

The Stamp of War

Many nations go into war for some cause that seemed just at the time, and sentence thousands of their own men and women to death as a result. Along the way, this ideal gets lost among those closest to the battle grounds; this ‘just cause’ is forgotten by those who are dying for it. In war it is impossible to escape becoming disheartened and left with the thought that all life is meaningless. As Sigmund Freud states, “(War) strips us of the later accretions of civilization and lays bare the primal man in each of us. It compels us once more to be heroes who cannot believe in their own death; it stamps strangers as enemies, whose death is to be brought about or desired; it tells us to disregard the death of those we love.” Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* shows the disillusionment of war—how one can easily lose all past ideals and human emotions, how one can easily forget that his enemy is human, and how one can easily fail to remember that he is still alive.

Remarque makes it very clear in this novel that war not only destroys the hopes of youth but also many of their emotions. The author often slips backwards in time to Paul’s memories of his life before the war. On one occasion Paul reminisces, “It is strange to think that at home...there lies the beginning of a play called ‘Saul’ and a bundle of poems...but that has become so unreal to me I cannot comprehend it anymore,” (19). Paul, as well as many of the other boys from his class, had passions and dreams. The war, however, shattered these aspirations and longings, making them distant and less of a reality. Paul continues on to say, “Kantorek would say that we stood on the threshold of

life. And so it would seem. We had as yet taken no root. The war swept us away...We...have been gripped by it and do not know what the end may be,” (20).

Unlike the older soldiers, Paul and his childhood companions have had their adolescence torn from them and have no hope of chasing any dreams or goals they once had. They “...only [knew] that in some strange and melancholy way [they had] become a waste land,” (20). On Paul’s leave he comments that the townspeople “...have worries, aims, desires, that I cannot comprehend,” (168). Paul, however, has essentially been turned into a weapon and can only think about war and the routines related to it. When in his room looking over books he feels excited, “...but [he] does not want to be, for that is not right,” (171). Paul feels that he is not allowed (or capable of) excitement; this lack of enthusiasm is what gets him through everyday on the frontlines—if he does not have to feel anything, then he will not have to be emotional when shooting at people all day long. *Remarque* shows how war rips apart the souls of the youth when in battle; how they are unable to function as normal human beings after living through a war—nothing is the same to them.

In order to survive, both sides of the conflict must forget that the soldiers of the other side are just the same as them. When explaining how the English frontline has been strengthened by heavier artillery and machinery, Paul adds, “Besides these they have brought up a number of those little French beasts,” (100). The Germans refer to the French as beasts—as less than human. By viewing the French in this way, it makes it easier to kill them. Soldiers have to forget that the enemy is human in order to be effective. Paul’s statement, “If your own father came over with them you would not hesitate to fling a bomb at him,” (114) shows how their survival is all that matters to

them. Even if family were on the opposing side, they would not hesitate to kill them in order to endure. “We have lost all feeling for one another. We can hardly control ourselves when our glance lights on the form of some other man. We are insensible, dead men, who through some trick, some dreadful magic, are still able to run and to kill,” (116). Through Paul, Remarque demonstrates how soldiers in battle switch into survival mode—having no other thoughts and capable of no other actions. All the combatant dare think is how to kill the enemy and escape the battleground alive. On one particular occasion, Paul has the opportunity to look into his enemy’s face, this time in the form of a Russian, and he comments how “[i]t is strange to see these enemies of ours so close up. They have faces that make one think—honest peasant faces, broad foreheads, broad noses, broad mouths, broad hands and hair,” (190). Even though Paul is a soldier, when not in battle, he can still wonder if the people he is fighting are really the enemy. After all, “[a] word of command has made these silent figures [their] enemies; a word of command might transform them into [their] friends,” (193). Paul comes to the realization that what happens in war has nothing to do with him, even if he is the one fighting it. His enemies are never concrete—he is fighting an idea. And this is what he has known all along—when he goes into battle to kill these people he must think of them a simply as a concept. This understanding comes into even sharper focus after he kills the Frenchman in the shell hole, saying to the dead body, “[y]ou were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind...It was that abstraction that I stabbed,” (223). War forces the people fighting it to think less of humanity in order to live with themselves while they are destroying it. While they may know outside of battle that they are killing

men just like them, when the battle rages, that thought is of no consequence—only survival matters.

Perhaps the most dismal aspect of war is the fact that the soldiers quickly lose their sense of life and joy. Very early on in the book, Paul notes, “We are none of us more than twenty years old. But young? Youth? That is long ago. We are old folk,” (18). It doesn’t take long for Paul to realize that his childhood has been stripped from him—he has been indefinitely aged by battle and nothing can change that. The dreams, aspirations, desires, passions that these boys once had are now gone thanks to the amount of killing that they witness and take part in daily. All they think or dream of now is war—for that alone is real to them. Paul, at age twenty, “[knows] nothing of life but despair, death, fear, and fatuous superficiality cast over an abyss of sorrow. [He sees] how peoples are set against one another, and in silence, unknowingly, foolishly, obediently, innocently slay one another,” (263). War has ruined him completely—he is a shell of a man, compelled to continue on by the orders of his superiors.

When the reader compares each character in youth to the ‘person’ they have become, the boys of 1916 are now no more than shadows of what they were or could have been. The only time they experience any happiness is when they are with each other, enjoying the peace of camaraderie. Erich Maria Remarque fiercely details to the reader all that is lost in a war—not only lives and money; but for those who are ‘lucky’ enough to survive—their lives have been forfeit as well. “We were eighteen and had begun to love life and the world; and we had to shoot it to pieces...The first bomb...burst in our hearts. We are cut off from...striving...progress. We believe in such things no longer, we believe in the war,” (87).