



Exploring the Woman's Status Through the Dialogic Relations in Rebecca West's War Fiction *The Return of the Soldier*

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Abstract

*This essay presents a critical reading of Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, eliciting prime inquiries on the role of female characters in war fiction. The novel depicts the story of a British soldier who returns home back from France, the place where he was fighting the Germans. Thus, this essay is interested in the types of dialogues presented within this story, i.e., how dialogism as an element of discourse is shaped through the lines of this story. This study offers as well a literary feminist analysis of the status quo of female characters in *The Return of the Soldier* and compares it to that in male literature, as a woman wrote the studied work. In this, our purpose is to delineate how men can be in need of help and how women can be a haven for them.*

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1. Introduction

Rebecca West, her real name Dame Cicely Isabel Fairfield, is one of the notable writers of all history. She took her first step as a journalist and literary critic, but when her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), was released, she received many positive reviews. One of these was by the editor in chief of the American weekly magazine "Time", who tagged her "indisputably the world's number one woman writer". The audience back then accepted her debut novel, seeing as it echoed the shellshock and trauma that most European families lived after or during the First World War. Hence, this essay puts forth a lucid explication of the dialogic relations and the woman's status in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918).

2. Literature Review

Before undertaking the analysis of Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, it is imperative to start with some key concepts. Seeing as this work is written by a woman, it is of high importance to shed light on Women's Writing, the literary discipline that came forth and ripened in the 20th-century. Likewise, this fiction is a novel, thence it is required mentioning an effective definition of this genre. Withal, there is an explanation of dialogism, since this essay is trying to study the dialogic relations in *The Return of the Soldier*.

2.1. Women's Writing

Throughout history, women were undervalued, unappreciated and shirked in by the male-dominated societies they were living in. In literature, the men writers dominated the scene, marginalised and limited the role of women in their writings. Women as characters were flat and were added to the story either to complete the image or to censure women more and more. As writers, women were shaded and absent from the literary image and the only women writers the public got the chance to know were unveiled through the male literary canon. In the beginning, women did not show any resistance to the situation they were subjected to. However, in The Victorian era, many women proved to the whole world that literature could be for 'her'. The early women writers did not survive seeing their works get the success since lots of them published their works anonymously like Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, or using incognito, in the case of George Eliot and George Sand, for instance.

Women's Writing as a literary discipline burgeoned, ensuing feminism's enormous outcome on the social side. As a field of study, women's Writing is divided into different generations who share thoroughly the same intentions but emerged in various settings. For Elaine Showalter, Women's Writing as a subject matter resulted from the fighting of many generations of women writers who remained unknown. She added that these women sacrificed all they got to see the future generations live and work in prosperity. The early genuine beginning of this literary field was with Mary Wollstonecraft, who gave great importance to education; because she knew that, the absence of education would create not only a generation but rather generations of ignorant women. In the early nineteenth century, Women's Writing took a turn for the better, the fact that could make them join the literary canon. Nevertheless, this latter did not happen since most publishers at that time were not keen to see women in literature; because they knew that their existence would open the door for many other rights, they did not want to give to women (Goodnow, 2010).

In the early 20th-century and amid the First World War, Women tried to find an open spot for themselves in the literary world. Among these women, there is Rebecca West, whose war novel, *The Return of the Soldier*, elucidates the impersonation of women in a time of crisis. In this novel, Margaret, an intelligent woman, tries to make the male protagonist of the story, Chris, recover back the memory, which he lost because of the cruelty he lived with as a soldier. In this fiction, whose narrator is a woman, West succeeded in portraying the woman as the abettor who can help men in their most challenging days. Furthermore, she even showed the man as the baby who is in need of care and help.

2.1. The Novel

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, the novel is a literary genre marked by its length, contrasting it with the novella and the short story. It is identified by a plot, which is the association of multiple events related to the other to narrate and recount the story. The main difference between the story and the plot is that the first one refers to the succession of events imagined by the reader as if they were real. At the same time, the latter is a collection of events presented to the readers without considering either the sequence or the timing. The second feature of the novel is the characterisation; in the novel, at least one character must be present because, without characters, there will be no events to happen; characters can be human beings like most the novels

for instance *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), they can be animals like in Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) etc. (Baldick, 2008).

In her 2016 PhD dissertation, Souad Berbar traced the history of the word novel, stating that both Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding are among the first writers that adopted this variety of writing. Berbar also added that the origin of the word novel could be associated with the chivalric 'romance', from its French origin 'roman', but there is a nuance when it comes to the English language since both the novel and romance signify two different genres. She backed up this idea by quoting Ian Duncan 'the distinction between novel and romance is peculiar to English' (cited in Berbar, 2016, p.10). Berbar added that it is premature to talk about the novel before the mid-eighteenth century uttering that Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) are among the first novels in history (Berbar, 2016).

2.2. Dialogism

As acclaimed by the Russian linguist and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogism is "a principle or condition of interconnecting performative differences underpinning all forms of communications" (Buchanan, 2010). For Bakhtin, it is out of the question to comprehend how the meaning is being produced without understanding that every word's exact implication and purport is nothing more than an outcome of a negotiation. He added that a given language's users grasp the meaning of every word, depending on the need of the situation. On this idea, Aleksander Skaza explained,

Bakhtin restrains the influence of purely communicative (only informative) aspects of the language and doesn't allow the changing of the personal meaning (the voice) into a thing, a mere message (it is the main idea of his theory of polyphonic novel and the philosophy of the language as a whole) (Cited in Vaupotič, 2010, p. 311).

For Bakhtin, literature's function is always to labour and create dialogism at every level by adjusting the speech to make a double-voiced discourse. "[It] presents a world in which no individual discourse can stand objectively above any other discourse; all discourses are interpretations of the world, responses to and calls to other discourses" (Cited in Allen, 2000, p. 23). Bakhtin saw that the novel was the ultimate literary genre that could be dialogic; for him, the other genres could not be.

He, i.e., Bakhtin considered the novel as the most dialogic literary genre. He affirms that dialogism is not just the dialogue that two characters may have in the novel. Still, he goes far more than this by explaining that dialogism is related directly to the language the character could use in his conversation with another character. Since the type of language, that character may use to interact with one character differs from the kind of language he may use in his conversations with another character. For Bakhtin, a specific way of talking about a character depends on many aspects related mainly to ethnicity, sex, social class, etc (Hamza-Reguig Mouro, 2014, p. 92).

3. The Return of the Soldier

The Return of the Soldier is Rebecca West's debut novel; it first appeared in 1918. The story is about the comeback of Chris Baldry, a British Soldier from his mission in France during the First World War, to his wife Kitty Baldry, whom he could not even remember at first sight. Under the trauma of the atrocities of the war, Chris lost all his actual memory except a part related to a specific period of his life, the days he was sentimentally related to Margaret Grey, whom he met on the Monkey Island in one of the summers while they were both adolescents. His obsession with this woman made him forget his life, he could not even recall his deceased child, and he thought he was still in his twenties. This fact made his cousin Jenny very worried about his estate, which led her to visit Margaret in her house and ask her if she could come to see Chris and help him get back his memory.

In the beginning, Margaret was somehow confused because she moved in her life and had a husband for whom she cared the most, but her strong character made her accept to visit him to help find out his lost retention. This fact made Kitty very upset, but with the intervention of Jenny, she could say nothing but accept the reality as it was, but she refused to see Margaret's face when she was giving visits to Chris. After many times together, Chris asked Margaret more and more, but she was brilliant and knew perfectly how to deal with the situation she was put in. In the final part of the story, Margaret starts to talk about Oliver (Chris' and Kitty's dead son); at this period, Chris starts getting back his memory, and at that moment, both Kitty and Jenny know that it is no longer twenty years old Chris but rather the soldier who was fighting in France. The Story is narrated by an inside narrator, Chris' cousin Jenny.

Chris Baldry is nothing but the reflection of all those men who went to the front line during the First World War and could not forget about all the obscenity, villainy and barbarity they

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survived. As any man who has been a soldier and was unable to accept that the war was a reality, Chris entered into a post-traumatic disorder that made him stagnant in the best epoch of his life, his days with Margaret. Perhaps, Chris was the one who went to the war, but all of his family and close people lived it in one way or another. Jenny, his cousin, was unable to see him as unfit for his present reality; she tried moving heaven and earth to make him get back to his existence. And that is what happened, and she went looking for his beloved ex Margaret, the only person capable of coming for help, as Chris can only think of her. The other character influenced by the war was Kitty, Chris' wife, who accepted her husband's actuality and complied with him meeting with his ex-lover, seeing as she wanted him to find back his existence. The life of Chris Baldry is a mirror that personates the life of every surviving soldier from the war.

4. Insights into War Trauma through Dialogic Relations

The Return of Soldier (1918) is also full of dialogues of different kinds. The first class of dialogism introduced by West occurs between Chris and his wife, Kitty Baldry. They are the novel's main characters and the historical background of the story's era. Firstly, there are few discussions between the two since Chris barely recognised his wife when he saw her after returning from the front line of the First World War like any other soldier returning home, feeling empty inside after seeing all those people passing the way in front of his eyes. Secondly, the description of the first dialogue that happened between Kitty and Chris is described as very sad, typically a dialogue that might occur between a returning soldier and his upper-class wife, who was very cold and not caring at all, and even the setting of the first meeting was very dark.

Dialogism is being also introduced between Chris' past and future. Since his return from the war, Chris was stuck in his past; he could not remember a word from his actual life; he was just repeating the past dialogues that he used to have with his ex-girlfriend Margaret. Through the cut of fifteen years that Chris and Margaret had, Chris remembered every word of what he was saying.

This novel also presents dialogism between the characters. The first one is between Chris and his wife, Kitty. In their dialogues, there was a kind of cold words used by both characters, it seemed that Kitty was not that caring since her husband was coming back from a traumatic period in his life, but this fact did not change anything. The other major one happened between Chris and his ex-beloved Margaret, who seemed to be the opposite of Kitty in everything, even in the use of words when she was discussing with Chris; she considered him a child who needed help, but he did not know how to

ask for it. Dialogically speaking, *The Return of the Soldier* is related to the narrator because, in this novel, the narrator is a round character (Jenny).

5. *The Position of the Woman in The Return of the Soldier*

The Return of the Soldier is considered a big jump in feminine literature. This novel which belongs to the second generation of women's writing, gave women all the credits they needed and deserved. In this story, whose narrator is a woman, the author wanted to prove one thing; the woman is not a flat character; the woman is there when the man requires her. Rebecca West was innovative in the choice of her characters, so on the one hand, she was very accurate and not sexist, and on the other hand, she gave women the space they needed, primarily since this text was written in the early 20th century, a period in which women did not have even the right to vote or to own properties.

In the novel, there are two types of women; they are different in everything. The wife is from an upper-class family, and all she cares about is how to behave in a good way without giving any importance to her education or her status quo as a woman. Meanwhile, the ex-lover is presented as a woman who knows what she wants; though she was Chris' first love and she knew he was from a wealthy family, she did not change her principles. This contrast in the characters confirms what Mary Wollstonecraft (2004) once said with an evolutionistic view; women will always remain under the dependency of men till the day they figure out that being rich does not change the fact that they are women.

The other characteristic of the woman in the description of this novel is strength and independence. Margaret is a tough woman. Though she comes from a middle-class English family, she is very enlightened, self-determined and very aware of her situation as a woman. The great thing that distinguishes this novel from the other feminine fiction belonging to the previous generation is that here the woman moved into action since here it is the man who requires the woman who is the opposite of what most of the 19th-century novels, which presented the woman as the character in need of help.

6. Conclusion

The Return of the Soldier (1918) is Rebecca West's most famous novel, which delves into the acts of cruelty that the First World War let into the mind of the people who experienced it. The storyline

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portrayed that women were not the only fragile creatures. Still, even men could not resist the psychological atrocities of the war, and that is what happened with Chris Baldry. The novel gave great credit to the woman whose primary role in life was making her husband (man in general) delighted; Margaret showed the opposite of that since her smartness was why Chris got back his memory. The novel implicitly highlighted the fact that women were the reason that European economies stayed up when men were fighting on the front lines.

The Return of the Soldier is considered a feminist work that did not disregard the position of men. Chris was treated well by his wife, cousin, and even his ex-loved, who thought twice about coming and helping him. The novel pictured Chris, who is a man, as a baby who needs help, and not as most masculinists suggest. Through literary analysis, the reader will immediately understand that men and women are not similar, but this does not change the truth that women are not born to please men and vice versa.

In *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), the reader will find different dialogues between characters and those between the text and other texts, which will make him, enjoy reading. The impressive part about this novel is the dialogue between the past and the present of the protagonist; it makes the reader passionate to understand why the man destroyed his past with his hand while he is still nostalgic for it in his present status.

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