

As much as I was into 20th century history in my youth, for some inexplicable reason, I never truly delved into the subject of the First World War. I had done only a nominal amount of studying on the topic in years past, and had not indulged myself to any works, fiction or non-fiction, to expand my understanding. I had chosen to read Erich Maria Remarque's classic war novel *Im Westen Nicht Neus*, better known as to English readers as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, on a kind of impulse to learn. I had initially feared that this novel, first published in 1928, would be an impenetrable work of fiction, accessible only to those who have absorbed a considerable amount of knowledge about the war to end them all. Surprisingly, and fortunately, I was wrong. It is quite a powerful work of literature from the post-war period, and you are about to learn exactly why that is.

Erich Maria Remarque's writes *All Quiet on the Western Front* with a voice that is at once unapologetic, frank, and at times, brutal. After all, the novel was born from the German writer's own experiences fighting for his country in the trenches of that savage conflict. It is from Remarque's own firsthand experience that he writes this novel, the story of a young German soldier's loss of idealism and eventually, his life on the front lines of World War I. Because of this, *All Quiet on the Western Front* possesses a verisimilitude that makes similar war novels anemic by comparison.

Structurally, we follow the young narrator, Paul Baumer, and his spiral into despair due to the war in chronological order. This choice of linear continuity greatly benefits the story, in that it not only keeps the reader focused throughout its pages, but also draws them into Paul's experiences. As we the readers flip through the book, we embark on a slowly draining downward spiral with Paul. In fact, he describes the front as "a mysterious whirlpool," and though he is far

from the heart of the battle, he feels “the whirl of the vortex sucking (him) slowly, irresistibly, inescapably into itself” (Remarque 43).

All Quiet on the Western Front explores, as its central theme, the disillusionment of German troops by the nightmarish fighting of the war, with the narrator Paul serving as a symbol of, as Remarque lays out in his introduction, “a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war.” (Remarque)

In addition, Remarque touches upon a theme now often covered in many war novels, and that is its agony. Having fought in those trenches, Remarque would have known nothing but strife and indignity, and it comes through in the finished novel. “Had we returned home in 1916, out of the suffering and the strength of our experience we might have unleashed a storm. Now if we go back, we will be weary, broken, burnt out, rootless, and without hope. We will not be able to find our way anymore.” (Remarque 213) Earlier, as Paul lies in a hospital bed after sustaining injuries in combat, he ponders the expectations of previous generations placed upon him: “What would our fathers do if we suddenly stood up and came before them and proffered our account? What do they expect of us if a time ever comes when the war is over? Through the years our business has been killing; --it was our first calling in life. Our knowledge of life is limited to death. What will happen afterwards? And what shall come out of us?” (Remarque 194)

It is difficult to find a negative quality in *All Quiet on the Western Front* that detracts from the overall reading experience. There are some readers expecting an uplifting tale of combat and bravery who may find the novel off-putting in its unrelenting bleakness and often quite gory violence. In one paragraph alone, Baumer describes the grisly injuries sustained by his fellow soldiers. They are “living with their skulls blown open”, and “running with their two feet cut off as they stagger on their splinted stumps”; some are holding their intestines in; some are

seen without mouths, jaws, or even faces; another man tries to avoid bleeding to death by holding the artery of his arm between his teeth for two hours straight. (Remarque 101) Earlier, Baumer comes across a dug-out full of dead recruits killed by poison gas (Remarque 98). Such visceral imagery is not for the faint of heart or the weak of stomach. Coupled with the bloodshed is the novel's relentless darkness, which can definitely wear more optimistic readers down. However, *All Quiet on the Western Front* is not entirely devoid of hope. In the final chapter, Paul has become "alone, and so without hope" that he can survive, day by day, within the trenches, because "the life that has borne (him) through" his time fighting is "still in (his) hands and (his) eyes" (Remarque 214). The final paragraph, told in a third person perspective, reveals that Baumer dies in October of 1918, his face having "an expression of calm, as though almost glad the end had come." (Remarque 215) In spite of his unpleasant experiences, it is clear that, with his death, Baumer has found a measure of peace and acceptance by the story's end.

If I have learned one thing from this novel, it is that

In the context of Mr. Gregory Mauriocourt's Western Civilization II class, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a valuable and important novel to read, not only when tackling the subject of the First World War, but also to understand the experiences of Remarque and other soldiers who fought in it. Like Paul Baumer, these men were lost in the bloody maelstrom. By the time of the armistice, at the end of the war, their spirits were devastated. Like the young protagonist,