

## **All Quiet on the Western Front**

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**Course:** HIST 434

**Instructor:** Dr. Judith Fai-Podlipnick

**Essay Type:** Book Review

*All Quiet on the Western Front* is the story of Paul Baumer's service as a soldier in the German army during World War I. Paul and his classmates enlist together, share experiences together, grow together, share disillusionment over the loss of their youth, and the friends even experience the horrors of death-- together. Though the book is a novel, it gives the reader insights into the realities of war. In this genre, the author is free to develop the characters in a way that brings the reader into the life of Paul Baumer and his comrades. The novel frees the author from recounting only cold, sterile facts. This approach allows the reader to experience what might have been only irrelevant facts if presented in a textbook.

This book is written from a perspective foreign to most Americans. Historically, American students are taught from a single perspective, that being the American perspective. This approach to history (the single perspective) dehumanizes the enemy and glorifies the Americans. We tend to forget that those on the opposing side are also human.

The author's main theme centers not only on the loss of innocence experienced by Paul and his comrades, but the loss of an entire generation to the war. Paul may be a German, but he may just as easily be French, English, or American. The soldiers of all nations watched their comrades die, experienced hunger, and even visited prostitutes. Paul is German, but his story is universal. The story is as relevant today as it was when published in 1929 because it is the story of more than war; it is the story of humanity.

The book begins with the death of Paul's friend. The men have, by this time, become almost desensitized to death. Kemmerich (the dying friend) owns a fine pair of English airman's boots. It is a forgone conclusion that Kemmerich will no longer require them. It is not petty greed, but pragmatism, which drives Muller's desire to have the boots. The troops' own equipment is ragged and worn, making anything in serviceable condition an improvement on what they have. As we find out in the story, not only are the soldiers' boots worn out, but the artillery of the German army is also worn out. This may symbolize that not only are the soldiers and equipment at the front worn out, but so is Germany as a whole. Germany was worn out and had no idea what was going to happen, just as the soldiers had no idea where the artillery shells would land.

Paul reminisces about his days in school and how he and his friends believed the indoctrination they had received from their schoolmaster. However, after experiencing war, Paul questions the fervent nationalism of the Germans. What has nationalism done for Germany other than destroy the country? In blindly following the words of his elders, Paul has achieved nothing except to become an old man at the age of twenty. Not only does Paul now question his schoolmaster's reasoning, but he also questions the ability of the officers superior to him. He seems to be asking, "Why? Is this worth it?" The question is answered, at least to Paul (whether he realizes it or not), when the officer who supervised his basic training arrives at the front. The officer is still trying to be a big man, but cowers in a corner when the shelling starts. Why has Paul been put into this position when even his leaders are unable to deal with the realities?

When Paul earns leave time, he immediately heads home. He has nowhere else to go, as he is still a young man. When he arrives home, he realizes that he no longer belongs. The town's citizens see him as a gallant warrior, and he is unable to tell them of the horrors he has

witnessed. The Nationalistic spirit of the town folk blinds them to the fact that Germany is not only losing the war, but (even though Paul and his cohort may still be alive), they too, are lost. Remarque alludes to this by showing us Paul's mother. The woman is dying (as is Germany), but she puts up a gallant (even if false) front. She, like Germany, refuses to publicly acknowledge the fact. The entire family (world) knows that she (Germany) is dying, but no one will admit it. Paul, with the wisdom of his premature old age, questions this deception. (Why do we continue to fight when the cause is lost? Is this silly pride worth the cost?) By asking these questions of himself, Paul becomes an outsider in his own home. He has lost his youth, his innocence, and his dreams. Paul is now an old man.

Even in the midst of destruction, one characteristic of man--the propagation of the species--survives. One day Paul and his comrades encounter a group of beautiful French women. When it becomes apparent that the women are willing to sleep with the Germans, Paul and his buddies devise a plan to visit the women. The men risk not only the ire of the German command, but also their lives to visit the girls. Though the women are prostituting themselves, the men act as if they are choosing a lifemate, a mother for their yet to be conceived children. In risking their own skins, the soldiers illustrate the indomitable spirit of humanity to survive. The man may perish, but mankind will survive, lost youth will again live in the next generation. Hopefully, there will be a next generation, even if they are the illegitimate offspring of unknown fathers and mothers. Hopefully, they will learn from their ancestors' mistakes.

The episode shows that we are, indeed, one people. Germans, French, English-- we are all people. If we can sleep together, comfort each other, and feed each other, why can we not live with each other? What is it in the human psyche that causes one nation to believe that it has some right to what another has? This question is not relevant only in the context of World War I, but

throughout the history of mankind, and sadly, well into our futures. Why can man not be happy to live his own life? Why must he believe he must dominate the lives of others? Why must he covet that which he does not possess?

Paul also shows the determination of man to survive when sent as an observer into No Man's Land. He loses his way and is forced to seek refuge in a shell hole. Unexpectedly, an enemy soldier enters the same hole. Paul, being the fittest and quickest, mortally wounds the other soldier. Paul then spends the day asking himself why it was necessary to kill the other man. He tells himself that he will apologize to the man's family and that he will help support them, but as soon as he leaves the shell hole he realizes that he will not. Again, Paul has become an old, desensitized man. Left alone, he can philosophize and seek answers and truths, but when he returns to the reality of war, the philosopher dies.

The final, important experience comes when Paul is injured. His injury symbolizes that the cause is truly lost, but his recuperation shows that it is still possible to heal the ills of the world. He again returns home, but it is chillingly obvious that the world has changed. The subconscious realization is that if the world is to learn any lesson from this war, it is up to the men on both sides (those who have become old men at age twenty), to survive, to pass on what they have realized, and not to let the philosopher die. However, Paul is pragmatic enough to realize that being a philosopher will lead to his ultimate destruction. He cannot be a hardened soldier and a philosopher at the same time. Even if the philosopher were to survive to become the social gadfly Socrates spoke of, humanity is unwilling to view itself objectively and to admit to its faults. Socrates was put to death for teaching the lessons which Paul realized he must teach. Paul; therefore, had to die.

Remarque's book is not only the story of a soldier in World War I, but it is the story of human history. Mankind will survive, even if illegitimately, but will it learn the lessons of its elders? Paul hopes it will and that his example will illustrate why it is necessary. Paul met his death as did Socrates, "with an expression of calm, as though glad that the end had come" (296).

The author does a remarkable job of drawing his readers into the story. The reader feels as if he knows Paul, has shared some of Paul's experiences, and privately philosophizes with Paul. Remarque also gives us historical insight into the plight of the soldier during World War I. Of this plight, Remarque writes from his own experience. Even though it is the German side he is describing, soldiers on both sides of the front shared the same experiences. Both saw death and destruction; both asked, "Why?" And both hoped for a better future. Innocence was lost on each side; hopefully, the wisdom of a premature old age might temper the exuberance of an overzealous youth.

*All Quiet on the Western Front* is written for a mass audience, yet the book has become larger than a work of pulp fiction. Young adults, adults, professionals in history and literature, rich and poor, German and American will all glean something from this book. For the young adult, it is an adventure story filled with the obligatory sex and violence today's youth demand. For the general adult reading population, it is a story of struggle, and a glimpse of what our (great) grand parents went through. It will help illustrate why they are (were) the way they are (were). For historians, Remarque describes how conditions really were, not just the sterile facts. For professionals in literature, the book offers a plethora of literary instruments. Remarque uses symbolism, allusion, foreshadowing, and others to tell a story that is grander than what is actually on paper. For all the preceding reasons, all college students should read the book. The

book will captivate the educated mind, and most importantly, will cause that mind to think and to question why things happen as they do.

Remarque also tried to teach his audience. Written within a decade of the end of the war, the book calls on those who forfeited their youth to the war not to allow time to hide what had happened. Time may heal all wounds, but the cause of those wounds must not be forgotten, nor allowed to repeat itself. The author is; however, pragmatic enough to realize that all will not learn the lesson; nevertheless, those who are willing to learn it will discover that the story has been told before, and without their intervention, it is doomed to be told again.

*Chuck Dellert is now a graduate student in the History department. Dr. Judith Fai-Podlipnik was his History professor.*

**Editor's Comments:** *This is a good example of a book review typically required in history classes. It is unbiased and thoughtful. Mr. Dellert explains the book and the time in which it was written in great detail, without retelling the entire story...a pitfall that many first time reviewers may experience.*