She’s the Man
A Close Reading of Gender in *The Return of the Soldier* by Rebecca West
Abstract

This essay focuses on gender behaviour in *The Return of the Soldier* by Rebecca West. The claim for this essay argues that West has changed the traditional gender roles in her novel by giving female characters masculine attributes and the male character feminine attributes. The theoretical framework provides a comparison of how West’s gender construction in her novel differs from older literature. The comparison is carried out by providing examples from two novels from the nineteenth century, in which we can see how men and women could be portrayed. The theoretical framework also discusses feminist theories by Toril Moi, masculinity studies by Alex Hobbs, and typical gender stereotypes according to Jeff Hearn. These theories are used to analyse how the characters’ gender behaviour is affected by social factors and how West deviates from the traditional construction of gender roles.

Key Words:

Gender, *The Return of the Soldier*, Rebecca West, Masculinity, Femininity, Stereotypes
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Introduction

West has been appreciated and anthologized by materialist feminists for her early, outspoken, even pugnacious liberal feminism, but she has not been considered sufficiently within the context of modernism. (Scott, “Refiguring the Binary” 169)

Rebecca West, or Cicily Fairfield which is her birth name, was born in London in 1892 and brought up in Edinburgh by her mother. In her early years, she studied drama, which is how she got her pseudonym, namely from the character Rebecca West in Ibsen’s play *Rosmerholm*. She kept the name Rebecca West when she started working for the feminist magazine *Freewoman* in 1911 (Klinkenborg v-vi). Virginia Woolf stated that Rebecca West was “upstanding and outspoken” (qtd. in Scott, “Transnational Women’s Writing” 17) in her work for organisations and publications. Her articles concern social change, suffrage, women’s education, labour conditions, and the privileges and barriers of class. West moved on to writing novels and used typical modernist writing techniques, such as flashbacks, time compression, and stream of consciousness. What makes West’s novels appealing for readers is her use of romantic and melodramatic components, along with the modernist elements (17).

*The Return of the Soldier* is West’s first novel and was published in 1918. In this novel, West turns from the stereotypical female features and characteristics of the time, such as female physical attractiveness or the dominant man, and the binary opposition between gender, and instead chooses to give typically female attributes to the male characters, and vice versa for the female characters. The novel deals with a love affair as well as the difficulties of social class and traditional gender roles (Scott, “Transnational Women’s Writing” 17). The soldier, Chris, returns home from the First World War with memory loss of the last 15 years. The story continues with Chris’ strange reunion with his wife, Kitty, whom he cannot
remember, his cousin, Jenny, and his former love Margaret, at the estate where they now live. All four main characters have their own different kind of struggles connected to Chris’ memory loss.

Previous research of West’s works has mainly been feminist or psychoanalytic studies. Bonnie Kime Scott is one of those who have made a feminist reading on works of Rebecca West. In “Refiguring the Binary, Breaking the Cycle: Rebecca West as Feminist Modernist”, Scott discusses West’s use of binary relationships in her texts and how “she consistently saw gender as a factor” (172). Scott examines these points in two works by West, *The Judge* and *Harriet Hume*, where West has made the female characters strong, beautiful, and wise. According to Scott’s article, West has a tendency to have more female characters than male characters in her novels; this creates a “female force” within the text (“Refiguring the Binary” 172-73). Marina MacKay has studied West’s *The Return of the Soldier* in her article “The Lunacy of Men, the Idiocy of Women: Woolf, West, and War”. MacKay argues that *The Return of the Soldier*, among other works by West, portrays women surrounding the centred, prized, and respected man (129). Chris is, according to MacKay, stuck in a masculine role without fulfilling the masculine demands of him. Nevertheless, in the end of the novel, he “returns” as the soldier (130). The women in the novel have a combination of vulnerability and virginity, which creates an image of desired femininity (130). *The Return of the Soldier* is full of “attempts to turn women into objects” (130), “ideals of gentlemanliness” (131), and “a desire to restore the old order” (132). MacKay’s article compares Virginia Woolf with Rebecca West, and she argues that their careers have followed the same track and that they were both addressing the public spheres and politics. According to MacKay, both authors were working towards the goal of illuminating the connection between feminist consciousness and international conflict (124-26).
Since previous research has focused on other works by Rebecca West, I will instead investigate the gender constructions in her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier*. I will examine how the characters display physical and personality traits that are generally associated with women or with men. To do this I will use both social feminist theory and masculinity theory. My claim in this essay is that West changed the traditional gender roles by giving her female characters masculine attributes and the male character feminine attributes. I also argue that social class is an important factor for different gender behaviour. In my analysis of *The Return of the Soldier*, I will switch gender structures by putting the characters in either feminine or masculine roles. I will also draw parallels between constructions of gender in fiction from the nineteenth century literature and the novel.

The novel brings forth several feminist viewpoints, however, the focus on the construction of gender is what makes the book stand out from older literature. Literary feminist critics investigate, among other subjects, female writers, social constructions, and femininity. *Femininity* is a group of characteristics such as attributes, behaviours, and subject positions that are generally associated with women. In theory, these characteristics are not something natural, but are socially constructed and produced (Scharff 59). The critique against these stereotypical images of how women should be represented in literary texts is a major part of modern feminist literary theory. The critique against stereotypical representation of women in literary texts led to a criticism which states that, according to Ruth Robbins’s *Literary Feminism*, “woman is the object of obsessive looking” and that her cultural value is bound in her appearance (51).

Feminist critique has numerous areas of interest and the term *feminism* can be used in a broad perspective. The Oxford Dictionaries’ definition of *feminism* is “[t]he advocacy of women’s rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes”. There are various kinds of feminism, such as liberal feminism, postcolonial feminism, cultural feminism, and social
feminism. This essay will focus on the latter; social feminism analyses the social structures and their effects. Different kinds of practical and psychic effects can be seen in social organisations. Analysing social structures has played an important role in reading literary texts (Robbins 33). I will use this type of feminism in my analysis since the difficulty of social structures applies to the structure of *The Return of the Soldier* and the understanding of its characters.

In this essay, I will start with a theoretical section that will clarify how West’s works can be considered as different from previous literature. It will discuss and provide examples of female and male stereotypes found in books from the nineteenth century. From there, I will continue with introducing literary feminism, specifically focusing on social literary feminist and gender theories by Toril Moi. Later on, I will discuss masculinity and men’s studies based around theories by Alex Hobbs and Jeff Hearn. The analysis section will follow and in this section I will use the theories, discussed in the theoretical framework, to analyse masculine and feminine attributes in the characters in *The Return of the Soldier*.

**Theoretical Framework**

I will start by presenting illustrative examples of how men and women are characterized in books from the nineteenth century. These examples, from novels by Jane Austen and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, demonstrate how gender in literary works could be constructed. They do not, however, represent all 1800s literature. This essay has no ambition to discuss 1800s literature and the examples are only provided to assist the analysis and will be used in comparison to West’s gender constructions in *The Return of the Soldier*. Furthermore, the theoretical framework will discuss feminism and modernism, social and literary feminism, and finally masculinity theory.
Gender Constructions in two Novels from the 1800s

Many writers in the 1800s portray their characters according to male and female stereotypes. For example, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle portrays his character Sherlock Holmes as someone who is both handsome to the eye and someone who is smart and quick-witted. These are stereotypical male attributes; females are primarily presented by their physical appearance. In “A Study in Scarlet”, the character Dr Watson describes Sherlock Holmes: “His very person and appearance were such as to strike the attention of the most casual observer. […] his thin, hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which mark the man of determination” (Doyle 20). Dr Watson’s description of Sherlock Holmes’ physical features seems to imply his superiority over other people in both attractiveness and intellect. Later on in the novel, Dr Watson describes two women: “‘I next called upon Madame Carpenter,’ […] ‘I found her very pale and distressed. Her daughter was in the room, too – an uncommonly fine girl she is, too; she was looking red about the eyes and her lips trembled as I spoke to her’ […]” (Doyle 43). Dr Watson is, in this paragraph, only paying attention to the physical attractiveness of the two women, the mother as being “pale and distressed” (43), and the daughter as being “an uncommonly fine girl” (43). He makes no remarks on their intellect, athleticism, or analytical abilities when they speak. However, some writers, such as Jane Austen, separate themselves from this literary characteristic of the nineteenth century. In Austen’s novel Pride and Prejudice, the female main character, Elizabeth Bennet, is a smart and quick-witted girl, however not as handsome as her sisters are. In the beginning of the novel Elizabeth’s parents discuss the prospect of a marriage between one of their daughters and the wealthy Mr Bingley. Mr Bennet wants to put in a good word for Elizabeth rather than the other girls but Mrs Bennet objects to his idea:
“I desire you will not do such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half as handsome as Jane, nor half so good humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving her the preference.”

“They have none of them much to recommend them”, replied he, “they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters.” (Austen 4)

Mrs Bennet represents the old traditional view that women’s appearance is far more important than their intelligence in the attraction of a husband. Her largest ambition is to find husbands for all of her six daughters. Mr Bennet, on the other hand, stresses the importance of his daughter being smart, and that she therefore would make a good wife to Mr Bingley.

In conclusion, in Doyle’s “A Study in Scarlet” the main male character is described in both physical and intellectual attributes, whilst the female characters are only described according to their physical appearance. In Pride and Prejudice, many of the characters value the main female character’s intellect instead of merely her appearance. The two novels display two different portrayals of women and men that can be found in nineteenth century literature.

Feminism and Modernism

In this section, I will discuss how the First World War affected women’s position in the public sphere and how this influenced authors in their depiction of female characters. I will also demonstrate through examples from two novels how women in modernist fiction sometimes are portrayed as bored according to Allison Pease’s idea of a “culture of boredom” which she discuss in her book Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom.
Anne E. Fernald writes, in her article “Women’s Fiction, New Modernist Studies, and Feminism”, about notions of social roles in literature during the modernist era. “[W]omen in the first half of the twentieth century lived through the most rapid and significant expansion of their social roles in history” (234). According to Susan Pyecroft, one of these significant social changes was the working roles of women. Women started working in male dominated workplaces after the men had been sent away to fight in the First World War (702). The social changes influenced authors, especially female, in their literary works (Fernald 234). In fact, many novels concerned feminist activism, such as suffrage, and gender in the domestic and public spheres (235). According to Fernald, in order to understand modernity, we must remember “that gender played and continues to play an enormous role in defining social roles and economic opportunities” (229).

Pease writes that women in modernist fiction were put in social situations that portrayed them as bored; sitting down drinking tea and engaging in small talk or laying down on a divan. An example of this is found in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story “The Offshore Pirate” from 1920 where the main female character, Ardita, is introduced as “a yellow-haired girl reclined in a wicker settee reading The Revolt of the Angels, by Anatole France” (Fitzgerald 70). Pease argues that literary modernism is shaped by ideas of boredom (vii). *Boredom* in the twentieth century was used in connection to other terms defining “psychic, spiritual, moral, and physical states” (viii). These states all interfered with the characters’ individual success. “Boredom’s constitutive role in modernism is a manifestation of broader social and cultural forces in which British women agitated for recognition as men’s legal and social equals” (Pease viii). Pease states that feminist modernist texts face female boredom as a problem in connection to what it means to be an individual in a culture defined by masculinity (viii). Nevertheless, it is important to point out that not all modernist fiction portray women as bored. In Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* the character John Dowell explains the living
situation of his friends Edward and Leonora Ashburnham. Edward gambles away most of the couple’s fortune and it is up to Leonora to fix his mistakes. She travels to England and takes lessons in business with her attorney (Ford 50). “She puts the rents [from their tenants] back at their old figures; discharged the drunkards from their homes, and sent all the societies notice that they were to expect no more subscriptions” (Ford 52). Leonora does not portray boredom in this quote. It displays how hard she works to fix Edward’s mistakes and to contribute to their estate. Feminists in the twentieth century observed and worked to counter the limiting of women’s potential as contributors to the public sphere (Pease viii). The war gave the society a push into recognising women and their active role in the workplace (Pyecroft 699).

**Social and Literary Feminism**

Next, I will discuss literary feminism concerning representation of women and men in literary works. I will look more closely at Toril Moi’s social literary feminist theories since she discusses subjects that are relevant for an analysis of West’s work, but also because she is a modern feminist critic that presents theories applicable to present day discussions of femininity and masculinity. First, I will present a short overview of literary feminism before I move on to Moi’s feminist criticism, the distinction between sex and gender, and finally the rejection of social roles in fiction.

Feminism concerning literature often turns to the physical attractiveness of women in fiction (Robbins 53). The novel is powerful in the sense that it can enforce stereotypes such as women being “always presented as angels” but men “can be whatever they want to be” (31). Robbins states that “[l]iterary representation is a straitjacket for femininity, limiting women to very narrow social roles and insisting on a uniformity of good qualities” (31). The representation of women and men in literature has not always been representative of all women. Robbins writes that “representation might not be the same thing as reality, but it is a
part of reality” (51). By this Robbins implies that the images of women and men become a part of our lives, and she desires that everyone should read “against the grain”, meaning that we should be more critical while reading literature, and only then can we change the perception of reality (51).

Moi writes in *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* that feminist critique in the twentieth century is understood as the product of the struggle related to social and political change (23). Furthermore, in *Sex, Gender, and the Body: The Student Edition of What is a Woman?* she stresses the importance of reading texts with the same perspective on men and women in a historical context (4-5). The critics used literary feminism as a medium to extend the political aspect into the cultural domain (Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* 23). Moi emphasizes the reader’s right to know the author’s background and experiences to support the feminist claim that no criticism is free from cultural, social, political, or personal factors (42). Social class, race, nationality, and age might affect women’s way of being women (Moi, *Sex, Gender, and the Body* 57). This makes literature a powerful tool of social control and oppression. Robbins argues that “[t]he heroine is trapped in the social roles that society has mapped out for her” (29). Nevertheless, literature also enables a transformation of reality. A mode of writing can invoke, for example, sensibility, sentiment, intellect, or analytical abilities (29-31). Reading is a means of communication between the life of the author and the life of the reader. Nevertheless, the text and the author are both criticised by the reader since everything an author writes has its groundings in cultural, social, political, and personal factors. The same applies for the reader; no criticism is “value-free” (Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* 42). The authors choose, perhaps unconsciously, to emphasize certain factors in their works. The factors they choose to emphasize are effects of their experiences in the “real world” which they then can use in the “fictional world” (Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* 44).
In *Sex, Gender, and the Body: The Student Edition of What is a Woman?* Toril Moi discusses what it means to be a woman. For example, the distinction between *sex* and *gender* as well as the understanding of what makes you a man or a woman are important parts of feminist theory. Feminism emphasizes that *gender* is a social construction and *sex* being simply biology (3-6). Gender can change but sex cannot (51). Gender is the effect of social constructions or social norms, and if people continue to act or behave according to these constructions, they are maintained and reinforced. The effects of social constructions are visible in literature (55). Social feminism links the effects of social constructions and class structures to issues of gender. This creates a toolbox of analytical methods to perform a literary feminist analysis of problems of social oppression, and can help relieve the effects created by oppressive structures. If feminist studies do not consider the troubles with class difference and gender in investigations, a major part of the picture is missing from the analysis (Robbins 37-38).

Social structures concerning gender create a major problem: the confusion between gender (effeminacy/unfemininity) and sexual orientation (homosexuality) which is maintained and reinforced by people who behave according to social constructions (Moi, *Sex, Gender, and the Body* 100). To be effeminate or unfeminine does not necessarily indicate that the person is homosexual. Moi discusses the question: why is it not always accepted for a man to have feminine qualities? Her theory is that in the past, and even nowadays, people doubt that a man that acts feminine can perform the tasks given to him by the society (102). Moi states that in the modern world, everything a person does (their habits, gestures, and activities) is sexualized and categorized as masculine or feminine. As if men and women were two different species, where the most powerful becomes dominating and the other subordinate (12-13). If we do not consider a person masculine, do we have to consider him or her as feminine? If we do not consider someone dominate, is he or she subordinate? Moi mentions
that some of her female friends display stereotypical male qualities, but she does not consider them as being masculine, nor does she consider them to be feminine (102). She continues to state that, for her, there are not only two separable styles of gendered behaviour, masculine or feminine (109). A quality that is not masculine does not have to be feminine, Moi states that “[t]he world is full of more interesting adjectives” (111) to use instead of categorizing people as masculine or feminine.

The “monster woman” is, according to Moi, a woman who rejects her compliant role in the society. A “monster-woman” acts on her own initiative and is, in some circumstances, selfish (Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics 57). Such a woman can be found in Pride and Prejudice. Elizabeth Bennet rejects the traditional plan of her marrying a man for safety instead of for love. Her rejection to Mr Collins’ marriage proposal almost drives her mother mad, since it jeopardizes her future of a married and happy life. However, Elizabeth tells Mr Collins that they could not make each other happy (Austen 73-76). A character that is portrayed as a “monster-woman” has something to say. She might choose not to, but she has formed her opinions without paying attention to what the society or the other characters think of her (Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics 57). Moi argues that more studies have started to appear since the 1970s, which concern women writers. These studies state that female literary tradition often deals with the relationship between female writers and the society (52). In some cases, the “monster-woman” is an effect of the relationship between society and the writer. According to this theory, it is “society, not biology, that shapes women’s different literary perceptions of the world” (52).

Masculinity Studies

In this section, I will discuss masculinity theory, focusing on Alex Hobbs’ article, “Masculinity Studies and Literature”, and Jeff Hearn’s definition of masculinity and masculinity theory in the anthology Gender – The Key Concepts.
The term *masculinity* origins in the Latin word *masculinus* and is defined as a person having qualities of the male sex, such as “virility” and “powerfulness” (Hearn 149). Masculinity theory is not as well-known as femininity theory or feminist theory. However, it has been around since the 1970s (Hearn 150). According to Hearn, analyses based on masculine theory have focused on: the critique of sex role theory, men’s unequal relations both to women and between men, and social and historical transformations (151). The main purpose of masculinity or men’s studies is to end the belief that there is only a single masculinity and set of masculine attributes that has formed acceptance for male behaviour (Hobbs 384). Hobbs stresses the importance of male participation in the gender debate, simply for the reason that assumptions about masculinity create stereotypes and are damaging (384). The body, sport, sex, family, military service, representation of masculinity in culture and art, violence against women, and masculinity in social institutions are some of the areas that are considered to be of most interest in masculinity and men’s studies (385). *Hegemonic masculinity* is defined as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant positioning of men and the subordination of women” (Hearn 152). The term appeared in the 1980s and is used to identify common male attributes (Hobbs 385). The dominating ways of men within *hegemonic masculinity* are “toughness”, “aggressiveness”, “violence”, “respectability”, “corporation”, “controlling of resources”, and “controlling of images” (Hearn 152). Hobbs writes in her article that in literary fiction, the male protagonists are often flawed and more complicated “heroes” than those displayed in films where fictional male characters represent “macho masculinity”, for example, the protagonists in films like *Rambo* and *The Terminator* (387). Typical male protagonists in novels are on the run from some type of social or institutional communities and then encounters a woman, an encounter that often leads to a relationship and responsibility: “Female characters are absent or
portrayed as malevolent forces, trapping male characters into sedate domestic lives” (Hobbs 391-92). According to Hearn, some of the typical masculine attributes are “aggressiveness”, “ambition”, “analyticity”, “assertiveness”, and “athleticism”, while some typical feminine attributes are “affection”, “childlikeness”, “cheerfulness”, “compassion”, and “flatterable” (150). These masculine or feminine stereotypes often have a way of restricting the characters’ experience or expression (Hobbs 390).

To summarize this theoretical section, in the nineteenth century the descriptions of characters contained more stereotypical female and male attributes in the description of characters. Literary feminism investigates the construction of characterization and social relations in fictional texts, physical attributes and gender constructions, for example. Masculine and feminine attributes in people are reinforced by social constructions. No literary critique is free of values; all opinions are based on cultural, social, political, or personal factors. Moi emphasizes the difference of sex and gender in her texts. Gender can change but sex cannot. Moi rejects the idea of categorising people as masculine or feminine. If someone is not considered masculine, it does not mean that they have to be considered feminine. There is a notion of the “monster-woman” in fiction, this character rejects her role in society and acts on her own initiative. Masculinity theory focuses on men’s unequal relations to both women and to men, and social and historical transformations of masculinity. The purpose of masculinity studies is to end the idea of there only being a single existing masculinity instead of several masculinities. I will now continue with my analysis of *The Return of the Soldier* based on the arguments discussed in the theoretical framework.
Analysis of *The Return of the Soldier*

In my analysis, I will focus on the construction of femininity and masculinity in *The Return of the Soldier*. I will specifically explore the ways the female characters, Kitty, Jenny, and Margaret, are lacking stereotypical female attributes and have more male attributes instead and how Chris seem to have more female attributes. In this section, I will study the physical descriptions of characters’ actions and personalities. I will focus on Moi’s feminist theories, Hobbs’ masculinity theories and Hearn’s gender stereotypes.

**Historical Context and Gender Roles**

As mentioned in the theory section, Moi states that it is important to be aware of the historical context whilst reading any novel (*Sex, Gender, and the Body* 4-5). Therefore, I will begin by briefly discussing how the war affected social relations in combination with the novel. As Fernald argues, women in the early 1900s lived through the most significant change in their social lives in history (234). During the First World War women had to take over the working roles of men. Women, who were viewed as helpless and the weaker sex, now had to take over their fathers’, brothers’, and husbands’ places at the workplace (Pyecroft 702-04). Even if Kitty and Jenny are not working, they have taken over the responsibilities at Baldry Court where they all live. They look after the people who live on their land and provide them with clothing and other requirements (West 26). Kitty and Jenny have larger roles than many other fictional female characters since they have more control in their everyday life. Robbins writes, “[l]iterary representation is […] limiting women to very narrow social roles” (31). The novel is a powerful tool since it can both strengthen and weaken gender stereotypes. Gender has always, and will always, play an important role in defining social roles (Fernald 299).

The war did in this sense force a change in the perception of women not being suitable for the same working roles as men. The women in *The Return of the Soldier* are not, as Pease
argues all women in modernist fiction are, put in situations that portray ideas of boredom (vii). Perhaps this is only because Chris had been absent for a long time and the women had to take over his chores.

Kitty enjoys her new responsibilities, which she has acquired due to the war and the absence of male supportive caretakers who would usually be in charge of the estate. She orders the other characters around with ease and finds herself to be very clever and suitable for the role of supportive caretaker: “‘I’ve ordered dinner at seven,’ […] She said it very smartly […] as if she was pleading that he would find her very clever about ordering dinner and thinking of his comfort” (West 22). Kitty’s comfortability in this role opposes the idea that masculine qualities in a woman would make her incapable of performing the tasks society has given her. She displays her potential as a contributor to both the public and the domestic spheres. This idea also affects male characters, if a man has feminine qualities, he is not accepted to perform the male role (Moi, Sex, Gender, and the Body 102).

Kitty demonstrates that there are not only two categories for gendered behaviour. She often snaps and shouts at Jenny and sometimes even at Chris or Margaret. The very first sentence in the novel is an example of where Kitty snaps at Jenny: “‘Ah, don’t begin to fuss!’, wailed Kitty” (West 3). Kitty displays aggressiveness throughout the novel, she demands to be treated with respect by the other characters. It is also very important for Kitty to look presentable, to be better than Jenny and Margaret. She needs them to know that she is Chris’ wife, that she makes all the decisions, and that they are subordinate to her. When Chris and Margaret are reunited and Margaret explains to him that everything is as it should be and that he is married, Kitty is enraged that he would not believe her when she told him, and instead decided to trust Margaret: “‘You mean, I suppose, that you know I’m your wife. I’m pleased that you describe that as knowing ‘it’s all right’, and grateful that you have accepted it at last – on Margaret’s authority. This is an occasion that would make any wife proud’” (West 54).
Kitty seems to manipulate Chris, by using irony, into doing what she pleases. Manipulation can also be seen in “A Study in Scarlet” where Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson are present during an interrogation of a character called Mrs Carpenter and her daughter. In this segment, Sherlock Holmes is using a technique to manipulate Mrs Carpenter to do what he desires, ergo, to tell him the truth: “Fixing her with my eye in a way which I always found effective with women, I asked her at what hour her son returned” (Doyle 45). Sherlock notes that this is a technique he often uses on women. We can, in this example, see the difference of how women and men are portrayed in subordinate or dominate positions and how the dominant characters can manipulate the other characters.

Similar to typical male protagonists in fiction (Hobbs 391), Chris flees the “social civilization”, in this case being his family and their home at Baldry Court; he seeks loneliness as a way of understanding his new life. The women, Kitty and Jenny, trap him in a domestic life when he really longs for Margaret and a sense of youthfulness and freedom.

[… ] Chris was taking the skiff, standing in the stern and using his oar like a gondolier. He had come down here soon after breakfast, driven from the house by the strangeness of all but the outer walls, and disconnected with the grounds because everything but this wet, intractable spot bore the marks of Kitty’s genius. After lunch […] he went back to the russet-eaved boat-house and this play with the skiff. (West 38)

In the quotation above, we can clearly see that Chris is trying to distance himself from Baldry Court. Nevertheless, we can also note that Chris is pushed out of the typically male dominant position, which has been taken over by Kitty. It seems, as Moi states, that if people are categorized as feminine or masculine, they are spontaneously put in social positions, dominate or subordinate (Sex, Gender, and the Body 12-13). If Kitty now is in the dominate
position, being the head of the house and making changes to Baldry Court during Chris’ absence, does it mean that Chris should be considered subordinate? In this case Chris accepts his new position, following Kitty’s lead, and instead of trying to regain his position he distances himself from the rest. He is put in the subordinate position of the relationship.

MacKay writes that Chris is trapped in the “conventional masculine role” (130) by being referred to as the soldier. MacKay refers to Jenny and Kitty’s struggle to come to terms with the Chris that has returned from the war and they put him in the role as “the soldier” (130). Moi’s theory of why it is not always accepted for a man to have feminine qualities is that people doubt that the he can perform the tasks he was dealt by society (Sex, Gender, and the Body 102). It is as if the females in The Return of the Soldier are pushing Chris to become more masculine. They represent society’s need or wish to have a “macho masculine” character, as Hobbs puts it (387). This type of character saves the day, brings everyone together, and protects the females. The “macho masculine” character is the hegemonic masculine ideal (Hobbs 387). Chris, on the other hand, is not capable of being this Kitty and Jenny’s ideal man. As mentioned before, some of the typical masculine attributes are “aggressiveness”, “ambition”, “analyticity”, “assertiveness”, and “athleticism”, and common female attributes are “affection”, “childlikeness”, “cheerfulness, “compassion”, and “flatterable” (Hearn 150). By Jenny’s description of Chris, he seems to fulfil many of the female attributes often found in literature. He is described as caring, happy, and loving. The stereotypical roles of females being caring and loving, and males being protective and intelligent are reversed between Jenny and Kitty, and Chris. When the initial shock has settled for Chris after his return, they are all sitting in the dining room and Chris says:

“Kitty.”

“Yes, Chris.” She was sweet and obedient and alert.

“I know my conduct must seem to you perversely insulting,” – behind him
the search-light wheeled while he grippled the sides of the window, - “but if I do not see Margaret Allington I shall die.”

She raised her hands to her jewels, and pressed the cool globes of her pearls into her flesh. “She lives near here,” she said easily. “I will send the car down for her to-morrow. You shall see as much of her as you like.” (West 27)

The next day Jenny finds Chris alone in the skiff in the lake. She tells him she is going to fetch Margaret for him and warns him about the meeting of his former love, “[s]he’s old, Chris. She isn’t beautiful any longer. She’s drearily married. […] You can’t love her when you see her” (39). Both Kitty and Jenny take over the masculine role of support and guidance of Chris, and they grant his wish to see Margaret in an attempt to make him happy. The definition of being masculine is to have the qualities of the male sex, qualities such as “virility” and “powerfulness” (Hearn 149). Kitty has in this section of the book taken on the role of being dominant. Chris is being submissive asking her for permission to see Margaret.

As mentioned in the theory section on masculinity studies, hegemonic masculinity consists of different ways men are dominant over women (Hearn 152). Moi writes that, in the modern world, men and women are characterized only as masculine or feminine and with this distinction they are put in different power positions where one becomes dominant and one subordinate (Sex, Gender, and the Body 12-13). Later on, she continues to state that, for her, there are not only two styles of gendered behaviour (109). In the novel, no character has only feminine or masculine attributes. The reversal of Kitty and Chris’ roles in the block quote above demonstrates how different the position of female and male characters can be in literature.

Chris demonstrates some aggressiveness, a typical male attribute, in Margaret’s analeptic story of her and Chris’ parting 15 years ago. Margaret tells Jenny about how Chris
saw her talking and laughing with Bert Batchard, the neighbour’s nephew, and how he bursts out: “Here am I coming to say good-by, because I must away to-night, and I find you larking with that bounder” (West 46). Chris continues to argue and Margaret describes him as cruel for not trusting her because she belonged to a lower class than him. This is the only passage in the novel where Chris shows any kind of anger or aggressiveness. Chris is displaying, in this section, the dominating ways of hegemonic masculinity (toughness, aggressiveness, violence, respectability, corporation, and controlling of resources and images) (Hearn 152). He seeks to control Margaret, and only then can he trust her; he thinks Margaret lacks respect for him since she is talking and laughing with another man, and he demonstrates aggressiveness when he argues with her for being, what he thinks, unfaithful.

As mentioned previously, Margaret’s memory is the only section where Chris is aggressive. After the shell shock and the return from the war, he is a changed man. The shell shock can be viewed as a metaphor of a changed gender situation. After his return, Chris has more attributes that are feminine. He is vulnerable and seems to have lost his aggressive side, which he displays in Margaret’s memory of him. MacKay argues that West incorporated the belief that “women are seldom given the opportunity to exercise historical influence […]” (129) into her novels. By changing Chris’ gender West gives a person with feminine qualities a chance to influence the world around him. Moi also argues that gender is changeable (Sex, Gender, and the Body 51). Chris is still a man even though he is not viewed as manly. According to Moi, everything a person does is sexualized and categorized (Sex, Gender, and the Body 12). In The Return of the Soldier, West gives the characters a chance to change. A shock might be a necessity to change the patriarchal society. With the shell shock, Chris shows new sides of himself and Kitty and Jenny learn that they might not know Chris as well as they thought.
Physical Appearance

Only Kitty, Margaret, and Chris are described in their physical appearance and attractiveness. Kitty is described as being very beautiful and having long golden hair and “[s]he looked so like a girl on a magazine cover […]” (West 4). Her physical attractiveness is a significant part of her personality, it is important for her to look respectable. There is a clear difference between Kitty’s physical attractiveness and Margaret’s attractiveness. Kitty symbolises the traditional woman in romantic literature in the sense of her physical appearance, the beautiful young woman with access to many opportunities. Margaret, on the other hand, represents the opposite of Kitty. Margaret’s physical appearance is not a part of her personality. West has portrayed her personality to be more important than her attractiveness. The first meeting between Kitty, Jenny, and Margaret captures Jenny’s first impression of Margaret:

Her body was long and round and shapely, with a noble squareness of the shoulders; her fair hair […]; her grey eyes, […], were full of tenderness; and though she was slender, there was something about her of the wholesome, endearing heaviness of the ox or the trusted big dog. (West 10)

Margaret is the opposite of Kitty. She immediately attracts people in her surroundings simply by being herself, kind, graceful, and thoughtful. Her physical appearance is different from the typical romanticised female character. Jenny describes her as shabby (West 57) and that she represents “dreary poverty” (61), she even makes the comparison between Margaret and a hen (61). All the same, West and Austen both have main characters that are plain but that still attract the coveted man in their novels. Reading is, as Moi states in Sexual/Textual Politics (42), a means of communications between the life of the author and the life of the reader. Authors choose to emphasize certain events or factors in their works (Moi,
Sexual/Textual Politics 44). West emphasizes certain parts in her characters. Margaret represents the lower class in The Return of the Soldier, and this can be seen as a silent protest from West where she demonstrates that the class system does not define characters.

Chris’ physical appearance is described frequently in the novel, and in a way that is quite different from that of Sherlock Holmes in “A Study in Scarlet”, exemplified in the theoretical framework. When Dr Watson describes Sherlock Holmes, he is connecting his physical appearance to his personality and intellect. West has, on the contrary, written the portrayal of Chris in a way that brings the attention to only his physical attributes, “the short golden down on his cheeks, the ridge of bronze flesh above his thick, fair eyebrows” (57). These are all flatterable and, according to Hearn, typical female attributes in literature (150). All the characters in The Return of the Soldier have a combination of Hearn’s typical female or male attributes. For example, Kitty is aggressive, assertive, childlike, and flatterable. Chris, on the other hand, is aggressive (at one point), affectionate, childlike, compassionate, and flatterable. He has, however, more typically feminine attributes than male attributes. Therefore, the characters are not as restricted as they would have been if they only had feminine or masculine characteristics and attributes. Robbins argues that literature enables a change of reality (31). Perhaps West’s intentions were to push for a social change through her novel. The change of stereotypical attributes between women and men in The Return of the Soldier is a critique against the standardized gender constructions. As Moi puts it, no criticism is “value-free” (Sexual/Textual Politics 42), therefore West is criticising the society based on her own experiences.

The readers are given a picture of Chris’ personality quite early in the novel. The first chapter starts with Jenny and Kitty discussing the absence of new letters from Chris, and Jenny remembers the way it was before he had gone off to the war. She remembers his kindness towards his son, his happiness, and that she and Kitty were so accustomed to his
amiability that it became almost like one of his physical characteristics (West 4-7). When Chris leaves for the war Jenny notices the different colours in his hair. “He kissed us both. As he bent over me I noticed once again how his hair was of two colors, brown and gold” (7). This type of remark on the colour of Chris’ hair is typical in male characters’ descriptions of beautiful women. Such an example is the character Ralph Touchett’s description of Isabel Archer in Henry James’ novel The Portrait of a Lady: “Her hair, which was dark even to blackness, had been an object of envy to many women […]” (100). Jenny mentions Chris’ physical attributes later on in the novel, when Chris is welcomed home. She describes his voice, his fair skin, his smile, and once more the colours of his hair: “I had seen that his hair was of three colors now, brown and gold, and silver” (West 21). Moi states that “gender [is distinguished] as a social or cultural category” (Sex, Gender, and the Body 3). The notions of Jenny’s gender, in her way of describing Chris, are perhaps the effect of the changes in social roles that took place in the early 1900s (Fernald 234). Jenny is in this sense, according to the traditional stereotypes, viewed as “unfeminine”. Nevertheless, this is in no way a confirmation of Jenny being homosexual. Moi argues that social constructions between men and women reinforce the confusion between gender and sexual orientation (Sex, Gender, and the Body 100).

Jenny describes all the other characters’ physical appearance. Her own appearance, though, is never discussed in detail, simply because she is the narrator. Nevertheless, we can still discover small remarks on her physical appearance in her comparison of her plain clothes with Kitty’s more extravagant dresses. Jenny seems to look at herself as plain and large compared to Kitty’s petite body; Jenny even describes her as having “large hands” when she grabs Kitty’s “small shoulders” (West 28). This is a signifier of being unfeminine, since females are often portrayed in their physical attractiveness as “petite”. Kitty is in this sense representing the stereotypical portrayal of a female body, petite, beautiful, and fragile, whilst
Jenny has a more masculine stature. As we can see, Jenny has several typically masculine attributes. She sees and describes beauty in a way that is typical for male characters and she view herself as being large and having a masculine stature.

Restricting Stereotypes

As Hobbs argues, stereotypes have a way of restricting the character’s experience or expression (390). West is in her novel giving the characters a combination of gender stereotypes. The stereotypes are still restrictive, but the combination allows the characters to express new and more complex sides of themselves. The stereotypes are still stereotypes, but by having a combination of stereotypes, the characters are not as restricted. Throughout the novel, we can see how stereotypes restrict or liberate different characters. An example of this is Kitty’s adoption of the typical masculine attribute of being tough, while typical feminine attributes are to be emotional and affectionate. Comparing these attributes, there is a clear difference in how men and women are supposed to act (Hearn 150).

As mentioned previously, Kitty has taken over Chris’ masculine role on the estate and is very comfortable in it. West gives Kitty the opportunity to be something else than a woman stuck in a subordinate position. Nevertheless, the stereotypical masculine attributes restrict her in certain ways, as Hobbs writes that all stereotypes do to characters (390). She never becomes emotional over the death of her and Chris’ son, Oliver. I believe that when Kitty took on the masculine role, she also adopted the stereotypical male attributes. Masculine attributes, such as toughness, prevent her from being emotional over her dead son. During the doctor’s visit to the estate, Jenny brings Margaret upstairs to do her hair, she turns around to put away Margaret’s hat when she hears a “sharp cry” (West 68): “She was standing up, and in her hand she held the photograph of Oliver that I keep on my dressing-table. It is his last photograph, the one taken just a week before he died” (West 69). Margaret tells Jenny about
how her own son, Dick, also had died approximately at the same time as Oliver. Margaret presses the picture to her bosom and Jenny thinks about the fortune of being childless (69). Both Margaret and Jenny demonstrate sadness over the death of the children. Later on in the novel, Margaret proposes an idea to bring back Chris’ memory:

“Remind him of the boy,” said Margaret.

The doctor ceased suddenly to balance on the balls of his feet.

“What boy?”

“They had a boy.”

He looked at Kitty.

“You told me nothing of this!”

“I didn’t think it mattered,” she answered, and shivered and looked cold, as she always did at the memory of her unique contact with death. “He died five years ago.” (West 73)

Kitty represses her feelings and the memory of Oliver. It seems, as if she is scared that if she even thinks of Oliver, she will not be able to hold back her feelings. At one point, her façade cracks. Jenny and Margaret are in the nursery to find a toy, which might help Chris to remember. Suddenly Kitty appears in the door. “The poise of her head had lost its pride, the shadows under her eyes were black like the marks of blows, and all her loveliness was diverted to the expression of grief” (West 79). If the masculine attributes restrict Kitty in this sense, the feminine attributes releases Chris to act out his emotions. He breaks down crying when Margaret reminds him of his son’s death. Jenny is watching the two from the house: “Under the cedar-boughs I dimly saw a figure mothering something in her arms” (West 81). After his breakdown, Chris changes. He straightens himself up and walks back up to the house “with the soldiers hard tread upon the heel” (81). Chris is once again the soldier that Kitty and Jenny so dearly miss.
The characters in the novel do not define themselves as masculine or feminine. It is up to the readers to make their own assumptions. They do however have typically masculine, feminine, and social expectations. For example, Margaret is supposed to, according to her status, act in a respectful manner towards the others. Moi states that gender is the effect of social norms and social constructions (*Sex, Gender, and the Body* 55). Margaret is, in a sense, submissive to the others because of her lower class. Moi argues that social class affects women’s way of being women (*Sex, Gender, and the Body* 57). Jenny and Kitty often judge Margaret’s appearance because of this. This is visible in forms of descriptions of Margaret’s clothing and hair from Jenny, or in judgemental looks from Kitty. For example, when the doctor has come to the estate to examine Chris, the three women are alone by the stairs. Kitty asks Margaret if she would not be more comfortable if she took of her coat. Margaret declines and says she will have to go soon, but Kitty insists. Jenny thinks to herself that “[i]t was, of course, that [Kitty] did not want Margaret to meet the specialist in those awful clothes […]” (West 67). In the example above, Margaret notices Kitty’s insult but Jenny reassures Margaret that Kitty means no harm, but only hospitality, and she uses her expression to manipulate the lower class Margaret into doing what Kitty and she wish. The expression of hospitality is successful and Margaret follows Jenny upstairs. There are several events like this one in the novel, and they all convey the oppression of social control between the classes. The women act differently according to what class they belong to. Margaret is from a lower class, she does not care so much about her appearance or what people think of her - Jenny is from a higher class but is unmarried and therefore has less influence than Kitty, who has the highest position of the three women. Kitty was born in a high social class and she has married a wealthy man.
The Monster Woman

There is no character in The Return of the Soldier that fully fits into the role of Moi’s “monster-woman”, which is a woman who rejects her role in society (Sexual/Textual Politics 57). In Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth Bennet portrays a “monster-woman”. She rejects Mr Collins’ marriage proposal, and with that, her social role (Austen 73-76). The character in The Return of the Soldier that comes closest to being a “monster-woman” is Margaret. She forms her own opinions and rejects the social role the class system is trying to put her in. In contrast to Kitty, Margaret does not seem to be thinking of how to act around people of higher classes. Moi states that a “monster-woman” acts on her own initiative (Sexual/Textual Politics 57). This characteristic fits Margaret. She says things that other characters would keep to themselves. When Jenny fetches Margaret to meet Chris after his return to the estate, Margaret surprises Jenny by pitying Chris for his hard work on the house instead of complimenting the beauty (West 49). Jenny thinks to herself:

The pity of this woman was like a flaming sword. No one had ever before pitied Chris for the magnificence of Baldry Court. It has been our pretense that by wearing costly clothes and organizing a costly life we had been servants of his desire. But she revealed the truth that, although he did indeed desire a magnificent house, it was a house not built with hands. (West 50)

In this quote, we can see how surprised Jenny is by Margaret pitying Chris for the hard work he must have put in into the house. By belonging to the higher class, Jenny is accustomed to people complimenting Baldry Court. She and Kitty had played their parts by wearing expensive clothes and organizing their lives at the estate to look respectable and rich. Margaret, on the other hand, values hard work and labour instead of aesthetics. She sees the
hard work behind keeping the estate up and running and in a condition that would fit their role in society.

As Moi discusses in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, the relationship between society and the writer is an important part of studies on woman writers (52). Since Rebecca West worked with organisations dealing with social change (Scott, “Transnational Women’s Writing” 17) I believe that she was influenced by society and social change when she created her characters. Margaret’s characteristics of that of a “monster-woman”, being outspoken and not bothered with acting according to her social class is Margaret’s way of rejecting her social role.

**The Soldier Returns**

The last few sentences of the novel describe Kitty and Jenny’s reaction to Chris’ recovery from the shell shock.

“Jenny! Jenny! How does he look?”

“Oh, “– how could I say it? – “every inch a soldier.”

She crept behind me to the window, peered over my shoulder and saw.

I heard her suck in her breath with satisfaction.

“He’s cured!” she whispered slowly. “He’s cured!” (West 82)

The ending might at first glance seem like a happy ending, but when you reflect on it, it seems more and more like a sad ending. Kitty and Jenny never truly understand Chris after his return from the war. The “new” Chris is never accepted by them. Kitty and Jenny do not believe that he can continue to be this way and all they want is for the “old” Chris to come back and make everything all right. Chris’ gender construction is influenced and for a large part formed by the social structures around him. Gender is the effect of social constructions and social norms (Moi, *Sex, Gender, and the Body* 55). The traditional gender settlement is once again re-
established as if nothing has changed at all. Chris now has to act as someone else to bring peace to his family. Nevertheless, it seems as if Chris is cured as Kitty thinks he is. He is cured from the shell shock, but he is also “cured” from a version of himself that was not desired by others.

**Conclusion**

To conclude my investigation of gender structures in *The Return of the Soldier* I will summarize, and draw conclusions from the analysis. I will start by looking into descriptions of male and female characters, then move on to social class and how stereotypes restrict characters. Finally, I will present how the novel connects to the issue of social change and gender constructions in society.

Jenny describes the other characters, especially Chris, in a way that is most typical for male characters’ descriptions of women. She relies on physical attributes more than the characters actions in her descriptions of them. Female characters are often portrayed as beautiful, having striking hair, fair skin, and male characters are mostly portrayed as being intelligent, handsome, and strong. What makes Jenny stand out is that she mentions Chris’ attractiveness more than Kitty or Margaret’s physical appearance. If there was, as Moi states there is not (*Sex, Gender, and the Body* 12-13), only two categories for gendered behaviour, Jenny and Chris, would have in this sense, changed gender with each other. Chris is the centre of attention for Jenny’s eye. Jenny describes the female characters differently. Whilst her notions of Chris are fairly romanticized, her descriptions of Kitty and Margaret are more concrete. Kitty demonstrates female physical perfection. She has a petite body, compared to Jenny’s larger stature, and her hair is long and golden. Jenny even compares her to a girl on a magazine cover (*West* 4). Margaret, on the other hand, is occasionally compared to animals, such as a dog (*West* 10) or a hen (61). Her hair is frizzy, her clothes are old and dirty, and
Jenny finds her as looking old, even though they are approximately the same age. Margaret’s personality shines through to Jenny after the first impression and her plainness does not affect Chris’ affections for her.

Social class seems to affect the female characters as well as gender structures. For Kitty, who comes from a higher class family, and has married into another one, it is very important to look respectable and to be respected by lower class people. It puts a strain on her to always have to behave in a certain way. For Margaret, a lower class woman, to look a certain way and act according to what others expect of her is not important. She is what Moi calls a “monster-woman” (Sexual/Textual Politics 57), rejecting her role in society. I believe that West is, by having prominent social classes in the novel, demonstrating the different stereotypes different women were subjected to.

Not only physical attributes are divided in female or male categories. The characters also display masculinity and femininity in their personalities and actions. Chris is kind, affectionate, happy, caring, and loving, which are typical attributes for female characters. The female characters are, on the other hand, portrayed as tough, intelligent, guiding, and aggressive. Kitty is the character who inhabits the most typically masculine attributes in her personality, but she is also the most feminine character in her physical appearance.

The idea that stereotypes are restricting characters (Hobbs 390) partly applies to The Return of the Soldier. For Kitty, the stereotypes are restricting. She is under the strain of only having to act according to traditional masculine attributes. For Margaret, the stereotypes are insignificant since she is a “monster-woman”, she rejects all kinds of social and gender stereotypes. For Chris, the stereotypes can even be seen as liberating from the strain he was put under before the war. Due to the shell shock, Chris, without even noticing the difference, acts as himself instead of a gender stereotype. For Jenny, masculine stereotypes do not seem
to be restricting. She behaves and thinks more masculine, but she also has traditional feminine qualities, such as being caring, that allow her to see a more elaborate picture of reality. What seems to restrict Jenny are stereotypes concerning social class. She is neither on the top of the hierarchy, as Kitty, nor the bottom, as Margaret. She is, however, judgemental of their class behaviour: Kitty being proud, and Margaret being unaware of how to behave.

The novel portrays West’s view of gender and class in society. It demonstrates the traditional viewpoint of gendered behaviour, here represented by Kitty and Jenny who needs the old Chris to return and to fill the masculine role society has given him. Chris represents change, he has changed into another version of himself that gives him the freedom to reject gender constructions. Margaret represents the rejection of class and gender stereotypes. These three groups have to work together for a change of the constructions of gender in society. Nevertheless, if the traditional group, Kitty and Jenny, keep being the stronger part, the gendered behaviour stereotypes are maintained and reinforced. As depicted in the very last episode in *The Return of the Soldier*, nothing has really changed. Chris returns as the soldier after being a version of himself that was not accepted. Kitty objects to the version where he has more feminine attributes and makes Jenny follow her lead even though Jenny started to understand and accept Chris.

My argumentation in this essay is that West changed traditional gender roles for her characters and that social class becomes an important factor in gender behaviour. In the analysis we can clearly see how the female characters have typically masculine attributes and how the male character has more female attributes. All characters in *The Return of the Soldier* have a combination of gender attributes. Social class is clearly visible in the interactions between the characters throughout the novel. Nevertheless, some characters, such as Kitty and Jenny accept the social order, and others, such as Margaret, reject their social roles.
Works Cited


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