

Example of book review on all quiet on the western front

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Erich Maria Remarque fought in World War I where he was badly wounded. A decade after the war he wrote a book detailing how ordinary German soldiers fared during the war and this book of his was translated into *All Quiet on the Western Front*. At the time he wrote his book, war books had a romantic feel about them in their dealings with honor, glory and adventure and in 1895 Stephen Crane changed that with his book titled *The Red Badge of Courage* which revealed the brutality and violence that is all too common with wars. Remarque followed a similar mold in his telling of the grimly experience of a soldier. Remarque's book went on to critical acclaim with an American movie made from it in 1930. Unfortunately the 30s saw him branded as unpatriotic in Nazi Germany as his reputation was been attacked. In a funny twist of fate, this book that was written about Germans who were very much hated by the English and Americans received so much popularity in those areas and remained a testament to the fact that the book had the ability to speak to all soldiers and not just German soldiers.

We see the events of this book through the mind of the nineteen year old narrator; Paul Bäumer who fought on the French front in the German army of World War I. it was the patriotic speeches of his teachers that convinced him and his friends to volunteer to join the army as the words of Kantorek their teacher stirred things up in them. However tens weeks of rigorous training at the hands of Corporal Himmelstoss and the brutal life on the battle front brought Paul and his friends to the realization that all those ideals of patriotism and nationalism was nothing more than clichés and empty ones at that. For once they don't see the war as the glamorous or honorable path to manhood but rather a terror filled destination.

The overwhelming theme in this book is how terribly brutal war is. There is no sugar coating the reality as war is portrayed as it is experienced in actuality. We see brutality and fear and butchery and men who feared for their lives and doubted their convictions. Remarque's novel captures these feelings properly and at the end of the book almost all of the major characters are dead and through that we could see the devastating effect that World War I had on the lost generation. We see the effects the war had on the soldiers that fought in them and how they dealt with the inhuman living conditions as they watched their friends and comrades die gruesome deaths. The only way these soldiers can survive would be living a disconnected life where the war is the only real thing and every other realness is just an illusion or a fantasy.

While the concept of nationalism was not entirely new, the nineteenth century saw it attain dizzying heights and this was carried into World War I. Nationalism in this book was shown to be a shallow, hypocritical tool used to control the nation and just like many people we see Paul and his friends seduced by ideals of nationalism to join the army. Remarque was able to show in his book one truth that those soldiers learnt on the battlefield: they were not fighting for the glory of their nation but rather for their own survival as they saw themselves kill to avoid being killed.

Their enemies no longer are the opposing armies but rather the men wielding authority in their country who had sent them to be sacrificed in a bid to amass power and glory. We see the lack of value placed on human life in time of war through the passing of Kemmerich's boots. We see these boots passed from one dying soldier to the next and the existing soldiers are

even seen haggling for the boots while it is still worn by the as yet undead soldier. It is almost as though the boots are more valuable than the soldier's life.

As the book begins we see Paul's group of mostly nineteen year olds return from their duty at the front with most of them having died in battle to see that the cook had cooked for the 150 soldiers that went out. While the remaining surviving soldiers are eager to eat the food the cook is not sure if they should be served more than the allocated single ration and would rather the extra food goes to waste. Paul remembers his teacher whose patriotic words led him to volunteer in the war and now the sights and experiences he has had leads him to lose his trust in authority figures and instead despise them for pushing him and the lost generation and exposing them to the horror that is war. " The first bombardment showed us our mistake, and under it the world as they had taught it to us broke in pieces" (SparkNotes Editors).

Contrary to the picture painted by those who spoke of patriotism and nationalism there was nothing heroic or glamorous about the life of the soldier. The war was stripping them of their humanity and everything that made them human and now they were almost like animals living by instinct alone. Through the letter of Kantorek we see the attitude held by the older generation of the younger generation fighting the war. They are seen as strong, young and impassive by the generation back home. However these lost youth fighting on the war front feel anything but impassive, young or strong. They are losing their minds as a result of the sights and sounds of war and aged beyond their years. What is left in them is a hatred for those

older men that sent them off to die for an ideal based on lies and empty clichés.

Before the war Paul was interested in things like poetry and creativity but the war changed all that. He had become cynical and felt empty. His parents and family have become to him a hazy memory as he feels that his generation was deprived the opportunity to live their lives as they were sent to the war front to die just when they should have been living their lives.

While the older soldiers still had the memories of their families and jobs to return back to, the war to the younger ones was their entire lives. They have nothing to take their minds off the trenches as they have been completely cut from humanity.

Paul was taught patriotism during his training and he was told it was his ability to suppress his personality as a sacrifice for his country. Corporal Himmelstoss, whose job it was to train the recruits was a petty man who derived pleasure from humiliating his recruits. With time they learnt to stand up to his authorities while finding the inner strength to endure the discipline that toughened them and hardened them to the point that the experiences of the war did not outrightly drive them insane. As Kemmerich is dying Paul goes in search of the doctor who refuses to come. On getting back to Kemmerich's bedside Paul finds out that he is not only dead but that he has also been removed to make space for the next wounded soldier. That was the reality of war and death was just treated as any other day.

We can see that although the war did to Paul what it did to every soldier - stripping them of their humanity, Paul still retained his kind-hearted and sensitive nature and Remarque ensured to highlight those even though

World War I and its brutality had damaged his psyche. Throughout the novel the author shows how hardship is endured through a stripping off of one's humanity and cutting off his feelings. In a normal world scenario a doctor should not refuse seeing a patient but in these pages this doctor had already amputated five legs that day and he could not tolerate anymore. His only form of survival was to shut off his compassionate side and allow Kemmerich to die in pain than him having to experience more tragedy and gore.

Remarque showed in this book that the war ensured that everyone who was front and center bit more than they could chew and they had to isolate their feelings and emotions in a bid to survive. Kemmerich might as well have been shot by the opposing army.

The symbolism of the boots is so astute as we see it out live its owners as it is passed from soldier to soldier. It paints the picture that in the war value was not placed on human life.

Some new recruits arrive to help out the decimated soldiers and seeing these even younger boys makes Paul and his friends feel like grizzled men. And soon they too realize that in the army they are not human beings but rather just able bodies. The unhealthy conditions are very much a part of the war. They have been changed in everywhere possible and dying on the war front they realize that the words of Kantorek were just mere words and nothing else. Many of them are wounded now and some are dead and their youthful exuberance is now a thing of the past as the war has destroyed everything. Their lives before the war now seem unreal and the only thing that is real is the war. This novel shows succinctly why these youngsters who were enlisted to fight the war are called the lost generation. Unlike the older

soldiers who already had prewar lives and jobs, the war was some kind of interruption and when the war ended they would return back to the lives they left behind. The younger ones had no identity or lives outside of the war as they joined the war at the cusp of their adult lives.

The soldiers fight for the right to retain their food as the fat rats are always on standby to eat the food. There are many enemies at war and their opposing enemies are not even the first on that list. Sometimes they wonder if they are even their enemies at all or if like them they have been sent to the war front to die for a mindless authority figure. Unfortunately they have to kill these soldiers to stay alive and the fear of death is too much for them not to do something about it. So with a mindless behavior they find themselves throwing shells at these enemies and gathering the provisions left behind by these dead soldiers as they realize that their provisions are better than the rations they get.

As Paul reminisces of the life he left behind sure that his youth is lost forever as he watches dead soldiers piling on either side of the battle ground. The new recruits who had less training than they did are the most affected as they die or run insane due to their lack of preparedness. Remarque paints a picture of a war that is repulsive and filled with animalistic savagery. He showed that these soldiers learnt soon enough that the goal of World War I was not victory but rather the ability to wear down one's opponent as the war gradually became a battle of attrition.

Now that Himmelstoss who was once an authority figure but is now relegated to the same fate as the other soldiers he once trained experiences the life at war, he became better as he tries to make amends with the young men he

had previously tutored. Paul and his comrades meet some French women and Paul desperately tries to relive the innocence he has lost as he realizes these women to be different from those at the army brothels. Paul is given a leave of 17 days before six week training and then sent back to the front. He wonders which of his friends will still be alive in six weeks.

On getting home to meet his mother ill and find that the civilian population is actually beginning to starve, he can't seem to shake away the feeling he has as he feels like his home is no longer his and he is just a stranger in their midst. He lies to his mom when she wants to know how it is on the war front as there are no words to explain what life or death really is like there. An incident on the street makes Paul begin to wear civilian clothes while out on the street in a bid to prevent them from re-occurring. Unlike his mother though, his father cannot let it go and he keeps questioning Paul about what transpires in war - if only he understood how dangerous it was to get Paul to tell of his experiences. Paul is finding it hard to adapt back to life here as he sometimes is startled by the screeching trams as they remind him of exploding shells. He tries and fails to recapture the times before the war as it seems the only real memory with him now is of being a soldier.

A friend tells him that Kantorek has been drafted into the war and this friend who was now an officer could lay it into Kantorek for the lives he helped get destroyed through the words he spoke. He remembered Joseph that was made to enlist against his will and eventually died as a result. Although in hindsight Joseph would have been drafted three months later but that would have been three more months that Joseph would have had to live. Now this friend took whatever pleasure he could derive from taunting Kantorek. As

Paul's time at home draws to a close, his mother gets sadder and sadder. Paul goes to his friend's Kemmerich's house to pass the news of his death to his mother and once again he finds himself lying when he told her that her son died quickly and painlessly. There was nothing but pain to be derived from telling her the truth and the lie was better for both of them. The last night at home and his mother comes into his room to sit with him. He now regrets coming home as the pain was being reawakened in both him and his mother and he wishes he could weep in her lap. Unfortunately he is not that person anymore.

We see Paul look to his enemy for refuge when he lies in the arms of the French women. He has come to realize that he will never find salvation in his people as his leaders and the Germans pressured him into coming to the war to get killed. His relationship with the French woman is shallow as we see her not as interested when he comes to her but not from the trenches. It shows another part of his innocence that the war had stripped him off. Also at home the people come to him to talk about his experiences at war because they want to partake in his patriotic ideals. Unfortunately Paul had come to realize that there was nothing patriotic about the war and the war had so scarred him that he could not talk about what the war had turned him into to anyone that was not in the war.

We see many authority figures in the books and many of them have been branded as evil by the soldiers. There is Kantorek and Himmelstoss who forced and humiliated Paul and his friends and he believes that these people do not respect him as a person but rather see him as a means to their ideological end. His only solution therefore comes from maintaining an

emotional distance from things that may trigger unwanted emotions. He lies to Kemmerich's mother in a bid to keep those same emotions at bay and swears to her that he is saying the truth. On his return to training camp he sees that captured Russian soldiers are in the camp nearby and Paul finds it hard to believe that the faces of the honest men he is looking at are actually the enemy. He sees them and sees himself in them and as such should have no reason to want to kill them. They too are dying of starvation and dysentery but in all this he sees the strength of their brotherhood as their warm voices reminds him of cozy homes. Yet they are the enemy so they get kicked and spat on by the German soldiers because of the words spoken by people in authority whom he has never seen. Those same words make them shoot and kill each other or risk being killed.

Before returning to the war front he gets another uncomfortable visit from his sister and his father. They sit there like the strangers they have become with nothing to talk about except his mother's illness. Before they leave they however present him with some cakes and jam that his mother had made which only makes him more depressed. He contemplates giving them to the hungry Russian soldiers but the fact that his mother must have made the cakes in pain was the only thing that stopped him but he still gave them two of the cakes. Through Paul's experience with the Russian soldiers we see Remarque attack what we knew as the nationalistic ideals of the war. World War I was a very good example of a war that resulted in immeasurable death due to misplaced nationalistic spirit. Leaders painted a picture to their people where they were able to separate their citizens from the enemy. Looking at these Russians though, all Paul sees suffering individuals and not

men sent to threaten his fatherland. These men could very well be peasants from Germany. The sad truth of this whole situation was that when these men were free they too must have been given the orders to kill German soldiers like him.

We see political power as it initiated military conflict and how the powerful people that wage war are the real enemies of the soldiers and not the people they have been sent to kill. Paul can no longer resume the life and relationship he once shared with his family as the war had damaged his innocence and replaced his mindset. He cannot feel the pain of his mother's illness because the war has filled his thoughts with greater horrors and traumas.

Back at the war front Paul finds that Müller, Kropp and Tjaden are still alive and he shares his supplies with them. He returns at a time that they are about to receive a visit from the German emperor and things are put in order for his visit as the soldiers are given new uniforms. After his visit Paul muses that all it may have taken would have been thirty people to say no to the war and it would not have happened. War, he concluded was just for a certain few to get recognition in history books.

In the No Man's Land Paul is forced to hide in a shell hole when he senses that an attack is coming. While there an enemy jumps in with him and he instinctively stabs him. Seeing the enemy to still be alive Paul bandages him up and gives him water. Unfortunately the enemy eventually dies and the agony of his first hand to hand murder is almost too much for him to bear. Paul begins to explain to the dead man that he never meant to kill him as he searches the man's pocketbook to see the picture of a girl and woman and

more details about the man he just killed. As this agony is not going away Paul makes a note of the man's address and decides to send some money to his family back home. On his return he confesses his kill to his friends and they assure him that he had to kill or be killed and it was in no way a pleasurable experience for him. We see here that although the soldiers are fighting each other they were sent to fight with the same matching orders - national pride and patriotism.

These men have come to identify themselves as soldiers first and foremost with every other thing coming after. In a bid to survive they have to learn to depend on each other and become like animals that don't think in a bid to survive the war. As the war begins to wear them down they all begin to make bad choices and one by one start succumbing to different types of death. Paul finally gets a chance at Kemmerich's boots when Müller is shot in the abdomen. As the war goes on it begins to go wrong for the Germans as their weapons get worn and the food gets worse. Now if they don't die at the hands of their enemies they die as a result of the worsening rations which they also consider being enemies as well. As the war continues Paul finds that he has lost all his friends to the war.

This story chronicles the lives of 6 German soldiers who volunteered to fight for national pride but never made it back alive. They were killed by gas attacks and rat infestations to getting shot and fatal illnesses. It was World War I and the people did not know better than to believe the clichéd speeches on national pride and patriotism. Erich Maria Remarque fought on the Western Front when he was eighteen and the memories of his time as a soldier stayed with him so much that he had to let it out in a literary format.

While many claim that this may have been a retelling of the story, the strength of this book is in its ability to open the eyes of people who are in any way affected by the war so they could have an inkling of the very unglamorous life all the travelling can bring.

This book gave a voice to World War I, one that we may never have been able to see from our history books if this book did not come around. Wars are fought so differently today and that is one of the things that make the narration of Paul as poignant as he explains the ideals and reasons behind their volunteering for war. We see young men who were wide eyed and carefree follow an ideology and patriotic direction that they could not explain and at the end they all died as empty vessels of themselves for a war they believed to be unnecessary.

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