



Margaret and Trauma on the Homefront: Gendering the Trauma Space in The Return of the Soldier

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ABSTRACT

A Eurocentric, white, heterosexual male bias in the discourse of trauma studies has often ignored the everyday trauma of the varied gender, class, ethnic, racial, and postcolonial identities. Hence, it is no wonder that the critique of war literature through a lens of trauma studies often leaves out the trauma of the Homefront, especially that of women. This paper investigates an alternative trauma space for women in war literature by closely analyzing Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, largely considered as a traumatic tale of a wounded World War I soldier Christopher Bradley. In the process, the paper reevaluates the character of Margaret, Chris's love interest, to situate her in the trauma framework towards attaining a trauma discourse that is more inclusive, gender-neutral, and free of definitive class bias. Drawing references on the pluralistic model of trauma studies and evaluating scholarship that, finally, foregrounds the role of Margaret, it aims at furthering the discussion in an attempt to exclusively listen to her ordeal and, eventually, respond to her unique traumatic situations.

Keywords: Trauma; Gender roles; War Literature; Rebecca West.

1.1 Introduction

The critique of war literature making use of a lens of trauma studies often leaves out the trauma of the Homefront, especially that of women. Hence, it is no wonder that Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* is largely considered a traumatic tale of a wounded World War I soldier Christopher Bradley. His amnesia stemming from a shell-shock and its repercussion on his loved ones is, undoubtedly, the core of the story. However, West's choice of using a female narrator and design of creating three major female characters against one male protagonist compel us to closely look into the ordeal of the women who had been fighting a different battle on the Homefront. This paper investigates an alternative trauma space for women in war literature by closely analyzing Chris's love interest Margaret to understand, and incorporate, the gender perspective in the context of trauma studies. Drawing references on the pluralistic model of trauma studies and evaluating scholarship that, finally, foregrounds the role of Margaret, it aims at furthering the discussion in an attempt

to respond to her unique trauma. In order to incorporate both gendered and classed trauma in the mainstream literary trauma discourse, the wound of the ostracized Margaret is studied using a lens of literary trauma studies, rather than a clinical form of trauma discourse. What this paper asserts is that a reevaluation of the character of Margaret is crucial to situate her in the trauma framework towards attaining a trauma discourse that is more inclusive, gender-neutral, and free of definitive class bias.

1.2 A Euro-white-male centric bias to Trauma Theory

A Eurocentric, white, heterosexual male bias in the discourse of trauma studies has been traced since its inception as a major field of study by many recent scholars. The recent trend of trauma studies adopts an inclusive and expansive approach to incorporate the trauma of varied gender, class, ethnic, racial, and postcolonial identities. Critic Stef Craps (2013) considers the hegemonic definitions of trauma “culturally insensitive and exclusionary” which should account for and respond to collective, ongoing, everyday forms of the traumatizing ordeal to represent the disenfranchised (3). He elucidates that traditional cultural trauma research continues “to adhere to the traditional event-based model of trauma,” according to which trauma results from “a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event” (4). He continues that trauma theory should deliberately consider the specific social and political contexts in which trauma narratives are produced, and should not take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery outlined by the dominant Western tradition. Another prominent scholar Dominick LaCapra (2014) expansively defines trauma as “a cross-disciplinary problem, for it falls within the compass of no single genre or discipline, and how one should approach it in a given genre or discipline is an essentially contested question” (205). He urges us to consider the crucial connections to social, political, and ethical conditions of history instead of following a dominant model. Bringing in the gender perspective into the trauma studies, Laura Brown (1995) sensibly discusses the limitations of the classic definitions and symptoms of trauma. Arguing that what is generally considered a ‘human experience’ is often a ‘male human experience,’ she invites us “to look beyond the public and male experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences that women encounter in the interpersonal realm” (102). The recent critical trauma studies exudes the same inclusive spirit with proposing a “pluralistic model of trauma due to the plurality of theories and approaches employed” (Balaev 3). Evoking an identical spirit, this paper examines the wound of Margaret, a marginalized woman, in an attempt to incorporate both gendered and classed trauma in the mainstream literary trauma discourse.

The above discussion requires us not to limit the discussion of trauma religiously following the dominant model that prefers the ordeal of the privileged sex, class, and ethnicity. The long-held understanding of *The Return of the Soldier* as a traumatic tale of a wounded male protagonist at the backdrop of World War I, by default, crosses out the possibility of reading women’s trauma at the Homefront. Dorothy Goldman (1993), in the Introduction to *Women and World War I*, discusses how the discourse of war is generally a partial picture that “utilizes only half the possible referents” (1). She argues that women experienced the War too, though in a different way from their male counterparts: “they suffered different torments, adopted new patterns of thought, new lives and sometimes new identities” (1). It is evident in the novel in the form of Jenny’s disturbing dreams about her cousin: “Of late I had had bad dreams about him. By night I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of No Man’s Land” (West 5). Jenny, the narrator, makes it obvious that it is not her nightmare alone, but “such are the dreams of Englishwomen today” (5). Therefore, a true understanding of trauma of the women on the Homefront in comparison to that of the men on the Front requires gendering of the trauma space. However, two issues might appear significant in the discussion when addressing war trauma and women together. First is our tendency of associating extreme violence like rape against women as the most viable form of women’s trauma, refusing to consider “normal” insidious traumata of being a woman” (Brown 109). The second one is our fear of demeaning the suffering and sacrifice of brave soldiers in a crucial time of war by foregrounding other forms of suffering. Though it is true that the narrative of the Front can overpower the narrative of the Home Front, no form of suffering should outweigh the other. Goldman (1993) categorically discusses why women have not been listened to and why their narratives have been forgotten as

"they were not part of the physical agony" (2). To attain a gender-inclusive trauma model, we must not rely on the above-mentioned trope of the dominant trauma model. What is worth mentioning here is again Brown's argument against believing the dominant, diagnostic manuals that informs the trauma discourse favoring White, privileged male (102). It is evident from her discussion that the patriarchal power dynamics always has the upper hand in exercising its agency to decide and define everything that keeps the social hierarchy going. The essence of her argument is to question the cultural hegemony of trauma, providing spaces for alternative approaches to trauma. This paper believes that any alternative discourse to trauma designed to emancipate the underrepresented is a step forward toward an inclusive and expansive trauma model.

1.3 Literature Review

Since the 1990s, when literary trauma studies intersected with gender studies, critics have started paying more attention to the sufferings of all the three major female characters: Jenny, the narrator and Chris's cousin, Kitty, his wife, and Margaret, his love interest. Critics, though not in a great number, have duly attempted to discuss the unique trauma of Kitty in parallel to Chris's trauma (Pulsifer 38, 48, 53). Surprisingly, like the conclusion of the novel, Margaret seems to disappear from the critical attention when it comes to her unique trauma. Critic Pinkerton (2008) rightly discovers a common trend in the discussion of Margaret that pays "scant attention in critical accounts," underestimating her potential traumatic experience (2). Her story is considered either impenetrable or unworthy of consideration because of "its belonging to that putatively contrived 'romantic' dimension of an otherwise compelling tale of trauma and the home-front" (Pinkerton 2). He regrets how most literary critics have undervalued Margaret's role as an intuitive analyst and therapist, who cures Chris through "talking cure." He recognizes Margaret's powerful agency in the text by evaluating her roles as comrade, ritual double, and maternal figure, that makes her Chris's "ideal therapist" (9).

However, Pinkerton is not alone in his effort to "rescue Margaret from critical neglect" (2); critic Misha Kavka and Cristina Pividori seem invested in making her an active agent in the telling of the tale of trauma. Kavka (1998) sees in Margaret an embodiment of maternal femininity, who finally cures Chris's illness through her maternal "wisdom" (165). However, unlike Pinkerton, she is critical of the way in which the feminine order upholds the masculine order at the expense of Margaret being disappeared into shadows. On a different note, Pividori (2010) suggests that, far from playing the traditional role of a nurse and mother figure, Margaret is positioned in the role of a witness of extreme human sufferings. By making her an active *listener-companion* to Chris's traumatic tale, Pividori gives Margaret "agency" that eventually makes her also a protagonist of the traumatic event (103). It should be duly acknowledged that all these critics have undoubtedly contributed to rescuing Margaret by foregrounding her agency. Having said that, I believe, in the process, they also make her tale subsidiary to that of Chris. Kavka's argument of maternal wisdom, Pividori's discussion of her role as a listener-companion, and Pinkerton's emphasis on her role as an ideal therapist make Margaret's trauma subservient to that of Chris.

1.4 Trauma of Margaret: Gendering Trauma Space

My reading of Margaret's impending trauma in *The Return of the Soldier* may sound subversive to the dominant discourse of trauma model on a surface level. To contest that claim, I deliberately catalogue Margaret's loss and abandonment as a young woman, as a daughter, as a wife, and as a mother in the form of a case study in an attempt to trace her unique, everyday trauma. It is through Margaret that the two different realities of the Front and the Homefront collide. The War finally broke into the lives of Jenny and Kitty once she brought the news of Chris's shell-shock. The opening chapter confirms how Margaret is received in the upper-class society because of her apparent gender and class display. To an aristocratic English society, she is nothing but an intruder who is "repulsively furred with neglect and poverty" (West 10). It is her poverty, shabby attire, and gender vulnerability that makes both Jenny and Kitty suspect her of masquerade. Jenny comments: "Kitty's bright eyes met mine and we obeyed that mysterious human impulse to smile triumphantly at the spectacle of a fellow-creature occupied in baseness" (11). What older Margaret

encounters at this point is sheer neglect and humiliation. West portrays her character in a manner that it is not difficult to feel a sense of abandonment that looms over her throughout the novel.

It is the shell-shocked Chris who frantically desires Margaret, idolizing their “changeless love” (38). In reality, as the plot unfolds, we realize that he abandons her timeless love “to keep the mines going through the revolution,” disappearing for long fifteen years from her life (53). His romantic love for her may appear as powerful as transcending all the physicality and social boundaries, making her believe that his love would persist “if she were old or maimed or disfigured” (38). However, the worldly Chris had to act otherwise to step into the material world to take charge of his family and estate, giving Margaret the least priority. He performed what his sex and social class required him to perform—that is, to become a proper Englishman in order “to keep everything bright and splendid” (53). The discussion of whether Margaret is a source of a youth’s romantic fancy or not is less disturbing than his pretext of breaking up with her. Margaret’s story is not as detailed and poetic as Chris’s story in the narration. What little we know is that one April afternoon, when Chris lands at the Monkey Island, he “by the first clean quick movement of tying up his boat made her his slave” (50). This expression not only demonstrates her love at first sight but also her vulnerability as a young woman who is ready to devote everything to her lover. Though Chris believes that theirs was a changeless love that time cannot alter, he breaks up with her for the “the silliest quarrel” (51). One Thursday afternoon, Margaret laughed out loud when Bert Wells, a town chap, was funnily rowing, handling oars as though they were teaspoons. Chris stood up there under the poplars, being visibly jealous: “his brows straight and black and not a smile on him” (51). This sense of jealousy or mistrust is nothing uncommon in a relationship; yet what is worth noticing here is Chris’s reaction despite Margaret’s clarification that she was not larking and has known Bert all her life. She did not fail to understand the fact that Chris is not only questioning her character as a woman but also implicating her class. Chris’s careless negligence towards her is evident in Margaret’s testimony: “And he went on talking and then it struck me he 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” (52). Though they were standing on the same lawn together, she could realize they are somehow miles away. Thus, Chris joins the clique that can simply dismiss her testimony due to her gender and social class before his cousin and wife do so.

Like Chris, the already motherless Margaret is thrown out of the fantasy world of the Monkey Island, which initiates her into a world of hardship, seclusion, and insecurity. Chris’s abandonment is followed by her father’s sudden death which aggravates her already vulnerable situation. He deserted her over a senseless whim when she wanted him most to support her, but he never made a real effort to meet her—other than writing some letters—until shell-shock flings him back to his youthful past. Deserted by her loved ones, she fell into “a lethargic disposition to sit all day and watch the Thames flow by” (53). What pulls her out from that shock is the harsh reality, revealing the fact that her father left “nothing save an income of twenty pounds a year in unrealizable stock” (53). If Chris is obligated to leave England for Mexico to be a proper Englishman, Margaret is also compelled to leave her very own Monkey Island just to survive. The narrator does not reveal the minute details of the struggle of a young, deprived, helpless, single woman at the turn of a new century. We only know that she had to take “an unfortunate career of mother’s help,” working for a noble Irish family named Murphy (53). Not surprisingly, she was, once again, abandoned by her employers who run away and left her in Brighton hotel with her wages and her board unpaid. The frustration and the shock she feels towards life in general are manifested in her utterance: “[I]t almost makes one think evil of people when they do a thing like that” (53). The novel skips the next “two years of less sensational but still uneasy adventures” of her life before she began a courtship with Mr. William Grey (53). She kept waiting for Chris for five long years and finally ended up marrying Mr. Grey. However, her ardent love for Chris, evident in her reunion with him, leaves the impression that she never loved Mr. Grey. Jenny’s observation corroborates this claim when she implies that Margaret’s marriage results from “an incessant whining up at her protection instinct” (54). Nevertheless, the loveless marriage does not prove to be as successful as she might have expected since soon after marriage Mr. Grey lost his job, and later developed a weak chest that needed constant attention. Critic Samuel Hynes (1998), in the introduction to the novel, rightly

points out how Margaret married “an ineffectual workingman and settled into bleak and shabby poverty” (x). Like Chris, Margaret went along with whatever comes in her way as “it all helped to pass the time” (West 54). Like Chris’s marriage, her marriage was as ineffective as it could possibly be; in addition, her financial vulnerability must have made it more complex.

Like Kitty, Margaret seems reluctant to remember the tragic death of her two-year-old son Dick. The opening of the novel makes us aware of Kitty’s suffering in the act of lingering in the nursery and her uncomfortable confession to Jenny that she only comes here as it is the sunniest room. However, when it comes to Margaret, the novel keeps the death of her child a secret until the very end. Unlike Kitty, who vents out some of her frustration visiting the nursery and sharing the awkward silence with Jenny, Margaret seems to bury the tragedy of her child into the unconscious. Therefore, when the memory comes back into her conscious psyche, it hits her with an enormous force. As if “suddenly paralysed,” Margaret keeps chanting: “They each had half a life...” like a neurotic person (77). The story of Oliver’s death forces her to revisit her trauma since both Oliver and Dick died of “a chill” at the age of two. The separation of her child has left such a deep scar on her mind that she refuses to relive the ordeal. As trauma is believed to be a delayed response that does not follow a singular pattern for everyone, no one can say for sure when and how it possesses the victim (Caruth 4). Oliver’s photograph reminds her of both her failed love and failed maternity. She could not keep the child the way she could not keep Chris in her life. Pressing the child’s photograph to her bosom “as though to staunch a wound,” she seems to demonstrate her fidelity towards her traumatic past (West 78). According to Caruth (2016), trauma is much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of the psyche, rather it is “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). Jenny’s words support this claim when she realizes that all these years Margaret was sustained by “a mystic interpretation of life” (West 78). However, the novel ends on a note where Margaret cannot hold on to the magic spell. The blue jerseys and the red ball are not simple objects that she uses to cure Chris, but they become belongings that carry a deeper meaning for her. She seems to be possessed by those symbolic things that evoke both her failed love and failed maternity. If the memory of the dead child serves as Chris’s cure, the same memory forces Margaret to become just a dim figure, a shadow in the darkness. Therefore, Jenny’s meditation of “a figure mothering something in her arms” (90) dissolving into the darkness at the end of the novel is not startling, but inevitable.

Listening to Margaret’s life in *The Return of the Soldier* as a case study surely reminds us of the necessity of listening to the “‘normal’ insidious traumata” of the women that we often overlook (Brown 109). Brown reminds us how war and genocide, which are the labor of men and male-dominated culture, are universally “agreed-upon traumas” according to the dominant trauma model (101). Therefore, the act of not counting in the wound of Margaret will result in enriching the cultural hegemony of the discourse of trauma, which, according to her, is biased to “white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men” (101). However, if one is reluctant to fit Margaret’s case into the grand narrative of historical trauma, one can, at least, categorize her case as a transhistorical (structural) trauma. LaCapra (2014) believes that victim is not a psychological category, but “a social, political, and ethical category” in transhistorical trauma (79). He argues that, unlike historical trauma, transhistorical trauma appears in different ways in all societies and all lives. It may be evoked or addressed in various fashions—in terms of the separation from the(m)other, the passage from nature to culture, the eruption of the pre-oedipal or presymbolic in the symbolic, and the entry into language (77). What is common between LaCapra and Brown is their emphasis on paying close attention to the knowledge of victim’s social and political context in hearing out those who do not comply with a spectacular, sentimental, and orthodox model of trauma. One can only respond to Margaret’s everyday trauma if he/she is willing to see beyond the definitive trauma discourse, considering her journey from a pretty vivacious young woman from Monkey Island to disappearing into shadows and examining her unique place as a lower-class woman in the context of the early twentieth century.

1.5 Margaret and Chris: Literary model of trauma

At this point, let us evaluate what affiliates Chris with an early literary model of trauma victim so that we can investigate whether the same framework works for Margaret. Literary trauma critics have long been arguing that Chris's trauma springs not from one single occurrence, but rather implies a socio-cultural dimension of a series of experiences. Shell-shock can be considered as the most explicit symbol of his encounter with trauma, but considering his amnesia as triggered exclusively by a single event would unjustly ignore "a constellation of life experiences" that are already present before he joins the war (Erikson 185). West's use of talking cure with the news of his son's death also substantiates the idea that at least one earlier tragedy—the traumatic "death imprint" left by his son—is as central to his amnesia as the war (Lifton 480). On a similar note, Pinkerton (2008) implies that Chris's trauma predates even Oliver's death, discussing his painful separation with Margaret and digging further back to his childhood. He argues: "The novel seems neither to discourage nor wholly to embrace this tracing-back of the trauma to unreachable origins" (3). Jenny herself admits to Dr. Anderson that she has "always felt" there was something wrong with Chris (West 81). Kavka (1998) finds the psychoanalytic logic in the novel explicit in the vindication of Dr. Anderson's theory that Chris suffers from "the effects of long-repressed material" (9). His cure with the news of his son's death equally validates his traumatic history before the war starts. Thus, it would not be too inappropriate to argue that his already traumatic condition was aggravated by his tragic experience in the war. The indeterminacy of Chris's initial trauma also speaks for why not every soldier, despite going through an almost identical physio-biological experience, suffers from shell-shock.

Before tracing the parallel structure of trauma between Chris and Margaret, let us pay more attention to Dr. Anderson's comment on Chris's trauma since the author provides him as the sole authority who has expertise on shell-shock than any others we can count on in the novel. He explains why Chris's unconscious self is refusing to let him resume his relations with his normal life: "There's a deep self in one, the essential self, that has its wishes. And if those wishes are suppressed by the superficial self – the self that makes, as you say, efforts and usually makes them with the sole idea of putting up a good before the neighbours – it takes its revenge" (West 79). Kavka (1998), refusing West's disclaimer of being influenced by psychoanalysis, claims that West inconsistently uses psychoanalysis that lies in the tension demonstrated between manifested trauma and the method of cure. She believes the Freudian psychoanalytic drive is established in Dr. Anderson's long speech in which he blames Chris's long-repressed wish as his cause of social trauma (Kavka 11). We can infer, at least, some of his deepest wishes that he repressed so long—his desire to love and live with Margaret, his dream of living in a non-materialistic place like Monkey Island where he does not have to prove his masculinity, his longing for seeing his son alive etc. Kavka also argues that the trauma of war not only shattered English masculinity, but "that the masculine order itself, even before the war" (12). Therefore, the relation between Chris's trauma at the front and his catastrophic experiences at home exposes that the war is not the trauma itself, but "marks the breakdown of the defenses of masculinity against the actual trauma" (Kavka 12). What is crucial to understand from the above discussion is that Chris's memory loss in the form of shell-shock itself is not the traumatic event, but the delayed response to a series of events.

The logic that justifies *The Return of the Soldier* as a traumatic tale of Chris equally qualifies Margaret as an alleged victim of trauma. Both Chris and Margaret lost their "changeless love" (West 83) that they thought would persist forever, both confronted an indifferent, materialistic world parting Monkey Island—one in Mexico and the other in uncharted squalid places of England, both married out of necessity and obligation, both lost their two years son, and both repressed their longing to see each other and become one. What is significant to notice here is that Margaret's unique position as a woman coming from a lower-class background in the context of early twentieth century makes her ordeal subtler and more convoluted. The decisive moment of confrontation with Chris might appear as a cure for him, but Margaret knows that in the act of reminding him of his past she is going to lose herself to the haunting memories of the past: "Her head fell back, her eyes closed, her mouth was contorted as though she swallowed bitter drink" (89). The novel might not portray Margaret as a trauma victim in exclusive terms. The time it was written and published predates the emergence of the idea of trauma with which we are familiar today. In fact, the word

"trauma" is never used in the book. It was a phase of an early stage of modern psychoanalysis that the novel authenticates by using the then known concepts such as shell-shock, amnesia, concussion and so on. Having said that, a twenty first century reading must incorporate the recent developments in the field of trauma studies in its discussion of Margaret.

1.6 Conclusion

Feminist trauma scholars attend to the diverse and complex aspects of gender experiences rather than comparing women to an androcentric standard based on primarily white male experiences. Brown (1995) reminds us why a feminist perspective on the trauma of war is different than a gender-insensitive trauma because it excludes "a knowledge of the social context... the presence of daily and insidious trauma into an analysis of what is now the only 'real' trauma" (110-111). She goes on arguing the centrality of social context and the individual's personal history within the context in hearing out trauma. Failure to do so might "lend traumatic meaning to events that might be only sad or troubling in another time and place" (Brown 110). To be able to respond to Margaret's trauma, thus, requires us to recognize her essence in totality—not just as Chris's lover and healer, but as a daughter, as a lover, as a wife, and as a mother in the context of the Edwardian Era. The bottom line is that an alternative lens is required to count in Margaret's unique gendered and classed trauma.

The Return of the Soldier ends with the so-called cure of Chris who is sure to return to the war front. However, the novel's ending is as ambiguous as Margaret's dim fortune: it neither reveals what has happened to Margaret nor discloses whether Chris can remember the reunion with her after his recovery. What is definite is that now Margaret has to process two traumatic episodes—one that encompasses all the sufferings that she learned how to repress and, thus, survive before her reunion with Chris, and the other is her second encounter with him that makes her revisit, and thus, dismember the traumatic past of her loss and abandonment. If Chris's trauma is a forgetfulness of his last 15 years, Margaret's trauma is an aching remembrance of those years. When the novel restores everything to its seemingly proper place, it "dissolved" Margaret into the shadows as if in another moment "the night would have her" (West 90). Here West prefers images to words to tell the untellable tale of Margaret's faint future as if she was only transformed into a repository of memory, lacking subjecthood and identity. If West is deliberately reluctant to decide on Margaret's fate in a war-ravaged Homefront, the novel seems to resonate a crucial question: has Chris's cure been achieved at the expense of Margaret's trauma?

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