

# Domestic Trauma in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*



Christina Huber, Heidi Potratz, Dr. Jenny Shaddock  
English Department

## 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' spinster 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 longs 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.



Rebecca West

## Literature Review

*Most of what has been written on *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 merely as a domineering housewife whose main focus is on appearance and status

•While 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, war, or abuse/neglect

•Though Kitty does not fight on the battlefields 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 final betrayal in siding with Margaret are like a domestic war for Kitty

•Symptoms of PTSD include dreams, sleep disturbance, heightened startle response, depression, difficulty concentrating, detachment and numbing of responsiveness

•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 comes from the Greek word *hysteron*, meaning "womb," and was attributed to a woman's uterus moving around her body

•Hysteria was thought to be suffered only by women and included symptoms such as amnesia, paralysis, sleeplessness, withdrawal, nervous ticks and hallucinations

•Many of the symptoms of hysteria parallel the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

## Conclusion

•Throughout the novel, Kitty suffers trauma when her husband (who is also her provider and protector in a time when women had little power) does not remember her, and again when Margaret (a very real threat to Kitty's life and marriage) comes to Baldry Court

•During this time, Kitty displays many symptoms of PTSD, but the other characters in the novel and literary critics have both ignored Kitty's trauma, instead calling her "domineering," "pathetic" or "two-dimensional"

•This is similar to the situations many women face today, both in the United States and abroad

•For example, in a 2009 article about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Iraqi military veterans, 40.1% of women in the study met criteria for a PTSD diagnosis but only 19.8% were actually diagnosed (a difference of 20.3%). On the other hand, 62.7% of men in the study met PTSD diagnostic criterion and 59.1% were diagnosed (a difference of only 3.6%)

•Many times, symptoms of trauma in females are written off as "hysteria," or, in today's terms, being "too sensitive" or "overly emotional"

•It is our hope that this research project will highlight the progressiveness of West's work while bringing to light the ways in which female trauma victims are often ignored or misunderstood

Support for this project came from the  
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire  
Faculty/Student Research Program