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# Forbidden Zone: *Borden on the Borders of War and Gender*



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## **Abstract**

Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* is a starkly modernist approach to writing about The Great War and approaches it from a unique perspective—that of a female nurse on the edges of the front lines. Borden blends memoir, poetry, and realism to inform her reader of the blurred realities of a war where borders between nations or people are often uncertain. Borden's unique approach allows her to portray the otherwise incommunicable suffering of war and translate it into a photograph of her experience.

In Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone*, the very first words the author has to her audience are to assure them that what they are reading is grounded in reality and real experience: Borden's note in the preface promises, "I have not invented anything in this book" (Borden 3). What may seem a surprising opening statement can be found to be reasonable in understanding the expectations set by early 20th century readers; female writers were believed less grounded in hard fact and women never wrote about war in any direct regard,

but there is also another, much more subtle reason that Borden lays out a direct grounding of her own work. Her experiences during the war as a hospital nurse on the frontlines clearly shaped her, yet the book is presented in a collection of short stories, apparently disjointed fragments given no particular order or emphasis. Borden herself calls them “fragments of a great confusion,” to indicate that there is an inherent blurriness and obfuscation of the literal and created elements of her work. However, she assures that they are still as real as her practice of nursing injured and dying men in hospitals near the front. This confusion and noise represent a style that would be new to the reader and is an example of modernism. *The Forbidden Zone* employs modernist approaches to war and storytelling using them to break down walls between genres, experiences of war and gender.

Part of the blurry new reality of literary technique created by Borden stems from her direct experience as a veteran of wartime life on the frontlines without being a soldier. She was one of a few women from the period who wrote about their experiences in war, in this case as a nurse, and helped bring about changes to expectations of women writers. In the introduction and preface of her study, *At Home, At War: Domesticity and World War I in American Literature*, Jennifer Haytock lays out the distinctions between war literature and domestic literature. She argues that they had been historically categorized as men’s and women’s genres respectively, thus connoting war literature as an important element of American literature and life. Haytock argues that the same should be true for domestic novels since we can view “domestic writing as a way for women to portray their inner lives and at the same time comment on the social and political contexts in which they live” (xii). She suggests that war literature and domestic literature are linked by virtue of portraying different sides of the same coin: war literature uses the serene, dry ideal of home as a counterpoint to the chaos and violence of war. Likewise, the domestic novel often incorporates war or outside conflict to upset the balance of home and showcase the importance of a strong domestic life. If these two genres are so clearly linked using “the same strategy,” (xvii) as Haytock claims, their gendered barriers of separation begin to break down. With home having different meanings for men and women but ultimately the same value of importance,

writings of home can no longer be separated on a gender line, thus the argument for war literature to do the same will follow.

Ariela Freedman laid out the same argument in her article “Mary Borden’s Forbidden Zone: Women’s Writing from No-Man’s-Land,” examining how women would write of the war because it was such a dominant element of their life, but could not write of direct combat experience; instead focusing on how “the many absences of the war surrounded them” (Freedman 111). In this way they helped expand war literature beyond the domain of solely the ‘soldier-poet,’ as Freedman refers to them, and broaden the view to the social, political and cultural elements of war created and destroyed. The merger of domestic literature, war literature and life become an attack on the foundation of masculine writing, whether intentional or not.

In Borden’s own work, we see wounded men portrayed more as damaged goods than harmed human beings, and their inability to fight is often directly linked to some kind of effeminate malaise and quasi-uselessness. In the chapter “The City in the Desert,” Borden writes of the breakdown of the recognizability of humanity and men, yet “they only remind one of men” (76). She compares the men she sees near the front to machines that have been rendered broken, “their faces are grey and wet as if modelled of pale mud ... [and] they have gone rusty lying out there in the mud, in the backwash” (76). Here the language use is strikingly specific as referential to golems, if not intentionally by Borden. Golems are Jewish folkloric creatures, made of clay and animated by magi; ultimately, they are only as alive as the desires of their creator to use them. These damaged and broken men have become golems, made only of the earth; their bodies only as important as repairable vessels for carrying out orders. It is only in the repairing of these broken tools of violence that women garner any direct positive comparison to men; their ability to keep the living cog of the war machine functioning is inextricably linked to the dichotomy of gender. Freedman claims, “the war not only challenged notions of masculinity, but also called into question the role of women and the very category of the human” (Freedman 113). Gender clearly plays a role in the humanizing of people, as femininity was devalued by the patriarchal society and its

expectations. It did gain a pedestalized, if limited and dehumanized, respect when participating in expected and permitted roles. This dehumanization of war and violence, and experiences for both male soldiers and female nurses is an important element of the Great War and of Borden's work.

### The Sound of Violence

In her article “‘But If You Listen You Can Hear’: War Experience, Modernist Noise and the Soundscape of *The Forbidden Zone*,” Nora Lambrecht quotes Great War veteran Robert Graves from a BBC interview. When asked about telling his family his experience in the war, he explains, “You couldn’t: you can’t communicate noise. Noise never stopped for one moment – ever.” Lambrecht argues that noise is two-fold: the literal sonic sensation of noise as “discordant sound” and a chaotic barrier to knowledge and understanding information. Both of these play a role in modernist literature as a simultaneous tool of communication and a border between those capable of navigating the noise and those who can’t. Borden’s acknowledgement of noise as an important element of war experience is attested to early on in *The Forbidden Zone*; Lambrecht quotes Borden on possible comprehensive difficulties for “those who have never heard for themselves the voice of the War.”

Sound is the most living thing throughout most of *The Forbidden Zone*. Early on, the audience doesn’t hear the sounds of dying men or cries of terror, then in the story “Bombardment” we see that “at last signs of terror and bewilderment appeared in the human anthill beneath” (Borden 12). Borden paints a picture of an aeroplane performing a bombing run on a small town and the response of the soldiers and citizens who occupy it. Humanity is left off until the last paragraph of the second page, when it finally shows itself, not as people, but as insects. Borden also later compares the people below to scurrying rats, ultimately always vermin. Personification is held solely for the aeroplane itself, described by an admirer as it carries out its mission through the night until dawn when “nevertheless the sun rose, touching the aeroplane with gold, and the aeroplane laughed. It laughed at the convulsed face of the town...” (Borden 13). This disregard for human life and worship of the advancement of the war-machine does not reflect Borden’s personal views but is used as a telescope to

highlight the barbarity of the war. This is the war as viewed through the eyes of those who wage it, of war itself. In doing so Borden places herself in the canon with the likes of Hemingway or Boyd when it comes to the dehumanization of men and bloody destruction, guaranteeing her authenticity and proper place in writing about war. There is no conversation, no words of excitement or hatred, just images and carefully chosen descriptions. Instead, we listen only to the sound of a lazy small-town morning when “suddenly a scream burst from the throat of the church tower” (11), highlighting the pain of noise and the inability for noise and communication to coexist. Where there is sound, there is noise, and this noise can only connote pain and death, which is antithetical to humanization and communication.

Noise for Borden is not just the noise of bombs, machinegun fire and destruction but also that of wounded men in medical tents and dehumanizing noises of the dying. In “Blind,” Borden is already caring for a dying soldier. A new man is brought in with no space, so his stretcher bearers wait around “while the little boy who had been crying for his mother died with his head on my breast” (92). This noise of a crying child is not just a reflection of the pain of the soldier, but also the complete breakdown of coherent and conscious communication. He can’t convey the pain through anything other than tears, which while raising empathy also simultaneously creates a barrier to understanding between individuals. Borden’s comparison of him to a little boy and of herself to a surrogate motherly figure serve to remind the audience of the destructive capabilities of words and ideas when trauma and pain becomes the predominant force on a person. Like the mother, Borden can do nothing to ease this man’s suffering or save him and must simply wait out his life. There is a gap between the experience of being a nurse trying to care for hundreds of wounded men, and the need for comfort of a dying soldier who will not last long. Borden is torn between the need of the individual versus that of the group; to cater to one is to ignore the other, as she can’t move to the larger group of potential survivors without abandoning this dying man in his final moments. These gaps in experience create discordant noise that raises barriers in communication and can reflect differences not just in war experience, but also in gender experience. Here borders are no longer simply between nations or neighbors, but also

separations between understanding and experience of violence, trauma, gender and self. Borden explores her world of personal experiences, taking advantage of these barriers and writing them such that they help convey the very issues she highlights. She's on the frontlines of a war in which borders between nations, gender and ethics are often blurry; these blurs can be translated into ideas that are more universally communicable to the layman who presumably does not share a war experience with the author.

### **Gender and Dehumanization**

Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* is aptly titled: it both refers to the area of land outside of the firing range of German artillery, which Borden's field hospital was near, and to the very presence of women so close to the front in the first place. War is depicted in *The Forbidden Zone* as a man's effort and a man's game, with women being broadly forbidden from it with the exception of nursing and medical care. Yet, even by engaging in this permitted behavior Borden is already treading on the edge of that zone of allowance for gender roles. Running a wartime hospital and being a nurse on the front lines makes Borden as much a direct participant in the war as any soldier, with very similar risks and consequences. At the end of the chapter "Blind," the blind soldier brought in at the beginning of the story tells Borden he was without company and "abandoned here alone" (103). This inflicts Borden with a terrible awareness of her surroundings. She notes she "seemed to be breaking to pieces" (103) when she lies to the soldier, telling him he was not alone or forgotten. He smiles, and she runs to hide beginning to sob. The trauma of handling so many wounded, dead and dying men has finally gotten to her after more than twelve hours of straight work. Her role as caretaker is exemplified here, her strength and will showcasing strongly how much she could handle, but the older male nurses only notice that "she is tired" (103). Borden's femininity comes through as much as it is allowed with the artificial limiters of a wartime environment encouraging dispassionate detachment. This is in direct contrast to the expectations set for a wartime nurse, a woman expected to be nurturing, caring and motherly to the men she is treating. She clearly cares for these men and does her damndest to make sure as many of them survive as possible while

maintaining as much emotional distance and detachment from them as she can. Both of these states of being co-exist simultaneously and are seemingly contradictory, but they ultimately both feed into Borden's actual and expected role as a nurse.

In their article "The Double Helix," Margaret and Patrice Higonnet use the metaphor of a "double helix" to explain that the gendered role of women is counter to that of men and always subordinate, as "the actual nature of the social activity is not as critical as the cultural perception of its relative value in a gender-linked structure of subordination" (34). During war this will indicate that the role of soldier is inextricably masculine and the role of civilian or nurse is inextricably feminine and subordinate, regardless of the actual gender of the individual. Borden's seemingly contradictory experiences of expectations can thus be explained as an overlap of the DNA strands on the helix: by participating in war in any fashion her role becomes by default more masculine than that of the roles of any women not on the front lines. It carries with it some of the expectations of that gendered experience, in the suppression of emotional responses and stoicism, without actually becoming male and thus garnering the "rewards." Because of this mixed role, Borden is still expected to perform her femininity and thus needs to still be, to some degree, a caring and compassionate nurse. These borders between male and female roles break down the closer one is to the front, closer to the borders between the French and German armies. The conflict largely consisting of wounded men and distant explosions mirrors the violence and murkiness of gender during the war, as noted by Higonnet, seems to show that "in this social dance, the woman appears to have taken a step forward," (35) while in reality roles and respect are simply being shifted around and changed because of the circumstances of wartime where both genders are gradually dehumanized.

This dehumanization is epitomized in "Rosa," a story about a large soldier who attempts suicide, fails and is left in Borden's hospital to be cared for. He never gives his name, only repeatedly calling out the name Rosa, so Borden begins to refer to the soldier as Rosa. Here the conflict between nursing and wartime policy as examples of femininity and masculinity respectively, is



best highlighted. Rosa is to be executed for attempted suicide, with the hospital expected to keep him alive until his sentencing and execution. Borden resists, stating to the general, “here you are with your military regulations asking me to save him for you so that you can shoot him” (69). Men are expected to perform heroically and sacrifice themselves for their country, to commit violence against a foreign enemy at the request of their generals and politicians, but they are not allowed to commit violence in non-permitted ways, such as murder back home or violence against the self, as Rosa does. The state has monopolized violence, controlling and owning it in all its forms and dehumanizing soldiers to use solely as tools to carry out that violence, while glorifying the men who carry out their orders. Men are allowed to live only by virtue of being more successfully violent than their enemy and violence outside of these defined roles is considered a failure punishable by death; their bodies are not self-owned anymore; the state has monopolized these as well.

Even here noise is an important element of the story in conveying this living nightmare of expectations, since Rosa only speaks to cry out the name Rosa all conversation involving him is left without his speech. The only quotations involve other characters whose conversations orbit around Rosa, painting an uncertain picture of the state of Rosa’s mind and personal feelings. These moments are told rather than directly experienced by the reader, helping to remove any sense of agency the audience might have in participating in Rosa’s story, thus further dehumanizing him. Ironically his suicide before and during the story are the only times he engages as a principal actor rather than passive experiencer of his own life. The experience leaves the readers ultimately witnessing the gradual deaths of men who are already dead without participating in any manner by which they can be saved. The border between action and inaction is strongly spotlighted here by Borden, but like her, readers are just as incapable of crossing the line to change anything.

Here Borden’s role as a woman and nurse also come into conflict with her position at a military hospital; she must care for and treat this wounded man, must save him and be a savior herself, only for his life to be taken by the very people demanding his life not end prematurely. Borden’s gendered role is

in some ways more free and sovereign, but only insofar as to not be allowed to be a facilitator of death, just like Rosa. Borden and the other nurses are forbidden from even directly euthanizing Rosa, since that would violate official ethics and military regulations. Instead they must keep up a pattern of constantly bandaging his head so that “every night he tore off his bandage, and then let himself be tied up again,” (68) ultimately he dies, in a respect, as another suicide. This blurred separation between men and women is a result of the state monopoly on the bodies and roles of both genders, where they become inextricably linked to one another through this mirror experience of permissible violence.

### **At War with Reality**

As previously mentioned, one of the greatly interesting elements of Borden’s *The Forbidden Zone* is the discussion of genre, fact and fiction. Borden’s introduction discusses the book as being composed of many “fragments of a great confusion,” which lines up with much of her storytelling, as it has been shown that there is some murkiness to the details of her book and less attention has been paid to the direct and literal experience. Ariela Freedman describes it as “mix[ing] the genres of essay, fiction, and poetry” (Freedman 110) with no favour given to any particular genre or style over another. Freedman further claims, “Borden attempts to go beyond ‘representation’ to ‘iteration’ by using strategies of dislocation that destabilize the reader,” (Freedman 110) such as the “Bombardment” story where the focus is on an aeroplane personified more than any of the humans involved, who are portrayed as vermin. Even the story itself is seemingly random, without any characters or proper plot its position in the book is completely unrelated to any of the surrounding material. There is no direct correlation to the previous story or the following one so the insertion seems entirely arbitrary.

This tactic is effective in that Borden is showing how these experiences and stories are merely snapshots. They function like memory in that they are non-linear; sometimes purely auditory or visual; sometimes very movie-like with dialogue and a direct through-line. Laurie Kaplan writes in “Deformities of the Great War: The Narratives of Mary Borden and Helen Zenna Smith” that

“Borden mixes an overtly poetic diction with a consciously clinical vocabulary to create an elliptical form that, paradoxically, particularizes trauma” (35). Borden’s form and writing style suggest poetry and beauty at odds with actual content, and her detached “clinical vocabulary” further emphasizes this fragmentation of experience, which in itself is a mirror of Borden’s trauma. To jar a reader like this and expose them to a series of stories that at many times are unconnected in any traditional manner, is to help them explore the very idea of narrative itself. The question is raised of what exactly is the truth and what is the sequence when the author herself, a direct experience recipient of all of these events, makes claim that she has assembled them in a manner that makes the most sense, without them being direct or linear. This helps to ground the confusion and murkiness and helps epitomize trauma to the reader as something that words ultimately fail to completely convey. The poetic diction leaves lots of tiny holes for details and specifics; the clinical language cannot completely represent the emotional experience. Only through the combination of multiple writing styles and approaches to information conveyance can there be any real resemblance to lived truth. This is in direct contrast to the history of the war novel as purely documentary, as factual and literal. Freedman further notes that “many of the male writers who emerged from the trenches employed a documentary tone, drawing authority from their eyewitness accounts” (Freedman 111).

Borden’s greatest success with *The Forbidden Zone* is the classifications of the contradictory natures and expectations of trauma, and the borders that lay out the distinct kinds of trauma that society allows for and acknowledges. Her role as nurse is one of caretaker and healer, but she writes predominantly of men being broken, damaged goods in need of fixing to be used again as tools for violence. The expectations set for women are completely opposite the needs she has for stoicism and grit to push through the horrors of her trauma. By showcasing her trauma in both vibrant yet hazy poetic snapshots replete with medicalized lingo, she helps the reader understand the role society plays in both creating and healing trauma. Borden, and by extension all nurses and women, is expected to raise barriers to the trauma of war and mitigate its effects on soldiers, but also needs to cross those borders she helped create in order to

survive her own personal trauma. Borden's path between these borders helps highlight their existence and the harm created by attempts to create barriers between traumas and experiences.

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