

# **The Soldier's Metamorphosis:**

Difficulty in *All Quiet on the Western Front*

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In chapter six of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the narrator, Paul Bäumer reflects on how foreign his youth seems to his wartime reality. This essay will attempt to develop the reader's understanding of the transformative effects of war on the loss of humanity by examining the following passage:

"We are burnt by the hard facts; like tradesmen we understand distinctions, and like butchers, necessities. We are no longer untroubled – we are indifferent."<sup>1</sup>

Remarque vividly describes the atrocities of war throughout *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Initially, I thought I possessed an adequate understanding of the passage. However, there are still parts of the passage I did not understand or acknowledge, which adds to the meaning of the passage, and therefore, the entire text. The soldiers on the front were no longer the people they were in their youth but had become callous men. The war had caused them to abandon memories of the past and aspirations of the future. I had yet to consider the meaning of being "burnt" by hard facts, the similes of "tradesmen we understand distinctions, and like butchers, necessities," and the distinction between being untroubled and indifferent.

Upon closer reading of the passage, I began to extract meaning from Remarque's word choice and syntax. At first when I read "We are burnt by hard facts," I acknowledged that "the hard facts" the soldiers experienced were their war experiences, which include the ubiquitous presence of death and destruction. The use of passive voice keeps the focus on the soldiers as they are the subject of the sentence. Furthermore, the passive voice indicates that the soldiers had little autonomy over whether they wanted to accept the hardships of war. Remarque's use of the word "burnt" can be taken literally as the burning of soldiers on the battlefield, or figuratively as the irreversible transformation that the soldiers went through as a result of the war. The soldiers

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1929), 122-3.

will never be the motivated and hopeful people of their youth. In fact, the soldiers barely view themselves as humans.

Remarque's comparison of soldiers to tradesman and butchers initially piqued my curiosity. When I consider the simile, "like tradesmen we understand distinction" I immediately thought that tradesmen must distinguish exceptionally made goods from inferior goods. For a soldier, understanding the difference between certain sounds and light could be the difference between life and death. Likewise, butchers must kill animals in order for themselves to make a living and for others to eat. Soldiers must kill their opposition in order for their, and their loved ones, way of life to continue to exist.

The transformation from being untroubled to becoming indifferent is essential to understand the loss of innocence of the soldier. To be unbothered is to be without worry. This is represented of the soldier life before the war. They were children, so they had yet to experience many of the hardships associated with adulthood. The constant death and chaos had emotionally traumatized the soldiers. Consequently, the soldiers are now apathetic; they find little significance in their lives. They're only concerned with finding food and survival like wild animals. Their fatherland and military bureaucracy have lost meaning along with the memories of their youth.

Erich Maria Remarque's short passage describes the means in which soldiers are permanently altered by the events of the war. The theme of the loss of humanity is observed through this passage. Soldiers stop viewing themselves as humans and begin to think of themselves as butchers of other humans. The experiences of the troops on the front have caused them to have a melancholy interpretation of normality.

## Bibliography

Maria Remarque, Erich. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1929.