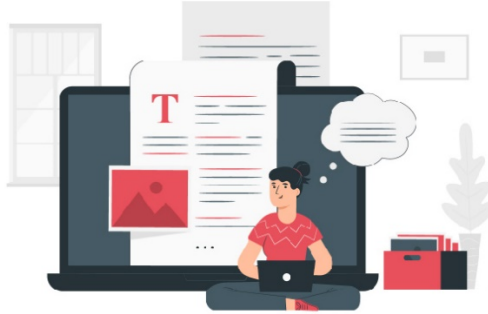


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## Trauma and Silence in the Aftermath of War: Rebecca West's *The Return of Soldier*

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### **Abstract:**

Rebecca West's war novel *The Return of the Soldier* was published in 1918, anatomizes the psychological and socioeconomic anxieties woven by the tumult of the First World War. Her art of aesthetic experimentation with Narratology not only challenges orthodox construction of the 19th-century realist novels but also rebels against the traditional structure of English society. West's legacy of the return of soldier trauma narrative, a conventional wartime mode, is unique in these alternating classist, testimonials and psychoanalytic elements. She depicts the amnesia of the physically and mentally wounded soldier, appears to be the most symbolic visual mnemonic of the Great War. In this novel the author proposes to identify transference in the analytical process as a re-experiencing of painful silence and past, unpredictable traumatic emotional states and reminiscence.

The writer achieves a clear move beyond current ethos to represent the horror of conflict, nightmares of war and the vicissitudes of the elusiveness of death suggesting the search for survival beyond trauma. The main concern of this paper analyzing traumatic experience, specifically how men and women got equally affected by trauma in the post-war period and to bring into being new literary delineation of not only shall shock but of just how vast and wide ranging its symptoms could be and shows the devastating impact of shell shock upon its victims.

**Keywords: War, Trauma, Amnesia, Home Front, Survival, Silence, Cure.**

The First World War wrought destruction on the physical and psychological landscape of Europe. At the end of war; millions of people were dead and millions more homeless, the whole European economy had collapsed. The Great War makes humans mentally crippled and ruins the calmness of their lives. The invisible scars of war from shell shock demolished the harmony and peace of life.

In his *The Great War in European Cultural History*, Jay Winter admirably presents the phenomenon of the horror of war, “To remember the anxiety of 1,500 days of war necessarily entailed how to forget; in the interwar years those who couldn’t obliterate the nightmares were locked in mental asylums throughout Europe. [...] They knew both remembering and forgetting, and by living through both they had at least the chance to transcend the terrible losses of war” (2).

The haunting memory of the Great War is captured by the many writers in the literary delineation of the traumatized soldier, returning to their homeland from war. No doubt in the context of the Great War literature, if the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen offered a glimpse of the experience on the battlefield, West's *The Return of Soldier* is an extraordinary work in itself. At the time when the entire world was grappled in devastation, Rebecca West's novel *The Return of Soldier* presents alleviation of traumatic testimony towards war. Although this novel did not directly portray the battlefield experience of war, in its fullest sense the novel concerned repercussions of a war that shattered the equilibrium of the human psyche. In his book *Modernism* Peter Childs rightly observes: "West was not only of the first war writer but also one of the first English novelists to exploit psychoanalytical theory as a narrative device"(180).

In her novel Rebecca West ignites new literary delineation of psychological upheavals and employed amnesia caused from shell shock and an atypical perspective of the war through the characters’ behaviour and their experiences of the past. In a subtlety elucidation of a typical trope of a soldier's return, Christopher Bradley is a shell-shocked soldier consigned from the western front where he gets injured in battle and loses his memory and has trapped his mind fifteenth years in the past. His experience in war has left him incapable of reminiscing about his nuptials to his wife, Kitty, or the death of their son, Oliver too. Chris had completely forgotten his cousin Jenny along

with his wife, if he had any memory, then it was Margaret, his first love. Chris had not found a balance between his inner and outer worlds. The plight of the shocked soldier is entering into an exotic world where all he knows is that he cannot trust his own cerebrum. It is this strain on the identity and the self, have been so well documented by West through the use of metaphorically narration: “This house is different.’ If the soul has to stay in his coffin till the lead is struck asunder, in its captivity it speaks with such a voice” (West 25).

The struggle of Christopher to reconcile his idealization of a past love with the impending demand of warfare and the modern world is the main motif of trauma theory. The engrossment of Christopher's mental breakdown and immersion in the past or subsequent cure subtly couches the critic's attention. The role of Nostalgia is ultimately revealed as a debilitating state of mind and in the novel, it is a useless means of escaping from the harshness of the present, envenomed by the inexplicable shackles of the past and horrors of the Great War.

Christopher Baldry's hysterical neurosis becomes an aesthetic contrivance that literalizes the traumatic strain, however, by analyzing the feminine aspects in West's trauma narrative, his wife Kitty and his cousin Jenny preserve the motifs of classist tension and exhibit the gender divide between the war and home fronts. A scholar Cathy Caruth, fabricating interrelationships between literary narrative and the traumatized Psyche, defines trauma as the " singular possession by the past ... while the images of traumatic re-enactment remain absolutely accurate and precise, they are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control” (Caruth 151). Here Christopher Baldry, suffering from selective amnesia that has caused him to obliterate his wedding and to retrieve only the events of fifteen years erstwhile, embodies what Caruth narrates as "the traumatic nightmare, undistorted by repression or unconscious wish ...that occupies a space to which willed access to denied"(152).

The novel navigates the disruption of ‘normal’ life and the fantasy through of the war traumatic hero. But when it is applied to Kitty and Jenny, the parameters of traumatic memory are more complex to determine. The First World War fractured the nation in the conundrum. Chris's trauma brings chaos into Kitty's perfectly arranged world, which yearns for the past's stability and alienates her from the outside world. (Or at least for her lost control over her life). But as the past

cannot be recovered, this desire for 'normality' reaches an aporia: Kitty's norms and values are no longer those of Chris, making her attempt at reconnecting with her husband narcissistic.

Chris's amnesiac cut off Kitty and Jenny from his life. The ideology of 'Home' becomes vacant in meaning for Chris, along with its inhabitants, leaving Kitty and Jenny as impoverished as he is. Furthermore, West's shift of focus from Chris's trauma to Kitty's own struggle with existence reveals her exceptional stand against established discourses and brutalities of modernity. The psychological journey that they face is the forced reconstruction of their social identification.

The silence liability placed on Kitty for Christopher's Amnesia is hardly a fair estimation of a wife who has waited loyally for his return and has suffered her own trauma from the death of her son and now through the shell-shock of her husband. In the initial pages, the description of Oliver's nursery, Baldry's son, shows how the woman tries to fight her own trauma. However, even so many years after Oliver's death the nursery room has been "kept in all respects as though there were still a child in the house" (West 3) Kitty has preserved Oliver's nursery and is undoubtedly still within the cycle of traumatic recall. The novelist clearly exposes the hollowness of relationships in the first meeting between Chris and Kitty, '*I am your wife.*' There was weak, wailing anger behind the words... He observed around for some benignity to heal the seamless wound, but he was unable and got Kitty out of this suspended caress. He saw her retreating into the shadows as though she was a symbol of this new life by which he was astonished and sad. (24). Underlying it demonstrates how Kitty is seen altering in the narrator's eyes through her new relationship with her husband. Her "beauty was as changed in grief from its ordinary-seeming as a rose in the moonlight is different from a rose by day" (22).

Further in the novel the narration of Jenny is based on wartime imagery is a more prevailing aspect of trauma fiction, but it also addresses gender tensions between the war and domestic fronts. The dissimilitude between the male and female realms of war is blurred by war movies and newspapers, allowing the knowledge of trench warfare to suffuse in text. Although Jenny had no trench warfare experience, these forms of imitation provide her with knowledge of battle scenes that serve as a metaphor for her own traumatic experience. Furthermore, Jenny deliberately uses the pattern of narrative and the formation of words reflecting her own intoxication with classist escapism.

Jenny's obsessed appreciation of the house represents a contrast to the painful memories that parallel Christopher's attempts to reconstruct the past in order to escape the disturbing realities of the present, rather than a reluctant recollection of a specific event. From the novel's opening pages, these traumatic events become apparent as recurring nightmares, as Jenny acknowledges that "Of late I have had bad dreams about him [Christopher]" (5). The dream itself is an almost visual graphic depiction of a battle scene that becomes the royal road for her. She says: "By night I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of No Man's Land, starting back there because of the awfulness of an unburied head..."(5).

Jenny's hidden love for Christopher and incapability to express in reality is transmuted in mental disorder, the haunted bitterness of war and the constant struggle for survival is equally parallel with Jenny to Christopher, this aspect of Jenny's narrative also illuminates her own traumatic perplexity.

In "*Simulation and Simulacra*", Jean Baudrillard, a post-structuralist, represents the concept of Disneyland: a world where all fantastical dreams come true apart from reality akin to Jenny in order to re-create the happiest place in dreams, she is more traumatized. Even Christopher does not remember his own experiences in the front, so it is dependent on Jenny to reconstruct them from what she has seen through social media. Her canon to see the world is that of the 'flattened' voice of the 'modern subaltern' who recalls his friend shouting "Help me, old man, I've got no legs! [Sic] And having to respond "I can't, old man, I've got no hands!"(West 5). After the first world war ended, Christopher returns to Baldry Court, Jenny describes his delusions to the present as almost as a prisoner of war, adding that "all the inhabitants of this new tract of Time were his enemies, all the circumstances, his prison bars"(29). In the expedition of trauma narrative, she imagines herself as his "trusted nurse," an ally who records his struggles to retrieve memory and self (32). The horror of war is macabre, that no human being can reside without being affected by it. The quest for survival with modern horrors and living past in a present transformed into nightmares.

West also presents a realistic picture of Baldry Court; both the females retained the luxury of Baldry Court. Nevertheless, it was only their fight to escape from themselves, which had no end. Jenny clearly says, "...I was sure that we were reserved from the reproach of luxury because

we had made a fine place for Chris, our little part of the world"(6). She maintains distorted standards of contentment. Her tortured allocation of the hardships of trench warfare is almost a disdain for the expensive lifestyle she and Kitty maintain at Baldry Court.

Aside from all aspects, the novelist exposes the plight of Margaret, she not only reflects the working class but also disclosed the hollowness of the upper class. The Novel retreats in flashback and becomes nostalgic when Margaret and Christopher were in love with each other. The outlook of Kitty or Jenny towards Margaret is completely repulsive. There was a lacuna between the rich and the poor which was created by society. The tension generated by their aversion towards the working classes comes to a head when Margaret comes to inform them of Christopher's amnesia.

In Baldry Court, Margaret was always treated as an outsider, reminiscent of the times of war that existed outside the surrounding country home. When she tries to explain Christopher's shell-shock, Kitty dismisses it as a hoax and snaps that she is inappropriate and calls her "impertinent"(14). Although she despises Kitty's disregard for Christopher's protection, Jenny admits to "hating [Margaret] as the rich hate the poor"(14).

Their dismissal of Margaret's existence comes out in a form of hatred is exemplified as the reaction of traumatic re-enactment. The distinctive perspective on the trauma narrative West infuses it with social consciousness, reminding the reader that the past that the women and Christopher were clinging to in parting ways is not necessarily the antidote to the wartime tensions they believe it to be.

Albeit Christopher Baldry turns to Margaret, his former love instead of Kitty or Jenny. The situation turned out to be more complex and heightened the jealousy of her rival. Jenny metaphorically illustrates Chris' reunion with the aged Margaret, she asserts that "there he was, running across the lawn as night after I had seen him run across No Man's Land...I assumed at Margaret's feet lay safety"(59).

Hither, the battlefield imagery manifests Jenny's Psych and expresses the stress of repudiation. Astonishingly Christopher sought refuge with Margaret, and he has forgotten her. As

much as she tries to empathize with his pleasant immersion in the past, this poignant scene turns out to be her nightmare.

No doubt, all the characters are trapped in their own desolate stretches of No Man Land, where no one finds serenity. The plight of loss and recovery is remarkable. The metaphorical language and elegant style of West characterize much of Jenny's narrative, reflecting her appropriated role as Christopher's testimonial voice, but also becomes a metaphor for her resulting eviction in the process. The impression this has taken on her conscience is made clear when she perceives that she has been "utterly cut off from Chris" and finds herself bending downstairs in a pile of leaves during a walk outside Bloody Court (63).

In spite of the fact that Jenny overcomes all mental disorders and plays the role of testimony in the novel and describes Christopher's reconciliation with Margaret as a sanctuary from the horrors of the war front. Christopher's journey for amnesia to find redemption in concluding lines, it is Deus ex machina that will cure Christopher of the shell- shock.

The psychoanalytical theory insists that patients can be cured only by removing whatever the depression is. The therapy ameliorates and relieves the suppression in reality. The past memories are recalled again to heal Christopher. In the process of reinvigorating, Dr. Anderson recognizes Margaret, the only woman whom he calls "an intellectual equal," is the one who has the idea to convince Christopher about his dead son to memorize him in the present to cure his trauma (81). Whereas Dr. Anderson instead of kitty urges Margaret to "take him something the boy wore, some toy they used to play with"(82).

Magically the curative method, however, proves effective, Meanwhile, When Christopher returns home after seeing Oliver's ball and jersey, he looks "every inch a soldier" and is affirmed "cured" by his wife (90).

Despite a favourable outcome reviving Christopher from his amnesia, the tendency to recall the present is hardly the source of a happy ending: it is slightly the tactic through which Christopher has been assessed and treated to return to normal life. It is the process of resumption of traumatic cycles through which he and the woman waiting for him have suffered over and over again. In the process of recovery Kitty's obsessive attempts to besiege herself with expensive decor is a healing



method of seeking solace from her affluence. Even after so many years after Oliver's death, she preserves everything associated with him, which shows that she did not even mourn the loss of Oliver properly. She creates a fantasy for herself in which she does not have to face the eventual death of her son or the possibility of her husband's death on the forefront. Here Kitty's melancholia has resulted from her inability to relieve traumatic stress, as she represses it through the creation of a fantasy in which it does not exist. The psychoanalytic critic Sigmund Freud recounts this phenomenon in his essay:

"*Melancholia and Mourning*" propound that "Melancholia... is on the one hand, like mourning, a reaction to the real loss of a loved object; but over and above this, it is marked by a determinant that is absent in normal mourning on which, if it is present, transforms the latter into pathological mourning"(587).

Readers become overly sympathetic when Kitty starts to balance with situations. West's novel illustrates her unique perspective on the credos of modernist representation and the larger social and cultural anxieties after the wartime. Her discourses of trauma narrative are remarkable. The inner struggle shown by the novelist is shared by all of them.

All the characters were engulfed in their own trauma and after giving up tired they find relief in silence. The horror of War makes a Man completely mentally crippled, the quest for survival becomes meaningless for them. Both those who were at home, and those who were in the war have endured the horrors of war.

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