

LESSON TWO: WOMEN AT HOME

Context

In the scene you are about to watch you will see how young working class women left behind on the home front might react. The scene reveals how little they knew about what was happening overseas. News and letters were censored so it would have been difficult for them to know what conditions were really like on the Western Front. Foreign travel was not something that most ordinary people would have experienced at this time. Later in the scene (not filmed) it also touches on the scandal and difficulties a young unwed mother would have faced at this time.

Look at the additional historical information section,
On the Home Front.

Play DVD: *Section Two – Women at Home*

The following drama exercises are intended to stimulate discussion and debate about the role of women on the home front.



Exercise One: Adventure

Travel abroad was a rare luxury for most at this time and working class women such as Betty, Polly, Hannah, Ruby and Eliza would have had little idea of the places, food and culture of France and Belgium. France for example seemed glamorous and romantic which for those serving out there could not be further from the truth.

Seat the group in a circle and ask individuals to think of one word to describe France, which they must keep to themselves. This should be very quick and take no longer than 30 seconds. Once all individuals have thought of something ask them to stand up one by one and mime their chosen descriptive word making their gestures as big and elaborate as possible.

Once done ask them to repeat the mime but this time add a sound of some kind. Once that has been done hear them for a third time but ask them to say their descriptive word as well after their mime and sound.

Once all have been heard, give the group 30 seconds to get into groups of 3 or 4 choosing other students who will complement their mime. From here each group should work on a short presentation that will 'describe' their view of France.



Exercise Two: Two Truths One Lie

Seat the group in a circle and tell them they have just 30 seconds to come up with two truths and one lie about themselves working in pairs. It must be inventive but realistic as it will be very obvious if it is too outlandish.

In turn ask each pair to present their truths and lies. The object of the exercise is to encourage the rest of the group to distinguish the lies from the truths.

Exercise Three: Moment of Truth

Keeping the group in a circle pick two confident pupils and put them into the circle. We are going to look at the scene (not filmed) where Betty tells the girls her news. Using the lines to the right, teachers should encourage a reflective discussion on the events of the scene. It is interesting to note the views of the young people today at a time where help is available. Using the lines below, taken from the play, choose a Betty and a Polly. Give line one to Polly and line two to Betty. Ask the chosen students to simply repeat the lines over and over again, experimenting with different intonation, energy and volume. The rest of the group should sit in a circle and observe the impact the different emphasis makes on the lines.

Line One: *'Scandalous, you don't do things by half!'*

Line Two: *'Left unmarried with a baby, heading for the poor house!'*

Now split the class into smaller groups and using the lines above begin to dramatise the sentences playing with, vowels, consonants, volume and 'colour' of the words. After sufficient time each group should perform their scene back to the rest of the group who should comment.

ON THE HOME FRONT

The First World War had an unprecedented effect on civilian life. Shortly after the outbreak of war the government brought in the Defence of the Realm Act, which gave it sweeping powers. News was censored, the coal mines nationalised, land and property requisitioned for military purposes, the sale of alcohol restricted and rationing introduced in 1918. Recruiting caused labour shortages, which resulted in large numbers of women doing jobs in industry, transport, agriculture and commerce previously done by men. More than 1.5 million women replaced men in the work place with 100,000 women joining the newly formed auxiliary services of the three armed forces; Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF). Zeppelin and air raids caused fear and hatred of Germany and put civilians in the front line for the first time. The war also made its impact on an emotional level, with almost every family being affected by the death or wounding of a relative or friend.

Key Points

- 1 Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) passed on 8 August 1914 gave the government considerable powers regarding censorship and controlling the lives of ordinary people.
- 2 Invasion threats were taken seriously, especially after the German naval bombardment of Scarborough and Hartlepool. A territorial force was kept on guard, especially on the east coast.
- 3 There were 103 air raids from first Zeppelin (air balloons) then Gotha aircraft, which, resulted in 1,413 people killed, and 3,407 injured.
- 4 Shortages and price rises in the cost of food plus the stranglehold caused by German submarines sinking merchant shipping, eventually led to compulsory rationing. On February 25, 1918 rationing of meat, butter and margarine came into force in London and the Home Counties and from April 7 meat rationing extended throughout Britain.
- 5 There were spy scares and 25 Germans were arrested and 11 executed.
- 6 Anti-German feeling was so great that shops with German sounding names were ransacked and 32,000 Germans living in Britain were imprisoned as enemy aliens.
- 7 Most families with loved ones in the military forces had to cope with the almost constant worry for their safety, especially during a campaign such as the Somme. Despite government propaganda casualty figures were printed.
- 8 The press stirred up further hatred of the Germans with a variety of atrocity stories concerning treatment of Belgian and French civilians. Some did have some truth such as the execution of civilians at Louvain and the execution of the British nurse Edith Cavell. Most however were exaggerated and made up, such as the bayoneting of babies. Germans living in Britain, even if they had been living in the country for several generations, now found that hatred was turned towards them.
- 9 Illegitimacy rates increased in the wartime atmosphere of living for the present. There was little sympathy for unmarried mothers and they were often turned out of their family homes and could end up in church-run homes for single and pregnant women, which were a bit like prisons, and were forced to give up their children if they could not support them.

