



Uncovering the Dark Truth: A Psychoanalytic Existentialist Exploration in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*

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Abstract

*In the convoluted halls of human experience, few events force the soul to face its reality as deeply as trauma. This research paper considers the shadowy lines where existentialism and trauma intersect in the literary world, unveiling that trauma, in its instinctual shape, again and again, sets people on a terrifying journey to understand themselves. Traumatic experiences leave profound uncertainties in the psyche, triggering an anxious quest for meaning in a chaotic reality. Moreover, this study paper suggests that existentialist literature, mainly the modern one, shows how pain disturbs the normal flow of life, forcing characters—and readers—to confront basic existential questions. Thus, this article suggests —through the reading of the British author Rebecca West's novel *The Return of the Soldier* (1918)— how pain may help people reclaim their position in the universe, from end to end of a voyage into what it is to be human being amid trauma's mysterious, terrible, and transforming experiences.*

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1. Introduction

In the opulent, eloquent, and dazzling writing of Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), the wounds of the First World War are not closed off to the combat zone but stretch into the darkest depths of the human brain, uncovering a multifarious tangle of sentimental anguish and pending trauma. This post-war story, eclipsing its archival setting, permits a psychoanalytic query to spot the yawning psychological sceneries of its protagonists, who are embroiled in a conflict far apart from the physical

clashes of war (Ameer-Said, 2019). The notion that overthrown trauma and cultural projection may unleash mayhem on the human psyche is the core of this article. By diving into the psyches of Chris Baldry, his wife Kitty, and his first love Margaret Grey, this research paper will demonstrate that their deeds, kinship, and privy plights are symptomatic of vast, prime psychological longings and hostilities. These pieces, when analysed through psychoanalytic and existential lenses, depict the stealthy traits of untended alerts and the camouflage humans espouse to travel across their existence.

2. Conceptual Framework

In light of the fact that traumatic experiences function as a significant impetus for existential query, it is of the utmost importance to investigate the ways in which literature operates as a speculum capable of bespeaking the perplexing dance that takes place between ordeal and the pursuit of meaning. Hanan Bushkin et al., (2021) assert that characters who are carried through taxing traumatic incidents frequently come across a central split second of existential crisis, which forces them to doubt the essence of their identity and position in existence; this is demonstrated via the study of a variety of literary works. This academic discovery lends credence to the idea that inside the narrative arcs of traumatic experiences, there is a powerful force that may be used for existential retribution; not only are the characters attempting to survive their experiences, but they are also being compelled to go on a never-ending search for comprehension, which is being propelled by the mayhem that the trauma has unleashed upon their standpoints. For Bushkin et al., (2021), existential literature offers an abounding representation on which the complex rapport between traumatic experiences and the quest for meaningfulness is realistically depicted. This lucid portrayal highlights how the outcome of traumatic experiences can steer people to cope with the meaninglessness of existence and, as a result, engage on a journey towards creating a renewed understanding of purpose and belonging from the ground up. As a result, the investigation of this topic in literary works not only contributes to a deeper comprehension of the human condition yet also provides a glimmer of hope that the search for meaning continues to be a deeply transformational endeavour, even in the most hopeless of circumstances.

From the observations made by Bushkin et al., (2021), it is of the utmost importance to investigate the ways in which trauma, which is referred to as an ‘existential crisis injury’, causes disruptions in an individual’s perception of identity and position in the universe, hence necessitating a re-estimation of life itself (Thompson & Walsh, 2010). This process of re-estimation or re-evaluation frequently requires coming face to face with the harsh truth of a universe that is both disordered and uncaring;

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in this universe, long-established props of meaning, such as society standards and individual beliefs, are discovered to be incomplete. In the process of displaying these existential musings, literary works not only catch the jangle that exists between the person's search for meaning and the universe's absurdity, but they also delineate the landscape of this search, which is riddled with uncertainty and doubt. Neil Thompson and Mary Walsh (2010) explain how traumatic experiences upset the basic foundations of personal and psychological constructions, such as identity and self-concept, which in turn prompts an acute existential investigation. In this framework, the voyage of literary characters throughout their traumas becomes symptomatic of a greater human desire for the search for meaning in front of pain. Through the angle of existentialism, such narratives offer a subtlety analysis of how characters traverse the consequences of tragedy, striving to rebuild a perception of self and purpose within the existential abyss. The reciprocity between trauma and existential quest in literary works therefore not only gives a greater knowledge of the human condition but also displays the tenacity of the human spirit in its tireless pursuit for meaning, even when faced with the bulk distressing of contingencies.

4. The Return of the Soldier: A Summary

Literature has always found a way to examine the profoundness of human pain and perseverance via the horrific reality and tragic war experiences. Of all the stories that explore this topic, Dame Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) is particularly noteworthy for its moving analysis of the psychological wounds that combat causes; the novel's narratives explore the psychological and sentimental struggles that people who come home endure in addition to the physical damage caused by the First World War. The story revolves around Chris Baldry's homecoming, a British soldier who was sent to the avant-garde to fight the Germans, after serving, Chris now experiences shell shock (today called post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD) and forgets what happened in the last fifteen years of his life; he is ignorant of his wife Kitty and feels that he is still bachelor. Being vulnerable and incapable of handling her husband's illness, Kitty turns to her girlhood friend and her husband's ex-lover Margaret Grey for support.

Margaret and Kitty find themselves in a harsh spot, being forced to face their unwanted pasts and the things they have kept buried as they attempt in different ways to revive Chris' memory; their connections become more tense and nuanced when they learn that one of Chris' still existing memory is of Margaret and their young love. All along the story, the events alternate between the past, where Margaret is Chris' passion and the present, where Kitty is waiting; this illuminates the complexities

of the lives of the two female protagonists of the story, but also the occasions that moulded their bonds. The truth of their shared past eventually dawns on Chris as he slowly begins to recover his memory, causing emotional turmoil and tough choices. *The Return of the Soldier* explores how war affects people psychologically, focusing on the trauma that soldiers like Chris go through. Themes like love, selflessness, and time passing are also covered; this work of Rebecca West highlights the significant effects of war on people and their interactions with one another while providing a complex portrait of human sentiments and kinships.

4. A Psychoanalytic Reading

Expanding on the groundwork established by the examination of Rebecca West's story, Misha Kavka's (1998) psychoanalytic interpretation reveals the complex and deep interplay between individual trauma and social norms that shapes the behaviours and affective status quo of the characters in *The Return of the Soldier*; rather than being a story device, Chris Baldry's amnesia serves as a metaphor for the mind's attempts to return to a presumably secure, pre-war version of itself in order to protect itself from painful war retentions and loss. His wife Kitty's compulsive upkeep of their opulent home is a physical representation of her want to maintain an untarnished social façade, which successfully represses her inner insecurities and emotional needs; this psychological fragmentation is reflected in this rigid behaviour. Margaret Grey, meanwhile, struggles with her inner conflicts and the consequences of straying from her given societal position; she shines as a beacon of genuineness in contrast to Kitty's societal pretensions. Kavka's observations highlight the destructive consequences of these unacknowledged traumas and the extreme measures people take to comply with or defy social norms, illuminating the characters' inner and deeper but sometimes unseen sentimental and psychological struggles. Using this perspective, *The Return of the Soldier* becomes more than just a story about the exterior destruction caused by war; it also becomes a deep investigation of the inner turmoil and the frantic, often fruitless, efforts at psychological survival in front of social constraints and the trauma's eerie endurance.

Moreover, Upendra Subedi (2012) goes into the complex representation of the psychological effects of war, building on Kavka's psychoanalytic analysis; she emphasises how West's account of Chris' amnesia and its eventual unravelling highlights the powerful destructive power of suppressed trauma. According to Subedi, the story not only documents the physical effects of the trauma caused by war but also offers a scathing analysis of the societal mores of the time, which add to the psychological suffering of the protagonists. Conscripted trauma concealment, a coping strategy in an

early English modern culture that values stoicism, has profound effects on Chris, Kitty, and Margaret, each of whom represents a unique reaction to the confluence of individual pain and social prospect. Chris' mental disintegration, which manifests as a vacillating between his longing for his much-desired past and his untoward current reality, indicates a deep detachment from his personal experiences and is a sign of his effort to manage the unresolved war trauma. The well-planned life of Kitty, her externalised shield against exposure, and Margaret's genuineness, which poses a challenge to the social order, all serve to highlight the detrimental consequences of the cultural pressure to suppress negative feelings and experiences; the novel here becomes a sharp commentary on the victims of war when viewed through Subedi's perspective. These losses occur not only in the war zone but also in the deepest corners of the human psyche, where restrained desires, traumatic memories, and social strains fight a silent war that has long-lasting effects.

5. An Existential Analysis

Expanding upon this analysis of social structures, West's subtle and refined description of her protagonists Chris, Kitty and Margaret makes a strong case against the efficacy of conventional rules in guaranteeing personal fulfilment and pleasure. Lydia Simmons (1970) posits that the characters' journeys shown through *The Return of the Soldier* highlight the fundamental limits of society's expectations when it comes to resolving the deep problems of identity and existence that follow tragedy; Chris' forgetfulness comes to be emblematic of larger existential amnesia in which the position and standards the English modern society imposed, seem detached from the truths of human distress and the pursuit of true selfhood, as he struggles with the psychic wounds of war. The portrayal of the wife Kitty and the first love Margaret, who embody distinct aspects of societal femininity, as they navigate their personal existential doubts underscores the insufficiency of traditional gender norms and social standing in offering a support system for authentic self-exploration and emotional fortitude. West asks the reader to reflect on the degree to which social structures may provide comfort or purpose in front of life's inherent misery and uncertainty via these finely crafted characters; by doing this, she emphasises an existentialist claim that genuine fulfilment is an intensely own journey freed from the social structures that often try to define and confine it.

West's examination of existentialist issues in *The Return of the Soldier* challenges the society's standards' efficacy and suggests that these structures are useless for bringing about true fulfilment. For Ian Brookes (2002), the expectations of conformity placed on ex-soldiers and, hence, on society at large, were not created to promote personal authenticity but, on the other hand, to preserve the

authority that is necessary for any given democratic regime to operate; per this criticism, societal structures often compromise people's sense of self and fulfilment even if they are essential for maintaining social order. In this West alludes to the joint existential forgetfulness of a society that is oblivious to the person's search for meaning outside of social constraints and fixated on outmoded norms and ideals via Chris' amnesia. The profound remark on the mismatch between society's expectations and the individual's yearning for authenticity is provided by this metaphorical forgetfulness. According to Brookes (2002), conformity may maintain social order but stifles an individual's existential quest, making it ultimately pointless to pursue personal fulfilment and insight; West challenges the idea that real pleasure can only be attained within the boundaries of conventional society duties and expectations by encouraging readers to consider the complicated interactions between societal frameworks and personal existential journeys via her tale.

West deftly challenges the social structures that were supposed to provide comfort and purpose but rather exacerbate existential problems. Her story offers a timeless analysis of the search for authenticity and fulfilment outside of social standards, in addition to reflecting the existential unrest of the post-war age. West asks readers to consider whether or not real self-discovery and sentimental strength may be facilitated by conventional positions and expectations. By doing this, *The Return of the Soldier* engages in a universal conversation about the human condition, transcending its historical setting; it serves as a reminder that finding real fulfilment is an individual journey that often calls for venturing beyond of the comfortable but constricting bounds of society norms.

6. Conclusion

Existentialist literature's examination of trauma reveals the profundity of human distress as well as the spirit's innate ability to find meaning amid disorder; characters navigating horrific trauma landscapes are representative of what the human condition is all about, a ceaseless search for meaning and purpose in the face of existential absurdity. The goal of this research paper has been to demonstrate how the scars of trauma can, in addition to representing loss or hopelessness, also serve as a starting point for a meaningful journey towards self-awareness and existential revival. Furthermore, as a mirror of the profoundly human process, literature not only tells tales of sorrow but also shows the paths people take to emerge from the shadows with fresh perspectives on what it means to be alive. Through the narratives of West's tale, we are reminded that even in the darkest corners of trauma and existential investigation, there is always room for change and rebirth; this gives us hope that the pursuit of meaning will always persist as a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit.

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In a nutshell, *The Return of the Soldier* by the British novelist Dame Rebecca West goes beyond just narrating the apparent destructions caused by World War I; it explores the deep psychological wounds that penetrate well beyond the front lines, into the fundamental fabric of human life. This article has demonstrated, via a psychoanalytic investigation, how the characters Chris Baldry, his actual wife Kitty, and his first beloved Margaret Grey embody a larger story about the long-lasting effects of suppressed trauma and the unrelenting weight of social expectations; their conflicts represent the unsaid wars that many people fight in the wake of unresolved trauma, when distinctions between the past and present, the individual and society, become hazy. To conclude, West's seminal work goes beyond its historical setting to provide a lasting meditation on the need to face and move past our pasts; by doing this, it not only exposes the subtle nature of untreated psychological injuries but also makes a strong case for society's need to recognise and deal with the unseen tragedies that mould our lives. As we come to the end of our analytical journey, *The Return of the Soldier* serves as a sobering reminder that, in addition to personal courage, social acceptance of susceptibility, honesty, and compassion are also necessary for genuine healing and emancipation from the ghosts of our past that keep haunting our present life.

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