

THE DELUSION OF THE NOSTALGIC CURE IN  
*ETHAN FROME* AND *THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER*

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Delusion of the Nostalgia Cure  
in *Ethan Frome* and *The Return of the Soldier*

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*Ethan Frome* (1911) by Edith Wharton and *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) by Rebecca West describe a psychological journey and also document a cultural moment. Written at the genesis of modernism, they express the anxiety about fragmentation of society that began with the industrial revolution and climaxes with World War I. In these texts this fragmentation is represented through suppressed desire, broken masculinity, and wasted potential. To cope with this cumulative trauma the primary male characters, Ethan Frome and Chris Baldry, use nostalgia, a sentimental and romantic longing for a past that did not exist, to recreate the circumstances of their youth. Existing in the past, however, has dire consequences, for as Ethan and Chris attempt to recreate the circumstances of their youth, they also, as Freud theorizes, repeat, relearn, and relive their trauma. In this way, nostalgia is not only inauthentic, but also damaging. Their respective lovers, Mattie and Margaret, who at first appear to be saviors in Ethan and Chris's nostalgic delusions by activating their life instinct, actually become angels of death, driving

them toward a bleak future and their inevitable demise. Ethan and Chris are pawns by which Wharton and West demonstrate the illusion of romanticism and its failure to act as cure. Nostalgia is only a temporary palliative, a placebo, masking reality.

One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –  
 One need not be a House –  
 The Brain has Corridors – surpassing  
 Material Place –  
 —Emily Dickinson, poem 670

Nostalgia is a particular sentimental longing, a deep ache to return home, to the familiar. As critic Susan Stewart noted, “Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience” (23). Nostalgia’s wistful, romantic qualities hardly seem to have a place in modernist literature, but in *Ethan Frome* (1911) by Edith Wharton and *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) by Rebecca West, nostalgia is wielded as a weapon and “tempered by [modernist] skepticism” to show it as an inauthentic and delusional state (Stevenson 135). Nostalgia entices the primary male characters, Ethan Frome and Chris Baldry, back to the past as a way to heal their cumulative trauma, reach out for their suppressed desires, and recover the wasted possibilities of their lives. Ethan and Chris, through nostalgia, exist in a magic bubble, which provides the illusion that as long as they remain in the past, they cannot be hurt. Existing in the past, however, has dire consequences, for as Ethan and Chris attempt to recreate the circumstances of their youth, they also, as Freud theorizes, repeat, relearn, and relive their trauma. In this way, nostalgia is not only inauthentic, but also damaging. Mattie and Margaret, who at first appear to be saviors in Ethan and Chris’s nostalgic delusions by activating their life instinct, actually become angels of death, driving them toward a bleak future and their inevitable demise.

These texts not only describe a psychological journey; they also document a cultural moment. Both *Ethan Frome* and *The Return of the Soldier*, texts written at the genesis of modernism, express the anxiety about fragmentation of society that began with the industrial revolution and climaxes with World War I. Ethan and Chris, although separated by class, country, and seven years, exemplify unease about evolving gender roles and broken masculinity. They are pawns by which Wharton and West demonstrate the illusion of romanticism and its failure to act as cure. Nostalgia is only a temporary palliative, a placebo, masking reality.

### **Reflections of a Fractured Society**

Both *Ethan Frome* and *The Return of the Soldier* juxtapose the possibilities of the past with the hopelessness of the future by creating rifts in time and imagination for their characters. This contrast, when explored through the lens of nostalgia in modernist literature, is often explored through temporal ambiguity. In his article on nostalgia and modernism, critic Randall Stevenson argues that nostalgia is “a key component of twentieth-century literature” and that “a compelling factor in the twentieth century’s literary nostalgia is simply the scale and nature of the disasters it experienced” (138). As Suzette Henke notes, “modernists were fascinated with the disjunction between internal and external time” and Wharton and West explore temporal ambiguity as a way of showing the disjuncture at large in the beginning of the twentieth century (161). Chris, as a British soldier in World War I, has lost his memory and believes that he is twenty-one again and still in love with Margaret Grey (née Allington), who is of the lower class. He erases the past fifteen years of his life, including any knowledge he has of his wife or his dead son. West uses amnesia

as a time machine to bring Chris back to a period in his life when his possibilities were ahead of him and he was not burdened by the constraints of Edwardian masculinity.

Likewise, Wharton fiddles with time in *Ethan Frome* where the bulk of the story is the narrator's imagined analepsis of Ethan's life. Ethan's thoughts are really the narrator's thoughts projected onto Ethan in a story about what might have caused Ethan's current circumstances. Ethan never explicitly tells the narrator his story. Instead, the narrator has to extrapolate pieces from the townspeople and pair them with his minimal interaction with Ethan. The narrator has "the sense that the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps" (11). Instead of asking Ethan his story during their long, snowy ride in Ethan's carriage, the narrator instead uses his imagination to piece together Ethan's story. Upon entering the Frome house, the narrator notes that "it was that night that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story" (19). This sentence concludes the narrator's frame and is followed by two lines of ellipses, indicating missing information. The story is as much about the narrator's anxiety about the shifting landscape and workforce as it is about Ethan's. The narrator sees in Ethan an older man who could have been an engineer like him, but who missed his opportunity and instead is stuck in the past, living with the trauma of the "smash-up" everyday. Ethan is a living reminder of how easily one can become caught in the past, and become obsolete. Ethan's story becomes a cautionary tale for the younger generation about the dangers of looking to the past as a way to move forward.

In addition to experimenting with time, Wharton and West also conducted “formal experiments with limited point of view and non-linear narration, thematic experiments in the representation of memory, sexual desire, and the micro-detail of everyday experience,” hallmarks of modernist literature (McKay 125-6). Critic Jennifer Haytock notes that “Literary modernism historically excludes [Wharton]... because the established definition of modernism has been built around a masculinist vision of art and the individual” whereas Wharton “was interested in women’s lives and the forces that shaped them” (1-2). In this way, Wharton’s contributions to modernism reflect the kind of cultural work that Jane Tompkins argued for about the nineteenth century American domestic novel. Tompkins, in *Sensational Designs*, says that the “popular domestic novel . . . represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman’s point of view; that this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, resourcefulness” (124). Although these texts are not considered domestic novels, Wharton and West skillfully combine the psychological underpinnings of modernism while also successfully navigating the tension of the masculine and feminine to represent larger social issues and deliver a critique on contemporary society. Wharton, in *Ethan Frome*, frames a story about a broken “masculinist vision” in a domestic setting, effectively weaving together these tensions to explore greater societal fragmentation in the microcosm of the Frome household. Similarly, Rebecca West brings World War I from the Western Front to the home front when she explores Chris’s lost masculinity and its effects on the women waiting at home for him. Jenny and Kitty are “like most Englishwomen of [their] time . . . wishing for the

return of a soldier” (West 5). They wish not for the return of a husband, or the return of a beloved cousin, but a soldier, a man who is their protector, who embodies the masculine ideals of upper-class English manhood. However, what returns is a broken figure who destabilizes everything they know to be true about the world.

Technological determinism also plays a large role in creating an environment in which Ethan and Chris have little to no control over their own futures. As Robin Peel suggests about *Ethan Frome*, “Inscribed in this novel are debates about technological determinism, the belief that changes in technology provide the dominant force in society and exert a far greater influence on societies and their processes than anything else” (134). In *Ethan Frome*, modernity has largely bypassed Starkfield as new modes of transportation, instead of connecting communities, create larger rifts. As the narrator explains, the “day of trolley, bicycle and rural delivery, when communication was easy between the scattered mountain villages, and the bigger towns in the valleys” has given way to the abandonment of the mountain villages in favor of the bigger towns (11). The narrator himself works at a powerhouse in Corbury Junction, the latest technology to eclipse the waterpower that moves Ethan’s outmoded sawmill. Starkfield and its residents become stuck in the past since the greater community no longer has a need to pass through. As Ethan explains to the narrator, “We’re kinder side-tracked here now, but there was considerable passing before the railroad was carried through to the Flats” (17). Starkfield, instead of being brought into the fold of modernity, is left behind, and its outlying residents, particularly the Fromes, are the victims of this



technological determinism. The disconnection from technology, and therefore modern society, has cut the Fromes off with dire consequences, starting with Ethan's mother, who "after the trains begun running [. . .] never could get it through her head what had happened, and it preyed on her right along till she died" (18). While on one hand it would seem that the Frome's inability to adapt to modernity is the root of their trauma, Peel suggests that the failure to adapt does not cause psychological schism, but rather that the "failure to adapt is indicative of a psychological paralysis" (134). Ethan's lack of forward mobility does not cause his psychological trauma. Rather, his trauma occurs at the moment he is preparing to abandon his old life for one of intellectual stimulation. Failure to adapt to his surroundings only occurs after his parents turn "queer" and die and he becomes stuck in a loveless marriage. Ethan becomes stuck, and it is only when Mattie enters his life that he sees a way to move forward by recreating events of the past with different circumstances.

Whereas Ethan's environment is one of stagnation, Chris's is one of upkeep, maintaining a lifestyle that affords his family the luxury of indulging in the modern while living in a sphere apart from the industry that produces such technologies. Chris's environment, like Ethan's, is a juxtaposition of two different environments, but instead of a rural remote village and the larger burgeoning towns, *The Return of the Soldier* casts a wider class gap between the bucolic serenity of Baldry Court and the dingy, smoky outer-lying town of Wealdstone. Jenny notes that Wealdstone's "streets are long and red and freely articulated with railway arches, and factories spoil the skyline with angular chimneys" (44). The encroaching technology has

irrevocably spoiled the beauty in the microcosm of their world, and on a much larger scale, irrevocably spoiled the larger beauty of the world by making the technological horror of World War I possible. Jenny and Kitty strive to create an environment that shields Chris from this fractured world. As Jenny says, “here we had made happiness inevitable for him” (6). But their pleasant home environment cannot stop Chris from being called to war and there is nothing they can do for him when he returns home, just as broken as when he left, now publicly displaying his trauma instead of suppressing it.

The failure to adapt and keep pace with frenetic modernity is expressed in both of these novellas through traumatized masculinity, which destabilizes not only the lives of the men, but also those of the women. By looking to the past instead of the future, the men become icons of sentimentality and the women, in a traditional role reversal, keep the men in the present reality. This juxtaposition of romantic idealism with the realities of a bleak future express the skepticism inherent in modernism and the failure of romanticism to accomplish anything other than creating an illusion of happiness.

### **Masculine Trauma: Wasted Potential and Repressed Desire**

Psychologist Martha Stout defines trauma as “a circumstance that forces us to confront our mortality—in other words, an event that emphatically raises the specter of death in our minds” (57). For Chris Baldry, the “specter of death” is seemingly located on the front of World War I. However, as West unravels Chris’s past by having him revisit it, it becomes clearer that World War I and shell-shock are devices by which she explores how trauma builds and manifests over the course of

his life. An exploding shell on the battlefield is only the trigger that sends Chris back in time, but not the root cause of his memory loss. Rather, as Jenny and Margaret later determine, Chris's trauma is cumulative. He confronts mortality when his father dies, when his youth is robbed by industry, and again when his young son dies. War is merely the finally traumatic trigger. Ethan also has experienced similar cumulative trauma. He confronts death when his parents die, but also on a daily basis as he is reminded of his wasted youth and passionless marriage. Likewise, Ethan and Zeena have no children to carry on their genetic legacy, and therefore when Ethan dies it will also be the end of the Frome bloodline. Ethan's is a life lived in the shadow of death. Chris and Ethan have both experienced traumatic losses, but if trauma is also approached as cumulative disappointment, then Ethan and Chris's situations mirror each other well.

Ethan's is a wasted life both when the narrator introduces him as an old and broken man, and also as the narrator imagines him when he is twenty-eight in the prime of his life. In conversations with the people of Starkfield, the narrator learns that Ethan "had taken a year's course at a technological college at Worcester and dabbled in the laboratory with a friendly professor of physics" (21). His studies are side tracked by his father's accident, which forces Ethan to return to the family sawmill not only to continue its economic production, but also to nurse his sickly mother. Ethan would have all reason to give up hope living in rural, isolated, and often-icy Starkfield, but Zeena arrives to take care of his mother and he regains hope of resuming his life after his mother dies. Ethan had hoped to sell the sawmill and move to a big town. He wanted "to be an engineer, and to live in towns, where there

were lectures and big libraries and ‘fellows doing things.’ A slight engineering job in Florida, put his way during his period of study at Worcester, increased his faith in his ability as well as his eagerness to see the world” (42). Ethan is a man with hope that his life has only been temporarily sidelined and will regain its course. He hopes to escape decaying Starkfield to take part in the technological and scientific advances that have become imperative to the advancement of modern society. Instead, Ethan is held solidly in the past, doomed to live out his life in the footsteps of kin who occupy the family grave plot. As he walks Mattie home passed the gravesite, he imagines that his deceased relatives jeer him. “For years that quiet company had mocked his restlessness, his desire for change and freedom” (32) Ethan’s adult life, from its start, is replayed as a hellish, deterministic remembering of his ancestors. He wholly believes in determinism, that his fate to be bound to Starkfield had been written before he was born.

Seeing nothing but despair as his future, Ethan undermines every chance he has to break free, believing escape to be impossible. There are moments when Ethan could have wrenched himself from the cycle of the Frome family fate, but he often makes decisions based on the good of others and not himself, constantly deferring his desires for what others want. Ethan, after all, did not have to return to the family farm to take care of his ailing parents. Instead, he could have hired a nurse and continued his studies. But instead he returns home and deprives himself of an education. Another opportunity for escape would have been to leave immediately after his mother died, but instead he marries Zeena because he is lonely. He imagines that they will have a smart life together, but when she becomes sickly he

realizes “the impossibility of moving her” (42). He could have exerted masculine power and insisted, but instead, he chooses to comply with her desires. When Ethan concocts the plan to run away with Mattie, he cannot bring himself to take advantage of Andrew Hale for the fifty dollars he needs to start a new life for them in the West. He worries not only about abandoning Zeena, but also about cheating people who had been kind to him. This is not to say that Ethan should have taken an immoral path, but to note that many of his roadblocks are self-constructed and deferential to needs and wishes of others. As such, Ethan’s own desires become repressed and form the locus of his trauma.

In addition to Ethan’s own moral compass, external economic forces also hold him back. When he returns to the farm after his father is kicked in the head by a horse, Harmon Gow explains that his economic situation is dire because “his folks ate up everything” and his father “gave away money like Bible texts before he died” (10). Since he abandoned his education, Ethan becomes reliant on the family sawmill as his source of income. First, he tries to sell it and, after buyers are slow in coming, he then uses the dying technology to create a wage for himself. Therefore, his economics are also deeply stuck in the past, unable to compete with the burgeoning technologies that he was excluded from due to his lack of education. When Ethan tries to run off with Mattie, economics also play a crucial role in his decision to abandon his plans. First, he does not have enough money saved and, as previously noted, refuses to take an advance from Andrew Hale knowing he will not be able to pay him back for sometime.

At first it might appear that the sledding accident that maims Ethan is the traumatic moment in his life that ties him to Zeena and Starkfield, but really the trauma is located not in this one event but in cumulative traumatic events and moments that add up to a life of missed opportunity and wasted potential. Ethan's trauma occurs before he even meets Mattie. Mattie is simply a device that Ethan uses to try and heal his trauma by recreating the past with a different woman, hoping for a different outcome. The sledding accident is a physical trauma that further cements Ethan's psychological wounds and represents the failure of looking back as a way to heal. On the other hand, Chris Baldry's trauma, on the surface, appears to have been a physical one, resulting in shellshock and his subsequent amnesia. However, while shellshock may be the catalyst for the trauma, it is not the source. Rather, Chris's root trauma is psychological and has accumulated over time, much in the same way Ethan's has.

Dr. Anderson, the psychologist called in to cure Chris, acknowledges that his memory loss is likely due to other traumas stemming from as far back as his childhood. He asks Jenny about Chris's mother and father, and Jenny responds that his father "always was a little jealous of him. His mother was not his sort. She wanted a stupid son, who would have been satisfied with shooting" (81). Chris, even as a child, defied his parent's expectations of wanting more than the life they thought appropriate for him. To want a "stupid son" is to want a son who will unquestioningly adopt the social mores and values of his class and produce children who do the same. Chris was expected to be happy with the life that his parents provided him but instead continues to long for a different kind of life, a life that will

allow him to marry below his class, a life that does not depend on his ability to exploit the lives of others to make money, and a life that takes into account what he wants instead of blindly accepting one that has been handed to him.

Chris's unhappiness appears largely to stem from a discrepancy between his family's expectations and his unacknowledged desires. His masculine identity as an upper middle-class white male is defined by his ability to maintain the family fortune and keep his wife in a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption. As a youth, Chris is called back from his Uncle Ambrose's house near Monkey Island by his father and asked to go to Mexico because he had to "keep the mines going through the revolution, to keep the firm's head above water and Baldry Court sleek and hospitable, to keep everything bright and splendid save only his youth, which after that was dulled by care" (53). In leaving Monkey Island, Chris is plucked out of his youth into an adulthood that he did not choose, but was rather assigned to him by his class and family.

Much earlier in the text, however, we learn that part of the reason Chris had to continue the family business and not seek out Margaret was because his father died and he had to take over his responsibilities. Jenny notes, "First of all, at his father's death, he had been obliged to take over a business that was weighted by the needs of a mob of female relatives who were all useless either in the old way of antimacassars or in the new way with golf clubs. Then Kitty had come along and picked up his conception of normal expenditure and carelessly stretched it as a new glove on her hand" (8). Chris's trauma is largely tied to his economic identity as a white, upper-class man who provides for his family. His economic circumstances

outline his life for him as if he had no choice. Then, in loving Kitty, he is further trapped by his economic circumstances in order to keep her satisfied in a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption. Masculinity, therefore, in *The Return of the Soldier*, is largely defined by how a man is able to provide for his family, largely subscribing to Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*:

The head of the middle-class household has been reduced by economic circumstances to turn his hand to gaining a livelihood by occupations which often partake largely of the character of industry, as in the case of the ordinary business-man of to-day [...] It is by no means an uncommon spectacle to find a man applying himself to work with the utmost assiduity, in order that his wife may in due form render for him that degree of vicarious leisure. (68)

Chris has been expected to produce and display his wealth through Kitty, who has been more than happy to take on the role of consumer. Chris, however, has received little vicarious joy in watching Kitty and Jenny enjoy the life he has provided for them. Instead, he has been silently suffering, wishing not for a life in which wealth is displayed conspicuously, but for one in which his spiritual desires are met. He is deferential not only to his wife and cousin, but also to larger social expectations of a man of his class.

Larger societal expectations define how Chris expresses his masculinity. In the life that he cannot remember, he does nothing to subvert these expectations. However, his amnesia, which removes this societal pressure, is in itself a subversion of conventional masculinity, albeit unconscious. His character in particular is marked by a rather "amazing goodness" that Jenny and Kitty consistently remark on, which, by their standards, means not only that he provides, but also that he does so without complaint (6). When they remark on his goodness, what they really remark



on is how well he has obeyed gender roles without complaint and seems to affably hold up expectations. At the same time, however, Jenny as well as Kitty, acknowledges that they have worked to make Chris happy, suggesting that if they did not contrive an experience for him he would have been unsatisfied. Jenny remarks of Baldry Court, “we had made a fine place for Chris, our little part of the world that was, so far as surfaces could make it so, good enough for his amazing goodness” (6). Jenny acknowledges that they have worked hard to construct a set of circumstances that would delight him, yet they are mostly external pleasures bought with money. Therefore, Jenny and Kitty fail to understand Chris’s real desires because they only speak to material happiness and the appearance of happiness, but not to happiness on a spiritual level.

Margaret, of course, sees right away why Chris would have had difficulty finding happiness at Baldry Court. She comments to Jenny, “‘It’s a big place. How poor Chris must have worked to keep it up’” (56). Margaret, as part of the working class, is the only one among the women capable of calculating the amount of work it took to amass such luxury. Unlike Jenny or Kitty, she understands how money is made and realizes that Chris must have worked tirelessly to bring Baldry Court to its current stateliness. Jenny is shocked by Margaret’s comment, but ruminates, “No one had ever pitied Chris for the magnificence of Baldry Court . . . [Margaret] revealed the truth that although he did indeed desire a magnificent home, it was a house not built with his hands” (56). While Jenny is able to understand Chris’s desire to a certain extent, that of creating something himself, she is incapable of understanding how Margaret is the one who is able to surmise the extent of Chris’s

pain. While Dr. Anderson himself can do nothing to cure Chris, he seems to be correct in his diagnosis of why Chris lost his memory. He posits, “There’s a deep self in one, the essential self, that has its wishes. And if those wishes are suppressed by the superficial self—the self that makes, as you say efforts and usually makes them with the sole ideas of putting up a good show before the neighbours—it takes its revenge” (79). Since Chris was around twenty years of age, he has put his own wishes and desires on hold to “put up a good show.” He has negated his essential self as a sacrifice for the good of his family. Therefore, he reverts to a time when his essential self was still intact and attempts to regain control of his own life without the needs of others pressing down on him.

### **Revisiting the Past, Reliving the Trauma**

Although Ethan and Chris’s traumas appear superficially different, they stem from the similar sources—wasted potential, lost youth, and expressions of adult masculinity that uphold the dominant ideology. Therefore it is not a stretch to imagine that the way they choose to heal their trauma is to revert to the past and try to recreate it, hoping for a different outcome that is no longer possible in reality. They seek a romantic cure to modernist problems, falsely thinking they can escape their circumstances by starting over. Instead of moving forward, Ethan and Chris attempt to heal their wounds and ignore their trauma with nostalgia, a type of imaginary past remembered sweetly instead of bitterly. As Fred Davis explains in his sociological study of nostalgia, *Yearning for Yesterday*, “Nostalgia is from the Greek *nostos*, to return home, and *algia*, a painful condition—thus, a painful yearning to return home” (1). And while Ethan and Chris do desire to return home,

their desire is, as Stewart noted, “a sadness without an object” (23). The homes that they seek don’t exist and never did. Ethan, in trying to recapture his youth, attempts not to return to a physical home, but to a state of his life in which he is empowered to embrace his masculinity and sexuality, a path he believes will lead to a forward progression and a life with love and children. In this new life he will not be stagnant, but engaged. Likewise, Chris, as a soldier certainly seeks to return to his physical home and escape the war. Yet he expects that this physical home will also double as the metaphysical home of his youth, where his love resided with Margaret.

The problem with nostalgia is that “like any form of narrative, it is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, the past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack” (Stewart 23). Ethan and Chris seek a past that they have created in their minds, one that can never be realized because it was not real in the past and cannot be real in the present or future. For both of these men, whose trauma lies in the wasted possibility of their youth, returning to their youth seems the only way to move forward and build their own lives. However, as they attempt to recreate their past, they will continue to feel a “lack” due to the incongruence of their imagination and reality.

Nostalgia is a special kind of remembering, one that is both deeply personal and sentimental. Therefore, it seems incongruous that modernist texts would spend so much time looking back to the past with a rosy, romantic light. Nostalgia, however, is a powerful modernist device as explained by Davis who argues that it “is a past imbued with special qualities, which, moreover, acquires its significance from

the particular way we juxtapose it to certain features of our present lives" (13). Therefore, contrasting the bright past with a bleak future while at the same time demonstrating nostalgia's failure is an effective narrative technique for analyzing and critiquing the fragmentation of the early twentieth century. For Ethan and Chris, it is not so much that their youth was picture perfect, but that their youth, compared to the bleakness of their present and future, offered so much hope and potential. As Stewart comments "nostalgia is the desire for desire" and Ethan and Chris's strongest desire is to experience a time when they were the objects of passion and felt passionately for another (23).

While the tone of Ethan and Chris's retreat to the past is tinged by sentimental nostalgia, Sigmund Freud's theories of repeating traumatic events add a psychological framework to their subconscious actions. Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principal* and "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" noted that often patients who have experienced trauma, instead of remembering the events of the past, repress them and then act out the events again. He says, "[the patient] is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past" (*Beyond* 12). Repeating and acting out events is the coping mechanism that Ethan and Chris subconsciously employ to alleviate their trauma. "Repetition, the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure," according to Freud (*Beyond* 30). This pleasure derives, perhaps, from the patient's belief that a different outcome is possible or simply that they are recreating happy events. However, there is also the possibility that the experiences he attempts to

recreate are traumatic ones, forcing him to relive or relearn them with the same, or more serious consequences. Freud notes, “The compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed” (*Beyond* 14). Ethan does not realize the danger in trying to recapture his youth with Mattie because he does not realize that he is repeating the past, and hoping for a different outcome. Likewise, Chris cannot know that in losing his memory, he will have to re-experience each of the traumas that he attempted to erase.

Ethan sees in Mattie all the hope and promise of the life he could have had. Instead of looking to the past and remembering it better than it was, Ethan attempts to imagine a time that could have been if he had chosen differently, and also to recreate that time. Mattie, for Ethan, is a way to start over, and in her promise of youth, he believes that he can. However, Cynthia Griffin-Wolff notes, “At first, Mattie Silver seems different, the embodiment of sexual promise. Yet a careful reader will note that this promise is largely a figment of Ethan’s imagination—a longing nourished with characteristic silence and a hope that can be sustained because it is never put to any test” (239). Although Mattie sexually excites Ethan, he chooses not to act on his desire, allowing the scenario that he has created in his mind to remain rosy instead of real. Wharton writes, “Their evening together had given him a vision of what life at her side might be like, and he was glad now that he had done nothing to trouble the sweetness of the picture” (55). Because Ethan’s relationship with Mattie largely resides in the realm of “inauthentic” nostalgic imagination, it does not

have to be tinged with the real troubles that occur in relationships (Stewart 23). His fantasies of their relationship, therefore, provide an escape for his actual life and his passionless marriage to Zeena. Ethan's hopes are created on false scenarios as he attempts to imagine the possibilities rather than the inevitabilities. On the evening that Zeena is out of town, Ethan and Mattie spend an evening at home together, play acting as husband and wife, which allows Ethan to indulge in fantasies about how his life might be if he was coupled with Mattie instead of Zeena. For example, Ethan, after Zeena has left, pretends that he and Mattie are married. Ethan "set his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evenings thus and would always go on doing so . . ." (51). When speaking of Ethan's imaginary relationship with Mattie, Wharton is careful to use ellipses to denote the absence or continuation of something. I would suggest the ellipses in this case are used to signify Ethan's imagining the possibilities of his life with Mattie. By the time Ethan is twenty-eight, he feels that most of his youth has been wasted. However, by loving Mattie, he sees the possibility to start over again. If Ethan left Zeena for Mattie, he would have to leave Starkfield because of the scandal it would cause. He imagines not only being with a woman who sexually excites him, but also moving out of his icy climate and going west where no one knows him and he can start over.

Whereas Ethan attempts to recreate his life with a younger version of Zeena, Chris is actually transported back in time due to his amnesia. Chris, instead of choosing a new partner, seeks out his former lover Margaret because he has erased the past fifteen years of his life. His amnesiac shellshock acts as a time machine, transporting him to a time when the possibilities of his life were still within his

grasp, to a time when, had he chosen differently, the outcome also might have been different. In losing his memory and believing that he is twenty-one years old, Chris can still choose Margaret and make his life right. This, of course, is impossible, because although he is transported, the rest of the world remains temporally intact. Margaret has moved on and gotten married. Kitty is deeply wounded by Chris's erasure of her. Chris's amnesia has left collateral damage in his wake that the women wish to repair in order to set their own lives right, even if it means traumatizing Chris all over again.

Nevertheless, Chris's reliance on nostalgia as a coping mechanism is easily understood through his characterization. Although he is supposed to be the epitome of English masculinity and a soldier, Jenny characterizes him as a romantic hero who never lost his sense of childhood. Jenny notes. "He thought that the birch tree would really stir and shrink and quicken into an enchanted princess, that he really was a Red Indian . . . and he expected these things with a stronger motion of the imagination than the ordinary child's make believe . . . I was aware that this faith persisted into his adult life" (7-8). Chris, who is expected to be a thoroughly modern man, has always felt that the extraordinary, the romantic was possible. Therefore, he is an ideal character to show the fracture between romantic idealism and modernist pessimism. Chris, who believes so much in romantic magic, which in his young adulthood manifests as love, at the end of his story is inevitably forced back into his life of violence and once again conforms to social expectation. He will not be allowed to reside in the past, therefore undercutting romantic idealism.

On one hand, retreating to a nostalgic past heals both Ethan and Chris, but on the other, it forces them not only to recapture the romantic parts of their youth, but also to repeat the trauma that has caused them to retreat in the first place, causing a paradox. By decentering his sense of time, Chris has created a scenario that makes repeating his trauma inevitable. He “does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (Freud, *Remembering* 150). His amnesia brings him back to happier times, but it also erases many of the traumatic moments of his life: the fight with Margaret that broke them apart, leaving to oversee the Mexican mines during the revolution, his marriage to Kitty, and the death of his father and son. It is not, as Kitty suggests, that Chris consciously decides to lose his memory, but rather that his subconscious tries to reboot, to take away the pain by restoring him to happier times. Instead of developing a new scenario of happiness, as Ethan does with Mattie, Chris tries to recreate one that has already existed by conjuring up his repressed desire for Margaret.

As Chris moves through the world with Margaret, Kitty, and Jenny as his guides, women who are fully conscious of the past fifteen years, they at once comfort him, but also present the facts of the past as reality, forcing him to re-experience his trauma. When in the care of his cousin Frank, Chris first learns that his father has died. He grieves the death all over again, or perhaps, for the first time. As a shell-shocked soldier, Chris no longer has to play the part of the stoic head of household and repress his feelings, as he might have when his father actually died.



Confronting this trauma again in his raw state allows Chris to fully embrace his feelings and come to terms with them. Chris also must learn that he is thirty-six, not twenty-one as he thinks he is. Instead of having his youth robbed by work, as it was the first time, amnesia simply sweeps fifteen prime year of his life away. Chris does not want to remember the trauma of that time, but subconsciously he will recreate, relive, or re-remember the traumatic events of those years leading up to his amnesia.

Perhaps the most important and complex trauma that Chris is forced to relive is the death of his son, Oliver. Believing that he and Margaret are still together, Chris negates his knowledge of Kitty, and therefore also of Oliver, whose existence is simply impossible without Kitty's. In the life he forgot, Chris fiercely clung to Oliver's existence. After Oliver's death, Chris was the one who wanted the room to remain a nursery, perhaps as a shrine to his dead child, or as a hopeful glimmer that there might be future children. In losing his memory, Chris must confront Oliver's death again. When Margaret presents him with the child's toy, Chris remembers Oliver's death and relives it. Once Oliver's death becomes a part of his conscious memory again, there is a chance that Chris may replay the situation over and over in the same way that a soldier who has experience shell-shock replays the scenarios of war after returning home. The reader, though, is never privy to Chris's thoughts during the narrative, and certainly not after, because the tension of the story ends with his cure. It is inevitable that he will return to war, that he will leave Margaret in the past, and forge on in a hopeless future with Kitty, that is, if he returns from the war alive.

Ethan also chooses to recreate past scenarios without realizing what he is doing. Instead of divorcing Zeena and striking out on his own, he can only see an alternative to his life in a marriage with Mattie, who happens to be Zeena's cousin. Because Ethan views Mattie as a rose-colored, nostalgic version of Zeena, he cannot see that she could become "queer" just as his mother and Zeena had become. Ethan ignores signs that she might not be the ideal wife he thinks she would be. For example, when Mattie's housekeeping falls short, Ethan scrubs the floor at night when he thinks no one is awake, only to be caught by Zeena (25). He imagines that "if she were to marry a man she was fond of the dormant instinct would wake." He first assumes that he is the right man, and then never questions why, if she loves him, her dormant domestic instinct has not awakened while she has been living with him (24). However, Ethan does not imagine that they will go west only for him to secure employment as well as scrub the floors at home. Rather, in Mattie, he sees the promise of a young wife who will give him physical satisfaction and children. He falsely believes in his masculine abilities to turn her into his feminine ideal. She is the life force he has been waiting for. However, instead of proceeding with his plan to run away with Mattie, Ethan instead causes an accident that turns her into a more severe version of Zeena, both in health and spirit. Recreating the past with different players only results in the same outcome for Ethan—a sickly, cantankerous lover that he must take care of. Fighting against his determined fate only leads to dire consequences, and what appears to be a new life is actually a path toward a hopeless future and inevitable death.

### **Women as Angels (of Death)**

*Ethan Frome* and *The Return of the Soldier* also typify modern anxieties in the way they explore the tension between masculinity and femininity and evolving gender roles. In many ways, *Ethan Frome* and *The Return of the Soldier* show the male side of an eighteenth-century novel of manners, in which the heroine wants to marry for love, but often settles for a marriage that provides her with economic stability. Wharton and West show the flip side to this story, presenting female protagonists, Zeena and Kitty, who have married for financial security without passionate love and are satisfied with the arrangement. The men, in contrast, wish they could have married for love and passion and seek to change their circumstances through infidelity. The men, therefore, identify women who are not their wives as activators of their sexuality or as Freud coined it, the life force. Conversely, they see their wives, Zeena and Kitty, as activating the death drive, pushing them toward the future and therefore toward their deaths. However, Mattie and Margaret, although they may at first appear to be saviors, also actively participate in driving Ethan and Chris toward death.

Zeena, being seven years older than Ethan, forms more of a companionate or even a mothering relationship with Ethan rather than a sexual one. When Ethan's mother gets sick, Zeena steps in to function as the maternal nurse figure and put him at ease in his role as a man. "She laughed at him for not knowing the simplest sick-bed duties and told him to 'go right along out' and leave her to see things. The mere fact of obeying her orders, of feeling free to go about his business again and talk with other men, restored his shaken balance and magnified his sense of what he owed her" (41). In the beginning, Zeena supports the dominant American

conception of masculinity, allowing Ethan to go back to what was perceived as man's work. His attraction to Zeena has nothing to do with sexual drive, or life instinct, but rather with her ability to relieve him of the feminine duties of nursing his mother so that he can attend to more masculine duties. He forms a relationship not with Zeena as a person, but rather with an idea of his own masculine independence as enabled by Zeena. The primary reason he asks her to stay is because he is "seized with unreasonable dread of being left alone on the farm" (41). His marriage to her fulfills the pleasure principal in the most basic way, not by actually giving him pleasure, but by removing dread. Naturalism has a hand in Ethan's decision, which he feels was not made of his own free will, but rather because winter offered only oppressive loneliness. "He had often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter" (41). The combined external forces of nature and a desire to conform to the dominant conception of masculinity are too much for Ethan to fight against, and he succumbs to a marriage with Zeena who does not ignite his life instinct.

It is not until Mattie comes to live with Ethan and Zeena that Ethan's latent sexuality is awakened. Mattie is seven years younger than Ethan, the inverse of his numerical relationship with Zeena. She is Zeena's younger, supple, fertile counterpart who ignites the fire that Zeena never did. Mattie is often described in blatantly sexual terms: Her "light figure" and "laughing panting lips" are a stark contrast to Zeena, who Ethan imagines asleep in their bed with "her mouth slightly open, her false teeth in a tumbler by the bed" (32). Ethan's feelings for Mattie are a "silent ache" unlike anything he might have felt for Zeena. When Mattie evades Denis

Eady's arm just after the dance, Ethan's heart "swung out over a black void [and then] trembled back to safety" (29). On their walk back to the farm, Ethan "longed to stoop his cheek and rub it against her scarf" (29). Ethan's attraction to Mattie fulfills the pleasure principal—igniting his life instinct to add progeny to the Frome bloodline. His marriage to older, likely barren Zeena, on the other hand, represents a tendency toward the death drive. Given that their marriage was based on her nursing his mother and never resulted in children, save words there is no evidence that they ever consummated their marriage. Therefore, Ethan's longing for Mattie is likely the first time he has experienced the intense instinctual drive to reproduce.

Ethan's relationship with Zeena is also emasculating whereas his relationship with Mattie allows him to perform the role of the confident older man who takes his protégé as his lover. Ethan "could show her things and tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling all that he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will" (23). Mattie helps Ethan gain confidence in his ability to be a thinking man who is the head of household and primary decision maker. While Ethan defers to Mattie's suggestion to drive the sled into the tree, Mattie also "yielded to the power of his voice" when he insisted on sitting in front (91). When the cat breaks Zeena's pickle dish that Mattie brought out even though she was not supposed to, Ethan takes charge and uses a "voice of sudden authority" that "completely reassure[s]" Mattie even though she has no idea what he has done to ameliorate the situation (49). Ethan's "soul swell[s] with pride" when he takes control of the situation and "except when he was steering a big log down the mountain to his mill he had never known such a thrilling sense of mastery" (49). Having never felt his

masculinity amplified with Zeena, Ethan “luxuriated in the sense of protection and authority which his words conveyed” with Mattie (51). Ethan feels he can not only teach the Mattie, but also dominate her. In his relationship with Mattie, Ethan is smarter, older, wiser, and more powerful, a traditional masculine power position with which he is comfortable.

In his relationship with Zeena, however, Ethan is submissive, bending to her wishes early in their marriage and deferring to her decision to turn Mattie out because he is afraid his desire for her will be exposed. When they were first married and had the option to move out of Starkfield, Zeena would not live in a place that “looked down on her”; had she moved to a larger city she would have “suffered a complete loss of identity” (42). Ethan, therefore, sacrifices his own desires and identity because his wife is unwavering in her assertion for herself. Zeena’s primary power over Ethan is that she is older than he is and not particularly impressed with the knowledge he attained in college, unlike Mattie, who hangs on Ethan’s every word and takes comfort in the idea that he could financially care for her, as he does now. Whereas Mattie is young and naïve, Zeena is mature and cunning. While at first Ethan worries that Zeena suspects his feelings for Mattie, noting that he’s taken to shaving every day, he eventually believes Zeena’s tale that Dr. Buck has prescribed hired help and therefore that they must turn Mattie out. While Ethan may be more intellectually inquisitive than Zeena, he is simpler in his desires and therefore cannot conceive that Zeena would be conniving enough to pretend to visit the doctor and hatch a plan to excise Mattie from their lives. Ethan, however, tells Mattie that he won’t let Zeena send her away and that ““she’s always had her way, but I

mean to have mine now” (67). Although Ethan’s plan is to defy Zeena, her emasculating force is too much for him. Zeena suspects that Ethan has developed feelings for Mattie and circumvents the potential for Ethan indulging in his fantasies.

While Zeena may seem cold and uncaring, her feelings of disappointment about her marriage come through when she discovers the broken pickle dish. She accuses Mattie: “you waited till my back was turned, and took the thing I set most store by of anything I’ve got [ . . . ] you’re a bad girl, Mattie Silver [ . . . ] I tried to keep my things where you couldn’t get at ‘em—and now you’ve took from me the one I cared for most of all” (70). The pickle dish is, metaphorically speaking, Ethan. Zeena, although she might not care for Ethan in a passionate way, still holds her marriage with sanctity. She is shrewd enough to send her husband’s prospective lover packing before he can do something foolish. In addition, Zeena has more at stake than Ethan. Without him, she has little to no economic stability as well as the shame of being left for a younger woman.

It would seem then, that Zeena, because she wishes to hold on to Ethan but does not sexually excite him, activates Ethan’s death drive. Mattie, on the other hand, because she sexually excites Ethan, activates his life drive and appears to be Ethan’s *savoir*. Because Mattie is young, there is a chance that she might be able to bear his children and give him a way back to the life he might have had. However, Mattie is actually leading Ethan toward death, and if Ethan had obeyed to Zeena and let Mattie go, he might have had a chance to one day take a hold of his own life and break the cycle of repeating his trauma. As Ruth Varnum tells the narrator, “if [Mattie’d] ha’ died, Ethan might ha’ lived” (96). Mattie, not Zeena, is the ultimate

source of Ethan's demise. Appropriately it is Zeena's image that offers salvation just before the smash-up. As he attempts to steer the sled into the tree Zeena haunts him, her "face, with twisted monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal" (91). Though Zeena's apparition is characterized as a monster, in this moment Ethan conjures her up because his life force has taken over. Seeing Zeena's face, Ethan steers off course, causing the disabling smash-up. Mattie is the one on the sled with Ethan, driving him toward his death.

Chris, on the other hand, is married to Kitty, a beautiful young woman who, by all conventional standards, should excite him. His desire for the older, bedraggled Margaret would appear to go completely against the pleasure principal. Chris's pleasure, however, is derived from the spirit rather than the flesh. He is a man made happy not by material goods, but by meaningful, fulfilling relationships, which we can ascertain from Jenny's narration, that he has never had with Kitty. Jenny, however, is an unreliable narrator, given her romantic feelings for Chris and her resentment of both Kitty and Margaret—Kitty for marrying a man she loves and Margaret for holding his love. Nevertheless, Kitty's behavior upon Chris's arrival does not signal that of a woman in love, but rather that of a woman in fear of losing everything she has.

Margaret is the unlikely activator of Chris's life force, given that she is thirty-five years old and "repulsively furred with neglect and poverty" (19). Unlike Ethan who must seek a younger woman to make him feel younger, Chris already believes that he is younger and that his lover, Margaret is still twenty. That she has physically changed is of no consequence to Chris because his desire resides in the realm of the



spirit instead of the physical. Pleasure is to return to a state of irresponsibility, before he became “completely reconciled to life” and gave up his notions of having “an experience that would act on his life like alchemy, turning to gold all the dark metals of events” (8). Yet, as Jenny states, “There had been, of course, no chance of his ever getting it” (8). Chris loved Margaret as a youth, before he was expected to be the man and uphold the prescribed economic duties of masculinity. His attraction to Margaret, therefore, is understandable in that loving Margaret encapsulates everything about the kind of man he hoped but was never able to be.

Margaret and Chris’s relationship transcends the physical and resides primarily in the realm of the spirit, allowing it to also transcend time. As Jenny notes, Chris and Margaret’s relationship is one in which “they are no longer conscious of the division of their flesh” (68). The first time that Margaret and Chris reunite, Jenny watches them from a window, expecting Chris to recoil at how aged and ragged Margaret has become. Instead, they embrace and Chris appears strengthened by Margaret’s touch. They hold hands and casually, as if commonplace, stroll toward the woods. Jenny reflects “how entirely right Chris had been in his assertion that to lovers innumerable things do not matter” (59). “Innumerable things,” in this case the age of the body, the passage of time, and the events that occurred during that time, should drive the couple apart, but instead they simply “do not matter.” Chris and Margaret are able to begin where they left off in Chris’s mind because theirs is a union fueled by love without the burden of social and economic expectation. Being of a different class, Margaret did not place upon Chris

the masculine expectation of keeping her in an upper class lifestyle. Her expectation was simply to love and be loved.

With the spirit as their foundation, Margaret and Chris forge different facets of their relationship that at times seem at odds with each other, including sexual attraction as well as a nurturing mother/child bond. Really, though, these facets work with each other to provide Chris with the kind of environment that Kitty could never give him—one that is supportive and calming without any expectations on his manhood while at the same time sexually charged and passionate. Before Chris sees Margaret again the thought of her makes him “unable to breathe, [and sends] the blood running under his skin” (24). Yet after they reunite, Margaret begins to take on more of a nurturing role, comforting him through his trauma. When they go out on a walk together Jenny watches the scene through the window and notes how “Chris lay there in the confiding relaxation of a sleeping child” (69). Margaret simply sits by his side and watches him as Jenny makes her way to take part in the intimate moment. When Chris wakes up, Margaret instructs him in a motherly way to go to the house to get warm. But Chris takes her hand and Jenny observes “it was evident that for some reason the moment was charged with ecstasy for both of them” (72). The caring and kindness mixed with the sexual gives greater depth to Chris’s relationship with Margaret as opposed to his relationship with Kitty, which the reader is never privy to, but which one can assume from her appearance and behavior is largely based on a sexual component. Chris and Kitty’s relationship likely has a quid pro quo genesis based on his masculine power to provide economically and her feminine power to provide him with physical pleasure.

Margaret is able to give more than just her body and does not expect Chris to provide an upper-class lifestyle. Therefore their relationship appears to be based more on mutual admiration, affection, and passion rather than materiality, sex, or status.

Kitty, much like Zeena, is portrayed as the unsympathetic wife who does not understand her husband's spiritual or physical needs. Jenny characterizes her as a petulant child who sulks and acts as if she is the one who is put out by her husband's trauma. She is a woman who often gets her way and who is treated delicately. For the first time, Kitty cannot control the situation with her beauty and grace, leaving her disempowered in a realm that she otherwise ruled. She takes Chris's memory loss as a personal rejection of her and not a wound of his own. When Chris first comes home and Kitty introduces herself as his wife, Chris bends to kiss her but stops. Kitty, instead of understanding his anguish and distress, "with a toss, like a child [says] 'Well, if you don't want to, I'm sure I wouldn't for the world!'" (24). Kitty is unable to see past her own hurt and understand Chris's trauma. If she did try to understand it, she might have to acknowledge the role she played in it; instead she chooses to uphold the status quo by playing the victim.

That is not to say that Kitty is not also a victim. Often, critics overlook how Chris's trauma affects Kitty, instead choosing to focus on his relationship with Margaret and Jenny. Jenny's relationship with Chris remains almost unchanged after his memory loss because their familial love for each other began when the other was born. Since their kinship is bound by blood and they had not experienced a traumatic break in the time that Chris cannot remember, their relationship is

unaffected. Margaret gains her lover back, in spirit if not wholly in body. While the situation for Margaret might be confusing, she does not lose anything or anyone. Kitty, on the other hand, has lost first her son and then her husband. Kitty's trauma rivals that of Chris's, but hers goes wholly unacknowledged. After Margaret explains to Chris the events of the past fifteen years, including his marriage, and Chris explains that he knows "it's all right," Kitty jabs back, "You mean, I suppose, that you know I'm your wife. I'm pleased that you describe that as knowing 'it's all right,' and I'm grateful that you have accepted it at last on Margaret's authority. This is an occasion that would make any wife proud," (61). Kitty's "low pitch of violence," as Jenny describes it, is completely justifiable given that her husband has just taken his former lover's word as authority over his wife's, and with his wife fully aware of his intimacy with another woman. Jenny at this point realizes that "this was no pretence and that something as impassable as death lay between [Chris and Kitty]" (61).

Kitty, if Chris cannot be cured to remember their life together, will lose her life as she knows it. Jenny will continue to be his cousin, but Kitty will be turned out as a stranger. Therefore when "Kitty lay[s] like a broken doll, face downward on the sofa with one limp arm dangling to the floor, or protruding stiff feet in fantastic slippers from the end of her curtained bed," her suffering should not be construed as less important than Chris's suffering (61). Kitty, unlike Chris, has no one to confide in. Jenny, while she sympathizes with Kitty, loves Chris passionately and would rather see him happy and fulfilled, even if that means that means sacrificing her way of life for him. Margaret and Chris have each other and their own special world that excludes everyone else. Margaret is perhaps Kitty's greatest sympathizer, given that

she understands that if Chris is not “cured” then he will never acknowledge Kitty as his wife. Kitty’s emasculating, emotionally violent behavior toward Chris therefore serves as a defense and coping mechanism to express her own trauma; she hurts him because she is suffering and has no other outlet.

Further complicating the tension of the love triangle between Chris, Margaret, and Kitty is Jenny, who at first appears to be an objective outsider, but, through her reaction to Chris and Margaret’s relationship, exposes herself as anything but. Jenny hides a deep passion for Chris and her life is ruled by jealousy of other women who love her cousin, a man she can never have but desperately desires. Jenny’s pain also goes wholly unacknowledged throughout the book because she has no legitimate claim on a sexual relationship with Chris. Therefore, her cause throughout much of the story is to, like Margaret, ensure his emotional wellbeing and happiness, the one area where she can connect with Chris without a taboo. Jenny, instead of emasculating Chris, inflates his masculinity and couples it with her longing. The pain she experiences is expressed as intense jealousy. In spying on Margaret’s interactions with Chris, Jenny comments, “I was physically so jealous of Margaret it was making me ill” (57) and “I was stunned with jealousy” (63). In deciding what is best for Chris, to continue to indulge his amnesia for the sake of his happiness or to bring him back to reality, Jenny is ambivalent. If Chris returns to his normal mental state, then Jenny can continue participating in his life, being close to him and adoring him yet never fulfilling her own desire. Chris will be less happy, but Jenny will be able to indulge in her desire for him in small doses. If Chris remains in the past, then he is wholly given over to his passion for Margaret,

cutting Jenny out of his life. Jenny would no longer play third wheel, but Chris would be happy and would be safe from war.

Jenny's relationship with Chris prior to his memory loss is in many ways parallel to the relationship that Ethan envisioned with Mattie before Zeena cast her out of the house. Ethan hopes to remain married to Zeena while still having Mattie nearby so they could maintain intimacy. Jenny wishes to continue having a similar arrangement with Kitty and Chris; the couple will remain married, but allow Jenny to participate as a bystander. The difference in relationships, however, is that Mattie and Ethan's feelings for each other are reciprocal, whereas Chris does not return Jenny's feelings. Also Zeena is highly aware and threatened by Mattie, whereas if Kitty acknowledges Jenny's feelings for Chris, she does not let on, or does not care because she knows that Chris does not reciprocate her feelings. Margaret, on the other hand, seems to acknowledge the feelings that Jenny has for Chris, perhaps because Margaret knows her relationship with Chris is just as illicit as Jenny's relationship with him, or because she knows what it is like to want him, but not be able to have him. Likewise, both Jenny and Margaret are interested in Chris's emotional and spiritual wellbeing and therefore are emotionally tied to each other. In parting for the last time just before Margaret administers her cure, the two women share an intimate kiss that demonstrates kinship with each other forged through their love for Chris. "We kissed, not as women, but as lovers do; I think we each embraced that part of Chris the other had absorbed by her love" (88). Sharing physical intimacy—as women who both love him and desire him but cannot have

him—is the only outlet they have for expressing their passion and having it reciprocated.

### **The Failure of the Romantic Cure**

In attempting to use nostalgia as a cure to their trauma, Chris and Ethan try to recapture a period of their lives when they were still in control of their own destinies. The women in their lives, however, largely have a different agenda, and that is to cure them of the notion that living in the past is possible. The women, therefore, are drivers of modernity and representative of the uncontrollable forces pushing through an old way of life to make way for the new, even if the new is upsetting and tragic.

In Ethan's case, both Mattie and Zeena are at opposite ends of what they perceive to be Ethan's trauma and how to cure it. Mattie, because she reciprocates Ethan's love, tries to help him find happiness by offering to run away with him. When a lack of funds prevents them from carrying out their plan, she then tries to cure him by proposing that they kill themselves by sledding into the big elm tree, "'so [they'll] never come up any more [ . . . and will] never have to leave each other any more'" (89). While at first Mattie appears to be his savior, the one who will awaken his life drive and give him another chance, she is really leading him toward death. The external forces of modernism are constantly driving against Ethan. If Ethan had a chance to be saved, to run away with Mattie, and to start his life over again, *Ethan Frome* would have been a sentimental, romantic work. But the cold, hard grip of reality takes hold of the story and forces Ethan not to look back and

wish for what might have been, but to look forward into a future that is an amplification of the bleak one he was already destined to live.

Zeena, through the course of the story, appears only to activate Ethan's death drive by keeping him in a dead-end relationship and the icy, remote town of Starkfield. However, in trying to turn Mattie out of the house, she too attempts to act as Ethan's *savoir*, understanding that it is foolish for Ethan to rely on Mattie to make him a younger man and start over. She sees the impossibility of the relationship between the two and interferes before Ethan can attempt to abandon her. During his suicide attempt, Ethan even sees Zeena's face and it steers him off course. Ethan thinks that by committing suicide with Mattie he is defying Zeena. He finally takes charge of his own life and attempts to end it as the only way to break free. Zeena could not realize that driving the lovers apart would make them attempt such a desperate and dramatic escape. Because her plan backfires, she too, without realizing it, also activates Ethan's death drive and sends him coasting into a tree as he tries to end his and Mattie's lives.

The irony of the situation, of course, is that Ethan does not end his life, or Mattie's, but Mattie will instead go on living with them forever, just as he envisioned. Ethan and Zeena will have to keep Mattie because the consequences of their accident is not death, but paralysis for Mattie and permanent physical disability for Ethan as well as broken spirits for both of them. Ethan, instead of moving forward, or even into a state of unbeing with death, repeats his trauma of being tied to Starkfield with no way out. Mattie also becomes a twisted, sickly, and unhappy woman, just as Zeena has become. The women turn "queer," (42) just as



his mother did, and the whole family is broken, just as his father left it. Ethan, as Freud suggests, simply repeats his trauma by trying to look back and recreate a new life. The danger of nostalgia is that the outcome from attempting to recreate a scenario can be just as bad or worse than the first time.

For the women of *The Return of the Soldier*, curing Chris is paramount to their existence. What is Chris if he is not the masculine center of their world? Does curing Chris mean healing his root trauma by letting him be happy and reside in his “magic circle” as Jenny calls it, or does it mean shocking him back to reality and actually curing his amnesia? Each outcome has different consequences for each party and Jenny is the one who straddles both sides. She at once wants to cure Chris and regain the stable masculine force she depends on and longs for, and at the same time she wishes to keep him safe, out of the war and happy in his devotion for Margaret. Jenny, at first, insists that Chris must be cured and asserts that Dr. Gilbert Anderson is the one who must do it (67). Jenny, like Kitty, simply wishes for their lives to return to normal. As Jenny sees the intimacy develop between Margaret and Chris, however, she slowly begins to change her mind. Unlike Kitty, who sees in Chris’s memory loss only the rejection of her and their life together, Jenny is able to understand the comprehensive pressure that has been put on Chris as a result of his gender and upper-class status. Now, seeing him in his current state of boyhood wonder, she realizes that the way he had been living was no way to live at all. As she says, “if madness means liability to the 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” (65). Jenny blames herself and Kitty for not providing

the kind of essential love that Margaret does. When Jenny says that Chris is “saner than sane,” she acknowledges that Chris’s search for a spiritual double is what is most important in the world, and also that she and Kitty have failed in their roles. If what Chris wants is essential love, which means leading a different life, Jenny recognizes that there may be no reason to cure him.

Jenny views Margaret not necessarily as the best love match for Chris, but rather as an enchantress who ultimately holds the power to his destiny. “While [Margaret’s] spell endured they could not send him back into the hell of war. This wonderful kind woman held his body as safely as she held his soul” (71). For Jenny, Margaret is Chris’s *savoir*. Only she can soothe his pain and keep him safe from war. At one point Jenny even imagines Margaret as another soldier saving Chris, as “someone carrying a wounded man from under fire” (59). If Chris remains in his eternal youth, he will be deemed unfit to fight and therefore, his physical safety is secured. “No more did [Jenny] see his body rotting into union with that brown texture of corruption which is No Man’s Land, no more did [she] see him slipping softly down the parapet into the trench” (71). What Jenny most wants is for Chris to be safe, for him to be loved even if it is not she who can do the outward loving. She convinces herself that it is possible for Chris to remain in his other world, out of time and space, and it does not matter to her that Chris will no longer be hers and Kitty’s.

Chris, although he is the masculine center of these women’s lives, ultimately is disempowered from making a decision about the rest of his life. It is the women who decide whether or not he should be cured, and then it is Margaret, the very

woman who was to be his *savoir*, who ultimately shocks him back to reality. She could have held him in his nostalgic delusions forever, but instead, delivers the final blow that snaps him back to the present by forcing upon him the memory of his dead son. Whereas Dr. Anderson is at a loss to cure Chris, Margaret brings him back to reality because she understands that Chris must relive his trauma in order to be brought back.

Kitty never questions what curing Chris means or whether bringing him back to reality is the right thing to do. Her personal happiness and economic status depend on Chris being able to perform his masculine duties. As Misha Kavka notes, "The problem of Chris Baldry's illness is not that it causes him any pain or discomfort . . . Rather the problem is that without the centering presence and financial support of their man, Jenny and Kitty's lifestyle loses its justification" (153-4). Therefore, Kitty's goal is to continue to mask the underlying trauma that caused his memory loss and ameliorate the symptom rather than cure the root cause. To cure the root cause would mean to release Chris from their relationship and his duty toward her as his wife, destabilizing her life entirely.

Margaret, like Jenny, tends toward letting Chris reside in his current state of "madness." As she tells Dr. Anderson, "'What's the use of talking? You can't cure him. Make him happy, I mean. All you can do is to make him ordinary'" (81). Margaret means that there is no way to cure Chris's trauma, but that his trauma may be healed if he is allowed to remain in his current state of happiness and leisure. As she suggests, Dr. Anderson will just "make him ordinary" and return him to the status quo of upper-class English masculinity, putting upon him again all of his masculine

demands, including that of a soldier. Margaret's skepticism toward a psychological "cure" for Chris's amnesia demonstrates West's mistrust of modern psychology. Much has been made of West's insistence that her novel was not about psychology. Bonikowski notes that "West herself made a point of distancing her novel from psychoanalysis, vehemently denying that Freud's theories inspired her story" (514). While West may indeed not have used Freud's theories to construct her story, the very root of it lies within psychology. West's rejection of Freud is evident in her characterization of Dr. Anderson, who cannot cure Chris. In removing the cure from the practice of psychology, a burgeoning field, West shows the failings of modern psychology to do any real good. While amnesia and shellshock are quite obviously deeply rooted in psychology, West might have rejected the notion that the greater injustices of the world could be cured at all, and certainly not through modern psychology. As Jenny later notes, she had "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" (78). Jenny's modernist realization cuts to the quick of romantic idealism, rejecting it in favor of bitter reality. Curing Chris through psychology is no cure at all because his trauma and the damage caused by that trauma remains. The only thing cured through truth is the protective "magic circle," which means dismantling Chris's delusions and returning him to his present reality. Therefore there can truly be no cure by turning to the past. There is only scarring and forging ahead to the future in spite of hopelessness and hurt.

Margaret and Jenny realize that there is no way to relieve Chris of his past trauma, and that all they might be able to do is keep him safe. Jenny feels “an ecstatic sense of ease. Everything was going to be right. Chris was to live in the interminable enjoyment of his youth and love. There was to be a finality about his happiness which usually belongs only to loss and calamity” (87). For a moment, she and Margaret truly believe that it is possible for Chris to physically occupy the present while mentally living in the past. Seeing Kitty, however, “who was the falsest thing on earth...remind[ed them] of reality” (87). While they want Chris to be happy, they realize the danger of allowing him to exist in a state of nostalgia. Jenny notes “if we left him in his magic circle there would come a time when his delusion turned to senile idiocy . . . he would not be quite a man” (88). For Chris to be whole and express his full potential of masculinity, he must live with his trauma and endure it. He must experience pain “or not be fully human,” as Jenny explains (87). She recognizes the impossibility of Chris living in his magic circle because he is an adult male and not a youth, and because they are adult women with responsibilities to attend to. She explains, “I knew that one must know the truth. I knew quite well that when one is an adult one must raise to one’s lips the wine of truth, heedless that it is not sweet like milk, but draws the mouth with its strength, and celebrate communion with reality, or else walk forever queer and small like a dwarf” (88). Chris, as the masculine center, cannot be “queer and small like a dwarf.” He must be restored to his position, even at the cost of his own happiness or his life.

As Chris is once again enmeshed in his life, he relearns all but one of the numerous circumstances of his trauma—the death of his young son, Oliver. Of

repressed trauma Freud says, “The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it” (*Beyond* 12). Oliver’s death is the last, and also most essential traumatic event that Chris must relearn to restore his memory. Although Chris has acknowledged his father’s death, his marriage to Kitty, and his breakup with Margaret, no one has yet reminded him of his dead son. As Kitty says, she “didn’t think it mattered” (82). But Margaret knows that it is ““a memory so strong that it would recall everything else—in spite of his discontent”” (81). Critic Steve Pinkerton argues that Margaret’s “own unique position as a mirroring survivor of loss” allows her to recognize how traumatic this event has been for Chris (2). He assesses that Margaret’s role in Chris’s cure is largely underestimated, claiming that “Margaret takes naturally and brilliantly to the job of psychotherapist” (6). She knows that just as Chris has been reminded of his other traumas, he must also be reminded of the loss of his son to complete the re-experiencing and bring the events to his consciousness. As Freud explains the psychologist’s role in curing those who have repressed trauma: “At first the analysing physician could do no more than discover the unconscious material that was concealed from the patient, put it together, and, at the right moment, communicate it to him” (*Beyond* 12). And this is precisely what Margaret does. She absorbs Chris’s repressed emotion, and, at the right moment, reminds him of it by presenting him with his child’s toy. She, who was Chris’s safe haven, now must be the one to shatter his magic circle from the inside, demonstrating that a romantic cure was never possible and merely a delusion.

One would think that Kitty, having been bent on violently disrupting Chris's happiness in order to punish him, would have lobbed the death of their child at Chris much earlier in the text to cause him further pain. But because Kitty also experienced that trauma, she cannot be the one to remind Chris. To remind him would also be to remind herself. Margaret has experienced a similar pain and can empathize, but she is not a particular part of Chris and Kitty's shared pain, which therefore makes her the ideal conduit to deliver such information. Furthermore, when Margaret identifies the cure, Kitty does not offer to remind Chris, nor does she elect Dr. Anderson. Instead, Kitty insists "'Mrs. Grey can do it now'" (82). If Margaret reminds Chris of this traumatic moment, then Chris might dissociate Kitty from the death of their son, and instead relate the trauma to Margaret, thereby bringing him back to the present, and also creating a rift in his feelings for Margaret.

When Margaret finally reminds Chris of his dead son, Jenny once again watches their interaction through the window and is able to instantly see the change in Chris's mannerism. "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" (90). Jenny describes him to Kitty as "every inch a soldier" (90). In restoring his memory, Chris is returned as the masculine center of their world, yet at the same time places his life in jeopardy by returning not to the bucolic setting of their country estate, but to the front lines of the war. As Jenny notes, "It recalled to me that, bad as we were, we were not yet the worse 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 . . . to No Man's Land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the

dead . . ." (90). Instead of allowing Chris to remain safely and happily in his nostalgic past, the women comfort him and force him to confront the present and relive his past trauma. In bringing him to the present, they force him to uphold masculine ideals and effectively sign his death sentence.

*Ethan Frome* and *The Return of the Soldier* typify modern fragmentation and a loss of innocence when they tear down the veil of romanticism to reveal the harsh realities of life. By juxtaposing romantic nostalgia with the certainties of the present, the novellas expose romanticism as a sham. In the end, Ethan and Chris are no better, and perhaps even worse, than when they first embarked on the endeavor to recapture their youths. Ethan, after his accident, is left to toil in Starkfield, attending to his sickly wife and also his paralyzed lover for the rest of his life. Chris, when he regains memory, is the same shell of a man who will forever have to put up a good show, if he ever returns from the war at all. In attempting to relive their youths so that they may salvage the wasted possibilities of their lives, Ethan and Chris relive, recreate, and relearn the cumulative trauma of their lives.

Masquerading as saviors, Mattie and Margaret seem to offer hope and the promise of restoring these men to the glory of masculinity by activating their life force. Yet, while the women upend gender roles by controlling the destiny of the men, they do so in a way that does not save them, but rather grabs the men from the lingering in the past and drives them toward the hopeless futures, and inevitably toward death. These texts exemplify that the forces of modernism are too great to rely on a sentimental illusion to cure societal fragmentation. Nostalgia can even be dangerous, as it serves no real purpose other than to provide a magic bubble in



which one feels protected, but which will eventually be destroyed because the bubble is imaginary. Recreating a sentimental past can never be a cure because time inevitably marches on.

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