

Traumatized Characters in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*

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Abstract—This paper offers a comparative analysis of psychological trauma as represented in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), with a particular focus on symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and war neurosis. Drawing on clinical definitions of PTSD and trauma theory, the essay argues that both novels portray characters whose psychological suffering reflects broader historical traumas—namely, the legacy of American slavery and the catastrophic effects of World War I. In *Beloved*, the trauma of enslavement manifests through recurring motifs of memory suppression, spectral hauntings, and maternal obsession, while in *The Return of the Soldier*, West explores the destabilization of class and gender roles in response to wartime psychological rupture. The study foregrounds how race, gender, and social class mediate individual responses to trauma in both narratives, revealing how personal suffering is deeply embedded within collective historical experiences. Ultimately, the essay highlights how Morrison and West use trauma not merely as a character attribute, but as a narrative device that critiques the cultural, psychological, and institutional consequences of violence and systemic oppression.

Index Terms—PTSD, postcolonialism, race, Toni Morrison, Rebecca West

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twentieth century, various fictional narratives have depicted characters who endure profound psychological and emotional hardships, including racial segregation, war-related trauma, and domestic violence. Many of these characters display symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a psychological condition that often emerges after exposure to life-threatening or terrifying experiences. PTSD is defined as a psychiatric disorder that may occur following the experience or witnessing of traumatic events such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, severe accidents, or physical and sexual assault during childhood or adulthood (England, 2009, p. 3).

Individuals diagnosed with PTSD may exhibit a range of symptoms, including recurring nightmares, memory loss (temporary or permanent), and disturbances in sleep patterns. This paper explores the psychological trauma experienced by characters in two significant twentieth-century novels—Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918)—and argues that these narratives portray characters suffering from trauma that closely aligns with contemporary understandings of PTSD. The analysis highlights the symptomatic behaviors of the central characters and draws connections between these symptoms and clinical features of PTSD.

The discussion begins with *Beloved*, in which Morrison presents characters subjected to extreme psychological and physical violence rooted in the institution of slavery. The novel strongly suggests that many of these characters' actions are driven by the trauma they endured at Sweet Home, the plantation where they were enslaved. Subsequently, the paper examines *The Return of the Soldier* and posits that four characters in the novel exhibit signs of trauma, with their responses shaped by their respective social class positions and personal experiences of the First World War.

II. DISCUSSION

A. Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, Morrison portrays the lasting psychological scars of slavery, particularly through the character of Sethe. The novel centers around Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman who escapes to Cincinnati with her four children. However, her master eventually tracks her down. Rather than allowing her children to be returned to slavery, Sethe attempts to kill them all, succeeding only in killing her youngest daughter. The spirit of the dead child later returns in the form of a mysterious young woman named Beloved, who haunts Sethe's home. Initially appearing vulnerable and childlike, Beloved gradually reveals herself to be a powerful and malevolent presence. While she seems benign at first, her influence ultimately proves destructive to Sethe's psychological well-being.

Sethe's life is marked by a series of traumatic events, beginning in childhood. As a young girl, she witnesses the public hanging of her mother and later endures sexual abuse at the hands of her slave masters at Sweet Home. Morrison (1987) evokes this trauma in Sethe's recollection: "Hung. By the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a

circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look” (Morrison, 1987, p. 73). In addition to witnessing her mother’s death, Sethe experiences repeated instances of physical and sexual violence, the loss of her partner, and the death and separation from her children—all of which contribute to her psychological deterioration and suggest the presence of PTSD-related symptoms.

Sethe tells Paul D. how she has been sexually violated saying: “After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Hold me down and took it” (Morrison, 1987, p. 19). Undoubtedly, these horrible experiences have left Sethe wounded physically and psychologically. Although the physical wounds inflicted could be healed over time, the psychological aftermath of trauma remain present in Sethe’s memory for a long time.

Nevertheless, there are brief intervals in Sethe’s life during which a semblance of normalcy emerges. After the loss of her mother, Sethe manages to mature and attain moments of happiness. She marries and expresses contentment with her “owners” prior to Mr. Garner’s death. As one character recalls, “‘I want you to have these, Sethe.’ I said ‘Yes ma’am.’ ‘Are your ears pierced?’ she said. I said, ‘No ma’am.’ ‘Well do it,’ she said, ‘so you can wear them. I want you and Halle to be happy’” (Morrison, 1987, p. 71). The episode in which Sethe receives a pair of earrings and her eager acceptance of the gift reveal her yearning for a normal, joyful life with her husband and her favorable feelings toward her owners despite the trauma associated with her parents. However, trauma seldom fully dissipates; it often manifests through subtle behaviors, habits, or reactions, as noted by Krause (2009). In Sethe’s case, the embodiment of her trauma is represented by Beloved as a distinct entity—a living symbol of her accumulated pain—serving as a primary indicator of her post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Krause, 2009, p. 94). Another child of Sethe’s, Denver, is aware of Beloved’s ambiguous nature. In a conversation, Denver inquires, “What’s it like over there, where you were before? Can you tell me?” to which Beloved replies, “Dark... I’m small in that place. I’m like this here.” Denver responds by covering her lips and asking, “Were you cold?” Beloved answers, “Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move” (Morrison, 1987, p. 88). While Sethe does not recognize Beloved as potentially imaginary, Denver exhibits skepticism and questions her “sister” to understand more about her origins.

Baby Suggs can also be understood as a character deeply affected by trauma. Having endured the brutality of slavery and the abuses inflicted by slave masters at Sweet Home, she exhibits several symptoms commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Notably, Baby Suggs demonstrates a pronounced tendency to avoid recalling her traumatic past. Hillman (2002) identifies avoidance of thoughts, feelings, or discussions related to traumatic events as one of the most prevalent symptoms of PTSD (Hillman, 2002, p. 64). Consistent with this, Baby Suggs barely remembers any of her eight children, stating to Sethe: “I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody’s house into evil.” She further reflects, “My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember” (Morrison, 1987, p. 5). Similarly, Paul D., another former slave, exhibits PTSD symptoms through his deliberate avoidance of discussing the traumatic experiences endured on the plantation. He metaphorically describes his heart as “a tobacco tin lodged in his chest,” wherein he confines his traumatic memories so that “nothing in this world could pry it open” (Morrison, 1987, p. 113).

Rothbaum (2000) asserts that children are also susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and may exhibit symptoms similar to those observed in adults (Rothbaum, 2000, p. 19). Accordingly, Denver can be interpreted as another traumatized character in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. As an eyewitness to her older sister’s murder by their mother, Denver lives under a persistent shadow of fear, aware that the same fate could have befallen her. This profound isolation is evident in Denver’s initial encounter with Paul D., where she displays intense fear of social interactions, approaching a state akin to agoraphobia—a condition Muscar (2013) identifies as a potential manifestation of PTSD common to both children and adults (Muscar, 2013, p. 84).

Sethe’s maternal love, while rooted in natural instinct, is profoundly shaped and complicated by her traumatic history. Her love for her children develops under extraordinary circumstances; the brutal realities of slavery forged Sethe’s psyche, intensifying her protective instincts, sometimes leading to extreme measures to safeguard her children. Scholars might agree that Sethe’s relationships with her daughters bear psychological scars inflicted by the horrific conditions she endured during slavery. This fierce maternal love is most notably demonstrated in two critical incidents: first, when she kills her infant daughter Beloved to spare her from slavery’s horrors, and second, in her protective care of Denver. Denver, however, appears to experience psychological exhaustion, exemplified when she breaks down crying in front of Paul D., a complete stranger. This emotional vulnerability may stem from Sethe’s overprotective love, which isolates Denver from broader social experiences. Sethe’s distrust of the external world, shaped by her traumatic past, restricts Denver’s social interactions, provoking Denver’s frustration and rebellion. She articulates her social ignorance and helplessness, admitting she does not know “what to do or where to go,” yet confesses she “can’t live here” in the oppressive environment her mother maintains: “Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don’t like me. Girls don’t either” (Morrison, 1987, p. 17).

Upon Paul D.’s arrival, Denver’s tolerance for her mother’s restrictive lifestyle appears to reach a breaking point. Paul D., who has endured experiences similar to Sethe’s, occupies a unique position as both insider and outsider within the mother-child dynamic. He perceives Sethe’s behavior as “very risky, especially for a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially, if it was her children she had settled on to love” (Morrison, 1987, p. 45).

He predicts that such obsessive love, born from traumatic conditions, will lead to adverse outcomes, suggesting that the love of a former slave woman differs fundamentally from that of others.

Sethe's love exerts psychological effects not only on Denver's psyche but also on her engagement with her social environment. Paul D. advises Sethe to seek moderation in her maternal affection: "The best thing he knew was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit" (Morrison, 1987, p. 55). This counsel reflects Paul D.'s clearer perspective as an outsider newly integrated into their lives, recognizing Sethe's obsessive tendencies and urging her toward balance.

B. Trauma in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*

Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) explores the impact of World War I through the varied reactions of three female characters to the return of Chris, a soldier discharged from frontline duty due to a mental breakdown. Over the past two decades, critics have frequently argued that West's portrayal neglects the direct experience of war trauma, particularly that of Chris. Wyatt Bonikowski asserts that "in West's novel, the soldier brings home a revelation about the war and the effects of war on the domestic scene, but the experience of war in general, and Chris Baldry's experience of his own trauma is absent from the novel" (Bonikowski, 2005, p. 514). Conversely, other scholars recognize multiple forms of trauma in West's narrative, noting "the front lines of World War I and the death of a young child" as significant traumatic themes (Pulsifer, 2004, p. 37). This section of the paper will focus on the theme of trauma from the perspective of war neurosis, arguing that four characters in the novel can be understood as war neurotics whose responses to war differ according to their social class.

Tate (1998) contends that soldiers were not the sole victims of mental trauma during the war. While combatants undoubtedly suffered trauma from witnessing battlefield horrors, Tate emphasizes that civilians and non-combatants on the home front were also indirect sufferers of war's psychological impact, which she terms "war neurosis." She highlights that civilians could experience mental breakdowns upon receiving tragic news about loved ones at the front (Tate, 1998, p. 22). Tate's framework offers a valuable lens for analyzing *The Return of the Soldier*, particularly through its depiction of the three female characters as embodiments of war neurosis.

The protagonist, Chris, suffers profound trauma manifested as amnesia resulting from his military service on the World War I frontlines. However, a close examination of the novel's three central female characters—Margaret, Jenny, and Kitty—reveals that they too may be categorized as war neurotics according to Tate's definition. Each woman maintains an emotional or physical connection to Chris. Jenny, Chris's cousin and the novel's narrator, reflects on Chris's departure for the front:

Then he got into the car, put on his Tommy air, and said 'So long! I'll write from Berlin!' and as he spoke his dropped back, and he set a hard stare on the house. That meant, I know that he loved the life he had lived with us and desired to carry with him to dreary place of death and dirt the complete memory of everything about his home, on which his mind could brush when things were at their worst as a man might finger an amulet through his shirt. This house, this life with us, was the core of his heart. (West, 2004, p. 4)

Linett (2013) notes that Kitty, Chris's wife—who is portrayed negatively by Jenny—aligns more closely with Margaret, despite not having recovered from her initial trauma: the death of her infant son Oliver. Kitty's distress over her husband's amnesia and failure to recognize her is exacerbated by her ongoing grief for Oliver. She attempts to preserve her son's nursery as a means of coping. Jenny observes this early trauma, stating, "Kitty returns repeatedly to the nursery, signaling that her experience of the present has been interrupted by the trauma of Oliver's death" (Linett, 2013, p. 2). Such remarks suggest that Kitty's behavior is atypical and symptomatic of her unresolved trauma. Jenny further describes the nursery as "so full of whiteness and clear colors so unendurably gay and familiar, which is kept in all respects as though there were still a child in the house" (West, 2004, pp. 3–4).

Kitty's initial trauma is compounded by the subsequent revelation of her husband's amnesia and his inability to recall their shared life. Pulsifer notes that Kitty "couldn't cope with her husband's amnesia, a shocking event that reasserts for her the trauma of her son's death" (West, 2004, p. 37). Kitty's reaction to the news of Chris's injury deviates from what might be considered normal. She adopts a calm and composed exterior, even suggesting that Margaret's visit is motivated by financial gain. Kitty retorts to Margaret's announcement: "You have read the news in the *Harrow Observer* or somewhere that my husband is at the front and you come to tell this story because you think that you will get some money" (West, 2004, p. 12). This response exemplifies Kitty's typical reaction to trauma—denial serves as a psychological defense to protect her fragile mental state. She attempts to deny her son's death by surrounding herself with his belongings and similarly dismisses the news about her husband to convince herself that all is well. Such behaviors are symptomatic of war neurosis.

Chris's cousin, Jenny, fares no better. Introduced early in the narrative before the family learns of Chris's injury, Jenny exhibits clear signs of war neurosis. Tate describes Jenny's condition, stating that "the civilian narrator of *The Return of the Soldier* suffers from war-neurotic dreams about the trenches" (West, 2004, p. 13). One hallmark of war neurosis identified by psychiatrists is sleep disturbance, including nightmares and recurrent dreams. Dr. Adrian Morrison explains that "posttraumatic stress disorder is characterized by the re-experiencing of a traumatic event in the form of repetitive dreams, recurrent, intrusive daytime recollections, and dissociative flashback episodes" (Morrison, 1989, p. 97). Jenny describes her symptoms vividly in the novel:

Of late I had had bad dreams about him. By night I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of no man's land, starting back here because he trod upon a hand not even looking there because of the awfulness of the

unburied head, and not till my dream was packed full of horror did I see him pitch forward on his knees as he reached safety if it was that. For on the war-films I have seen men slip down as softly from the trench-parapet, and none but the grimmer philosophers could say that they had reached safety by their fall. (West, 2004, pp. 7–8)

Margaret, Chris Baldry's first love, is likewise profoundly affected by the horrors and trauma of war. Her suffering results from a succession of traumatic experiences, beginning with Chris's abandonment during her stay on Monkey Island, followed by her father's death, and compounded by the loss of her son and Chris's unexpected return after her relocation to Wealdstone. Chris's reappearance shocks Margaret deeply and reactivates painful memories. She becomes immersed in nostalgia for her past life with Chris on Monkey Island, a sentiment apparent in her conversation with Jenny during their journey to Baldry Court. Jenny observes that the news of Chris's wish to see Margaret evokes vivid memories of Monkey Island, disrupting the fragile tranquility Margaret had established despite her previous traumas. Margaret poignantly reflects, "when a thing you had thought ended fifteen years ago starts all over again, you are very tired" (West, 2004, p. 36).

Having demonstrated the trauma and impact of World War I on these four primary characters, it is possible to further categorize manifestations of war neurosis. The condition does not present uniformly across the characters, suggesting that social class influences the experience and expression of war neurosis. By interpreting the characters as representatives of their respective class and gender positions, one can understand their diverse reactions to identical historical events. Notably, *The Return of the Soldier* contains no direct depictions of the battlefield or war's progression; the narrative unfolds entirely on the home front. Yet, the characters belong to distinct social strata.

The Baldry family, comprising Chris, Jenny, and Kitty, is firmly situated within the upper class. Their preoccupation with preserving the prewar social order functions as a defense mechanism against the trauma engendered by the war. Hershman observes that "in their obsession with preserving the prewar social order, a move portrayed with ambivalence by the leftist West, they form a carefully constructed defense mechanism against its impending destruction" (West, 2004, p. 2). Thus, these characters appear to cling tenaciously to a familiar past as a means of psychological protection.

David Silbey, in *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War*, observes that the majority of volunteers in the British army originated from the working class. He highlights the working class's notable enthusiasm for the war and active participation, contrasting it with the comparatively restrained responses of other social classes (Silbey, 2004, p. 13). This enthusiasm, as described by Silbey, is vividly illustrated in *The Return of the Soldier*. The four main characters' responses to the war differ according to their positions within the social hierarchy. Margaret's reaction to the adversities and suffering in her life reflects that of the working class. Her cheerful disposition and willingness to reunite with Chris after his return from the front, despite the traumatic memories associated with him, exemplify this attitude. Although Jenny warns Margaret that Chris might perceive her as changed and less attractive after their fifteen-year separation, Margaret embraces her first love without fear, displaying enthusiasm instead:

That is nice," she said. "He always looks so lovely in a boat. I called after her, trying to hint the possibility of a panic breakdown to their meeting:

'You will find he's altered'

She cried gleefully:

'Oh, I shall know him. (West, 2004, p. 47)

This reaction can be interpreted as evidence of the enthusiasm Silbey attributes to the working class, who met challenges and novel circumstances with positivity and resilience. Such an outlook may stem from the socioeconomic hardships endured by this class before the war. For the working class, the war and the ensuing changes symbolized hope for escape from their former conditions, fostering adaptability and composure in the face of distress.

In contrast, the three upper-class characters—Kitty, Jenny, and Chris—appear fragile, vulnerable, and inclined to evade the harsh realities of their lives. J. M. Winter notes that "officers were drawn from the well-educated and well-to-do middle and upper classes; these groups suffered disproportionately heavy losses during the First World War" (Winter, 1977, p. 460). This historical fact suggests that, compared to their working-class counterparts, upper-class soldiers exhibited less battlefield efficacy—an interpretation that aligns with the novel's portrayal of upper-class characters' psychological fragility. The deaths of officers can be read metaphorically as wartime defeat, and similarly, the upper class's difficulty in coping with war trauma may reflect their failure on the front lines. For example, Kitty is unable to even contemplate her husband's mental condition before his return from the hospital in France. When Jenny inquires about Margaret's news, Kitty responds: "Either it means that he is mad, our Chris, our splendid sane Chris, all broken and queer, not knowing us—I can't bear to think of that" (West, 2004, p. 32). This scene captures the upper class's fragile psychological state before and after the war. Kitty's reaction can be interpreted as an attempt to flee the battlefield—here symbolizing real life—with life's traumas as the adversary.

While the Baldry family largely avoids confronting life's difficulties, Jenny appears to disintegrate emotionally. She cannot endure the fact that Chris, whom she secretly loves, is passionately devoted to Margaret: "As I went up-stairs I became aware that I was near a bodily collapse; I suppose the truth is that I was physically so jealous of Margaret that it was making me ill" (West, 2004, p. 114). This escapism displayed by the upper-class characters in response to life's hardships signifies weakness, arguably a consequence of their privileged backgrounds and a desire to maintain their social status.

III. CONCLUSION

The role of the working class in English society during World War I extended beyond providing manpower and serving as the British Army's backbone; it also intersected with a broader social movement. The upper class was preoccupied with preserving the existing social order, which the war threatened. Rebecca West depicts this dynamic by portraying the working class as part of the solution to the societal upheaval caused by the war and as agents of salvation guiding British society toward stability. Margaret, representing the working class, plays a pivotal role in Chris's recovery. West uses Margaret as a symbol of the working class's struggles during wartime. Jenny describes Margaret's role in Chris's healing process with a battlefield metaphor, likening Margaret to a soldier carrying a wounded comrade to safety: "I assumed naturally that at Margaret's feet lay safety even before I saw her arms brace him under the armpits with a gesture that was not passionate, but rather the movement of one carrying a wounded man from under fire" (West, 2004, p. 48).

Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* critiques World War I and portrays the profound impact of wartime catastrophe on both individuals and social structures on the home front. The novel is recognized as one of the earliest literary works to address the theme of war neurosis. Yet, beyond its depiction of trauma, many critics overlook the novel's hopeful conclusion, which envisions a more egalitarian and cooperative society.

Similarly, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* explores war neurosis, but from a different perspective. Morrison's characters, particularly the protagonist Sethe, are deeply shaped by the trauma of slavery. While *Beloved* tells the story of one former slave, Sethe's experiences symbolize those of an entire generation. Sethe represents a traumatized race and generation suffering from loss of belonging, identity, and faith. Ultimately, her faith is restored through the collective support of her community. This process parallels the collective efforts of a nation working together to overcome the trauma and legacy of slavery.

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