Rebecca West (1892-1983) was a prolific writer who tried every literary genre; journalism, literary critique, the short story and the novel. Her first novel *The Return of the Soldier* published in 1918 spans half a century of creative output culminated in 1966 with her last novel *The Birds Fall Down*. However, all her narrative is easily identifiable because of her unmistakable style, the structure of her novels, the topics she chooses and the coherence of her ideas about mankind and society. Subsequently, all her novels are psychological, historical and social documents depicting human behaviour in a precise historical and social context. West synthesizes what she observes rooting her ideas in British literary tradition. Her keen critical eye is both penetrating and enlightening, for example, when in *The Return of the Soldier*, Margaret Grey appears poorly dressed daring to invade the Baldry mansion with her mud covered boots, while Jenny, the narrator, expresses crude feelings of resentment towards Margaret and her social group. The latter is represented: ‘... 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’ (West, 1918, rpt.1984: 32).

West’s literary reputation was revived in the 1980s with the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Her *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon; A Journey through Yugoslavia* (1941) brought her wide critical attention because this novel was the last of her efforts to understand the pre-war situation. Furthermore, it was central to West’s next book, *The Meaning of Treason* (1947), where she concentrated on the psychological characteristics of traitors and she wondered what caused these people to do what they did—for West, war fosters deception and betrayal. The final example of West’s interest in treason is her novel *The Birds Fall Down* (1966) which concludes with the deaths of both the traitor and the friend he betrayed and in *The Return of the Soldier*, a study of the sequels of war in human mind, the protagonist is betrayed by his family. In the aforementioned novel, West employs what at the time was an original device, amnesia from war trauma or ‘shell shock’ as well as an unusual perspective on war—that of those who waited at
home. West tries to explore the reactions of three women to a returning soldier who, though married, remembers only an earlier love for another woman.

In spite of its obvious literary quality, *The Return of the Soldier* proved to be a novel severely punished by critics. Peter Wolfe affirms that the lack of the novelist’s imagination diluted the novel: ‘A failure of the book certainly is ... her imagination that failed to supply a just and shapely finale’ (Wolfe, 1971: 34-35). I agree with Wolfe that Rebecca West commits some errors as, for example, unnecessarily extenuating the description of the afternoon Margaret spends with Chris fifteen years prior to the present situation. Hence, I also agree that West should have avoided accumulating so many useless details in the narration because the only thing she achieves is to hinder fluidity in her novel. Additionally, Freud’s influence is undeniable. In this sense, several critics have remarked Freud’s influence in *The Return of the Soldier*, for instance, Wolfe (1971) defends its clearly Freudian connotations and maintains that it is an error to blame West’s preference for psychology for the book’s failure: ‘To blame the book's failure on a … preference for text book psychology is to miss the point’ (Wolfe, 1971: 44). Also, Rollyson (1995: 51) states that West introduced in the novel ‘The Freudian ideas that had begun to emerge in Rebecca’s literary criticism’. I especially agree with Ann V. Norton when she shows West’s contradictions between her patriarchal education and her feminism: ‘As a Freudian ... West looked to mothers and fathers as the key to a human soul. As a feminist ... she blamed men and the patriarchal structure of society -or fathers- for human unhappiness’ (2000: 80). Nonetheless, in my opinion, the book is much more than a case of Freudian analysis—social implications are also deeply studied.

*The Return of the Soldier*, like many other of her first novels, *The Judge* (1922), for example, echoes Henry James's influence, a novelist who West admired greatly and about whom she wrote a literary essay. *The Return of the Soldier* follows Jamesian structure, with its seemingly simple linear narrative though endowed with greater complexity. The novel is laced with harsh criticism towards her contemporary society. Baldry Court, the huge estate belonging to the family with the same name, a grandiose, majestic place, is the symbol of oppression for Chris Baldry. At the same time, Baldry Court, a Freudian element in the book, is used to show the family’s power and arrogance more adequately: ‘... the splendid house which was not so much a house as a vast piece of space partitioned off from the universe and decorated partly for beauty and partly to make our privacy more insolent’ (145). The Baldrys are the mirror image of members of
a society that live anchored in the past, in imperial grandeur, without realizing that this social reliquary is about to crumble. In addition, West describes other decaying societies in several of her novels, as for example in *The Fountain Overflows* (1956) and *The Birds Fall Down* (1966).

The Baldry mansion and its surroundings contrast with Monkey Island, where Margaret and Chris met fifteen years before. Both of them refer to that place as if it were not a mere location, but ‘a magic estate’ (102), an eddy of peace, ‘... whose utter difference was a healing ... in its green silence’ (103). It is not therefore odd that Chris in the grip of amnesia only remembers Margaret and this symbolic place, Monkey Island. This is where her father ran a small, quiet inn, frequented by peaceful people, intellectuals, professors fond of fishing, and married couples still in search of a blissful atmosphere. This was Chris's refuge far from his paternal mansion. In Monkey Island he felt that ‘The whole world seemed melting into light’ (79). Baldry Court also contrasts with his uncle Ambrose’s house, surrounded by the idyllic grasslands ‘where Whiston's cows are put to graze’ (71), which is another safe harbour for tormented Chris Baldry.

Monkey Island brought pleasing memories to Rebecca West because she had been happy too at Monkey Island Inn. H. G. Wells also knew the place, when as a boy he used to visit his uncle at Surly Hall Inn which was only half a mile down the river. It does not seem that the novel offers any more autobiographical details, with the exception of this love triangle. The novelist has always denied the similarities between her life and Margaret’s, always insisting that the character resembled the personality of a certain Mrs. Vernon, her patroness at Claverton Street.

A Freudian analysis of Chris's case would probably coincide with Rebecca West's portrait of Baldry family. This family is presented as an institution that provided status and comfort to its members, but at the same time it suffocated and crushed their identities. Chris is only happy when he is far away from that place. Chris uses the gates of his uncle’s house to run towards the open spaces or to visit Margaret on Monkey Island in exactly the same way as Jane Eyre seeks Gateshead’s windows to sit down and read to escape from oppression. That is to say, to escape from the oppressive family atmosphere and to seek sanity in the spiritual retreat represented by Margaret’s loving embrace: ‘the woman [Margaret] has gathered the soul of the man into her own soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quiet for a little time’ (144), as Jenny, Chris’s cousin, tells us.
In Chapter VI, we can appreciate the great influence of Freud’s theories—the emphasis on childhood as a lifetime marker in the development of an individual’s personality. Dr. Anderson, the psychiatrist, enquires about Chris’s parents, and Jenny answers ‘His father was old when he was born, and always a little jealous of him’ (167). Gilbert Anderson does not believe in hypnotism as a therapy, though it is declared in the book that Chris ‘can remember quite well when he is hypnotized’ (166-167). As it is well known, hypnotism was used by Freud but he abandoned it after he had elaborated his theory of the unconscious. Then, the doctor’s words imply a certain criticism when he refers to hypnotism, ‘It [hypnotism] releases the memory of a dissociated personality which can’t be related ... to the waking personality. I’ll do it by talking to him. Getting him to tell his dreams …’ (166). Therefore, he is obviously following Freud’s techniques and consequently states ‘The mental life that can be controlled by effort isn’t the mental life that matters ... There is a deep self in one, the essential self, that has its wishes’ (163). However, the solution for the hero’s recovery is not either in hypnotism or in Freud’s free association theories, but in love, ‘Remind him of the boy’ (169), says Margaret. Therefore, it is Margaret who solves the problem and not Dr. Anderson.

Furthermore, it seems that Chris has developed a phobic disorder towards his family during his illness. However, that phobia has always existed and is not only directed towards his inner circle but towards social hypocrisy as well. Chris apparently suffered from it before being drafted into the army, and now his condition is exacerbated by war trauma. Chris maintains his phobia both when living in fantasy and in real life. Chris is a Freudian example since his behaviour after homecoming from war is rooted in his early life.

Chris is attractive, rich and apparently possesses all that one needs to be happy according to social conventions. However, he feels the oppression of his social class and family. In his youth he escaped from Baldry Court, a symbol of his social status, to Monkey Island in search of something completely different from what surrounded him from birth. As an adult, his amnesia helps him to reject everything that he does not want to remember. Thus, Dr. Anderson explains to Chris’s wife that he wants to eradicate that part of his life that ties him to the Baldrys because he cannot stand the idea of belonging to that family, Dr. Anderson says: ‘His unconscious self is refusing to let him resume his relations with his normal life, and so we get this loss of memory’ (163). Anderson’s explanation follows Freud’s theories about the role of the unconscious. The hero’s mental wound is a strategy that isolates him from the rest of the Baldry crowd.
Chris has been able to extract what could have been saved from the chaos of his life and he wants to preserve it at all costs.

Though Chris is portrayed as a victim of his family, he does not escape Rebecca West’s criticism. The separation from Margaret occurs because he does not trust the girl that belongs to a social class different from his, Margaret says: ‘he wasn’t trusting me as he would trust a girl of his own class’ (107). The young Baldry is contaminated by the conventions and prejudices of his class although he wishes to escape from its trappings. Chris becomes free only when he loses his memory. Only then is he able to liberate himself from his phobias against his own family, against the social group his family represents, and against the characteristics that conform their rigid social rank: pride, hypocrisy, selfishness, and injustice. His amnesia is therefore selective because in his memory there remains a place for the world he had shared with Margaret as well as for that beautiful place where she comes from and which he still seeks fifteen years later. Margaret appears transformed before his eyes, she is not the stout, badly dressed woman, impregnated by the smell of cooking cabbage that denotes her social origins, ‘... she is transfigured in the light of eternity’ (137). However, the rest of the Baldrys do not undergo that transfiguration because they do not mean anything to Chris.

Upon recuperating freedom thanks to his memory loss, Chris starts to express himself with bitter sincerity. Still sick in the eyes of his family, Chris Baldry recognizes his error in marrying Kitty. West creates cousin Frank to exalt Kitty's ridiculous virtues but very much accepted by social canons of the era: her beauty together with a wonderful and educated soprano voice, to which Chris adds with abruptness: ‘... I hate everybody male or female, who sings. O God, I don't like this Kitty’ (46). His family and his social class weigh him down like a yoke and he confesses to Frank with all sincerity that he wants to see Margaret Allington. After returning to his house, Chris lives in the past which is the only thing he strives to retrieve and remember as when he asks for deceased steward Griffiths. Therefore, all the innovations he finds in the house become an object of his bitter irony. His amnesia is a triumph over the limitations of society and over the language that on so many occasions prevents individuals from manifesting the truth of a thought or real feelings. His love for Margaret is the love where he experiences a spiritual communion. His attraction to Margaret happens spontaneously and they cannot control the impetus of that awakening. Love and desire trap them both, love embraces them and enslaves them—they are living in a magic circle.
According to Rebecca West, marriage is the cradle of isolation. At the very beginning of the novel, Rebecca West describes Kitty in faithful image of Victorian cliché: beautiful, innocent, elegant, superfluous, and a seemingly perfect organizer of her house. The first thing she tells Chris when he returns from war is that she has fixed dinner and she expects him to be on time, not a minute later, even though she thinks that Chris suffers ‘concussion’ (29). West writes ironically: ‘She said it very smartly, with her head on one side like a bird, as if she was pleading that he would find her very clever about ordering dinner and thinking of his comfort’ (53). Freud’s influence is also seen in Kitty’s portrait. She is presented as a frigid woman, ‘she looked as cold as moonlight, as virginity’ (56). Furthermore, Kitty’s depression can be perceived in the novel, ‘... Kitty lay about like a broken doll, face downward on a sofa, with one limp arm dangling to the floor’ (125). Kitty’s identity is based on jewels, rings, pearl necklaces, and diamonds which symbolize both her social class and her lack of emotions. Moreover, she thinks she can maintain her identity by keeping social differences, so she is derogatory with all those who do not belong to her world. Kitty directs her anger towards the servants to the point of making them cry, and she refers to Margaret as ‘That dowd!’ (65). As expected, she paints herself as a victim in the role of an offended wife.

So, Kitty represents the typical Victorian woman while Margaret subverts the role assigned to women. Margaret is strong enough to take care of her father, her father’s inn, her husband and her ex-lover, Chris. In one way or another, all the men that appear in her life depend on her and survive thanks to her strength. The contrasts between Kitty and Margaret are woven into one of the main topics of the novel. Kitty is introduced as a caricature of a bygone era, whereas Margaret represents a modern woman. In spite of her ordinary look, poverty, and lack of taste, Margaret is intelligent, passionate, free, responsible, and possesses an inborn sense of duty and extraordinary generosity—she is able to forsake her emotions so that Chris can be cured. Nevertheless, Kitty’s frivolous attitude is manifested on several occasions, especially when she awaits the doctor's arrival. She greets him splendidly dressed because she wants to capture the man’s attention and admiration just like a royal peacock, for this is her only mission in life as a woman.

The antagonism between Kitty and Margaret is also depicted in motherhood. There is not a speck of maternal love in Kitty, whereas West exalts the maternal figure in Margaret. She is the perfect mother, she remembers the happy moments with her son,
and even when Margaret is with her lover she projects these maternal feelings. Nonetheless, there are parallelisms between the two women. Both Kitty and Margaret had a son, Oliver and Dick, respectively, and both children died early—they were both two years old. In fact, the novel’s opening sequence takes us to Oliver's room with an intention to accentuate the differences between two opposite social classes; Margaret cannot afford the luxury of having two nurseries, while the Baldrys have ‘the day nursery’ and ‘the night nursery’ (173). Margaret as a mother used to joyfully make clothes for her little son with her own hands, which is intended to prove that wealth does not assure happiness. In this way, Rebecca West is trying to insinuate that poor children live surrounded by love. The rich are not happier than the poor, as it is seen in the sorrowful example of the novel’s main character.

Another Freudian element appears when West describes Margaret as Chris’s lover and mother, she also explains to Dr. Anderson that Chris was very dependent on sex, furthermore Margaret acts as Chris’s protector figure ‘This wonderful kind woman held his body as safely as she held his soul’ (147), she protects him from his fears and phobias. She substitutes Chris's mother who is scarcely ever mentioned in the novel. Chris Baldry’s mother is hardly ever put on stage, so the reader only gains some insights about her and she always appears in clear contrast to Kitty. For example, Mrs. Baldry never closed her windows because she liked to see how the night extended ‘like a pool in the valley’ (55). Again, West alludes to open spaces as a symbol of freedom while Kitty had them closed the whole day, so that her house seemed like a prison. The Baldrys' mansion is utterly patriarchal since there is not even a small portrait of Chris's mother. However, the enlarged picture of Margaret’s mother presides ‘over the mantelpiece’ (93) at her daughter’s humble house.

Both women are also the lens through which Rebecca West criticizes society and its institutions, especially the upper classes. Kitty’s superficiality contrasting with Margaret’s moral superiority can be appreciated in many situations throughout the novel. It becomes more acute in the final passages of the book when we see Margaret searching for some object, a garment or a toy that belonged to Oliver in order to help Chris overcome his illness, while Kitty is presented with devastating irony in the same scene holding ‘in her arms her Chinese sleeve dog’ (180-181). The Baldrys reject the lower social classes—the servants do not even have names in the novel, since for Jenny they are ‘faceless figures with caps and aprons’ (96). Margaret has been judged by such standards beforehand as well, tragically in accordance with the prejudices established by
the ruling classes. Thus, at the beginning of the novel Kitty accuses Margaret of coming to bring the news about Chris's illness more for the money than for anything else. However, Jenny affirms that she would not mind giving her some coins to quell that troublesome affair.

Jenny is the only Baldry character who changes as the novel progresses. The character fulfills its narrative role, but some critics fall short when they consider her just as a mere narrator. Jenny could well have been another Kitty. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, all her features are made to resemble dangerously those of her cousin's wife. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two women: Jenny knows how to interpret Chris's selective amnesia with discretion and compassion whereas Kitty does not. Thanks to Margaret and Chris, Jenny grows emotionally and becomes an adult woman. She comes to realize that true love is an inseparable bond between the lovers although she feels jealous of Margaret. On the one hand, she is able to recognize that she has always been in love with her cousin, and on the other hand she learns to respect and to accept the love that binds them ‘a changeless love which would persist if she were old or maimed or disfigured’ (78)—not a proper form of love from the social standpoint, but true to its core in spiritual terms. At the end, she finally realizes that her cousin's wife, Kitty, has always hated her. Eventually Jenny becomes Margaret's friend, she fraternizes with her, and in the last scene they kiss not as friends, but as lovers because each one is embracing Chris, the part of him that the other one possesses. So she says: ‘I think we each embraced that part of Chris the other had absorbed by her love’ (184). Jenny is the only one in the entire family who realizes that her cousin is not mad, for Jenny considers Chris ‘so much saner than the rest of us’ (134), but the rest of the Baldry family cannot bear the social disgrace of Chris’s rejection. The features bestowed on Jenny reappear in West's other novel Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy (1929)—Harriet is a reminiscence of Jenny, she is witty, intelligent and has flair.

Chris’s amnesia is the instrument by which Rebecca West skillfully exposes the problems of the Baldry family, apparently united, but with no affection, no understanding, and no communication among them. That family rejected by Chris decides that he has ‘to be cured’ at all costs because if he is not cured—he will never be one of them, he will be an eccentric damaging testimony of their own failures. Thus, they decide to wrest him from his fantasy in order to bring him back to reality and to put an end to his happiness. So, he is being treated with ‘cures’ that break his heart, and Chris returns to his marriage with a terrible smile, ‘... that little stiff-lipped smile’ (185).
The Baldrys deny him the right to happiness for the sake of their own salvation and to perpetuate their social status. West’s criticism against the family as an institution is present throughout the entire novel. Rebecca West criticizes the family as a unique cell of society, usually seen as the institution that saves humanity but at the same time has the ability to destroy individuals. Thus, the family is a castrator of Chris’s emotional life and he is only happy when removed from its influence, finding refuge in his amnesia.

Likewise, the Anglican Church does not escape West’s severe criticism. Cousin Frank Baldry ‘who is in the Church’ (40) receives Chris’s telegram begging him to visit Chris at the hospital in Boulogne. Frank has to inform his cousins Kate and Jenny what Margaret has already told them. But like them, he is more concerned about the social drama caused by Chris's illness when he outwardly rejects his lawful wife and declares that he is in love with Margaret. When Chris admits that his most burning desire is to hold Margaret in his arms, Frank is terrified by this socially unacceptable situation, and thus feels a great relief when he sees that Chris faints again. Frank has been introduced by West with the sole purpose of serving as a platform for her criticism against the established church. Frank does not reappear in the novel yet the novelist uses him to criticize not only the institution he represents but also religious beliefs. West’s criticism against religion is seen in the sentence that little Oliver mispronounces in his prayer, ‘Jesus, tender leopard’ (175) instead of ‘Jesus, tender shepherd’ (175). It shows Jesus not as a protector of poor souls like a shepherd, but rather aggressive as a feline, which when freely translated can mean that the divine oppresses, it subdues and destroys both the individual and the society.

The medical profession does not appear better depicted than the clergy or the Church in West’s novel. Rebecca West criticizes this by describing hypnotism as ‘a silly trick’ (166). These methods are formulas to falsify human truth. West’s irony is patent again in the description of the doctor, who she portrays as a fake. Thus, we learn that Dr. Gilbert Anderson is a stumpy, fat middle-aged man, blue eyed, with a grey moustache whose physique resembles that of ‘an amiable cat’ (150). His aspect is almost comical and he does not project the image of those highly ‘distinguished practitioners’ (150) at all.

War, even though it is the cause of the main character’s wound, is not submitted to exhaustive scrutiny by the novelist—it is a vehicle to introduce contemporary society instead. Though war causes death, physical and psychological wounds, pain and desolation, West does not pontificate on its causes or consequences. If anything, she
shows what it means for a woman to deal with its horrifying consequences after traumatized soldiers return home. In this case, war serves as the background for analysing the lives of three women: Kitty, Margaret and Jenny. They greet Chris on his arrival although, as we have learned, that homecoming is not experienced equally by each of them. Only the last two rejoice upon his return even though Jenny’s emotional outpouring is severely restricted by suffocating social conventions.

Feminist echoes rebound from emotional pathos for the return of the wounded soldier. A loving woman nurses back to health what society, the interests of the mighty, and the government have tried to annihilate in the act of war. The novel confirms that women live in a man-governed world, which is why West thinks women must exercise political power to have the possibility of deciding instead of just dealing with the duty of healing war cruelties with their unyielding attention, love, and maternal feelings. West believed both in the socialist solution and also in feminism. For these reasons she creates Margaret who belongs to the working class yet she is very superior as a human being to the other two Baldry women. In fact, because of her beliefs, West had written for *Freewoman* and had defended women’s right to vote.

In conclusion, we could say that this novel, apparently so simple, is a great introspective essay where clever intellectual resources are used to denounce privileged classes, social institutions, political ideas, and religious creeds. Rebecca West explores various social conventions, as for example the apparent purity and innocence of the wife equipped with the moral solvency of the British ruling classes and, in a very unsteady historical moment, she dares to write about the manners and the behaviour of these ruling classes who refuse to look beyond the windows of their mansions and wounded pride. Therefore, love between Chris and Margaret is possible because he is ill. At the end of the novel, when he is apparently ‘cured’, Chris returns to the reality of his empty marriage, to the absurdity of war, to the stale family life, and to his own emotional vacuum. After this seemingly purifying experience he is reinstalled as a respectable English gentleman: ‘Every inch a soldier’ (188). Chris Baldry gives us a practical lesson: It is essential to resuscitate the past only when it is worthwhile to remember, the other irksome experiences are better buried forever.

Change, incoherence, and isolation are some of the characteristics of British society at the beginning of the twentieth century. No wonder Rebecca West proposes love as a moral code—as a solution to dignify human behaviour. Margaret makes the bond of love her behavioural rule, since because of love she takes care of her father, her
husband, and her ex-lover. Also, for the sake of love she renounces every right to Chris. Margaret does what she believes ought to be done: She always chooses duty and what is morally right. Not in vain, Rebecca West introduces these moral, social, and even religious aspects as unalterable values in Margaret’s decision. There are several reasons for Margaret's participation in the game played by the Baldry family: firstly, because she loves Chris; secondly, because he is married to Kitty; and, finally, because she is married too. Lastly, every individual has to accept his/her reality: ‘one must raise to one's lips the wine of the truth, heedless that it is not sweet like milk but draws the mouth with its strength, and celebrate communion with reality’ (182). Margaret’s act of renouncement has many Jamesian connotations: love is contradictory, it causes pleasure and pain, it can cause as much damage as happiness, and it is a kind of death. However, all that survives in the novel endures thanks to Margaret’s love.

In a broader sense, the novel is a reconciliation between innocence and human experience. Chris, the main character, desperately clings to that innocence but finally is left with no choice but to live with all previous experiences including all his phobias. Nonetheless, Margaret, the heroine, does not need to dismiss reality for she lives peacefully in the present and in perfect harmony with the memories of her innocent past. The novel, a small masterpiece, may lead to conclusions on: how to confront reality, how to defend truth versus falsity, how to ban hypocrisy, how to recognise true love, how to defend good versus evil. The novel is a deep, serious, psychological study of its main characters, especially Chris, not forgetting that human behaviour is also influenced by social context, rules, and institutions.
Note

1. From now on, only the page number will appear between brackets when referring to the novel by Rebecca West, 1918, rpt. 1984, *The Return of the Soldier*, Middlessex: Penguin.
References:


