

All quiet on the western front essay sample

[Life](#), [Emotions](#)



In *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, a profoundly horrific image of war is formed in the eyes of the reader. In the past, War stories leaned toward themes of glory, adventure, and honor. In presenting his realistic version of a soldier's experience, Remarque strips away the glory of war and reveals the physical and mental hardships of war. Throughout his book, a plethora of themes are emphasized and brought to light. Among those themes are deception, camaraderie, and propaganda, but the prevailing theme seems to be maintaining one's humanity. The theme of humanity is readily prevalent throughout the novel, and can be tied in with the loss of innocence, fear, and ultimately the emergence of courage. During *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the main character Paul who is only nineteen, is faced with the atrocities of war which take a toll on his humanity.

The results of war possess the ability to destroy whatever humanity is left in a man. Through Remarque's use of imagery, the reader can see the terrible effect of the war on Paul. Throughout the book, Paul Baumer, the main character, experiences many changes. In the beginning, Paul's schoolmaster Kantorek idealistically describes the glories of war. It is Kantorek's rhetoric on the ideals of patriotism that lead Paul and his classmates to enlist in the war full of optimism, eagerness, and a strong sense of nationalism. In a letter written to his classmates, he calls them "Iron Youth," implying that they are hard, strong, and resilient. However, Kantorek fails to consider the horrors Paul and his classmates experience and the constant state of anxiety and fear they endure.

However, as the war progresses, many factors and events cause Paul to transform into a different person than he started out as. The everyday

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struggles to survive in the war are slowly wearing away at Paul, causing him to feel bitter and lost. Joseph Behm was a student who had been hesitant to enlist. But to prevent being ostracized, he eventually caved into pressure. At the outset of the War, Joseph was the first to die, and his death was particularly gruesome. He had been shot in the eye and was taken for dead. However, he was later heard screaming in pain wandering in No Man's Land, and without any cover, was killed. With Behm's death, Paul and his classmates have lost their trust in authority figures and thus have lost a sense of their humanity. This is the first step in the long trail for Paul who begins to lose his humanity.

As the book progresses, Paul's experiences of war has aged him well beyond his years. Paul speaks of how he had once held a passion for poetry, but the war has stolen that from him. Remarque compares the young soldiers' lives to adults by writing, "[t]hey have wives, children, occupations, and interests, they have a background which is so strong that the war cannot obliterate it. We young men of twenty, however, have only our parents, and some, perhaps, a girl" (20). Unlike the older soldiers, the younger ones have nothing to return to. Paul expresses sorrow for his lost, young life, and his humanity. War stripped him of his innocence and humanity in such a way that, like aging, they have been forever changed and there is no return. He is left with no other purpose in life but to survive the war.

Paul conveys his reluctance of what the future holds for him when he says, "[w]hat 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? (264). Not only does Paul feel that everything he has ever learned in the past is useless at the front, but his future is forever lost. Once again, we can see Paul losing his identity and self-worth; he is becoming less and less human.

Another factor where one can see Paul losing his humanity is witnessing death and atrocities all around him, which not only change his perception on death but has also made Paul unfeeling. Paul proves this by saying, “[i]f your own father came over with them you would not hesitate to fling a bomb at him.” (114). To kill your own father without hesitation proves the horror and devastation war can have on one’s humanity. Like a machine, Paul is without emotion. He learns that the only way to survive the atrocities of war is to push away your fears and numb the pain. The experiences Paul endures through is something no 19year old should ever have to bear. He has forgotten the most fundamental aspect of one’s humanity; to feel.

In another situation, Paul instinctively kills a French soldier, Gerard Duval. While in the shell hole, Paul is forced to listen to the soldier die a slow agonizing death. He comments to the soldier by saying, “[f]orgive me, comrade, we always see it too late. Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony- Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy?” (223). With these heartfelt words, Paul is able to express remorse, a human emotion. He recognizes the purposelessness of the war and finds a common bond with

the dead French soldier, even though he is the enemy. He realizes that perhaps in another time, they would have been friends, perhaps even best of friends.

However, amidst the shadow of death there arises a sense of brotherhood. As a result of their shared experiences, Paul and his comrades form an inseparable bond of loyalty and friendship. The author is careful to place a strong emphasis on these values since they are the only romanticized element of the novel. During one incident where Paul and Katczinsky are roasting a goose, Paul says, “[w]e don’t talk much, but I believe we have a more complete communion with one another than even lovers have... so intimate that we do not even speak.” (94). This is a perfect example where Paul retains his humanity. However, not only does he retain his humanity, he strengthens it. Sadly, if those words were spoken today, many would misinterpret it as a homosexual relationship.

Oftentimes, people will say that a man and woman create the perfect bond. They neglect to mention that there is a limitation as to how much a woman can understand a man’s true essence. The bond Paul forms with his fellow comrades makes today’s friendships pale in comparison. They are no longer mere friends with superficial ties, but brothers who without hesitation, will sacrifice everything for each other. It is crucial that the soldiers form this kind of bond because it is the only thing that is preserving their humanity.

As the war drags on, one can see the changes Paul undergoes. While mostly full of death and suffering, one thing is for certain. Paul is no longer the boy he used to be when the war started. His experiences with soldiers, trenches,

and the war itself have given him a completely new perspective of the world. After surviving through traumatizing situations and finding first-hand the futility of war, Paul departs the living world with, “ I am very quiet. Let the months and years come, they can take nothing from me, they can take nothing more. I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear” (295).

Here Remarque vividly portrays Paul’s nakedness. He feels as though he has nothing else to lose and his life without purpose. Although the feeling of hopelessness pervades Paul’s words, his ability during the war to muster courage amidst the most morbid times proves that if anything, the war has strengthened his humanity. He does not see it, but through his experiences, he had not lost his humanity but was merely subduing his emotions out of necessity. In the end, no one but the soldiers can fully understand each other’s experiences. However, they no longer have to bear the burden by themselves; Paul is no longer alone.