Domestic Trauma in Rebecca West’s
The Return of the Soldier

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Plot Summary

The novel (published in 1918) takes place during World War I and is set at the fictional Baldry Court, an English estate.

Chris Baldry: Wealthy British soldier returning home from WWI with shell-shock
Kitty Baldry: Chris’ beautiful wife
Jenny Baldry: Chris’ agonized cousin (the story is narrated by Jenny)
Margaret Grey: Chris’ working-class ex-lover

Chris returns home from war with a case of “shell-shock” (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and cannot remember the last fifteen years of his life, including his marriage to Kitty or the loss of their son, Oliver. Instead, Chris弄着 only for his former lover, a working-class woman, now married named Margaret. Margaret comes to Baldry Court to help and heal Chris. Kitty, whose social status, monetary income and future security depend on her marriage to Chris, is extremely threatened by Margaret’s appearance in her home. Kitty, Jenny and Margaret vie for Chris’ attention and try to find a way to bring his memory back. In the end, Margaret chooses to heal Chris by telling him about his dead son.

Thesis

Kitty, much like her shell-shocked husband, Chris (the novel’s central protagonist and the focus of most literary criticism), also experiences severe trauma and in turn suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Yet, because her war is a private, feminine battle, Kitty’s trauma is not recognized by either the male-dominated society in which she lives or by recent modern critics.

Literature Review

Most of what has been written about The Return of the Soldier focuses on Chris, Margaret and/or Jenny, ignoring Kitty’s trauma and multidimensionality.

- A relatively small amount of academic literature has been published about The Return of the Soldier;
- The majority of articles that have been published compare West’s novel to other World War I novels or spotlight Chris’ trauma psychology;
- The articles that do mention Kitty as more than a mere footnote, tend to see her mainly as a dominating housewife whose main focus is on appearance and status;
- Although Chris’ symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are clearly recognized by recent modern critics, Kitty’s are ignored.

PTSD Review

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has been difficult to characterize due to wide variations in symptoms. Kitty develops PTSD (known as “shell-shock” during WWI) as she struggles with the domestic turmoil at Baldry Court after Chris’ return from World War I.

- PTSD usually develops after experiencing natural or accidental disasters, wars or abuse/neglect
- Although Kitty does not fight on the battlefield of WWI, Margaret’s invasion of Baldry Court, Kitty’s extreme fear over the potentially permanent loss of Chris and his memory, and Jenny’s failed treatment with Margaret are like a domestic war for Kitty.
- Symptoms of PTSD include dreams, sleep disturbance, hyperaroused startle response, depression, difficulty concentrating, detachment and numbing of responsibility.
- Kitty experiences many of these symptoms throughout the novel.

Hysteria Review

Longstanding ideas about female minds and bodies being weaker than men’s often led to women’s diseases and trauma being ignored by society.

- During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a variety of female health problems and concerns were attributed to “hysteria”;
- Hysteria came from the Greek word hysteron, meaning “womb,” and was attributed to a women’s uterus moving around her body;
- Hysteria was thought to be suffered only by women and included symptoms such as amnesia, paralysis, delusions, withdrawal, nervous ticks and hallucinations;
- Many of the symptoms of hysteria parallel the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Conclusion

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