Discussion Questions for ***Testament of Youth***

**Directions**: These questions are only for our discussion—no need to write your answers, at least not as homework. As you read the excerpt from the memoir this film is based on, keep in mind that I’m leaving out vast swathes of the story. It will be much easier to answer the questions after you’ve seen the film.

1. **Vera likable?**

Both Mark Bostridge and the actress playing Vera have said they did not find Vera particularly likable, though they sympathized with her plight. Bostridge added, though, that he feels “we need complex women characters. It is very easy to portray people as heroines—so many modern films portray babes or go for hagiography [portraying them as saints]—so it’s great to have a film that portrays a complex figure in an interesting way.” Do you agree that’s what this film does? Do you find her likable, or admirable, or overly romanticized, or what? Why?

2. **Rights for “Bluestockings”?**

A significant conflict early in the film arises over Vera’s intense desire to go to college—specifically at Oxford—and her parents’ belief that such an experience would be inappropriate for a girl. In her memoir, Brittain adds that when her mother’s friends heard of Vera’s academic ambitions, they asked, “How *can* you send your daughter to college, Mrs. Brittain! . . . Don’t you want her ever to get *married*?” (73) (It should be noted that Vera had already received one proposal and refused it.) Sadly, when Vera goes to Oxford to take the entrance exams, she also meets a certain resistance from one of the Oxford women administering the exam, who judges her to be too provincial and (because of her clothing) too frivolous.

* Considering Vera as she’s presented in the film, would you say that it makes a certain sense to call her a “daughter of the father,” that is, someone who rejects conventional feminine identity to claim a more “masculine” role? [This term is from *The Heroine’s* Journey, discussed on page 43.] Why or why not?
* How does this relate to the experience of Gita (from *Swades*) and Mathilde (from *Ridicule)*, who also face resistance when they try to make learning a major part of their life?
* How does this warning that a women’s chances of marriage might be damaged if she gets too much education relate to our own society?

3. **Vera and Rolland: true love or youthful infatuation?**

Mark Bostrige, a biographer and consultant on the film, pointed out that Vera and Roland met only 17 times before they were betrothed. In the film, does this look like mere youthful infatuation, or do the characters seem to be really in love, soul mates who belong together? Be ready to explain your answer.

4. **Edward, the perfect brother.**

In addition to Roland, another major figure in Vera’s life is her younger brother, Edward. Consider how the film deals with the implications that he is gay. Should this suggestion have been more developed? Why or why not? How does this theme, submerged though it is, contribute to the film’s depiction of masculine ideals in this society? Considering not only Edward but also his peers and the older men we see, what seem to be the key virtues of men, particularly men of Edward’s class? From what we can tell from the film, how does this society’s ideals of manhood compare with our own?

5. **Foregrounding the poetry in love and war.**

In his award-winning, highly influential study of WWI, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, cultural critic Paul Fussell has a chapter called “Oh What a Literary War,” wherein he notes that perhaps the largest proportion of soldiers in history were not only literate but “vigorously literate,” and inclined to interpret their wartime experience through the lens of classical literature. In the film, we certainly see this is Roland and Vera, both in the poems they write before the war and the poems that articulate their changing perceptions of war. Writing her memoir many years later, in the early 1930s, Vera would have been influenced by the poetry of disillusioned soldiers such as Siegfried Sassoon, who also survived the war.

How does this work in the film? How does the inclusion of so much poetry shape your understanding of the war, the characters we see experiencing it, and the society that produced them?

**6. Ideals of war and peace.**

A major theme of Brittain’s memoir and of this film is the transformation of Vera’s romantic, chivalric ideals of war. We watch as she moves through disillusionment to an embrace of pacifism. In an article about the film for *The Telegraph*, Rosie Alison, one commentator, said this: “All of us go through the journey of youth and hope and thinking the world is one way and then having to encounter dark and difficult reality. Her [Vera’s] story is that in extremis. That’s why it is important to keep telling it.”

What do you think of this? Did Vera’s disillusionment seem relatable to you? Did the film seem to support her view by the end? Should the film have shown more of her political activism after the war? Why or why not? Do you think Vera’s pacifist views are more consistent with mainstream America’s views of war, or is pacifism still a minority view?