

Testament of Youth, a Heartbreaking Tribute to the Lost Generation

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Master of Arts in English**

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Declaration

This is to certify that I, Shreyashi Mondal a student of Masters English have carried out this Dissertation Project titled “Testament of Youth, a heart breaking tribute to the lost generation” under the supervision and guidance of Prof. Debdeep Banerjee, department of English, Rishi Bankim Chandra College Naihati. The work submitted is original to the best of our knowledge and belief and it has not been carried out elsewhere in any other University or Institute.

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Supervisor's Certificate

This is to certify that Shreyashi Mondal, a student of Masters in English Rishi Bankim Chandra College, has carried out this dissertation work titled "Testament of Youth, a heartbreaking tribute to the lost generation" under my supervision and guidance. The work submitted is original to the best of my knowledge and belief and has not been carried out elsewhere or submitted in any other University or Institute.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Testament of Youth” is a 2014 British drama film based on the First World War memoir of the same name written by Vera Brittain. It is a powerful story of love, war and remembrance, based on the First World War memoir by Vera Brittain, which has become the classic testimony of that war from a woman's point of view. The Film “Testament of Youth” was directed by James Kent and written by Juliette Towhidi. James is an accomplished award-winning director and writer of drama in the UK and USA - his feature films include “Testament of Youth” and “The Aftermath”, and his TV drama credits take in “The White Queen”, “Mother Father Son”, “Inside Men”, “Marchlands” and “The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister”. He has a long-established track record in making feature length and one-hour documentaries - “Gianni Versace: Fashion Victim”, “John Osborne: Angry Man”, “9/11: The Voices from the Towers”, “Larry and Vivien: The Oliviers in Love”. James brings his skills in high-end dramatic narrative structure seamlessly to documentaries and factual productions as consultant story editor, turning them into edge-of-the-seat viewing without losing editorial integrity or credibility. He draws from over 20 years’ experience as a television documentary and current affairs producer and director.

It is not an action war film that shows the fighting, but the psychology of the characters. The story starts by showing the audience the life of Vera, her brother Edward and their friend Victor, right before the outbreak of the First World War. The film is told mostly through Vera’s experience and that is emphasised in the sequence at the beginning, which was uniquely shot – it is a sequence showing Vera’s point of view and it is used for a flashback that takes the audience back to the start. The film centres around Vera and the men of her life: her brother Edward, her best friend Victor and of course the love of her life Roland, with whom she shares the same passions and interests – especially for poetry and writing – and their relationship is very intellectual and not only romantic.

The actors Kit Harington (Roland) and Alicia Vikander (Vera) had great on-screen chemistry. The rest of the cast was also brilliant and their performances captivating. “Testament of Youth” pummels the viewer with the pain and futility of war. It’s a sad, sad film about the tragic loss of a generation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A literature review is a comprehensive summary of previous research on a topic. The literature review surveys scholarly articles, books, and other sources relevant to a particular area of research. There are few works on the memoir of Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*. Sandra Hall wrote an article “*Testament of Youth* review: Love in a time of war” in which she throws light on Vera Brittain’s life journey during the great war and how she put her feelings and memories into words. According to her, “At the nub of the story is the importance of words in her life and that of Roland’s. In the era of the SMS and the sound bite, it’s supremely romantic to come across a pair of lovers who pore over every sentence, analysing its nuances, for the letters and the poems they exchange are crucial to all that they cherish in one another. This is a year awash with memories of World War I, but Vera and her story offer an angle unlikely to be found anywhere else.” Brittain’s biographer and literary executor Mark Bostridge was delighted with the film adaptation. Bostridge said what separates Brittain from other Great War writers is she penned “an incredibly moving love story about terrible loss”. He added “Unlike a lot of memoirs it tries to educate. When she published it in 1933, Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany and she was very conscious that another war was likely. The book tries to warn about the attachment the 1914 generation had to the idea of war and it’s false glamour.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter 4: Discussion

War films are usually about men. They're often about heroism, brotherhood and perseverance. The film "Testament of Youth" takes a different view. It's based on a famous antiwar memoir published in 1933. It was written by a young woman named Vera Brittain who had served as a nurse tending to gravely wounded servicemen in World War I. She set out to tell the story of those left behind. The film weaves in her personal letters to her fiancé, a soldier at the front.

The beginning of "Testament of Youth" prepares you for the end. In a prologue set in 1918 on the day of the Armistice, the palette is a chill blue and Vera wanders dazed through the jubilant crowds into a church where mourners light candles for the dead. Warm colours are reserved for early flashbacks in which Vera swims in a pond beside her brother, Edward (Taron Egerton), and his smitten friend, Victor (Colin Morgan), buoyed by the prospect of entrance exams for Oxford University — and a place alongside the men who regard her with awe.

Her affectionate but bemused father (Dominic West) initially obstructs her dream of studying at Oxford, believing it a pointless vocation for marriageable women; with the persuasion of her devoted younger brother, Edward, he permits her to sit the entrance exam.

The second person to truly understand Vera, Roland Leighton (Kit Harrington), enters her life around this time. Roland is a school chum of Edward's, and like Vera, he dreams of becoming a writer. The two soon fall in love. As luck would have it, all three of them are accepted into Oxford, along with a fourth member of their circle, Victor.

In the background of all of this, visible in random newspaper headlines, is the inexorable build-up to world war. Suddenly everyone's lives get very serious very fast, and one by one all the young men in Brittain's life, drawn by an unthinking combination of patriotism and naiveté, volunteer for what they think will be a few months of military service.

When Britain declares war on Germany, driving home a crisis that had previously intruded on Brittain's upper-class life only via distant-sounding headlines, the idyll rapidly crumbles. Edward enlists, followed in short order by Leighton, and Brittain must attend Oxford on her own, mentored by prickly but supportive teacher Miss Lorimer (Miranda Richardson).

Before Roland leaves the country, he and Vera have a number of chaperoned dates, and the sexual tension is tangible. Even in wartime when couples were being separated and many young men faced death, the rules of etiquette that ruled British society could not be suspended. Some of the most emotionally stirring scenes involve their stolen moments of privacy and kisses.

Unable to sit and study while those she loves are risking their lives, Vera makes the decision to leave school and volunteer as a nurse, and once again she finds herself as an outsider. At home she didn't fit in because she refused to be restrained by social norms, at school she had trouble being taken seriously because of her background, and now she has to prove to other nurses, who come from all different classes that her hands aren't just for holding books.

There are memorable moments, such as the reading of Roland's Vilanelle poem, made famous from his published letters to Vera, and images, such as the train pulling away from the platform leaving a gaggle of women in funnel-cake hats and a cloud of fluttering handkerchiefs behind. The young men, too, begin to feel disillusioned from their respective roles. But it's unfortunate that the women in Vera's life who experience love and similarly devastating loss aren't also given opportunity to have more than one dimension (the oblivious mother, the firebrand feminist, the disapproving matron).

Vera keenly regrets her blindness to the realities of war, especially since just as Edward had lobbied her father to let her try for Oxford, she pleaded with him to let her brother "be a man" and enlist. For the rest of her life, Brittain would regret succumbing to propaganda. Another powerful moment is when the family say goodbye to her brother Edward at the railway station, and Dominic West as her father breaks down in tears. Watching a parent cry is traumatic for a child – possibly even more so in such an era of stiff upper lips.

When Roland visits on leave, it is clear that the war is worming its way into the bodies, minds, and souls of the soldiers. Words cannot convey the fears of those who live every day with the dread of hearing that they will never again see their loved ones. Reading the newspaper listings of casualties becomes a daily ritual.

Falling in love with Roland Leighton, and watching him go off to the trenches, changed everything. The young lovers grew up very fast and when, inevitably, the news came that Vera's fiancé had "died of wounds" just before Christmas 1915, Brittain's fate was sealed. Now, all her ambitions as a writer were bent towards expressing the agony of her loss.

Brittain's experience in war becomes emblematic of the slaughter, as her immediate circle is annihilated. After Roland, her beloved brother, Edward, is killed and then two close soldier friends, Geoffrey and Victor. This is a film full of tiny heartbreaking moments that pile up until they're almost unbearable.

Brittain's turning point — in the film and her memoir — is when she is assigned to minister in the field hospital not to her fallen countrymen but to the "dirty Huns," many of whom are delirious and dying. Fluent in German, she understands their cries and can no longer bring herself to hate them for the deaths of her loved ones. Her "Testament of Youth" became a cornerstone of the pacifist movement, and led her to take a public stand against punishing the defeated "Huns" in the spirit of revenge. She was right not merely from a humanist standpoint but a tactical one: The rise of the Third Reich was at least in part a consequence of the Allies' harsh retributions.

The unthinkingly blind patriotism manifests itself in the approving platitude, "You look so handsome," which is uttered several times in the movie, tellingly, as the only thing the women can find to say, because it's what they've been conditioned to think. It's only when the dashing uniforms return, soiled, bloodied and wrapped in paper that the reality hits home. Even then, it's hard to find the words to give one another comfort and instead, the

mothers, sisters and sweethearts talk in more propaganda – untruths about noble and painless deaths.

Vera made sure that even now, 100 years later, we would learn not just of the men in the trenches or the workers on the home front, but the people left behind. The people who would lose so much and go on to live in a much different world, without the ones they loved. And by producing this film the makers have ensured that her story will be passed on to a whole new generation, and for that they have my utmost respect.

What makes this film adaptation so special is the awesome performance of Alicia Vikander in the lead role. She portrays Vera as a courageous, smart, sassy, and patient young woman who witnesses and endures the staggering costs of war. At one point she tells Roland, "I shall never be afraid to confront the real." And that she does, even when it brings her massive amounts of grief.

Previously best known for playing the scowling, deeply boring Jon Snow in "Game of Thrones", Harington is a revelation here, displaying a range and a lightness of touch that's as surprising as it is refreshing. It helps that he's so easy on the eye, of course, but then nearly all the younger actors are impeccably pretty, as if to underscore what a great loss to the gene pool the war to end all wars was. But the rest of the supporting cast are no slouches either, and even with their much smaller roles several manage to make indelible impressions, particularly West with a howl of despair (delivered off camera no less) and Richardson with a touchingly underplayed scene when she receives news of a death. There are a lot of telegrams and phone calls throughout, nearly every one of them a harbinger of death, a slightly repetitive device.

In terms of craftsmanship, "Testament of Youth" is an exemplar of all the best things about British films. Budgeted at \$10 million, it looks the bomb, like something that cost a lot more. Consolata Boyle's lavish costume design, period perfect but knitted with nuance that reveals character, is especially deserving of praise, as is Jon Henson's thoughtfully coordinated production design. Max Richter's soundtrack sometimes sounds slightly too similar to his previous film scores elsewhere, but it still has a majestic beauty, with tiny aural echoes of War Requiem, a musical memorial written by another great Britten, Benjamin.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

“Testament of Youth” is a brilliant and original film. And one that grows in my memory. As times goes on I am drawn back again and again to the pain of Vera’s experiences. Her young and happy life, her selfish but important hopes and dreams, crushed under the shadow of World War I. How did she ever come back from that? What do you do when the people who mean most to you are gone, along with the person that you were, and the life that you had hoped to have? Can anyone come back from that?

“Testament of Youth” is Brittain’s story, and Leighton’s chief importance is what he means to her—“chaperone, lapdog, humble slave,” as he describes what he hopes to be for her. It is the love Brittain feels for Leighton—and for the dear brother and friends who never make it home from battle—that she will channel later in life into her work as a peace activist. Harington’s Leighton offers plenty for Vikander’s Brittain to fall, and fight, for: He writes her poetry, takes her criticism as a challenge, and encourages her to write when others expect nothing more of her than her marriage ability.

Whereas Vera is the narrator – obviously – in her autobiography, in the film she is inevitably narrated. In the book everything is seen through her perceptions; in the film we watch her as she acts and reacts. We are above all observing her rather than seeing everything through her eyes: of course there are important point-of-view shots, but there is a good deal else that the film compels us to perceive from a more or less neutral stance.

Between the memorable opening and closing episodes, the film divides itself into three main “chapters.” The first of these depicts the end of Vera’s girlhood, her reactions against the conventionality of her provincial middle-class upbringing, leading her to Somerville College, Oxford, much as her parents fear the effect of this on her matrimonial chances. Towards the end of this section, she has met and fallen in love with Roland (Kit Harington), school friend of her beloved brother Edward (Taron Egerton). The lives of all three, along with so many others, will be irrevocably disrupted by the war, and the large central section of the film will dramatise vividly the nature of this disruption. Vera quits Oxford to become a nurse, and the exposure to the horrors of “the front,” where she nurses “Huns” as well as British wounded, along with the deaths of those closest to her, alters her forever. In the third section, she returns to Oxford, with all the appalling knowledge of the last four years behind her, and announces a change in her intellectual pursuit, from the comparative safety of Literature to the messier demands of History.

This structure highlights the centrality of the experience of war, not just for Vera as an individual but for her representative function. Virtually everyone’s life is disrupted by the war but what Vera’s trajectory emphasises is the way such an experience might alter the whole course of the rest of a person’s life. Post-war, she will head off in different directions, with new commitments. She has always resented the restrictions placed on her as a woman by parents and others; now, she will have no truck with these. She will go her own way, not out of obduracy but from the honing of perceptions of what matters – and there will be a very brief glimpse (for those in the know, anyway) of the man she will marry.

Director Kent maintains a firm grasp of all this, offering an astute but unhurried account of Vera's metamorphosis (brilliantly incarnated by Alicia Vikander) and of the changing world in which this occurs. That she has changed more than the provincial world in which she has grown up is depicted through its narrow conventionality, which will be shocked and shaken as it wonders what to do with the peace.

Kent's film does justice to – honours – the great work on which it is based, and earns the right to share the final title, which describes Brittain and her book as: "The voice of a generation." It is salutary that this should be heard again.

Works cited