Christina Benedict

Dr. Rupp

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All Quiet on the Western Front

In his book *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque states that “this book is to be neither an accusation, nor a confession, and least of all an adventure.” This paper will explore Remarque’s intended message to the audience in response to World War I. The events of the book suggest Remarque’s wish for the realities of the war to be known, a shared connection of all soldiers in the quest for survival, as well as the effects the war had on men. For these reasons, Remarque includes graphic scenes in his book to better convey the horrors of the First World War.

Due to the use of propaganda in World War I, it was common in the European nations to have a disillusioned view of their nation’s state in the war. Remarque highlights the ignorance of the home front to the atrocities of the war by including stories of Paul’s time at home. Like every soldier, Paul Bӓumer, the story’s protagonist and narrator, is allowed a short period of leave from the war front. When Paul arrives home he is met with many questions from his father – questions that a soldier cannot answer without reattaching himself to his emotions. Paul encounters questions like “what are the trenches like?” “How are the spirits in the front line, excellent?” and “have you ever had a hand-to-hand fight?” Remarque uses these scenes to depict that the civilians at home are blinded to the horrors of the trenches. Little do the townspeople know that before he was even allowed to leave for home he had to be deloused, a problem so prevalent that it caused typhus to spread like wildfire among the trenches.

Paul’s visit home is also hindered by his father’s insensitivity to his experiences as a soldier. He urges Paul to continue to wear his uniform in public so that he can go visit his dad’s friends as a German soldier. While this request does show that Paul’s dad recognizes the honor he has brought to his family, it also suggests that the people on the home front cannot see the unwillingness of the soldiers to be immersed in war while on leave. Paul does not want to wear the uniform during his visit home because he wants to use those days to forget about the bleak, bloody trenches. However, it seems as though no one can relate to Paul in this way except for fellow soldiers – specifically those in Paul’s company. Because of this, Paul feels out of place when going home because his experiences have separated him from the others in his community. In this way Remarque again shows disconnect between the soldiers and the home front, as well as a strong brotherhood between the soldiers.

Remarque uses the Second Company to continually exemplify the support and connections the soldiers had with each other in World War I. Historically, the beginning of the First World War was celebrated with nationalism. Every man was encouraged to enlist, and every man shared a notion of heroism through their enlistment. However, the realities of war soon tainted this surge of nationalism amongst those in combat. Remarque presents the decreasing nationalism as a way to band the soldiers together. He includes a count of the number of men left in the Second Company as a way to put into perspective the amount of death the soldiers faced every day. Paul and his “brothers” begin to realize that death is quite literally all around them; in the landscape, in the trenches, and even within themselves. Remarque uses these details to show the ways in which the men rely on each other for support and survival.

In accordance with World War I being the bloodiest war the world had ever seen at this point in history, it seems as though Remarque found it necessary to explain the ways in which a soldier could survive. Paul explains that in order to survive a man must follow his primal instincts. In other words, when under fire, a soldier does not have time to form logical thoughts. His only reaction should be his first reaction. Paul even expresses that sometimes he would hit the ground even before shots were fired, only to be missed by a downpour of bullets. This depicts a dehumanized form of man, who in order to live, must begin to act solely on his animal senses. Remarque’s description of the living conditions in the trenches hint that survival is also based upon a man’s ability to disconnect from their former selves and feelings. Paul describes the trenches as fat filled, louse filled, dirty, ration-less places. The war front living conditions are similar to that of a pigsty, and in this way Remarque symbolizes that the soldiers are quite literally living the lives of animals. This in turn strips away the humanity of man, leaving soldiers to question what their post-war lives will consist of since they now face an emptiness within themselves.

The loss of “sense of self” amongst the soldiers of World War I is a major result of the experiences a soldier had while in combat. Paul states multiple times throughout the book that his generation will have nothing after the war is over as they were too young to have married already, and too old to reinvent themselves. Their return home would be painful in that it would only remind them of the lives they lead before the war, lives that they will not be able to get back. Remarque attempts to explain that some things cannot be unseen by using Paul as an inside look to the emotionless, “lost” person he has become due to the tragedies of war. Symbolically, he shows that Paul has outgrown his former life by incorporating the scene in which he tries on his civilian clothes and they no longer fit, rather they are too small. Paul fears that the men of his generation have lost their identity, and even claims that the soldiers will – and will always – see themselves as soldiers first, then men. The transition of the men’s spirit and hope to emptiness is shown throughout the book as Remarque includes flashbacks of Paul’s life and highlights of his liveliness as compared to the hopelessness shown at the end of the novel.

While *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a work of fiction, Remarque does not fictionalize the experiences of soldiers in the First World War. A clear goal of Remarque is to bring to light the gruesome truths of the war, as they were commonly misconstrued, to the home front through propaganda. It is highly presumable that Remarque states the book “is not an accusation, confession, and least of all an adventure,” because his intention is to depict the hell on earth that was World War I and to educate the masses on the unfathomable realities of the war.