage of their lives. The second text, *Testament of Youth* (1933), recounts Brittain's life from her childhood until her marriage, going through college, the First World War and financial independence by working as a journalist and writer. Brittain describes her experience as a college student at Oxford and subsequently as a war nurse, not only exposing the harsh realities of the war, but also describing the real-life experience of a middle-class British young woman from the early twentieth century.

The dissertation starts with an attempt of describing – and not necessarily defining – what Modernism is, considering its main characteristics, when it was created and when – and if – it had an end, who were the main authors who were part of it and how it influenced and was simultaneously molded by the historical events of the time, such as Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*, Freud's psychoanalysis techniques and, of course, World War I. Considering the main events which impacted the movement, I move on to consider how this impact was reflected in the general population's perception of the concept of time and consequently of age, a shift that affected the relationship between different generations and was reflected on the social pressures and expectations put upon people according to their gender. Age and ageism, that is, "systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender" (Butler 1960 as cited by Calasanti 2005: 8), continue to be relevant topics to this day, and they become a particularly dense issue when coupled with other social, historical, cultural and political matters such as gender.

The first decades of the twentieth century also included new ways of thinking the spaces women could occupy and engage with, which was particularly the case for the figure of the woman-worker that became a strong point of discussion at the time. Still, the space women had in society at the time was rather limited, and this limitation became for many Modernists a defining characteristic of Modernism, which recognized itself in

stereotypically masculine elements and traits, such as the public sphere, rationality, and strength. Because of this frequent limitation, it is important to reevaluate the definitions of Modernism while also trying to find new perspectives from inside it, as is arguably the case of authors Rose Macaulay and Vera Brittain.

In the second chapter, I describe the main events of the two previously mentioned writers' lives and what their work's most important characteristics and influences are. Although both Macaulay and Brittain are usually categorized as simply "Middlebrow" authors, I argue that they can also be considered Modernist writers both because of the period in which they lived and because of the elements found in their work, such as fragmentation, polyvocality, focus on certain elements of the text instead of the plot, and others, all of which are staple elements of Modernism. After establishing the context, I analyze the authors' positions when it came to feminism and gender issues with the goal of better understanding their relationship to the changing world they were living in and their relationship with their writing.

The third chapter brings the direct comparison between the works *Dangerous Ages* (1921) and *Testament of Youth* (1933) through the process of analyzing each one of the phases of life which were identified in both books, and how each phase related to the reality of the women in the story. This comparison, when paired with the socio-historical context of the period, illustrates the biases and prejudices regarding age and gender from those decades, which leads to a broadening of our perception of what Modernism was and what it represented in the past. Ultimately, although fundamental for Modernism and still being a rather relevant concept, age, as is the case with gender, is based on social constructs and therefore it can be malleable. The books which I analyzed in this dissertation, then, not only describe the perception of the intersections between age and gender issues, but they document a transition towards a more open mentality regarding these subjects. By exposing the mentality of the time and of Modernists, considering books by female authors who are often erased from discussions around Modernism and including the perspective of more varied age groups in its description, I hoped to corroborate to the argument posed by academics such as Calasanti, Slevin and King, that expanding the points of view included in Modernism is not only enriching for the study of Modernism itself, but it also improves the discussion around other topics, such as age and gender (Calasanti et al. 2006: 24-25).

Chapter 1
Defining Modernism

As is the case for many other literary terms, "Modernism" is not easily definable. While some may consider it a mentality or style that transcends a specific historical period (Roper 2005: 169-170), others see it as a cultural movement which presents itself in a range of styles that reflect as well as explore certain themes and ideas which were deeply related to cultural and historical changes that were taking place in the late nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century. Topics such as identity and the analysis of the self, the perception of time, women's rights and social structures and their expectations are all examples of largely discussed themes in this period. "Modernism" can be defined as the cultural current which was first generated in the late nineteenth century, in the post-industrial modern society, whose definable trait is the result of the combination of factors that created this society, which can be called "Modernity". Its end is still debated and can be considered, as Childs mentions in *Modernism*: "as 1930, 1950, or yet to happen" (2000 : 14).

As Felski argued in 1995's *Gender of Modernity*, "one can be 'for' or 'against' modernity in a way that one cannot be for or against the Renaissance, for example. The symbolic force of the term lies in its enunciation of a process of differentiation, an act of separation from the past" (Felski 1995: 13). Although Modernist literature is generally associated with the 1920's due to the amount of renowned Modernist works which were published in that decade such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920*)*, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (both published in 1922), the origins of this movement - as we will call it here - arguably trace back to the *fin de siècle* writers of the 1890s (Childs 2000: 14), who reflected on their views and concerns about what the rapidly-changing Victorian society could lead to.

The rapid process of urbanization which took place in England in the nineteenth century highlighted the extreme social differences present in British society, causing discussions on topics such as Labor Laws and Women's Rights and therefore provoking turmoil in the established social order. That, combined with the new methods of transport and communication invented and made widespread in the early twentieth century such as the airplane and the radio, which created a sense of shortened distances and opened new horizons when it came to the access to more – and new – information, caused in the

general population both the feeling of new possibilities and the fear of unstoppable chaos (Wilson 2007: 9-10, 63).

Besides the fear of an inexorable chaos, in these years there started to be a fear of a hidden one as well: in 1900, Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) published his book *The Interpretation of Dreams,* which defended the argument that dreams are the result of repressed, hidden desires. This piece, along with other of Freud's works such as *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) were rather polemic – and highly discussed. Freud's texts were translated into English from 1915 on, and by the 1920s his theories were fairly known by British intellectuals (Childs 2000: 47-48). These theories not only challenged the Victorian ideals of purity because of the new idea that every individual had a part of themselves which was constituted of repressed feelings – in other words, everyone had things to hide-, but also created a sense of uncertainty regarding the concept of identity, which was not considered as something unitary gifted by God, but as a fragmented self, determined by experience.

It has been said earlier in this chapter that Modernism characteristically presents itself in many ways because it was a period of great experimentation when it came to the textual form. Two of the main formal revolutions of this movement, in fact, were the practice of the "stream of consciousness", highly influenced by the previously mentioned Freudian theories and used by authors of great relevance such as William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, and the experimentation with the timeline in stories, which allowed the authors to explore the possibilities that devices such as the analepsis – also known as "flashback" – and its opposite, the prolepsis, could offer to the story. Both of these textual instruments are profoundly related to the Anglo-French philosopher, Henri Bergson (1859-1941), who introduced in his original French text in 1889 the concept of "durée", a continuous, "internal" time, one that cannot be controlled or made external to one's existence, and that can only be thought of qualitatively and never quantitatively (Bradshaw 2008, 102-103). By using the stream of consciousness and by playing with the timeline – which was not necessarily a "line" anymore -, authors were reflecting this search for an "authentic" time in literature, a way of accurately representing the internally experienced time – like the one Bergson described - in the pages of a book.

Relativism is another main characteristic of the Modernist movement which grew in this period - profound questioning, whether that was related to social norms, religion or the Self, was constantly practiced mainly thanks to the appearance of new paradigms regarding, for example, gravity itself. In 1916 Albert Einstein (1879-1955) published his *General Theory of Relativity*, which changed the perspective on one which was considered an absolute truth, that is, the nature of gravity, which Einstein saw as a distortion of space (Wilson 2007: 60). Realistically, it is unlikely that most of England's population would have fully understood Einstein's theory, not only because it was related to a more "scientific" and academic world, but because even in those fields it was considered rather complex. Even so, it became an enormous topic of discussion because figuratively and, to some extent, literally, this new idea took the ground from people's feet – a "groundbreaking" theory, in every sense. Now, the universe and its rules were not as fixed and unchangeable as they had been thought to be. Quickly, then, Einstein's Relativity theories got reinterpreted by the general public as Relativism in less scientific spheres: the idea that nothing is certain, anything can be questioned, and there are no more absolutes. This favored literary experimentation as well as criticism towards historically established institutions such as the Church (or organized religion in general) and the traditional models of family, but also towards social constructs such as gender, class and age.

There was, of course, a major historical event that combined all previously mentioned cultural shifts, confirming some and expanding on others: the First World War (1914-1918), with its 750.000 deaths just in England (Winter, 2003, as cited in Wilson 2007: 40), reinforced not only the idea that the ground was being taken off people's feet, but that this ground was now "No Man's Land" – a place of incredible violence and unspeakable horrors. Time, in this period, was manically calculated by new technologies such as the clock in an endless search for precision and waste prevention. It was full of precise decisive moments which alternated with times of absolute emptiness that recalled Bergson's *durée* and the Greek words *chronos* and *kairos* (Smith 1969: 2), the first being a measurable, controllable, linear time and the second being a "perfect time", a moment which provides an opportunity that is unique and unrepeatable – in war, "*kairos*" could dictate whether one would die or survive. By comprehending the meaning of these

concepts it is easier to understand how influential their combination was to the shaping of the modernist mentality.

The Great War also created the sense of a gap between generations, firstly because of the idea of the "Lost Generation", represented by the young soldiers who had died in the war or that had been deeply traumatized by it, to the point they felt their lives were "over". In this sense, there was a literal "gap" between one generation and the other because an entire age group had been almost annihilated. Secondly, there was an emotional gap between these groups caused by the conviction that the war had been the older generations' fault, a problem that had been caused by them, but whose responsibility to solve was put on the younger generation's shoulders. This conviction led to a feeling of resentment which manifested itself in a rejection of the "old" – an example of that is the fact that Modernists such as Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis used the title "Les jeunes" ("the youngsters") when referring to themselves, a name which highlighted their pride for being young and further separated their generation from the older ones (Port 2006: 142).

This emotional gap could also be noted between genders, and as was the case for the generational issues, the tension between genders was not generated by the war but was expanded and made explicit by it. Of course, just like the resentment towards the elders, the one towards women had, at first, a very similar root – the older generations did not fight on the fronts, and neither did women. This difference between the groups, once combined with all the traumas the soldiers were submitted to at the front, quickly created a distance that was more than just physical between the soldiers and their female counterparts. In *Testament of Youth* (1933), which will be further analyzed in the following chapters, Vera Brittain mentions this tension through a passage from one of her fiancé Roland Leighton's letters: "I wonder if your metamorphosis has been as complete as my own[…]. You seem to me rather like a character in a book or someone whom one has dreamt of and never seen." (Brittain 1933: 216). In this excerpt the physical and emotional distance is evident and the unspoken conviction that the female partner will never truly understand the war experience is almost tangible.

This opposition between "fighter" and "observer" was problematic for a number of reasons, the main one being that it fed into the myth that women did not work at all before or during the war: when war broke out, almost a third of the women in Britain

were already working. The myth comes from the fact that most of the jobs women were accepted for were related to domestic labor, which was not considered "real work", mainly because women were considered naturally inclined to seek this type of labor (Pyecroft 1994: 699-700). It is true that in this period women had the opportunity to work in fields that had been previously exclusive to men, but the reality of the pre-war, non-working woman generally applied only to upper-middle-class cases.

Through work, particularly through nursing, women managed to get closer to the war they were reading and hearing about, although they were always put in a secondary role. Even though the war nursing experience was a fundamentally different one from the experience of being on the front, it was nonetheless a deeply shocking and traumatizing ordeal. Yet, women did not have the freedom to speak about what they had seen the same way men did, both because of their perpetual secondary role in the war as noncombatants – which seemed to delegitimize their experience – and because social expectations dictated what was acceptable for a woman to talk about or not. Here, then, is where we find an intersection between literature, especially war literature, written by women and Modernism: the persistent tension between the "seen", the "unseen" and the "unspeakable" often creates fragmentation of the subject and the object of their description, and the constant elusive language which avoids directly referring to specific elements frequently disrupts the coherent narrative (Acton 2004: 65-66), which are all key components of Modernist literature.

The difference between the resentment towards women and the one towards older generations starts showing when we think about the occupation of spaces and positions which were previously reserved for (young) adult men. In that sense, when it came to the older generations, it is safe to say they were considered burdens by many – they were people who did not produce anything necessary for the growing capitalist society which had been intensely developing since the Industrial Revolution, and not only did they not produce, but in many cases, they also needed to be taken care of. This mentality was one that had been growing since the end of the Victorian age and had been reinforced in the twentieth century through discussions caused by, for example, the approval of a pension bill in 1908, which, by virtue of its age-related nature, required a specific definition of what "old age" meant (Mangum 1999: 62).

By contrast, the (young) women, although always noncombatants, instead of burdens, were considered more of an uncomfortable presence, even a disrespectful one – as previously mentioned, they started occupying spaces they had not been allowed to until that point, but while for women that could mean a new world that was opening to them in which they could further develop their own independence, for many men in the fronts their presence there meant they would be unemployed after the war ended, besides, of course, challenging the idea that women needed men for their survival. In other words, women's shy further steps towards a more independent and liberated life – symbolized, although in a limited sense, by the enfranchisement of women over thirty in 1918 (Kent 1988: 232) – challenged the very definition of masculinity in the first half of the twentieth century.

Considering all that has been said so far about the fears and anxieties regarding gender and the elements which changed people's way of seeing certain aspects of society, it comes as no surprise that masculinity was a fundamental issue during those years. Although debates around gender in both social and biological terms were beginning to be had (Suárez 1997: 16) as well as discussions around realities that defied or transcended the binary, which can be exemplified by the questions raised about gender in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the general idea regarding gender was still very much limited to strict definitions of male and female. Partly because of that, after the war had ended, many men felt emasculated because some of the pillars of their masculinity had been shaken thanks to the results World War I brought by, such as the previously mentioned position of women in society, mutilation – which often made men feel "useless" and therefore unable to assume the role of the protector and breadwinner of the family, a role that was ideally assigned to men – and shellshock – which was often dismissed as "cowardice", a characteristic that went deeply against what the masculine ideal was about (Roper 2005: 343-344).

When discussing Modernism and its various definitions, it is easy to find the connections between this movement and the reinforced preoccupation with gender normativity, firstly because many of the main topics related to modernity and to Modernism such as speed, hardness (Lypka 2020: 3), and rationality were also topics commonly associated with Masculinity, as well as many of the symbols used in this period, such as the public sphere, the stranger or the dandy (Felski 1995: 16). Secondly,

from a more social and professional point of view, around the turn of the century, thanks to measures such as the Copyright Act from 1910, literature started to be considered a profession on its own, which meant it was out of reach – or should be out of reach – for women. An example of this turn towards a masculinization of literature can be found in the 1910's Academic Committee, an all-male group of writers – names such as Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats and Joseph Conrad were amongst them - who came together to debate the English literary canon (Childs 2000: 23). Much like it happened with the elders, women were, for various reasons, rejected and left aside from discussions about the Modern, and it was only in the 1970s that other female Modernist writers besides Virginia Woolf started to be researched and taught (Lypka 2020: 20).

It is safe to say, given all that has been considered so far, that Women and "the older generation", as groups, had many things in common in the Modernist period when it came to the way they were perceived and treated in society -most of these similarities, in fact, center around feelings of resentment, tension, and rejection. Taking the analysis of these affinities one step further, we can begin to observe what is at the basis of these feelings – that is, sexism, misogyny and ageism – and, most of all, what happens when these elements intersect.

While it can be argued that age, considered as the number of years one has lived on Earth, is an objective, quantifiable thing, age in the sense of 'phase of life' in which one is allowed certain things and is expected to act a certain way is, to a great extent, a social construct. As Simone de Beauvoir explains in her book *Coming of Age*, first published in English in 1970, while in nineteenth-century France and England accumulating age meant accumulating experience, which was considered a valuable good, in the twentieth century experience underwent a process of devaluation, being considered a symbol of obsolescence, in favor of an ever new (and therefore, young) mentality (Port 2006: 159-160). Indeed, observing Frederick Taylor's famous *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), which defended that every single moment in the production process should be "scrutinized" and "timed" with the objective of optimizing productivity (Wilson 2007: 65), it is possible to see how a slower – and rather often, older – body would not be able to keep up with the goal of maximum productivity in progressively reduced times, which made this type of body unfit for what was arguably the main element of modern society – work. Taylor's ideas regarding management

continue to be relevant even at the present day, but observing them in their original historical context helps with further understanding the mentality in vogue in that period.

When it comes to Freudian theories, considering that the Viennese doctor based many of his thoughts on the logic of sexual desire in the context of the goal of reproduction, women that had reached menopause were considered out of the system which formed individuals, which meant being a dysfunctional piece inside the most important of human processes – it meant, therefore, being invisible, if not useless (Woodward 1999: 150). This logic was particularly strong after World War I, when the birth rates were low (Clifton 2012: 156) and there was a need to "replace" the so-called "Lost Generation", so women who could not or did not want to have children were looked at with contempt for failing at their main social duty. The same exclusionary process happened to grandparents in Freudian theory, who had no fixed place in the generational struggle, since they did not generally represent parental figures and therefore did not participate in the parent-child struggle – this contributed to what Susan Sontag, in 1972, called "the double marginality experienced by women who are older" (Woodward 1999: XI-XXI), that is, not only did they have to face all the limitations and obstacles imposed on them for being women and had to deal with the invisibility of being old, but also had to manage the figure created by the intersection of these two categories, that of the "old woman", whose womanhood is not entirely analogous to that of her younger counterparts and whose experience of old age differs from the one experienced by men.

Another shift which took place after the Great War was the restriction of many of the liberties women had conquered during the international conflict. As Cynthia Port argues in *"Ages Are the Stuff!": The Traffic in Ages in Interwar Britain,* these restrictions "caused a sense of loss over time (…), but these psychological costs are often disguised behind what is feared and mourned as the "loss" of youth" (2006: 139). Coincidentally or not, as Port argues, the amount of time and energy which was then required that women would dedicate to keeping themselves "young" was one that could have been used to fight for their lost liberties – the obsession with youth, then, can be seen as both a spontaneous and organic phenomenon related to modernity and as a means of controlling women.

The idealization of the young woman, however, was not exclusive to those who calculated women's worth based on their fertility or parental role. The previously mentioned idea of the modern age as constant progress and the association of progress

with the "new" and the "young", having as a reaction the automatic rejection of everything that was old as necessarily obsolete, is also related to the feminist movement of that period, particularly when it came to the figure of the "New Woman", who, in all her progressiveness, was usually thought of as young and in opposition to the outdated Victorian-age (old) woman (Clifton 2012: 154-155). Ageism, then, as it was defined in the 1960's by Robert Butler, that is, the "systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender" (Calasanti 2005: 8) with "systematic" being a keyword, was not only present, but it was (and arguably, still is) pervasive in society.

Even though sexism and ageism in the modern era was a pervasive and systematic reality, that does not mean that everyone who lived in that period agreed with those ideas. When it comes to feminism and women's issues it is not hard to find a long list of names of people who made history in this movement – the Pankhurst sisters are an example of life-long fighting for women's enfranchisement – and, although less highlighted, it is also possible to find greatly important names who defied the strength of ageist logic in Modern – and Modernist – mentality. An instance of this transitional mentality which was beginning to question this reality came from a "youngster", Wyndham Lewis, who criticized what he called a "youth cult" from the 1920's, exemplified in his view by the success of the book *Peter Pan* (1911), by J.M. Barrie. However, while recognizing the problematic nature of idolizing youth to the detriment of growing old, Lewis still considered idolizing youth a natural thing for women to do, whereas he considered it a perversion for men (Port 2006: 143).

When it comes to authors and thinkers who combined their challenging of sexism with their questioning of ageism, examples can be found in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936) and Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1937), but the list is not limited to them. In fact, two pieces which greatly represent these struggles are Rose Macaulay's *Dangerous Ages* (1921), which offers a beautiful analysis of gendered anxieties centered around age and how they affect the relationship between different generations, and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933), which allows the readers to observe how the perception of age changed in those years from an individual point of view. These authors, along with other names of the same period, represented a part of Modernism which was

socially engaged and contributed to the discussions around womanhood as well as the view of age beyond the binary old/young.

Chapter 2

Macaulay and Brittain: female Modernist perspectives

In order to further analyze the previously mentioned relevance of Rose Macaulay and Vera Brittain, it would be wisest to deepen our knowledge regarding who these women were, what their main influences were and what were the main characteristics of their works. Upon establishing these elements, it becomes easier to comprehend the position occupied by their works within the literary currents of their time of publication as well as the authors' personal opinions, experiences and inclinations, through which it is possible to expand the general perception of what Modernism encompassed.

Rose Macaulay, the second daughter of Grace Mary Conybeare and George Macaulay, was born in 1881, in Rugby, England. From an early age, Rose was in close contact with highly intellectual environments and had access to great literary works, mainly thanks to her father's job as a professor – first in Rugby, then at the University College of Wales, then at Cambridge – and her mother's interest for literature and poetry, which can be exemplified by Grace's 1880's diary entry, which attests she was working on a translation of Victor Hugo at the time. Rose's family tradition in academia was not limited to her parents, though. In fact, many of her relatives were important intellectuals, such as her great-grandfather, Aulay Macaulay (1758-1819), who had been Queen Caroline's tutor (Crawford 1990 :13).

When Rose was six years old, the Macaulays moved to Varazze, Italy, in hopes that the new place could help improve Grace Macaulay's health. The family stayed there until 1894, and when they returned to England, Rose began attending the Oxford High School for Girls. This was for many reasons a reality change that shocked both Rose and her sister Jean, for they were not used to many of the behaviors which were expected from English girls of their class, and the adaptation to a whole new scenery and pace was not easy. Rose Macaulay perceived those days in Varazze as her own personal "Golden Age", to the extent that she even wrote poems about her time there – the two main examples being *The Sea*, her first published poem, and *Lament for Varazze,* both of which were written during her Oxford High School days (Crawford 1990 :14, 43).

These poems are the result of years of having intense daily contact with literature. Besides the presence of the parental figures, which in itself inspired a love for literature

given their professions and interests, their influence was also intentional: in a diary entry from 1887, Grace Macaulay records that she had been reading much to the children, explaining that she had the habit of going through simpler and lighter stories with them when they were all together, and that she would then introduce more complex pieces to the older kids as soon as the younger ones went to bed. At eight years old, Mr. Macaulay gifted Rose with a copy of the complete works of Tennyson, which she later claimed to know almost by heart (Crawford 1990 :26-31) – clearly the interest in the written word was not only present in the Macaulay household, but it was also actively encouraged.

All the contact with books and the frequent daydreaming Macaulay confessed herself to engage with as a child developed in Rose a fascination with Mysticism, which can be found in her works, especially her poetry, and which she perceives as an "attainment of a state of perfection" (Crawford 1990: 34). To Rose, Mysticism goes beyond a loosely defined term – she seemed to know much about the subject, and although it is not fully clear where or whom she learned it from, it is plausible that she got her knowledge from the rather popular pieces on the topic which were being published in the first years of the twentieth century, such as W. R. Inge's *Studies of English Mystics* (1906) or R.H. Benson's *Mysticism* (1907), both authors who, amongst others, were cited in Macaulay's letters written in the 1950s (Crawford 1990: 35). Although admitting to daydreaming, Rose Macaulay never explicitly talked about any mystic experience she might have gone through herself. She did, however, often experiment with the idea of reaching an almost-transcendent goal in her writing, of working towards something which aspires to absolute perfection (Crawford 1990: 37).

According to Alice Crawford, author of *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole: Pattern and Quest in the novels of Rose Macaulay* (1990), two names are fundamental to Rose's works, particularly in her first phase, and these were Walter de la Mare and Rupert Brooke. She was introduced to de la Mare around the 1910's, and he seemed as intrigued as she was by the idea of the existence of different realms and by the concept of the possible "closed doors" that might exist between them. While Walter de la Mare shared Rose's interest for mysticism, Rupert Brooke seemed to have influenced Macaulay's prominent symbolism, and more than that, the very symbols she used in her writings.

Brooke and Macaulay met through their families, who had known each other since their time at Rugby, given that both Rose's and Rupert's fathers worked as professors

there. It is unclear just how close their relationship was, because although Rupert seems to recall many memories involving Rose in his letters, Rose, on the other hand, seems to remember very little about him. Even so, in Rose's works it is possible to find symbols similar to those used by Rupert, such as roses and, most relevantly, paths which lead to an ineffable goal, something that would be further developed in Macaulay's later works. Besides Brooke, another crucial name for Rose's symbolism was W.B. Yeats, although he had a different type of influence on the author. In fact, while Rupert influenced general concepts which Rose later worked on, Yeats can be said to have been fully metabolized by Macaulay, in the sense that she was not only inspired by "what" he used as a symbol, but also by "how" the choice of this symbolism took place. For Macaulay, as well as for Yeats, no symbol was used by accident (Crawford 1990: 48-56).

It is important to investigate Rose Macaulay's poetry before analyzing her prose because the former works as the basis for the latter, as well as a reflection of it. Rose began writing verse before she started her prose, so it is possible to recognize many of her first influences there, but later, with her prose work surpassing her verse in terms of quantity, her poetry may work as a way of unveiling some aspects of the other form. The main topic that can be identified right from the beginning of Rose's poetry and that can also be found throughout her career both in verse and in prose is the topic of the "quest", which, although coming from her earlier mystic interests, is not necessarily used by her in a spiritual sense – even though they can be considered philosophical and even existential. One example of that is *Dangerous Ages* (1921), which will be further analyzed in the next chapter, in which the concept of "the quest" can be found in and exemplified by a mother's trip to Rome in hopes of helping her daughter find her way in life. Here, the quest is neither spiritual nor transcendental, but it is an experience which highlights the complexity of mother-daughter relationships and how women can identify in and thanks to those relationships.

As has been alluded to in the previous paragraphs, Rose Macaulay's work can be divided into different phases according to her interests and environment at each given moment. For the purpose of this thesis, I will concentrate on the decade of 1921-1931, in which Rose wrote those which were arguably her best novels. The publication of her novel *Potterism* in 1920 as well as the inheritance her uncle left her upon his passing in 1937 allowed her to have considerable financial stability, favoring her emergence as a

"professional" writer (Crawford 1990: 175). In this period, she was also particularly connected to Gerald O'Donovan, the publisher who was responsible for Macaulay's publications with Collins. The two often spent holidays together in various countries in Europe, and the importance of his presence in her life was not only connected to the publications of her works but it was also associated with the content of her work itself.

Gerald O'Donovan was a married man and a former priest, and Rose and he had a twenty-year-long relationship. Although there are not many known details about their affair, mostly due to their discreetness about it, it is possible to see some elements in Macaulay's personal and professional life which could have had their origin in it, such as Rose's complicated relationship with her stances regarding women and women's issues. Before 1918, the year when the couple met, anti-feminist sentiments were nowhere to be found in Macaulay's works. However, although her novels tend to have remarkably independent and emancipated women, some of her journalistic works of the period reflect a rather antagonistic view of her own gender, going as far as stating in The Nation, in 1931, that "the bulk of women are, and have always been, even more ignorant than the bulk of men" (Crawford 1990: 207-208). Notably, O'Donovan seemed to believe in the superiority of masculinity, and as Constance Babbington Smith shares from Marjorie Grant Cook's recollection, O'Donovan even stated that he found it attractive that Rose had "a brain like a man's" (Crawford 1990: 209).

The dichotomy between Macaulay's literary feminist-leaning writings and her sometimes outright misogynistic journalistic work lasted many years, a period which practically coincides with the years of her relationship with O'Donovan. In fact, after O'Donovan's death in 1941 following a battle against cancer, Macaulay wrote and published works such as *The World my Wilderness* (1950) and *The Towers of Trebizond* (1956). The former presented a sense of chaos that could be representative of Macaulay's state of mind in those years, considering both the end of the Second World War and O'Donovan's passing. Her partner's death not only provoked in her a sense of grief, but also a rediscovery of many elements of her own life which had been left behind because of their relationship, one of them being the issue of religion – Macaulay decided to leave the Anglican church because of the former priest, and after his passing she went back to her original faith (Crawford 1990: 318). Moreover, *The Towers of Trebizond* (1956), her last novel, presents the story of Laurie, a woman in an adulterous affair who has the

opportunity to rediscover her own faith and must decide between that or her lover – the parallels with Macaulay's personal life are rather explicit. Considering these parallels alongside the previously mentioned statement by Gerald and the fact that before 1918 Macaulay's work did not present any anti-feminist sentiment, it is possible to argue that the ambiguous stand she adopted towards feminism in those years was connected to her relationship to the former priest. If Macaulay's religious beliefs were deeply influenced by that affair, it would not be exaggerated to argue that her positions regarding women and women's issues could have been molded by the same relationship.

However, feminism was not the only movement which Rose Macaulay had a complicated - and almost paradoxical – relationship with. Modernism was also a movement and a community in which Rose did not seem to quite fit in, in her lifetime, which might be connected not only to the structural formation of the movement itself, but also to the people in it. The former can be explained by going back to the foundations of Modernism: although this movement was deeply connected to the idea of deconstructing "old" and obsolete models, whether that would be through the text's literal form or through its content, it was also, as argued in the previous chapter, strongly associated with masculinity, besides being related to very specific – even exclusive – groups. That means that for decades not only Macaulay, but many other female authors of the period were left out of the conversation when the subject was Modernism, leading to a reinforcement of the idea that Modernism was a masculine movement, except for the almost tokenized figures of Virginia Woolf, in British Modernism, and Gertrude Stein in the North-American one (Suárez 1997: 21).

Considering the frequent exclusion of women writers from the Modernist canon due to the movement's association with an idea of masculinity, it could be argued that many women writers of this time who could have been considered Modernist writers were put instead into different categories which were seen as more appropriate for them. One of the categories many women writers were put in was, for instance, the "Middlebrow" one, as was the case for Rose Macaulay, as Melissa Sullivan explains in *A Middlebrow Commander: Rose Macaulay, the 'Intellectual Aristocracy' and The Towers of Trebizond:*

> While her birth, education, and books on history, literary criticism, and travel earned her praise as a respectable author, the best-selling novels, popular journalism, and lively essay collections that formed most of her prolific literary output positioned her as more of a 'middlebrow' writer in the literary public sphere.

(Sullivan 2012: 168)

Middlebrow literature had already existed before Modernism and it was a general category which included literary works that were not highly intellectual nor completely aligned with popular culture. According to Ann Ardis, though, it was from the 1920s on that this term was coined and that this niche was strategically disparaged by elite intellectuals who believed in the superiority of a "Highbrow" literature, which was generally associated with complexity and exclusivity and defined by its distance from commercial (Middlebrow) literature (Sullivan 2012 :168-169). Macaulay was often put in this category because, as a person as well as a writer, she found herself on a middle ground: her novels were fairly easy to comprehend and talked about common, "regular" people while they also included multi-faceted, interesting characters and, structurally, presented a loose plot which was more focused on the inner developments of the characters and on the prose than on telling a story with a conventional beginning, middle and end. Similarly, from a more personal perspective, she came from a highly intellectual family and appreciated very complex literature from a young age, which created certain expectations that she broke by participating in mass-culture such as radio programs and journalism. Rose Macaulay never actually used the term "middlebrow" to define herself or her work, yet she did not aspire to be a "highbrow" author or scholar as was often expected from her given her origins and abilities (Sullivan 2012: 171).

It could also be argued that many women writers had to adapt their writings to something more palatable to the masses so that their work could be accepted and published in order to generate enough profit to maintain them financially, considering the hardships of being a woman-worker, let alone a female artist, in that period. This could be one of the reasons why Macaulay decided to stay in this literary sphere throughout her career, besides the – highly probable – argument that she would thus have had enough space to express different sides of herself, which would not necessarily be the case had she chosen to move to a more exclusive, highbrow sphere, because although being part

of the elite meant having prestige, it could also mean being constrained to stay within certain limits in order to appease said exclusive groups. In a way, then, being "middlebrow" could mean having the opportunity to be more flexible regarding her writing (Sullivan 2012 : 171-172). However, being considered middlebrow does not exclude one from being considered a Modernist – the former is connected to the accessibility and target-audience of the piece, while the latter is, as was observed in the first chapter of this dissertation, related to form, type of approach to the text, subject and mentality behind the writing work. This means that, middlebrow or not, an author like Rose Macaulay could be considered a type of Modernist author, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

I have already expanded on a few aspects of Macaulay's writing style, such as her symbolism and her interest in mysticism which eventually translated itself into a fascination for and a repetition of the trope of the quest. By further analyzing her work, it is also possible to find several staples of Modernist literature, such as fragmentary layers involving history and varied cultural and religious communities - which could arguably recall the works of renowned Modernists such as T.S. Eliot (Sullivan 2012: 178) -, as can be found in the already mentioned *Towers of Trebizond,* a novel which describes a missionary journey in Turkey which includes travelling to the Russian border, to Venice and to London in a quest to resolve religious and romantic dilemmas. Another Modernist element that could be mentioned is the secondary position the plot has when compared to other elements of the text (Guerinot 1987: 110); two examples of said elements are the development of the characters' internal struggles and the attention put into the prose itself, which is written in such a way that renders the text concise while still heavy with meaning. For instance, in the opening scene in *Dangerous Ages* (1921), Macaulay describes the awakening of Neville on her forty-third birthday, when the character begins to feel the weight of getting old as a woman in the 1920s:

> Neville, at five o'clock (nature's time, not man's) on the morning of her birthday, woke from the dream-broken sleep of summer dawns, hot with the burden of two sheets and a blanket, roused by the multitudinous silver calling of a world full of birds.
> (Macaulay 1921: 3)

The first noticeable element heavy with meaning in this short passage is the clarification that time, in this case, is "nature's time, not man's", implying there is a

difference between what society considers as time and what actual, natural time is. Then, taking into consideration that Macaulay had been deeply influenced by symbolism in her youth, it is possible to assume that "hot with the burden of two sheets and a blanket" is a symbol for Neville's family, whom she loves, but who is also the reason why she was not able to follow her dream of becoming a doctor. The two sheets could be seen as her two children, while the blanket, which is relevantly heavier, could be interpreted as her husband Rodney. As Crawford also defends when talking about the same scene: "the whole sequence is studded with carefully placed images" (1990: 185).

Other components of Rose Macaulay's writing which could be considered modernist are her fascination with androgynous characters or characters that did not necessarily fit into the boxes that were assigned to specific genders or that struggled and defied those boxes (Crawford 1990:211), therefore questioning one of the main pillars of traditional society; her sarcasm, cynicism and skepticism regarding said pillars or other societal conventions; and finally, the fact itself that Rose Macaulay, considering all these characteristics (and more), still cannot be fully identified with any limited definition, which is, arguably, a very Modernist characteristic.

Besides strictly formal elements, one could argue that Macaulay could also be connected to the Modernist movement because of her personal social circles – and the possible influence she had over some individuals in them. While she never actually got into the famous Bloomsbury Group, she did get quite close to important Modernist figures – from 1918 to 1922, Rose Macaulay lived in the house of Naomi Royde-Smith, who at the time was a friend and a mentor. Smith was a rather influential subject, and her weekly gatherings called "Naomi's Thursday's" were a big success, giving Macaulay the opportunity to get to know acclaimed individuals such as W.B. Yeats and Aldous Huxley. After moving out of Smith's flat in 1922, Rose Macaulay's social life did not stagnate: at Sylvia Lynd's "Fridays", the author from Rugby started friendships with names such as E.M. Forster, Elizabeth Bowen, James Joyce, and even Virginia Woolf – with whom she had a complicated relationship (Crawford 1990: 18).

It would be hard to define Woolf's and Macaulay's relationship as "friendship", but it would be an exaggeration to call it enmity – there was, however, a sort of resistance between the two, coming more intensely from Virginia Woolf, which could be broken down to simultaneous feelings of admiration and competitivity. It was not uncommon

that, in her private letters to friends and family, Woolf would refer to Rose Macaulay using words such as "sexless", "hard-headed" and "don" (used pejoratively, referring to Macaulay's family history of scholarship and to her own intellectual persona). However, it was not only Macaulay's personality that Woolf criticized, but also how – and where - the other author decided to work: not only did she not approve of Rose's journalistic work, but she did not understand why she should "take the field so unnecessarily" (Woolf 1926, edited by Anne Olivier Bell, as cited by Fromm 1986 : 296-297).

In 1928, however, once Woolf had won the Prix Femina for her novel *To the Lighthouse* – a prize Rose Macaulay had won more than a decade earlier for Dangerous Ages, in 1922 -, she finally admitted, albeit privately, in her diary, that there was a feeling of jealousy between the two of them, and that it was not one-sided. This admittance opens a door that has not been widely explored by many literary critics who deal with Virginia Woolf; that is, that she might have been influenced by a contemporary author, and that this author could have been Rose Macaulay – a theory that is also supported by the argument of the striking prose similarities between Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Macaulay's *Told by An Idiot* (1923), as can be attested in the scenes which describe the end of the nineteenth century in *Orlando*'s Chapter 4 and *Told by An Idiot*'s part 2 (1986 : 298-299):

> As the ninth, tenth and eleventh strokes struck, a huge blackness sprawled over the whole of London. With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth Century was over; the Nineteenth Century had begun.
>
> (Woolf, 1928)

> Meanwhile the most august representative of the Victorian age hovered wearily between her own century and this strange new one, peering blindly down the coming road as into a grave. It did not belong to her, the new century. She had had her day. A few days of the new young era, and she would slip into the night, giving place to the rough young forces knocking at the door.
> The great Victorian century was dead.
>
> (Macaulay, 1923)

Although Virginia Woolf is probably the most famous amongst the relevant authors Rose Macaulay might have influenced, she was most certainly not the only one. In fact, there is another important writer who not only explicitly admired Macaulay, but

who later in her career was directly helped by the object of her admiration – Vera Brittain, author of poetry, novels, memoirs and more, and arguably the most important voice in the narration of the female experience of the First World War in England. In *Testament of Youth* (1933), regarding meeting Macaulay and other authors of the time, she states that "it was too wonderful, too incredible actually to stand within speaking distance of these Olympian presences" (Brittain 1933: 545).

Vera Brittain was born in 1893 in northern England. Her father, and later in life Vera herself, albeit partly, owned a paper mill in the Potteries – at Staffordshire - which had belonged to the family for three generations when Vera was born. Given that hers was a family of business owners or, in her own words, "capitalists" (Brittain 1933: 19), Vera Brittain's later membership to the Labor Party came as a surprise to her father, who used to pride himself in never having had a "Trade Union man on the place" (Brittain 1933: 19). Vera's mother, on the other hand, was the descendant of a financially struggling family of musicians who lived off the father's work as a music teacher – in fact, Vera Brittain's parents met thanks to said lessons, and their difference in social rank had been a point of tension since the beginning of their relationship, while to Vera it represented one of her first topics of personal analysis and questioning.

While describing her childhood, Brittain states that her first years were peaceful and uneventful, and that she only began distinguishing real-life facts from fairy tales around 1899, when the South African War broke out. Two years later, another historical event which made an impression on young Vera was the death of Queen Victoria, that also determined the beginning of the historical period which would be the setting of Vera Brittain's childhood and first adolescence – the Edwardian Era.

The Brittain household was not particularly interested in literature, so Vera's first literary experiences were with children's books she got as gifts for Christmas, then later on the so-called "yellow-back novels" (Brittain 1933 : 26), that is, affordable, "lowbrow" literature, written by authors such as Wilkie Collins. As was the case for Rose Macaulay, also in the Brittain household their mother would read for the children, although in their case it would only happen on Sundays, and the experience did not leave a very positive impression on Vera, who appointed those Sundays as the reason why she was never able to truly enjoy Charles Dickens's works. It was around this period, when Vera was eleven

years old, that she started writing her own stories on paper that came from her family's mill.

From then on Brittain's interest in reading, writing and learning set her apart from the people around her, a difference which was intensified when she was sent to St. Monica's school, in Surrey. There, she got in touch with vastly different financial and social realities, and she quickly realized that her biggest dream was, opposite to her classmates at school, not to get married as soon as possible, but to go to college. This idea remained in Vera Brittain's mind, but she did not seem to be able to convince her parents of letting her try to get into Oxford until in 1913, when a lawyer and family friend visited them and made an impression on the Brittain's by not seeming to be alarmed by the idea of having a daughter in college. That dinner was the beginning of Vera Brittain's arduous fight to get into Oxford – arduous both because it went far beyond what was expected of young girls in the reality she had been raised in, and because, as a result, the formal education she had received had not fully prepared her for the type and amount of academic work she would have to face at Oxford. In the end, Vera did pass the required papers and was admitted into Sommerville College at Oxford, but the year was 1914, and two other important events happened which would change her life forever: her first meeting with her future fiancé Roland Leighton and the start of World War I.

Vera continued her studies at Sommerville, where she met that who was later to become a lifelong friend, author Winifred Holtby. However, on June 27th, 1915, after having passed all the examinations of that semester, Vera Brittain left college to start working as a war nurse at the Devonshire Hospital. Her most famous book, *Testament of Youth* (1933), which I will discuss in the following chapter, is the account of her experiences immediately prior to, during and after the war, until 1925, but it is not her only work on the subject nor is it the only one deeply connected to her personal experiences – her other main publications all come from personal occurrences, even when they are fiction. In *Verses of a V.A.D.* (1918), her collection of war poems, she covers subjects such as melancholy, grief and the ineffable. She later criticized her own poems in *Testament of Youth* and yet, in the latter, it is possible to find some verses from the 1918 publication which illustrate the aforementioned subjects:

> I walk in ways where pain and sorrow dwell,
> And ruin such as only War can bring,

<div align="center">
Where each lives through his individual hell,
Fraught with remembered horror none can tell,
And no more is there glory in the spring.

(1933: 269)
</div>

Vera Brittain published twenty-nine books, apart from an abundant production of articles for newspapers such as The Nation (Rintala 1984: 23) but she only wrote 5 novels, all of which include themes that were highly relevant for their time and that allow readers to get a glimpse into how Brittain herself saw those issues. Her first published novel, *The Dark Tide* (1923), following the pattern mentioned in the previous chapter, also contained elements which she retrieved from her own life. The story revolves around two former Oxford female students and deals with the idea of the deterioration of relationships and marriage through the domination of the male partner over the female one, and the sense of entrapment a woman could feel when finding herself in such a situation, while also exposing the exaggerated restrictions imposed upon women students at Oxford in the 1920s (Mellown 1983: 216-217). It took Vera countless tries with numerous London publishers to manage to get the book published, and in this process she could count on the help of Rose Macaulay herself, who offered advice both regarding Brittain's writing as well as regarding the publishing world. When the book did get published, in 1923, by Mr. Grant Richards, it was highly criticized for its subject and the approach to it, and Vera claimed to having received letters from rather offended Oxford dons who recognized themselves in that story and assumed the novel was about them (Brittain 1933: 601).

After the publication of her second novel, *Not without Honor* (1924), which did not have great commercial success, Brittain took some time off from novels and dedicated herself to journalism and biographical as well as autobiographical work. It was in 1936 that she returned to publishing novels, coming back with her most ambitious one yet, *Honourable Estate*. This work covers the story of two families, the Rutherstons and the Alleyndenes, from 1894 to 1930, up until the point in which their children meet and develop the first healthy and balanced relationship of the two families. The book ends with Ruth Alleyndene being elected as a member of parliament as part of the Labor Party. Again, this is a work in which it is possible to find numerous elements that came from Vera's personal experience - the two families were based on hers and her husband George Catlin's family and the main character, who in many ways could be interpreted as an idealized version of Vera Brittain, decides to marry the son of the Rutherston family after

struggling with the grieving of her late lover, exactly as what had happened to the author of the book. However, those are not the only personal contributions to the book – in it, Brittain also makes some of her opinions regarding marriage, sex, women's rights, politics, and others quite explicit.

In order to understand Vera Brittain's positions as a feminist and to comprehend the importance of having her write about such topics in her novel, it is best to start by knowing the changes caused by the war in what we now call the feminist movement. As Kent explains in *The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War I and the Demise of British Feminism* (1988), in pre-war times, feminists described gender inequality through the metaphor of the "war of the sexes", a war that was ultimately generated through social constructs that formed individuals with the goal of making them fit into one specific gender, which was then put in opposition to the other. What pre-war feminists aimed at, then, was to create a society in which the positive characteristics which were ascribed to one gender or the other could be made universal, that is, no longer belonging to a specific sex or gender – in this period the two were often used as synonyms - but shared by men and women alike. On the other hand, pre-war anti-feminists also believed in a tension between genders, but as opposed to feminists, they believed certain characteristics were biologically ascribed to men and women – consequently, whereas feminists thought that, for example, men needed to be raised differently so they would not be violent towards women, anti-feminists believed women should find ways to defend themselves against the natural, inevitable violence men would bring upon them (Kent 1988: 233).

During and after the war, then, with the further separation between men and women that this event brought by, there was a shift in many currents of feminist thought. First, the war metaphor used before felt out of place given the historical moment; second, since war was so heavily associated with traditionally masculine traits and so often rejected or dismissed feminine ones, many feminists started believing in the existence of separate spheres when it came to gender, abandoning then the idea of common qualities and focusing instead on an idea of complementarity between sexes (Kent 1988 : 233-234), "sex" and "gender" being considered as synonyms in this period, two different words to indicate both biological sex and socially constructed gender, which was then considered part of the binary man-woman. Here, then, post-war feminists recall pre-war anti-feminists, also because the idea of complementarity reinforced certain gender roles,

such as the woman as primarily a caregiver and as having the responsibility of bearing children, which put many feminists of the time against, amongst other things, contraceptive methods.

Brittain, like her friend Winifred Holtby, was against this so-called "new feminist" (Kent 1988: 239) view which was obsessed with fertility and reduced women's lives to their reproductive functions, which, in Vera Brittain's words, "immediately removes them from the category of human being" (Brittain, June 1928, as cited by Kent 1988: 244). In a time when the topics of abortion and contraception were even more polemic than they are nowadays, then, Vera Brittain presented in her novel women who did not desire children and actively tried to get through with an abortion and who were able to engage in consensual sexual activity thanks to the access they had to the contraceptive pill (Mellown 1983: 218-220), presenting, therefore, women who had – or were fighting for – agency over their own bodies and who defied not only pre-war anti-feminist ideals, but some post-war feminist ones as well.

Although clear in her novels, Vera Brittain's opinions regarding subjects like feminism become quite explicit in *Testament of Youth* (1933). In this memoir, which was followed by *Testament of Friendship* (1940), about Vera Brittain's friendship with Winifred Holtby, and *Testament of Experience* (1957), which deals with Brittain's life from 1925 to 1950, the author tries to describe the indissolubility of her own life experience with that of World War I. She offered several different reasons why she had chosen to write this book in the way it was written, covering the topics that had been chosen for it: she claimed it had been part of her process of metabolizing and finding inner peace regarding what she had been through, she admitted to carefully reading and analyzing the work of other First World War writers such as Sassoon and asking herself if – and why – her story was not as interesting as theirs (Joannou 1993: 50), and, perhaps more relevantly, she wanted to talk about people like herself, whose story she knew too well. However, Vera Brittain never claimed to be absolute in her memoir, that is, she never claimed that her story was all-encompassing and comprehensive; what she stated she could do with it was, in fact, telling a story about that war through the use of personal elements, which she concluded was the only possible way of doing it:

> I wanted to give too, if I could, an impression of the changes which
> that period brought about in the minds and lives of very different groups of

> individuals belonging to the large section of middle-class society from
> which my own family comes.
>
> > Only, I felt, by some such attempt to write history in terms of
> > personal life could I rescue something that might be of value, some element
> > of truth and hope and usefulness, from the smashing up of my own youth
> > by the War.
>
> (Brittain 1933 : 11)

Of course, the issue of a memoir which simultaneously deals with a historical event that killed and traumatized millions of people naturally reveals a tension between the concepts of uniqueness and representativeness (Badenhousen 2003: 431) – it poses the question as to how such a personal experience could ever claim to be representative, and yet, given the dimension of the historical event, its deep entanglement with the personal experience, and the wide identification of readers with this personal story, it is difficult to fathom how it cannot be. This question does not, of course, have one correct answer. Still, *Testament of Youth* is a work which asks precisely that, and the fact that it is a book that still causes audiences to ask questions is one of the elements which make it such an influential one.

The question of uniqueness vs. representativeness, which can also be seen as an opposition between the personal experience vs. the collective experience, is closely related to the issues of trauma and the legitimation of it. First, traumatic experiences such as the war are notably difficult to process; that, combined with the fact that the account of a traumatic experience is necessarily retrospective make it so that this type of account becomes a rather challenging narration to make because it rarely presents itself in a concise manner, which pushes the traumatized person to often search for the stability they need in external elements, such as historical events. Second, as discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, women's experiences with the war were often delegitimized on the basis that women were non-combatants, which then favored authors like Vera Brittain to connect their story not only to important historical facts but also to recognizable names as a way of claiming their legitimacy, something Brittain does often by quoting well-established and renowned writers such as William Wordsworth, which helps with associating her name with the literary canon, or citing war-poets such as Rupert Brooke, which on the other hand helps with creating a connection between her accounts on the war and those made by relevant – and, being a war poet, automatically legitimate - names (Badenhousen 2003 : 438).

Besides quoting renowned authors and thinkers, Brittain also often quotes letters, poems and songs written by her fiancé, her friends and her family, a feature that could be defined as polyvocality and that is very much aligned with the simultaneous sensations of linearity and fragmentation that readers have when reading *Testament of Youth*. As Jane Marcus said, fragmentation is one of the main characteristics of women's writings about World War I (Marcus 1989, as cited by Acton 2004: 54), exactly because the topic they are talking about is in itself a fragmented one, besides the inherent fragmentation of the woman's experience in this war – one that presents a constant tension between being both observer and participant (Acton 2004: 57), between war-related work and the expectations assigned to women in the domestic sphere, between offering a service to their community and seeing things which were considered improper for women to see, amongst others. An example of this polyvocality can be made by Brittain's mentioning of a letter from her friend Geoffrey, who she had just discovered had died in the war, in which the young man quotes and comments on Rupert Brooke's verses:

> Characteristically he concluded his letter with the haunting lines that must have nerved many a reluctant young soldier to brave the death from which body and spirit shrank so pitifully.
>
> *War knows no power. Safe shall be my going…*
> *Safe though all safety's lost; safe where men fall;*
> *And, if these poor limbs die, safest of all.*
>
> "Ruper Brooke", he added, "is great and his faith also great. If destiny is willing I will write later."
> Well, I thought, destiny was not wiling, and I shall not see that graceful, generous handwriting on an envelope any more.
> (Brittain 1933: 345)

The text, then, can be seen as a hybrid one, because it contains a certain linearity when it comes to time as well as plot devices such as a deep focus on romance and an almost martyr-like dedication to a cause, which are elements easily found in the Victorian novel, while also presenting characteristic Modernist features, such as the aforementioned polyvocality and fragmentation brought to the text through the use of different types of media such as poetry and music, and, as Badenhousen mentions, "intense psychological introspection" (2003 : 440). With that said, considering that Vera Brittain was born in and lived through a period of historical transition, which explains the presence of Victorian-like elements in her writing, and bearing in mind that, as a woman in a heavily male-

dominant and gendered society, her experience would necessarily differ from the ones lived by her male counterparts, who, because of their social position, dominated for decades the definition of Modernity and Modernism, it is possible to consider Vera Brittain part of the Modernist movement. As Rita Felski argues in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995): "If women's interests cannot be unproblematically aligned with dominant conceptions of the modern, neither can they simply be placed outside of them" (p. 16). By analyzing both Brittain and Macaulay through Modernist lenses it is possible to broaden the limits of the Modernist movement while simultaneously reading these authors in a layered manner, which contributes to a deeper understanding of gendered realities in this highly discussed period.

Chapter 3

Testament of Ages and Dangerous Youth: parallels in the Modernist perception of age

Both Rose Macaulay's *Dangerous Ages* and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* deal with a key element of Modernist thinking, that is, age and its interpretations. By analyzing the parallels between these two pieces it is possible to gather elements which contribute to the delineation of the perception of age in Modernism, particularly that of social spheres that included women like Macaulay and Brittain, which ultimately cooperates to a better understanding of Modernist and Modern gender issues in general.

Dangerous Ages (1921) follows the story of the Hilary family, focusing specifically on its female members, all six of which are in different stages of life. Grandmamma is in her eighties and has made peace with time; Mrs. Hilary, Grandmamma's daughter, is a sixty-three-year-old woman who is rediscovering her own identity beyond the image of "wife" or "mother" through Freudian psychotherapy; Neville, who has just turned forty-three, is fighting to escape what she sees as her mother's fate, refusing to have her identity reduced to external roles assigned to her; her sister Nan, thirty-three, is starting to deal with the idea that the world does not see her as young anymore; Gerda, Neville's daughter, even with all the opportunities her young age offers her, still has to make choices and compromises. Finally, there is Pamela, Nan's and Neville's sister, who, apart from Grandmamma, is the only woman in the family who is not somehow at war with her age.

These women are connected not only through their familial bond, but they also represent each other's fears and anxieties, as well as their own past and future. They expose the possibilities and the limitations surrounding each different age and how time can be perceived in various ways in diverse stages of life. This can be exemplified by an interaction between Grandmamma and Pamela in which the following dialogue can be found:

> […] Pamela said blandly to Grandmamma, when the old lady commented one day on her admirable composure, "Life's so short, you see. Can anything which blasts such a little while be worth making a fuss about?"
>
> "Ah", said Grandmamma, "that's been my philosophy for ten years…only ten years. You've no business with it at your age, child."
>
> (Macaulay 1921: 206)

It is also possible to observe a similar view on the evolution of the perception of time and age in Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933). In this memoir, Vera recounts her life story from her childhood in Northern England up until 1925, when she decides to marry George Catlin. Between these two moments, Vera goes through World War I working as a nurse, a period in which she had to deal with the death of many of her loved ones, such as her then-fiancé Roland Leighton and her brother Edward. After the war, Brittain worked as a writer and journalist, going on to work as a lecturer for the League of Nations as a pacifist, a political position which she maintained throughout her life. By following Vera's personal story, as also happens in *Dangerous Ages*, it is possible to see shifts in how Vera herself perceived her age and how society around her saw it.

In this chapter, age will be analyzed in the context of the two previously mentioned works through five main phases of life, all of which are connected to different types of social constructs built upon or due to historical events. The first phase, that of childhood and early adolescence, is one that, interestingly, is not covered in *Dangerous Ages*, although it is mentioned and discussed in *Testament of Youth*.

The lack of discussion on the topic of childhood and early adolescence in the novel by Rose Macaulay could be due to the fact that she used to see her own childhood as a perfect age, an age with no sorrows and therefore, no "dangers". If anything, considering that the end of Macaulay's childhood and early adolescence was marked by her – unhappy - return to England, it could be possible to infer that, to her, the "dangerous ages" started after this first phase. While Macaulay saw her childhood as the "Golden Age", Vera saw hers as an age of innocence, in which she was isolated from the rest of the world both due to the close-mindedness of her family and acquaintances and because of the limited access she had to things that came from outside that reality. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Brittain began to understand the difference between the real world and fairy tales around 1899, so beyond seeing it as an age of innocence, she also indirectly described her childhood as a somewhat fantastical period – a characteristic Vera shared with Rose Macaulay.

This common view of childhood shared by both authors probably stems from the idealization of the child which took place in the Victorian era (Port 2006 :150), the period which both Macaulay and Brittain lived their early-childhood years through. Although

Brittain was twelve years younger than Macaulay and was born in those which are largely considered the last years of the Victorian age, she still had a Victorian childhood, as exemplified by the books Vera Brittain grew up reading and the values she was raised with, for instance the almost obsessive focus on becoming a wife and a mother projected upon young ladies at the time, an attitude which arguably mimicked or got inspiration from the figure of Queen Victoria.

Moving on to the phase of early adulthood, it is one of the main points of intersection between *Testament of Youth* and *Dangerous Ages*, and it is a rather rich one to analyze in both works. In the former, Vera Brittain's early adulthood could be considered the period from 1914 to 1918, and it is no coincidence that it matches the duration of the First World War. As to the latter, the character who embodies this period of life in undoubtably Gerda, Neville's twenty-year-old daughter.

Of course, as always happens in every phase of life, the precise definition of what "early adulthood" is and when it begins – or ends – is subjective and heavily based on the historical period. Therefore, considering that Vera Brittain started her nursing work at 21 and that Gerda began her first job at 20 – suggesting that the search for women's financial and social independence started generally around that age – and considering that from 1918 on women above the age of 30 had the right to vote, indicating that women's fully-formed adulthood was considered to start around that age, it is possible to place early adulthood between the early and late twenties in the historical period in question.

With that said, although not always straightforward, there are many shared elements between Gerda and Vera considering this phase of life. The former, who is described as a twenty-year old woman in "July, 1920" (Macaulay 1921: 44), is not interested in having an academic life, mostly because she rejects what she calls the "academic mind" (1921: 41), regarded by her as unfruitful. Still, she retains a sort of arrogance that comes from the lack of experience which is often mentioned in the novel and that is frequently transmitted in other characters' lines through the use of the word "child" when referring to Gerda. Even Barry Briscoe, the man who Gerda later marries in the book, thinks of her as "an absurd, lovable, teasable child" (1921: 69).

The use of this word to refer to a young woman highlights her inexperience while also provoking a feeling of compassion towards a character who has much to learn, but who must do it on her own terms, without the interference of others. The term could be

interpreted as patronizing, but it is not reduced to that due to the fact that her innocent pretention, represented by the title of "child", is not simply mocked by other characters, but it is simultaneously envied by them. Gerda's attitude towards her intense convictions regarding a wide range of topics – from politics, to religion, to sex – are what exposes her lack of knowledge of the real world, as can be exemplified by Neville's perspective on Gerda's rejection of the academic life in favor of having practical experience, stating that Gerda was "still young enough to believe it important that she should attain proficiency" (1921: 41). Still, on a different moment, Neville herself admires her children because of their "splendid earnestness with regard to life" (1921: 8), which according to her was directly connected to Gerda's generation, one that had not been marked by the pre-war world.

Another issue which is highlighted by Gerda's presence besides the way other characters refer to her is the issue of inter-generational struggle, which as mentioned in the first and second chapters of this dissertation, was one of the main questions of the first half of the twentieth century, mainly due to World War I and to the new discussions generated by Freud's theories and practices. This tension between different generations is summarized by the fact that when Neville and Gerda talk, neither of them is sure if one correctly understands the other, while when Gerda spends time with her grandmother, Mrs. Hilary, she says nothing at all because she knows words would not suffice to surpass the difficulty in communication caused by their forty-year age difference (1921:56). Observing the interactions in which Gerda is called "child", the generational struggle she finds herself in, and the new centrality of youth in the historical period she lives in, it is possible to notice a certain duality in the way young people were perceived – their lack of experience, naivety and eagerness were seen as a disadvantage compared to more experienced people. At the same time, these very same characteristics were the ones the older generations had lost, and therefore having them was not only desirable, but enviable.

Lastly, Gerda's character makes an important decision, one that is rather meaningful – from the beginning of the novel it is possible to understand that Gerda is interested in social issues and strives to be an emancipated woman, even asking Barry Briscoe for a job as his secretary in order to learn about the profession. Gerda does not wish to get married, she believes it to be a legal and almost contractual limitation on something that should be purely emotional, and she is weary of the possibility that one

day she and her future partner – later on represented by Barry - may stop loving each other, and so they would be confined in a perpetual unpleasant situation if they were married. However, once Barry decides he wants to marry her and she refuses to, her entire family tries to convince her otherwise, until Neville appears with the line that arguably summarizes the weight of this episode: "[…] Barry isn't going to do it. Barry won't have you on your terms. If you won't have him on his, he'll leave you and go and find some nicer girl" (1921:152). Here it is possible to observe two rather relevant points, the first one being that, even for the younger, more emancipated and "modern" generation of women, equality and freedom were restricted through the repetition and reinforcement of social expectations – in this case, getting married – which ultimately limited the opportunities they could have and the decisions they could take (Port 2006: 155). Secondly, it becomes very clear – as will also be observed in other instances of the novel, with different characters – that these social expectations were deeply intertwined with the fear of "not being chosen", or better yet, of not being chosen because of "some nicer girl", where "nicer" can mean "more agreeable" or, as will be seen in the next paragraphs, "younger".

As for Vera Brittain's early adulthood, it is possible to infer that Brittain had always been an opinionated girl and woman, a feature which is first presented when she insists on her desire to go to Oxford even though her parents find it a foolish idea. When it came to marriage, Vera was not opposed to it as Gerda was, but she surely believed in developing one's own identity before looking for external relationships, or, in her own words: "(…) one has no right to have great and intimate friends unless one can stand alone first" (Brittain 1933: 109). Furthermore, before Vera managed to go to Sommerville College her one main idea was to leave Staffordshire, and she saw the academic career as her only option to achieve that goal since, in her opinion, marriage would only limit her opportunities (1933: 53).

As opposed to Gerda's case, Vera changed her mind in an organic way, without external – or explicit – pressure, when she agreed to her engagement to Roland Leighton, with whom she fell deeply in love. Vera comments on the severe scrutiny young women would be put under when they were engaged or merely interacted with a young man, and as was only natural, she, too, believed in some of the social expectations of her time. An example of that can be made through her response to Leighton when he proposed that one

day they should go see Florence, in Italy: "'But'- I objected – my age-perspective being somewhat different from that of to-day – 'it wouldn't be proper until I'm at least thirty.'" (1933: 123).

As it was the case for *Dangerous Ages*, another issue which is found in this memoir is the generational one, however this time, more than a distance between generations caused by miscommunication, the tension between the young and the old is given by the resentment for the on-going war, which caused a catastrophe that deprived Vera's generation "of that youthful happiness" (1933: 129). This resentment rapidly made it so that the ideas of tiredness and sorrow were associated with the idea of growing older, as can be observed in the episode in which Vera tells her headmistress that she "felt about thirty" (1933:163) when the war had been happening for about a year. This feeling of resentment and bitterness towards the older generations was only reinforced by her family's request that she would go back home – she was then still working as war nurse - in order to take care of her ill mother, a matter which Vera was not only unsure was entirely valid, for she suspected the situation was not as much of an emergency as her father made it to be , but that, according to her, would have been solved without her if she had been a man (1933: 422). Here, then, there is an intersection between age and gender issues, because this is both a situation of one generation clinging on to another for both physical and emotional support, and a situation that exposes the requirements made to women at the time, as Brittain herself makes explicit:

> What exhausts women in wartime is not the strenuous and unfamiliar tasks that fall upon them, nor even the hourly dread of death for husbands and lovers or brothers or sons; it is the incessant conflict between personal and national claims which wears out their energy and breaks their spirit.
>
> (Brittain 1933: 422-423)

Finally, Gerda and Vera Brittain, in their early adulthood, had quite similar views on their own generation, as is demonstrated by a list Vera Brittain wrote when trying to define "the age" she was living in, which she describes as an "intensely introspective" one – both Vera and Gerda believed in getting to know their own identity before anything else – and that is focused on developing versatility instead of specialization (Brittain 1933: 125). The two young women hardly settled for limited horizons; theirs was an age

of endless possibilities combined with infinite sorrow, a combination that was favored by the historical changes which took place in that period, namely the war, and which became a characteristic trait that can also be found in the following phase – adulthood.

Fully developed adulthood, albeit complicated, can be exemplified in *Dangerous Ages* by the character of Nan, Neville's thirty-three-year-old sister who works as an editor. From the beginning of the novel Nan is presented as a somewhat problematic sibling, not fitting into many of the roles that were assigned to her for her age and gender while being in a constant battle with herself in hopes to avoid becoming like her mother – a process she can already see is happening. By seeing many of her own characteristics in her aging mother – her anger issues, her proneness to melancholy, her unstable character that causes her to get easily bored – and noticing both the hardships her mother is facing because of her struggle with aging and her own difficulties defining herself in her age, Nan has her first experience with aging through what Woodward described as "the mirror of the family" (Woodward 1999 : XXI), that is, through the recognition of herself in a family member who is aging. This mirror creates in her an urge to "fix" her life in order to have a different outcome from her mother's.

Nan's desire for "roots", as she defines them (Macaulay 1921: 62) is what makes her decide she wants to marry Barry Briscoe, her long-time friend who had always been in love with her, and whom she had always kept at arm's length. After Nan's decision, she goes on a trip with Barry, Gerda and Kay, Gerda's brother, and as the trip progresses, Nan gets increasingly more bitter towards her niece, resenting her at first solely for her youth, then later for the fact that Barry choses Gerda over her. The anger towards Gerda begins one night as they are sharing a bedroom and Nan cannot sleep. Observing the other woman sleeping, the aunt questions the idolizing of youth: "It wasn't really touching to be young; it was touching not to be young, because you had less of life left. Touching to be thirty; more touching to be forty; tragic to be fifty, and heartbreaking to be sixty" (Macaulay 1921: 118).

From this moment on, Nan's opposition to Gerda becomes progressively worse, culminating in a bike accident which hurts Gerda caused by Nan's attempt to establish herself as more skilled, adventurous and resistant than the twenty-year-old. It was Nan's desperate last effort to unconsciously prove herself to Barry, who can be interpreted in this case as the social expectations for a woman over thirty living in the 1920's, and to

her own self – a conflict which can only result in both women getting hurt, either physically, like Gerda, or emotionally, like Nan.

Again, as it was mentioned earlier about Vera Brittain, there is an intense conflict between the individual woman's identity and that which is expected from her, in this case applied to an adult woman, particularly in a time that not only glorified youth, but which actively treated aging as a deficiency or disease through plastic surgery, hormonal interventions and other new technologies (Port 2006: 148). Therefore, aging for Nan is not simply about existing in passing time, but it means losing everything she built her identity around – her freedom, her energy, her adventurousness, her independence. Additionally, it means losing to a younger woman that which she perceived as her one chance of fitting into the social expectations put upon her, which uncovers yet again an intersection between gender and age issues – not only were there social roles projected onto women, but these roles had a deadline, so women who strived to be accepted and respected in society had to both fit into those roles and do it in an arguably arbitrary time window.

Vera Brittain's adulthood, which here is considered the years from 1918 on, was also marked by loss – albeit of a different kind compared to Nan's. By the end of the war Brittain had lost her fiancé, her best friends and her brother, which provoked in her a sense of numbness that stopped her from being capable of nurturing deep relationships with people until the time around April, 1920 (Brittain 1933: 445). Besides her own loneliness – relevantly, the chapter which marks the beginning of this new phase is the same which describes Brittain's reaction to the news that the war was over, and it is titled *The Loneliest Hour* -, Vera realizes just how much the war changed her and those around her, and seems to be aware of a change in terms of age, both historical and individual: "The War was over; a new age was beginning; but the dead were dead and would never return" (1933: 463). The last phrase regarding the dead seems to recall the loss of innocence close to pessimism which was considered characteristic of adulthood in *Dangerous Ages*.

At the point when the war came to an end, Brittain was convinced that even if she did manage to go back to Sommerville College, it was too late for her – the trauma she had endured due to the war had transformed her, made her somehow too old – and therefore "unfit" - for the life she had had three years before. Still, she goes back to Oxford, not

because she was particularly keen to going back to the place itself, but because it was the one thing from her past that had not been severely changed or even destroyed by the war (1933: 468). Once in Oxford, Brittain finds herself amongst students who are mostly younger than her and who for the most part have not experienced the war as closely as she has, and all of whom are eager to move on from that event as soon as possible – which meant that, for Vera, in a situation in which she has difficulties overcoming what she has lived through and in which the world around her treats her as an inconvenience, or, as Brittain herself describes, as "the universal stranger whose sudden appearance out of a remote and unknown world was a little embarrassing for everyone" (1933: 478), the beginning of what we here consider her adulthood is a period of isolation.

In a parallel with Nan, Vera Brittain feels she has run out of time to achieve the goals that she believes needed to be achieved and that, in part, transformed itself into resentment not only for the older generation, but also for the younger one, even if the difference in age in many cases was not particularly great. When describing her meeting with Winifred Holtby at Oxford upon her return to the school, Vera Brittain finds herself openly bitter about Holtby's youthfulness: "Only too well aware that I had lost that youth and energy forever, I found myself furiously resenting its possessor." (1933: 487). Like Nan, Vera Brittain seems to feel like she has lost her place in the world to younger women, both from an intellectual or academic point of view, because society is not welcoming her and her fellow former war nurses, and from a physical standpoint, exemplified by the episode in which Brittain is rejected by the College's tennis team, a case which also presents similarities with Nan's and Gerda's biking scene.

Furthermore, there is one last key term which seems to be involved with both Nan's and Vera's adulthood: guilt. In Nan's case, guilt does not necessarily come from her interiority, but is projected onto her for allegedly becoming the mistress of a married man after Barry Briscoe chose to marry her niece. Nan herself explicitly says she feels no remorse for it, but Mrs. Hilary claims to see a bit of guilt in her, although she is not quite sure about it (Macaulay 1921: 185) – it could be inferred, then, that even if Nan herself does not feel guilt, she is expected, in her social context, to feel it; even by her own mother. When it comes to Vera the guilt is internal, however equally caused by external factors. In her case, there is not only the guilt she feels for not being able to "truly" participate in the war – that is, fight on the front – and suffer like her loved ones did, but

there is a more complex guilt, the one that comes from Vera reinserting herself as someone who survived into the retrospective tale of the war (Badenhousen: 432). It is a complex feeling because Brittain used her memoir as a way of metabolizing her trauma, it is the method she found to be able to navigate the present through her past, which means that the very thing that allows her to cope with what has happened is something that further highlights the fact that she is alive and many others are not, which partly reinstates the same guilt she is trying to overcome. With that said, Vera's sense of guilt can be considered somewhat external because the only reason why she was not able to do the same things her loved ones did was because she was not allowed to for being a woman – she faced external limitations, as was the case for Nan.

Pamela, Nan's and Neville's sister who is also in her adult years, seems to be one of the few people in the story who do not have any problems with their age. Interestingly and perhaps relevantly, Pamela seems to be a bit detached from the rest of the family and her appearances in the novel are not as frequent as her sisters', and this distance from their mentality could be one of the reasons why she has such a neutral position regarding aging. Another reason, which goes along with the first one, could be the type of environment she lives in: Pamela lives with her friend and potential romantic partner Frances Carr, and her life seems to be simplified by the absence of a male companion, something that is also hinted to in symbols such as the "sweet peas in a bowl" she has in her apartment. Flowers and bowls can be interpreted as a symbol for "femininity, passivity and receptivity" (Crawford 1990: 191), a symbol which was also used in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) when the character Clarissa thinks about her infatuation for another female character – a fact which may hint at the idea that besides femininity, this symbol may also signify romantic love between women. The fact that Pamela seems to have reached full contentment in the lack of a male partner and that she is so accepting of her own age again reinforces the idea that very often the feelings women had towards this subject were strongly connected to sexism and the tension between genders.

Limitations and relationships are also two relevant themes for the middle age phase, along with the theme of memory. Both for Vera and for Neville, the people who are close to them when they are in their middle age do not remember who they used to be when they were younger. In Vera's case, this is because everyone she knew from before the

war had either died or followed separate paths in life, which made her get accustomed to revisiting her memories on her own (Brittain 1933: 495). In Neville's situation, the ones who do remember her from when she used to go to medical school, amongst whom was her brother, seem to be convinced that her intelligence and brain power are simply not the same anymore, whereas her children, who were born when she had already quit her academic career, never knew she used to be as sharp and witty as them. This lack of memory regarding both women prompted in them a reaction – for Vera, not having anyone else that could validate her story, she chose to write it down so it could be validated through its remembrance. As for Neville, her urge to go back to her studies on her forties was both an attempt to do something that "counted", something important, as well as an attempt to prove to herself and the ones around her that the Neville from the past had indeed existed and was still there.

Besides their individual experiences, Vera's and Neville's need to validate their existence as middle-aged women also comes from a broader cultural phenomenon that was taking place in those years. With the advent of accessible plastic surgery, the growth of the beauty industry and celebrity culture – which were directed mostly towards women - and the already established obsession with youth, there was an increase in the social pressure to look ever-young, creating the idea that looking "old" was now a choice; looking one's age became, then, a sign of negligence towards one's image. With that mentality, magazines such as *Queen* in publications from the 1910s declared the "disappearance of the middle-aged woman" (Port 2006 : 151), which was theoretically intended to be a flattering comment towards older women who were being praised for the fact that in that new era they were not sentenced to an unactive, almost hidden life, but were able to participate in activities that had been previously reserved for the young, and more: they were able to look just as good as their younger counterparts. The issue here is that what on the surface may appear as flattery hides ageist thinking behind it through the idea that an aging woman can do anything – as long as she looks young. This idea creates a connection between female emancipation and youth, which creates a vicious cycle of striving to look young in order to feel allowed to occupy certain spaces and participate in certain activities.

Neville's desire to go back to college and work had much to do with the preservation of her identity and how it was seen in opposition to that of her husband, the successful

politician. In more than one occasion Neville makes it explicit that she wants to be seen as more than someone's wife, as it is clear when she talks to Grandmamma: "I don't *like* being merely a married woman. Rodney isn't merely a married man, after all…" (Macaulay 1921: 36). Her dream was to do something that made a difference in the world and there seemed to be an endless list of things she should achieve, and yet, every year, on her birthday, she would find herself not having accomplished any of them: "Another year gone, and nothing done yet. Soon all the years will be gone, and nothing will ever be done" (1921: 3).

Accomplishments were likewise a strong element in Vera Brittain's life and work and, exactly like Neville, Vera also felt like she had not achieved much of what she had originally intended to. The main difference between the two is, then, the element of optimism – while Neville gets strongly frustrated by the fact that she cannot, in fact, keep up with medical school and does not seem to be doing enough relevant work, Vera Brittain declares she is glad she never gave up on her writing, even when it seemed like she was making no progress at all (1933: 596). However different their view may be regarding the outcomes of their expectations, both of them seem to see work – in the sense of jobs outside of the home - as a dignifying action, as exemplified by the following quote from *Testament of Youth*: "[…] 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" (Brittain 1933: 536).

Furthermore, the two women are equally self-aware, a trait which both of them recognize and that Brittain considers a particular feature of her generation:

> We had not quite lost – and perhaps never shall lose – a self-conscious feeling of boldness in our candour; not all our experience could change us from the earnest, idealistic War generation into our flippant juniors the post-war youth, who had never been taught to think the terms of sex indecent and to see its facts, if at all, through a glass darkly. But we were now capable of the frank analysis of our own natures, and the stoical, if reluctant, acceptance of realistic conclusions.
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> (1933 : 578)

Significantly, this self-awareness seems to be at some point transferred onto the older generations, who begin to be understood by those in middle age. Neville realizes that what she is going through – the hopelessness and feeling of powerlessness – are both things her mother has been going through for some time as well (1921: 156). Years after

the end of the war, Vera starts to understand the desperation felt by the middle-aged during those years, she began to understand how they still felt strong and vigorous and yet could not contribute to their country during the conflict, and so all that was left for them to do was sit and wait for news (1933: 427). This is the point in which, at least for Neville, there starts to be an acceptance of other people's as well as her own limitations.

Even though Vera Brittain seems to develop a greater understanding towards those who were middle-aged during the war, she does not show the same type of sympathy for the ones older than that. Vera is at no point explicitly critical of elders, but their almost complete absence from the memoir indicates that, at the very least, they were not relevant enough to be included in her story. The only episode in which an elderly person is at the center of Brittain's account is, again, when the end of the war is announced, a moment in which an elderly woman gets hit by a car just outside the hospital gates. Although allegedly real, this event strikes the reader as a symbolic element, because it not only highlights the frailty of that person - and as a consequence of the group she belonged to - but it also seems to represent the recklessness with which the younger generation acted after the war, something which Brittain arguably criticizes in her book. Besides, the episode seems to mark a historical shift: the old are dead and now the power is in the younger generations' hands.

In the novel's case, Rose Macaulay challenges the common perception of elderly people which was widespread at the time – first with Grandmamma, who is perfectly at peace with her age and what it entails, and secondly with Mrs. Hilary, who, although struggling in her process of accepting her "complexes" through Freudian psychotherapy, is nonetheless trying something new and challenging in a quest to learn more about herself, a point which is perhaps one of the most important messages this novels tries to transmit.

It is relevant to call attention to the fact that both Mrs. Hilary and Grandmamma are never called by their own names in *Dangerous Ages*. Mrs. Hilary continues to be called by her husband's last name throughout the novel and the readers never get to know her first name, which matches – and perhaps it is a symbol for – the fact that she is still struggling with the loss of her husband, given that the position of "wife" offered her a sense of relevance and it allowed her to have duties which filled her days. Now, without that title and re-evaluating her role as a mother given that all her children are adults, she

tries to redefine her identity without the help of external roles. Similarly, in Grandmamma's case, her name is never revealed, making it so that her identity is closely attached to her relationship to the other members of her family. However, she is not limited by that since she has already lived through the same crises the other women, especially Mrs. Hilary, are going through, and she found her way out by finding new – or old – things to work on and be entertained by.

While the younger generations of the family, albeit in different ways, have the impression of not being capable of keeping up with time – Gerda is eager to start her career and wants to waste no time, Nan finds herself running out time to fit into the expectations society has for her, Neville feels like this is her last chance of doing something that matters, otherwise it will be too late for her -, Mrs. Hilary is still in her adaptation phase, fighting to tame time, and Grandmamma has learned that, ultimately, all ages are "dangerous" in their own ways, which means time cannot be tamed, because it is already dead: "'Time is so long', thought Mrs. Hilary. 'I can't bear it.' 'Time gets on that quick,' thought May, 'I can't keep up with it.' 'Time is dead,' thought Grandmamma. 'What next?'" (Macaulay 1921: 205).

The analysis of the various representations of age in these texts, when considering them as two Modernist pieces, illustrates the perception of the concept of time and age in Modernism, how this perception was molded by historical and socio-cultural events and exposes the ways in which these views are connected to gender issues. By making these observations we expand our understanding of what Modernism can mean, consequently rendering it a term that includes more varied perspectives, which is arguably in itself a rather Modernist behavior.

When it comes to the observations made regarding age throughout this chapter, it is possible to infer that even though ageism was already a real issue in the early twentieth century and it could seriously affect people, the expectations and limitations surrounding age were, much like the case with gender, heavily based on social constructs which are ultimately malleable and allow, if not require, change. Relevantly, in Rose Macaulay's novel, the only two people who have made peace with their age were the two people who have found a way to break free from the social expectations that weigh in on them. As Cynthia Port says in *Ages are the Stuff!* (2006): "there is a danger, as Rose Macaulay repeatedly reminds us throughout her journalism and novels, in making grand claims

about generational differences (or about any category of identity), which will inevitably be reductive and limiting" (Port 2006: 141-142).

On the same vein, Vera Brittain makes it explicit that she is glad she did not let external limitations stop her from achieving her goals, especially because everything she went through led her to something new: "I found it not inappropriate that the years of frustration and grief and loss, of work and conflict and painful resurrection, should have led me through their dark and devious ways to this new beginning" (Brittain 1933: 661).

Therefore, upon observing all the aforementioned elements, it is be possible to conclude that the analyzed pieces not only represent the forma mentis of the time, but they also document a shift in attitude when it came to the concept of growing old towards a more open-minded and accepting view of it.

Conclusion

In this work, I have attempted to expose how the concept of age in women was perceived in Modernism and how this perception impacted women's lives in this period, analyzing age as a gendered issue in the novel *Dangerous Ages* (1921), by Rose Macaulay, and in the memoir *Testament of Youth*, by Vera Brittain (1933). In the first chapter I outlined some of the main elements associated with Modernism, from its characteristic formal experimentation to the sociocultural and historical changes which helped shape the period.

After highlighting such characteristics, I went on to argue in the second chapter, as did C. T. Lypka in *Anxious Femininity: Rethinking Womanhood in Modernist Women's Writing* (2020), that the Modernist literary canon can still be expanded if we keep in mind the fact that many authors, especially female ones, were left out of the Modernist roster because they did not fit into the restrictive molds which were often arbitrarily ascribed to the title of "Modernist". More specifically, many of the women who were excluded from the Modernist canon were part of a category of literature called "Middlebrow", that is, literature which was not academic nor highly complex, but which still offered rich stories with deep reflections and criticism. I then explained that this categorization does not necessarily exclude authors from also being considered Modernist, which, I argued, is exactly the case of authors Rose Macaulay and Vera Brittain, who can be considered as part of both Middlebrow and Modernist literature.

For example, experimentation with the plot and with its timeline, intense introspection, polyvocality and text fragmentation, amongst others, are all characteristically Modernist elements which are also found in both Rose Macaulay's and Vera Brittain's work, particularly in *Dangerous Ages* (1921) and *Testament of Youth* (1933), the two works analyzed in this thesis. By considering these works as Modernist, the analysis of the portrayal of the concept of age in women in them works as an exploration of this topic inside the broader category of Modernist literature itself. Moving forward with said analysis, I separated both works into different stages of life – childhood and early adolescence, early adulthood, fully-developed adulthood, middle age and old age – and observed the points of intersection in the representation of these stages between the works.

The first realization which came from this consideration of the two texts is that both followed rather similar patterns in the portrayal of each stage. First, childhood is portrayed as an age of innocence and fantasy associated with the authors' late-Victorian upbringing and with the idealization of childhood found in Modernism for being the symbol of the future, of the ever-young new world.

Early adulthood is portrayed in both books as an age of self-discovery, of defending one's beliefs and going after one's desires while simultaneously being discredited for said beliefs, as well as being a phase of introduction to what a woman is expected to act and be like. Moreover, it is a phase which is both mocked and envied by its elders, causing a tension connected to the characteristic Modernist conflict between generations. When it came to women, this tension was also intensified by the idea reinforced after World War I that a woman's purpose was to procreate, which was paired with the opinion that women workers were to blame for male unemployment in the same period. When it comes to fully-formed adulthood, it is a period of realization and even isolation – in both works the adult women suffer with the idea that they are running out of time to reach that which is expected of them. This sensation of running against time comes from the constant conflict experienced by these women between their own identity and that which is imposed by societal standards, and it translates itself, in both cases, to bitterness towards the younger generations, specifically younger women, and to the feeling of guilt which comes forward every time they do not live up to the expectations put upon them.

Moving on to middle age, there is a distinct search for the affirmation of one's identity coming both from Vera and from Neville in an attempt to stop the erasure of the existence of the middle-aged woman, a phenomenon which, thanks to scientific and historical changes such as the popularization of plastic surgery, was not only talked about, but was encouraged particularly by the media in those years. The search for affirmation comes from both women in the form of personal achievements, something that collaborates to a reconnection with their own selves instead of only being known for their connection to someone else. This rediscovery of the identity ultimately results in self-awareness and in the conviction that work is – whether they manage to engage with it or not – an element which brings dignity to a woman's life.

Lastly, the two portrayals of old age found in the two works are quite different from one another, but they can be seen as two ends of the same spectrum, one which represents the Modernist view on old age. On one side, Brittain seems to indicate the "death" of the old age in the Modernist era; on the other, Macaulay challenges this view by writing interesting old characters who are either in peace with their age or in the process of coming to terms with it, and whose lives do not end because of their exclusion from what is considered ideal in a woman.

In my view, through the study of Rose Macaulay's and Vera Brittain's lives and careers and through the analysis of their works as Modernist pieces, it is possible to see these works as a reflection of the mentality of the historical as well as literary period, exposing the forma mentis of the time. Furthermore, just like including more female authors in the Modernist canon has an impact in Modernism's image of being highly masculine, considering different ages and their representation in Modernist literature can help explore and question the image of Modernism as fundamentally ageist.

La presente tesi si pone come obiettivo l'osservazione dell'intersezione tra i concetti di età e di genere nel contesto della letteratura modernista attraverso l'analisi del romanzo *Dangerous Ages* (1921), di Rose Macaulay, e le memorie di Vera Brittain nel suo libro *Testament of Youth* (1933).

Il primo capitolo di questo lavoro punta alla descrizione del modernismo come periodo letterario attraverso la considerazione delle sue caratteristiche principali e la sua collocazione nel contesto storico. Eventi storici quali la Prima Guerra Mondiale, assieme a pubblicazioni scientifiche come, ad esempio, la teoria della relatività di A. Einstein e le teorie e pratiche di psicoanalisi freudiane ebbero un grande influsso sulla definizione di Modernismo. La teoria di Einstein, per esempio, provocò un cambio di prospettiva riguardante le leggi universali, mentre la psicoanalisi freudiana collaborò a cristallizzare la definizione dei ruoli di genere tradizionali, nello specifico rimarcando la diade donna-madre e rafforzando il conflitto generazionale nella società dell'epoca.

Il Modernismo è stato per decenni associato ai concetti di mascolinità e giovinezza: l'uomo giovane viene considerato come la figura ideale di questo nuovo periodo storico, rappresentato dalla velocità, dall'automazione, dalla forza e dalla costante innovazione tecnico-scientifica. L'idealizzazione della giovinezza e la preferenza per il maschile contribuirono al rafforzamento dei ruoli di genere e alla crescita dei pregiudizi nel confronto dei membri più anziani della società. Il canone modernista espresse questo cambiamento di paradigma spesso escludendo donne e anziani dalla rappresentazione letteraria.

In questo processo di esclusione sono state lasciate in disparte molte donne che avrebbero potuto essere considerate scrittrici moderniste dati i contenuti della loro opera. Molte di queste donne venivano frequentemente categorizzate come scrittrici "middlebrow", cioè autrici che producevano una letteratura ricca e complessa, ma che non veniva apprezzata da un pubblico abbastanza colto ed istruito per essere considerata parte della letteratura alta.

Due autrici "middlebrow" che potrebbero anche essere considerate moderniste sono Rose Macaulay e Vera Brittain. Il secondo capitolo descrive lo sviluppo della vita e della carriera di queste due scrittrici, considerando le loro influenze letterarie e

caratteristiche principali in termini stilistici, caratteristiche che sono spesso anche considerate elementi-chiave della definizione di Modernismo. Queste caratteristiche sono, ad esempio, la frammentazione del testo, l'uso di più voci nella costruzione testuale e la decostruzione della struttura tradizionale del racconto.

Dopo aver contestualizzato lo stile letterario di Macaulay e Brittain, ascrivendolo al modernismo, la tesi prosegue con l'analisi di due loro opere, *Dangerous Ages* (1921) e *Testament of Youth* (1933).

La tesi, attraverso l'analisi delle opere di cui sopra, arriva alla conclusione che la rappresentazione delle donne e la relazione tra femminilità ed anzianità offerta da Macaulay e Brittain nelle loro opere letterarie sono in linea con la mentalità del periodo modernista, un periodo che considera la virilità e la giovinezza come elementi positivi, esautorando, dunque, la figura della donna, specialmente se anziana, e relegandola ad un ruolo di secondo piano. Tuttavia, lo sviluppo della percezione del concetto di età in entrambi i libri dimostra che questa stessa mentalità può infatti cambiare anche nell'arco di poche generazioni, indicando che i pregiudizi sociali, nonostante l'innegabile impatto che possono avere nello sviluppo di una società, non sono necessariamente delle idee fisse ed immutabili nel tempo. In più, nell'azione di ampliare il canone del Modernismo con nuove autrici prima non considerate moderniste, si espande anche la percezione del significato di questo periodo letterario.

In conclusione, includere opere letterarie che raffigurano una molteplicità di elementi troppo spesso esclusi dalla discussione e dal discorso sul Modernismo, collabora non solo allo sviluppo di una miglior comprensione delle diverse realtà facenti parte di questo periodo storico in continuo ed eterogeneo mutamento, ma mette in dubbio anche l'idea che il Modernismo sia un concetto fisso ed inevitabilmente legato alla mascolinità e alla giovinezza a discapito di altri generi ed età.

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