**War Poetry** | *Many Sisters to Many Brothers*, by Rose Macauley



Macaulay’s 1914 poem expresses women’s envy of men’s freedom to go to war (service being voluntary until conscription began in 1916). The sister of the poem voices her frustration to her absent brother at not being able to play her part. This feeling was not a rare one. Vera Brittain, another young woman aspiring to equal her brother, had felt similarly. In her war diaries she records how she felt in 1914: ‘To-day I started the only work it seems possible as yet for women to do, the making of garments for the soldiers. I started knitting sleeping-helmets.’ And while she struggles to knit, her brother volunteers for military service.

To us, this envy might appear naïve, but we need to bear in mind that these young middle-class women were caught up in that initial romaticisation of the war which followed the declaration. And this was before women had been granted the vote and entry into many professions – these were freedoms that would only come after the war. It was also before either Macaulay or Brittain had the opportunity to join the war effort as Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses from 1915 – an experience that Brittain would later describe in her war memoir, Testament of Youth as ‘the tutelage to horror and death.’

Source: The Conversation

1. Make detailed annotations on the poem; think hard and really reflect on the frustration that Macauley feels – not necessarily just about the war itself, but also the wider role and expectations of women in the early twentieth century.
2. Watch Professor Jo Fox reflect on the use of women as symbols, victims and homemakers in WW1 propaganda –<https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/women-in-world-war-one-propaganda>

**Many Sisters to Many Brothers**

The use of brackets helps to create an informal, conversational tone; it is as if we are being spoken to directly, which evokes a sense of realism and makes the central message of the poem seem more compelling

Anecdote emphasises that the speaker is just as capable as her brother

When we fought campaigns (in the long Christmas rains)

With soldiers spread in troops on the floor,

I shot as straight as you, my losses were as few,

My victories as many, or more.

The distinctive rhyme scheme conveys the energy, enthusiasm and confidence of the speaker

And when in naval battle, amid cannon’s rattle,

Fleet met fleet in the bath,

My cruisers were as trim, my battleships as grim,

The verb ‘swift’ shows that the speaker’s submarines moved quickly and dynamically through the water – a further indication of her capability

My submarines cut as swift a path.

Or, when it rained too long, and the strength of the strong

Surged up and broke away with blows,

I was as fit and keen, my fists hit as clean,

Your black eye matched my bleeding nose.

Was there a scrap or ploy in which you, the boy,

Could better me? You could not climb higher,

Ride straighter, run as quick (and to smoke made you sick)

… But I sit here, and you’re under fire.

Oh, it’s you that have the luck, out there in blood and muck:

You were born beneath a kindly star;

All we dreamt, I and you, you can really go and do,

And I can’t, the way things are.

In a trench you are sitting, while I am knitting

A hopeless sock that never gets done.

Well, here’s luck, my dear; – and you’ve got it, no fear;

But for me…. a war is poor fun.