

## **Women Depicted In The War Novel *The Return Of The Soldier* (1918)**

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### **Abstract:**

My paper aims at analyzing women character's as portrayed in the above novel *A Return of the Soldier* published in 1918 and written by a woman writer Rebecca West. It is the only novel written by a woman writer about the war and published during the war. It is her first novel and as the title suggests is an account of a shell-shocked soldier coming home. Since the novel was produced during World War I and the story undoubtedly has war at the backdrop of its writing it thus categorically falls into the canon of war literature.

The war literature speaks about not only the experiences of the soldiers on the war front which was published mostly in the form of poetry but also it deals with other forms of literary genres as well. It also speaks about the home front that is life at home during the ongoing war. The war is a reality that involves both the soldiers and civilians physically and mentally. It can be said that, most of the work during and about the experiences of war were written by men due to the war's intense demand on the young man of that generation. At least we can say, their work was much sought after than that of women writers. Only when you do a study you realize that there were women writers as well who created literature about the war, giving their work a feminine touch.

My study demonstrates the life of women at home while their husbands were busy fighting at the war front. It analyses their role at home and focuses on the effect war had on their everyday life. The chosen author is specifically female since I wanted to explore the woman writer's perspective under the canon of war literature.

**Keywords:** War literature, modernism, World War one, shell-shock, displacement, escapism, class struggle.

❖ Women's role in writing war (World War I):

While the 15<sup>th</sup> century discovered America to the whole world, the 11<sup>th</sup> Century discovered women to herself- - -

E.W. Harper

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a battleground for women particularly in political and social spheres. 'A New Woman' came to the forefront as women began to struggle for their rights and justice. The First World War and its aftermath had altered permanently the lives of women and their function in the society. Notable writers of this period include Vera Brittain, Rose MacCaulay, Margaret Sackville, Rebecca West, Jessie Pope and Aice Maynell among others.

These women are educated, cultured and emancipated from the shackles of society. They are sensitive and highly individualistic, persuing their own visions and ideas. It is natural that these ideas would reflect in their works and not merely in their autobiographical projections.

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, British women's literature war ignored for the reason stating they hadn't participated in the war (Khan, 1988).Therefore their writings cannot be genuine. Hence only one body of work was added to the cannon of Great War Literature, that is Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933)(Barlow, 26). But this notion changed overtime and especially the research in Britain explains the importance of women's war literature and its role in shaping the feminist discourse.

Catherine Reilly has studied women's literature from First World War and its resulting impact on the relationship between gender, class and society. She published her anthology, *Scars upon my Heart* (1981), dedicated to women's poetry and prose from Second World War. In it, she demonstrates the existence of a strong female narrative. She argues that women's writing was overshadowed by the false belief that male writing was of greater importance. (4) (Barlow 2000, p.27).Scholar Vincent Sherry agrees, noting that women had a strong and powerful literary voice, that until recently had been ignored.Feminist historians categorize women writings from front to be authentic representation of the war. David Trotter, a literary historian asserts that the addition of women's writing helps provide a more encompassing, and thus, stronger picture of Britain's involvement in the First World War (Trotter 2005, P.34).

The chosen novel for the study is Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* published in 1918. It is considered to be the only war novel, written and published by the woman writer during the World War I. As the title suggests the novel is an account of a return of the shell-shocked soldier home. Set during World War I on an isolated country estate just outside London, Rebecca West encapsulates the effect the war had on the soldier as well the three women characters at 'home-

front'. The story is a bittersweet homecoming of the soldier suffering from amnesia and the effect that he would in turn have on the three women.

My paper focuses on the socio-economic and psychological effect of the war on the 'women' at home. Unlike the title, that states the return of the soldier (shell-shock) to the home front the novel is more about the impact soldier's return had on the women at home. My paper thus explores this impact. As Verlyn Klinkenborg asserts it is imperative to read this novel as West's means of analyzing the experience of being female. This distinction between 'home front' and 'war front' has gendered identification. 'Home Front' carried the meaning of home and domesticity and women thus feminine. 'War Front' on the other hand defined men at war and masculinity. Suzan R. Grayzel states, while problematic, this gendered identification worked to support the traditional male and female paradigm in Britain. (Grayzel, Susan, P.11).

The plot of the novel can be outlined briefly: Christopher (Chris) Baldry returns home with amnesia, losing his last fifteen years memory. Hence, forgetting his wife Kitty Baldry and his cousin Jenny, who is the narrator of the story. Chris's amnesia also makes him forget the death of their son, Oliver. He only remembers Margaret Allington, now Margaret Grey who was his love interest 15 years ago. She is the woman of the lower class, who is looked down upon the two upper class women namely Kitty and Jenny. Chris however insists to see her "if I do not see her, I shall die" (30) hence allowing Margaret to enter Baldry Court regularly. The novel deals with Chris's amnesia and his love for Margaret and Jenny's & Kitty's reaction towards the same. In order to "cure" his "illness" which is repeatedly addressed in the novel, they call in a help of a psychologist Dr. Anderson whose treatment brings him back to sanity. Hence making him return to the war front and forget his love interest Margaret who actually made him exceptionally happy. That happiness he never encountered with his marriage with kitty. (79-80)

There are various critical reactions to this end. While some critics detest his coming back to his sanity that would make him return to the war front and forgetting his love interest Margaret who made him happy in the truest sense. While, other, critics agree with Jenny when she rationalizes the 'cure' by stressing on the spiritual values of 'reality' and 'truth'.

#### ❖ Kitty Baldry

Kitty Baldry, the upper class woman of the British society is the wife of our shell-shocked soldier Christopher Baldry. She possesses an obsession over preservation of the pre-war social order. As a woman she has faced the death of their son Oliver five years ago but has not come out of the mourning process. She repeatedly visits his nursery and spends time in there. In the initial lines, Jenny narrates their entry in the Oliver's nursery wherein as Kitty "Slip(s) the key into the lock" of the nursery door" (3). The room has been "kept in all respects as though there were still a child in the house" (3). It is in Jenny's words "Kitty is revisiting her dead." (4) This disturbing environment of the scene indicates that Kitty has not mourned the death of their son in the healthy way.

Freud describes their phenomenon in his essay “Melancholia and Mourning”, asserting that “Melancholia is on one hand mourning, a reaction to the real loss of a loved object, but over and above this, it is marked by determinant that is absent in a normal mourning or which, if it is present, transforms the letter into pathological mourning” (587).

The earlier conversation of Kitty and Jenny in the text highlights their materialistic overtone wherein there are detail description of the rooms and ground of the Baldry estate. It is like their strategy wherein they are enclosed in the prewar part, where everything seems, functioning, normal. The quote from the text suggests their seeming aloofness from the horrors of war: Baldry court built with “the knowing wink of the manicurist” and “matter for innumerable photographs in the illustrated papers”, is a well maintained symbol of dying aristocracy, their haven away from the modern world. (4)

It also reminds the reader, after the splendid description of the Baldry estate that Britain is not nearly so prosperous wherein it is fighting the war putting its financial state at risk. This is a kind of repression of trauma that the female characters kitty and Jenny practice. Their prewar social hierarchy and classist stature is intact and come to foreplay as Margaret, a women of lower class comes to their estate. She is the bringer of the news of Shell-shock soldier’s return home. Yet, she is looked down upon by kitty, merely because she resembles, a lower class stature. Also Margaret becomes an irritation (11) as an outsider, a reminder of the reality that Kitty and Jenny wants to keep outside. Further when Margaret tries to explain Christopher’s Shell-shock, Kitty dismisses it as fraud and snaps at her calling her “impertinent” (13).

Her dismissal look towards Margaret and her disbelief of the news that she brings exemplifies her overall indulgence in the prewar thoughts and escapism. Wherein, she seems pitiless towards Margaret and also to the news of her husband’s Shell-Shock even after reading the telegram.

The dialogue between Kitty and Jenny on realization of Chris’s Shell-Shock, shows Kitty’s pitilessness on the surface but inwardly fear of losing her husband as indicated below:

“But Chris is ill” I cried. (Jenny)

She stared at me. (Kitty)

“You’re saying what she said.”

Indeed, there seemed no better words than those Mrs. Grey had used. I repeated:

“But he is ill!”

She laid her face against her arms again.

“What does that matter?” she wailed: “If he could send that telegram, he is no longer ours” (16).

For her, her husband has become ‘stranger’ (16) something she can’t bear to think of and his coming into the house would actionably bring the reality (war) in picture, something that she tries to escape from her everyday life. By constantly being busy with materialistic thoughts, spending lavishly on Baldry estate, she desperately tries to preserve the social order (pre-war). We can say it’s an carefully constructed defense mechanism against impending destruction brought by the ongoing war.

Kitty further in the text is insulted and hurt by the words of Dr. Gilbert Anderson when he attacks her after she suggests that Christopher would care himself “if he would only make an effort” (79). He snaps in response, declaring that “the mental life that can be controlled isn’t the mental life that matters...but that’s all technical. My business to understand it, not yours” (79). Hence showcasing his male dominance he “gleefully” and with “winking blue eyes” humiliates Kitty by repeatedly asserting that “quite obviously he (Christopher) has forgotten his life here because he is discontented with it” (79-80) though he assures her “it wasn’t (her) fault”, Jenny understands this as a superficial comment and not the truth (80). The blame that Dr. Anderson knowingly or unknowingly places on Kitty for Christopher’s amnesia is very harsh given the fact that she waited loyally for her husband’s return, and has suffered trauma through the death of their son and now through her husband’s shell-shock. Further deteriorating her mental state Dr. Anderson’s technique of bringing back Christopher’s past by reminding him about their dead son aggravates her pain even more.

Dr. Anderson appears to be an anti-woman figure in the text with his knowledge of *deus ex machina* that will cure Christopher. He thinks only Margaret among all three is his “intellectual equal” and works upon her idea of explaining Christopher about his deceased son to bring him back to his present (81). But the whole process of bringing Margaret to “take him something the boy wore or some toy they used to play with” (82) traumatizes Kitty even more but it is least bothered about.

On the surface she appears to be an unlikable character, the one who is unsympathetic towards her husband’s plight. Secondly, on a psychological note she embodies many of the traits of the melancholic personality. Also her materialism is central to understanding her character. In the words of Jenny “Kitty had come along and picked up Chris” idea of normal expenditure and carelessly stretched it”(8). When we analyze her character on these terms, her obsessive attempts to surround herself with expensive goods is a method of seeking comfort from her wealth, it’s a way of escapism from reality wherein she does not have to face her son’s death or the possibility or fear of her husband’s death at the warfront. It is a façade that makes her act according to her social identity, hiding deep within the trauma that she has undergone.

It is this escapism that makes her deny the news of her husband's shell-shock and later shows discontent to the treatment given by Dr. Anderson. This indicates how entrapped she has become in her own fantasy of pre-war world at Baldry court.

#### ❖ Jenny

Jenny is the narrator of the story and has emotional attachment towards her cousin Chris Baldry. She also renders dislike towards Chris's wife Kitty, which makes her narrative unreliable. As Kitty faces the trauma of their loss of son Oliver and the fear of/possibility of Chris death at the warfront, Jenny too is traumatized. But this trauma like Kitty she has successfully hidden under her façade of classist thoughts and indulgence in materialism. The initial pages of the novel are dedicated to the detail description of the Oliver's room and the grandeur of the Baldry Court. It however signifies her solace in materialistic thoughts. It is evident in her words when she quotes, "I could send my mind creeping from room to room like a perusing cat, rubbing itself against all the brittle beautiful things that we had either recovered from antiquity or ding from modern craftsmanship (6)."

The repression of trauma is not only through her indulgence in materialism, but also through her classist thoughts. Like kitty, she too looks down upon Margaret a woman belonging to the lower strata of society. Although later she sympathizes with her, the disdain towards Margaret is apparent in early pages of the text. Jenny admits to "hating (Margaret) as the rich hate the poor" and despises the "evil, shiny, pigskin purse" that is so out of place among the "solemnly chosen fabrics" of Baldry court's luscious interior (14, 12, 6).

Apart from this socio-economic outlook, the text also discusses the gendered tension between war and the home-front. The distinction between male and female spaces of war has become blurred by the constant outpouring of war time images through films, radio and newspapers. Though Jenny had not experience trench warfare, the war images that she absorbed through above sources works as a source for her own traumatic experience. She experiences recurrent nightmares, as Jenny admits that "of late I have had bad dreams about him [Christopher]" (6). The dream itself is an almost cinematically vivid depiction of a war scene. "By nights I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of No -Man's- Land, starting back here because he trod upon a hand, not looking there because of the awfulness of an unburied head...For on the war- films I had seen men slip down as softly from the trench- parapet, and none but the grimmer philosophers could say that they had reached safety by their fall" (6). Here the disturbing battle scene possesses a stoic departure from the previous descriptions of Baldry Courts grandeur. This aspect of Jenny's dreams, reveal her own psychological state. Her description of the trench warfare is seemingly opposite to the luxurious lifestyle she and Kitty have been maintaining at Baldry Court, a reminder that he is far from "this green pleasantness his wife and I now look upon" (6). Her guilt over these luxuries is compounded by the fact that she is not his wife, but an unmarried cousin and his childhood playmate, whose position in the house is likely of temporary sorts.



She struggles to be, Christopher's confidante, who is now dealing with amnesia and shell-shock, a very beloved confidante but fails miserably as he seems to be distrustful towards her. As can be recounted in the text: Despite his distrust of her advanced age, which he in his amnesia cannot process, she fondly imagines herself as his "trusted nurse" as ally who records his struggle to regain memory and self (32).

He turns instead to Margaret, his former love, for support and Jenny is left with two opposite thoughts, on-one had happy that his shell-shock allows him to stay at home (safer) but filled with jealousy towards Margaret, with combat metaphor, as she asserts that "there he was, running across the lawn at night after night I had seen him in my dreams running across No- Man's - Land...I assumed naturally at Margaret's feet lay safety" (52). Margaret pulls him up in "the movement of one carrying a wounded man from under fire", and it was as though her embrace fed him, he looked so strong as he was pulled away" (52,53). Jenny's narration here indicates the stress of his rejection. Christopher has forgotten her and has associated himself with Margaret. Even though she sympathizes with Christopher so called happy immersion into his part, this scene describes her psychological state of being forgotten and hence more vulnerable in the Baldry estate. Also it seems to be parallel to her nightmares of combat scenes.

We realize in the process of reading that it is not so much Christopher who is trapped in the no man's land; in the narrative of the soldier's return and recovery it is she who has become an outsider. This is apparent in her diction when she realizes that she is "utterly cut off from Chris" and things herself face down in a pile of leaves while on a walk outside Baldry Court (63). She is hurt by his view of her as "disregarded Playmate" and imagines the moment of his amnesia in a almost hallucinatory fashion (65). She thinks of "it happening somewhere behind the front" where houses have "uncovered ruffers which stick out like broken bones" (66). Here, in this landscape that closely resembles the war front of her nightmares, an old man who is "the soul of the universe" has mesmerized Christopher with identical crystal balls of Margaret and the women at Baldry Court; Christopher grabs at the image of Margaret and break the other in doing so, and "no one weeps for this shattering of one world" (66-7). This narrative speaks of her unreliability as a narrator that suggests of her own displacement.

#### ❖ Margaret

Margaret is introduced to the reader as Mrs. Grey who was apparently Chris's love interest fifteen years ago. She is the one who brings the news of Chris's shell-shock because he only remembers her due to his amnesia. She brings in the classist thoughts of Kitty and Jenny to the forefront as she is described critically by Jenny calling her "bad enough" (10). Further stating that, "She was repulsively furred with neglect and poverty, as even a good glove that has dropped down behind a bed in a hotel and has lain undisturbed for a day or two is repulsive when the chambermaid retrieves it from the dust and fluff" (10).

The description above highlights the class distinct that was apparent during the time. Since Kitty and Jenny belongs to the upper class they are uninhibited to use all the derogatory remarks to describe Margaret in the initial pages of the text. They call her “a fellow-creature occupied in baseness”, “poor clumsy animal” “hated her as the rich hate the poor as insect things that will struggle out of the crannies which are their decent home and in struggle out of the crannies which are their decent home and introduce ugliness to the light of the day”, calling her “impertinent” and even think she has come to their home for money (10, 11, 13, 15).

She undergoes ill treatment not only at the hands of Kitty and Jenny but also through Chris. As Margaret recalls in one instance, “he (Chris) wasn’t trusting me as he would trust a girl of his own class, and I told him so, and he went on being cruel (46).” He left her to go to Mexico to keep the mines going, to keep the firm’s head above water and Baldry Court sleek and hospitable-to keep everything bright and splendid save only his youth, which even after that was dulled by care (47). This statement makes it evident that Chris did not love her in the truest sense and left her, finding better prospect in the mines. After he leaves, she soon loses her father which makes her position even more vulnerable. She waits for Chris desperately but he never comes nor writes to her aggravating her situation further (47). She was financially drained as her father left her nothing save an income of twenty pounds a year from an unrealizable stock. She negotiated the transfer of the lease of the inn to a publican and embarked upon an unfortunate career as a mother’s help. She worked for an noble Irish family, who left her bill and wages unpaid (48) distressed her further. It is another example of the ill treatment that she faces at the hands of upper class people. Her innocence is thus reflected in her dialogues when she is perplexed about Irish family’s treatment towards her. “Why did they do it?” she asked. “I liked them so. The baby was a darling, and Mrs. Murphy had such a nice way of speaking (48). After two years she meets Mr. Grey, and begins a courtship with him, wherein the narrator inserts he is interested at her prospective instinct. This however proves right for he (Mr. Grey) in the words of Margaret has never been successful and lost his job soon after their marriage, making her life precarious. Her statement wherein she asserts, “she had been very much upset” (48) speaks at a larger level the psychological trauma that she suffered at the hands of so called upper class people including Chris that left her devastated.

However, after Chris suffers from shell-shock and forgets his life of fifteen years he remembers only Margaret his love interest of the past. She assists in helping cure his illness. She selflessly suggests Dr. Anderson to “remind him of the boy” (72). This suggestion actually proves effective and “He is cured” (82). Her act of helping Chris cure of his amnesia is in reality of loss for her. Since, he was happy with her. In the words of Jenny, “It was as though her embrace fed him, he looked so strong as he broke away. They stood with clasped hands looking at one other. They looked straight, they looked delightedly! (53).” In other words, she sacrificed her love, happiness and security that she would have otherwise gained by being with Christopher Baldry.



As the novel progresses Jenny the narrator of the story who first dislikes Margaret starts to like her and her dislike changes into friendship and gratitude. She has become a kind of a hero that she desires to worship. This realization comes from the fact that Margaret has inner beauty and love for people that she showcases in her treatment towards Chris. The class superiority that both Kitty and Jenny felt over Margaret dissolves at an instance when Chris finds love and a temporary home in Margaret as a substitute for their highly decorated furnished estate.

Her character is thus cast in strong contrast with Kitty, a woman of upper class wherein Margaret is a worn out woman belonging to lower class “as though she were a splendid bird of prey”, “an insect food”, that Kitty was about to attack (11). But, she proves to be thoughtful and caring amongst all three. She is the one who intelligently suggests Dr. Anderson for treating Chris’s amnesia by reminding him of their lost son (73).

#### ❖ Conclusion:

The novel is a tool for understanding the role woman played at home while their men fought at war–front. West’s novel however is a contrast to the male centered literary tradition and focuses on the female characters and the trauma that they face at home.

Jenny being an outsider, Chris’s cousin has no definite possession of “home” or “love” for that matter. She constantly struggles to be the voice for Chris but fails miserably as he confides in Margaret. She is constantly baffled with the dream of combat that leaves her shaken and disillusioned.

Kitty on the other hand lives in denial, denies the death of her son and later the news of her husband’s ‘shell-shock’. Who prefers to stay with her illusionary world of pre-war aristocracy, traumatized on one hand by the death of their son and on the other feared by the possibility of her husband’s death at the war front?

Margaret undergoes humiliation at the hands of Kitty and Jenny because of her lower class. She is also in the past have been left by Chris her love interest to pursue his higher dreams. She is an example of an individual who faces trauma due to the ill treatment she undergoes at the hands of upper class people. But as the novel progresses comes into light as a benevolent human being who sacrifices her own happiness in suggesting a cure for Chris.

Rebecca West by placing three woman distinctly opposite of each other, criticizes the classist thought of the British Society of the time, explored the trauma women face at home-front and the life that they actually lived which may be superficially good. But in reality they were scarred and traumatized psychologically even though all the three women characters did not participate in the war, in the words of Jenny they had enough knowledge of the trenches due to modern media like films, interviews and newspapers.

Rebecca West in her novel acknowledges this truth of the traumatic effect the war had on the lives of women otherwise ignored by history. Apart from this socio-economic outlook, the text also discusses the gendered tension between war and the home-front.

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