

Eternality of war



**ASSIGN
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Perhaps nothing is more frequent in the pages of history books than wars. Since the beginning of time, men have fought to hold their ground and conquer more. Yet the images of war are not always the trumpeting, flag-flying, fresh-faced recruits that they are painted out to be. The reality of war is dark, desolate, and harrowing, with conditions detrimental to mind, body, and spirit. The realities of war and the terrors experienced there are documented and told by authors throughout time, including Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Tardi's graphic *Goddamn This War!*, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. What the three men allude to is the idea that perhaps the true brutes are not the ones on the defense, but the offense, and that the disease of imperialism and the contagion of power are what turns men into savages in the end.

The most graphic and raw depiction of the war is told by Jacques Tardi, who in his collection of drawings portrays a bitter and brutal state of perpetual violence. His short captions are paired with images of dismembered men and bloody faces, the worst of the quotes being "I'd have liked to see the wise guys right there, in the heart of the inferno: Joffre, the president, the Kaiser, the ministers, the priests and every last general. And my mother, too, for bringing me into this world" (Tardi 18). The cynicism and general weariness of the unnamed narrator leaks from every angle in the story, leaving nothing up to the imagination. The very definitive anti-war message the comic sends couples the horrors of the war with the mental scarring of the men who witnessed it.

Remarque approaches the war from the perspective of Paul Baumer, young, promising, full of the fire of his fellow friends and soldiers as they fight for

their home country of Germany. Pumped with patriotism and nationalism, Paul and his friends soon realize that war is not what they expected, or even what they wanted; it is what they feared. The physical, emotional, and psychological stress forced upon the young men proves to them that patriotism and nationalism are but myths, some clichés to mask the actual terror of the war. The excerpt provided portrays a scene in which Paul and his friends visit Kemmerich, an old classmate and now-amputee. Muller, a “really quite sympathetic” character, asks Kemmerich for his boots, which obviously he’ll have no need for anymore (Remarque 20). This bitter but realistic scene painfully displays the loss of emotional morality through the brutality on the front. Though Muller meant no harm in asking for the boots, the scene simply proves the survivalist nature of the men and the dog-eat-dog mentality they must have to survive. Corporal Himmelstoss, brutal, tyrannical, and strict, forces them to perform meager, demeaning tasks, like making and re-making beds, sweeping snow, crawling in mud on all fours, and bayonet-fighting with heavy iron rods (Remarque 23-25).

Though Himmelstoss is cruel, he teaches the naive men the reality of war without the rose-colored lenses of nationalism that they learned through in school. The scene about Kemmerich in the hospital is particularly poignant in showing man’s moral lineup still in the face of terror; Paul refuses to leave him alone, and holds him until he dies. This heartbreaking scene is swiftly made cold by the doctor, who says, “You know, to-day alone there have been sixteen deaths – yours is the seventeenth. There will probably be twenty altogether” (Remarque 32). Paul is sickened by the doctor’s carelessness, and collects his friend’s belongings. He unties his friend’s

identification disc, and delivers the boots to Muller. This very brief scene of friendship and love is pulled away almost as quickly as it comes, strategically in Remarque's writing to juxtapose the reality of the war with the naïveté and the innocence of Paul and the men on the front.

Marlow of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* experiences a similar rawness of death. Marlow is Conrad's Paul in this story, honest, headstrong, but also cynical, skeptical, and weary. He travels in the Belgian Congo to find Kurtz, who he is told harbors great ideals and ability (Conrad 28). When he first sees Kurtz in the second part of the story, Marlow tells us that he is only ever referred to as "that man", and never by name (51). His station, is "desolate", and we quickly discover that Kurtz not some genius or guru, but in actuality a heartless megalomaniac, described by Marlow as "hollow." As he dies he gives Marlow a packet of documents, one of which ends with the words "Exterminate all the brutes!" When he dies in the last part of the story, his last words are "The horror! The horror!" (116). His final moments exist in some vision that Marlow cannot see, in which Kurtz cries out in a look of "intense and hopeless despair." When Marlow journeys to Kurtz's home later on in the story, almost a year has passed since his superior's death. The departed's fiancée tells of her late lover's talent, humanitarian works, political experience, and leadership qualities. Marlow lies to her and tells her that his last words were her name.

It is important to note that even through Kurtz's power-hungry, bloodthirsty ways, he is the one that dies first. In his own station, there are severed heads on the fence posts, but his own body betrays him; he is the one that dies. He is ill with jungle fever, his own body conquered by the land he is

trying to own. It is as if the land itself is fighting back because its people cannot. As Marlow comes into contact with people from Kurtz's past, he is forced to doubt his own memories of the man, as the only things he is hearing are good. This brings to light the truth that war changes people. Perhaps Kurtz was this extraordinary man before he came to the Congo. However, it is also the exact theme that Conrad is trying to portray: that in the European perspective, interference in the African colonies was a good thing – humanitarian work, even – but if they saw the heads on posts, and the extreme brutality that is not only fostered but implemented by their people, Europeans would think differently of the entire situation.

Perhaps it is not a single person or an actual occurrence that forces these men to fight. Rather, they are driven by an extreme sense of duty towards their countries, pushed by an unseen force of patriotism that quickly fades and fizzles as the true horrors of war set in. The three different yet overlapping stories of Tardi's narrator, Paul, and Marlow depict the dichotomy between the expected nature of war and the reality of it. Each provides a staunchly anti-war dialogue. Yet they are written in ways that avoid shining the spotlight on any particular person; note that Conrad's novel takes place, not in a colony of his homeland England, but one of Belgium. This creates the exact absurdity and hypocrisy that he writes about: the idea that the true "brutes" are the white men in Africa, while not being specific enough to make British readers find parallels between themselves and the evils of the novel. Each author attempts to and succeeds in illustrating the fact that the real darkness and the real evils happened under European control, but far from European eyes.

Works Cited

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