

Sarah Weiner

Professor Davros

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The Youth of War in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*

A clear theme in *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque is youth and the effect that war has on it. Throughout the book, the narrator, Paul, talks about his and his fellow soldiers' youthfulness and how they have changed in their couple of years on the frontline. Despite their young age, the war has forced the boys to grow up in different ways, whether by changing their looks and attitudes temporarily with a uniform or by causing them to mature more deeply with the new life lessons that war has taught them.

One way in which the theme of youth is evident in the novel is the way Paul and his friends jest with each other in the midst of such dark times. These boys are still young, and they use coping mechanisms that young people would use in traumatic times like a war. Throughout their time on the battlefield, they try to find some levity to make their lives as soldiers more bearable.

For example, as the days pass on the front, Paul observes, "The terror of the front sinks deep down when we turn our back upon it; we make grim, coarse jests about it, when a man dies, then we say he has nipped off his turd, and so we speak of everything; that keeps us from going mad; As long as we take it that way we maintain our own resistance" (140). Levity is needed to help the boys deal with the trauma of war. Remarque reiterates this idea again when Paul counters what news reports may say about soldiers being in such good humor and contends, "we are in a

good humour because otherwise we should go to pieces” (140). If the soldiers were to really process their situation seriously, it could break them and leave them depressed.

Aside from the theme of youth and innocence being presented through the soldiers’ attitudes of levity, there are also many instances in the book where characteristics of childishness are used. When Paul is interacting with the younger recruits, Remarque often describes them similarly to children. For example, when a young recruit is frightened of the barrage of bombs and gunfire one night, Remarque writes that the recruit burrowed his head under Paul’s arm and cried against Paul’s chest “like a child” (61). Paul almost sounds like a maternal figure for these young boys. As the more experienced soldier, he must look out for the rookies and make sure they do not break too fast.

Similarly, about the new recruits Paul narrates that their “dead faces have the awful expressionlessness of dead children. It brings a lump into the throat to see how they go over, and run and fall” (130). These soldiers, unfortunately, die rather quickly compared to the more experienced soldiers, and it is sad for those older soldiers to have to see that happen to the young men. The new recruits are considered young because of their inexperience with the reality of life in the war. As opposed to Paul and his fellow soldiers, who are young in age but have grown up quite a bit in their short time in the army. While watching some birds in no-man’s-land, Paul reflects, “A year ago we watched them nesting; the young ones grew up too” (128). Paul compares himself and his friends to these birds that have changed and matured out here on the front.

Thus, despite their youth, Paul and his friends have grown emotionally in their short time in the army. One example of how war can change a person is with the uniform and the power that it gives to that person. After addressing how strong and clunky his feet look in his boots, Paul acknowledges, “But when we go bathing and strip, suddenly we have slender legs again and slight

shoulders. We are no longer soldiers but little more than boys; no one would believe that we could carry packs. It is a strange moment when we stand naked; then we become civilians, and almost feel ourselves to be so” (29). Not only is Paul explicitly saying that they, as soldiers, do not consider themselves young boys anymore, but Paul is also saying that it is the uniform itself that turns them into these adult soldiers. Beneath the uniforms, they are themselves again—merely boys.

Remarque reinforces the idea of the effect which a uniform can have on a person with regard to the character of Himmelstoss. The boys used to make fun of Himmelstoss when he was a simple postman in their hometown, but when he is appointed as their drill sergeant, he takes out his revenge on them. The boys discuss that the reason for Himmelstoss becoming a bully now is because of his uniform. One soldier says of people like Himmelstoss, “As sure as they get a stripe or a star they become different men . . .” and Paul adds, “That’s the uniform” (43). The status of one’s attire changes one’s view of himself. Kaczinsky, an older soldier in the group, goes on to explain that the power one feels from a role of authority in the army will often go to one’s head, and “the more insignificant a man has been in civil life the worse it takes him” (44-45). This explains why Himmelstoss, who was an insignificant postman before the war and whom school boys used to pick on, would take advantage of the authority given to him by his uniform.

Nevertheless, Himmelstoss is not very different from the other frightened soldiers. At one point during an attack, Himmelstoss curls up and remains paralyzed in the dug-out until Paul yells and pushes him out to continue fighting with the rest of the army (132). Himmelstoss acts similarly to the young recruit who had cowered against Paul earlier. Underneath the façade of power that the army uniform gives someone, he is still the same man he always was.

So too, these soldiers are still just simple men and boys looking for power and glory. Poet Wilfred Owen describes youth before the war as “children ardent for some desperate glory” (Owen). The prospect of having an important role in fighting for one’s country, and even gaining some authority over others, is enticing. It is when they are finally put in hostile situations that they go back to being young boys. They become frightened and wish they were home. However, they are ultimately different than they were at home, and it is not only the uniform that affects them. They have matured in a deeper way that could only be brought about by experiencing battle in wartime.

Paul acknowledges the change he and his friends have gone through from the war throughout Remarque’s book. In one scene early in the narrative, Paul thinks back to the plays he used to write for fun, and he reflects on how unreal that old life seems to him now (19). A young soldier’s life before seems frivolous compared to his life during war time. Now, the soldiers have been forced to grow up and see the world more seriously. In a later scene, while reminiscing about the old days before the war, Paul ponders the idea that “To-day we would pass through the scenes of our youth like travelers” (122). That old life is like a dream in this new reality of life as a soldier.

Because of this new reality of army life, as Remarque shows in his book, going back home is a very weird experience. When Paul goes home on leave, he comments about his family and home, “There is my mother, there is my sister, there my case of butterflies, and there my mahogany piano—but I am not myself there. There is a distance, a veil between us” (160). War has changed Paul. He and his fellow soldiers have been forced to mature. When putting on his old clothes while home on leave, Paul says, “I feel awkward. The suit is rather tight and short, I have grown in the army” (164). Paul has grown physically in the army, but he has grown emotionally as well. He has gained a different perspective on life from fighting in the war.

Another way by which Remarque discusses the soldiers' maturity is in the way that Paul and his friends talk about their school days, which were really not so long ago. Paul expresses his attitude toward the old school life as he tells in exposition, "We remember mighty little of all that rubbish" (85). Paul thinks the lessons they were taught in school are useless to them now. In the real, cruel world, they do not need to know the things they learned in school. Similarly, a different young soldier says about their school lessons, "How can a man take all that stuff seriously when he's once been out here?" (86). These men are no longer young school boys being taught by others. They are learning more about life by trying to survive it.

Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a narrative about youth and the loss of it in war. The theme of youth is shown through the soldiers' efforts to keep spirits high in traumatic times and through the descriptions of childishness that the narrator uses for the new recruits. The main character and his friends, though still technically young, cannot fully be described as such because they have grown up from their experiences as soldiers. War changes people. This idea is expressed through characters like Himmelstoss, whose uniform affected him if superficially, and Paul, who remarks about the more permanent change that he and his friends have undergone since leaving their home and school days for the reality of war.

Works Cited

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