

The Return of the Soldier



INTRODUCTION

developed by the 20th century's most famous psychological thinker, Sigmund Freud.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF REBECCA WEST

Cicily Fairfield was born to a musically talented Scottish mother, Isabella, and a journalist, Charles, who had served as a stretcher-bearer during part of the American Civil War. Charles deserted the family when Cicily was a newborn. Isabella moved the family, including Cicily's two older sisters, to Edinburgh, Scotland, where Cicily grew up in a bookish and intellectual home. As a young woman already advocating for feminist causes in various periodicals, she adopted the pseudonym Rebecca West, taken from the heroine of Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm*. After West published a provocative review of one of H. G. Wells's novels, Wells, intrigued, invited West over for lunch, which led to a 10-year love affair. Their relationship produced a son, Anthony West, with whom West had a troubled relationship. West wrote widely, including travel narratives (*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*), literary criticism, novels (*The Return of the Soldier* was her fiction debut), and coverage of the Nuremberg Trials for *The New Yorker*. By middle age, West had accrued both fame and fortune for her writing, and during World War II, she sheltered Yugoslav war refugees on her southern England estate. Though she considered herself a member of the political left, West was also staunchly anti-Communist in her writings, a position that didn't endear her to some erstwhile allies. West was made a Dame of the British Empire in 1959. She traveled widely and wrote prolifically well into old age.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War I began in the summer of 1914, sparked by the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and ended in November, 1918. On one side fought Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and on the other fought the Western allies of France, Britain, Russia, and (eventually) the United States. Two of the distinctive developments of World War I included the emergence of mechanized warfare (e.g., the use of machine guns, tanks, and airplanes) and the prevalence of trench warfare, in which soldiers spent months living in opposing muddy trenches, often at a near-stalemate as they fought over small sections of land up and down the warfront. Shell-shock like Chris Baldry's caused high numbers of casualties during World War I due to the effects of relentless bombardments on soldiers in the trenches. The novella also includes an early portrayal of psychoanalytic theory—the attempt to understand the repression of desires due to societal pressures, and the symptoms such repression was understood to cause—as

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Rebecca West's best-known work is *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), a nonfiction work about Yugoslavia's history and culture. Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) is another World War I novel by a female author, this time told from the perspective of an American soldier. *The Return of the Soldier* has also been compared to Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922), which portrays a soldier through the perspectives of the women surrounding him. Pat Barker's novel [Regeneration](#) is similar to *The Return of the Soldier* in its focus on the trauma and shell shock suffered by British soldier's in World War I. Notable nonfiction accounts of World War I include Ernst Jünger's [Storm of Steel](#) (a memoir of a German soldier) and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (a memoir of a British volunteer nurse).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Return of the Soldier*
- **When Written:** 1916-1917
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1918
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** England
- **Climax:** Chris Baldry's amnesia is cured.
- **Antagonist:** Kitty Ellis Baldry
- **Point of View:** First-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Groundbreaking Debut. Besides being West's debut novel, *The Return of the Soldier* is considered to be the first World War I-themed novel written by a woman, and it is one of the earliest fictional portrayals of shell-shock as well.

Stage and Screen. There have been two dramatic adaptations of *The Return of the Soldier*: a 1928 play which ran in London's West End, and a 1982 film starring Alan Bates, Glenda Jackson, Julie Christie, and Ann-Margret.



PLOT SUMMARY

It's March, 1916, during World War I. Kitty Baldry hasn't heard

from her husband, Chris, who's fighting on the Western Front, for two weeks, but she's trying not to fret. Chris's cousin, Jenny, who lives at Baldry Court with Kitty and has been devoted to Chris all her life, is also worried. She tries to take comfort in the beautiful house and grounds they've worked so hard to maintain for Chris, believing that these rich surroundings make him happy and content. Even before the war, Chris's life had been difficult—he inherited his father's failing business and a job he didn't want, and his and Kitty's baby son, Oliver, died five years ago.

A visitor arrives at Baldry Court—Mrs. William Grey from neighboring Wealdstone. Kitty has never heard of her and doesn't know anyone from the suburbs, but she figures the woman is looking for charity. In the hall, Kitty and Jenny find an unfashionably dressed, work-worn woman who's clearly lower-class. Mrs. Grey (Margaret) claims to have received word that Chris has suffered shell-shock on the front. Kitty doesn't believe Margaret, questions her harshly, and finally dismisses her as a fraud, making Jenny uncomfortable. Margaret hands them a telegram from Chris that was sent to her old residence, then leaves in tears. Kitty tells Jenny that whether Chris has truly gone mad or has secretly harbored affection for this objectionable woman, he's lost to them either way.

The next morning, Jenny receives a letter from a cousin, Frank Baldry, who received a telegram from Chris and went to visit him in the Red Cross hospital in France. Frank found Chris in a strange state—acting “boyishly” and claiming to be in love with a girl named Margaret Allington. When Frank asked Chris what Kitty thought of all this, Chris didn't know who Kitty was—he thought it was still 1901. When Chris learned that it was actually 1916, he fainted. Frank warns Jenny to prepare Kitty for the shock of Chris's homecoming.

A week later, Chris returns to Baldry Court. It's immediately clear that he does not recognize Kitty and is jarred by Jenny's age and the remodeled house. Kitty changes into a white dress for dinner, hoping to remind Chris of their wedding day, to no avail. Chris explains to Kitty that he must see Margaret, and she agrees, but Jenny notices the hateful expression on Kitty's face. After Kitty storms off to bed, Chris begins to talk to Jenny about the last memories that feel real to him—his visits to Monkey Island 15 years ago.

While visiting his Uncle Ambrose, Chris used to walk to the Monkey Island Inn. He and the innkeeper's shy, thoughtful daughter, Margaret Allington, would sit and talk for hours. His last memory is of the day he found Margaret alone on the island; they declared their love for one another, and when he saw Margaret glowing indistinctly in the moonlight, Chris felt that neither Margaret nor his feelings for her could ever change.

The next day, Jenny goes to Wealdstone to fetch Margaret. Jenny feels repulsed by Margaret's modest suburban home and the fact that Margaret is covered with flour and sweat from

working in the kitchen. She persuades Margaret to visit Chris, and Margaret, weeping with longing, agrees. As they ride to Baldry Court, Margaret explains how her romance with Chris ended—a misunderstanding over Margaret's friendship with a neighbor boy. Soon after that, Margaret's father had died, and two years later, she married Mr. Grey, an unsuccessful, sickly man who requires a lot of tending. Recently, she revisited Monkey Island for the first time and was given old letters from Chris that had never been forwarded, as well as the telegram from the front.

At Baldry Court, Jenny notices the contrast between Margaret's shabby appearance and the opulence of the estate, and she dreads Margaret's reunion with Chris. But as she and Kitty watch from a window, Chris and Margaret embrace joyfully and immediately begin an animated conversation, as if they'd never parted. Jenny was sure that Chris could never love Margaret as she is today, but she realizes she was wrong.

In the coming days, Margaret continues to visit, and Chris blossoms in her presence, while Kitty grows depressed and Jenny grieves. Various doctors come to Baldry Court in an effort to help Chris regain sanity. One day, after a week, Jenny goes looking for Chris and Margaret to remind them that another doctor is coming by. Though she's been wrapped up in jealousy, she is stunned by their beauty when she comes upon them sitting in the woods. Margaret is watching over a sleeping Chris, and Jenny feels that Margaret's soul offers Chris's soul a healing shelter. In that way, Jenny thinks, Margaret has given a gift to all of them. What's more, if Chris doesn't regain his memory, he cannot be sent back to the front.

Back at the house, Chris goes off with Dr. Gilbert Anderson while Jenny and Margaret go upstairs and talk. When Margaret sees Jenny's photograph of baby Oliver and learns what happened to him, Margaret reveals that she, too, had a two-year-old son, Dick, who died five years ago. In contrast to the peaceful scene in the woods, Margaret's raw grief gives Jenny a sense of foreboding.

Gathering with the others, the women hear Dr. Anderson's explanation of amnesia as an act of Chris's unconscious self—he's refusing to let himself remember the present for some reason. Dr. Anderson says this is because Chris is suppressing some sort of strong desire. Kitty and Jenny can't guess what this desire might be, but Margaret says that Chris has always had a dependent nature and yearned for love, revealing that she knows him better than the others do. She suggests that a jarring memory would bring Chris back to the present—like the memory of his little boy's death.

Margaret and Jenny go to Oliver's nursery to find some of the baby's old belongings. Margaret weeps, saying that there's nothing more important than happiness, and she can't bear for Chris to lose it. But when a tearful Kitty walks past, Margaret and Jenny agree that if they truly love Chris, they must try to cure him. If Chris remains stuck in the past, he will eventually

become a pitiable, eccentric figure, and they must spare him that for his dignity's sake. Margaret goes to Chris with Oliver's things.

Jenny collapses in sadness, then looks outside at Kitty's urging. On the lawn, Margaret has receded into the shadows, and Jenny is shaken by the sight of Chris, staring hopelessly toward the house, now walking with a soldier's step instead of a boy's. Looking over Jenny's shoulder, Kitty says with satisfaction, "He's cured!"



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Christopher (Chris) Baldry – Chris is 36 years old, Kitty's husband, and Jenny's beloved cousin. He and Kitty had one child, Oliver, who died as a baby five years before the start of the story. Chris has a warm, friendly, sympathetic character. As a child, Chris had a vivid imagination, and as an adult, he always seems to be searching for lasting, transforming joy. As a young man, he took over his father's failing mining business in Mexico, but he doesn't enjoy the work. Around the same time, he had a short-lived romance with Margaret Allington, then married Kitty a few years later. He is now a captain in the British Army, serving on the front somewhere in France. After suffering shell shock and amnesia, Chris believes that he and Margaret are still a couple, and he has no memory of Kitty. He and Margaret have a joyful reunion back home at Baldry Court, and it becomes apparent to Jenny that Chris was never satisfied with the luxurious, relatively superficial life with Kitty, having longed for a deeper relationship all the while. Chris's amnesia represents Rebecca West's view on the ultimately futile human tendency to escape into fantasies of seemingly simpler times. Although Chris is happy when he believes that his marriage to Kitty never happened, the other characters all understand that denying reality in this way will only lead him to lose his dignity in the long run. After Dr. Gilbert Anderson visits and diagnoses the longings at the root of Chris's amnesia, Margaret shows Chris some of baby Oliver's old things, and Chris comes out of his amnesia, once again "every inch a soldier."

Kitty Ellis Baldry – Kitty is Christopher Baldry's wife. Kitty and Chris married about 10 years ago, in 1906. Kitty is beautiful, superficial, self-involved, and petulant. She is scornful toward lower-class people. Kitty also has an aversion to suffering and grief and avoids mentioning the death of her baby son, Oliver, five years ago. When Chris returns from the front with amnesia, she initially refuses to believe his condition, then becomes angry and depressed over Chris's love for Margaret. Kitty is the only major character who is happy about Chris's eventual cure, indicating her selfish and shallow nature.

Margaret Allington Grey – Margaret is married to William Grey and lives in a house called Mariposa in the downscale

suburb of Wealdstone. Margaret spent her teenage years living on Monkey Island on the Thames, where her father, Mr. Allington, was an innkeeper. She and Chris Baldry were a couple in 1901 and hoped to marry, then broke things off over a petty quarrel. Chris describes the youthful Margaret as shy, sharp-minded, and loving. After her breakup with Chris and her father's death, Margaret eventually married Mr. Grey, and although she isn't in love with him, she's happiest while taking care of him; she becomes depressed when she doesn't have someone to look after and protect. She and William had one child, Dick, who died at the age of two, and she is heartbroken over her childlessness. After Chris is stricken with amnesia and comes to believe that Margaret is still his girlfriend, Margaret receives a telegram from him and informs Kitty and Jenny of his condition, then rekindles a romance with him upon his return to Baldry Court. Though Kitty scorns Margaret's aged, unfashionable, lower-class appearance, Jenny realizes that Margaret has an attractive soul and that she offers Chris something deeper than either she or Kitty can—she is sensitive, romantic, and instinctively appreciative of all beautiful things. Though Margaret initially wants to let Chris remain happily lodged in the past, she decides this would be doing him a disservice in the long run and shows him his son Oliver's belongings, thereby bringing him back to the present.

Jenny Baldry – Jenny, age 35, is Chris Baldry's cousin and childhood playmate. She is the novella's narrator. Jenny grew up at Baldry Court and loves Chris deeply; it's implied, though never directly stated, that her feelings for Chris are at least somewhat romantic in nature. Unmarried and childless, Jenny continues living at Baldry Court as an adult and takes pride in maintaining a beautiful home for Chris. Jenny is a loyal companion to Chris's wife Kitty, but as the story develops, she sees through Kitty's superficiality more and more. Though Jenny shares Kitty's disdain for lower-class people, she gains admiration for Margaret throughout the story, and she is generally much more sensitive than Kitty, both to beauty and to other people's feelings. In these ways, she stands as a mediating character between Kitty and Margaret and the very different forms of beauty and truth that they represent. At the end, Jenny realizes that Chris's ability to face reality is more important than his happiness and supports Margaret in bringing about Chris's cure.

Dr. Gilbert Anderson – Dr. Anderson is the last of the several doctors who visit Chris in an effort to cure him. Jenny is surprised by his comically plump, "unmedical" appearance; he sports a catlike moustache and amspotted tie. He accurately diagnoses the suppressed longing at the root of Chris's amnesia, leading Margaret to come up with a cure.

Mr. William Grey – William Grey is Margaret's husband. He is a rather incompetent gardener, inclined to sickness, and has never been very successful at work. However, he appears to love Margaret and to thrive under her protective nurturing; she

doesn't love him in return, but she does derive satisfaction and dignity from caring for him. He and Margaret had one child together, Dick, who died at the age of two.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Oliver Baldry – Oliver was Chris and Kitty's baby son. He died five years ago, at the age of two, from a slight cold, having always been delicate. Reminders of Oliver finally jar Chris out of amnesia.

Frank Baldry – Frank is a cousin who writes to Jenny from France, where Chris has been hospitalized, to explain Chris's amnesiac condition. He is a clergyman.

Mr. Allington – Mr. Allington is Margaret's father and the keeper of the Monkey Island Inn. He is a good-natured, gossiping little man who enjoys keeping ducks and rabbits.

Uncle Ambrose – Chris stayed with his Uncle Ambrose in the Thames Valley while on university holiday, meeting Margaret when he ventured to nearby Monkey Island.

Dick Grey – Dick was Margaret and William Grey's son. Like Oliver, he died five years ago, when he was two.

TERMS

Shell-shock – The term shell-shock was coined during World War I to describe various psychological and physical effects resulting from shell bombardment on the battlefield. Such effects could include panic, tremors, nightmares, mental distress, visual and other sensory impairments, and even memory loss, as happens to **Chris Baldry**. Today, the term shell-shock has generally fallen out of use, as the term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the preferred way of describing such symptoms.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



NOSTALGIA, ESCAPISM, AND REALITY

Rebecca West's novella *The Return of the Soldier* is set during one of the bloodiest phases of World War I, the spring of 1916. English soldier Chris Baldry is suffering from amnesia caused by "shell-shock" (psychological disturbance caused by the trauma of warfare) and he remembers nothing more recent than 15 years ago, in 1901. When he returns to his country estate to recover, he

cannot even remember his wife, Kitty, and so he rekindles a romance with his girlfriend of 15 years ago, Margaret. Yet because Chris's and Margaret's romance is stuck in an idealized past, it renders Chris helpless to face the present. By portraying Chris's longing to return to a seemingly "simpler" time as an eventual failure, West suggests that while nostalgia might provide a shelter from present horrors, it's only a temporary solution because it fails to deal honestly with reality.

Traumatized by the war, Chris suffers a sense of dislocation from the present and he remains stuck in the past. Although Chris doesn't remember Kitty or his life with her, he vividly recalls his romance with Margaret Allington 15 years ago. As he describes their visits to Jenny (his cousin and the story's narrator), he reflects, "[P]resently Margaret in a white dress would come out of the porch [...] Invariably, as she passed the walnut tree that overhung the path, she would pick a leaf and crush it and sniff the sweet scent; and as she came near the steps she would shade her eyes and peer across the water." While the present remains inaccessible—even to the extent that Chris can't recognize his wife—memories of Margaret are palpably real to Chris.

Upon meeting Margaret, Jenny sees a stark difference between the "Margaret of time" (the aged, work-worn Margaret of the present) and the "Margaret of eternity" whose timeless memory Chris cherishes. Jenny believes that the aged "Margaret of time" cannot please Chris: "I perceived clearly that that ecstatic woman [...] was Margaret as she existed in eternity; but this was Margaret as she existed in time, as the fifteen years between [...] had irreparably made her. Well, I had promised to bring her to him." Jenny assumes that because Chris is stuck in the past, he will reject the "Margaret of time" just as he's rejected Jenny and Kitty.

Though Jenny predicts that Chris will not be able to love the aged Margaret, this assumption proves to be incorrect. Because Chris has always romanticized Margaret, the aged Margaret of the present does not disrupt his timeless perception of her, allowing her to become a refuge from present horrors. Chris recalls the dreamlike night when he first declared his love to young Margaret: "That he loved her, in this twilight which obscured all the physical details which he adored, seemed to him a guarantee that theirs was a changeless love which would persist if she were old or maimed or disfigured." In a sense, then, Chris has always looked at Margaret through a biased lens that "obscured" certain things about her. When Margaret was young, Chris didn't always see her clearly, instead seeing her in a romantic light that didn't allow for the possibility of real change. Therefore, now that Margaret *has* aged, he still sees that imagined Margaret—the one who lets Chris hide from realities of the world around him.

In the escape that their relationship offers, Margaret represents a reprieve from the horrors of modern war. Though a recovered Chris would be expected to return to the front,

Jenny takes comfort in the fact that “They could not take [Chris] back to the Army as he was. Only that morning as I went through the library he had raised an appalled face from the pages of a history of the war. ‘Jenny, it can’t be true—that they did that—to Belgium?’ [...] While [Margaret’s] spell endured they could not send him back into the hell of war.” Under Margaret’s timeless spell, in other words, Chris has ceased to be a functioning soldier—he no longer recognizes the world in which he is supposed to fight and he’s thus able to hide from its demands on him.

Though Margaret’s love offers a temporary shelter from the horrors of the war, this is ultimately shown to be a negative coping mechanism because it’s a mere escape from reality—and a degradation of Chris’s humanity. Even though Chris seems to be truly happy with Margaret, Jenny and Margaret conclude that leaving him in a nostalgic delusion would ultimately be cruel, since it effectively denies the truth: “We had been utterly negligent of his future, blasphemously careless of the divine essential of his soul. For if we left him in his magic circle there would come a time when his delusion turned to a senile idiocy; [...] He [...] would become a queer-shaped patch of eccentricity on the countryside [...] He would not be quite a man.” In other words, if Chris is allowed to stay disconnected from reality, he will lose something essential to being human—that is, his ability to interact with the present. His happiness will eventually degrade into something pathetic and pitiable, reducing his dignity and potential. The reality of the present moment, then, is more important than happiness.

Like Chris Baldry returning home, people in West’s England no longer feel at home in the world they inhabit. Chris’s amnesia can be read to symbolize society’s understandable yearning to return to a deceptively simpler, happier, pre-war past. Yet West warns that pining for an earlier age isn’t the answer; memories of an idealized past can’t be trusted, and they don’t help people face the changes all around them. Confronting those changes, in her view, is more important and more in keeping with human dignity than clinging to a deluded comfort.



SOCIAL CLASS, BEAUTY, AND HUMANITY

The Return of the Soldier pointedly contrasts wealthy, beautiful Kitty (the wife of Chris, a World War I soldier) and impoverished, ugly Margaret (Chris’s girlfriend from 15 years ago) through the eyes of Jenny, who is Chris’s cousin and the narrator. At first, Margaret’s appearance and mannerisms are described in almost dehumanizing terms, and her lower-class home environment is distasteful compared to Kitty’s gracious, cultivated Baldry Court. These details lead the reader to expect that Chris, whose amnesia means he can only remember a younger Margaret, will reject Margaret when he sees her ugliness compared to Kitty’s beauty. Yet he finds Margaret to be a healing presence, and by the end of the novella, Jenny

concedes that Margaret possesses a spiritual beauty that the shallow Kitty can never have. Through this reversal of expectations, West argues that the poor are more sensitive to beauty and true humanity than the rich, whose wealth insulates them from deeper beauty (and hence from pain and love).

At first, Margaret’s poverty causes others to associate her with a dehumanized ugliness. When Margaret first appears at Baldry Court, she’s an unwelcome intrusion. Her very appearance offends Kitty and Jenny: “The bones of her cheap stays clicked as she moved [...] there was something about her of the wholesome endearing heaviness of the draught-ox or the big trusted dog. Yet she was bad enough. She was repulsively furred with neglect and poverty[.]” Even Margaret’s better qualities are described in animalistic terms when they compare her to an ox or a dog. From Kitty and Jenny’s perspective, Margaret does not belong in the refined world of Baldry Court—rather, she belongs closer to nature and her presence in their home is therefore “repulsive.”

Although Jenny usually shows more sensitivity and compassion than Kitty does, she expresses “hatred” for Margaret’s poverty: “I pushed [her] purse away from me with my toe and hated her as the rich hate the poor, as insect things that will struggle out of the crannies which are their decent home, and introduce ugliness to the light of day.” Jenny identifies Margaret (and, presumably, other people like her) with “insect things,” implying that she’s lowly and repulsive. In Jenny’s mind, rich people shouldn’t even have to see Margaret’s “ugliness,” much less have it in their homes.

After Kitty shrilly dismisses Margaret as a fraud, Margaret tries to form a retort but she gives up, “simply because she realized that there were no harsh notes on her lyre and [...] had fixed me with a certain wet, clear, patient gaze. It is the gift of animals and those of peasant stock. From the least regarded, from an old horse nosing over a gate [...], it wrings the heart.” Margaret has a kind of gentle sincerity that wealthy people see as weak and inferior, yet it softens Jenny’s attitude into a sort of condescending sympathy.

Margaret’s and Kitty’s environments—of hardworking squalor and leisured wealth, respectively—reflect their characters, with Margaret’s emerging as the one more grounded in reality. When Jenny goes to fetch Margaret to visit Chris, she continues to find Margaret’s environment distasteful: “So in her parlour I sat [...] And as I spoke of his longing I turned my eyes away from her, because she was sitting on a sofa, upholstered in velveteen of a sickish green, which was so low that her knees stuck up in front of her and she had to clasp them with her seamed floury hands; and I could see that the skin of her face was damp.” Jenny can’t reconcile Chris’s longing for Margaret with the ugliness of her lower-class surroundings—the unfashionable furniture, not to mention Margaret’s work-worn hands and sweaty face—that mark Margaret as someone who must do the physical labor of the household.

When Jenny and Margaret first arrive at Baldry Court, Jenny can't help comparing Margaret unfavorably to these wealthy surroundings. Her description of the **landscaping** is a metaphorical commentary on Margaret's and Kitty's appearances: "There is no aesthetic reason for that border; the common outside looks lovelier where it fringes the road [...] Its use is purely philosophic; it proclaims that here we estimate only controlled beauty, that the wild will not have its way within our gates, that it must be made delicate and decorated into felicity." The "controlled," artificial beauty within the gates reflects the leisure of Kitty's life and the superficiality of her personality. At the same time, the wilder, lovelier growth beyond the gates reflects Margaret's beauty, which Jenny now concedes is more grounded in reality, yet she still feels that it does not belong within the borders of Kitty's carefully sculpted realm.

By the end of the story, Jenny has moved from disgust to ambivalence to admiration of Margaret, associating her poverty with spiritual beauty. Jenny attributes to Margaret's poverty a certain nobility, even spirituality: "Perhaps even her dinginess was part of her generosity [...] And so I could believe of Margaret that her determined dwelling in places where there was not enough of anything, her continued exposure of herself to the grime of squalid living, was unconsciously deliberate. [...] [so that] there should be not one intimation of the beauty of suave flesh to distract [Chris] from the message of her soul." In other words, Margaret's beauty is the beauty of the soul. This is something that the externally beautiful Kitty (who Jenny implies has beautiful "suave flesh" in contrast with the "spiritual" Margaret) altogether lacks. It seems that Kitty's wealth will not allow her to develop such beauty—in fact, it even stands in the way, since the luxuries it brings only "distract" from the kind of spiritual beauty that Margaret possesses.

West's romanticized view of Margaret's beauty expresses her belief—reflected in her later writings and political stances—that the poor and working-class are more grounded in reality than the wealthy can be. Yet the fact that Chris ultimately returns to the present-day "reality" of his marriage to Kitty, forcing him and Margaret to separate, suggests that West is pessimistic about society's willingness to recognize the poor in this way. Overall, the novella's exploration of beauty reflects the unease of a society in which longstanding class structures are beginning to shift.



WOMEN'S ROLES

While Rebecca West's novella revolves around a soldier's homecoming, the story is told from a woman's perspective, and the story's central figures are, arguably, *all* women. Though men bear difficult burdens in the public realm—whether going to war or struggling to provide for their households—women, like Jenny,

Kitty, and Margaret, also bear heavy, albeit largely private, burdens of supporting their men's happiness and even protecting them from harm to their souls and dignity. Throughout the story, in other words, men's happiness, dignity, and life trajectories rest in the hands of women. By portraying her female characters' power in this way, West argues that although women's roles are most often reserved for the private sphere, their difficult, behind-the-scenes burdens are indispensable to men's survival in the public sphere.

Women bear the burden of homemaking—a difficult and dignifying task that helps compensate for the unhappiness and failure in men's lives. Jenny and Kitty bear the burden of making Baldry Court as happy as possible for Kitty's husband Chris while he runs the family business and then goes to war. Jenny describes Baldry Court as follows: "Here we had nourished [Chris's] surpassing amiability [...] Here we had made happiness inevitable for him." A little later, she describes this work as "the responsibility that gave us dignity, to compensate him for his lack of free adventure by arranging him a gracious life." Jenny senses that Chris isn't happy with either business or war, so she wants to create a home environment that will make up for his constrained, unchosen life.

Like her upper-class counterparts, Margaret, too, bears the burden of making her husband—the sickly, unsuccessful William Grey—as happy as possible. As Jenny overhears Margaret's motherly tone telling Mr. Grey about the macaroni she's left for his supper and praising the cabbages he's grown, she "perceived from its sound that with characteristic gravity she had accepted it as her mission to keep loveliness and excitement alive in his life." In other words, even though Margaret's social status is very different, she has the same fundamental task as the Baldry Court women—compensating for the unhappiness in a man's life by creating the happiest home environment possible.

Women don't just look out for the day-to-day happiness of the men in their lives; they also bear the burden of protecting men's souls and preserving their dignity. When Jenny sees Margaret watching over Chris while he naps in the woods, she sees a timeless male/female dynamic: "[T]he woman has gathered the soul of the man into her soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quiet for a little time. That is a great thing for a woman to do. I know there are things at least as great for those women whose independent spirits can ride fearlessly and with interest outside the home park of their personal relationships, but independence is not the occupation of most of us." Just as women create a comforting home environment for men wearied by their public duties, Jenny also sees women's souls as protective guardians for the tired souls of men, enabling them to regain strength for their public roles.

When Chris receives psychological treatment, it is up to the women whether and how Chris should ultimately be protected. Though they're tempted to let Chris remain stuck in the past,

both Jenny and Margaret realize that “the first concern of love [is] to safeguard the dignity of the beloved” rather than letting him remain satisfied with “the trivial toy of happiness.” In other words, they choose to protect Chris’s human dignity by recalling him to the present, instead of leaving him in a fantasy which would eventually infantilize him. Thus Chris’s future is in the women’s hands, not his own or the doctor’s, and they recognize that only they can ensure that he lives a dignified life.

Rebecca West was an ardent suffragette in her youth, and she considered herself to be a staunch feminist throughout her life. *The Return of the Soldier* provides a good summary of her interpretation of feminism. As Margaret’s “protection” of Chris’s soul suggests, West sees a real yet complementary difference between men’s and women’s roles which goes deeper than the social conditions surrounding them. She believed that downplaying this difference didn’t serve to elevate women, but instead tended to denigrate the crucial, seldom recognized role that women serve.



THE TRAUMAS OF MODERNITY

After learning that Chris has suffered shell-shock on World War I’s Western Front, Jenny wonders, “Why had modern life brought forth these horrors

that make the old tragedies seem no more than nursery shows?” Rebecca West explores this question in various ways throughout *The Return of the Soldier*, identifying manifold “horrors” that impact the natural world, the individual psyche, and society at large. While the immediate culprit for human suffering is World War I, which frames Chris’s troubled homecoming and inevitable return to battle, West doesn’t reduce Chris’s troubles to the war alone. By situating Chris’s sufferings alongside other traumatic circumstances in the early 20th century, West argues that modernity is fraught with perils that alienate people from the natural world, each other, and even themselves.

Aspects of modernity, like industrialism and war, alter the natural environment in ways that detract from its beauty and constrain people’s happiness. Jenny muses that the encroaching horrors of modern life are due to the fact that “adventurous men have too greatly changed the outward world which is life’s engenderment. There are towns now, and even the trees and flowers are not as they were,” with imported Mediterranean crocuses and Chinese larch trees altering the native English **landscape**. “And the sky also is different,” she goes on; “a searchlight turned all ways in the night like a sword brandished among the stars,” an inescapable reminder of the war’s hold on human lives. In other words, men’s ambition has introduced foreign elements (too many towns, unfamiliar plants, and artificial light) into the environment, all of which create distance between people and their natural environment.

Describing one of those newly built towns, Jenny says that “Wealdstone is not, in its way, a bad place; [...] But all the streets

are [...] freely articulated with railway arches, and factories spoil the skyline with red angular chimneys, and in front of the shops stand little women” making “feeble, doubtful gestures as though they wanted to buy something and knew that if they did they would have to starve some other appetite. [...] It was a town of people who could not do as they liked.” Though she does not draw an explicit connection between the effects of industrialization (railroads and factories) and people’s poverty, Jenny suggests that people’s lives are constrained by the looming presence of industrialism—another sign of “adventurous men” altering the outward world to their liking.

In addition to its impact on the natural world, modernity also takes a psychological toll on individual people, as exemplified by Chris’s amnesia. Though the war itself is clearly responsible for Chris’s suffering (a shell concussion causes his amnesia), West suggests that the war is a symptom of the all-encompassing social pressures of modern existence, which are thus the deeper cause of Chris’s unhappiness and alienation from his own life.

When a succession of doctors visits Christ, their “most successful enterprise had been his futile hypnotism. He had submitted to it as a good-natured man submits to being blindfolded at a children’s party,” remembering Kitty and recovering a semblance of his middle-aged personality. “But as his mind came out of the control he exposed their lie that they were dealing with a mere breakdown of the normal process by pushing away this knowledge and turning to them the blank wall, all the blanker because it was unconscious, of his resolution not to know.” In other words, Chris’s amnesia isn’t just a disruption of normalcy, but, on some level, a willful resistance of a reality that’s too much for Chris to bear.

Dr. Anderson, who helps finally cure Chris, actually confirms the idea that Chris’s amnesia is an escape from an unhappy superficial life, explaining: “The mental life that can be controlled by effort isn’t the mental life that matters. [...] There’s a deep self in one, the essential self, that has its wishes. And if those wishes are suppressed by the superficial self [...] it takes its revenge.” It’s implied that Chris’s deeper desire is to put aside his marriage to Kitty and his unsatisfying efforts to maintain his wealth—trappings of modern life—in order to embrace happiness with Margaret, who represents a simpler life that’s closer to nature. While shell shock is the immediate cause, Chris’s bigger problem is living according to a modern script (running a business he doesn’t care about, marrying a wealthy girl, and fighting a pointless war) that alienates him from his true desires.

Dr. Anderson’s diagnosis of Chris is an expression of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which was all the rage in the early 20th century when West wrote this novel. West’s point, though, is not to advocate for a particular psychological theory, any more than she directly opposes the war or mounts a considered critique of modern industrialism. Her point is that the various

forces of modernity exert a crushing influence on individuals and society at large, and that these forces—attitudes about the natural and political worlds and what constitutes a happy life—must be critically examined, if people hope to live meaningful, connected lives in the future.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



LANDSCAPE AND NATURE

Throughout the novella, an untamed natural environment symbolizes authenticity and thriving, while an immaculately landscaped environment symbolizes falseness and even oppression. The “controlled” yet empty beauty of the gardens at Baldry Court reflects Kitty’s effort to manufacture a happy environment for Chris; she and Jenny try to mold the natural world into something that will please Chris, but he’s ultimately unable to connect with the contrived kind of beauty they create. In contrast, Margaret is associated with the wilder (and implicitly more genuine) beauty on Monkey Island and in the Baldry estate’s outlying woods, and it turns out that this more spiritual kind of beauty is much more moving to Chris. Jenny also comments explicitly on the results of manipulating the natural environment, believing that ambitious people have “too greatly changed the outward world which is life’s engenderment,” giving the building of new towns and the planting of non-native flowers and trees as examples. She associates the desire to artificially control nature with degrading effects of modernity, like warfare and industrialization.

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes at the beginning of the novella, as the narrator, Jenny, overlooks Baldry Court, the estate belonging to her cousin, Chris, and also Jenny’s home. Baldry Court is the setting for almost the entire story, and its appearance is symbolic. West associates “wild” or natural beauty with authenticity and artificial beauty with its opposite, so the fact that Baldry Court was renovated with a “knowing wink” instead of a “wild eye” suggests that its beauty is only superficial—it’s a beauty suitable for public consumption in society newspapers, but not a durable beauty. It’s also significant that this beauty is associated with Chris’s marriage to Kitty, suggesting that Kitty is no more authentic than her home, and that Chris knows this already. At this point, Jenny takes Baldry Court’s beauty at face value, but as the story develops, she, too, becomes disillusioned both with her home and with Kitty, seeing that neither one has made Chris happy—in a way, they’re both a façade.

☞ Here we had made happiness inevitable for him. I could shut my eyes and think of innumerable proofs of how well we had succeeded, for there never was so visibly contented a man: the way he lingered with us in the mornings while the car throbbed at the door, delighting just in whatever way the weather looked in the familiar frame of things, how our rooms burned with many-coloured brightness on the darkest winter day, how not the fieriest summertime could consume the cool wet leafy places of our garden; the way that in the midst of entertaining a great company he would smile secretly to us, as though he knew we would not cease in our task of refreshing him; and all that he did on the morning just a year ago, when he went to the front. . . .

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Kitty Ellis Baldry, Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 6



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Return of the Soldier* published in 1998.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ You probably know the beauty of that view; for when Chris rebuilt Baldry Court after his marriage, he handed it over to architects who had not so much the wild eye of the artist as the knowing wink of the manicurist, and between them they massaged the dear old place into matter for innumerable photographs in the illustrated papers.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Kitty Ellis Baldry, Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Explanation and Analysis

Here Jenny describes the effort that she and Kitty have put into making Baldry Court a beautiful haven for Chris. Chris assumed the burdens of the struggling family business while still a young man, and a few years after marrying Kitty, his baby son died. Jenny, always sensitive to her cousin's feelings, knows he isn't happy, but she believes that if she and Kitty maintain an ideal environment for him, he can't help but be content. Much later, it emerges that Jenny is a somewhat unreliable narrator, and that the so-called "innumerable proofs" she lists are more likely her own perceptions of Baldry Court than of Chris's feelings about it. Perhaps there is a self-justifying motivation, since Jenny sees it as her duty to make Chris happy, later describing her homemaking efforts as "a responsibility that gave [her] dignity." Throughout the book, West suggests that such work is part of the unique burden women bear in the private sphere—work that, especially at times of crisis as during World War I, is a genuine part of the overall societal burden that men and women share, even if it's less visible and valued than men's contributions.

Well, she was not so bad. Her body was long and round and shapely and with a noble squareness of the shoulders; her fair hair curled diffidently about a good brow; her grey eyes, though they were remote, as if anything worth looking at in her life had kept a long way off, were full of tenderness; and though she was slender there was something about her of the wholesome endearing heaviness of the draught-ox or the big trusted dog. Yet she was bad enough. She was repulsively furred with neglect and poverty, as even a good glove that has dropped down behind a bed in a hotel and has lain undisturbed for a day or two is repulsive when the chambermaid retrieves it from the dust and fluff.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Kitty Ellis Baldry, Margaret Allington Grey

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Jenny and Kitty's first encounter with Margaret Grey, who has come to Baldry Court with news of Chris. Even before Margaret speaks, the other two women have formed an impression of her based on her suburban address and her lower-class appearance. It is a decidedly negative impression. Even when Jenny tries to acknowledge

what she sees as Margaret's better points, she describes these in dehumanizing terms—Margaret is "wholesome" and "endearing" in the way a barnyard animal would be. Even worse, her evident poverty reminds Jenny of a discarded, filthy glove. As far as Jenny is concerned, neither of these kinds of things belong in the front hall of Baldry Court; they should be kept in their proper sphere, or preferably out of sight. Although this quote shows the extent of upper-class derision toward women like Margaret, such attitudes can change—and Jenny's do, as she gets to know Margaret better and learns to appreciate her less obvious kind of beauty. Though Jenny initially models her perceptions upon Kitty's, she later shows that she's capable of developing a more sensitive, kinder estimation of those from other classes.

Chapter 2 Quotes

“Oh, I'll take you up!” Kitty rang out efficiently. She pulled at his coat sleeve, so they started level on the lowest step. But as they went up the sense of his separateness beat her back; she [...] fell behind. When he reached the top she was standing half-way down the stairs, her hands clasped under her chin. But he did not see her. He was looking along the corridor and saying, “This house is different.” If the soul has to stay in his coffin till the lead is struck asunder, in its captivity it speaks with such a voice.

She braced herself with a gallant laugh. “How you've forgotten,” she cried, and ran up to him, rattling her keys and looking grave with housewifery, and I was left alone with the dusk and the familiar things.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry, Kitty Ellis Baldry (speaker), Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

After Chris, stricken with amnesia, arrives home at Baldry Court, he doesn't remember his way around the recently remodeled house, so Kitty rushes to help him—her way of asserting control over the intolerable reality that Chris doesn't know her or the world they've built together. Her attempt quickly fails, however—Chris has so totally forgotten Kitty that they can't even climb the stairs like a familiar couple; they are completely out of step. Chris seems oblivious to this fact, preoccupied with the changes in the home he once knew. Jenny likens Chris's voice to that

of a corpse stuck in a coffin, suggesting how helplessly trapped he feels in trying to navigate the unfamiliar present. Kitty continues trying to laugh off the situation and to display her authority, while Jenny remains just out of sight below—a hint that the women will cope with this tragedy in very different ways. The scene as a whole is a jarring example of a soldier's return, suggesting that, given the novel horrors of the Western Front, even a soldier who isn't suffering from amnesia will face a disorienting homecoming—as will his loved ones.

☛ That night [...] we sat about the table with our faces veiled in shadow and seemed to listen in quiet contentment to the talk of our man who had come back to us. Yet all through the meal I was near to weeping because whenever he thought himself unobserved he looked at the things that were familiar to him. Dipping his head he would glance sideways at the old oak panelling; and nearer things he fingered as though sight were not intimate enough a contact [...] It was his furtiveness that was heartrending; it was as though he were an outcast and we who loved him stout policemen. Was Baldry Court so sleek a place that the unhappy felt offenders there? Then we had all been living wickedly and he too.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the first family dinner at Baldry Court after Chris's return from the front. It is a good example of the interplay between appearance and reality in the story: what looks like a heartwarming reunion is actually overshadowed by grief and uncertainty. Even as Chris talks cheerfully to the women, he's searching for the familiar comfort he can't find in his family members and trying desperately to get his bearings. Observing this, Jenny feels heartbreak instead of the gratitude and joy she'd imagined for this homecoming. It's especially heartrending to Jenny because of how much pride she's taken in making Baldry Court a beautiful, inviting home for Chris; now, he looks like an "outcast" and "offender" in what should be sacred ground to him. This implicates Jenny as well ("we had all been living wickedly"), suggesting to her that, Chris's amnesia aside, her efforts at Baldry Court have been a failure on some level. The scene as a whole disrupts expectations for a soldier's

homecoming, a premonition that the reassimilation of soldiers on the home front will be a far more difficult task than many had imagined.

☛ As I played I wondered if things like this happened when Purcell wrote such music, empty of everything except laughter and simple greeds and satisfactions and at the worst the wail of unrequited love. Why had modern life brought forth these horrors that make the old tragedies seem no more than nursery shows? Perhaps it is that adventurous men have too greatly changed the outward world which is life's engenderment. There are towns now, and even the trees and flowers are not as they were; [...] And the sky also is different. Behind Chris' head, as he halted at the open window, a searchlight turned all ways in the night like a sword brandished among the stars.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

After dinner on Chris's first night back home, Jenny plays the piano in the drawing-room, pointedly choosing a cheerful piece by the English Baroque composer Purcell after being scolded by Kitty for playing Beethoven (since England is at war with Germany). Purcell's music prompts Jenny to muse about the nature of modern life—has life always been this difficult, or was life in the 17th century, when Purcell lived, devoid of all but relatively primitive struggles? Jenny feels that modern ambitions have altered the familiar landscape, disrupting the supposedly natural rhythms of life. In her mind, even things like introducing unfamiliar flowers and building new towns are examples of such disruptions, and the searchlight—a sign of war's intrusion even in their peaceful country existence—is the most unnatural such intrusion. West does not necessarily affirm Jenny's simplistic comparison of different eras, and in fact she critiques the idea that nostalgic yearning can ease modern anxieties. However, she does suggest that in the early 20th century, taken-for-granted assumptions and ways of life are being permanently unsettled, and people must face them no matter what.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ Well, one sounded the bell that hung on a post, and presently Margaret in a white dress would come out of the porch and would walk to the stone steps down to the river. Invariably, as she passed the walnut tree that overhung the path, she would pick a leaf and crush it and sniff the sweet scent; and as she came near the steps she would shade her eyes and peer across the water. “She is a little near-sighted; you can’t imagine how sweet it makes her look.” (I did not say that I had seen her, for indeed this Margaret I had never seen.)

Related Characters: Christopher (Chris) Baldry, Jenny Baldry (speaker), Margaret Allington Grey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote Chris describes to Jenny his romantic summer with Margaret 15 years ago. Chris became acquainted with Margaret while exploring the Thames Valley countryside surrounding his uncle’s house, and her environment and personality present a stark contrast to everything about his eventual bride. Unlike Kitty, who transforms her environment to reflect her wealthy status, Margaret responds to her environment with wonder and delight, even picking a leaf just to enjoy its scent. Not only is the shy, sensitive innkeeper’s daughter a contrast to the shallow, demanding Kitty, but she’s also a contrast to the Margaret whom Jenny first met, who looked simply poor and downtrodden to Jenny’s eyes—hence Jenny’s thought that she has never seen the woman Chris describes (though she soon learns to recognize that Margaret). The fact that their romance is circumscribed by the island—it never ventures off of Monkey Island, even when Chris tries to coax her away—adds to the sense of timeless, almost unreal magic about their relationship.

☛ She was then just a girl in white who lifted a white face or drooped a dull gold head. And as that she was nearer to him than at any other time. That he loved her, in this twilight which obscured all the physical details which he adored, seemed to him a guarantee that theirs was a changeless love which would persist if she were old or maimed or disfigured. He [...] watched the white figure take the punt over the black waters, mount the grey steps and assume their greyness, become a green shade in the green darkness of the foliage-darkened lawn, and he exulted in that guarantee.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Margaret Allington Grey, Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the ecstatic, magical quality of Chris and Margaret’s summer romance. Yet there’s an ambivalent quality about it, too. Chris’s memories of Margaret’s features are curiously indistinct. She blends into her surroundings (“girl in white,” “assume their greyness,” “become a green shade”), suggesting that in Chris’s eyes, Margaret takes on the qualities that he’s already inclined to see. At the time, this featureless sort of beauty convinces Chris that he will always love her, despite time, age, and change. These vague, rather mystical memories add to the complexity surrounding Chris and Margaret’s relationship. On one hand, Margaret has a more elevated, interior beauty that seems suited to make Chris happier in the long run. On the other hand, since Margaret’s beauty has always provided a respite from reality for Chris (whether from the pressures of family and class expectations or the trauma of warfare), it’s uncertain whether Margaret could suffice for Chris in the long run—at least if he is to face the modern world honestly rather than hiding from it.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ Wealdstone is not, in its way, a bad place; it lies in the lap of open country and at the end of every street rise the green hill of Harrow and the spires of Harrow School. But all the streets are long and red and freely articulated with railway arches, and factories spoil the skyline with red angular chimneys, and in front of the shops stand little women with backs ridged by cheap stays, who tapped their upper lips with their forefingers and made other feeble, doubtful gestures as though they wanted to buy something and knew that if they did they would have to starve some other appetite. When we asked them the way they turned to us faces sour with thrift. It was a town of people who could not do as they liked.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Margaret Allington Grey

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

When Jenny goes to fetch Margaret from the neighboring town of Wealdstone, she finds the place appalling. This quote describes some of those things which Jenny finds objectionable about the modern world. For example, in contrast to its pleasantly green surroundings, Wealdstone itself is marred by the markers of industrialism, like railroads and factory chimneys. For Jenny, these signs of industrialism are somehow connected to the pinched, unsatisfying lives of Wealdstone's residents, who must wear cheap clothing and "starve" their appetites in order to make ends meet. This life of endless constraint has a "souring" effect on people. Jenny's opinions of Wealdstone don't necessarily suggest that Rebecca West opposes all technological advancement, or that she sees unfettered wealth as a preferable state (indeed, her characterization of the shallow Kitty suggests the opposite). Besides indicating lingering snobbery on Jenny's part, the quote instead suggests that when technology and ambition dominate communities, the lives of the less fortunate suffer most.

☛ When she came back into the parlour again she was wearing that yellowish raincoat, that hat whose hearse plumes nodded over its sticky straw, that grey alpaca skirt. I first defensively clutched my hands. It would have been such agony to the finger tips to touch any part of her apparel. And then I thought of Chris, to whom a second before I had hoped to bring a serene comforter. I perceived clearly that that ecstatic woman lifting her eyes and her hands to the benediction of love was Margaret as she existed in eternity; but this was Margaret as she existed in time, as the fifteen years between Monkey Island and this damp day in Ladysmith Road had irreparably made her. Well, I had promised to bring her to him.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Christopher (Chris) Baldry, Margaret Allington Grey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up Jenny's conflicted and shifting attitude toward Margaret. When she goes to Wealdstone to fetch Margaret to visit Chris, Jenny struggles to hide her distaste for Margaret's modest, restrained lifestyle and her cheap,

unfashionable clothing. The very idea of touching Margaret's clothes repulses Jenny. Yet, at the same time, she gets a glimpse of Margaret's inner beauty—her generosity, her appreciation of the world around her, and her protective love. This is the contrast between the so-called Margaret of eternity and the Margaret of time—the former appeals to Chris in a way that the latter never could, Jenny is certain. The passage of time and the resulting change of environment—from the natural beauty of Monkey Island to the industrialized squalor of Wealdstone—have transformed Margaret from one version of herself to the other. Yet as Jenny gets to know Margaret, she increasingly realizes that the Margaret of eternity persists in spite of, and perhaps even because of, the unpromising exterior—an example of the soul's mastering of the body, as she later puts it.

☛ Then, one April afternoon, Chris landed at the island, and by the first clean quick movement of tying up his boat made her his slave. I could imagine that it would be so. He was so wonderful when he was young; he possessed in great measure the loveliness of young men, which is like the loveliness of the spry foal or the sapling, but in him it was vexed into a serious and moving beauty by the inhabiting soul. [...] [F]rom his eyes, which though grey were somehow dark with speculation, one perceived that he was distracted by participation in some spiritual drama. To see him was to desire intimacy with him so that one might intervene between this body which was formed for happiness, and this soul which cherished so deep a faith in tragedy.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Christopher (Chris) Baldry, Margaret Allington Grey

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Margaret's initial falling in love with Chris, and also Jenny's idealized perception of that love (and thus, perhaps, a reflection of her own stubborn love for Chris). To Jenny's eyes, Chris is an ideal blend of the physical and the spiritual. He has a fresh, youthful physical vitality, yet his soul displays a deeper, more beautiful gravity. Chris's internal tumult is irresistible, eliciting a protective response from women like Margaret and Jenny, who long to somehow mediate between the outward and inward beauty. In fact, Jenny later describes this mediating function as

being essentially women’s work—providing a safe haven for the troubled male soul so that the male body can fulfill its duties. Both Jenny and Margaret instinctively gravitate to this function, while a woman like Kitty, herself so preoccupied with the body, is dulled to the needs of the soul and can therefore never satisfy a man like Chris.

●● As the car swung through the gates of Baldry Court she sat up and dried her eyes. She looked out at the strip of turf, so bright that one would think it wet, and lit here and there with snowdrops and scillas and crocuses, that runs between the drive and the tangle of silver birch and bramble and fern. There is no aesthetic reason for that border; the common outside looks lovelier where it fringes the road with dark gorse and rough amber grasses. Its use is purely philosophic; it proclaims that here we estimate only controlled beauty, that the wild will not have its way within our gates, that it must be made delicate and decorated into felicity. Surely she must see that this was no place for beauty that has been not mellowed but lacerated by time, that no one accustomed to live here could help wincing at such external dinginess as hers.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Margaret Allington Grey

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

When Margaret and Jenny arrive at Baldry Court together for the first time, Jenny notices the contrast between the beauty within the gates and the beauty outside them. The flowers on the border of the property have no natural or even aesthetic reason to be there. They are there just to be noticed and remarked upon, and to send a message of refinement to visitors, even if they don’t fit into the natural environment. By contrast, the flowers and grasses along the road are wilder and rougher-looking, but they belong there, and their loveliness befits the place. Jenny sees this as a metaphor for the “controlled” beauty of Kitty’s realm and the untamed, even paradoxical beauty of Margaret’s, which on the surface looks to have been “lacerated by time.” The contrast also marks a turning point in Jenny’s perception of Margaret. Though she’s still inclined to wince at Margaret’s “dinginess” and to believe that Chris will reject her beauty in favor of Kitty’s, she is aware of and receptive to Margaret’s

beauty in a way that she wasn’t before.

●● But instead she said, “It’s a big place. How poor Chris must have worked to keep it up.” [...] No one had ever before pitied Chris for the magnificence of Baldry Court. It had been our pretence that by wearing costly clothes and organizing a costly life we had been the 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.

Related Characters: Margaret Allington Grey, Jenny Baldry (speaker), Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

When Margaret and Jenny arrive at Baldry Court, Jenny is shocked by Margaret’s response to the magnificence before her. Rather than being awed by its ostentation and beauty, Margaret pities Chris for having to work so hard to afford and maintain such a place. Margaret’s response conflicts with the social script to which Jenny is accustomed. In other words, the role of a guest—especially a lower-class guest—is to admire and praise Baldry Court’s beauty, thereby acknowledging the Baldrys’ socially superior status. Margaret is indifferent to this script, however, in part because of her own social status; she knows what manual labor is like, so she sees the property in terms of the work required to maintain it. More to the point, Margaret sees through the opulence to the human toll it takes. She knows Chris well enough to realize that he doesn’t find such a life satisfying. The fact that she knows Chris better—and the way her perception cuts through Jenny’s sense of her own purpose in serving Chris’s supposed wants—is devastating to Jenny.

●● [Jenny] constantly contrasted [Margaret's] appearance with the new acquisition of Kitty's decorative genius which stood so close behind her on the table [...] This was a shallow black bowl in the centre of which crouched on hands and knees a white naked nymph, [...] Beside the pure black of the bowl her rusty plumes looked horrible; beside that white nymph, eternally innocent of all but the contemplation of beauty, her opaque skin and her suffering were offensive; beside its air of being the coolly conceived and leisurely executed production of a hand and brain lifted by their rare quality to the service of the not absolutely necessary, her appearance of having but for the moment ceased to cope with a vexed and needy environment struck one as a cancerous blot on the fair world.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Kitty Ellis Baldry, Christopher (Chris) Baldry, Margaret Allington Grey

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Jenny and Margaret have tea together before Margaret meets Chris, and Jenny has another opportunity to compare Margaret's external ugliness with Baldry Court's fashionable beauty. The expensive decorative bowl symbolizes Kitty's own beauty as well. Kitty lives a leisurely existence in which external decoration is one of her chief occupations, and contemplation of (particularly her own) beauty is one of her few concerns. By contrast, Margaret has the worn and tired look of someone who has spent her life occupied with the pressing needs of others, and her unfashionable hat represents the taste of someone who can't aspire to finer things. Margaret, in other words, is completely out of place in Kitty's world. At this point, Jenny believes that Chris prefers only Kitty's beauty and will utterly reject Margaret as she currently is. This comparison shows that, though she's softened toward Margaret, Jenny doesn't yet understand the inner beauty Margaret possesses or the hold it has over Chris.

●● I covered my eyes and said aloud, "In a minute he will see her face, her hands." But although it was a long time before I looked again they were still clinging breast to breast. It was as though her embrace fed him, he looked so strong as he broke away. They stood with clasped hands, looking at one another (they looked straight, they looked delightedly!), and then as if resuming a conversation tiresomely interrupted by some social obligation, drew together again and passed under the tossing branches of the cedar to the wood beyond. I reflected, while Kitty wept, how entirely right Chris had been in his assertion that to lovers innumerable things do not matter.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Kitty Ellis Baldry, Christopher (Chris) Baldry, Margaret Allington Grey

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Kitty and Jenny have anxiously awaited Margaret's reunion with Chris, sure that Chris will reject her in horror once he sees her aged face and work-worn hands. Contrary to this expectation, the two embrace, and Chris seems restored by their reunion instead of repelled by it. They apparently pick up where they left off 15 years ago, despite the intervening demands of their differing social classes. Just as Chris had told Jenny earlier, his love for Margaret is apparently eternal, unaffected by time and change. When they disappear into the woods together, they symbolically reenter the realm where they fell in love with each other—the wilder natural beauty of Monkey Island, which contrasts with the controlled, class-bound beauty of Baldry Court. The scene between Margaret and Chris is a final blow to both Kitty and Jenny, confirming that the two of them, despite their devotion to their goal, cannot ultimately make Chris happy.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ You may think we were attaching an altogether fictitious importance to what was merely the delusion of a madman. But every minute of the day, particularly at those trying times when he strolled about the house and grounds with the doctors, smiling courteously, but without joy [...] it became plain that if madness means liability to wild error about the world, Chris was not mad. It was our peculiar shame that he had rejected us when he had attained to something saner than sanity. His very loss of memory was a triumph over the limitations of language which prevent the mass of men from making explicit statements about their spiritual relationships.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Kitty Ellis Baldry, Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

After Chris and Margaret are reunited, Jenny and Kitty become depressed, having been displaced from their cherished roles in Chris's life. Here Jenny reflects that this depression might seem foolish, given the fact that Chris is driven by delusion, not reality. Yet Chris seems to have found a deeper happiness in delusion than he could ever have found in reality (or perhaps even some deeper form of reality), which reveals that Jenny's and Kitty's efforts for Chris's happiness have been a waste. In other words, whether Chris is "mad" or not, his delusion reveals the delusion underlying the Baldry women's lives, too. Chris's amnesia frees him from the constraints of social expectations, allowing him to be honest about the world in a way that "sane" people cannot be. This paradox eventually sets up the novella's looming question of happiness versus reality—is it better for Chris to remain happy in his delusion or unhappily "sane" in reality? The implication is that happiness and honesty about the world can't fully coexist, and that there's no easy way of choosing which to prioritize.

☝☝ I felt, indeed, a cold intellectual pride in his refusal to remember his prosperous maturity and his determined dwelling in the time of his first love, for it showed him so much saner than the rest of us, who take life as it comes, loaded with the inessential and the irritating. I was even willing to admit that this choice of what was to him reality out of all the appearances so copiously presented by the world, this adroit recovery of the dropped pearl of beauty, was the act of genius I had always expected from him. But that did not make less agonizing this exclusion from his life.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Margaret Allington Grey, Kitty Ellis Baldry, Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Jenny closely observes Chris's blossoming happiness with Margaret, as they begin spending time together in the woods every day—a kind of reenactment of their youthful romance on Monkey Island. This observation is deeply painful to Jenny, since Chris's newfound happiness unavoidably repudiates all that she and Kitty have striven for over the years. Yet, at the same time, Jenny takes pride in Chris's rejection of the social norms that have outwardly governed his life thus far. While most people, like Jenny herself, accept what life hands them and do not resist what societal convention demands of them, Chris's rejection of these things—even if it's through an unconscious act of forgetting—seems ingenious to Jenny, and it's no less than what she's always believed Chris to be capable of. Even if it's technically unreal, Chris's retreat into the past is a kind of chosen reality that reveals him to be saner than those who stick to the present.

☝☝ I have often seen people grouped like that on the common outside our gates, on Bank Holidays. [...] So it was not until now, when it happened to my friends, [...] that I knew that it was the most significant as it was the loveliest attitude in the world. It means that the woman has gathered the soul of the man into her soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quiet for a little time. That is a great thing for a woman to do. I know there are things at least as great for those women whose independent spirits can ride fearlessly and with interest outside the home park of their personal relationships, but independence is not the occupation of most of us. What we desire is greatness such as this which had given sleep to the beloved.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Margaret Allington Grey, Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote Jenny describes her impressions when she comes upon Chris and Margaret resting together in the woods. To her, Chris innocently sleeping while Margaret watches over him is a kind of archetype of the male/female relationship. The woman has a protective role, sheltering the man's soul with her own so that he can rest from the demands of his public duties. While this is an inherently private and unheralded duty, it is a tremendously important one, in Jenny's view. Jenny also acknowledges that some women have public callings themselves, and she doesn't denigrate this; she simply believes that it's more rare, and that most women's desires center around supporting and protecting the men they love. Besides summing up Jenny's attitude about women's role, this quote also gives insight into Rebecca West's feminist views. Though West was an ardent suffragette, she sometimes criticized feminists for downplaying and devaluing what she saw as women's distinctness from men.

☛ Perhaps even her dinginess was part of her generosity [...] I could believe of Margaret that her determined dwelling in places where there was not enough of anything, her continued exposure of herself to the grime of squalid living, was unconsciously deliberate. The deep internal thing that had guided Chris to forgetfulness had guided her to poverty so that when the time came for her meeting with her lover there should be not one intimation of the beauty of suave flesh to distract him from the message of her soul.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Margaret Allington Grey, Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up Jenny's change of attitude about Margaret. At the beginning of the story, Jenny was completely disgusted by Margaret's lower-class appearance and lifestyle, but then she gradually warmed to Margaret's inner beauty as she got to know Margaret personally and

saw her restorative influence on Chris. Now, as she witnesses Chris and Margaret's tenderness firsthand, Jenny begins to see Margaret's external shabbiness itself as an expression of her spiritual beauty, without which she could not help Chris (and, by extension, Jenny and Kitty) as effectively as she does. She speculates that Margaret's years of poverty, deprivation, and hard work have been an unconscious way of cultivating her soul—something which has prepared her for her eventual reunion with Chris, allowing her to provide a spiritual haven for him after all these years. She even sees it as paralleling Chris's amnesia in a way—as if it's some “deep internal thing” that guided both of them to this present healing moment.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☛ Not only did [Margaret's agony] make my body hurt with sympathy, it shook the ground beneath my feet. For that her serenity, which a moment before had seemed as steady as the earth and as all-enveloping as the sky, should be so utterly dispelled made me aware that I had of late been underestimating the cruelty of the order of things. Lovers are frustrated; children are not begotten that should have had the loveliest life, the pale usurpers of their birth die young. Such a world will not suffer magic circles to endure.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Christopher (Chris) Baldry, Dick Grey, Oliver Baldry, Margaret Allington Grey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

While Chris and Margaret have been spending time together, Jenny has been lulled into the belief that their “magic circle” of peace and healing will persist forever. This all changes when Margaret learns about Oliver, Chris's little boy who died five years ago. Margaret reveals that she, too, lost a two-year-old son around the same time. Margaret's steadfast, quiet strength is shattered by this revelation, which in turn dispels Jenny's complacency about Chris's condition. She recognizes anew the cruelty of things, even implying that Chris and Margaret ought to have been together all along, and that if they had been, they would have had children together whose happiness reflected their own. Instead, each had a child who wasted away because of his parent's grief. Jenny's realization about life foreshadows Chris's own restoration of memory, which, though

necessary, is a form of cruelty in itself, since it brings Chris back to a world where he can't be with Margaret.

“Effort!” He jerked his round head about. “The mental life that can be controlled by effort isn't the mental life that matters. You've been stuffed up when you were young with talk about a thing called self-control— a sort of barmaid of the soul that says, 'Time's up, gentlemen,' and 'Here, you've had enough.' There's no such thing. There's a deep self in one, the essential self, that has its wishes. And if those wishes are suppressed by the superficial self [...] it takes its revenge.

Related Characters: Dr. Gilbert Anderson, Jenny Baldry (speaker), Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

When the Baldry household meets with Dr. Anderson, the latest of several doctors who've been summoned to try to cure Chris, he explains certain tenets of then-current Freudian psychoanalytic theory to them. Kitty objects that surely Chris could regain his memory through an exertion of will, but Dr. Anderson dismisses this as nonsense. He argues that so-called self-control is essentially a myth. The more important part of a person is his or her deeply buried “essential self,” which has ways of getting what it wants no matter how firmly its desires are suppressed. In Chris's case, then, his deeply suppressed desire is his yearning to be with Margaret and to give up the responsibilities of his social class, and amnesia (though directly caused by shell-shock) is his unconscious self's way of achieving that goal. Though some reviewers at the time criticized Chris's case as too simplistic, it nonetheless illustrates the shift in views about human psychology that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Now, why did Kitty, who was the falsest thing on earth, who was in tune with every kind of falsity, by merely suffering somehow remind us of reality? Why did her tears reveal to me what I had learned long ago, but had forgotten in my frenzied love, that there is a draught that we must drink or not be fully human? I knew that one must know the truth. I knew quite well that when one is adult one must raise to one's lips the wine of the truth, heedless that it is not sweet like milk but draws the mouth with its strength, and celebrate communion with reality, or else walk for ever queer and small like a dwarf.

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Margaret Allington Grey, Kitty Ellis Baldry, Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After the consultation with Dr. Anderson, Margaret concludes that Chris must be shocked back to reality by being shown some of his little boy's belongings. When she and Jenny go about this task, however, Margaret suddenly falters. Having suffered through a difficult life herself, she doesn't want Chris to lose the fragile happiness he's finally attained. But Kitty's tearful form passing by the room strengthens the resolve of both women. Interestingly, Jenny acknowledges that Kitty is “the falsest thing on earth,” yet her very superficiality is a reminder of the importance of fidelity to the truth. Jenny resolves the book's looming question by concluding that Chris's happiness is not as important as his dignity, which he will sacrifice if he spends the rest of his life pursuing a delusion. If he is allowed to remain happy, in other words, his soul will be permanently stunted. Facing reality, in Jenny's view and in West's, is an indispensable part of being human.

He walked not loose-limbed like a boy, as he had done that very afternoon, but with the soldier's hard tread upon the heel. It recalled to me that, bad as we were, we were yet not the worst circumstance of his return. When we had lifted the yoke of our embraces from his shoulders he 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[.]

Related Characters: Jenny Baldry (speaker), Christopher (Chris) Baldry

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, near the end of the book, describes Chris's "cure." After Margaret shows Chris baby Oliver's old things, Chris is brought back to the present, just as she'd predicted he would be. Jenny and Kitty don't hear this conversation, but they witness its results from Oliver's nursery window. Chris's cure is immediately evident from the transformation of his stance—from the boyish ambling he'd adopted during

his amnesia, to the characteristic march of a trained soldier. The stark contrast tells Jenny that the worst is still ahead of them. Chris is a soldier again, which means he can't avoid being sent back to the front—which is Jenny's old nightmare come true. Kitty alone rejoices at this turn of events, believing that Chris's healing will return him to her as well, which highlights just how shallow and self-interested she is. This quote also gives a darker double meaning to "the return of the soldier." It's not just about a longed-for homecoming, but about the choice every soldier must make between happiness and duty.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Kitty Baldry hasn't heard from her husband, Chris, for two weeks—he's on the Western Front, "somewhere in France"—but she begs Jenny not to fret. She and Jenny are sitting in the nursery that had belonged to Kitty's baby son, Oliver, before he died; it's been kept as it was during the child's life, "unendurably gay and familiar." It's an early spring day, brilliantly sunny. The sun highlights the baby's rocking horse and the stuffed animals on the mantelpiece.

Jenny turns away, not wanting to intrude on Kitty's grief, but Kitty calls her back—she's just washed her hair and is only sitting in the nursery so she can dry it by the window; it's the sunniest room in the house. She wishes Chris had not kept the room as a nursery, she says, "when there's no chance."

Jenny joins Kitty and gazes out the window at Baldry Court, which architects transformed after Chris and Kitty's marriage, with "not so much the wild eye of the artist as the knowing wink of the manicurist." The house sits in Harrowweald, which overlooks a country **landscape**—pastureland, hills, and woods.

Jenny feels offended by the beauty, however, because like many other Englishwomen, she is "wishing for the return of a soldier"—her cousin, Chris. She's been having bad dreams about Chris running across No Man's Land, dodging bodies, until he reaches safety and drops to his knees. But Jenny knows from the war films that reaching the trench doesn't mean one is really safe.

After Kitty wails to Jenny, "Ah, don't begin to fuss" about Chris's whereabouts, she studies her reflection in a hand-mirror as if "[bending] for refreshment over scented flowers." Jenny tries to cheer herself by admiring the work she and Kitty have put into the new house. She is proud of the beautiful antique and modern furniture and glowing fabrics they've carefully chosen, believing they haven't indulged in luxury because they've done all this for Chris's sake, to reflect "his amazing goodness."

Set in the spring of 1916, one of the bloodiest stalemates of World War I, the story immediately pulls the reader into the unknowns and anxiety of that time. The women's location in the baby's nursery also hints at a more intimate family tragedy framing the story. The bright sunshine contrasts with the sad memories that the women seem to feel in the nursery.



Even before Chris himself enters the story, a contrast between he and Kitty emerges—Chris is the more sentimental of the two and the more deeply impacted by the child's death. It's also clearly implied that the couple can no longer have children.



The description of Baldry Court's beauty as "knowing" instead of "wild" suggests that it was intentionally renovated to conform with the tastes and expectations of higher society.



No Man's Land refers to the contested territory between two enemy trenches, which was often strewn with mud, barbed wire, and bodies. World War I was the first major world conflict that was documented on film, meaning that its realities were much more easily pictured—and dreamed about—by civilians than ever before.



Kitty appears to escape into the consideration of her own beauty for relief from the real world. Jenny, likewise, finds a distraction, but it's more external—the house that she and Kitty have lovingly transformed in Chris's absence. She sees the house's beauty as a faithful reflection of Chris's own goodness (and she clearly has strong feelings about him).



Jenny believes that they have “made happiness inevitable” for Chris, because he is so “visibly contented.” She recalls how Chris delights in his surroundings at Baldry Court and in the women’s company. She especially remembers the morning when Chris first left for the front. He’d wandered through the house and stables, gazed into the woods, and then stood sadly beside Kitty until it was time to go. Even as the car drove off, she’d seen Chris staring hard at the house. Jenny knew this meant that Chris loved his life with them at Baldry Court and wanted to hold it close in his memory.

Jenny cherishes Chris’s happiness because she believes that he isn’t like other men. They’d played together as children, and Chris had had a tremendous imagination, seeming to genuinely believe that a tree could become a princess, or that a tiger would emerge from the forest. Even as an adult, his imagination has turned into “the equally wistful aspiration of becoming completely reconciled to life”—believing that some wonderful event will transform his life into permanent joy.

However, Chris has been too busy for such joy. After his father’s death, he had to take over the struggling family business, and then he married Kitty, who is used to an expensive standard of living. Later, his little son Oliver died. It became Jenny and Kitty’s job, then, to make up for Chris’s lack of freedom and joy “by arranging him a gracious life.”

Jenny’s reflections are interrupted by the parlourmaid entering with someone’s card—a visitor has arrived. The visitor is “Mrs. William Grey, Mariposa, Ladysmith Road, Wealdstone.” Kitty doesn’t know anyone from Wealdstone, which Jenny describes as a “red suburban stain” between Harrowweald and London (“one cannot now protect one’s environment” as in the old days). The parlourmaid says that the visitor claims to have news for Kitty. Kitty decides to see her, quickly pinning up her hair in an outdated style that’s good enough for someone “with that sort of address.” She figures the woman may need money, and it’s good to be charitable while Chris is at war. As they head downstairs, though, Kitty pouts over the interruption.

Jenny believes that she can accurately read Chris’s feelings about his life at Baldry Court. Her opinion of his happiness is based only on outward appearances, however, which she interprets as contentment; it will soon become clear that Chris’s feelings about Baldry Court may be as superficial as its carefully managed beauty.



Jenny has a longer history with Chris than Kitty does. Nevertheless, it’s questionable whether she fully understands him. She observes that Chris takes delight in believing that things aren’t what they seem—whether through childhood pretending or the adult belief that a deeper joy is hidden behind visible circumstances. Yet Jenny has committed herself to making him happy by fixing up his superficial surroundings, so this moment hints that her efforts might not really be what Chris needs to be happy.



Though Chris seems to favor a more reflective and whimsical approach to life, his adulthood has been marked by consuming burdens and sorrows. Unable to help shoulder these, Jenny tends to the external details of his life in hopes of compensating for his unhappiness. It’s already clear at this point that the women’s private work at home is part of what makes it possible for Chris to carry out the public duties expected of him as a man.



Jenny and Kitty’s insulated existence is suddenly disrupted by someone from a very different world. Though Wealdstone is within walking distance of Baldry Court, the women have no relationships with people in the town, due to the sharp class difference. Jenny describes Wealdstone as an undesirable “stain,” suburban sprawl from which wealthy people deserve protection. Though Kitty is willing to be generous to someone whom she assumes has come to beg from her, her charitable feelings don’t run deeper than money.



At the top of the staircase, Kitty and Jenny look down and see a middle-aged woman in a yellow raincoat, unfashionable hat, and muddy boots. Kitty shudders at the sight of the woman but runs downstairs and greets her sweetly. Jenny acknowledges that the woman has noble shoulders, a good brow, and tender eyes, but she likens Mrs. Grey's solidity to that of an ox or a trusted dog. Jenny adds that Mrs. Grey is "repulsively furred with neglect and poverty."

Mrs. Grey fidgets with her purse and seems embarrassed. She's heard from her maid, she explains, that Kitty doesn't know about Chris—that he's been hurt. Kitty's and Jenny's eyes meet in amusement—they both know this can't be true, because the War Office would have wired them the news. They suspect this is one of those infamous frauds that has been appearing in the papers—the woman will surely ask for money soon.

Jenny can't help feeling put off by the accusatory way Kitty begins interrogating the woman. When Mrs. Grey says that Chris has "shell-shock," Kitty doesn't react. When she asks how Mrs. Grey knows all this, Mrs. Grey claims that an acquaintance of her husband's serves in Chris's regiment, but her eyes implore Kitty not to question her any further. Uncomfortable with the woman's agitation, Jenny hopes that there is some polite way of concluding this scene, but she can't resist nudging aside Mrs. Grey's cheap-looking purse with her foot, "[hating] her as the rich hate the poor."

Finally, Kitty accuses the woman of trying to defraud them and dismisses her in shrill tones. Jenny feels ashamed that such an incident is connected to Chris, and she is touched by Mrs. Grey's patient gaze, which reminds her of "an old horse nosing over a gate." She encourages Mrs. Grey to tell them everything she knows. Gratefully, Mrs. Grey explains that she knew Chris 15 years ago. She withdraws a telegram from her purse and says again, imploringly, "He isn't well!" She explains that Chris has lost his memory and thinks he knows her.

Mrs. Grey hands Kitty the telegram and explains that it was sent to her old home, Monkey Island at Bray, where she had helped her father run an inn. She and her husband visited recently and found the telegram waiting for her there. Kitty continues to disbelieve Mrs. Grey, saying that the telegram mentions nothing about shell-shock. Mrs. Grey admits there was a letter as well, but then she rushes for the door, saying she can't show it to them. They hear her begin to sob as she runs outside.

Kitty and Jenny draw conclusions about the visitor's social status from just a glance at her appearance. Even when acknowledging her nicer points, Jenny likens the woman to a trusty farm animal; at worst, she's completely identified with her undesirable social status. Either way, both women make it clear that Mrs. Grey's lack of refined beauty makes her offensive and perhaps even less than human.



Kitty and Jenny assume that this lower-class intruder couldn't possibly have real information to offer them and can only be after money—when really, it will soon become clear that Mrs. Grey knows Chris better than either of them.



Shell-shock is a term that began to be used during World War I to describe the effects of bombardments on soldiers in the trenches—things like anxiety, nightmares, tremors, and many other sensory and cognitive effects. Rebecca West's inclusion of this controversial topic (shell-shock was sometimes chalked up to mere cowardice) was cutting-edge for the time. Even though Jenny thinks Kitty is being unnecessarily cruel, she is still instinctively repulsed by Mrs. Grey's relative poverty.



Jenny continues to associate Mrs. Grey with an animal—an endearing yet dispensable figure—even in her growing sympathy. But unlike Kitty, she manages to show kindness even though she's still disdainful of Mrs. Grey. Chris's past connection with a woman like Mrs. Grey seems strange and unlikely, and it hints at the way both Jenny and Kitty will soon need to evaluate what they know about Chris.



Mrs. Grey's past connection to Chris is clearly an emotional one. It's such an incongruous link that Kitty is unable to conceive that it could be genuine. Mrs. Grey realizes she can't cross the wide class divide and that it's useless to try to explain further, highlighting how class divisions create senseless separations between people; Kitty and Jenny have a lot to gain from listening to Mrs. Grey, but they're so scornful of her poverty that they miss the chance.



After a while, Jenny tells Kitty that Kitty wasn't of much help in clearing this up. Kitty knows that she seemed rude, but she can only see two alternatives: either Chris has gone mad, which she can't bear, or else Chris really does know and have affection for "such a woman." This suggests that there are parts of Chris she doesn't know, and she resents the very thought. Even if Chris is ill, Kitty concludes, it doesn't matter to her—if Chris could send a telegram like that, it means "he isn't ours any longer."

Kitty can't cope with the implication that she doesn't really know her husband—that there could be aspects of Chris that don't belong within the careful boundaries of her world. This is why Mrs. Grey's appearance and alleged news are such an affront to Kitty; they threaten her sense of control over her life, and she would rather lose Chris altogether than try to understand the parts of him she doesn't know.



CHAPTER 2

At breakfast the following morning, there is a letter postmarked from France, written by Frank Baldry, a clergyman cousin of Chris. He informs Jenny that Chris has suffered shell-shock and is in "a very strange state." Chris had telegraphed Frank at Ollenshaws, a place where Frank worked nearly 15 years ago. Upon getting the forwarded telegram, Frank left for France immediately and was surprised not to see Kitty and Jenny on the boat. When Frank found Chris in a Red Cross hospital, Chris seemed not quite himself—he'd greeted Frank in an "oddly boisterous" manner. Chris had seemed eager to get home to Baldry Court.

With Frank's letter, it is revealed that Mrs. Grey was telling the truth about Chris's condition. Chris has contacted his cousin at an old address and appears to have reverted to mannerisms from a much younger phase of life, so it seems that Chris is hiding from the realities of the war by unconsciously repressing the more recent events of his life.



Oddest of all, though, is that Chris boyishly informed Frank that he is in love with a girl named Margaret Allington, daughter of the innkeeper on Monkey Island. Shocked, Frank asked how long this had been going on, and Chris laughingly replied that it's been true ever since he visited his Uncle Ambrose after finishing his university degree. That was 15 years ago.

When Chris speaks of Margaret, Frank first assumes that Chris has been carrying on an extramarital affair all this time. Chris's explanation is the first clue to the nature of his old connection with Margaret.



Chris asked Frank if he wouldn't mind sending Margaret some money, or fetching her himself, since Margaret hadn't wired Chris any news of leaving for France. Alarmed, the clergyman told Chris that although he considers himself to be quite "broadminded," there *are* limits, even during wartime! Chris just sneered at Frank's old-fashioned attitude and declared his intention to marry Margaret. When Frank asked what Kitty thought of this plan, Chris demanded, "Who the devil is Kitty?"

Chris's amnesia becomes clear to Frank—it's not that he's cheating on Kitty, but that, in his mind, Kitty isn't in the picture at all. The fact that he summons his cousin Frank instead of his immediate family, however, suggests that even back then, Chris felt pressured to conform to class expectations and hesitated to reveal his intentions toward Margaret to his family.



Frank replied that Chris married Kitty Ellis in February, 1906. When Chris learned that it is now 1916, he faints. An hour later, when Frank returned to the room, Chris was studying himself in a hand mirror, finally believing that he is in fact 36, not 21. He was frightened and wanted to see Margaret immediately. He also wept over the information that his father died 12 years ago. Later, when Frank described Kitty as a "beautiful little woman" with "a charming and cultivated soprano voice," Chris ranted against Kitty (say that he hates "everybody [...] who sings") and spoke longingly of his desire for Margaret.

Chris's study of himself in the hand mirror recalls Kitty's doing the same at the beginning of the story—only for Kitty, self-regard is an escape from reality, while for Chris, it's a painful reckoning with reality. Chris's disdain for Kitty, whom at this point he knows only as a type and not as an individual, also shows that Chris resists the trappings of his class and that he might not really like the luxurious life at Baldry Court that Jenny and Kitty have so carefully crafted for him.



The doctor advised Frank to take Chris home for the time being. In the letter, Frank urges Jenny to prepare Kitty for the coming shock. Kitty reads over Jenny's shoulder and complains that Chris had always pretended to like her singing. Then she demands that Chris be brought home.

A week later, Chris is brought home. Until he arrives, a restless feeling of dread hangs over the house, and Kitty makes the maids cry. When at last the car pulls up to the house, the women hear Chris's strong voice, and then he emerges from the gloom of the evening with a sleepy, contented smile. Seeing that part of his brown and gold hair has turned silver, Jenny cries out, and Chris turns to greet her. Jenny feels ashamed to be visibly 35, noticing that Chris appears unsettled by her appearance.

When Kitty emerges from the shadows, white-faced and grimacing, it's obvious that Chris has no memory of her. He refrains from inquiring, instinctively not wanting to hurt her, but Kitty volunteers, "I am your wife," in a voice that's restraining anger. Chris stoops as if to kiss her, but he cannot follow through; at this, Kitty haughtily retreats.

When Chris goes to dress for dinner, he initially starts toward his old bedroom, but Jenny holds him back. Kitty rushes over to guide him in the right direction, but they struggle to climb the stairs at the same pace, and Chris moves ahead, musing, "This house is different." Kitty laughingly tries to smooth over the moment, and Jenny is left below, reflecting that everything in the house feels touched by strangeness, even time itself.

Later, when Kitty reappears in the drawing-room, she has changed her outfit. She wears a white dress similar to her old wedding dress, her hair is in her bridal hairstyle, and on her left hand, she's removed all but the wedding ring. When Chris enters the room, breathing hard from tripping down some unfamiliar steps, he's greeted by the glowing vision of Kitty. Kitty gestures to her necklaces and says that Chris gave her all these, so it's strange that he doesn't remember her. Chris compliments her, but his gaze wanders, and it's clear he's thinking of somebody else.

Kitty's sole response to Frank's letter, while amusing, shows her narcissism and failure to deal with the full reality of the situation. She only sees Chris in relation to her own needs.



Instead of joy, Chris's homecoming is an occasion for anxious dread and uncertainty, suggesting that the homecoming of soldiers is a more complex and painful matter than traditionally understood. Even though he has visibly changed himself, Chris still expects things to be as he'd left them, which is why he's surprised to see how old his cousin Jenny is.



At once, Chris and Kitty's reunion is marred by the trauma Chris has undergone—he's unable to greet her as a husband is expected to. Kitty responds not with compassion, but with anger at the disruption to her world, indicating again that her beauty and tranquility are only superficial.



Even Kitty's attempts to help Chris navigate the remodeled house—her way of trying to exert control over the situation—fall flat. The husband and wife can't even climb the stairs in step with one another, suggesting a deeper incompatibility in their marriage that's only now rising to the surface.



Kitty makes a transparent attempt to shock Chris back to reality by dressing as his bride—an effort that's as clumsy as Chris's stumbling around the house. Ironically, though, Kitty is on the right track—her failed attempt to jog Chris's memory with significant objects anticipates Margaret's successful attempt at the end of the book. That this attempt doesn't work highlights Kitty's relative unimportance to Chris.



Over dinner, Chris talks cheerfully of childhood memories, but Jenny feels grieved, because Chris keeps staring at and caressing familiar objects. Jenny sees that Baldry Court feels like a prison instead of a home to Chris. Even the butler is a different man than Chris expects, his favorite one having died seven years ago. Jenny knows that she, too, is a stranger to him, not the girl he remembers—"all the inhabitants of this new tract of time were his enemies."

After dinner, Kitty scolds Jenny for playing Beethoven ("German music") on the piano, so she switches to a cheerier piece by Purcell, imagining that it recalls a simpler time. She muses on the "horrors" of modern life, which she attributes to "adventurous men" who've altered the external world too much; beyond Chris, she sees a searchlight sweeping the sky.

Chris speaks up, telling Kitty that he knows his behavior must seem insulting, but that he must see Margaret or else he'll die. Kitty agrees. Jenny is amazed at Kitty's unselfishness, then notices the ugly expression on Kitty's face, as Kitty hisses "That dowl!" so that Chris won't hear. Jenny tries to comfort her, reminding her that Chris is sick, but Kitty maintains that Chris is just "a man like other men" and must be pretending. This wounds Jenny, who has perceived Chris's own pain all evening, and she shakes Kitty in anger. Chris interrupts them, imploring them to be kind to each other, and Kitty storms off to bed.

Chris and Jenny are left alone to talk, Chris seeming more relaxed in Kitty's absence. Chris asks Jenny if all these changes—his age, Kitty, the house—are real. Jenny confirms it and asks Chris what *does* seem real to him. After a moment's thought, Chris looks up with a bright, laughing expression and begins to tell her about Monkey Island. Jenny can no longer remember his exact phrases, but she will tell the story as she has long visualized it, saying: "I think it is the truth."

The homecoming dinner, meant to be a joyous reunion, is instead a mere pretense, since Chris clearly doesn't feel at home whatsoever. Jenny is much more sensitive to Chris's internal state than Kitty has been, realizing that the well-meaning household can't help but seem antagonistic to Chris as he struggles to get his bearings. The way that Chris feels unable to settle into what should be his home subtly underscores West's point that modernity makes many normal aspects of human life feel unfamiliar and harsh.



Jenny chooses an English composer to placate Kitty's superficially patriotic objection. Jenny also wonders nostalgically if past ages have included such sufferings as this one. She sees modernity's problems as resulting from excessive ambition and willingness to meddle with the natural environment, which hints at Chris's underlying issue. It's not just that he's dealing with shell-shock; it's that he's having to confront a broader reality in which he's never really felt comfortable.



Chris's plight has unsettled the household, setting each of them at odds with each other and showing the long-reaching effects of wartime trauma. Kitty continues to be in denial, believing that Chris's behavior is simply a cover for his unfaithfulness, while Jenny is much more attuned to Chris's palpable suffering.



Though Jenny has aged, Chris still trusts her as his old childhood companion and confides in her as he can't confide in Kitty. For Chris, nostalgic, escapist memories of his youth seem real in a way that the tangible world isn't. His memories are conveyed through Jenny, who tells what she recalls much later, adding more layers between reality and perception in the story.



CHAPTER 3

Chris describes the country walk that took him from his Uncle Ambrose's house to Monkey Island. He particularly remembers a white hawthorn tree overlooking the path to the ferry. On Monkey Island sat a green-domed white house, the Monkey Island Inn. When Chris rang a bell hung on a post, Margaret would emerge from the house wearing a white dress. On her way down to the river, she always stopped to pick and crush a walnut leaf, enjoying the sweet scent. Then she would shade her near-sighted eyes and, seeing Chris, row the small punt across the river. Then Chris would row them back, and they'd sit in the boat and talk. Margaret's shyness would fade as she talked; Chris praises her sharp mind and tender heart.

Eventually Chris and Margaret go up to find her father, Mr. Allington, tending to his poultry or rabbits, and they all sit outside having tea together. As dusk falls, Margaret's beauty becomes more indistinct yet all the more striking to Chris, and he feels closer to her than ever. Somehow, the twilight's obscuring of her features assures Chris that their love is timeless.

Chris's life continued in this way for some time, though he doesn't remember exactly how long. On the last day that he can remember, Chris bicycles to Monkey Island in beautiful summer weather and finds Margaret alone there, Mr. Allington having gone to town on business. Chris tries to coax Margaret to take a boat trip with him, but she feels duty-bound to stay on the island, in case any visitors drop by the inn (as in fact they do). Finally, he draws her away on a walk to the wilder part of the island, where they end up embracing in the moonlight.

After nightfall, Chris and Margaret cross the lawn to a little Greek-style temple, which had been built by the property's 18th-century owner. Chris places Margaret in a niche above the altar, where she's illuminated by the moonlight. Seeing her thus, he again feels that his love is changeless, and he tells her that.

In Jenny's telling, the Greek temple dissolves, and suddenly Chris is lying again among the barbed wire of the trenches, the sky is full of explosions, and the stretcher bearers are hurting Chris's back. In the drawing room at Baldry Court, Chris blows out the candles, then pauses and tells Jenny that if she'd seen Margaret's beauty 15 years ago, she would understand why he can't repudiate her now. Jenny agrees, and they take hands affirmatively.

Chris's memories of Monkey Island are marked by that place's natural beauty—a beauty that's less cultivated than the gardens of Baldry Place. His memories of Margaret are closely connected to that beauty. In contrast to Kitty, who likes to control her environment, Margaret takes a frank, uncomplicated delight in her environment, even taking every opportunity to enjoy its scents. Margaret's delight pleases Chris, suggesting he's more aligned with her way of seeing the world than with Kitty's.



Margaret's obscured beauty suggests that, even in his youth, Chris didn't always see the world as it truly was, but rather saw what he wanted to see—in effect, the same thing he's doing now by forgetting the present.



Chris's recollection of the season on Monkey Island has a timeless quality, giving it a romantic, nostalgic air. Margaret, and Chris's romance with her, is once again associated with natural wildness as opposed to the artificial beauty that characterizes Kitty and life at Baldry Court.



Margaret's position above the altar symbolizes Chris's idealization of her. Instead of seeing her according to reality, he sees her as timeless and changeless. Thus, even in his idyllic youth, Chris's love for Margaret had an escapist element.



The dissolving of the idealized temple scene into a battlefield scene intentionally muddles the story's sense of time and reality: it's unclear whether this is Chris's memory or Jenny's imagining. Either way, it shows the fragility of the line between nostalgia and reality. It also shows that the trauma of warfare constantly lurks, confusing one's sense of reality—even for people like Jenny who weren't at the front themselves.



CHAPTER 4

The next day, it's Jenny's job to fetch Margaret from Wealdstone. Before she leaves, she sees Chris rowing a skiff around the pond. He feels uncomfortable being around Kitty and all the evidence of her work on the estate. Jenny finds it "dreadful" seeing a middle-aged man playing like a boy in this way. She warns Chris that Margaret is aged and no longer beautiful; she thinks he won't love her. Chris says it won't matter.

Wealdstone isn't a bad town, but it's covered with railway lines and factories, and it's populated by lower-class women who can't afford everything they would like to buy. Margaret's austere little house seems to blend into the ungrouted field beyond. Margaret herself "belongs" to this place; when she answers the door, her hair is askew, she's covered with flour, and she's sweating. Jenny tells Margaret that Chris is home.

Margaret, apologetically telling Jenny that her "girl" is off today, seats her in the parlour. Jenny is disgusted by the parlor, which contains a sagging sofa, nostalgic pictures, and Mr. Grey's carpet slippers. Outside, Mr. Grey himself is digging ineptly in the garden and frequently sneezing.

After Jenny describes the situation with Chris, Margaret weeps, explaining that when something resurfaces after 15 years, and one is very tired, it's difficult. She knows it's wrong, but she wants so much to see Chris. Jenny encourages Margaret to visit, assuring her that even Kitty expects her to come. Margaret exclaims that Kitty must have "a lovely nature," but Jenny cannot even think about Kitty right now. She seems like "a faceless figure with flounces," and only Chris and Margaret seem real.

Mr. Grey comes in from the garden, and Jenny understands from Margaret's "girlish" tone that she has made it her life's mission to "keep loveliness and excitement alive in his life." After she's given Mr. Grey instructions about his supper, Margaret reappears in the garish raincoat and hat that Jenny had despised the first time she saw them. She cringes at the thought of Chris seeing the present-day Margaret compared to the timeless Margaret he imagines, but she follows through on her promise to bring Margaret to Baldry Court.

Chris is literally escaping from Kitty and the house by playing a boyish game. The contrast between Chris's age and his behavior is unsettling, and the sight will later help Jenny decide how best to help Chris. For now, she tries to prepare him for the shock of reality versus nostalgia.



Wealdstone's industrialized condition is a count against it in Jenny's mind, which is consistent with her view of the failings of modernity. She also connects its industrialism with the deprived state of its residents. Margaret's home matches Wealdstone, in stark contrast to everything about Baldry Court.



The fact that Margaret can afford a servant (the "girl" who has the day off) shows that she isn't completely destitute. Nonetheless, Jenny's disgusted attitude toward her and her modest home reveals the strict social hierarchy in English society at the time.



Margaret has evidently harbored feelings for Chris over the years, even though she's dutifully sought to suppress them. In contrast to Margaret's genuine emotion, Kitty seems unreal and artificial to Jenny, demonstrating how Jenny's understanding of reality and beauty is shifting as she gets to know Margaret.



Margaret has something in common with Jenny: she devotes herself to the comfort of the man in her life, much as Jenny has done for Chris. With this comparison, West suggests that such a "mission" is a universal burden for women, even though it can also provide them with meaning. Nevertheless, Jenny still feels embarrassed to present this awkward, lower-class woman to Chris, who seems to belong to a totally different world.



As they leave, Margaret comments that Mariposa is “a horrid little house,” and Jenny is forced to agree. Yet, “with the smile of the inveterate romanticist,” Margaret points out that “Mariposa” means “butterfly.” To distract Margaret from her shyness around the chauffeur (“the poor are always afraid of menservants”), Jenny asks what came between her and Chris, since Chris didn’t remember their parting. Embarrassed, Margaret tells the story. She describes Monkey Island in the same magical way that Chris did, even mentioning the hawthorn tree by the ferryside.

Mr. Allington and Margaret had settled on Monkey Island after Mrs. Allington’s death, when Margaret was 14. Life had been happy for her there. When Chris appeared one day for a visit, looking spry yet thoughtful and serious, Margaret was instantly devoted to him. But Jenny stops Margaret from talking about their romance, fearful of feeling jealous. Margaret describes their quarrel, which happened just a week after they’d declared their love. She was in a dinghy with a neighboring innkeeper’s nephew, laughing at the boy’s clumsy antics, when Chris suddenly rang the ferry bell, frowning and distant. When Margaret tried to explain, she realized that Chris couldn’t completely trust a girl of her class. That was the end of it.

Jenny makes the connection—in the spring 15 years ago, old Mr. Baldry’s business had begun to fail. Chris had been summoned home to be told that he had to take it over. When Jenny passed him on the drive, she’d noticed the “drowned look” on his face, as well as his total obliviousness to her presence, which made her realize that he’d never really noticed her. From that time forward, he’d been busy with the mines in Mexico, his youth “dulled by care.”

Jenny mentions something of this to Margaret, who brushes indifferently past it, going on with her story. Three weeks after her quarrel with Chris, Mr. Allington died. She longed for Chris to come, but he never did. Depressed, she transferred the inn’s lease to someone else and attempted to become a mother’s helper, which went poorly for her. Two years later, she began a courtship with Mr. Grey, whom she eventually married. Mr. Grey is an unsuccessful man: he was out of work for a time, and his health is poor. Margaret is most contented while tending to him, and when she has no outlet for that protective instinct, she gets depressed.

Even in the midst of less than ideal circumstances, Margaret persists in finding beautiful things to enjoy, a trait that Jenny will come to admire. Still, Jenny at this point continues making class-based assumptions about Margaret. Margaret’s description of Monkey Island substantiates Chris’s account of the same—it had the same timeless quality for both of them, and natural beauty predominates in both their memories.



Margaret readily sees people’s inward potential; that’s what drew her to Chris for the first time. Jenny’s discomfort with the conversation shows that her own devotion to Chris has something approaching a romantic quality, even though she never makes this explicit. Margaret and Chris’s romance ended over a fairly typical young lovers’ quarrel, yet there’s a class element as well—Margaret implies that Chris, despite his love for her and his attraction to her wild beauty, assumed that a girl of her station would be less inclined to remain faithful. This piece of information makes it clear that, even when Chris had the chance to reject class-based expectations and pursue deeper joy, he couldn’t quite bring himself to do so.



Jenny realizes that Chris’s romance coincided with a crisis in his life—the demand that he take over the Baldry business, a role he never wanted. Class expectations intruded on his magical romance and redirected the course of his life. Jenny implies that this crisis might be connected to Chris’s classist assumptions about Margaret, as he wrestled with the unwanted demands of upper-class responsibility.



For Jenny, Chris’s change of role constituted a crisis in her own life, but for Margaret, it’s relatively unimportant; this suggests that the demands of social status aren’t as meaningful to someone of her class and character. However, Margaret, like Chris, settled into a marriage thought to be better suited to her class. She isn’t in love with Mr. Grey, but she finds meaning in protecting and caring for him, much as Jenny does in caring for Chris.

One day, Margaret was seized with a desire to visit Monkey Island once more. The new proprietor gave Margaret 12 letters that had been left for her at the inn and never forwarded. For a long time, Margaret refrained from reading them, thinking it against her wifely duty. But after she got Chris's telegram, she finally opened the letters. She now weeps at the memory, saying nothing of their contents.

As they arrive at Baldry Court, Margaret looks out at the strip of turf along the drive, which is **landscaped** and covered with flowers. Jenny observes that this border has no aesthetic justification; in fact, the common land along the road, with its wildflowers and rough grasses, looks much prettier. But within the gates, there must be only "controlled beauty." Margaret's aged "dinginess" contrasts with such beauty. Jenny expects Margaret to notice this and to feel self-conscious.

Margaret, however, merely pities Chris for having to work so hard to keep up such a place. Jenny is privately shocked; no one has ever pitied Chris in this way. She and Kitty have always made a pretense of creating the home of Chris's dreams; but Margaret's words, she realizes, reveal that Chris has always desired something deeper.

While the women drink tea, Jenny contrasts Margaret's appearance—especially her dull hat and air of suffering—with a decorative bowl on the table, which was chosen by Kitty. On the bowl is the image of a delicate nymph, forever occupied with nothing but "contemplation of beauty." Beside it, Margaret's appearance looks especially offensive. Jenny thinks the nymph on the bowl also symbolizes Chris's idealization of women—passionless figures who only exist for others' admiration. She cringes at the thought of the impending meeting between him and Margaret.

After Jenny sends Margaret outside to meet Chris, she finds she's on the point of an anxious collapse—or perhaps, she admits to herself, it's jealousy. She wanders up to the nursery, where Kitty is sitting by the window, staring out at the garden. It's a bedraggled, windy March day, and Jenny sees that Margaret's yellow raincoat stands out starkly against the gray.

Margaret doesn't reveal the dates or contents of Chris's letters; it's simply clear that Chris's feelings for Margaret didn't disappear after their quarrel. Margaret's sense of duty to her wifely role wars with her deeper emotions, similar to Chris's inner conflict; his amnesia has let these emotions come to the fore, but presumably they were always there.



Though the landscaped flowery border is more beautiful from an upper-class perspective, Jenny begins to see it with new eyes after having talked with Margaret. The border is beautiful, but it has no deeper meaning. Uncultivated beauty, by contrast, has a special appeal of its own.



Margaret's reaction to Baldry Court is another marker of class difference. While Baldry Court is Jenny's pride and joy, to Margaret—who's actually familiar with manual labor—it just looks like wearisome toil. Margaret's words also suggest that both she and Chris are attuned to a different kind of beauty than the one Jenny and Kitty prioritize.



The nymph on the decorative bowl symbolizes Kitty's beauty—leisurely and detached from everyday life. Next to that, Margaret looks ugly; their respective beauties can hardly be compared. Jenny also assumes that Chris is drawn to Kitty's type of beauty, but his reunion with Margaret will soon reveal that Jenny's assumption is incorrect.



Jenny senses that something monumental is about to happen between Chris and Margaret. The women's location in the nursery suggests that it's from this perspective—the site of a past family crisis (the baby's death)—that the current crisis should be viewed.



Jenny sees Chris running across the lawn, just as he'd run across No Man's Land in her nightmares; and just like that dream, he collapses on his knees, only he does so in front of Margaret. Jenny covers her eyes, dreading Chris's recognition of Margaret's age and poverty. But when she looks again, the two are embracing; they gaze delightedly at one another and begin talking animatedly, as though resuming an interrupted conversation. Kitty weeps, and Jenny reflects that Chris was right; to lovers, many things don't matter.

Jenny's memory of her dream suggests that Margaret is the safety for which Chris has been running all this time—or is that a delusion, too? At this point, it's unclear what exactly Chris is drawn to in Margaret and how much of it is real. Meanwhile, their joyful reunion finally convinces Kitty that Chris is lost to her.



CHAPTER 5

After Margaret is driven home, Chris comes to Kitty and Jenny in the drawing room and says that Margaret has explained things to him, and everything is all right. Kitty responds sarcastically that she's glad he has accepted such news on Margaret's authority, and from her drooping demeanor, it's clear that she recognizes the chasm that's come between the two of them.

Margaret's presence has brought Chris a measure of peace, but that's no comfort to Kitty, who instinctively recognizes that an alliance with Margaret inevitably means a rejection of her.



From then on, Chris spends his days sitting like "a blind man waiting for darkness to lift," except for those hours he spends in Margaret's company. Kitty, depressed, is like a "broken doll," rarely getting out of bed. Jenny grieves too, spending her days taking what pleasure she can find in the house and grounds so that she doesn't have to think.

Margaret illuminates the meaninglessness of Chris's present by allowing him to indulge in the joy of his past. This devastates both Baldry women, dislodging them from their confident places within Chris's world and showing them that their attempts at crafting superficial beauty in their lives are no match for the deeper, more genuine joy that Chris and Margaret share.



A week after Chris's reunion with Margaret, Kitty, still bedridden, declines a walk and reminds Jenny that Dr. Gilbert Anderson is coming that afternoon—their last hope. Everyone must see him, she adds, including "that woman." So Jenny goes out alone into the lovely spring day, wishing for Chris's and Margaret's company. She suddenly envies the two, not their love for each other, but the beautiful sights they're looking at together. She feels cut off from Chris, unable to connect with him because all her effort goes into maintaining a stoic exterior that doesn't betray her grief. Margaret, by contrast, is now different—her eyes smile, and even her shabby clothes look somehow endearing. Jenny throws herself onto a pile of dead leaves in despair.

Jenny has moved from disdain for Margaret, to ambivalence, and here to acceptance—even to a fondness and desire for friendship. Yet she senses that Margaret understands Chris on a deeper level than she can, which grieves her. Margaret, meanwhile, is able to love and support Chris as she's long dreamed of doing.



Jenny says that while it might seem as if she and Kitty attributed too much importance to Chris's delusions, Chris appears to be perfectly sane, even while walking the grounds with various doctors who have come to see him. She feels ashamed "that he had rejected us when he had attained to something saner than sanity." It would have been easier, she thinks, if he had coldly spoken his rejection, but his polite blankness—seeing Jenny as a "disregarded playmate" and Kitty as a mere "decorative presence"—is worse. Yet his steadfast attention to the essentials of his life—namely his renewed love for Margaret—seems an "act of genius" to Jenny.

Jenny sees herself, Kitty, and Margaret as symbolizing different types of women. Kitty is the type of woman who "makes the body conqueror of the soul," Jenny mediates between body and soul, making them run evenly "like a well-matched pair of carriage horses," and Margaret "[champions] the soul against the body." Jenny thinks that Chris sees a transfigured, eternal version of Margaret; she and Kitty, however, are only worth a glance, because "there is nothing more to us" beyond "our material seeming."

Jenny has little faith in the many doctors who've visited over the past week. One of them seems to have successfully hypnotized Chris, causing him to remember Kitty and regain his middle-aged personality, but as soon as the hypnosis ceased, Chris immediately reverted to his amnesia. Jenny goes in search of Chris in a faint hope that today's doctor might offer something different. But she dreads coming upon him with Margaret and witnessing their intimacy.

Though Jenny has been thinking discontentedly of Margaret's ugliness, she is stunned by the beauty she sees when she comes upon them in the woods. They are sitting on a rug in a clearing, Chris has fallen into an innocent, childlike sleep, and Margaret is watching him. To Jenny, they are like an archetype of men and women: the man's soul gathered protectively into the woman's soul, allowing him to rest. Jenny knows that Chris has been sleeping poorly at Baldry Court, but she was unable to do anything to help him.

Watching them, Jenny realizes that Margaret has been generous to her and Kitty, too. By placing Chris into "this quiet magic circle," Margaret has created a pattern in their lives that wouldn't have been there otherwise. Jenny speculates that even Margaret's "dinginess" is an aspect of this generosity. Perhaps in the same way that Chris was led to amnesia, Margaret was led to poverty, because it allowed the conditions that made Margaret's soul so attractive to Chris.

There is a disarming sense of reality to Chris's amnesia. Despite being stuck in the past and therefore scarcely functional in the present, he seems to have found a deeper happiness than real life could ever give him. Because Jenny and Kitty have organized their lives around Chris, this is a deep blow to both. Yet Chris's abandonment of himself to the past vindicates Jenny's long-standing belief that he would someday achieve transcendent happiness.



Jenny's description of herself might be a reference to the imagery in Plato's [Phaedrus](#), in which the soul is a winged chariot driven by two horses, representing noble and base desires—the soul's job is to subdue the "base" horse for the sake of the soul's beautification. In Chris's eyes, Margaret represents the triumph of the soul—something Jenny and Kitty can't attain, in part because of the restrictions of their wealth and social class.



Hypnosis was a fairly cutting-edge form of psychological treatment at this time, and it was understood to help a patient recover repressed memories. Still, West presents it as a failure, in contrast to the more advanced psychoanalytic theory that will be applied to Chris later.



The scene in the woods represents the pinnacle of Margaret's beauty; her inner beauty and union with nature have transformed her outer ugliness. More than that, the scene represents the height of the female role, as West presents it—a protective, sheltering role that enables in private what men must do in public. Jenny grieves that she can't be the one to provide this.



Because Margaret has restored Chris's peace, Jenny sees Margaret as restoring a kind of balance to their broken household as a whole. Her poverty and ugliness play an unconscious, supporting role in this work, rather than being at odds with it as Jenny had first believed.



Margaret has also given Jenny the gift of peaceful sleep—she no longer dreams of No Man’s Land, because she knows that in Chris’s condition, he cannot be sent back to the Army. That very morning, in fact, Jenny had come upon Chris reading a history of the war, horrified by what had happened in Belgium. Because of Margaret’s kind presence, Chris’s body is protected from the war as well as his soul.

Though it feels intrusive—it’s clearly an ecstatic moment for both Margaret and Chris, who stirs awake but keeps clinging to Margaret’s hand—Jenny sits on the rug beside the two. She tells them about the doctor’s impending visit, and they follow her back to the house, talking quietly. A silence tells Jenny that the two have stopped to embrace.

CHAPTER 6

When they reach the house, they see Dr. Gilbert Anderson, and Jenny feels a chill of premonition. He has a surprisingly “unmedical” appearance, including a cheerful moustache and a spotted tie. He is playing with a tennis ball as they approach. Dr. Anderson takes in the three of them, identifies Margaret, and tells her they’ll talk later. He walks off with Chris. Inside the house, Kitty emerges in a nice dress, ready to meet a new man. Jenny wryly thinks that women like Kitty lose “their otherwise tremendous sense of class distinction” at the prospect of a new admirer.

Jenny and Margaret go upstairs, and even in her anxiety, Margaret openly admires the beauty of Jenny’s things, praising her taste (“The charity, that changed my riches to a merit!”). As Margaret fixes her hair, she suddenly gives a cry—she has found the photograph of Oliver that sits on Jenny’s dressing-table. It was taken a week before Oliver died, five years ago. When Jenny explains this, Margaret reveals that her own son, Dick, died around the same time and that he, like Oliver, was two years old.

Jenny explains that Oliver had always been delicate, and that he finally faded away from a cold. Margaret explains that the same thing happened to Dick. “It’s as if,” she says, “they each had half a life.” She falls to her knees and embraces Oliver’s photograph. Watching this, Jenny reflects to herself that childless people have the greatest joy in children, because to them children are simply lovable, while to mothers, they can be sources of deep agony. The sight of Margaret’s pain disrupts Jenny’s sense of a benign “magic circle” enfolding Chris; the world is crueler than she’d realized.

Ultimately, Margaret’s apparent healing of Chris means that Chris, securely stuck in the past, is safe from the war—she has rescued him both in body and soul, because he won’t be sent back to battle as long as he has amnesia.



Margaret and Chris’s quiet scene in the woods recalls their ecstatic, moonlit evening on the isolated island in their youth. This parallel foreshadows disaster; Margaret’s story of their breakup has already made it clear that such idealized peace can’t last.



Dr. Gilbert’s comical appearance contrasts with Jenny’s sense of foreboding; he doesn’t look like a serious physician, which, according to the pattern that the story has established so far, suggests that there’s more to him than meets the eye. Kitty, true to form, rouses herself from her grief when there’s a chance of being admired.



In keeping with her generous personality, Margaret instinctively notices beauty and thinks the best of others. By this point, Jenny understands that this is an act of “charity”; she knows that her “riches” aren’t really worth as much as Margaret’s kindness and inner beauty. Because Chris has no memory of his child, Margaret hasn’t heard of his existence until this point.



Oliver and Dick’s lives paralleled each other, as if both boys were somehow weakened by their parents’ loveless unions. The eruption of this raw grief into the “magic circle” parallels the crisis that ended Chris and Margaret’s romance the first time, suggesting that the same thing is about to happen again.



The parlourmaid knocks with the message that the doctor wishes to see them. Margaret's grief-stricken gestures as she sets the photograph aside give Jenny a foreboding feeling. They find Dr. Anderson in the drawing room, cheerfully discussing amnesia. He explains that Chris's unconscious self is refusing to let him reconnect with his normal life, hence the loss of memory.

Kitty suggests that if Chris would just make an effort, perhaps he'd be cured. Dr. Anderson reacts sharply to this. He explains that the "controlled" mental life isn't the one that really matters. There's an essential self that lies much deeper than self-control, and that self has strong desires. When those desires are suppressed, they eventually take revenge by manifesting in odd obsessions. Chris's obsession, Dr. Anderson says, is that he can't remember the last 15 years. What, then, is the suppressed desire?

Kitty argues that Chris lacks for nothing, but Dr. Anderson responds that there must be some discontentment in his life—people forget only those things they want to forget. He questions the women as to what it might be. Kitty has nothing to say, but Jenny admits she has always sensed something wrong in him. Then Margaret speaks up, saying that Chris has always been "very dependent." She asks the doctor what the purpose would be in "curing" Chris—doing so can't make Chris happy, only "ordinary."

The doctor seems relieved at Margaret's words, admitting that he can only return people to a generally accepted "normal," though it often doesn't seem necessary to him. Margaret says that only a jarring memory would bring Chris back—like the memory of his boy, Oliver. The doctor is surprised—Kitty had not mentioned this. He says that Margaret must be the one to remind Chris.

Jenny takes Margaret to the nursery to find some of Oliver's belongings. Seeing Oliver's things, Margaret can't help beaming at the baby's frocks and rocking horse, but she soon turns sorrowful, crying, "I want a child [...] It's all gone so wrong!" Trying to steady her, Jenny gives Margaret Oliver's blue jersey and red ball, but Margaret quails at presenting them to Chris.

Margaret says that she ought never to have come to Chris, or else they should just let him be. After living a hard life, she knows that happiness is the most important thing there is. She can't bear that Chris should lose it—and then he'd have to go back to the war. Jenny relaxes, grateful that Chris will be able to know an enduring, youthful happiness.

Dr. Anderson cites the Freudian psychoanalytic theory which was ascendant at this time. Chris's amnesia, in other words, is his unconscious self's attempt to avoid confronting reality.



Dr. Anderson explains psychoanalytic theory in greater detail. Basically, the "essential self" cannot be controlled by a simple act of will. The unconscious and its desires are much more powerful than what's on the surface—what seems to be in charge. The key is confronting whatever Chris has been trying to escape.



Kitty has a characteristically shallow view of Chris's wants and needs, revolving around herself. The other women's replies reflect their own relationships to Chris as well—Jenny's is a partial, inarticulate suspicion, and Margaret's is a pointed diagnosis of Chris's weakness. Margaret also recognizes that Chris's cure and his happiness will be incompatible.



Even the doctor acknowledges that while psychology aims to heal people by restoring them to what is conventionally called "normalcy," this is mainstream version of what's desirable is often incompatible with people's actual happiness.



Margaret, who's always been so emotionally steadfast, falters at the prospect of destroying Chris's happiness. This is connected to her own deep sorrow over her childlessness and her inability to be with Chris.



The book has been driving toward the question of whether happiness or reality should be the ultimate priority in a person's life. Here, it appears that the women will decide in favor of Chris's happiness—essentially allowing him to remain a young man forever.



But then Kitty appears in the doorway, looking grief-stricken and clutching a little dog that she usually ignores. After looking in at them tearfully, she walks on. Somehow, her presence, despite her “falsity,” recalls them to reality. Jenny remembers that “there is a draught that we must drink or not be fully human.”

Jenny further realizes that if they truly love Chris, they must safeguard his human dignity. If he stayed in the “magic circle,” he would eventually become senile, doddering, and eccentric, “not quite a man.” She looks at Margaret and sees that the other woman has realized the same thing. Grieving, they embrace in this shared knowledge.

Sadly, Margaret takes Oliver’s jersey and ball and goes downstairs. Jenny collapses on an ottoman, her “spirit asleep in horror,” trying to take comfort in the thought of the parts of Chris’s personality that will remain intact after the shock. Kitty comes in and paces fretfully, asking Jenny to see what’s happening outside. Finally Jenny looks and sees Margaret and Chris on the twilit lawn. Margaret is in the shadows, cradling something in her arms. Chris faces the house, looking hopelessly up at it, with a “dreadful decent smile.”

Chris no longer walks boyishly, as he had that afternoon, but with a soldier’s tread. Jenny realizes that the worst is yet to come—this cure means he will have to return to “that flooded trench in Flanders.” Kitty keeps begging to know how Chris looks, and at last Jenny tells her, “Every inch a soldier.” Kitty looks over her shoulder and whispers with satisfaction, “He’s cured!”

Kitty’s appearance jolts Jenny and Margaret out of their decision. Her embodiment of “falsity” reminds Jenny that she doesn’t want to see Chris reduced to the same state; in other words, she doesn’t want him to lead a fake life like Kitty’s. After all, then, Jenny seems to conclude that reality is more critical to one’s humanity than happiness is.



Notably, Chris’s fate rests in Jenny’s and Margaret’s hands—it’s up to the women, and their moral compass, what course the rest of his life will take. Their decision also suggests that nostalgia is an insufficient refuge that society must reject, no matter how hard it is to face modernity.



Margaret’s retreat into the shadows suggests that she (and the deep joy and beauty she represents) will no longer occupy a prominent role in Chris’s life—she will go back into the recesses of life, a suppressed desire once again. Chris’s gaze at the house, meanwhile, shows that he is free of delusion and has dutifully assumed the burdens of his real life once again.



This is the true “return of the soldier”—now that Chris remembers his duty, he will inevitably be sent back to the front, Jenny’s nightmares will resume, and Chris may even die. Kitty alone takes joy in this return, since she is the only one who stands to gain happiness (however shallow) from Chris’s cure.





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