All Quiet On The Western Front And The Road Back: The Consequences Of War On Young Men

One way journey to hell and back: An analytical study of how Erich Maria Remarque explores the consequences of war on young men and the subsequent hardships the central characters faced while having a cynical outlook on the world and trying to assimilate into post-war society in ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ and ‘The Road Back.’

Introduction

The Great War created an impact nobody could have foreseen. It lasted four hellish years but with the belief that the war would have finished by Christmas, it was impossible to consider the ever-lasting damage it would create. The world was irrevocably changed by the First World War. Harrowingly, a whole generation was lost. Yet it also saw men return home from four barbaric years on the front line. The men who survived were not those who had left. These men experienced the unimaginable, among them Erich Maria Remarque’s characters, Paul Bäumer in ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ and Ernst in ‘The Road Back’. ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ is narrated by nineteen year-old Paul who fought alongside his friends on the front line in France, who were persuaded to enlist by their school teacher, Kantorek. In ‘The Road Back’ Ernst and the men from his company return to Germany trying to readjust to post-war civilian life. Both Paul and Ernst faced struggles with their identity, mental health and view on the world due to the mental and physical trauma experienced during the war. By examining the two novels, I will look at how effective Remarque was in portraying the repercussions of war on Paul and Ernst. We see Paul lose hope and struggle to comprehend a world absent of constant violence whereas Ernst is haunted by his military ordeal. Surrounded by indifference and incomprehension, they fight a silent internal battle, trying to dream of a life beyond the front lines while struggling to re-adjust to their homes and normal life.

Chapter 1: The Impact of War on World View

Men were plagued by the effects of the war, and Remarque does not hold back in conveying their repercussions on Paul and Ernst. With the end of hostilities approaching, both men are battling their thoughts and feelings due to being exposed to the hardships of the front line. Paul and Ernst attempt to regain the optimism and strength with which they left to go and defend their country, but despite their greatest efforts they both remain a victim of their own agonizing thoughts revealing the disturbing truth of the war which led to warped views of life and the world.

It is established from the first chapter of the novel ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ that the characters have very little hope of surviving the war. When Paul and his friends visit a friend in a field hospital, the tone for the rest of the novel had been set. Kemmerich, a recent amputee, lies hopelessly in his bed waiting for death to embrace him “There is no longer any life pulsing under his skin…”[footnoteRef:2] when Paul tries to cheer him with the prospect of going home. However as Paul knows, the only way Kemmerich will be going home is in a coffin. Müller, having spotted Kemmerich’s expensive boots asks if he can swap them and if he will be taking

his boots home. However, the possibility of Kemmerich going home alive is unlikely and the pair of boots being needed is even more. [2: Remarque, E. and Murdoch, B. (n.d.), All quiet on the Western Front. (London: Vintage, 1996)]

“All three of us are thinking the same thing: even if he did get better he would only be able to wear one of them, so they wouldn’t be any use to him.”[footnoteRef:3] [3: Remarque, E. and Murdoch, B. (n.d.), All quiet on the Western Front. (London: Vintage, 1996)]

When Kemmerich does die Müller inherits the boots. However, the leather boots become a symbol of death as the novel progresses, foreshadowing the deaths of their successive owners; Kemmerich is the first to die, Müller the second and the passing of the boots occurs until the death of Paul. Although the boots appear as an item of clothing, the subtle meaning behind them reveals the inescapable nature of war. By choosing a mundane clothing item as a symbol of death, Remarque highlights the necessity and banality during war; you need to wear shoes on a daily basis, just like death is a prerequisite of war. It plays an essential role at the heart of any conflict. By using symbolism, Remarque effectively portrays the inescapable consequences of war- even if you didn’t die, those surrounding you would. Remarque uses the inevitability of death to highlight the hopelessness engulfing these men; and with no hope achieved from the outset of the novel explored through symbolism, it is evident that the characters’ chances of survival are low. The inevitable, constant prospect of death damages the men’s mentality; it would be hard to consider life without war. Death becomes a requirement, just like wearing a pair of shoes every day.

A key discussion in ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ further reveals the depths of the men’s despair. Prompted by the question “Albert, if you really got to go home, what would you do?”[footnoteRef:4] Paul and his companions discuss the idea of returning to school and poke fun at their schoolteacher, Kantorek, who persuaded them to enlist. However, the good mood diminishes as the men realise the harsh reality of their situation. Enlisting when they were only teenagers, the soldiers realise that they have nothing back home. They left their ordinary lives to go and fight relentlessly for a country that never had a chance to give them anything. Denied the usual opportunities offered to young men, their lives are now confined to the harsh environs of the frontline. This idea is shown when Kropp answers: [4: Remarque, E. and Murdoch, B. (n.d.), All quiet on the Western Front. (London: Vintage, 1996)]

“‘There isn’t any I fancy doing,’ Kropp answered wearily. ‘One day you’ll be dead anyway, and what have you got then? In any case, I don’t think we’ll never get home.’”[footnoteRef:5] [5: Remarque, E. and Murdoch, B. (n.d.), All quiet on the Western Front. (London: Vintage, 1996)]

Remarque is conveying several alternative meanings with this statement. Primarily, Kropp does not think he will live to see his home again. Secondly, Kropp does not think he will ever be able to recover from the war and see a life beyond the front lines. Thirdly, their lack of involvement and investment into pre-war society prevents the characters from viewing returning home as an inviting prospect. The damaging nature of war is thus emphasised; these men cannot envisage a life worth living beyond no-man’s-land. With the mood sullen and miserable, Paul’s own thoughts reveal how broken these men have become.

“Albert has put it into words. ‘The war has ruined us for everything.’ He is right. We’re no longer young men. We’ve lost any desire to conquer the world. We are the refugees. We are

fleeing from ourselves. From our lives. We were eighteen years old, and we had just begun to love the world and to love being in it; but we had to shoot at it. The first shell to land went straight to our hearts. We've been cut off from real action, from getting on, from progress. We don't believe in those things anymore; we believe in war."[footnoteRef:6] [6: Remarque, E and Murdoch, B. (n.d), All Quiet on the Western Front. (London: Vintage, 1996)]

These men, or boys, are products of the horrors of the modern world. The war has not only physically but mentally damaged them. Stripped of hope or aspirations for the future, they will forever be rotten goods in a post-war world. The ceaseless torment of the war forces Paul and his friends to flee from their own bodies and lives, thoughts becoming suicidal. Remarque creates this impression with the above list stating what the men no longer hold to highlight their hopeless misery. War has shattered their dreams and love for the world- "We've lost any desire to conquer the world"- and strengthened their desire to gain freedom from the war. 'cut off' applies to the soldiers' missing limbs and also the soldiers' isolation from their homes, families and previous lives. Trading normality for sustained violence, it is impossible to view life in a positive light. Remarque highlights this through Paul's self-awareness; he knows that the war has impacted him and the irreversible damage it has caused. Instead of admiring its beauty and charm, Paul has been mutilated by his experiences. Instead of socialising with friends, he has been forced to stab his French counterpart. 'You're just a man like me, and I killed you…you could be my brother.'[footnoteRef:7] Their lives now consumed by war, the characters' morals have become warped, a transformation they secretly acknowledge. [7: Remarque, E and Murdoch, B. (n.d), All Quiet on the Western Front. (London: Vintage, 1996)]

Similarly, Ernst experiences the same pain in 'The Road Back.' Although Ernst has survived the war and returned home, it does not mean he is unscathed. After weeks of tirelessly trying and apparently successfully readjusting to civilian life, Ernst's progress is upset after attending a dance for war veterans. For the most part the men seem to be coping until Ernst is left sitting by himself after being called 'dull' and begins to mull things over.

"-Yes, it is a hard thing to part; but to come back that is sometimes far harder."[footnoteRef:8] [8: Remarque, E, The Road Back (United States of America, Random House, 2013)]

Ernst has not seen the girl, Adele, since he went off to defend his country and it's not until she calls him 'dull' does he really notice how damaged from the war he really is. Ernst realises that it won't be easy assimilating back into society. Attending dances will not bring back his old self, a recovery could take years- and may not succeed. Ernst sits by himself; his positioning becomes metaphorical. Isolating Ernst while the others interact gleefully, Remarque is showing that veterans felt detached from society. They faced unthinkable experiences unlike the rest of society who remained unmaimed. Remarque emphasises that these men were on the outside of the society and the world due to never having experienced life and its associated joys.

Ernst strives to move on from the war but fails to do so. Trying to gain stability, Ernst finds employment as a countryside schoolteacher, although he believes cannot fulfil this duty. Standing before his morning class, Ernst experiences a "…spasm over the heart..."[footnoteRef:9] The untainted innocence of his pupils causes him question his own identity. They are "…unspotted by the terrible years…"[footnoteRef:10] unlike Ernst. He cannot believe in his banal lessons; he feels he is an imposter. Ernst thinks that he should educate his class about how to survive on the front lines: "Should I tell you how to pull the string of a hand grenade, how best to throw it at a human being?"[footnoteRef:11] Remarque uses this extreme

suggestion to reveal the extent to which Ernst has been broken by the war and that his view of the world has been forever changed. [9: Remarque, E, The Road Back (United States of America, Random House, 2013)] [10: Remarque, E, The Road Back (United States of America, Random House, 2013)] [11: Remarque, E, The Road Back (United States of America, Random House, 2013)]

“I stand here before you, a polluted, a guilty man and can only implore you to remain as you are, never to suffer the bright light of your childhood to be misused as a blow of flame of hate…How then should I presume to teach you? Behind me, still pursuing, are the bloody years- How then can I venture among you? Must I first not become a man again myself?”[footnoteRef:12] [12: Remarque, E, The Road Back (United States of America, Random House, 2013)]

This imagery paints Ernst as a crippled man. He is frail and struggling to heal from the brutality that was forced upon him. ‘polluted’ gives the impression that Ernst is a harmful substance which will contaminate people, especially his class; he views himself as corrupt and poisonous; Remarque creates the impression that Ernst views himself as a danger to himself and others. The comparison to a substance further highlights the dehumanising nature of war; men were trained to ignore all rational thoughts and feelings and to kill. This emotional shutdown continued after the war, as experienced by Ernst. He is unable to concentrate in the classroom, his mind drawn to the memories of the front line (“Behind me, still pursuing, are the bloody years…”).[footnoteRef:13] Ernst struggles to see past the war. The question he asks himself conveys a thought shared by most soldiers upon returning home: “Must I first not become a man again myself?”[footnoteRef:14] Ernst struggles with his identity now he no longer identifies as human. Remarque uses these two ideas to convey the inescapable nature of war that still haunts the men. Ernst’s new life is tarnished by his memories of the war and his constant conflict with himself hinders his ability to move on. The concept of Paul and Ernst seeing the world in a different light is supported by Brian Murdoch[footnoteRef:15] who states: “The young soldiers in the novel have grown up killing as their principal occupation and their knowledge of the world is limited to death.”[footnoteRef:16] [13: Remarque, E, The Road Back (United States of America, Random House, 2013)] [14: Remarque, E, The Road Back (United States of America, Random House, 2013)] [15: German professor at University of Stirling] [16: Murdoch, Brian. ‘Innocent Killing: Erich Maria Remarque and the Weimar Anti-War Novels’ (Gale, 2011)]

Chapter Two: Struggling to Assimilate into Society Subjected

Struggling to assimilate into society Subjected relentlessly to the front lines Paul’s and Ernst’s homecomings, either on leave or after the war has ended, represents the first time that either has been in a place of safety and stability for a long time. With both trying to regain some normality, it is obvious that they both stand out from the rest, internally and externally.

While on leave, Paul sees his family for the first time in a year. A lot has changed since he enlisted; the ongoing food shortage affects his family and his mother has become gravely ill. Paul struggles to keep his composure when he hears his sister say ‘Mother, mother…’ upon his return home, and begins to cry. Remarque is highlighting how vulnerable Paul has become. The contrast between the mental toughness required on the front line (“The Iron Youth”[footnoteRef:17]) and the comforting security of home has Paul overcome with emotion; he was been pining for safety and has finally found it. Seeing his mother lie in her sick-bed, Paul

takes in the familiar surroundings and yet again, reveals a heart-breaking thought. [17: Remarque, E. and Murdoch, B. (n.d.), All quiet on the Western Front. (London: Vintage, 1996)]

“There is my mother, there is my sister, there is the glass case with my butterflies, there is the mahogany piano- but I am not quite there myself yet. There is a veil between them and me.”[footnoteRef:18] [18: Remarque, E. and Murdoch, B. (n.d.), All quiet on the Western Front. (London: Vintage, 1996)]

During this first night of leave spent in the family home, Paul realises how badly the war has affected him. While the house and family are unmaimed by the front lines, Paul is not. Their innocence is intact, whereas Paul’s has been destroyed by the death and brutality he has witnessed. Remarque is creating the impression that men felt isolated from their families and place in society. Paul feels that he his experiences of the war will forever divide him from his family, as if he is looking through a one-sided glass. He feels he no longer belongs in his home, and that nothing will ever be the same.

Ernst endures the same thoughts as Paul. Despite his teaching position, Ernst struggles to return to normality. Refusing to socialise with his colleagues, Ernst stays at home with his sinister thoughts, with images of the war flooding back during this self-imposed isolation.

“ghostly shadows of things past, but strangely changed; memories rise up again of grey, sightless faces, cries and accusations.”[footnoteRef:19] [19: Remarque, E, The Road Back (United States of America, Random House, 2013)]

Remarque is highlighting the men’s perpetual struggle to forget the war in everyday life; it is inescapable. Ernst’s flashbacks (a sign of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) highlight that men would forever be haunted by war; the violence they endured would never leave them. The pinnacle moment when Ernst realises how truly mentally injured from the war occurs in the classroom. Studying the impressionable youths before him, Ernst realises he is a destroyed man. He has no idea of how to educate his class when he views himself to be a man of “…whom the war destroyed every belief and almost every strength.”[footnoteRef:20] [20: Remarque, E, The Road Back (United States of America, Random House, 2013)]

The concept that men would struggle to assimilate back into society is supported by Dr Jane Robinett who supports the idea that Remarque uses narrative trauma to explore his characters struggles.[footnoteRef:21] Narrative trauma is a psychological technique that helps survivors understand their painful experiences acting as a form of exposure for the victims.[footnoteRef:22] Allowing his own experiences of war and battling depression, Remarque shapes the character’s voices through narrative trauma. Narrative trauma is a healing process under psychological trauma, which is split into three categories. Remarque employs “intrusion… traumatic events are relived “as if they’re were occurring in the present” in intense flashbacks, hallucinations and dreams…” Narrative trauma is heavily explored near the end of ‘The Road Back’ when Ernst experiences hallucinations of the front line “ghostly shadows of things past...”[footnoteRef:23] By exploring intrusion in the form of narrative trauma, Remarque is conveying the war’s implications on mental health and the inability of forgetting about war; Remarque highlights the severe difficulty men faced trying to return to normality while haunted by war. Dr Robinett draws the conclusion that someone [Ernst] who has sustained psychological trauma, “cannot resume the normal course of their lives.”[footnoteRef:24] Through the use of narrative trauma, Remarque is showing that Paul and

Ernst will forever be trapped by their past experiences and struggle to feel safe in a healthy environment; for Paul while on leave and Ernst while trying to regain his life. [21: Professor of Rhetoric and Comparative literature] [22: https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-guide/trauma-narratives] [23: Remarque, E, The Road Back (United States of America, Random House, 2013)] [24: Robinett, Jane, The Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience, Literature and Medicine, vol. 26, no.2 , Fall 2007, pp. 290-311]

Conclusion

It is therefore evident that the men of these novels find themselves to be in difficult situations. Both novels ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ and ‘The Road Back’ feature characters tormented by the effects of the war. The front lines destroyed them and blinded their view on the world. Paul can no longer fathom a life before the war and has lost all ambition to do so whereas Ernst in search of normality is haunted by the chilling hallucinations of the war preventing him from moving forward. By creating two characters who suffer and by using narrative trauma to highlight their psychological damage, Remarque effectively explores the consequences of war. By creating characters who have a warped views of the world, feeling like a stranger in their childhood home and attempting to rebuild their life, Remarque highlights the inescapable effects war had on men; their love of the world turned to hatred and the feeling of safety was a feeling hard to grasp.

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