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Role of Women in Service

by Neil Davis

(History 1120)

In the novel, *Not So Quiet...Stepdaughters of War*, by Helen Zenna Smith, a theme that is introduced is that of women's role in service. During the times leading up to the First World War, the men of England had to leave their farms and factory jobs behind and fight. As the war progressed, women were called into service to help out in any way that they could, mainly to take care of the wounded men. This essay will specifically discuss and analyze the role of women before, during, and after WWI.

Prior to the war, women's role in society included work in the home and taking care of the household and children. Some lower skilled women worked in the textile mills completing very dangerous jobs for long hours. However, other women were turning to higher education to move up the workforce ladder: "[c]ollege women were a new elite; their advent shaped roles on all fronts—home, work, and 'world'" (Woloch, 279). These women coined the term "professional women" because they were college trained and working in professional careers. Some of the women dominated certain careers including teachers, nurses, librarians, and social workers. Women thrive in these fields due to their caring, nurturing mentalities. Teaching has always been a predominantly female occupation, but during this time women with college degrees were replacing the uneducated, younger women teachers in the schools. Several women wanted to study law but that was one of the few careers that were male dominated: "[t]he legal profession was highly organized and the courtroom, like the saloon, a male citadel" (Woloch, 279). For the few that wanted to enter this field, they often had family members in the business and were able to be trained at their practices. At the turn of the century, some women had been accepted into the field and were able to receive their legal licenses. However, they were still unable to enter the courtroom and were given jobs performing office work for males. The medical field was another popular profession that women were interested in, as it was not male dominated. Women "[t]reat[ed] mainly [other] women and children, they charged less than male competitors, and often worked out of offices in their homes" (Woloch, 280). As the First World War began, women's priorities and jobs severely shifted, as more opportunities arose.

As many of the men left for service, women had to leave their own careers and help by taking the male jobs that were left behind. At the start, they took up factory work doing jobs such as building heavy machinery or making bullets: "[i]n England the munitionettes as they were dubbed, numbered nearly a million" (Coffin, 765). As the war continued, women were needed on the war front, serving under the American Expeditionary Force "as nurses, clerical workers, canteen workers and telephone operators" (Woloch, 377). Being a nurse during this time of war was a very gruesome and hazardous occupation. They had to be close to the front lines and enemy fire and always on alert to help the wounded soldiers. The conditions they worked in were often unsanitary, with a very limited amount of medical supplies, which led to many diseases and amputations. On the home front, 12,000 women enlisted in the Navy and Marine Corps and many of them worked in army offices or hospitals (Woloch, 377). Nellie Smith, the main character in *Not So Quiet*, is a 21 year old volunteer ambulance driver. Throughout the book her troubles working as an ambulance driver as documented to depict the horrible conditions women faced while working on the war front. One night, Nellie draws the Number Thirteen Hospital as her station, which is the most dreaded of them all. This is because it is "the farthest one out of camp...on top of the hill with a rough, detestable,

badly-winding road,” that is difficult to drive “with a load of wounded on a pitch black night in a hurricane of wind” (Smith, 36). Also, Nellie is subject to acquiring diseases and infections from transporting wounded soldiers and eating poorly. The food prepared for the workers is unsanitary as one may “find hair-combings in the greasy gravy; bits of plate-leavings from the day before and an odd hairpin” (Smith, 51). Everything about their life and jobs reeked of uncleanness. For example, the ambulances that the women drive had to often be cleaned out as they became so filthy from vomit, blood and mud: “cleaning an ambulance is the foulest and most disgusting job” (Smith, 59). The war hardened women, especially those who took care of gruesome injuries and witnessed death on a daily basis. After the war, perceptions of women working once again shifted, this time for the worse.

As the soldiers returned home from war, women’s roles in the factories were severely cut. Women were no longer needed to work male jobs and the government treated them poorly. For all the work they did throughout the war, including taking care of the men, one would think they would be treated the opposite and praised for their hard work. Unfortunately this was not true, and women were treated with less respect. The government and employers sent them home after the war and gave the jobs to the returning veterans. Women were often widowed after war and had to take care of their family and relatives. However, because women were losing their jobs it was difficult to provide for their family as earnings were very low. Working male jobs provided women with a higher pay and more money to spare for the household. Now they had “to return to their poorly paid traditional sectors of employment: the textile and garment industries and domestic service” (Coffin, 766). World War I provided women the opportunity to work in different jobs usually dominated by males, but ultimately the war took away those same opportunities as it came to an end.

Throughout history, women in the workforce have had several ups and downs, and World War I is a prime example of this demonstration. Before the war, women were beginning to broaden their options as their education and experience increase, making them more qualified for different jobs. During the war, women were called to the forefront to become nurses and ambulance drivers to aid in treating wounded men. After the war, men returned to their former jobs, taking them away from the hard-working women. The war solved and created problems of employment for women as they were treated with less respect than their male counterparts. Women in the workforce deserve more recognition for the work they completed while the men fought and should not have been subjected to the poor treatment afterwards that they received.

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