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## **ABSTRACT**

### **'Pitied but distrusted': Discourses surrounding British widows of the First World War.**

This thesis employs critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) to unpick the discourses surrounding British widows of men who died as a result of the First World War. The war widows' pension scheme, as implemented under the Royal Warrant of 1916, was the first (financially) non-contributory pension, and the first specifically directed towards women in Britain. Implemented against a backdrop of the first mass, industrialised war of the modern era, the discourses and ideologies underpinning it are firmly rooted in those of the previous century.

At a time when the State was intervening in the life of its citizens in more extensive way than at any previous time, it also sought to distance itself from these citizens through the use of an impersonal style of communication. This was used to present war widows' pension legislation that was framed around discourses of morality and nationalism that masks underlying parsimony and patriarchy.

This thesis draws on a wide range of resources such as charitable records, media sources and Hansard reports, concentrating on a selection of 200 individual case files relating to claims for a war widow's pension, held in the National Archive, Kew. Two case files are analysed in detail using discourse-historical analysis (Wodak, 2001) as a framework for a linguistic analysis. The two case files chosen represent widows whose experiences are typical of those found in the corpus. One widow is representative of the sizeable group of women who had their pensions stopped because of 'improper' behaviour, the correspondence in her file revealing how discourses of morality, social welfare and national identity are employed interdiscursively to deny her State funds. The second case study is more diachronic, showing how one widow, in common with thousands of others, was denied a pension on grounds on ineligibility. She employs discourses of social welfare and nationalism to support her claim over a period of nearly 40 years. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship between the State and the public altered, and this case file offers an opportunity to explore this in some detail.

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I've been doing in my mysterious research and seemingly never-ending 'writing up', Anth has managed to cheer me up over the years in countless ways. From introducing me to Harry Potter (and a whole new line of research interests in the process), to taking me out for a drink, even when he's had a 'challenging' day at work, he's always shown the greatest tolerance and good humour. Truly the best brother anyone could hope for – even if he never ceases to remind me that he went to a 'proper' university!

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## **Title note**

He pitied widows but he distrusted them. They knew too much. As free as unmarried women, they were fully armed; this was an unfair advantage, and when it was combined with beauty, an air of well-being, a gaiety which, in a woman over forty had an unsuitable hint of mischief in it, he felt that in this easy conquest over, or incapacity for grief, all manhood was insulted, while all manhood, including his own, was probably viewed by that woman as a likely prey.

E.H. Young (1947: 11) *Chatterton Square*. London: Jonathan Cape

The object of this description of a Rosamund Fraser, 'war widow' from the First World War, as perceived in the consciousness of a middle-class, middle-aged, male neighbour. Emily Young was herself a war widow, her husband having been killed at Ypres in 1917. She did not remarry but went on to live with a married man in the inter-war years. We can assume that the description of the middle-class Rosamund is taken from her own experiences and observations of war widowhood. As we will see, this pity and distrust for a middle class widow such as Rosamund in Young's novel extends to society's attitudes and the consequent legislation under which working class war widows in this thesis were framed and confined.