

LEEN VANDENBERGEN

ART and
REALITY in
REBECCA
WEST'S
FICTION

JIB
BOSCH EDITOR

Art as opposed to Reality, Beauty as opposed to Ugliness, Construction as opposed to Deconstruction, War as opposed to Peace, Men as opposed to Women, Progress as opposed to Regression, Imagination as opposed to Common Sensical jarring, Stability as opposed to Chaos, Betrayal as opposed to Loyalty...

All these themes, which in fact prove to be universal, are present in Rebecca West's fictional work and critical work. A great part of it was written during the Interbellum period, between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II. However, her literary and journalistic activity continued all through the Cold War period. Her vivid comprehension of human nature made her a great writer and reporter when she was sent to cover the Nuremberg Trials.

She was one of the first suffragists, advocating for the women's right to vote. Although she was prone to defend women's rights in general, she was decidedly not a typical feminist writer. In her own words :

"I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is : I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat."

West bequeathed us with a characteristic voice, her true form, in which art and fact meet and keep faith with reality.



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WEST'S
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Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to present an analysis of three novels by Rebecca West which are related to each other in their themes and the view on the world they render.

Our choice of these novels was first based on their availability in Belgian bookshops. Later, when we ran down the English bookshops, we were able to make a more personal choice.

The Return of the Soldier (1918) is the first novel we analyzed. It is the novel Rebecca West is most famous for. It was adapted for the stage and also provided the material for a film.

The Harsh Voice (1935), a collection of four short novels was the second work subject to our analysis. It is generally recognized as a considerable piece of fiction, reminiscent of *Henry James*, in setting and in dealing with American and European culture. Although it is mostly considered to be much of an exercise in formal experiment.

The Fountain Overflows (1957) is the third novel we analyzed. It is different in style and tone from the two earlier works and critics have compared it to the work of *Charles Dickens* because of the great number of eccentric characters, the poverty which govern their world and because Rebecca West has, with this novel, looked back into the past, into the time of her own childhood. In this novel, the themes implicit in Rebecca West's earlier fiction come together and therefore it was the right novel to end this dissertation with.

In our analysis we were particularly concerned with characterstudy. We feel this to be the most interesting aspect of her novels, more so because West creates characters in motion, changing characters, round characters. In *A Visit to a Godmother*, she wrote: "*What I chiefly want to do when I write is to contemplate character: either by inventing my own characters in novels or short stories based on my own experience, or by studying characters in history, ancient or by preference, modern. This is an inborn tendency in me, I am sure, but various events have stimulated it.*"

The second aspect we discussed was a logical continuation of the first, namely the interaction of characters and their relation to each other and their psychology. To do so, we used *Mieke Bal's De Theorie van Vertellen en Verhalen* and her article *Methoden in de Literatuurwetenschap: er zijn geen feministiese methoden* from *Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies*.

Finally we determined the essence of these novels and put forward their message, what was finally being said. In other

words, we went after their theme, in West's language "*the moral statements*" being made in a story or a novel.

It should be pointed out that our choice to study character, psychology and the interaction of characters has been an entirely personal one. However, in order not to be too idiosyncratic we have drawn upon the theories of *Mieke Bal*, *Algirdas Julius Greimas* and *Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan* and do sincerely hope to have done some justice to Rebecca West's fiction.