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HIST 314/Deshmukh

ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

"It's queer, when one thinks about it," goes on Kropp, "we are here to protect our fatherland. And the French are here to protect their fatherland. Now who's in the right?" (124) Albert Kropp, friend and classmate of Paul Bäumer, poses this question several days before he loses one of his legs to surgeons trying to save his life. Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* brings to light many more unanswerable questions in its pages. This novel is an anti-war epic on the level of the 1970's film *Johnny's Got His Gun* and a powerful commentary on the futility and disparate nature of war.

Albert is one of the few members of the novel's main group of young German soldiers that do not die. He is joined by Tjaden and possibly Detering, who deserts. All the rest—Stanislaus "Kat" Katschinsky, Haie Westhaus, Müller, Leer, Franz Kemmerich, and the main character, Paul Bäumer—die in battle. As the novel opens, this tight-knit group from the 2nd Regiment is visiting a dying Kemmerich in a field hospital, trying not to feel guilty over asking him for his nice boots.

The recruits begin the novel as recent additions to the front. Kemmerich is the first of their number to fall; after his death, the rest fall rapidly. They begin the war

young and idealistic, ready to fight to the death for their country in a just war. As their number begins to dwindle, their idealism passes quickly.

Paul does not notice the shift in his own mind as it happens. He realizes only that the change has occurred, and that does not happen until he is granted two weeks' leave and returns home to visit his family. His cancer-stricken mother is overjoyed to see him, of course, and his proud father shows off his warrior son to his friends. Paul, however, realizes he is no longer the child of 18 that boldly marched off to war. In his room, he goes through the books that captivated his imagination only a year before, mutely asking them to take his mind off the war. The books he struggled to buy, that meant so much, hold no meaning any longer. He begs his books "Speak to me—take me up—take me, Life of my Youth," yet they do not. His feelings of disquietude grow as he continues, "I cannot find my way back. I am shut out though I entreat earnestly and put forth all my strength...I sit there and the past withdraws itself. And at the same time I fear to importune it too much, because I do not know what might happen then. I am a soldier, I must cling to that." (107)

While the loss of idealism is more internal in Paul, the others in his squad show their change more obviously. When their drill-sergeant, Himmelstoss, is sent to the front, the change is quite distinct. Though they hated Himmelstoss during their war training, they nevertheless obeyed him, however grudgingly, because they knew he was preparing them to face their immediate future. Tjaden especially rebels against Himmelstoss when

the latter joins the former's unit at the front; blatant confrontations between the two lead to quick disciplinary hearings that result in penalties for Tjaden, Himmelstoss, and Kaczinsky.

Remarque uses Paul's duty as a guard over Russian prisoners-of-war as another device to reflect on this loss of idealism. He writes, through Paul's thoughts, "The Territorials who are in charge of them say that they were much more lively at first...But now they are quite apathetic, and listless." (118) The prisoners, once warriors like himself but now pitiful creatures that Paul realizes were once only a pen-stroke away from being his allies instead of his enemies, are a symbol of the lost idealism of all the soldiers participating in the brutal fighting. Paul watches them die one by one, not realizing that their shrinking number reflects what is happening to his own unit.

The differences in how fathers and sons perceive war is also dealt with very effectively. In an exchange amongst the unit members, Kaczinsky points out that common Frenchmen would want to attack Germans no more than their own desire to attack Frenchmen. He says, "...it is merely the rulers. I had never seen a Frenchman before I came here...They weren't asked about it any more than we were." He goes on to hypothesize that they are at war because "...every full-grown emperor requires at least one war, otherwise he wouldn't become famous." (125-6)

Paul's father reinforces this idea that it is the older generation that wants the war, despite the fact that the younger generation is rapidly being destroyed. During Paul's

short visit, he only wants to hear of the front; he does not understand Paul's unwillingness to discuss it and prods his son with questions at every turn. While relaxing in a pub together, Paul's father pulls him into conversation with other village men, who ply Paul for his stories and pay him off with beer and cigars. These arm-chair warriors, too old to be soldiers, know exactly what to do to win the war. "Smash through the Johnnies," one says, "and then there will be peace." Paul endeavors to explain the difficulty in oversimplification of battle strategy, but the man will hear none of "the details." "Every man of you ought to have the Iron Cross," he continues, "but first of all the enemy line must be broken through in Flanders and then rolled up from the top...And then to Paris." (103-4)

Though Paul prefers to sit quietly, while he is home he is repeatedly disturbed by men with minds he can no longer comprehend. Paul's need is for quiet, to escape the fury and noise of the front's near-constant shelling. He feels his inquisitors understand only the words he utters, but miss completely the concepts. He both envies and despises them for their ignorance. The older men, in simplifying and glorifying war, lose sight of Paul's "closed and hard existence of the utmost superficiality," (163) the daily detachment that allows him to move past events like when he is forced to kill Gérard Duval with his knife. Paul and his friends believe that if the older generation knew what they were learning on the front, wars would be a thing of the past.

Paul survives four years of fighting only to be killed in the waning days of the war, on a day that commanders report "All quiet on the Western Front." (175) In an action symbolic of the futility of war, Paul spends the better part of one of his last days in the war carrying his wounded friend Kaczinsky through the battle lines to a field hospital. They dodge the continued shelling all the way, Paul being careful not to land on his friend's wounded leg when he has to dive for cover. Paul does not believe the orderly that tells him his best friend is dead until he sees Kaczinsky's blood on his hand, Kat having been hit in the head with a small piece of shrapnel minutes before reaching the hospital.

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