

War Narratives and Mourning in Willa Cather's *One of Ours* and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*

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The dividing line between experience at the front and the innocence on the home front...was, and is, often gendered. Men die and fight; women read and write. As is usually the case, the binary opposition valorizes one of its terms over the other. Words come all too easily for women, . . . while men are silenced either by death, trauma, inhibition, or censorship.

Pearl James, *The New Death: American Modernism and World War I*

This excerpt from Pearl James' introduction to *The New Death* effectively summarizes one of the prevailing attitudes toward women, not only at the time of the First World War, but also in the literary criticism of war literature that followed. This attitude and the more modern need to push back against it are palpable in criticism of Willa Cather's World War I novel, *One of Ours*, particularly in its early reviews. As Steven Trout and Richard Harris note in *Memorial Fictions* and the "Historical Essay" for the scholarly edition of *One of Ours*, respectively, the main critical conversation around *One of Ours* centers on the question of the "reality" of Cather's depiction of war. Some scholars and reviewers, such as Stanley Cooperman and Guy Reynolds, argue that Cather glosses over war's horrors by depicting her protagonist's journey to war as heroic and his death as "clean" (Cather 367). On the other side, critics such as Jennifer Schwind and Susan Rosowski claim that the text should be read ironically, as questioning the protagonist's own belief in the ennobling effects of his war experience. Underneath this debate lies the submerged question of what women can say about war and whether they can adequately represent it, especially given their lack of direct experience. As James notes, in the binary that develops between anti-war rhetoric that shows the

meaninglessness of war and pro-war rhetoric that highlights its ennobling effects, women generally come to be seen as proponents of the jingoistic rhetoric that sends men to war to be killed (James 30). Cather's novel becomes a victim to this binary view of war representation, particularly since it is a novel by a woman that gives voice to different discourses around war, including more patriotic ones, without conclusively answering the question of how we should talk about war or what meaning we can assign it.

Meanwhile, criticism of former Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse Vera Brittain's memoir *Testament of Youth* often centers the question of gender rather than submerging it. For instance, Santanu Das, in his analysis of Brittain's and other World War I nurses' war memoirs, describes women's war trauma (particularly that of nurses) as involving "witnessing and helplessness rather than . . . survival or any direct threat to life" (Das 248). The women, so far removed from the scene of the battle, are powerless to affect any change, and can only look on in horror at the battle's "aftermath" (248). By placing Cather's novel alongside *Testament of Youth*, I will examine how each author deals with this "aftermath" of the war, particularly through their engagement with the letters of men from the front, rituals around death, and the narratives they use to make sense of these profound losses. *Testament of Youth* has not received the same criticisms that *One of Ours* has, likely because its author participated in the war as a VAD and became a very vocal anti-war activist afterward. Also, Brittain does make clear her anti-war stance and her belief in war's absurdity at several points in the memoir, which Cather allows to remain ambiguous. Some scholars have critiqued what they view as Brittain's ambivalence toward war (Joannou; Tylee) just as in criticism of *One of Ours*, but most critics recognize Brittain's text as one of mourning, and any ambivalence about war within it as caused by her love for the men who died (Stewart 39). I seek to extend the same acknowledgment to Cather, even if

the loss that inspired her war narrative (of her cousin, G.P. Cather) was less personal and traumatic than Brittain's loss of her fiancé, brother, and two best friends. Both authors still struggle with the difficult balance of honoring the men who died while denouncing the war that killed them.

While much of the negative criticism around *One of Ours* focuses on its depiction of men finding meaning in war, the letters of real-life World War I soldiers G.P. Cather and Roland Leighton confirm that some men (whether delusionally or otherwise) did at least claim that they did. Both *One of Ours* and *Testament of Youth*, however, reach beyond these men's narratives through the perspectives of the women left behind to mourn the soldiers' deaths. Vera Brittain's framing of Roland's death in her autobiography breaks through and breaks down Roland's increasingly militaristic language and the narrative arc that structures his own perception of his pre-to-post-war transformation as shaped by wartime codes of masculinity. Instead, she shows how meaningless and devastatingly absurd his death was, especially when contrasted with the language he uses to describe his participation in the war. In *One of Ours*, Willa Cather ends with Mrs. Wheeler's perspective, which similarly undercuts Claude's heroic narrative to show how his perception of his own death might be based on delusion. However, neither Cather nor Brittain necessarily give a conclusive answer to the question of whether Claude's or Roland's deaths were based on heroism and therefore fit within the myth of glorious, honorable wartime death. Rather, they use their texts to memorialize these lost men, to show their "beautiful beliefs" (Cather 370), and to question what the war meant. They try to make sense of senseless loss using letters, artifacts, rituals, and comforting narratives to piece together these crucial and traumatic events from which they are largely excluded in order to give them the meaning necessary to process them. In doing so, Brittain and Cather present the perspectives of the women left to

mourn the dead and highlight the great difficulty of balancing the competing demands of adequately acknowledging the pointless destruction of the war while mourning the lost heroism of its combatants.

I. Making Sense of War

Not only did the deaths of G.P. Cather and Roland Leighton (along with Brittain's brother Edward and friends Victor and Geoffrey) inspire the creation of Cather's and Brittain's texts, but Roland Leighton, G.P. Cather, and Claude Wheeler all share similarities in terms of how they talk about war. They come to interpret their experiences through heroic narratives and feel disdain for their ordinary lives back home. In this way, the men in these texts give meaning to their roles in the war by situating them within narratives that emphasize purpose, utility, and transformation. Of these men, however, none gets the last word on how their wartime roles or deaths are interpreted. Rather, all leave behind women to mourn them and attempt to process their deaths through narrative. These women—Willa Cather, Vera Brittain, and Mrs. Wheeler—all give different narratives than the men they mourn. Brittain and Mrs. Wheeler emphasize the meaninglessness of the war and their loved ones' deaths. Meanwhile, Cather uses her novel to put a variety of discourses around war into play without overtly endorsing any. She shows the different narratives that help people process this collective loss, as well as the "collapse" of these narratives when the "horror of the Great War enters the text" (Trout, "Iconography of Remembrance" 199), and the more cynical perspectives of those who see through the "beautiful beliefs" (Cather 370) to the senseless destruction.

G.P. Cather's letters to his mother, Willa Cather's Aunt Franc, from training camps in France point to this sense of purpose that he found in France, which reviewers of *One of Ours* take

issue with when it appears in *Claude*. Willa Cather reviewed these letters, and they served as inspiration for Claude Wheeler's attitude toward war (Harris, "Historical Essay"). As Richard Harris has argued, G.P.'s correspondence from this time shows a pride in his accomplishments and a purpose to his life overseas ("Pershing's Crusaders" 77). He mentions shooting competitions many times, noting the vast number of men he competes against and his own high rank among them (G.P. Cather [GPC] to Franc Cather [FC] 11 Oct. 1915; 4 July 1917). He also endorses the popular rhetoric around sacrifice in France, stating:

The French people stand up wonderfully under the strain of three and half years of war. France has made a terrible sacrifice. She threw her millions of the best blood of France into the fight when there was no one to help. She stopped the German army when it was fresh and at its prime, a thing no other nation has done. France is a wonderful nation, but she certainly is feeling the effects of this war.
(GPC to FC, 3 Dec. 1917)

This rhetoric resurfaces in *One of Ours* through the words and attitudes of Mrs. Wheeler in the early parts of the book. Some might criticize such black-and-white support for France's cause in the war in *One of Ours*, but its presence in these letters reveals that such discourse has its roots in the ways that people, including soldiers, actually talked about war at the time.

The letters from G.P. also reveal a developing separation between himself and his life back home, a separation that Cather includes in her novel and that Roland Leighton addresses in his letters to Vera Brittain. G.P. writes in September 1917 that "[t]he U.S. Public don't realize what this war means," even though he admits later in the letter that he has not "got near the Front, but [he has] seen the results of the Front" (GPC to FC, 24 Sept. 1918). He creates a distance between himself and civilians at home, despite not yet having experienced combat. Roland will do the same when writing to Brittain from his own training camp. G.P. writes in January 1918: "I

never hear anything about what is going in the U.S. anymore. I suppose it is still on the map" (GPC to FC, 21 January 1918). Again, there is deepening distance between the soldier and the home front, and a sense that the only meaningful place to be is at the Front. G.P. thus situates the war as a site of meaning more profound than what can be found at home. Richard Harris' analysis of G.P. Cather's letters also points to the sense of transformation Cather underwent during his training. Harris traces G.P.'s descriptions of recently gained skills and experiences in his many letters home about training, writing:

[G.P. Cather] wrote his mother on 15 December, "We are getting most thorough instruction as to how to play this new and severe game. It is changing everyone." Two weeks later he noted that he was "still learning the war game." By the end of three months, he had been "pretty much all over France," had learned battle tactics, and had become familiar with various weapons. ("Pershing's Crusaders" 78)

Here, we see G.P.'s emphasis on learning and "changing," as the training transforms him into a capable soldier and a man with purpose. He mentions his rank multiple times in the letters and shows his pride in the role he is playing in the war in a letter sent in May 1918: "The Govt. movie man has taped us many times. If you see any pictures of Pershing picked men look for me. I was there" (GPC to FC 12 May 1918). This quote demonstrates how G.P. wants to be seen and the pride he takes in his role as a soldier.

Although Roland Leighton was on a more promising path than Claude and G.P. in his life outside the war (he was accepted into the prestigious Oxford University and wished to become a scholar), he still constructs a narrative of finding a purpose through the war. More than once in his letters to Brittain, Roland adopts a superior persona in order to condescend to explain the glory of his new path (a maneuver that earns him Brittain's derision in her reply). For instance, in

a letter written while Brittain is still a student at Oxford and Roland is in the process of trying to obtain a commission, he writes:

I don't think in the circumstances I could easily bring myself to endure a secluded life of scholastic vegetation. It would seem a somewhat cowardly shirking of my obvious duty. . . . I feel that I am meant to take an active part in this War. It is to me a very fascinating thing—something, if often horrible, yet very ennobling and very beautiful, something whose elemental reality raises it above the reach of all cold theorizing. You will call me a militarist. You may be right. (Brittain 104)

In another letter written after Brittain became a VAD but before she was stationed in France, Roland writes:

I wonder if your metamorphosis has been as complete as mine as my own. I feel a barbarian, a wild man of the woods, stiff, narrowed, practical, an incipient martinet perhaps, not at all the kind of person who would be associated with prizes on Speech Day, or poetry, or dilettante classicism. I wonder what the dons of Merton would say to me now, or if I could ever waste my time on Demosthenes again. One should go to Oxford first and see the world afterwards; when one has looked from the mountain-top it is hard to stay contentedly in the valley. (216)

In both of these letters, Roland, like G.P., distances himself from the home front even when he has not yet seen combat. He situates himself within a narrative of finding purpose in war. Roland uses such words as *secluded*, *scholastic vegetation*, *shirking*, and *cowardly*, demonstrating the influence that the war propaganda and societal conceptions of masculinity have had on his life goals and on his perspective on the war. This language situates war as a kind of benchmark of masculinity, using it to measure whether one is “man enough” to endure its horrors. The “metamorphosis” Roland claims to have undergone is one of becoming a “man” as defined by this wartime standard, of attaining all the militaristic skills that G.P. Cather lists in more detail in

his own letters and the qualities that Roland enumerates here. For both these soldiers, war becomes an “ennobling” force that makes “men” of its participants. Brittain feels her inability to wholly take part in the war deeply, and Roland’s apparent self-satisfaction in his war “metamorphosis” gets under her skin. His comments about feeling like a different person from the one “associated with prizes on Speech Day, or poetry, or dilettante classicism” echo G.P.’s comments about feeling as though he is unaware whether the US is “still on the map.” This line from Roland’s letter also has greater importance, considering that “Speech Day” is where he met Vera Brittain, and “poetry” and “classicism” are the common interests they bonded over during their courtship.

Brittain pushes back against this rhetoric in both instances, through her replies to Roland and in the way she frames these letters within the memoir. She replies to the second letter by mocking Roland, writing:

Most estimable, practical, unexceptional adjutant . . . My first impulse was to tear that letter into small shreds . . . My second impulse was to write an answer with a sting in it which would have touched even R.L. But I can’t do that. One cannot be angry with people at the front—a fact which I sometimes think they take advantage of...

She also questions his narrative of himself, asking:

Are you *quite* sure that you are on ‘the mountain top’? You admit yourself that you are ‘stiff, narrowed, practical, an incipient martinet,’ and these characteristics hardly seem to involve the summit of ambition of the real you. (218, emphasis in original)

Because she is the only woman in this trio (consisting of Mrs. Wheeler, Willa Cather, and Brittain herself) actually writing direct replies to the men’s narratives of their wartime experience, she is

also the most unambiguous in her stance on them. She questions Roland's narrative directly and actually causes him to retract his statements and apologize after both of these letters, though he still does consistently show that he believes in the war as a greater force for meaning and purpose. Her emphasis on the "real you" acknowledges the transformation that Roland describes, but she reframes it as a form of destruction rather than creation. The boy from "Speech Day" who loves poetry and classics is quickly disappearing beneath the guise of militaristic rhetoric. She goes on to lament that not only does the war endanger Roland's life, but it also puts him at risk of losing his "individuality" and becoming one of the masses, parroting back the army's rhetoric and beliefs rather than the ideas that once set him apart.

Claude finds a similar heroic narrative in France. Despite the scholarship criticizing *One of Ours* as unrealistic due to the positive effects of war on Claude's life, this overlap with the life of two real soldiers—G.P. Cather and Roland Leighton—corroborates Cather's portrayal and shows that soldiers could find purpose and power even in the horror of war. For instance, after a particularly pleasant week at Madame Joubert's, Claude thinks to himself:

Life had after all turned out well for him, and everything had a noble significance. The nervous tension in which he had lived for years now seemed incredible to him . . . absurd and childish, when he thought of it at all. He did not torture himself with recollections. He was beginning over again. (Cather 332)

Claude shows an appreciation for the life that the war has afforded him, one to which he can at least ascribe "noble significance," whether or not we question the veracity of that ascription. He gets a fresh start through the war, something that Roland would also agree with, though perhaps with a darker significance. Roland sees himself becoming a new person, but also fears (along with Brittain) the loss of his former self in the process. Meanwhile, Claude feels no parallel

mourning for a past self, since that self could never achieve anything meaningful or be happy.

The most direct parallel in *One of Ours* to Brittain countering Roland's narrative of wartime experience is in the scene of Claude's death and Mrs. Wheeler's reframing of it that follows four pages later. In the initial scene, Claude assumes a role of masculine leadership, becoming the conductor of the symphony as he "direct[s his men] with his voice and with his hands" (Cather 366). The death scene shows a brotherhood gained through combat: "the men behind him had become like rock. That line of faces below . . . Their eyes never left him. With these men he could do anything" (366). This leadership and camaraderie between men comes from Willa Cather's engagement with her cousin's letters. Many letters from other soldiers describe G.P. as a great leader who cared about his men ("Pershing's Crusaders" 84). Thus, in *One of Ours*, even (and especially) in the moment of death, the war seems noble and honorable. When Claude is shot, the narrative (moving inside Claude's mind) states:

The blood dripped down his coat, but he felt no weakness. He felt only one thing; that he commanded wonderful men. When David came up with the supports he might find them all dead, but he would find them all there. They were there to stay until they were carried out to be buried. They were mortal, but they were unconquerable. (Cather 366)

Here, there is very little ambiguity or nuance in the characterization of war: it clearly brings the heroism out of these brave men who will die for its ideals. However, this entire portion of the book largely comes from Claude's perspective, whose views of the war are skewed by his desperation for a purpose and heroic end, a desperation born out of his disappointing and emasculating life in Nebraska.

When the perspective turns to the women at home after Claude's death, the

characterization of the war becomes murkier. When she thinks about Claude following his death, his mother thinks, "He died believing his own country better than it is," and he has been "fooled" by the ideals of the war, even if they are "beautiful beliefs to die with" (Cather 370). For his mother, Claude's ideas about the war's heroism and glory may be beautiful delusions, but they are delusions nonetheless. She notes that "*for him* the call was clear, the cause was glorious. Never a doubt stained *his* bright faith" (370, emphasis added). The italicized words point directly to Claude's narrative of war, calling out the slanted perspective that dominates the final two books, particularly the scene of Claude's death. However, this is not to say that Mrs. Wheeler's perspective or the moments when the "horror" of war "enters the text" ("Iconography of Remembrance" 199) represent Willa Cather's or her novel's *true* stance on war. Rather, the sudden switch between different discourses framing this same event lets the reader know that differing perspectives of war are being used and hints that one should not trust the characters to provide the answer to the novel's opinions on war.

Mrs. Wheeler then directly analyzes and comments on Claude's idealistic trust in war's glory. She thinks that he died with "beautiful beliefs" and:

perhaps it was well to see that vision, and then to see no more. She would have dreaded the awakening...One by one the heroes of that war, the men of dazzling soldiery, leave prematurely the world they have come back to. (370)

Mrs. Wheeler, as a woman and therefore a person unable to rise to glory through the war, sees through to its emptiness, just as Brittain does in *Testament of Youth*. These two women, left to mourn the men who died at the front, rewrite the narrative of their deaths. Just as Vera Brittain's replies to Roland temper his ideals of heroic masculinity, Cather uses Mrs. Wheeler's perspective to interrogate Claude's beliefs that he carried with him through his death.

While ambivalence toward war is much more clearly present in *One of Ours* due to its use of free indirect discourse to move between different perspectives on war, Brittain does also show the difficulty of completely condemning the war in all senses. In particular, separating the war itself from the men who fought in it proves challenging. This ambivalence toward war was much more present in Brittain's original letters and diaries from the war and has largely been removed by the time she frames these within her autobiography several years later. By this point, she has adopted her pacifist views, and generally sees war as meaningless destruction and death, with few exceptions. However, even in *Testament of Youth*, she does stick with her belief that war ennobles those who fight in it. For instance, she writes toward the end of the book that:

since those years it has often been said by pacifists, . . . that war creates more criminals than heroes; that, far from developing noble qualities in those who take part in it, it brings out only the worst. If this were altogether true, the pacifist's aim would be, I think, much nearer of attainment than it is. Looking back upon the psychological processes of us who were very young sixteen years ago, it seems to me that his task—our task—is infinitely complicated by the fact that war, while it lasts, does produce heroism to a far greater extent than it brutalizes.”
(Brittain 370)

This quote illustrates a contradiction in Brittain's depiction of war, but it is one of which she is aware and that she intentionally analyzes. She makes her central distinction between the war and those who fought in it, but still cannot entirely denounce the war and its effects on its combatants. Rather, she believes that war does generate heroism, but is not worth the violence and death it brings.

II. *Making Sense of Death*

Not only must these women make sense of the war and the roles the men they love play in it, but they must also find ways to mourn their losses, situate these losses within broader narratives of the war, and piece together these traumatic events that occur far away from them and are cloaked in euphemism in letters from well-meaning men at the front. Willa Cather's interactions with the letters from G.P. Cather to her Aunt Franc allow her to come closer to the war and learn more about it despite her distance from it. They also bring about a new connection to and appreciation for her cousin, with whom she did not previously have a close relationship ("Historical Essay") and whom she did not particularly like (Trout, *Memorial Fictions* 3). Through her perusal of these letters, she finds a closeness to, even an obsession with (*Memorial Fictions* 40), her cousin. Steven Trout provides useful context on *One of Ours* as a memorializing and sense-making project. He helpfully lays out the mythologizing efforts of Cather's novel, which he argues seeks to "*remember* the war and to make sense of the more than 100,000 American soldiers who died in it" ("Iconography of Remembrance" 190, emphasis in original). He asserts that this work is very distinct from the "propaganda used to generate support for the war effort while it was underway" (190). This effort to make sense of such loss begins at the personal level with her cousin, whose narrative she puts into her novel and with whom she feels so connected through the letters she reads.

Through Cather's examination of her cousin's letters, we can see that she still seeks to make sense of his death, assign meaning, and situate it within a larger narrative in order to make it more legible to herself and her family members. Cather recreates this epistolary mourning process (that Vera Brittain clearly also engages in) in her novel. For instance, the final turn at the end of the novel toward Mrs. Wheeler's perspective includes a scene of Mrs. Wheeler rereading

Claude's letters after his death. She consoles herself through this rereading process:

When she can see nothing that has come of [the war] but evil, she reads Claude's letters over again and reassures herself; for him the call was clear, the cause was glorious. Never a doubt stained his bright faith. (Cather 370)

Mrs. Wheeler, like Cather herself, turns to epistolary contact with the deceased in order to engage with the discourse on war heroism. Even if she cannot personally believe in the glory of war, her interactions after Claude's death with these letters offer reassurance that he died ignorant of the war's evils and secure in his own convictions. While she cannot believe Claude died a good death in the way that he might, she can take comfort in *his* belief, and that can (almost) be enough for her.

Her last thoughts of Claude reflect this self-consoling drive. She interrupts her thinking of the disillusionment that Claude might have suffered had he survived with an ellipsis, ". . . safe, safe" (370), seeming to repeat these words as a mantra that soothes her own disturbed thoughts about the war. The ellipsis indicates the trail of Mrs. Wheeler's thoughts in directions that disturb her, only to intentionally redirect herself back to her only solace: Claude's apparent satisfaction in his death found in these letters. The novel ends with a sense of continuing life:

By the banks of Lovely Creek, where it began, Claude Wheeler's *story* still goes on. To the two old women who work together in the farmhouse, the thought of him is always there, beyond everything else, at the farthest edge of consciousness, like the evening sun on the horizon. (369, emphasis added)

Claude lives on in these women's—Mrs. Wheeler's and Ma Hailey's—thoughts, words, actions, and the *stories* they tell themselves about him. They frame how he is remembered, as reflected by the positioning of this remembrance at the very end of the text, and the fact that Claude's "story" continues through them.

Brittain's mourning process through contact with letters from the men at the front is the most obvious out of these three women and is pervasive throughout her memoir. Letters to and from the men are peppered throughout the text, and scholars have argued that she includes these to recreate the only community that could truly understand the trauma she underwent: the men themselves. She tells her traumatic narrative with the epistolary versions of these men as witnesses, because she feels no one else can fully know her wounds (Badenhausen). There are too many instances of this in *Testament of Youth* to name, but Brittain's inclusion of her (now-deceased) friend Geoffrey's letter to her after Roland's death is a particularly poignant example. She quotes him:

'I'm so very, very sorry,' Geoffrey had written from the bleak perils of the Salient, vainly striving for words that would express his acute sensitiveness to another's pain. 'There are times,' he said, 'when letters are but empty things, and I cannot write.' (Brittain 246)

Despite his acknowledgment of the futility of letters in the face of inexpressible grief, Geoffrey writes anyway, and Brittain includes his letter in her memoir anyway. After the war, Brittain is completely alone, having lost everyone to the violence. Through her incorporation of all these letters, Brittain creates a community around her that understands her pain. Although the letter proclaims its own uselessness, its vital role in helping Brittain process her grief with others is clear.

This mourning process does not only occur through contact with letters, but also through other stand-ins for the actual presence and voices of these men and the war they are fighting. Analyzing the ritualized return of, in Brittain's case, her fiance's tattered military uniform, and in Cather's case, her cousin's exhumed body for reburial, also helps highlight the impulse to make

meaning out of what is left behind. Beginning with Cather, G.P.'s body is returned, as Steven Trout notes, with mixed feelings from various family members (*Memorial Fictions* 25). Even within a single family, individuals could not agree on how to ritualize the deaths of fallen World War I soldiers. Brittain, too, shows a horror at the way that the British government chooses to ritualize Roland's death. Rather than receive a body to bury, however, Roland's family receives a uniform, bloody and dirty, although also a signifier that allows her to piece together the gruesome facts of Roland's last moments that are left out of letters sent from the front.

This return of the uniform occurs about a month after Roland's passing and brings the tragic news of his death back with renewed force. Brittain describes in visceral detail the garments returned to the Leighton family, including "the tunic torn back and front by the bullet, a khaki vest dark and stiff with blood, and a pair of blood-stained breeches slit open at the top by someone obviously in a violent hurry" (Brittain 251). These items, with their visible marks of violence and suffering, signify to Brittain the horror of the war through the particularity of Roland's death. While Leighton experienced the actuality of these physical horrors, Brittain is left only with their signifiers in the form of these clothes, showing the great differences between men's and women's wartime traumas. These "gruesome rags," however, bring Brittain closer to an understanding of the war than she had previously achieved, making her "realise, as [she] had never realized before, all that France really *meant*" (251, emphasis added). This clothing thus helps Brittain assign meaning to the war.

Meanwhile, the ceremony around G.P.'s death possesses more pomp and ceremony and allows for the insertion of a narrative that leaves out the gorier elements of war. The invisibility of the body and any signifiers of its final wounds allows for the papering over of the gruesome facts that Brittain must confront when faced with Roland's uniform. For G.P. Cather's family, the

return of the body from France and the ceremony around its reburial becomes an opportunity for sense-making and for G.P.'s death to be properly ritualized and honored. Steven Trout also shows that the main speech at this ceremony did not revolve around the war as a whole, but rather around the figure of G.P. Cather as a heroic soldier making a noble sacrifice. The speech situates G.P.'s sacrifice within a more local setting to make sense of foreign war deaths (*Memorial Fictions* 28). Once again, we see the dominant cultural narrative projected onto soldiers emphasizing honor, glory, bravery, and, especially, sacrifice. This ritualized celebration of G.P. becomes a way to create a narrative that makes his death meaningful, brave, and more palatable to those left behind to mourn.

In contrast, Brittain's encounter with Roland's uniform cannot give her the same comfort. There are no kind speeches, grand ceremonies, or ritualized spectacles. There is only Vera and Mrs. Leighton, alone in Roland's childhood home with a uniform that clearly illustrates the horror his death must have been. No comforting letter could obscure this reality, once seen. The delivery of the uniform to this home brings the horror of war into the domestic sphere and face to face with women who might not otherwise be forced to confront it (of course, Vera sees this kind of horror in her work as a VAD, but Mrs. Leighton would likely be able to avoid it if not for the arrival of this emblem of it in her own home). Brittain still uses this as a sense-making tool, just a much grimmer one. Rather than situating Roland's death within a narrative of nobility and sacrifice, the arrival of the uniform helps her to reconstruct the narrative of his death, of the exact events that transpired. She sees the gashes in the uniform that indicate a rush to treat the wound, the bullet holes and blood stains where he was shot, and the dirtiness that reveals the filth in which he was forced to live during his time in the trenches. She uses these visible markers of Roland's final moments, along with information conveyed to her in letters from Roland's

fellow soldiers, to construct a detailed account of Roland's final hours and opens the chapter with this narrative.

Brittain then dramatizes her own ambivalence and vacillation in the immediate aftermath of her fiancé's death. She goes through the sense-making process, combing through letters sent by "his colonel, his fellow-officers, the Catholic padre who had buried him, and his servant" to finally "piece together" the actual events that led to his death, which "gradually . . . began to acquire coherence in [her] mind" through her exposure to these various accounts (Brittain 241). She provides the details of his death in short, direct statements, to show the brevity of the information she was given about an event so monumental in her life, as well as the vital importance that putting together this short narrative held for her. However, it could not give her complete comfort. Rather, she notes:

That was all. There was no more to learn. Not even a military purpose seemed to have been served by his death; the one poor consolation was that his routine assumption of responsibility had saved the wiring party. (243)

After acknowledging the scanty data and scanty comfort provided by the story, she claims that all her feelings about the death became consumed by one question:

I dwelt upon these facts until it seemed as though my mind would never contain the anguish that they brought me. Had it been heroism or folly, I asked myself for the thousandth time, which had urged him forth to inspect the wire beneath so bright a moon? In those days it seemed a matter of life or death to know. (243)

Brittain then wrestles internally with conflicting answers to this question. One moment she thinks it is "heroism," which "means something infinitely greater and finer" than merely doing one's duty. A paragraph later, she laments that Roland, seemingly destined "to fall in a great fight," should be instead "shot like a rat in the dark!" (243). Here, she puts into action the competing

discourses around war, debating what it means and swinging wildly between two extremes. Not only does she try to make sense of Roland's loss, but also his choices leading up to it. She struggles with whether she should blame him for a heedless decision or praise him for a brave and noble one. This oscillation reveals not only the desperate need to assign some meaning to the actions and loss of the deceased, but also the heartbreak that comes from never truly knowing.

Mrs. Wheeler, Willa Cather, and Vera Brittain also all receive letters from men who fought alongside their loved ones giving details about their deaths. Willa Cather reads the letter that was sent to her Aunt Franc, G.P. Cather's mother, by an unidentifiable lieutenant who served with G.P. Much of the rhetoric from this letter will be familiar to readers of *One of Ours*. The letter gives a fairly detailed account of G.P. Cather's time with this company and the battle in which he died. The Lieutenant¹ who writes to G.P.'s mother praises Lieutenant Cather as "conspicuous by his courage and bravery" during the battle, "absolutely cool, fearless, and a splendid example to his men, whom he handled in an able manner" (Letter to FC, 5 July 1918). This unqualified praise makes sense in the context of a letter to the dead soldier's bereaved mother, but one can see how, in the context of *One of Ours*, it might come across as unrealistic. However, very similar language is used to describe G.P. when he receives a citation for bravery and demonstrates "splendid courage and coolness" ("Major Roosevelt Cited for Bravery"). In his death scene, Claude also commands his men well and demonstrates great bravery (one could argue recklessness, especially given Brittain's account of the fine line between the two for Roland). The use of the word *splendid* in both the letter and the article about the citation also resonates with

¹ The handwriting is unclear in the letter, and I cannot make out the name of the lieutenant

One of Ours, for it is Claude's search for "something splendid" that draws him to war (Cather 46).

This lieutenant's letter to Franc Cather also contains reassurances about G.P.'s death and burial. Of the moment of death, he writes: "he died instantly" (Letter to FC, 5 July 1918), just as Claude dies an instant and "clean" death when he is shot at the end of the novel (Cather 367).

The lieutenant then offers further reassurances about the body itself. He states,

An officer buried [G.P.] that night behind the lines. His grave is marked with a cross, his name being on the cross, also company and regiment. The chaplain of the regiment has the location. His belongings were turned over to the effects section of the A.E.F. and no doubt will be returned. (Letter to FC, 5 July 1918)

Thus, rituals were performed after death, and steps were taken to ensure that the family knew what was done with the body. Willa Cather would visit this grave in 1920 and note that the name was misspelled (*Memorial Fictions* 37). Even later, the body would be exhumed and reburied in Nebraska with a great deal of ceremony, as discussed above. From this letter, we can see not only that Cather got some of her most-criticized details in *One of Ours* from letters describing her cousin's actual death (although the letters themselves likely were made more palatable to comfort the deceased's family), but also that certain prescribed narratives around war were sent through letters to those not present at the front.

After receiving letters detailing Roland's death, Vera Brittain undergoes the same process when her brother and her two best friends are killed. When her brother Edward dies, she is again disappointed by the lack of real information she receives. After reading this section of *Testament of Youth* after the memoir's release, Colonel Hudson, who fought in the war with Edward, reached out to Vera Brittain to provide more information. He met with her and, although Brittain did not discuss this meeting publicly, the colonel's own memoirs show that he told Brittain about

her brother's homosexuality during this meeting. Hudson actually told Brittain that Edward was warned about an impending court martial for his same-sex relationships the day before his death. Hudson feared that Edward intentionally walked into enemy fire and committed suicide due to this threat, but Vera remained unconvinced (Bostridge and Berry 131). This episode demonstrates that Brittain was right that the truth of war was kept from those at home to spare them unnecessary pain and was often far more complicated than the honorable service and swift death promised to the family. Brittain believes that she wants to know the "reality" rather than the trite phrases doled out to grieving family members, but when confronted with more of the story she chooses to disregard it. She decides how Edward's life will be remembered after he is gone and deems this part of the story not suitable to include in her other writings about Edward and the war following this revelation.

III. Conclusion

What is the appropriate tone to adopt toward war, the proper meaning to assign it, and the right kind of narrative to make sense of it? Willa Cather and Vera Brittain circle these questions in *One of Ours* and *Testament of Youth* without answering them definitively. Rather, each demonstrates the struggle for those who survived the war to talk about those it killed and the experience in general without resorting to prevalent discourses around wartime heroism, glory, and honorable sacrifice. To mourn these soldiers required a discourse of wartime mourning that often relied on these tropes. Cather uses free indirect discourse to introduce multiple perspectives on these questions. Although she does not give precedence to any particular way of thinking about the war, she does give Mrs. Wheeler's thoughts about the war's meaninglessness the last word in the text. In this way, Cather upends the usual gendered

assumptions about war narratives: that men—particularly men who have experienced combat—will see through to the meaninglessness of war, while women who lack war experience will be fooled by the seductive rhetoric of honor achieved through wartime sacrifice. Cather and Brittain both give their most overtly glorifying language about war to their male soldier characters (although some male soldiers do express disillusionment), and the most notably critical, skeptical rhetoric (or in Cather's case, the most significantly positioned skepticism at the very end of the text), to the women who outlive the fallen soldiers.

Despite the many questions from reviewers and scholars about the realism of Cather's war depiction, this glorification of war by male soldiers has its basis in reality. It comes from G.P. Cather's actual letters and is supported by Roland Leighton's. While Claude's idealistic perspective on war certainly does not reflect every soldier's experience of or attitude toward war, there were men who thought and felt about combat as he did. Both Cather's and Brittain's texts come out of the losses that inspired them to write. Letters are central to making sense of that loss, as they allow these women to connect to the male soldiers that died and enter into conversation with the narratives they created. The rituals around death, including G.P. Cather's reburial and the return of Roland's uniform, also help them make meaning of the war deaths. As women, these authors were kept from the action of war but still felt its effects. Framing the events of the war through the objects (letters, uniform), narratives, and rituals that they do encounter helps to contextualize and make sense of a trauma experienced at a distance.

Bringing these two texts together allows us to foreground the work of mourning and sense-making in *One of Ours*. These are already at the center of scholarship on *Testament of Youth*, and some critics have also worked on these concepts in relation to *One of Ours*. Cather's novel begins and ends with loss: inspired by the death of her cousin and concluded with

Claude's death and his mother's mourning of it. Delving further into these aspects of the text allows for greater understanding of the ambivalence within the novel and its source in the competing discourses around war: the rhetoric of mourning that helps one process the scope of the war's devastation on the one hand and the war's utter meaninglessness on the other.

Testament of Youth also brings with it the idea of women's specific war traumas and the ability for narrative to work toward healing these. By taking mourning and its impact on war narratives as the point of departure rather than the question of whether or not Cather's portrayal of war is realistic, we can better understand what *One of Ours* shows us in terms of the way narratives are constructed and used to process collective traumas, as well as women's roles in processing and framing the meaning of this devastating historical event.

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