

## **Moral Crossroads of World War I: Examining Shell Shock In Both Literature and News**

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### **Abstract**

Today, soldiers returning from war with severe nervous deterioration are labeled as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. While much remains unknown about PTSD, the symptoms of this disorder have been familiar to society since the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Soldiers returning from the front with apparent mental difficulty were labeled with what was then known as “shell shock.” In Rebecca West’s novella, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Captain Chris Baldry is sent home from the front with amnesia, unable to remember the past fifteen years after a shell explodes near him on the battlefield. The doctors and his family members are unable to make sense of this persistent lack of memory, at times wondering if Chris is feigning amnesia to stay at home away from battle.

By questioning how society of the early 1900s viewed those afflicted with shell shock and how those views affected families’ and soldiers’ beliefs about national and individual responsibilities in the wartime effort, society today may hope to be able to understand current theories, opinions, and treatments of PTSD. Between the years of 1914 and 1940 newspapers such as *The Times of London*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* overflowed with society’s panic concerning shell shock. Month after month, reports appeared in the news about the best treatment for a “nervous” soldier; articles discussed how some had been cured of their shell shock by sudden loud noises while retirement in the country seemed to help others. West accurately portrays the confusion, frustration, and ethical dilemmas involved in helping a soldier recover from shell shock as Chris’s family tries to cope with his lack of memory and their fear of his return to the front. The comparison between real newspaper articles of the time and the evidence West provides in her literature shows that even when the war is won on the front, there is no resolution for soldiers and society; shell shock is still an enigma waiting to be solved.

**Keywords: World War I, Shell Shock, Literature**

### **1. Body of Paper**

World War I became a test of ethics for the entirety of society during 1914-1918. As seen in *The Times of London*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, major newspapers of the time, society and the media were in a panic. There were reports of strange sicknesses caused “[w]hen a big shell explodes [creating] a sudden and very great pressure in the surrounding air” (“What Shell Shock Is”) or in those with “neurotic tendencies” (“Shell Shock Not Serious”). The clashing opinions and confusion conveyed in the newspapers began to seep into the literature of the time. Rebecca West manages to embody the moral anxiety that comes with trying to determine whether or not a soldier is faking his illness, how to cure him, and whether or not he should be cured. West accurately portrays the confusions families during wartime feel within her writing. The main focus of Rebecca West’s novella, *The Return of the Soldier*, is the moral contradictions that effect society during a time of total war. West allows her audience to see Chris and the war through his cousin Jenny, his wife Kitty, and his estranged lover Margaret, which in turn

shows the struggles people at home must face as they try to understand the war and the trauma of it and how there is no completely moral solution. Three moral conflicts West introduces to her audience are the responsibility to serve one's country versus the responsibility to serve one's family, the question of relieving a soldier from the war or from his trauma, and society's dedication to the nostalgic past or the need for a progressive future.

During the early 1900's, a lot was expected of men. To prove their manhood, when the Great War broke out, they were expected to fight for their country as a way to show their national pride, courage, and honor. Any soldier that suffered from shell shock was seen by a large portion of society as a lesser man. On July 2, 1918 *The New York Times* announced that "shell shock is not now regarded as serious" since it "is not suffered by the best, physically sound soldiers" ("Shell Shock Not Serious). Chris is definitely subject to this stigma as seen by Kitty's and Jenny's view of him. Kitty and Jenny see Chris as the perfect man, which, based on social dictates, would require Chris to be honorable, courageous, and take personal pride in his nation. This, most likely, is what sends Chris off to fight in World War I before the novella opens in the midst of the war, with Jenny and Kitty fretting about him from home.

When Chris is sent back from the war after his concussion, a sense of shame settles over the family before concern for him does:

"Either it means that he's mad, our Chris, our splendid, sane Chris, all broken and queer, not knowing us—I can't bear to think of that. It can't be true. But if he isn't—Jenny, there was nothing in that telegram to show he'd lost his memory. It was just affection—a name that might have been a pet name, things that it was a little common to put in a telegram...Things may be awfully wrong. It's all such a breach of trust! I resent it." (West, 17)

As a man, Chris is the representative of Kitty and Jenny and his incapacity reflects a deficiency in them both. While they prefer his safety, Kitty and Jenny also desire that he fulfill the expectations society has set for him as a man—strength and courage in the face of a horrifying war. By retreating into memory, Chris is displaying the vulnerability to react strongly to fear, something that men were expected not to do.

Kitty and Jenny, while desiring "splendid, sane Chris" (West, 17) to uphold the qualities that make him such a manly icon in their society, also adore Chris. They've spent the majority of their lives in an attempt to keep him perfect. The war forcefully rends Chris from the peaceful world at Baldry Court. Jenny iterates it precisely when she says:

"I was wishing for the return of a soldier. Disregarding the national interest and everything else except the keen prehensile gesture of our hearts toward him, I wanted to snatch my Cousin Christopher from the wars and seal him in this green pleasantness..." (West, 4)

While they want Chris at home with them, Kitty and Jenny also recognize the national belief that he should be at war to defend his country's pride. When finally confronted with his damaged return, Kitty and Jenny find themselves eager to cure him of his amnesia, which would, in turn, send him back to the front. Kitty rages in the beginning of the novella, "Bring him home! Bring him home!" (West, 23) only to eagerly demand his cure and find relief when he becomes again "every inch a soldier" (West, 100).

Margaret, bestowing the information of Chris's shell shock on Kitty and Jenny, finds herself faced with the same conflict. "It's wrong, I know it's wrong, but I am so glad Chris wants to see me, too!" (West, 48) Margaret exclaims after finding out that Chris has been asking to see her. "I know the way we're coming together is terrible, but I can't think of a meeting with Chris as anything but a kind of treat" (West, 51). Margaret is conflicted in a way that is parallel with Kitty and Jenny's moral conflict. While she realizes that Chris has a responsibility to serve his country and his family, his injury is what allows her reconciliation with him. Chris is living in a fantasy that keeps him inappropriately infatuated with Margaret rather than his real life as well as keeping him boyish rather than manly. Several times Chris is described as, "loose-limbed like a boy" (West, 99) and with "the confiding relaxation of a sleeping child" (West, 75). While Chris's reaction to shell shock may seem unrealistic to West's audience, due to his specific form of amnesia, many soldiers were sent home from war, suffering from amnesia and other even more unusual afflictions.

"While treating shell-shock cases in the field in France [Dr. William Brown] found that a large proportion of the cases showed a more or less extensive amnesia for events that had occurred immediately after the shell explosion," reported *The Times of London* ("Hypnotic Cures"). In fact, *The Washington Post* reported an instance in which a soldier had two personalities—one that had no recollection of any memories before the shell explosion, much like West's Chris, and the other produced by hypnosis with all memories intact ("Loses Personality After Shell Shock"). Even his characteristics varied—"jaunty" without hypnosis and "modest and altogether less loud in manner" with

hypnosis. The article continues to tell of his change in accent under hypnosis (“Loses Personality After Shell Shock”). Other articles discussed soldiers “struck dumb by shell shock” (Dumb Man Cured By A Joke”) and others who became “temporarily deaf...and blind” (“What Shell Shock Is”).

Though his amnesia does place Chris fifteen years back in time, he was not a child fifteen years ago. However, his injured mental condition, which causes his incapacity to uphold his manly stature by heading his family and fighting in the war, causes the people around him to view him in a regressed, immature state. The news reports that “ill-informed persons...look upon most cases of shell-shock as cases of malingering” (“ ‘Shell-Shock’ Cases”), upholding the stigma that men who are weak feign illness to retreat from the battlefield. As a result “rough methods were occasionally employed” (“ ‘Shell-Shock’ Cases”) to try to force soldiers into admitting their lies. Other soldiers’ ailments were treated in Army hospitals and asylums when their mental needs could not be met (“ ‘Shell-Shock’ Cases”). In the end, Margaret realizes the way to bring him back up to society’s expectations and “by curing Chris, [Margaret] enables the soldier to return and secure the nation’s future through war” (Rizzuto, 27).

Similarly, West forces her characters to consider how best to provide Chris relief. While suffering from amnesia, Chris is unfit to fight, allowing him to be safe from the war—“They could not take him back to the army as he was...While [Margaret’s] spell endured they could not send him back into the hell of war” (West, 77-78). However, while in his confused state, Chris is uncomfortable with his current life. He trips down the steps in the hall because “[t]hey’re new” (West, 28), he is unable to recognize his bedroom, which causes him unrest at night, faces he knew are now gone such as Griffiths the butler, and he cannot remember Kitty.

The forgotten fifteen years is a terrible disruption to each character’s life. Kitty and Jenny devoted themselves to making him happy—“we had nourished that surpassing amiability which was so habitual that one took it as one of his physical characteristics...here we had made happiness inevitable for him” (West, 6). Now back within his house, he seems uncertain of his own safety and happiness by being surrounded by unfamiliarity:

“...his eyes hardened in the midst of his welcome, as though he had trusted that I [Jenny] at least would have no party to this conspiracy to deny that he was young... ‘Chris,’ I went on, ‘it’s so wonderful to have you safe.’

‘Safe,’ he repeated. He sighed very deeply and continued to hold my hands.” (West, 24)

His repetition of “safe” seems to suggest that he is trying to find an understanding of the word and his sigh shows that he is unable to find one in the unfamiliar house. Kitty’s way of life is destroyed and she is now considered “a symbol of this new life by which he was baffled and oppressed” (West, 25). She is used to Chris showing strong affection for her and giving her gifts of jewelry, all of which she wears in a hope to remind him of their emotional and material love.

Jenny feels she has lost all of Chris’s confidence. He can’t remember her at the age of thirty-five, only at the ages of their childhood through age twenty. His image of her as a child does not line up with her present picture, causing a disruption in their relationship. Jenny finds herself on the outside of his affections, a place she has never before belonged, and it hurts her ego—“I did not matter” (West, 80). He is physically present with Kitty and Jenny, but also lost to them.

Kitty and Jenny’s feelings and comfort in their stable life with Chris would return upon the return of his memory. Chris would again remember the changes in his house, marrying Kitty, and how he aged with Jenny. He would be at peace within Baldry Court again, restoring order to their three lives there. However, “the cure is poison, because it returns Chris to the traumas of the front” (Rizzuto, 27), which is why many thought that soldiers were malingering. When the armistice was signed, “[m]ore than 2,000 American soldiers in France suffering from shell shock were cured by the news” (“2,000 Cured By Armistice”). With the end of the war, those who were suddenly cured most likely further solidified the notion that some soldiers were pretending to be under stress to avoid returning to the battlefield.

Though Margaret finds a solace in Chris’s amnesia, her life is also ruptured by his return both to Baldry Court and the past. She is already married and Chris’s re-entrance into her life serves as a reminder of the misfortunate events that caused her such a downfall. “I suppose I ought to say that he isn’t right in his head, and that I’m married, so we’d better not meet” (West, 47), Margaret says when Jenny asks her to visit Chris. The impropriety of Chris’s returned affections for her, bringing to the forefront her never completely repressed affections for him, is obvious to her, she can’t help but feel fulfillment in their unrequited love.

Like Jenny and Kitty, Margaret’s main focus is for Chris to be happy as well. “Her spirit...was...deeply concerned about Chris” (West, 83). Once she figures out how to cure Chris of his shell shock, she is confronted by the fear of hurting Chris further. However society dictates that doctors should “bring people from various outlying districts of the mind to the normal. There seems to be a general feeling it’s the place where they ought to be” (West,

89). Margaret is torn between maintaining Chris's happiness within his dream world, happiness that only exists when Margaret is near him, or reminding Chris of his present, which would set each character's life back to its day-to-day functioning. "Whether it is truly saner to remain in one's own 'tract of time'...or to return to a temporal world that sends men to their deaths in dubious wars is of course one of *The Return's* persistent questions" (Pinkerton, 6).

Margaret's idea of a cure, showing Chris evidence of his life before the war, may seem unlikely due to its simplicity in comparison to the cures the newspapers were recommending at the time, the news continuously reached for methods of curing shell shock within their articles. Letters to the editor of *The Times of London* suggested mixing shell-shocked patients "with more cheery disabled men" ("Neurasthenic Pensioners") to improve morale as a means toward a cure. Others wrote to insist upon religion as the ultimate cure (" 'Shell-Shock' And Moral Control"). Articles reported music as a cure to shell shock on several occasions—soldiers would "suddenly regain their speech by joining in the chorus of some well-known song" ("Music Cure for Shell Shock"). The same article reported that musical memory seemed easier for amnesiac patients to retrieve than other memories ("Music Cure for Shell Shock"). Hypnosis was a prominent cure at the time for "hysterical patients" ("Hypnotic Cures"). Every soldier responded to treatment differently while some did not respond at all.

During World War I, curing and healing soldiers of their physical or mental wounds was, in a way, harming them. Once revitalized, these men were sent back to the warfront and, again, put in danger. The question of whether or not it was better to heal them in the hospital or keep them out of the war arose for doctors and families. "The irresolution produced by trauma can incite nationalist discourse to convert absence of a harmonious past into loss" (Rizzuto, 13). As seen with Chris at the end of *The Return of the Soldier*, "he would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders, under the sky more full of flying death than clouds, to that No-Man's-Land where bullets fall like rain on rotting faces of the dead" (West, 100). His cure is a curse and a death sentence.

The very nature of Chris's shell shock is an obsession with the past rather than being "characterized...by absence (of memory)...West depicts Chris's condition as less a matter of loss than of excess" (Pinkerton, 4). West seems to be suggesting the melancholy nostalgia for a simpler time is struggling with the global force of progress. The Great War changed a lot of things about society around the world. New health issues, especially shell shock, took the forefront of the medical world, perplexing both patients and doctors. For the first time, war was total war. Everyone in the world was affected and the way people viewed war began to change. It became more violent, causing a stunning increase of casualties. Men came back from the war, scarred from seeing for the first time the truly terrible things men could do to men.

As these changes moved society toward modern warfare and jaded views of mankind, the past became a lost comfort. Because of Chris's experience of the war, he refuses to remember a time of conflict: his break-up with Margaret, the loss of his baby boy, and the war itself. He dwells in the past, recalling feelings of boyish innocence in order to push away the discomfort of the present wartime. "*The Return's* portrayal of traumatic testimony questions both dominant British national histories and modernist studies that situate the war as a central crisis of modernity, an event which constitutes a break from earlier historical moments thought to be defined by stasis and stability" (Rizzuto, 8). However, if Chris continues in this past-obsessive state, he will not be able to continue on in present life and "[resume] his place in the social order of the sane" (Pinkerton, 6).

Shell-shock created numerous obstacles for many soldiers like Chris to overcome in order to continue with their lives. Many committed suicide. One article describes "Hatman, the French soldier who sustained shell-shock at the battle of the Marne" as being in a coma for twenty-nine months ("Officer In Coma 29 Months"). *The New York Times* reported that Captain A. L. Zimmerman's death was caused when he was cleaning his pistol, accidentally firing it due to the awkwardness induced by his shell-shock damaged arms ("Pistol Shot Kills Capt. Zimmerman"). Others in moments of confusion, committed murder like George Parry who was reported as acting in a moment of "temporary insanity as the result of being shellshocked" ("Kills Wife, Ends Own Life"). Shell shock ruined the lives of soldiers, but also those of their family members. It interfered with the perception society had of them and the perception they had of themselves.

In time, the war ended, certain nations triumphing over others. However, West seems to be reminding her readership that, upon looking closely at all the people affected by the war, there is no winning. Kitty, Jenny, Margaret, and Chris serve as a microcosm of the conflicts felt by all. Society calls men to fight for their country, but also to lead their families. Kitty, Jenny, and Margaret must decide which would better relieve Chris of his suffering—keeping him away from the war with his mind unsettled or curing his shell shock and sending him back to danger. Chris's desire for the past hinders his movement forward, yet progress is necessary for survival. West shows that there are no answers to these moral conflicts. One way or another, Kitty, Jenny, and Margaret must lose their soldier and time must go on. Shell shock continued to be a major point of debate even through the 1930's moving toward the 1940's. Committees discussed the continuation of treatments in anticipation of "future

hostilities" ("Nervous Disorders from War Service"). Already shell shock had been subject to several theories ranging from intense air compression to nervous disorders and the conversation has continued into the present. Now referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder, shell shock still plagues the military forces. Because of writings like Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, society today can have more compassion for those suffering even if not much else has been learned about the affliction. The medical field has definitely made progress by educating society and providing psychological treatments for returning soldiers. The literature we have preserved and reviewed has played a significant role in the progress and the hope of finding the ultimate cure. The war may be over, but as long as soldiers still suffer from their experiences, no one has yet won.

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