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"The Gender Politics of Trauma during the Great War in *Mrs. Dalloway*,  
*The Return of the Soldier* and *Sunset Song*"

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### Abstract:

Traumatic disorders during the Great War were heavily gendered in regards to their diagnosis and treatment. Psychiatrists made a clear distinction between the traumatic experiences of women, known as 'hysteria', and the traumatic neurosis of soldiers, which was popularly known as 'shell shock'. The aim of this article is to study how gender politics influence the experience of trauma in three modernist novels: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Virginia Woolf), *The Return of the Soldier* (Rebecca West) and *Sunset Song* (Lewis Grassie Gibbon). In the exploration of the parallelisms and differences between shell shock in soldiers and the traumatic experiences of women in the domestic sphere in these novels, I argue that these experiences were not only marked by the expectations of appropriate behaviour according to the rigid gender roles of the period, but that they were triggered and accentuated by the burden of these expectations on the psyche of individual men and women.

**Keywords:** Gender politics, Trauma, World War I, Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Lewis Grassie Gibbon.

## **Leyre CARCAS MORENO**

### **The Gender Politics of Trauma during the Great War in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Return of the Soldier* and *Sunset Song*.**

#### **0. Introduction**

Contemporary psychiatrists define trauma as 'overwhelming life experiences that shatter the social and psychological sense of self and precipitate existential crisis' (Henke 2010, 160). However, as Healy explains in *Images of Trauma*, at the beginning of the twentieth century this type of psychological distress was understood to be part of the psychiatric disorder known as 'hysteria', which was being studied by Janet and Freud among others and became the most common disorder at the time (XV). Hysteria was largely connected with femininity, both because it usually affected female patients and because its symptoms played into the notions of unpredictability and emotionality traditionally associated to feminine nature. These ideas will be challenged during the First World War when 'a remarkably large number of soldiers succumbed to traumatic neurosis' (92), whose symptoms were in essence those of hysteria. In spite of this, psychiatrists made a clear distinction between the traumatic experiences of women, known as 'hysteria', and the traumatic neurosis of soldiers, which was popularly known as 'shell shock'. These traumatic experiences were not only heavily gendered, but often triggered or worsened by the individual's inability to fulfil society's expectations in regards of gender. Moreover, Showalter exposes in *The Female Malady* the way in which 'notions of gender influence the definition and, consequently, the treatment of mental disorder' (5). Feminist critics have argued that the diagnosis and treatment of psychological distress were heavily gendered and completely dependent on the social expectations of feminine and masculine behaviour based on the very rigid gender roles of the period.

During the First World War period, fiction became a primary culture expression to explore and address the cultural anxiety surrounding the hundreds of men and women that presented symptoms of trauma. Henke states that 'the historical trauma of the First World War ushered in a pervasive chord of cultural upheaval' which dominated twentieth-century modernist fiction. Following this idea, First World War fiction constituted then an 'attempt to represent a range of quotidian traumas suffered not only by soldiers (...), but by non-combatants who, in domestic isolation, endure an overwhelming sense of loss, anxiety, and emotional rupture' (Henke 161).

According to Showalter, 'Woolf was the first woman writer to connect the shell-shocked veteran with the repressed woman of the man-governed world' (172). However, other modernist authors before and after her also approached and explored these themes in their works. The aim of this essay is to explore the novels *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925, Virginia Woolf), *The Return of the Soldier* (1918, Rebecca West) and *Sunset Song* (1932, Lewis Grassie Gibbon) in the light of these ideas, and to analyse the correlation between the traumatic experiences of soldiers in the battlefield and women in the domestic world, as well as how gender politics shaped both these experiences of trauma and their diagnosis and treatment. Firstly, I will examine shell shock as presented in the novels and its relationship with contemporary ideas of masculinity. Later, I will explore the parallelisms and differences between shell shock in soldiers and the traumatic experiences of women in the domestic sphere. Finally, I will compare how contemporary ideas of femininity and masculinity shaped the experience, diagnosis and treatment of these psychiatric disorders.

#### **1. Shell shock and the ideals of masculinity**

During the Great War, the soldiers who went to fight on the battlefield were expected to uphold the ideals of masculinity ingrained in British society at the time. An essential aspect of the masculine ideal was the complete repression of emotions when confronted with violence, and the need of maintaining a rational and detached response to the events witnessed in war. As Levenback explains, manliness demanded 'the apparent death of feelings, that is their denial in combat and their repression in the post-war world' (62). The large proportion of soldiers that experienced traumatic neuroses and struggled to maintain these expectations, nonetheless, clearly undermined this ideal of British masculinity. Showalter argues that 'the Great War was a crisis of masculinity and a trial of the Victorian masculine ideal' since 'shell shock was related to social expectations of the masculine role in

war' (171). This crisis of masculinity and its relation to the traumatic disorders experienced by soldiers is going to be a central topic in modernist fiction about the war.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf portrays a soldier suffering from shell shock in post-war London in the character of Septimus Smith. While he is fighting in the front, he affirms 'he developed manliness' (75), that is, he is able to sustain the manly ideal of a good soldier. He is able to suppress his feelings even when confronted with the death of his friend Evan, even though his death will haunt his hallucinations once he is back in London. As a result of this repression, he gains several honours for his actions during the conflict. He seems to consider his emotional repression a sign of a good soldier: 'Septimus (...) congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him' (76). It is not until he returns to London that this emotional detachment is finally recognized as a symptom of his shell shock: 'the appalling fear came over him--he could not feel. He could reason; he could read, (...) his brain was perfect; it must be the fault of the world then--that he could not feel' (77). As Henke proposes, it seems that it is precisely this 'façade of stoicism that eventually drove him mad' and makes Septimus 'unable to conform to society's expectations regarding gender', forcing him to withdraw into 'a world of megalomania and terror' (2010 166). It is interesting to notice that, in both instances, he unmistakably identifies 'the war' and 'the world' as the reasons he is unable to feel emotion. Septimus' awareness of the way these forces play into his traumatic neurosis blurs the lines between society's notion of sanity and insanity, since it is precisely during his repressive emotional state in the war when he is considered 'sane'. As Gilbert and Gubar claim, 'Septimus' madness and suicide demonstrate both the ferocity and the fragility of the patriarchal enterprise' that surrounded the war and the masculine ideal of soldiers (1994, 25). That is, the character of Septimus highlights how British masculinity ideal was sustained in an impossibility that is made crudely obvious during the Great War, and that results in a crisis of masculinity when society has to be confronted with the shell-shocked soldiers that come back from war.

Rebecca West also examines the impact of the militarization of British masculinity in *The Return of the Soldier* through its masculine protagonist. Chris Baldry is a soldier that returns home from the battlefield affected with a case of amnesia that has made him regress to his adolescence and forget his adult life, including his marriage and the death of his son. Rizzuto argues that the fact that Chris returns in his amnesia to his period on Monkey Island suggests that his struggle with the imposed masculine role goes farther back than the battlefield, that for him 'adulthood means becoming an English patriarch, "gentleman", and capitalist' (24). Like Septimus, the war acts as the disruptive element that destabilizes the illusion of the masculine ideal and reveals their inner struggle to sustain the roles patriarchal society imposes on them. His cousin Jenny, who is the voice of the narrator, also interprets Chris' amnesia as an escape from the restricted gender role of masculinity: 'His very loss of memory was a triumph over the limitations of language which prevent the mass of men from making explicit statements about their spiritual relationships' (128). Thus, through his fixation on his pre-adulthood love for Margaret, Chris seeks to escape the gender roles and expectations that are imposed on him as the 'man of the house', which he finds even more oppressive and unbearable after his traumatic experiences in the war.

The impossible reconciliation between Chris' happiness and his masculine role is a recurrent theme throughout the novel, and reaches its climax in the final conversation between Margaret and Jenny. Margaret says that 'if anybody's happy you ought to let them be' (134), but Jenny concludes that they have to restore Chris' memory because otherwise 'he would not be quite a man' (137). As Henke explains, Chris' 'cure' only means his return 'to the spousal and military obligations that once defined, and will henceforth circumscribe, an upper-class lifestyle based on duty and privilege' (2010 162). More than cured, Chris is reprogrammed to fulfil his duties as the man of the house in accordance to societal expectations. The supposed happy ending is only a precarious return to the masculine ideal that has proven to be unsustainable in the long term.

Gibbon's *Sunset Song* offers another example of the cost of militarism to the soldier's psyche in his character Ewan Tavendale. His psychological decline during the war is filtered through his wife's perspective, which allows us to witness the progression from the happiness of their pre-war relationship, in which she claims 'she was safe with Ewan' (153), to a complete alienation from each other once Ewan becomes a soldier. Once he's inscribed in the army, he starts to disrespect her: 'He had never spoken to her like that' (214). Chris realizes then that 'it wasn't Ewan, her Ewan, someone coarse and strange and strong had come back in his body to torment her' (228). Once again, it is emphasized the desensitization and lack of emotional response necessary for men to adhere and perform the role of masculinity demanded of a soldier, which required them to be cruel and violent in order to accomplish their military orders. He becomes moody and aggressive towards her, and she admits that 'the horror of his eyes upon her she would never forget, they burned

and danced (...) in her brain' (228). In the end, Ewan is shot as 'a coward' for deserting the trenches. It constitutes yet again an act of escape from a situation that is unbearable to Ewan's psyche. Akin to Septimus' case, Ewan deliberately chooses death as the only solution to the alienation that his role as soldier provokes in him; to the burden that the performance of masculinity represents for him. War, and the necessary aggressiveness and violence that requires from soldiers, results in the complete disintegration of Ewan and its relationship with his family and causes a state of such psychological distress that he prefers to be executed rather than continue fighting in the war.

## 2. Hysteria and the female domestic sphere

As it has been seen, in these novels it is apparent that 'what had been predominantly a disease of women before the war became a disease of men in combat' (Gilber and Gubar 1989, 318). Many scholars have written about the parallelisms between women suffering from 'hysteria' and the shell-shocked soldiers. Just as soldier were imposed a masculine ideal, women back home were also being forced to conform to an unyielding set of social expectations regarding feminine behaviour that often conflicted with their personal needs and caused similar psychological distress. Hysteria, as Showalter explains, 'expressed the insoluble conflict between their desires to act as individuals and the internalized obligations to submit to the needs of the family, and to conform to the model of self-sacrificing "womanly" behaviour' (144). In both cases, individuals found themselves in a position of powerlessness over their circumstances and obliged by higher powers to conform to society's idea of 'proper' behaviour, which derived in a struggle that had very similar psychological consequences. However, patriarchal socialization meant that the traumatic experiences that women suffered on their own household were often concealed and diminished precisely because they belonged to the domestic sphere.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, the only character that is able to empathise with Septimus' struggle is Clarissa, a politician's housewife. The way Woolf portrays the strong bond between the characters of Clarissa and Septimus reveals the numerous similarities in their life experiences. Levenback argues that the novel portrays the complete isolation of Septimus from the civilians that are able to act as if the war had never happened, including Clarissa since 'she, like the other civilians represented in the novel, believes herself immune from its effects and evidence of them in the post-war world' (81). However, that analysis fails to acknowledge Clarissa's empathy after hearing about Septimus' suicide, as well as the instances where she expresses as much disconnection with the role society has assigned her as Septimus does. Both characters have similar responses to the world around them and are portrayed as 'highly sensitive, imaginative and wilful' (Henke 1981, 139). At the beginning of the novel, she makes manifest the gap between her individuality and the persona she is forced to perform in society, and how the latter obscures and asphyxiates the former: 'She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; (...) not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs Richard Dalloway' (8). Moreover, she is very conscious of the threats life poses to people even away from the battlefield: 'She always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day' (6). Clarissa's awareness of social constraints and the danger they symbolize to particular individuals explains her unexpected empathy at Septimus' suicide, which she interprets not as cowardice but as an act of rebellion: 'Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate' (163). Thus, as it has been discussed before, Clarissa is the only one capable of understanding Septimus plea for empathy amidst a society that regarded shell shocked soldier with incomprehension and considered them almost a nuisance: 'the whole world was clamouring: kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes' (140).

West contrasts as well the military versus the domestic sphere of trauma in *The Return of the Soldier*. Although the main focus of the novel revolves around Chris' amnesia, the traumatic experiences of women are equally present in the margins of the story. Pulsifer proposes that Kitty is also suffering traumatic symptoms resulting from the death of their son but they 'are overshadowed by Chris's experience of trauma in war' (38). At the beginning of the novel, Jenny finds Kitty in the untouched nursery 'revisiting her death' (5), and it happens again when Chris returns home, which clearly suggests a process of mourning. Yet, during the whole novel Kitty appears to be constantly trying to hide her grief and avoid any mention of her son's death. She wishes 'Chris wouldn't have kept it as a nursery' (7); and when the doctor asks her why she hadn't mentioned it before, she states: 'I didn't think it mattered. It was five years ago' (128). Thus, West seems to suggest that 'nurseries, which often conceal women's experiences of trauma, may be analogous sites to the battlefields of modern war' (Pulsifer 47). The fact that Kitty's trauma is overlooked by everyone in the novel, including Jenny, shows how women's traumatic experiences were

relegated to the private sphere and largely diminished in their seriousness or their consequences. Women were infantilized and their distress was interpreted as 'silly fancy' by the patriarchal views held by medical practitioners. Kitty, however, is not the only one in the novel confronted with the traumatic results of patriarchal oppression and the dismissal of women's experiences and suffering. Margaret has also experienced the loss of a child, and Jenny is acutely aware that her only role available is to serve and care for her cousin and his wife in exchange for her living, saying that 'she knows that I know there are things at least as great for those women whose independent spirits can ride fearlessly and with interest outside the home park of their personal relationships, but *independence is not the occupation of most of us*' (129).

Burton and Dixon in their feminist readings of *Sunset Song* have also emphasised the understanding of women's psychological distress present in Gibbon's portrayal of his female protagonists, Chris Caledonia. Burton highlights 'the recurrent representation of Chris's awareness of her own split subjectivity and contradictory social and psychological positions' (36). In *Sunset Song*, Chris continuously expresses herself as if her subjectivity was split in two opposite halves: 'she hated also she didn't hate, father, the land (...). Two Chrisses there were that fought for her heart' (40). This feeling of disconnection arises as well during her pregnancy, when she claims that she wouldn't 'ever be her own again' as 'Chris Gurthie crept out (...) and went wandering off' and 'Chris Tavendale heard her go, and she came back to Blawearie never again' (181). Like Clarissa, Chris acutely feels the contradiction between her individuality and the role imposed to her gender. When her brother Will says she 'should never have been born a quean', she responds: 'I wish I hadn't' (96). Again the sense of helplessness and lack of independence is reflected in the portrayals of the women characters in these novels.

In *Sunset Song*, Gibbon provides a crude depiction of the realities of female experiences that the patriarchal discourse so often diminished. Chris is very influenced by the figure of her mother. She remembers her standing 'white and lonely and sad' in the kitchen (70) and witnesses how her father mistreats her and forces her to have children against her will, after which she kills herself and her younger children. The figure of her father is the epitome of patriarchal oppression within the household in 'a combination of religious zeal, sexual frustration and male oppression' with tragic consequences (Dixon 297). After their mother dies, Will warns her 'not to let father make a damned slave of you, as he'd like' (75). The threat of sexual abuse is constant in her house, she describes how some nights her father 'stopped by her door, and she held her breath, near sick with fright' (81); it is not until he dies that 'she was free at last' (117). Her relationship with Ewan is also fraught with tension as they negotiate their respective power, and it is fatally wounded by war. As Chris reflects, 'everything she had ever loved and desired went out to the madness beyond the hill' (235) and never to come back. Ewan's psychological distress during the war destroys their relationship and it will ultimately mean his death. However, in the same way Clarissa is able to empathize with Septimus' suicide, after hearing of Chris' true death, she is able to recognize Ewan's final act as one motivated by love: 'I understand. You did it for me, and I'm proud (...) -sleep quiet and brave, for I've understood' (243).

Caruth talks about 'the way in which trauma may lead (...) to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound' (8). This is seen to happen to the women of these novels, who are able to empathize and comprehend the soldiers' trauma through the empathy developed because of their own traumas and their experience of them. They are the only ones among the different agents in society which are able seen through the acts of desperation (suicide, amnesia, treason) of the soldiers and understand the nature of their traumas.

### 3. The role of gender in the experience of trauma

Abel proposes that in *Mrs Dalloway* 'Woolf represents the world war as a vast historical counterpart to male intervention in women's lives' (*Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* 41). Showalter support this analogy when she affirms that during war 'men were silenced and immobilized and forced, like women, to express their conflicts through the body' (171). Under the military hierarchy of the army, men found themselves in the same position of dependency and helplessness as women under patriarchy. In these circumstances, 'shell shock may actually have served the same kind of functional purpose in military life that female hysteria served in civilian society' (175). These novels portray the process by which these traumatic disorders were often the end product of the psyche's inability to cope with the struggle of performing the imposed gender roles that were demanded of them. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth states that trauma represents 'not the

incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival' where 'survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living' (62-4). The experiences of trauma for these characters, therefore, do not emerge from the confrontation with their own mortality, but rather from the inability of dealing with a survival that continued to require necessarily adherence to unsustainable patriarchal gender roles.

According to this analysis, it is obvious that the consequent treatment of traumatic disorder will be evaluated only in its relation to the success of the patients to conform to patriarchal gender roles once again. Hence, just as the treatment of hysteria seeks to control women into adhering to their feminine duties, the treatment of shell shocked soldier had the final purpose of restoring men into 'fighting' form. In *The Return of the Soldier* there is an evident depiction of this phenomenon, as Chris is only considered 'cured' when he becomes again 'every inch a soldier' (140). As Margaret tells the doctor: 'You can't cure him. Make him happy, I mean. All you can do is to make him ordinary' (127). Under these parameters, the male authority of patriarchal society is embodied in the medical profession, which is in charge of policing gender behaviour and 'curing' those that fail to conform to it. Moreover, when the pressure to conform and the incomprehension of those around them make soldiers like Septimus resort to suicide, it was met with disdain and considered an act of 'cowardice'. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the reaction of Septimus' doctor is to exclaim: 'That coward!' (132), while in *Sunset Song* Ewan's emotional meltdown is considered 'and act of cowardice'. It is ironic, nonetheless, that even when a soldier is considered 'cured', as in the case of Chris, the result is his return to war. Thus, death is in the majority of cases the only end possible and it is only the patriarchal discourse that differentiates the 'heroic' from the 'coward' form of dying according to their idealized masculine standards.

In contrast, these novels have shown how women's experiences of trauma are in most cases invisibilized and confined to the domestic sphere. The fact that the patriarchal order has rendered these traumatic experiences a substantial part of its systematic oppression of women does not mean they have any less of a psychological toll on the individuals that suffer them. For women, the threats to her psychological well-being and the pressure to conform to a very constrained set of behavioural norm associated to gender are much more extreme, and not associated to an event with a delimited time-span like war, but it is a continuous presence through their lives and a condition they have learn to deal with since their childhood. As Chris' mother tells her: 'You'll have to face men for yourself when the time comes' (69). It is poignant, then, that the women we encounter in these novels are able to survive their traumas, or at least learn how to live with them, while their male counterparts are overwhelmed and incapable of handling them. Lacan proposed that the 'awakening' from the traumatic experience is in 'itself the site of a trauma' since 'to awaken is thus to bear the imperative to survive' which goes against the wishes of the individual's consciousness (Caruth 100-5). For the male characters, this awakening, or their resistance to it, seems to necessarily mean their own death, considering Septimus' suicide, Chris' return to battle, and Ewan's execution for desertion. On the contrary, for the women in the novels it results in a newly found will to survive and thrive against the obstacles. In the case of Clarissa and Chris, the deaths of Septimus and Ewan serve as the emotional revelation that allows them to carry on with their lives. Both have similar reactions: Clarissa states that 'she felt glad he had done it' and now 'she must go back' and 'assemble' (165), while Chris claims Ewan 'did it for me, and I'm proud' and she 'ran down the stairs' to kiss his son (243). Kitty also receives the news of Chris' cure 'with satisfaction' (140). Therefore, it could be argued that the death of the male characters is almost a necessary condition for the women's survival, and acts as a catalyst to overcome their own psychological turmoil.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article has discussed the manner in which patriarchal ideas about gender roles played an essential part in the experience of trauma during the First World War. I have argued that the ideal of British masculinity was used as an instrument to control and dictate the behaviour of the soldiers during the war in the same way patriarchal ideas about femininity were used to dominate and limit the behaviour of women back home. The characters in *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Return of the Soldier* and *Sunset Song* serve as a perfect example to illustrate the psychological distress that the imposition of these gender roles caused on the individual and contributed to accentuate their traumatic neurosis. Finally, I have analysed the impact that patriarchal ideas of gender had in the diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric disorders, and patients were considered 'cured' only when they were able to successfully conform again to their gender roles. Moreover, the novels reflect how patriarchal discourse often overlooked the traumatic experiences of women in the household while the epidemic of shell shock

among soldiers represented a traumatic event for society as a whole and took a central place in public discussion, which certainly manifested the patriarchal value system that prized masculinity over femininity and the public over the domestic sphere. In conclusion, these novels portray the crisis during the First World War that destroyed the ideal of masculinity upheld by British society, and placed men under the same strain to conform to an impossible standard which women had been experienced under patriarchal authority in their own homes. This shattering disturbance of the status quo could explain why the male characters are unable to deal with their traumas, which lead them ultimately to death, while female characters find the strength to survive.

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