

# **Masculinity in Collapse: Shell Shock in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier***

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**Abstract:** The author compares Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) for their respective juxtapositions of shell shock, splintering families, and homoeroticism and argues that these juxtapositions are used by the writers not to condemn the characters themselves but rather to condemn the society that brought on this trauma and destruction, thereby forming a critique of pre- and post-WWI British attitudes toward masculinity and gendered expectations. Shell shock renders soldiers incapable of returning home and fulfilling their heteronormative duties, while patriarchal ideals prevent even the possibility of homosexuality, leaving the British public in a state of limbo.

While neither novel takes place on the battlefields or in the trenches of World War I, both Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) allow the effects of war to invade the text and the stability of their respective characters' lives. Five years after the end of the war, *Mrs. Dalloway*'s Septimus Smith continues to struggle with suicidal thoughts and vivid, violent flashbacks, while *The Return of the Soldier*'s Chris Baldry is sent home during the war due to suffering from severe amnesia. Shell shock, the condition that dominates both characters' lives, was a diagnosis often characterized as weak and cowardly, and therefore feminine—Septimus, Chris, and any men suffering from shell shock were considered to have failed their own senses of masculinity. It is no coincidence, then, that both characters, having been deemed unable to fulfill

the traditionally masculine role demanded of them from society, return to broken homes: homes where, in the absence of proper displays of masculinity, the heterosexual union is destined to fail. Both Woolf and West juxtapose shell shock, incomplete family portraits, and homoeroticism to demonstrate the inherently flawed logic of a society that demands men go to war only to punish them for experiencing the natural consequences of witnessing such horror, and to form a critique of the heteronormative ideals that also tie themselves to the institution of war.

Suffering from shell shock was simply not compatible with early twentieth-century notions of masculinity in Great Britain. As Jessica Meyer writes in “Separating the Men from the Boys: Masculinity and Maturity in Understandings of Shell Shock in Britain” (2009), “in the case of the psychologically disabled ... it was not disability that caused effeminacy, but feminine tendencies that led to disability” (4). Shell shock was a manifestation of all that was already wrong with the soldier in question—immaturity, physical weakness, homosexuality—being brought to the surface by war. In essence, it was these men’s own fault for suffering from shell shock. And as Mark Humphries writes in “War’s Long Shadow: Masculinity, Medicine, and the Gendered Politics of Trauma 1914–1939” (2010), “in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries patients who exhibited these conversion disorders were classified as hysterical. Hysteria ... implies that the womb is the cause of the patient’s symptoms and thus the condition is inherently feminized” (506). Soldiers coming home with shell shock are, in essence, being reprimanded for acting like women. Even though both Septimus of *Mrs. Dalloway* and Chris of *The Return of the Soldier* receive some sort of treatment for their conditions, the approach their doctors use is often a Freudian one, searching for some sort of cause that goes further back—frayed relationships with their respective wives, the loss of a child—rather than focusing on the war itself as a source of trauma. But despite their doctors’ claims that they sought out latent desires and motivations in order to truly restore the patient in question, the desired results of the treatments Septimus

and Chris receive are largely surface level—get along better with your wife and be able to start a family, go back to the frontlines. Both of these expectations are traditionally masculine ones that, ironically, do little to solve the deeper issues. Both Chris's and Septimus's narratives demonstrate how "doctors constructed trauma as an individual failure to meet masculine ideals" (Humphries 508) while neglecting to consider how war, a manifestation of that masculine ideal, might contribute to this trauma in the first place. In this way, both Woolf and West come across as skeptical and critical regarding the methods Freudian psychologists were using at the time.

In Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus embodies the figure of the shell-shocked soldier, plagued by fears of effeminacy and homoeroticism. The most profound connections that Septimus appears to make in his lifetime are inappropriate or socially discouraged. Before heading off to war, he takes literature classes that "made him fall in love with Miss Isobel Pole" (Woolf 113) and the literature she teaches. His love for Miss Pole is not a productive one: while he may have "thought her beautiful, believed her impeccably wise; dreamed of her, wrote poems to her" (113), his love is not reciprocated and has no chance of ending in marriage and children. The poetry that he falls in love with—Keats, Shakespeare—distracts him from more masculine pursuits, to the point where Mr. Brewer, out of what he claims to be genuine concern for Septimus's health, "advised football" (114) to toughen him up. But the text quickly reveals Mr. Brewer's true intentions when Septimus goes to war and "develop[s] manliness," which was the true "change which Mr. Brewer desired" (114). In the trenches, Septimus forms a new, doomed relationship—that with his senior officer, Evans. Woolf uses euphemistic language to allude to their homoerotic bond, writing that the two "had to be together, share with each other" (115). The relationship eclipses any need for heterosexual companionship, and Evans is "undemonstrative in the company of women" (115). When Septimus hears the news of Evans's death he is stoic and appears "very reasonable" (115) in his response: he represses any

sort of emotionally charged, hysterical, “feminine” reaction for the sake of appearing more masculine. The war has suitably “toughened him up,” but at the cost of his being able to properly process his emotions, demonstrated by his continued visions of Evans years after his death. These flashbacks and hallucinations, which constantly remind him of his own sexual and gender transgressions, will ultimately cost Septimus his livelihood.

Septimus’s marriage to Rezia becomes both the balm with which he attempts to soothe his wounds and a further source of his distress. He proposes to Rezia shortly after the war’s end—and Evans’s death—“one evening when the panic was on him” (115) and anxieties over returning to England were beginning to set in. But the war has simply rendered Septimus incapable of returning to normal life in his current state, and the marriage, under the invasive presence of mental illness, is destined to fail. Meyer writes that “the inverse of the proper male soldier was defined ... as the child as well as the woman, and that the failures of shell-shocked men were as much those of immaturity as of effeminacy” (4). Not only is Septimus, as a sufferer of shell shock, not enough of a man to be a husband, but he is also not even an adult. Rezia, who “had a right to his arm” (Woolf 57), must escort her husband throughout town, make sure he crosses the street safely, and try to avoid judgement from strangers when he regularly announces, “I will kill myself” (56) in public, much like a mother trying to hush up a melodramatic, crying child. Five years into their marriage they still have no children to show for it, making it easy to infer that theirs is a loveless marriage, perhaps by virtue of Septimus’s perceived effeminacy on account of his shell shock. Septimus, the previously rosy-cheeked, idealistic poet, returns to Shakespeare with a new perspective: now he is compelled with how, as he perceives, “love between a man and a woman was repulsive to Shakespeare” (117) and how “Shakespeare loathed humanity” (116) in all its heteronormative forms—“the putting on of clothes, the getting of children ... the business of copulation” (116–17). Septimus and Rezia’s relationship is not like that of a married couple,

and they have left no “proof” (children) that would solidify their union; even the symbolic representation of their relationship, their wedding rings, is no longer sufficient. Rezia looks down at her hands and realizes “her wedding ring slipped—she had grown so thin” (63). She will later remove the ring, and Septimus will realize “with agony, with relief” that “their marriage was over” (98). Agony that the facade, all he has, is fading; relief that he could be free from the social confines that continue to be a detriment to his mental health.

His own marriage a failure and source of stress, Septimus finds himself unable to trust the doctors and therapists who claim to help him, due to their own respective marital statuses. Dr. Holmes is, according to Rezia’s assessment, “such a kind man” (119) who had “four little children” (120) and a wife of his own and only wants to help Septimus to see him achieve the same lifestyle. “Didn’t one owe perhaps a duty to one’s wife?” (119), Dr. Holmes asks Septimus, framing Septimus’s recovery as a matter of simply returning to normal, heterosexual society. Septimus sees through it. He views Dr. Holmes as “the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils” (119) from whom he must escape if he is to survive at all. Sir William Bradshaw, too, a man with “a natural respect for breeding and clothing” (123) who keeps a “photograph of his wife in Court dress” (124) in his office, assures himself that Septimus, when he was well, “was the last man in the world to frighten his wife” (124); again, Woolf characterizes the doctors and professionals as men who simply want Septimus to achieve the same socially acceptable life that they have. The two men blend together in Septimus’s mind—“Holmes and Bradshaw are on you” (124), he tells himself, imagining the destruction they will bring to him. The mental health profession is directly associated with reinstating social norms and expectations, and therefore a deep distrust of the profession permeates its appearances in the novel.

Septimus frequently characterizes the notions of heterosexual marriage and the expectation of children from these unions as an aspect of human nature as opposed to

something that is socially constructed, a misconception that ultimately leads to his death. When Septimus thinks of Holmes and Bradshaw, he sees them in his mind as “they scour the desert. They fly screaming into the wilderness” and declares, “human nature is remorseless” (124). In contrast to the civilized manners Holmes and Bradshaw wish to return Septimus to, Septimus views their behaviours and ideals as reckless, wild, and utterly remorseless and unsympathetic—and natural, but in a much more destructive manner than Holmes or Bradshaw would characterize their own endorsement of the “natural” order of things. Septimus evokes images of the barren “desert” in response to Holmes’s and Bradshaw’s encouragement for Septimus and Rezia to start a family, revealing just how hopeless he considers the usually fruitful endeavour. Septimus loves Shakespeare not because of the playwright’s distaste for society but for his distaste for “humanity” (116), which Septimus views as synonymous with sex and procreation, neither of which he has any desire to engage in with his wife. And when interrogated by Bradshaw about his time during the war, Septimus thinks that “he had committed an appalling crime and had been condemned to death by human nature” (122), the specifics of which are never revealed. Considering what he tends to associate human nature with, could Septimus’s crime then be his relationship with Evans? His lack of relationship with his wife? Septimus’s conflation of social constructs and human nature further emphasizes how deeply embedded these ideals have become and how truly difficult they are to unlearn. Indeed, the only escape Septimus can seem to find is ultimately suicide.

As in the case of Septimus, the doctor attending to Chris in *The Return of the Soldier* searches for some deeper, latent cause behind his amnesia and shell shock rather than viewing the war as a trauma-inducing experience in itself. This is not to say that Chris does not have any repressed subconscious desires—his dislike of his wife most certainly rises to the surface with his amnesia—but the war itself is curiously never problematized by the characters in the novel. In fact, Chris’s returning to the war is the end goal

of his treatment. Jenny declares, in the novel's conclusion, that the now-cured Chris looks "every inch a soldier" (West 82), ready to return to the front lines, the novel's title being a reference not only to Chris's return home at the beginning of the novel but also to his re-establishment as a proper soldier in the novel's conclusion. Similar to how Septimus's doctors are only ever focused on repairing his relationship with his wife, which itself seems to be the source of much of Septimus's stress, Dr. Gilbert Anderson and Chris's family want Chris to get better so that he can return to the war that caused his distress in the first place. Whereas Woolf's distrust of the mental health profession is largely vocalized through Septimus, one of her characters, West must employ irony to express her own distrust in contrast to her characters' ringing endorsements of Dr. Anderson's psychoanalytic techniques. How productive is a treatment of shell shock if it serves only to send soldiers back to those traumatic environments in the first place?

Chris's fixation on his past relationship with Margaret does not recall the homoerotic, but it does represent a freer life than Chris's upper class would have dictated him. The Monkey Island Inn of his adolescence is remote, surrounded by "dark-green, glassy waters" and a "bright lawn set with many walnut-trees and a few great chestnuts," and is "well lighted" like a painting (31): not realistic but idealistic. His love for Margaret is "changeless" (37), timeless, not dictated or bound by others' expectations. Monkey Island provides a retreat from the institutions—class, marriage—to which Chris must inevitably return. When the fantasy is shattered by Chris's becoming jealous of Margaret's interactions with another man, she realizes that "he wasn't trusting me as he would trust a girl of his own class" (46), demonstrating just how embedded Chris's notions of class and difference are, despite his love for Margaret. And yet, when he returns to his own, more "trustworthy" class to marry, he is deeply unhappy in his marriage, which becomes evident when he simply wipes out all his memories of Kitty and of the past fifteen years in his traumatized state. Like Septimus believing that all expectations placed upon him are human nature,

Chris has arrived at an impasse. No matter which way he turns, what timeline he chooses to believe, something is lacking, and he will be unhappy.

Unlike in *Mrs. Dalloway*, wherein the homoeroticism is an element of the past that unwillingly crops up in Septimus's subconscious, *The Return of the Soldier* situates its homoeroticism firmly within the time span of the text—and unlike in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the pivotal relationship in question occurs between two women. Jenny, as the spinster cousin, is entirely dependent on Chris for her social status, financial stability, and household. As she watches the reunion between Margaret and Chris unfold, she becomes “physically so jealous of Margaret that it was making me ill” (51) as she realizes the potential consequences of having Chris leave the household. The more affection Margaret receives from Chris, the more jealous Jenny grows; likewise, as soon as Kitty loses her husband, Jenny's resentment toward her rears its ugly head. Jenny realizes that she “hated [Kitty] as the rich hate the poor as insect things that will struggle out of the crannies which are their decent home and introduce ugliness to the light of day” (13). This hatred grows, and Jenny searches for behaviour of Kitty's that she says “confirmed my deep, old suspicion that she hated me” (72). Without Chris, Jenny has become almost perversely traumatized in the absence of the proper family unit. Furious with Kitty and jealous of the affection Margaret is hoarding, Jenny feels as though she must turn to Margaret for the attention she seeks. An image of Chris growing old and becoming “not quite a man” (80) terrifies Jenny; like with Septimus, Chris's trauma has emasculated him and made him incapable of fulfilling his patriarchal duties. This fear hovering uneasily in her mind, Jenny turns to toward Margaret and the two “kissed not as women, but as lovers do; I think we each embraced that part of Chris the other had absorbed by her lover” (80). After Jenny and Margaret kiss, Margaret disappears, virtually unexplained, from the text, and Jenny turns her attention to Chris, who is “coming back” (82) to his restored state. Do Jenny—one of the characters who remembers what Chris cannot—and Margaret—the



only one who remembers Chris as he was before—carry a piece of Chris within themselves? Is this kiss an attempt on both parts to retrieve what they believe has been lost forever? Or is it, like Chris reverting to his love of Margaret, an expression of Jenny's latent desire for Margaret, for other women, which had previously been redirected onto Chris? Among the three women in his life, Chris cannot reciprocate any one of their feelings—Margaret, the one he loves, is married; Kitty, his wife, is a stranger to him; and Jenny was always destined to be the spinster cousin. Chris's amnesia shatters the normalcy of the lives of all three women, and Jenny and Margaret's kiss is a manifestation of this collapse. West leaves her syntax purposely ambiguous as to what the motivations behind the kiss would be, but regardless, Chris's mental absence serves as the missing piece that causes the family structure to collapse.

By arguing for the respective novels' links between homoeroticism and social condemnation, I do not mean to say that either novel condemns these behaviours in themselves; but with both novels taking place in worlds where social acceptance and conformation eclipses all other desires, making such a link proves effective for their respective criticisms of Freudian psychology and gendered expectations. Both West and Woolf are highly skeptical of a system that seems set on ruining a generation's chances of a happy family while simultaneously condemning any alternatives. *The Return of the Soldier*, set firmly within the war, casts a glance at the mounting crisis that doctors and society alike were unprepared to deal with. *Mrs. Dalloway*, with its characters having been granted five years of hindsight after the war's conclusion (and seven years for Woolf, who published the novel in 1925), reveals how the lingering effects of such ideologies continue to fail the men, the women, and the families affected by shell shock. In the respective novels' conclusions, Septimus is dead, and Chris is most likely being sent to his grave, leaving Rezia without any children and Kitty with no more children to bear after the death of their son: the war destroys both the man and the family in one fell swoop.

## Works Cited

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