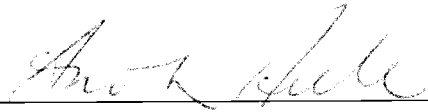


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Peggy D. Pence for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in English, English, and Political Science presented on June 12, 1998. Title: Irreconcilable Differences: Modernist Representations of Class and Gender in the Early Work (1911-1936) of Rebecca West.

Abstract approved: _____



Anita Helle

This thesis on Rebecca West's writing (1911-1936) addresses the relationship between her polemical essays and her fiction, exploring modernist representations of class and gender differences and conflicts. West expresses a view of gender and class relations in early twentieth century Great Britain that is based on opposed and dichotomous pairs which cannot be deconstructed. Multiple and shifting tensions between socially constructed versus essentialist views emerge through representations of war, marriage, female bodies, and social bodies. I provide an analysis of several of West's political articles published in The Clarion and in The New Republic from 1911-1916, and two novels, The Return of the Soldier (1918) and The Thinking Reed (1936). I argue for a reading of West's work

that does not attempt to reconcile the contradictions therein, but rather examines them as "irreconcilable differences." Reading West's work in this way allows for an understanding of West's view of the paradoxical nature of gender and class relations, as well as what Marshall Berman termed the "paradoxical unity" of modernism.

Irreconcilable Differences: Modernist Representations of
Class and Gender in the Early Work (1911-1936)
of Rebecca West

by

Peggy D. Pence

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

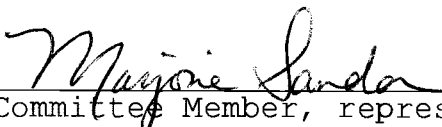
Presented June 12, 1998
Commencement June 1999

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies thesis of
Peggy D. Pence presented on June 12, 1998


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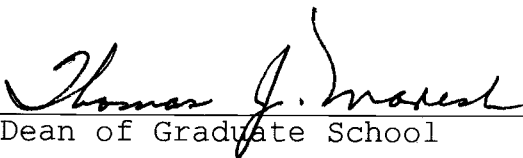
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Acknowledgments

I cannot adequately express my thanks to Anita Helle for her understanding and insight, which were invaluable to me as I was working on this paper. I am also tremendously grateful for her patience and support.

Richard Clinton convinced me to pursue an advanced degree, and offered a great deal of encouragement throughout the process.

Marjorie Sandor and Henry Sayre provided perceptive comments on my draft.

My Mom and Dad, Ken and Judi Pence, and my sister, Julie Reardon, have given love and supported me in all of my endeavors.

My close friends Molly Cook and Robin Sandeno helped me maintain my sanity throughout graduate school, and were always there to listen to me and give me pep talks.

And finally, my dear cats, Tommy, Grep, Malcolm, and Charlie continuously reminded me what is truly important in life: eating, sleeping, playing, and loving.

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**Irreconcilable Differences: Modernist Representations of
Class and Gender in the Early Work (1911-1936)
of Rebecca West**

Introduction

I explained that I was a writer wholly unsuitable for her purpose . . . that I had never used my writing to make a continuous disclosure of my own personality to others, but to discover for my own edification what I knew about various subjects which I found to be important to me . . . (Hynes xviii).

Thus journalist and fiction writer Rebecca West turned away a graduate student seeking material for her thesis in the late 1930s, explaining that her work "could not fuse to make a picture of a writer, since the interstices were too wide" (Hynes xviii). West's characterization of the wide interstices of her work is insightful; the task of fusing all of her work in an attempt to create a complete and unified picture of her as a writer would be nearly impossible. By the time she was turning away this graduate student, West had already published successfully in a number of genres, including literary criticism, political analysis, fiction, and biography. Her body of work, however, could most accurately be described as a work in progress on socially contested ideas rather than as authoritative conclusions on the subjects addressed. West herself admitted in an interview late in her life, "I

really write to find out what I know about something and what is to be known about something" (Warner 137).

In this thesis, I will first examine the feminist and socialist polemics in West's early non-fiction, including readings of articles she wrote for The Clarion (1912-1913), a socialist weekly, and "The World's Worst Failure" a series of articles she wrote for The New Republic (1916). The articles serve to illustrate West's responses to socialist and feminist movements, her understanding of the basis of patriarchal oppression, and also her way of treating the dichotomies of gender and class in a political framework.

I will then offer an analysis of two of West's early novels in which she extends her political speculation to the realm of fiction: The Return of the Soldier (1918) and The Thinking Reed (1936). The Return of the Soldier is West's first novel, published shortly after the Great War, and The Thinking Reed, although published in 1936, is set in the prosperous 1920s. In both novels, West explores the irreconcilable differences inherent in the dichotomies of gender and class through both the internal and external conflicts of her characters. Both novels end with a crushing return to the social order that has been exposed as unjust and cruel, particularly to those characters who represent the feminine side of the dichotomy. For West,

neither the social order nor her own literary imagination would allow for any other type of ending, which might have falsely "fused" the gender and class differences that were a reality of the social order within which West worked.

Neither West's polemical essays nor her political fiction (1911-1936) have received much critical attention, not only because its elements are somewhat disparate, but also because her responses to feminist and socialist movements and ideas are not consistent throughout her body of work.¹ As I will demonstrate, rather than illuminating possibilities for a new social order based on feminist and socialist ideals, West's writing often illustrates the impossibility of reconciling class and gender difference in order to eliminate patriarchal oppression. West herself appears uncertain about the degree to which gender difference was socially constructed. This ambiguity creates a tension in her work between an essentialist and a meliorative view of the possibility for social and historical change.

I will argue for a "picture" of West's work that does not attempt to resolve or "fuse" these contradictions, but instead uses them to form a perspective of what I have termed "irreconcilable differences." In her polemical writing, West expresses a view of gender and class

¹ For a brief description of some difficulties feminist critics have had with West's work, see Scott, Refiguring Modernism, p. 125.

relations in early twentieth century Great Britain that is based on opposed and dichotomous pairs. West explores irreconcilable differences at many different levels, the most obvious involving conflicts and inequalities between men and women and between the upper and lower classes. West examines the underpinnings of these fundamental divisions as well. Through material and discursive practices, she implicitly suggests that gender and class differences are propped up through other socially constructed dichotomies--those of the mind and the body, and of the public and the private spheres, therefore complicating the possibility of achieving lasting change through social reform based on either class or gender issues alone. West believed that the only way to accomplish social change would be for feminists and socialists to work together for social justice; however, her explorations ultimately suggest that the movements were divided within their own ranks, and were, therefore, too disparate to come together as a unified community.

My analysis draws upon ways contemporary feminist theorists, political historians, and literary critics have understood the overlapping layers of gender and class intersect in texts of literary modernists. While contemporary scholars tend to emphasize conflicts within feminism, the conflicts themselves are not a new

phenomenon.² It is important, therefore, to locate these contradictions historically, as well as aesthetically and politically. West's contemporaries would have described her as a "New Woman," as she was "an energetic and independent woman struggling against the constraints of Victorian norms of femininity" (Felski 146).³ Yet the "New Woman" of the early twentieth century was not necessarily feminist and/or socialist. Examining gender and class issues as interrelated is one way to begin to open up modernist texts of the pre- and post-war periods.

West's multiple aesthetic affiliations also make it difficult to classify her. She participated in the crisis of modernist representation in modern aesthetic movements, straddling the aesthetic traditions of the novel of consciousness and the tradition of social protest of novels of social realism. She had ties within the literary circles of the Vorticists and the Futurists, who believed in the idea of destruction and sex antagonism as a way to recreate literary form.⁴ West also, however, had

² See Hirsch and Keller's Conflicts in Feminism, a collection of essays on conflicts within contemporary feminist scholarship.

³ See Victoria Glendinning or Carl Rollyson's biographies of Rebecca West for a description of her self-supporting writing career, her involvement in political and literary circles, and her "free love" relationship with H.G. Wells.

⁴ West's short story, "Indissoluble Matrimony," a story of sex antagonism taken to the point of physical violence, was published in Wyndham Lewis's *Blast*, the main publication of Vorticist pieces in Britain.

connections to the high modernist Bloomsbury group and admired the aesthetic achievements of Virginia Woolf. Woolf admired West's work as well and praised her novel Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy as more groundbreaking than her own Orlando: "'I can't tell you how it exhilarates me to feel your mind running along where mine tried to go'" (Rollyson 128).

The struggle of representation within modernist aesthetics creates another layer of tension in West's writing as she works through conflicting differences in art and politics. It could even be said that, like other female modernists, her work opens up new ways of linking the terms "gender" and "modernism." Representations of the feminine are played out in West's literary work through her manner of reworking the terms of the 19th century novel in new social and cultural contexts in portrayals of war, marriage, feminine bodies and social bodies. All of these become increasingly important. This new terrain is thrown open in part because modernism's "pre-history" included the idea that women were not only the other, but the essential other whose bodies represent the ground and material of representation.⁵ Some modernists took a radical position on literary stylistic revolt, but remained conservative in their portrayals of women and gender difference. Hence it

⁵ See Felski, pp. 35-60.

should not be surprising that a latent strain of essentialism persists in West's writing as she works her way toward the manifestly new. West herself, however, may not have recognized what literary critics and cultural historians such as Marshall Berman now describe as the "paradoxical unity" (15) of modernity and modern consciousness.

It is only recently, as we look at modernism through the lens of contemporary feminist and postmodern perspectives, that we recognize some of the tensions in modernism as a conflict between the essentialist and the socially constructed, thus making it possible to read West's work from this perspective.⁶ I also attempt to understand West on her own terms by assuming, as she did, that literature can function as a terrain on which these ideological battles can be fought. In The Strange Necessity, West states that ideas can be tested in literature in an "effort to make the fantasy and the reality match" (65). She further asserts the relationship between art and life, saying that in both art and experience, "the individual is examining his environment to see what chances of survival it affords him" (189). I

⁶ See Moril Toi's Sexual/Textual Politics, pp. 166-167, for a discussion of essentialist vs. socially constructed views of femininity.

therefore read West's work with her own philosophy in mind, seeing the power of her work in "its telling of the truth," (90) even when the "truth" is fraught with contradictions.

Feminist and Socialist Polemics in the Writing of Rebecca West

Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me . . . His face expressed horror and indignation . . . He was a Beadle, I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path" (Woolf 6).

Rebecca West, much as Virginia Woolf's unconventional persona in A Room of One's Own, must have elicited reactions of "horror and indignation" from beadles or similar patriarchal figures of with her independent thinking, insightful political analysis, and sharp literary criticism. She strayed from the path of convention at a young age when she began putting forth her feminist and socialist views. As a literary journalist, she ripped apart the reigning novelists of the day (including Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, and G.B. Shaw) in scathing reviews of their work. As a political analyst, she argued that women were victims of an unjust social system which encouraged the creation of a "slave class" consisting of those whose personal development and well-being were sacrificed to maintain the patriarchal social structure.⁷ As a novelist, West explored the same aspects of gender and class difference that she had addressed in her polemical work, demonstrating the difficulty of attempting to reconcile

⁷ West makes this argument in "The Sin of Self-Sacrifice," included in The Young Rebecca, Jane Marcus's collection of West's early work.

these differences to create a new social order as envisioned by modern feminist and socialist movements in Great Britain before, during, and after the Great War.

West came to the feminist and socialist movements of the early twentieth century with a unique perspective. She had "the advantage of education and an inheritance of social gentility," but also, due to her father's mismanagement of his inheritance, she had "experienced what it meant to do the bleak, bone-chilling labor of the poor and to feel the meager, stultifying confinement of their lives" (Deakin 22). According to one of her early biographers, West, as a young suffragette, believed that middle-class and working-class women should be united in feminist and socialist causes, and that "the benefits of unity transcended any differences the two groups may have had" (Deakin 22). While West believed in the potential benefits of this collaboration, she was skeptical as to whether women of various socioeconomic standing could transcend their differences.

West's trajectory as a political thinker was strongly influenced by the Fabian Society in pre-war Britain. While still a teenager, West began attending Fabian Summer Schools and eventually became acquainted with some of the intellectual leaders of the movement, including George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells. While West was intellectually

compatible with the Fabians on some issues, such as their support of trade unions and their belief in a minimum standard of living, other social issues that interested her did not fit the Fabian Society's criteria of "questions of public policy which held a broad promise of non-partisan support" (Pierson 81). The Fabian view of politics was thus too narrow for West. Their policies "ruled out fundamental challenges to prevailing institutional structures and values," (Pierson 98) which West believed were necessary in order to achieve social change. The Fabians did not want to address women's rights, as the feminist political agenda was considered too controversial for the middle-of-the-road group. H.G. Wells's proposal that the Fabians "enlarge their scope by reexamining the institution of marriage and by investigating the special problems of women in society" (Pierson 308) was rejected by the Society. Therefore, while West was attracted to the progressive aspects of the Fabian philosophy, and its implications for women's participation in the public sphere, she was also critical of the Society. Literary scholar Motley Deakin argues that her affiliations were often vaguely divided: "Committed to the cause, but not to any one organization, she made her voice heard, weighted by her personal conviction and incisive intellect . . . she

kept her intellectual independence and a physical aloofness" (23).

A fundamental problem West had with the Fabians was that they were not a group of activists, but rather legislative reformers, or as Wells characterized them, "administrative socialists" (Pierson 306). West, on the other hand, "advocated action and thus seems attracted to those who act . . ." (Deakin 23). Whether or not the social system might actually be changed through political action, however, or the extent to which it might be changed through the feminist and socialist movements, West was uncertain. In particular, I find a fundamental tension in West's polemical work between an ahistorical essentialist view of gender and class difference and the meliorative point of view implied by her link to the socialist and feminist movements.⁸ West is difficult to pin down; she weaves between the constructed and the essentialist ways of looking at gender and class difference. When asked about the nature of gender difference late in her life, West had still not settled her mind on the matter. Rather, she says that it is not possible to know gender apart from social and historical construction: "You can't imagine what

⁸ Fraser, Felski, and Wolff's comments on women's experience of modernism may serve to ground my observation on West's historical experience and political affiliations.

maleness and femaleness would be if you got back to them in pure laboratory state, can you?" (Warner 125).

West's polemical writing gives early indication of the themes and issues surrounding gender and class that later shadow her modernist experiments in fiction. The same tension between an essentialist and a meliorative point of view that is evident in West's political essays also exists within the narrative structure of The Return of the Soldier (1918) and The Thinking Reed (1936). In West's writing, there are no simple solutions that would lead to the elimination of an oppressive social structure.

For West, the dynamics of patriarchal and capitalist oppression were very complex--like Woolf, she was not one who believed that gaining the vote, or achieving particular socialist reforms would completely cure society of its ills. West's dark, modern skepticism about permanent change complicated her work within the visions of the socialist and feminist movements. Although she had lofty ideals and a vision of what an improved society might look like, she could not be an idealist. Underlying her strong feminist and socialist rhetoric is the belief that gender and class dichotomies are truly irreconcilable differences.

In her autobiography, West summed up the tensions in her philosophy with characteristic candor:

Human beings are constantly having to face crises and resolve them with no hope beyond substituting a new and less painful situation for the existing one; the most we can effect is a slight reduction in the amount of pain in the universe. Its abolition is plainly an impossible dream (74).

West's skepticism caused her to reach grim conclusions about the possibility for progress, because, in her opinion, the social order and human nature allowed for no other.⁹ In spite of this, she continued to struggle for change and to encourage others to work for change, even while she asserted the ultimate futility of such efforts. Her well written political rhetoric in support of feminist and socialist causes was an attempt to awaken society to its problems and call women to action, both publicly and in their personal lives.

West's primary affiliation with the feminist and socialist movements came about through writing for publications associated with those movements. Her struggle for change began in a public way with her career in journalism, the first of many genres in which she wrote in her lifetime. Prior to World War I, her intelligence and wit exhibited in her work for the feminist publication, The Freewoman, drew the attention of Robert Blatchford, editor of The Clarion, a popular socialist weekly. The Clarion was not a "high brow" political journal; it enjoyed a broad

⁹ Further, West's images of women's nature in particular drew upon modernist ideas of the "primitive other." See Felski, pp. 35-60.

audience and "made Socialism seem as simple and universal as a pint of bitter" (Marcus 90). It was in her pieces for The Clarion, written in 1912-1913, that West attempted to fuse her feminist and socialist polemics, arguing that the oppression of women and the oppression of the working classes in modern society were "parallel" forms of patriarchal oppression, and that the feminist and socialist movements needed to work from this common ground to fight the oppression.

The Rebecca West the reader senses through The Clarion essays, collected by Jane Marcus in The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911-1917, is a determined yet generally skeptical woman, one who tries to rally people to change society even as she doubts its foundations can be changed. In these pieces, she often employs the militant language of war, telling her readers, for example, that the sane "walk the earth to choose their battlefields, and touch all it contains to find the substance most fit for the forging of weapons" (235). Blatchford's daughter Winifred called West "one of the sturdiest and most gallant wielders of the battle-axe it has ever been my luck to see" (Marcus 89). West believed that gender and class issues needed to be addressed simultaneously, and many of her essays in The Clarion focused on those who were dually oppressed: the women of the lower classes. She wielded

her "battle-axe," in the form of a pen, against their oppressors: the capitalists, the British aristocracy, and the privileged middle-class women West often referred to as "parasites."¹⁰

In the pages of The Clarion, West defines social injustice not only in terms of economics, but also in terms of differing social values, subjectivity, and social forms of subordination, including social attitudes about sexuality and birth control, the family, and religious institutions. In Hidden From History, Sheila Rowbotham underscores the comprehensive nature of the socialist movement in Great Britain at the time: "Socialism was not only seen as public ownership, or the control of the worker over the produce of his or her labour, it was also the search for a new ethic, a new culture, a new life" (91). It was through this search that West participated in the socialist movement, exposing oppression and exploring possibilities for a more just society. She observed that despite greater freedom and mobility which the modern experience offered women, those without power, economic or otherwise, remained subordinate in order to maintain the social structure. For example, in remaining subordinate to men, women left important activities of the public sphere such as government to them. The lower classes remained

¹⁰ See Sheila Rowbotham's discussion of the middle-class woman as man's "property" in Hidden From History, pp. 47-50.

subordinate to the upper classes, oppressed not only in economic terms, but in their aesthetic ideals and social habits.

In "A New Woman's Movement: The Need for Riotous Living" (1912), West describes the repressive conditions in which rich people expected lower class women to live, claiming that they had a "lower standard of comfort" (132). West argues that "The rich perceive they are giving the poor a very bad time in this world So they coerce the poor into virtue, and thus make them sure of a good time in the next world" (131). West explains that poor women staying at philanthropically sponsored housing such as the YWCA were expected to be in by 10:30, and therefore were unable to participate in suffrage meetings or other activities of educational or cultural value. She argues that "a militant movement for more riotous living" is needed to combat this social subordination of lower class women. She encourages school teachers to go to work wearing suffrage badges and working women living in "respectable" boarding houses to "stay out until two in the morning, and then come back and sing outside until the doors are opened" (134).

West did not limit herself to discussions of social subordination; she addressed economic issues as well. West argued that the working class or poor sacrificed their own

opportunities in order to gain more wealth for the rich, just as women sacrificed their own self-development to give more opportunity to the men in their lives. West asserted that this arrangement was ultimately destructive to the entire society, not just to poor and working classes:

"When one section of the community sinks into poverty it infects the whole community with its misery . . ." (125).

West argued that capitalism had weakened society as opposed to strengthening it, because it required a scaffolding of lower classes of people to maintain the upper echelons of society. Responding to the opening of new career opportunities aboard ships for women in "Women and Wages: Blacklegging and Timidity" (1912), West offers a key example--that of "blacklegs," working class women of a number of occupations, who provided cheaper labor than male workers. Women who were accepting these lower wages, West argued, were not only allowing themselves, but the entire working class, to be exploited. Men also suffered, as they would not be hired for positions if women would accept lower wages. West concludes her argument on blacklegging by stating that this arrangement perpetuated patriarchal exploitation: "The capitalist sucks strength out of an exploited class which enables him to exploit other classes" (103).

Another recurring but contradictory theme in West's polemics, especially prevalent in her pieces for The Clarion, appears in "The Sin of Self-Sacrifice" (1913). West focuses particularly on the unjust sacrifice of the submissive or "feminine" side of the gender dichotomy in order to maintain the role of the dominant side and the system of gender relations. She explores sacrifice in terms of gender and class differences by touching on a variety of social issues, including marriage and divorce, labour activism, motherhood as a social institution, and lack of opportunities for women to work outside the home. West believed that the sacrifice of individual women, particularly working class women, who tend to have to sacrifice the most, was destructive to the society as a whole. When people are unhappy, West argues in "The Divorce Commission: A Report that Will Not Become Law" (1912), they "take their revenge on society" by creating "an atmosphere of depression" (125). In "Women and Wages: Blacklegging and Timidity," West paradoxically positions the description of sacrifice in almost revolutionary terms. She sees destruction and creation as closely linked: "The soul finds that the life for which it has sacrificed itself is in its present state hardly worth preserving. It turns to rend and destroy life, that out of its wreck it may make

a new and more beautiful life. To this stage have men come" (105).

While West was quick to point out flaws in the social system and the government, she also believed that much of this sacrifice was self-inflicted and encouraged women to quit submitting and to take action in shaping their own lives. In "The Sin of Self Sacrifice" (1913), West is repulsed by the idea that "women ought to sacrifice the development of their own personalities for the sake of men and children" (235). She believed this was harmful not only to the women making the sacrifice, but to the entire society--both men and women were ill-served by the lack of educational and professional opportunities for women. West states that a woman who "remains tinged with no clearer light than the kitchen range" (236) cannot possibly support her husband and children, as she lacks the experience necessary to live up to her potential. Although women were supposedly making this sacrifice of their own development for the sake of men and children, West argued that it only weakens society as a whole to be arranged in such a way:

If half the individuals agree to remain weak and undeveloped half the race is weak and undeveloped. And if every alternate link in the chain is weak, it matters not how strong the others are: the chain will break all the same. Every nation that has contained a slave class has fallen to dust and ashes in spite of all its military glories and its pride of brains (237).

In her essays for The Clarion, West frequently draws upon her key argument that the relations between men and women are "parallel" to the relations between the rich and the poor. She applies this argument to class difference among women in several of her essays. For example, in "Socialists and Feminism: The Fate of the Limited Amendment" (1913), West explains that within the suffrage movement, class issues are divisive, but that without addressing these issues, the movement could not be successful. While West supported the mainstream feminist movement, she was concerned that it was run exclusively by middle class women such as the Pankhursts, whom she believed held simplistic views of feminist potential. In "The Future of the Middle Classes: Women Who Are Parasites" (1912), West reflects: "It is strange that the middle-class woman, who forms the backbone of the suffrage societies, should believe that one can superimpose the emancipation of women on the social system as one sticks a halfpenny stamp on a postcard" (111). West believed that the suffrage movement, as well as the Fabian Society, ignored key issues that applied to working class women and that working class women needed to be rallied to organize themselves around socialist and feminist issues. In

"Socialists and Feminism: The Fate of the Limited with Amendment" (1913), she concludes,

As it is England is merely starved groups of sympathizers too heterogeneous for effective action and too largely composed of middle-class women to organize industrial revolt. Not that the middle class movement is to be despised: this impulse of its women toward political service of the State may prove the redemption of the materialistic section of society. But the fact remains that the working woman has not been organized into a feminist army (149).

West states her case regarding class differences among women most clearly in "The Personal Service Association: Work for Idle Hands to Do" (1912). She addresses the irreconcilable differences of both gender and class by stating, "This mingling of the rich and poor will not do. There are too many irritations between them as there must always be between honest men and thieves. Least of all, can there be any easy relationship between the rich and poor woman" (130). West believes both rich and poor women to be "failures." She describes the rich woman as "the most expensive luxury the world has indulged in," and "the most idle human being that has ever secured the privilege of existence" (130). The poor woman, on the other hand, is a failure because she is overworked: "She is too weak, too tired, to shift the blame to those who ought to bear it, and feels humiliated" (130). West views the rectifying of

this situation as "the true significance of the feminist movement," asserting that "The poor and rich can only meet when the poor have been exalted and the rich humbled by some moral passion" (130).

West is also particularly critical of the failure of modern social movements to transform the privileged status of middle class women. In "The Future of the Middle Classes: Women Who Are Parasites" (1912), she explains that the only way for these women to continue to be kept in luxury while remaining idle is for most of the population to be working and never rising above the subsistence level. West reasons, " . . . we may assume that if middle-class women are to remain parasites these four-fifths must remain at the subsistence level. It is not only a question of whether slaves will submit to supporting women, but whether women will submit to being supported by slaves" (115).

In "The World's Worst Failure" (1916), a series of essays published in The New Republic, West exposes an underlying belief in essential gender difference that she believed could not be changed through social reform. West was caught up in what Virginia Woolf called the "double-bind"¹¹ in terms of her sometimes conflicting roles as a feminist and a socialist and also as an intellectual woman in a society in which there was no cultural position for

¹¹ See Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own.

women as intellectuals. In "The World's Worst Failure," West combines some of the strong political rhetoric we see in the pages of The Clarion with an uncertainty about the possibility of change due to an essentialist explanation of the nature of gender difference, which she calls woman's "instinct for elegance." West uses the term "elegance" to encompass the ways in which different types of women willingly (or instinctually) set out to be pleasing. The series also serves as an exploration of the double-bind as West perceived it affecting different types of women, from an upper-class French woman who devotes her entire life to perfecting the elegance of her body, to working class women who will not join a trade union because they believe politics are the exclusive domain of men.

In her examination of the "instinct for elegance" in women of varied socioeconomic status, West argues that there is a feminine instinct in all women which can manifest itself in different ways but is always detrimental to the social progress of women. She establishes this point clearly in the first essay of the series, "The World's Worst Failure," in which she describes two women she meets in a hotel, a French woman and an American woman, and how they each exhibit the "instinct for elegance." The comparison serves to expose the ways in which this instinct manifests itself in different types of women.

West begins with the most obvious example of a socially regressive representation of the feminine--that of the upper class French woman, who has devoted herself completely to striking "a note of the highest possible pitch of physical refinement" (242). West comments that "in spite of her tremendous and successful concentration upon her person, she aroused no interest in her personality" (242). The French woman invites West to her room to hear her life story, but instead shows West her hats and dresses, the trappings of elegance (243). The woman explains that she lost her husband in the Great War, and her lover hasn't enough money to marry her, which has left her without purpose in life, and, as West notes, "so preoccupied by her misery that her elegance sat absurdly on her like a smart hat worn on one side" (243). She is, as West describes, "a woman bred to please when there is no one at hand to be pleased" (242).

The second woman West meets in the hotel is an American, who is at one point engaged in a disagreement with the French woman as to whether or not love ought to interrupt a woman's life. The French woman states bluntly that "women are like that," while the American disagrees: "A woman ought to preserve her general interests and take part in the world's work" (243). However, while advocating women's independence, the American woman at the same time

insists that women must maintain their femininity, with a look on her face that West describes as "calculating coquetry" (243). West claims that women like the American do not do their work out of passion, but because they want to maintain "an appearance of independence which some man would be proud to see exchanged for dependence upon him" (243). She argues that the "instinct for elegance" is just as strong in the American woman as it is in the French woman: while the French woman was "bred to please," the American woman "lived and worked that she might be worshipful" (243).

West extends her criticism to herself at the end of the essay, revealing just how difficult it might be to reconcile ideals of social reform within the heightened consciousness achieved through art. She has been talking with the two women late into the night and glances across the hotel lobby to see their reflections in the mirror. She notices an ink stain on her gown and admits, "I was immediately distressed by this by-product of the literary life" (244). She recognizes her distress over the ink stain as a result of the same impulse that she has criticized in the other two women: "I perceived suddenly that in every woman there is just such an instinct which urges her, just so far as it is not resisted by her

intelligence and education, towards an existence such as that of the French woman" (244).

Once she has established the "universal instinct" for elegance among women in the first essay, West focuses subsequent essays on critical examples of women who are failures due to the "instinct for elegance," including the schoolmistress and the industrial woman, both of whom perpetuate an unjust social system through their refusal to act on their own behalf. The schoolmistress, West argues, lacks experience and freedom, and therefore inhibits the education of her students. She conforms to the expectation that she will practice an "abstinence from action," thereby conforming to men's ideal of women as "blank pages on which they may write what they will" (302). The industrial woman will not become involved in a trade union because "'Tisna becoming to a woman to do the clacking'" (16). West sets out to prove through these examples that elegance is causing women to fail because they remain complacent about a social structure in which there is no way they can succeed.

Throughout the series, elegance is described as an instinct--an indication of West's view of feminine character as retaining an essentialist, primitive trace.¹²

¹² West reiterates her point about the primitive in the final essay of the series, in which she says that the "instinct for elegance" began when cavewomen wove scarlet berries into their hair to attract men.

However, the tone of the essays remains similar to that of The Clarion essays--a feminist call to action. Therein lies the fundamental tension in West's writing: while she is exhibiting an essentialist view of the nature of gender, she is at the same time endorsing change through social action. West, who as a feminist "gravitated to the rebellious group around *The Freewoman*," a journal which "sought to widen the feminist debate beyond the vote," (Rowbotham, *Women* 170) concludes the series by proposing this type of comprehensive feminist action as the solution to the problem of woman's "failure," arguing that "The freedom that feminists desire will not be a wrenching away to personal freedom from the immemorial duties of women; it will be an added strength of function" (127).

In the next two chapters of this thesis, I will demonstrate that West's strong socialist and feminist polemics, put forth in her essays for The Clarion, as well as her uncertainties about the possibilities of reconciling gender and class differences, play a key role in two works of her fiction, resulting in explorations of reconciliation of the "irreconcilable differences" within the narrative, but typically concluding with the reinstatement of the status quo. West's pessimistic view of the human condition tends to dominate her impulse toward radical social change

in her fiction, leading to notions of perpetual sacrifices made in order to survive within the current social system.

Contradictions of Class and Gender in War: The Return of the Soldier

Ev'ry body's doing
 Something for the War,
 Girls are doing things
 They've never done before, . . .
 All the world is topsy-turvy
 Since the War began.¹³

In No Man's Land, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that during the Great War, female writers "explored the political and economic revolution by which the Great War at least temporarily dispossessed male citizens of the primacy that had always been their birthright" and "celebrated the release of female desires and powers which that revolution made possible" (263). However, Rebecca West complicates Gilbert and Gubar's account of women's writing during and about the Great War. Her first novel, The Return of the Soldier, is shadowed by the same skepticism she often displayed in her polemical writing. While the novel does address the unsettling of gender roles that Gilbert and Gubar explore, West stays closer to the Victorian social fabric. Although the possibility has been exposed, she demonstrates that permanent and significant social change in terms of the dichotomies of gender and class difference

¹³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar include Nina MacDonald's poem, "Sing a Song of War-time," in No Man's Land, p. 263.

will not necessarily follow the "topsy-turvy" world of the Great War.

In a sociohistorical reading of this "topsy-turvy" world, Gilbert and Gubar point out that what formerly was commonly believed to be the truth about men and women and their roles in society had to be altered drastically in order to meet the needs of the country in war time; the conscription of men to the labor of battle gave rise to newly public roles for women on the homefront (262). While women were discovering all that they could successfully accomplish, men were discovering--as men in war often have--their limitations and their fragile mortality, sometimes manifesting hysterical symptoms uncannily like those of hysterical women.¹⁴ The gender anxiety thus produced posed a threat to the traditional patriarchal society by bringing issues of gender difference to the fore. This was often reflected in literature of the time through re-visions of conventional portrayals of marriage and traditional character types. In The Return of the Soldier, West offers elements of re-vision through an unsettling of these societal institutions. At the same time, she reinforces tradition with a "return" to the pre-war social order.

¹⁴ See Elaine Showalter's Sexual Anarchy for a discussion of hysteria.

In this chapter, I will argue that West's The Return of the Soldier is far from being an "early experiment" or "merely a women's novel," as some previous critics have argued.¹⁵ Although it contains elements of a Victorian era "women's novel," it is actually a powerful study of patriarchal society in crisis over differing forms of oppression and a strong critique of the social institutions that enforce the limitations of difference. In addition to presenting parallel forms of difference, the novel presents conflict among differences that West believes cannot be resolved within the given social structure. West demonstrates this through the unsettling of gender and class roles, which are then restored through an act of feminine self-sacrifice. In The Return of the Soldier, West offers a glimpse of potential for radical social change before the "return" to the pre-war social order.

Jenny Baldry, the cousin of the shell-shocked soldier, Chris, is the narrator, and the character through whom political resistance and the possibilities of social transformation are developed. She navigates the class and gender dichotomies presented in the novel through her view of the upsetting of tradition caused by the war. Chris

¹⁵ See Motley Deakin's Rebecca West, pp. 130-134, and Samuel Hynes's Introduction to Rebecca West: A Celebration, xi.

represents the unsettling of gender, as he is "unmanned"¹⁶ by his condition. Kitty Baldry, her sister-in-law, is the "parasitic" upper-class wife who represents the pre-war way of life, with the dichotomous oppositions of gender and class firmly in place. Margaret Allington Grey, Chris's first love, is a poor but virtuous woman, very similar to the sentimental heroines of the previous century. For Margaret, a woman of the lower class, sacrifice has been a way of life. Jenny's description of the differences between Kitty and Margaret provides a key to understanding the theme of irreconcilable difference in the novel. The narrative point of view maps a dialogue between the characters representing the oppositions of class and gender difference.

The setting of the novel also serves to illustrate the conflict between the pre-war social structure and the "topsy-turvy" modern world in which traditional roles have been blurred. The aristocratic grounds of Baldry Court, in which the gardens are "well-kept as a woman's hand" (15), is a pre-war pastoral landscape. Kitty maintains it even while Chris is at war, creating "a little globe of ease," and proving herself "worthy of the past generation" (15). Throughout the novel, other landscapes symbolically intrude upon the controlled beauty of Baldry Court, including the

¹⁶ Gilbert and Gubar use the term "unmanned" in No Man's Land, p. 291, to describe the unsettling of gender roles brought about by W.W.I.

"brown rottenness" (13) of the No Man's Land of Jenny's nightmares, the "red suburban stain" (22) of the lower class neighborhood in which Margaret resides, and the natural and wild beauty of the woods beyond the grounds in which the shell-shocked Chris spends his time with Margaret. These other landscapes challenge the aristocratic tradition, breaking down the semblance of control Kitty has been trying to maintain in her home. Kitty is the one character in the novel who does not leave Baldry Court at all, waiting inside the grand mansion for the life she knows will be restored.

While West's restoration of the pre-war social order at the end of the novel is pessimistic regarding the possibility for radical social change, West also demonstrates through The Return of the Soldier that one cannot fully return from the "topsy-turvy" once its possibilities have been exposed, even when order is again imposed. The war had, in effect, illuminated these societal injustices, so that in the end there could be no true return. West's representation of society during the war explores the crisis of traditional values in which there is a struggle to return to the psychological space of the Victorian era, and indeed The Return of the Soldier does, in ways, reinforce this tradition. However, with the desirability of traditional social institutions more firmly

in question, things could never be quite the same, much as Chris Baldry could never be the same after he was "cured"-- patriarchal society has also been shell-shocked. The contradiction is that in its representation of the femininity of sacrifice, the novel returns to a representational space of pre-modern femininity.

An Unsettling of Gender: Hysteria and the Masculine Crisis

Paradoxically, the war to which so many men had gone in hope of becoming heroes ended up emasculating them, confining them as closely as any Victorian women had been confined. (Gilbert and Gubar 318)

We first meet Chris Baldry on the morning he leaves for the war. Chris is described as a content, handsome English gentleman who "got into the car, put on his Tommy air, and said, 'So long! I'll write you from Berlin!'" (18). However, the Chris who "returns" from the front to recover from shell-shock exhibits none of this pre-war masculine confidence, but rather more typically feminine hysterical symptoms and a decline into a child-like state of dependence. Chris also exhibits a longing for a simpler lifestyle as opposed to the extravagant, upper-class lifestyle he led before the war. He now longs for the natural over the constructed and for the simple virtues of his first love over the demands of his

excessively materialistic wife. The symptoms Chris exhibits, attributed to shell-shock, represent an "unmanning" and are therefore disruptive of pre-war conceptions of gender.

The first description of the "unmanned" Chris comes in the form of a letter to Jenny from Frank Baldry, a cousin who sees him in the hospital. Frank quickly discovers Chris's amnesia, as he has no memory of his wife, Kitty, only of Margaret, a girl he had courted fifteen years before. Frank describes Chris as becoming hysterical as he attempts to fill in the lost years for him. When Frank tells Chris that the year is 1916, "he fell back in a fainting condition" (44). Chris awakens later and asks Frank about his father, who had passed away twelve years ago. Frank writes, "I had never before seen a strong man weep and it is indeed a terrible sight" (45). Finding out about the loss of his father at this crucial time leaves Chris very alone in the world, bereft of his pre-war masculine confidence. Chris, left with no way to return to and recover his past, suffers a crisis of values, yet longs nostalgically for a reunion on pre-war terms. He wishes for Margaret and pleads with Frank that "he would never rest until he once more held her in his arms" (46). Frank is puzzled by the episode and is relieved when Chris ceases his "raving" about Margaret and faints once more.

When Chris returns to Baldry Court, he is essentially a stranger in his own home and helpless to assume his pre-war role as head-of-household. When he comes down for dinner, he trips and falls down some new stairs in the hall. Chris displays a lack of physical adjustment that suggests a deeper lack of adjustment of his character. He is in the midst of a crisis of values, trying to reconcile the grandness of Baldry Court and of his wife with what he wants in his soul, and trying to reconcile what is with what he feels ought to be. Jenny describes him staring at everything in the room that was familiar to him throughout the meal: "It was his furtiveness that was heartrending; it was as though he were an outcast and we who loved him stout policemen" (59). Even his own room, which could be said to represent his essential self, or his masculinity, no longer existed at Baldry Court: " . . . the little room in the south wing with the fishing rods and the old books went in the rebuilding, absorbed by the black and white magnificence that is Kitty's bedroom" (53).

When Chris left, he was a strong English gentleman who ran a successful business and a large estate; now he is but a child-like version of his former self, trying to escape the reality of the life he had created in order to do what he liked, retreating into a landscape of wilderness and the safety of his first love, the nurturing Margaret Allington

Grey. Again, he is depicted as "unmanned" when Jenny tells him she will go fetch Margaret. She finds him at the pond, the only part of the grounds of Baldry Court that doesn't bear "the marks of Kitty's genius." Jenny reflects upon seeing Chris in his boat, "It was a boy's sport, and it was dreadful to see him turn a middle-aged face as he brought the boat inshore" (89). The pull of the natural, wild beauty of this landscape he had loved as a boy was stronger than that of the aristocratic landscape of Baldry Court as it had been rebuilt after his marriage, when he "handed it over to architects who had not so much the wild eye of the artist as the knowing wink of the manicurist" (12).

Each day, as Chris waits for Margaret's next visit to Baldry Court, he sits "like a blind man, waiting for his darkness to lift" (125). Blindness is symbolic of a refusal to see, and also to accept, his former way of life. His refusal to "see" the truth indicates his resistance to his former way of life. When Margaret visits, they leave Baldry Court and spend their time together in the woods, with Margaret in the role of a "purely restorative" nurse figure who wants "only to bring peace" (Gilbert and Gubar 287). The wilderness represents the unsettled nature of society during the Great War: a society in which a man can display an "unmasculine" vulnerability, and a woman can display strength and protectiveness. While Chris is

described in terms of vulnerability, with "his hands unclenched and his head thrown back so that the bare throat showed defencelessly [sic]" (142), Margaret is described in terms of a strength that could be considered "masculine," but at the same time nurturing. At one point, Margaret is depicted as "bracing" Chris with "the movement of one carrying a wounded man from under fire" (123).

In spite of the challenges made to the social order through the unsettling of gender roles, traditional values are restored at the end of the novel when Chris is "cured." He is portrayed as having regained his masculinity as he walks across the lawn to Baldry Court: "He wore a dreadful decent smile," and "walked not loose limbed like a boy, which he had done that very afternoon, but with the soldier's hard tread upon the hill" (187). Margaret's traditional feminine role is restored as well, through her sacrifice of her own happiness to cure Chris; she is the sentimental heroine for whom there is no happy ending.

An Unsettling of Class: A Conflict Among Women

As in her polemical writing, West tends in her fiction to focus her exploration of the dichotomy of class difference on class difference among women. It was, West believed, a major barrier to achieving social change

through the feminist and socialist movements. In The Return of the Soldier, West creates conflict between female characters who represent opposite ends of the class spectrum, Kitty Baldry and Margaret Grey, showing the unsettling of the class dichotomy against the backdrop of the Great War. The conflict of class difference manifests itself in the novel as a battle for Chris's affection.

Kitty Baldry is a representation of an ideal upper-class woman of the Victorian era, the kind of woman Rebecca West termed a "parasitic" woman in her polemical work--the epitome of superficiality. Throughout The Return of the Soldier, Kitty is described in terms of outward appearances only; she is completely without passion or concern about the world outside of Baldry Court, including the war in which her husband is fighting. Her entire being seems to revolve around her status as an upper-class wife. Kitty herself is merely a "decorative presence" at Baldry Court (133). She is first described as looking "so like a girl on a magazine cover that one expected to find a large '7d.' somewhere attached to her person" (11). We meet her chastising Jenny for being worried about Chris, drying her hair in her dead child's room, and regretting that her husband wanted to keep it as a nursery as "it's the sunniest room in the house" (10). Upon learning of Chris's injury, Kitty shows no concern about his health or well-

being, but only about her rightful place as his wife. Kitty is utterly useless in this unsettled world of the Great War and can accomplish nothing but vain attempts to restore Chris's memory and thus her own social position.

Margaret, on the other hand, is associated with nature, nurture, and primitive strength. She is in many ways a typical sentimental heroine, poor but virtuous, and endowed with abundant potential for sympathetic imagination. She lost Chris, her first love, due to a misunderstanding in which class played a part: " . . . it struck me that he wasn't trusting me as he would trust a girl of his own class, and I told him so, and he went on being cruel" (107). Like many romance heroines of the previous century, she was orphaned just as she had reached the threshold of adulthood. Being left with no money, she had to give up her home on Monkey Island, described as a natural paradise, to find work as a governess. Margaret, although battered by a life of poverty, consistently displays strength. Jenny describes her impression of Margaret's courtship by the sickly Mr. Grey as "an incessant whining up at her protective instinct" (112). Her generous nature shines through her unseemly physical appearance; Jenny speculates on the reason for this toward the end of the novel, asserting that it could be due to a conscious sacrifice on Margaret's part: "Perhaps even her

dinginess was a part of her generosity, for in order to fit into the pattern one sometimes has to forgo something of one's individual beauty" (145).

The conflict between Kitty and Margaret is set from the beginning of the novel as a problematic confrontation between the upper- and lower-classes. When Jenny--who presents herself as one of the "mob of female relatives" dependent upon Chris for her keep--and Kitty go downstairs to meet Margaret for the first time, they "linked arms and went out into the corridor" (23). They are a united force of upper-class pride against this intruder from Wealdstone, described by Jenny as "the red suburban stain which fouls the fields three miles nearer London than Harrowweald" (22). The "red stain," like the bloodshed of the war, is spreading, and even Baldry Court cannot escape the changing society. As Jenny points out, "One cannot now protect one's environment as one could in the old days" (22).

As Margaret tells Kitty and Jenny of Chris's injury, they both immediately assume she is lying in order to get money from them for going out of her way to inform them. "Kitty's bright eyes met mine and we obeyed that mysterious human impulse to smile triumphantly at the spectacle of a fellow creature occupied in baseness" (27). However, a moment later, Jenny acknowledges that the source of

baseness in this situation seemed to emanate from Kitty, with "her brightly colored prettiness arched over this plain criminal, as though she were a splendid bird of prey and this her sluggish insect food" (29).

When Margaret returns again to Baldry Court, she does so at Chris's bidding and is clearly coming out ahead of Kitty in this struggle for Chris's affections. She and Chris create their own idyllic world in the wilderness just outside of the sleek landscape of Baldry Court. Jenny claims that Margaret led him into a "quiet magic circle out of our life, out of the splendid house which was not so much a house as a vast piece of space partitioned off from the universe . . ." (145).

While Margaret is creating a new social order from the chaos of war, Kitty is attempting to destroy it by finding a way to restore Chris's memory and thus her own pre-war existence as an upper-class wife. Margaret's focus is on Chris's happiness, which is not a concern of Kitty's. Jenny realizes, however, that the pre-war life Chris had shared with them had not made him happy. When Margaret expresses pity over all the work Chris must have had to go to to maintain "the magnificence of Baldry Court," Jenny reflects, "It had been our pretense that by wearing costly clothes and organizing a costly life we had been the servants of his desire" (116). It is through relics of

this costly life that Kitty attempts to reach Chris, but Margaret holds the key to Chris's memory.

Neither Kitty nor Margaret develops as a character throughout the novel; they remain the same, illustrating West's way of looking at the dichotomies set up by society and social expectations. Margaret clearly has the advantage in the "topsy-turvy" world; Chris's affections are hers as long as he remains in his shell-shocked state. She is a potential force for social change but is defeated as such through the feminine impulse to sacrifice. Kitty does not gain an understanding of the unsettling of her pre-war world; her position is restored strictly through the sacrifice made by Margaret. At the end of the novel, Margaret denies her own desire for Chris to remain her companion by taking to him "the very things that will make him remember" (177). Kitty remains inside the walls of Baldry Court, turned away from the window, waiting for her aristocratic world to come back together.

Margaret's sacrifice is an important element of West's understanding of the forces that maintain traditional social roles. As West asserted in her polemical writing, both class and gender are forms of difference and oppression that require the sacrifice of one side to maintain the social structure and, therefore, the dichotomy. The willingness of the weaker side of the

dichotomy to make this sacrifice is, in West's fiction, one of the primary deterrents to progressive social change. In The Return of the Soldier, Margaret sacrifices the idyllic world she has created within the "topsy-turvy" world of the war, and in so doing restores the traditional social order, thus illustrating the truth of irreconcilable differences as West perceived them.

Margaret first realizes that she has it within her power to restore Chris's memory when she discovers that Chris had a son who died around the same time as her own son, and at the same age. Jenny watches as Margaret "fell on her knees," and holds the photograph, "pressed to her bosom as though to staunch a wound" (161). Her reflection on the loss of her own son foreshadows her loss of Chris through sacrificing herself for the sake of others as she has done all her life.¹⁷ She admits to the psychotherapist visiting Baldry Court, "'I know how you could bring him back. A memory so strong that it would recall everything else--in spite of his discontent'" (168).

When Jenny then takes Margaret to the nursery to get some of the dead boy's things for her to use to cure Chris, Margaret at first tries to collaborate with Jenny to avoid shattering her world: "'You wouldn't let them take him away to the asylum. You wouldn't stop me coming. The

¹⁷ See Jane Tompkins, Sensational Designs, for a discussion of female self-sacrifice and the sentimental novel.

other one might, but you'd see she didn't. Oh, do just let him be . . .” (179). However, Margaret and Jenny come to realize simultaneously that Chris must know the truth. Margaret asks for the boy's jersey and ball, saying, “‘The truth's the truth,’ smiling sadly at the strange order of this earth” (184). Margaret's sacrifice is portrayed as a necessary part of “the cruelty of the order of things.” After she is gone, Jenny notes that “Out there Margaret was breaking his heart and hers, using words like a hammer, looking wise, doing it so well” (186). Through Margaret's sacrifice of happiness, order is once again restored. Jenny hears Kitty “suck her breath with satisfaction” when she sees Chris coming across the lawn (187). But Jenny acknowledges that their pre-war world was not entirely restored. The war raged on, and now “cured,” Chris “would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders under that sky more full of flying death than clouds, to that No Man's Land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead . . .” (187).

Conclusion

At the end of The Return of the Soldier, West offers neither a reconciliation of the dichotomies of class and gender she has presented, nor a true “return” to the pre-

war conception of them. The characters, although their former way of life is restored on the surface, cannot truly "return;" they are changed by their experiences and by an acknowledgment of different values regarding gender and class differences than those of the patriarchal social order. Chris's "return" is nothing like the "Tommy air" he put on in the beginning of the novel, but a return to "a hated place to which, against all his hopes, business had forced him to return" (187). Thus, an ending that would have been considered happy in a Victorian novel, with the restoration of Chris's memory, of his marriage to Kitty, and of his position as a soldier, is actually a disappointment in this novel. The social order has been restored, but it has been exposed, through the unsettling of the pre-war ideas of class and gender, as an unjust construct rather than a natural order. Therefore, there can be no true "return." West's conception of the social order as fixed oppositions does not allow the plot to come to a happy conclusion: "Such a world will not suffer magic circles to endure" (162).

Marriage and Miscarriage of Expectations in The Thinking Reed

The revolutionary woman knows the world she seeks to overthrow is precisely one in which love between equal human beings is well nigh impossible. We are still part of the ironical working out of this, our own cruel contradiction (Rowbotham, *Resistance* 98).

Rebecca West stated in a synopsis of The Thinking Reed (1936) that the novel has two themes. These are the "effect of riches on people and the effect of men on women, both forms of slavery, of forced adaptation, against which the individual with a sense of individuality is bound to struggle" (Rollyson 173). West plays out these themes in The Thinking Reed by exploring and exposing the irreconcilable nature of gender and class difference through metaphors of marriage, pregnancy, and miscarriage. Within the narrative structure, a conflict between conscious reason and unconscious sensuality is also developed: it is ultimately the dichotomy of mind and body that is the underpinning of the representations of corporeality in the novel.

The Thinking Reed is among West's most neglected works, considering its "extraordinary critical success" when it was first published (Rollyson 175). The novel is barely mentioned in contemporary feminist critical

studies.¹⁸ The reason for this may lie in the difficulty of positioning West as a political novelist since her politics were a work in progress that was under continuous revision: "Few reviewers or even her later critics have taken sufficient cognizance of her effort to write novels--each one quite different from the other--which do not easily situate themselves in the English and American tradition" (Rollyson 175). Another possible reason for the lack of feminist attention to The Thinking Reed may be because the ending to this novel can, like The Return of the Soldier, be read as affirming rather than resisting the traditional social order. I will argue that, in spite of its critical neglect, The Thinking Reed is indeed a novel of significance to West's critical philosophy of culture; it provides another side to the paradigm of West's analyses of the irreconcilable differences of gender and class. When examined through the lens of West's polemical work, The Thinking Reed provides a framework in which West addresses the possibility of a feminist and socialist progress which never comes to fruition in the novel. It is an intricate novel that illustrates West's pessimism about the possibility of sweeping social change.

The setting of the novel is the French Riviera in the prosperous 1920s. Isabelle is a beautiful and wealthy

¹⁸ A notable exception is Maroula Joannou's discussion of feminism and femininity in Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows, pp. 127-158.

American widow and heiress who has come to France to decide what to do with her life. Her heritage is as an "Orleanist" from a family which "had never lost its French character." However, the fact that she is highly educated and has a "competent, steely mind" (4) situates her as a potential revolutionary in spite of her royalist background. As in the earlier tradition of the Victorian novel, however, Isabelle's choice is only a choice as to which of her suitors will become her husband.¹⁹ The world she enters when she marries French industrialist Marc Sallafranque is an artificial culture created by expatriates, including British aristocrats who aimlessly float from one social occasion to the other with no sense of purpose, and Luba, a displaced Russian princess who, after the Russian Revolution, no longer has a place in society--just as after the French Revolution, no "Orleanist" had any place in French Society. In this affluent, rootless expatriate milieu, Luba is socially marooned between gender and class expectations, "roughly rejected" by the poor when she attempts to earn a living, and also by the rich who, because of their "lack of values," cannot "respect her genius for love" (251).

¹⁹ See Jean Kinnard's *Victims of Convention*, pp. 108-135, for a discussion of the function of marriage and "the two suitors convention" in the Victorian novel.

Isabelle, like Kitty Baldry in The Return of the Soldier, fits the profile of what West called a "parasite" in her polemical writing. Unlike Kitty, however, Isabelle is dissatisfied with traditional gender and class roles in which she is cast and throughout the novel provides a critique of society through her judgment of characters and social situations in which she finds herself. Isabelle is wealthy, although her Uncle Honore controls her inheritance, but in spite of her economic dependence as a "parasite," her intelligence and her capacity for struggle are evident; her body and the body politics of marriage is the terrain upon which the battle between reason and sensuality is played out. After her marriage, Isabelle spends her time entirely wrapped up in the domestic duties of entertaining Marc's family and business acquaintances and running her household. According to Isabelle, women are "sentenced to a privacy of fate which makes a living woman not so alive as a living man . . ." (133). Marc is largely blind to both gender and class tensions, while Isabelle is keenly aware of them, widening the gap of understanding in their marriage. This gap makes it difficult for Isabelle, even when she is expecting a child, to fulfill the expectations of her bourgeois social role.

Through the narrative perspective of Isabelle's reflective and critical consciousness, West offers in The

Thinking Reed many points of resistance to the social order, including the institution of marriage, capitalism, and class structure and wealth. Isabelle's dream is for a *just* reconciliation of gender and class difference; she wants to live "at the centre of a focus of pleasantness, and harmony and things coming out right" (57). At least initially, she defines this dream somewhat naively.

Isabelle wants "love between equal human beings," but in the end her relationship with Marc is restored on the same terms as it was initially presented, with Isabelle's role and her consciousness lying ironically within the domestic sphere. As in The Return of the Soldier, the conclusion does not involve transformation of the social order, but rather acknowledges the contradictory nature of gender and class difference. It remains difficult for Isabelle to fulfill the role of a bourgeois wife, but she does not recognize any other options, because she tells herself, "It would be well at this moment if you did not think, but felt" (420), and with this resigns herself to her role, willing to settle for the contradictions. At the end of the novel, Isabelle notes, "Well, there are many things in life that seem to be contradictions, and we will be able to reconcile them only when we know more" (431).

A Miscarriage of Justice

As in The Return of the Soldier, West's characters in The Thinking Reed represent social positions that highlight the irreconcilable differences of gender and class. Marc Sallafranque is representative of the modern capitalist and nationalist interests; he has great wealth, but does not truly fit in with the aristocratic set because he has earned his wealth, with assistance from the war reparation fund, through the automotive industry. He is, therefore, somewhat displaced among the members of the leisured class with whom his wealth and social status oblige him to associate. He is also very naive, believing that he is "universally popular," because as a rich and successful man, "people had always been declaring that they were pleased to see him" (71). Because of his child-like naiveté, Marc's character is both "farcical and noble" (75). He appears to believe that he has a mutually beneficial relationship with his employees, but Isabelle judges the relationship otherwise: "She saw, she did indeed, that there was a case against him, which was not less formidable because all his crimes were rooted in his innocence" (76).

Isabelle is an American heiress, and as critics have pointed out, not entirely unlike Henry James's Isabel

Archer, the heroine of A Portrait of a Lady.²⁰ West published a critical study of James in 1916, in which she criticized the portrayal of women in his writing: "James's women did not *think*; they were presented as sexual objects who behaved by the most conventional standards and exhibited no sense of their own" (Rollyson 61). West's Isabelle is then, in a sense, a fuller version of James's Isabel: "Henry James portrayed a lady; Rebecca West presents a woman" (Deakin 150). Isabelle is also an intellectual modern woman, educated at the Sorbonne. Her conflicts, therefore, appear to have as their source the internalization of the conflicting expectations of women who think and women who feel, including the feelings of the sensual body. Isabelle's reliance on logic often dominates her emotions, allowing her to rationalize her position. Isabelle's reason is contrasted with Luba's passion: while Isabelle likes to "bring everything that happened to her under the clarifying power of the intellect," (4) Luba wants only to "use her gift for tenderness" (251). Isabelle's role in the novel is also that of a judge;²¹ she, unlike James's Isabel, is a woman who "thinks," and is

²⁰ See Motley Deakin's Rebecca West, pp. 148-152, and Peter Wolfe's Rebecca West: Artist and Thinker, pp. 48-49.

²¹ West's novel The Judge (1922) also includes a female character who judges those around her. The epigram reads, "Every mother is a judge who sentences the children for the sins of the father."

constantly criticizing the unfairness of the society of which she is a part.

Therefore, it is Isabelle's and Marc's marriage, the potential and perils of their union, that provides much of the framework for a thoughtful analysis of gender and class tensions of the social and political body throughout the novel.²² Within this framework, Isabelle is caught up in a bind between the public and private spheres.²³ As a thinking woman, Isabelle is politically astute, and thoroughly capable of making contributions to a civic discourse. However, throughout the novel, her keen observations generally remain within the realm of thought and are not expressed through action. She struggles to communicate them to Marc: "It was impossible to carry on any truly contrapuntal conversation with him . . ." (78). Isabelle, then, can only relate to Marc on the sensual level of the body. It is only within the private sphere that the couple can unite, and this is expressed in the novel through scenes of intimacy and domesticity: "But she forgot her discomfiture in the amusement of preparing for her marriage, of choosing her trousseau and her

²² Rebecca West is not, of course, the first novelist to emphasize the socio-symbolic functions of marriage. For marriage as trope in the novel tradition, see Carolyn Heilbrun's "Marriage Perceived: English Literature 1873-1941," and Susan Rubinow Gorsky's Femininity to Feminism: Women and Literature in the Nineteenth Century.

²³ See Janet Wolff's Feminine Sentences, pp. 34-37, for a discussion of modern women's experience of the public and private spheres.

house . . ." (78). However, the novel also illustrates West's belief that intimacy between a man and a woman is potentially dangerous for the woman's political effectiveness: the maintenance of such a union requires sacrifice of reason to impulse on the part of the woman. There is, however, no parallel of sacrifice for West's masculine characters who marry.

West initially portrays the marriage as satisfactory, although Isabelle is constantly rationalizing her position in an attempt to convince herself that her marriage is a happy one. Isabelle and Marc are closest to achieving a blissful union when Isabelle becomes pregnant. Isabelle's thoughts move farther from political observation as she reflects on the changes in her body. She experiences a "gluttonous indulgence of the senses," in which "the taste of milk was more delicious to her than any wine, and she became infatuated with the smell of wood fires . . ." (154). Described as "too theatrically beautiful," Isabelle is playing the role of a wealthy bourgeois wife well, and enjoying it, "entertained by the company of her unborn child" (154). Isabelle confesses to Marc, "All the time I am a little drunk these days. I am so well" (160). During the period of Isabelle's pregnancy, the Sallafranques's marriage is often described in ideal terms as the reader is made more aware of the intimate side

of their union. The couple is loving and happy, sleeping late, and waking up "lazy and gossiping, so that it was a long time before they were dressed" (167). When they do go out, they enjoy the aristocratic landscape of the hotel grounds together, examining "the rigid imperial hyacinths, the mobile daffodils," and laughing "at the forest of rounded turrets that rose from the precipice of windowed walls" (168). In these intimate scenes of marriage, Isabelle seems close to achieving her dream of "living at the centre of a focus of pleasantness" (57). Her dream, however, undergoes severe reexamination throughout the novel.

Isabelle remains subject to the conflicting impulses of her intellect and her body, and these tensions are played out in the social aspect of the Sallafranques' marriage. The focus of the novel shifts from scenes of marital tenderness to the public arena of the aristocratic set with whom the Sallafranques are spending their holiday. The Sallafranques attend a party in a casino. Marc has been forbidden to gamble by the government, as they fear the workers will revolt if they become aware of such a conspicuous display of the industrial leader's wealth. Marc is unaware of the seriousness of class tensions. He believes that his workers all "adore" him, although Isabelle notes that their faces are "wolfish behind their

smiles" (73); they are hungry for power, and poised to take it from him. The government is also poised to take it from Marc if he becomes a threat by possibly precipitating a rebellion. Marc does not seem to have a sense of the reality of what he could lose by gambling; in his view, he is making a "challenge to the government" which he will, of course, win (303). When Isabelle tries to persuade him with reason, he says, "'You are a woman, and women do not understand impersonal matters'" (304). Marc gives in to the temptation to gamble with the others at the party, heedless of the consequences. Isabelle is left to try to come up with a way to save him from himself.

This situation presents Isabelle with a dilemma: can a woman achieve emotional satisfaction in a mutually nourishing marriage and at the same time effect significant change? In order to do so, Isabelle would need to be able to communicate with Marc at the level of the *body politic* as well as at the level of the intimate body, thus moving from the private sphere of intimate discourse to the public sphere of civic discourse. If she attempts to put forth her judgment of Marc's capitalist greed, she will potentially sacrifice the domestic bliss with which she has seemed satisfied since she became pregnant. If she remains silent, her public status is left entirely in Marc's hands, and he will surely bring about their ruin.

The tensions in the marriage develop gradually in the novel through conflicts that at first glance seem to be superimposed from the outside. However, in the casino scene, the tensions come to a head as a fundamental conflict between Marc and Isabelle and all each represents. Marc's insistence that Isabelle as a woman could not understand "impersonal matters" forces her to enter into the discourse of this public setting in a way other than reasoning with him. The only means Isabelle can come up with to put herself into a position where she can attract Marc's attention is to create a violent scene that will distract him, requiring him to leave the casino to attend to her. By doing this, Isabelle uses her own body to make a public scene.²⁴ As Isabelle transforms their intimacy into a political act, her body becomes a part of the structure of conflict in the movement between the private to the public sphere. Isabelle "had realized the plan demanded from her the kind of behavior she found most repellent. Her body must become an instrument of violence and disorder" (305). With a "high scream that passed like a wind through the room," Isabelle goes into a tirade, accusing Marc of having an affair with Luba (305). Isabelle acknowledges that "the brutality she was doing to her own nature amounted to torture. But the power within

²⁴ See Lynda Hart's Making a Scene.

her had its strength . . .” (306). She does succeed in saving Marc from potential ruin, and her action has the secondary effect of helping Luba attract the attention of Mr. Pillans, her future husband. But in the process, her unborn child--a metaphor for the possibility of reconciling differences--is destroyed. As Marc leads Isabelle out of the casino, she realizes that “there was something happening in this room worse than the awful action she had just been forced to commit.” As “a dull grinding of the muscles in her back was sharpening to agony,” she realizes that she is losing her child and says simply, “‘I am destroyed’” (307).

Re-Union: Potential and Sacrifice

The subplot of Luba’s pending marriage to Mr. Pillans serves as a counterpart to the breakdown of Isabelle’s and Marc’s marriage. Isabelle and Luba offer different versions of possibilities for reconciling differences in the social order. Luba is the first character we see with Isabelle after the incident, and indeed, Isabelle’s relationship with Luba becomes increasingly important after her miscarriage, exposing potential for the reconciliation of the rational and the sensual. Isabelle finds “her greatest satisfaction in the company of Luba,” who takes

"time off from buying her trousseau to come to Isabelle's bedside" (310). Luba, in the tradition of the sentimental novel, is unselfishly forgiving of Isabelle: " . . . having been able to forgive God for the miseries He had brought on her through the medium of history, she could scarcely be hard on her fellow creatures" (310). When Luba is to leave for America with Mr. Pillans, both women "wept bitterly," (310) in a union of sympathy.

Isabelle passes "into a phase of dejection" after Luba's departure: "She wanted to get out of her bed and struggle to some place where she had never been before" (311). The concluding chapters of the novel present Isabelle's struggle with the paradox of marriage as her dilemma shifts from the question of her role within her marriage to whether or not she should remain married. As Isabelle moves from clinic to clinic in an attempt to recover from her ordeal, she realizes that she wants to live in harmony with men, but their tendency toward violence and destruction confounds her. She reflects on the nature of gender difference, suspecting that "the relationship between men and women could never be very satisfactory" (311).

The irreconcilable differences between Isabelle and Marc manifest themselves physically when they attempt a reunion. Her bodily resistance to Marc signals an aversion

to the political position he represents. Isabelle decides to return home to Marc, but as much as she tries, cannot forgive him: "She reflected that soon she must let him make love to her again; that perhaps it would be good to begin that night. But she found herself thinking of it less as a surrender of her affections for him than as a performance she had to give . . ." (343). Isabelle had made the decision in her mind, but her body would not let her submit to his advances:

A convulsion had passed through her body that was more violent than any opinion she could have conceived herself holding in regard to Marc, that was like a judgment passed on him by some person inside herself who had no affection for him, who condemned him utterly, who was wiser than she was (358).

Isabelle's decision to return to Marc in spite of this at the end of the novel restores the traditional social order, but no true reconciliation is made in terms of either gender or class alliance. Staying married represents a sacrifice of consciousness on Isabelle's part. Marc is still ignorant of the tensions that complicate their lives. Theirs is a union based on the bourgeois model of marriage after all. When Isabelle tries to explain to him how much she detests being rich, he sarcastically suggests that they "go Bolshevik" (421). Isabelle replies seriously, and Marc "bent on her a kind,

teasing smile, as if she had said something endearingly, femininely foolish" (421). Marc is still of the mind that women cannot understand "impersonal matters," although Isabelle is much more politically astute than he is. Isabelle notes that "on his face, as on the faces of all the men she knew who had power over the immediate world, there lay an expression of acquiescence in what was going on around him, which was dissociated from the findings of the critical brain behind, yet was not exactly insincere" (429).

When Isabelle and Marc are discussing their marriage, Isabelle thinks to herself that she hates being a woman, and questions to herself, "All men are my enemies, what am I doing with any of them?" At that point,

A voice advised her coldly from the remote recesses of her mind. Had you better not put up with men as there is no third sex on earth? It would be as well at this moment if you did not think, but felt. Pressing her mouth against his, she tried to preserve some fairness in life (420).

As in the casino, the only way Isabelle can enter into a discourse with Marc is through the use of her body; she attempts to reserve her judgment of Marc through a physical union with him, since an intellectual union is clearly not possible.

Isabelle's social position as a wealthy bourgeois woman is therefore restored within the traditional confines of marriage. However, it is hearing of her friend Luba's pregnancy, the return of the force of intimate life that Isabelle lost through her miscarriage, that in the end allows her to concede to living with her differences with Marc. Isabelle realizes that she must "feel" rather than "think," and as Luba represents the sensual over the intellectual, the body over the mind, she serves as a conservative representation of how Isabelle must try to be to make the marriage work and reconcile her own internal divisions. Isabelle's change in attitude upon receiving the news from her friend makes no sense to Marc, who says to her, "You think everything ought to be unsettled, and then when you hear that a woman is going to have a baby, you say now everything is settled It is just a little bit of a contradiction, that is all" (431). Luba's pregnancy, however, represents another opportunity for Isabelle's expectation of "living at the center of a focus of pleasantness" (57) to be fulfilled. The potential union of rationality and sensuality symbolized in Isabelle's relationship with Luba, however, is not to be realized in Isabelle's marriage. Rather, she must sacrifice rationality in order to live at peace with Marc.

In this world of indissoluble matrimonyes, Isabelle and Marc are reconciled as much as a man and woman can be, because while Isabelle realizes that the "difference between men and women is the rock on which civilization will split," she also "knew that her life would not be tolerable if he were not always there to crush gently her smooth hands with his strong short fingers" (431).²⁵ This "gentle crushing" is to West what women have to tolerate in their "mutual symbiotic dependency" with men. Isabelle realizes that she is once again making a sacrifice: "'It is probably that I do something to men as dreadful as they do to me, without knowing it.' But she knew that she was only softening the harsh lines of the picture her mind had taken of the world" (420). The closest West comes to a reconciliation of gender and class difference in The Thinking Reed is Isabelle's rationalization for returning to Marc, a "softening of the harsh lines" of the dichotomies of gender and class (420).

²⁵ West's story, "Indissoluble Matrimony," included in The Norton Anthology of Women's Literature, pp. 1577-1599, is an earlier example of a fictional representation of the same themes West explores in The Thinking Reed.

Conclusion

In his introduction to Rebecca West: A Celebration, Samuel Hynes states that West's warning to the graduate student requesting material for her thesis was "an acute observation." West did not believe she was a fitting subject for a thesis, as her work could not "fuse to make a picture of a writer." Hynes argues that "Dame Rebecca's work has not fused in the minds of critics, and she has no secure literary status--the interstices between her books . . . are too wide; she is too difficult to define" (xviii).

I have not attempted in this thesis to "make a picture" of Rebecca West as a writer who develops a monolithic perspective, but rather to address the way in which she explores issues of class and gender affiliations in several of her early works of non-fiction and fiction. However, the issues West deals with in her early writings arguably influence her later work. Although her political interests shifted around the middle of the century from feminism and socialism to espionage and treason, West always remained concerned with problems of social justice. Jane Marcus states in her preface to The Young Rebecca, "All her life Rebecca West has written in praise of virtue

and condemning wickedness. She finds moral relativism ridiculous, and says so in her essays and her fiction" (ix). In his article on West for The New Yorker, Brian Hall asserts that West's body of work "can be read as one vast *essai*, for which she wrote draft after draft, and in which, instead of replacing one draft with the next, she lined them up end to end" (78).

Perhaps in this sense one could "make a picture" of Rebecca West as a writer, focusing on the common threads of social justice and moral absolutism throughout her work, reading it as one essay. However, I think that one would lose the essence of Rebecca West by focusing only on the common threads and thereby ignoring the contradictions in her work.

As I have argued in this thesis, Rebecca West herself was a contradictory figure who defies classification in a political or a literary sense. In her early career, she was passionate about the causes of feminism and socialism but really did not fit into any defined social movement. A comprehensive study of Rebecca West's body of work would have to fully acknowledge the contradictions, oppositions, and tensions that lie therein. I believe the true picture of Rebecca West lies in the contradictions.

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