All Quiet on the Western Front

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERICH MARIA REMARQUE

Remarque was born into a family of modest means and attended the University of Münster before being drafted into the German army at the beginning of World War I. He fought on the Western Front, where he was wounded several times. After the war, Remarque worked as a sports reporter, race car driver, and teacher before publishing *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which garnered him international fame. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they burned and banned Remarque's books. Remarque had already moved to Switzerland in 1932, and in 1939 he immigrated to the United States, where he was naturalized in 1947. He returned to Switzerland shortly thereafter, where he lived with his American film star wife, Paulette Goddard, until his death.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War I, which began in the summer of 1914 and ended in November of 1918, was fought by many countries but mainly involved Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire fighting against France, Britain, Russia, and eventually America. While the causes of the war were complex and are still debated by historians today, the spark that ignited the conflict was the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo in June of 1914. Austro-Hungary blamed Serbia for the assassination, and declared war on Serbia in July of 1914, an act that drew Serbia's ally Russia and Austro-Hungary's ally Germany into the war. Soon, France and Britain had joined the Russian side, and the catastrophic war began. The war was the first "mechanized war," and the killing machines (machine guns, mortars, etc.) made the war unbelievably brutal and impersonal, shattering for many the idea of war as something heroic, a face-to-face battle between courageous warriors. Survival was not a matter of skill but of luck. World War I was also characterized by trench warfare, in which soldiers on either side lived for months on end in wet, rat- and disease-infested trenches dug into the ground, suffering thousands of lost lives to gain or lose just a few feet of ground.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

American critics saw Remarque as the heir to Stephen Crane, whose *The Red Badge of Courage* was perhaps the first anti-war war novel and therefore similar to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. An entirely opposite take on the First World War can be found in Ernst Jünger's *The Storm of Steel*. Jünger, who was three years older than Remarque, also fought and was wounded in the war, but he came away from the experience with an even stronger sense of nationalism and militarism. Jünger, whose books became very popular with the Nazis, fought in World War II, though he became critical of the Nazi regime after the war.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *All Quiet on the Western Front*
- **When Written:** 1929
- **Where Written:** Berlin, Germany
- **When Published:** 1929
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** War novel
- **Setting:** France and Germany during World War I
- **Climax:** Paul stabbing the French soldier Gérard Duval in No Man's Land
- **Antagonist:** Corporal Himmelstoss, Kantorek, the authority figures behind the war in general
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Western Front in Hollywood. *All Quiet on the Western Front* was adapted into a film in 1930 by the American director Lewis Milestone. The film, which won the Academy Award for best director, sparked unrest in Germany, where Nazi gangs released stink bombs and mice in movie theatres. Joseph Goebbels, who later became the Nazi propaganda minister, denounced the movie as anti-German. In Poland, however, the film was banned because it was seen as pro-German.

PLOT SUMMARY

After enduring heavy fighting on the Western front of World War I, a group of German soldiers rest behind the front lines. Over their first good meal in weeks, Paul Bäumer (the novel's narrator), and his friends Kropp, Tjaden, Leer, Katczinsky (Kat), and Müller bitterly remember how their schoolteacher Kantorek convinced them to enlist in the army with his idealistic and romantic ideas about war and glory. Now they've become so pragmatic and focused on mere survival that when they visit Kemmerich, a friend dying in the hospital, Muller asks Kemmerich if he can have **Kemmerich's boots** since Kemmerich won't need them anymore. Paul and his friends spend a lot of time talking about their petty and cruel commander during boot camp, Corporal Himmelstoss. They

discuss why men like Himmelstoss, who was a postman in civilian life, become so terrible during war. Kat suggests that the military offers men an outlet for their animalistic impulses. When Himmelstoss is called up to join Paul's company, Paul remembers how he and his friends ambushed and beat Himmelstoss on the last day of boot camp.

The German army sends Paul's company back to the front to set up barbed wire. After finishing the job under heavy fire, the company is attacked and forced to take cover in a cemetery. The shelling throws coffins into the air; dead bodies mix with the bodies of the living and dying. Paul and his friends survive, though many don't. Back at camp, the men discuss what they would do after the war. It's soon apparent that the younger soldiers in the group, such as Paul, can't come up with anything. Their lives have been defined by war. Paul thinks of them as "lost."

A new French offensive begins. The men shelter in a cramped bunker, and the constant French shelling drives some recent reinforcements insane. Himmelstoss, for one, cowers in a bunker pretending to be injured. Paul beats him until an officer orders them both to join a charge against enemy lines. The Germans eventually repel the French attack and make a counter-attack of their own before retreating to their original lines.

Only 32 of the 150 men in Paul's company survive the battle, and the company is brought off the front line to a depot to reorganize. While there, Paul, Albert and Leer meet three French women who are excited to sleep with soldiers. Soon after, Paul receives enough leave to visit his hometown, where he finds that his mother is suffering from cancer, and that the townspeople, including his father, are supportive of the war and know nothing of its horrific nature. The townspeople's ignorant patriotism annoys Paul, but also makes him feel distant, as if he's lost his home. When his leave is up, Paul is sent to a camp on the moors for further training. His duties include guarding Russian prisoners of war, with whom he comes to identify and sympathize as fellow human beings

Eventually Paul is sent back to the front and his company. On an intelligence-gathering mission between enemy lines, he loses his bearings just as a French attack begins. As he waits in a shell hole for the attack to end, a retreating French soldier falls on top of him. Paul stabs the man but does not kill him. As the man slowly dies over the next day, Paul feels regret and does what he can to comfort him. After the shelling ends, Paul returns to camp, and is sent with his friends to guard an abandoned village. Paul and Albert are injured while on patrol, and wind up in a hospital, a frightful and depressing place where doctors sometimes practice unnecessary surgical procedures on injured soldiers. Albert has to have a leg amputated, but Paul recovers and is sent back to the front. Though the Germans are clearly losing, they fight on, and the war rages on into the summer of 1918. Many new recruits go crazy; a soldier named Detering deserts and is captured; Müller, Leer, and Kat are killed. In October of 1918, one month before the long awaited armistice is finally agreed to, Paul is killed on a day of otherwise quiet on the western front. The expression on the face of his dead body is calm, as though he were relieved to be dead.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Paul Bäumer – The narrator and protagonist of the novel. Paul and a number of friends enlist in the army at the onset of World War I after being inspired (and pressured) by the nationalist rhetoric of their schoolteacher Kantorek. After experiencing the cruelty of Corporal Himmelstoss at boot camp and the horror of the trenches, Paul becomes disillusioned with the war and feels as though he has been robbed of his past and his future. Paul exemplifies soldiers of the "lost generation," who had no jobs or wives to return to once the war was over and who carried the physical and emotional scars of the war with them forever. Though Paul often talks of how the war has transformed him into an animal or automaton, he retains compassion and affection for his close comrades. And while he sometimes becomes nostalgic for his childhood spent reading and playing among the poplar trees, he is, by the end of the novel, almost indifferent to his own fate.

Kantorek – The former schoolteacher of Paul, Albert Kropp, Leer, and Joseph Behm. Kantorek pressured his students to enlist in the army and inspired them with nationalist rhetoric. Paul and his friends had trusted Kantorek because to them he appeared cultured and civilized, but what they found most persuasive about him was the "idea of authority" that he represented. Interestingly, Paul notes that it was members of the educated upper classes like Kantorek who were most in favor of the war, while poor and simple people were the most opposed.

Corporal Himmelstoss – A postman in civilian life, Corporal Himmelstoss abuses young recruits in his wartime role as a trainer at boot camp. He was particularly cruel to Tjaden, a bedwetter, whom Himmelstoss made share a bed with another bedwetter, Kindervater. Kat theorizes that ordinary men like Himmelstoss come to be so cruel because all men have something cruel and barbaric in them, and this dark inner nature is released by the rigid power hierarchy of the military. Himmelstoss, however, is a dynamic character: after he is moved to a combat position at the front and experiences the horrors of trench warfare, he softens up and tries to make amends with the men he had terrorized at boot camp. In another wrinkle of complexity, Paul wonders if the cruel treatment Himmelstoss doled out actually made them better able to survive the war.

Müller – One of Paul's classmates. Müller is practical and

unsentimental about what it takes to survive in war. When he visits Kemmerich, he pesters Kemmerich to give him his good **boots** even though this is a rather rude thing to do to a dying man who has just lost a leg.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Stanislaus Katczinsky – One of Paul's closest friends. Katczinsky, or Kat, at 40 years old, is the oldest of Paul's friends at the front and by far the cleverest. Kat has a knack for rounding up food and supplies in even the most barren conditions.

Tjaden – Another classmate of Paul's. A bedwetter with a big appetite, Tjaden suffered abuse from Corporal Himmelstoss and longs to get even with him.

Gérard Duval – A French soldier whom Paul kills after Duval jumps into a shell hole in No Man's Land where Paul is hiding. As Gérard slowly dies, Paul comes to sympathize with him and tries to comfort him.

Albert Kropp – A classmate of Paul's and the most strong-willed and independent of the group. At boot camp, Albert, who is often referred to as "Kropp" in the novel, was the first to stand up to Himmelstoss.

Leer – One of Paul's classmates, a smooth-talker with women, and an excellent math student. He bleeds to death after being hit in the hip towards the end of the war.

Joseph Behm – One of Paul's classmates and also the most reluctant to enlist, and he does so only after Kantorek exerts great pressure. He is the first of Paul's friends to be killed.

Detering – A simple peasant farmer with an affection for horses. Near the end of the war the sight of **cherry trees** makes him homesick for his farm, and he deserts the army, only to be caught and arrested.

Franz Kemmerich – A classmate of Paul's whose leg wound develops into a deadly case of gangrene. His death early in the novel offers a glimpse of the meaningless destruction of life that is to come.

Paul's father – Paul's father is typical of the older generation in his militarism and ignorance of the horrors of trench warfare.

Haie Westhus – A member of Paul's Second Company, Haie was a peat-digger in civilian life. He shocks his friends when he tells them he would re-enlist in the army after the war, if only because it is better than peat-digging.

Kindervater – A bedwetter with whom Himmelstoss forced Tjaden to share a bed in a cruel and misguided attempt to cure both of them of their bedwetting problem.

Lewandowski – A wounded soldier from Poland whom Paul and Albert meet while recovering in the hospital. When Lewandowski's wife, whom he has not seen for two years, visits him, Paul, Albert, and the others watch out for hospital orderlies while Lewandowski and his wife have sex.

Mittelstaedt – Another former classmate of Paul's. Mittelstaedt advances in the ranks to become a training officer, and torments Kantorek when he is eventually drafted into the army.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE HORROR OF MODERN WAR

World War I is considered the first modern war, as it was the first conflict in which weapons like poison gas, armored tanks, and shell bombardments were used widely by both sides. Much of the land conflict in WWI was fought in networks of trenches dug throughout Europe, including the infamous "Western Front" in Belgium and France. Set in the final years of the war, the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* is famous for its extremely graphic depictions of life and death in the trenches. Trench fighting was grueling and inefficient. Gaining a few hundred yards of land could easily cost the lives of thousands of men. Those who survived direct attacks often suffered catastrophic shrapnel injuries, losing arms, legs, and even faces.

The technological advances that powered the war effort allowed for wholesale, mechanized slaughter. With weapons like heavy artillery and poison gas at their disposal, soldiers no longer had to come into contact with enemy combatants in order to kill them. Violence became a much more impersonal affair. Soldiers like those in Paul's regiment became detached from the men they killed, and the threat of a vague, unforeseeable death hangs over them. When Paul kills in person for the first time by stabbing a French soldier named Gérard Duval, he is deeply shaken by the experience—the "abstraction" of killing becomes a reality.

In addition to the unprecedented trauma caused by the advances in war machinery, soldiers experienced other physical and psychological hardships. Paul, the young German soldier who narrates the novel, describes the soldiers' horrific living conditions in detail. Trenches flooded easily and offered little protection from the elements, making them breeding-grounds for diseases like dysentery and typhoid. They were also infested with vermin, including large, aggressive "corpse-rats" that fed on the bodies of fallen soldiers. Living in this environment, under the constant threat of violent death, took an emotional toll on the young soldiers. Many suffered from ***shell shock***, a psychological condition similar to post-traumatic

stress disorder (PTSD). Several characters in the novel, including Paul, experience some form of shell shock, causing them to freeze up, go mad, or attempt to flee during battle. As Paul observes repeatedly, no one can survive the war completely unscathed.

SURVIVAL

Many of the young soldiers, including Paul, joined the army because they were motivated by romantic ideals like patriotism and honor. On the front, however, they quickly learn that patriotic fervor will not protect them from exploding shells or poison gas. In the trenches, there is only one goal: survival at any cost. Soldiers must be prepared to act unthinkingly in battle, no matter how horrifying these actions might have once seemed. The men revert to animal instinct under fire, suppressing all higher thought. Emotions like pity, grief, or disgust are fatal to the soldier, as they might cause him to hesitate or second-guess himself.

Readers of *All Quiet on the Western Front* often find Paul's calm, neutral attitude towards his experiences almost as disturbing as the carnage he describes. As Paul himself explains, however, becoming desensitized to the horror around him is the only way he can keep going. Only rarely is an event traumatic enough to briefly break down these mental barriers—as, for example, when Paul is trapped alone for hours with the body of a French soldier he has killed, or when his best friend Katczinsky (Kat) is killed by a shrapnel fragment.

THE LOST GENERATION

Though Paul often dreams about his life before the war, he knows that he can never return to it. The war has destroyed an entire generation of young men, leaving them "lost"—physically and psychologically maimed and unable to readjust to their past lives. Even if they manage to survive the trenches, the things they have seen and done there have permanently transformed them. Paul experiences the jarring effects of this transformation most clearly when he briefly returns to his home village on leave. The village has not changed, yet Paul feels completely out of place there. His old interests in literature and art, represented by the shelves of books in his childhood room, now seem childish and unreal. He feels alienated from his father and his former teachers, who expect him to play the role of the heroic young soldier. Only his ailing mother seems to understand his reluctance to discuss what has happened to him—and even she, Paul knows, could not possibly imagine the terrible realities of trench warfare. When his leave ends, Paul is almost relieved to return to the front. His trip home reinforces his conviction that the war has created an unbridgeable divide between the young men who fight and the communities they have left behind.

COMRADESHIP

For Paul, the one positive aspect of the war experience is that it forges extraordinarily strong bonds between soldiers. The men of the Second Company are comrades-in-arms, closer than family or even lovers. They have seen unspeakable horrors and endured unimaginable suffering together, experiences they will never be able to share with those who did not fight. The war creates sharp distinctions between soldiers and civilians, but it erases other distinctions. Class divisions, for example, are no longer significant: well-educated young men like Paul fight and die alongside peasants like Detering.

Comradeship is such an intense bond that one would expect the death of one soldier to trigger a strong emotional reaction from the others. But grief is a luxury these battle-hardened soldiers cannot afford. Apart from brief outbursts of rage or sorrow, the men are unable to properly mourn their fallen friends. Paul becomes increasingly numb to these losses over the course of the novel, as he watches every single one of his friends die. Paul continues fighting after the death of his last and closest friend, Kat, but he seems to have lost the will to survive. The novel's final paragraph suggests that Paul accepts and even welcomes his own death.

THE HYPOCRISY OF THE OLDER GENERATION

When war broke out in 1914, many Germans viewed the conflict as an opportunity for Germany to prove her superior military strength. Young men were expected to support the national cause by signing up for active duty. These soldiers were volunteers in theory only, Paul says. The reality was that most had no say in the matter. Under immense pressure from parents, teachers, and politicians, young men had to enlist or risk being accused of cowardice. One of Paul's teachers, a patriotic older man named Kantorek, even marched his class down to the local recruitment office to volunteer.

Paul feels that these authority figures deceived his generation, filling their heads with romantic ideas about patriotism but failing to prepare them for the horrors of battle. He is disgusted by the hypocrisy of those who preach the virtues of sacrifice, yet are content to let other men die in their place. Even when it has become obvious that Germany cannot win, those in power stubbornly prolong the war, blinded by greed and pride.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

KEMMERICH'S BOOTS

When Paul, Müller, and Albert visit Kemmerich in the hospital, Müller is more concerned with getting Kemmerich's boots than comforting Kemmerich. Müller, Paul points out, is not being rude: the war requires that soldiers abandon social niceties and think realistically about their own interests. Even the hospital orderlies have their eyes on Kemmerich's boots. The boots command as much, if not more, respect and attention than the man to whom they belong, and in this way symbolize the cheapness of human life in the war.

THE CHERRY TREE

When Detering glimpses a blooming cherry tree while coming back from the front, he is reminded of the beautiful farm with cherry orchards that he left behind. The memory is so compelling that he deserts. While the cherry tree holds particular meaning for Detering, it symbolizes the lives that all of the men have left behind, lives that had just begun to bloom.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ballantine Books edition of *All Quiet on the Western Front* published in 1987.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war.

Related Themes:

Page Number: v

Explanation and Analysis

At the novel's onset, the narrator frames the way the reader should receive the content. He presents it as a primarily factual story.

These lines serve to preempt any expectations about the impetus for or message of the novel. One might expect a war novel to be an "accusation" against own one's government or an enemy government; or perhaps a "confession" recounting the crimes the narrator has committed. To expect an "adventure" would be to assume that the narrator aggrandizes the events he recounts—another turn foreseeable in a war story. Yet the narrator denies the value of seeing experiences in this epic light, claiming that death is an adventure only in the gaze of an external observer—not the one who has actually spent time in war. Promising to "simply tell of a generation of men," he ultimately rejects each of these conventions for a non-political and deeply realist style.

Beyond prefiguring the style of the novel, these lines also offer keen insight into the content of the text: the inner psychology of those who fought in the war. Once more, a reader may arrive with expectations that the novel will focus on the battles and successes—which Remarque epitomizes as "its shells"—but this text is less concerned with physical pain than with mental distress. Thus its realism is an explicitly psychological and interior one, ultimately concerned with the way that a set of traumatic events transformed the human mind.

"There were thousands of Kantoreks, all of whom were convinced that they were acting for the best—in a way that cost them nothing. And that is why they let us down so badly. For us lads of eighteen they ought to have been mediators and guides to the world of maturity, the world of work, of duty, of culture, of progress—to the future…The idea of authority, which they represented, was associated in our minds with a greater insight and a more humane wisdom. But the first death we saw shattered this belief. We had to recognize that our generation was more to be trusted than theirs.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker), Kantorek

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Paul recounts how he and his schoolmates entered the army through the provocations of a teacher named Kantorek. This memory spurs a reflection on the way that many other young men were recruited to the army.

The story of Kantorek addresses an essential question in the organization of war efforts: how youth are recruited to a cause they would otherwise find repulsive. Paul explains that the authority vested in an older schoolteacher allowed Kantorek to convince them that "progress" and the "future" would be best reached by their joining the army. That is to say, the mentorship role of a teacher granted Kantorek

increased his moral and advisory power over his students. Yet Paul is careful to point out that he did not operate with malicious intentions, but rather was certain to be "acting for the best." Thus the authority power structure is presented not as a group of individual agents acting maliciously, but rather the result of a larger social system of proud, patriotic older men sending younger men to die in wars the older men have started.

That "there were thousands of Kantoreks" speaks to the universality of these soldiers' experience, presenting the text as a microcosm for what was happening in broader German society. Kantorek's individual character turns first into a "they" and then into "the idea of authority," growing increasingly broad and representational. Similarly, their small group of soldiers becomes "our generation." Often Remarque will use phrases like these to broaden the scope of the novel, to transform a single realist tale into an account of a cultural paradigm.

❝ Iron Youth. Youth! We are none of us more than twenty years old. But young? Youth? That is long ago. We are old folk.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Kropp mentions a letter penned by Kantorek calling the student cohort the "Iron Youth." Paul reacts sarcastically, finding that the term has little relevance for what transpires at the front.

The irony of this phrase stems from how little the terms conform to the soldiers' actual experience in the army. "Iron" refers to the way their character would remain steadfast and brave in war, yet the soldiers have already found their spirits broken by the psychological and physical toil. The irony of "youth" is a bit trickier to parse, and Paul therefore spells out his reaction. Although they are, by numerical accounts, indeed quite young, the members of the cohort are "old folk" psychologically—for they have by now weathered extreme personal traumas over the course of the war. Paul demonstrates here that this generation was thought to be iron-willed and powerful—able to resist pain and win glory during the war—but notes that these images were ultimately in vain.

More broadly, the passage demonstrates how mismatched the propaganda language of a nation can be from the reality experienced by its citizens and soldiers. Each of these words implies a cultural image rather than a personal reality—and they were used by those like Kantorek to motivate the schoolboys to become soldiers. Remarque's stringent realism can itself be read as a response to this type of disjointed language—an attempt to recapture simplicity in the face of bombastic, misleading discourse.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Though Müller would be delighted to have Kemmerich's boots, he is really quite as sympathetic as another who could not bear to think of such a thing for grief. He merely sees things clearly…We have lost all sense of other considerations, because they are artificial. Only the facts are real and important for us. And good boots are scarce.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker), Müller, Franz Kemmerich

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

When Paul goes to the hospital to see Kemmerich, he is told to take the dying man's boots for Müller. Paul observes that this is not cruel but rather a reasonable and pragmatic response given the soldiers' circumstances.

Once more, Paul preempts the reader's potential criticism of the soldiers' actions. By focusing on the boots, Müller would seem to be violating an important cultural norm of having deference toward the recently-deceased—but Paul contends that he experiences emotions just as much as anyone else. Turning the apparent fault into a virtue, he continues, "He merely sees things clearly"—implying that the pragmatic approach to the boots is in fact *better* than an overly-sentimental one. Similarly, he casts "considerations" like reverence for the dead as "artificial" and in contrast with "the facts."

Though one might read this passage as evidence of how extensively a war experience can alter one's psychology, the language actually presents the soldiers as *more* aware and *more* intelligent than those who have not experienced such trauma. Juxtaposing "facts" and "artificial" considerations presents normal social rituals as false

constructions—indeed the exact type of lie that initiated the war in the first place. Thus Remarque actually rehabilitates the image of being a soldier, contending that it grants a painful clarity into reality of the world.

❝ Had we gone into the trenches without this period of training most of us would certainly have gone mad. Only thus were we prepared for what awaited us. We did not break down, but adapted ourselves; our twenty years, which made many another thing so grievous, helped us in this. But by far the most important result was that it awakened in us a strong, practical sense of esprit de corps, which in the field developed into the finest thing that arose out of the war—comradeship.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker), Corporal Himmelstoss

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Paul reflects on training for the war under Corporal Himmelstoss. He observes that while the corporal's tactics may have been brutal, they were absolutely necessary to prepare them for the front.

Although other passages have presented the war as massively destructive on the soldiers' psychology, this line shows that it could have been even more dire. Himmelstoss's training, Paul explains, may have been awful but it was also necessary to imbue the soldiers with the stamina and resilience to not "break down." He therefore reveals a certain respect for the harshness of such a leader—even recasting cruelty as necessary and pertinent in certain situations.

Beyond improving mental resilience, Paul explains, this training also had a significant impact on the group mentality of the soldiers. "Esprit de corps" is an expression taken from French to mean, literally, the "spirit of the body"—or the ineffable energy that connects a group of people in a metaphorical "body." His emphasis on "comradeship" as perhaps the only positive effect of the war is worth noting. For despite his emphasis on atrocity and psychological toil, Remarque repeatedly lauds the efficacy of the soldier unit against that toil.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ If you train a dog to eat potatoes and then afterwards put a piece of meat in front of him, he'll snap at it, it's his nature. And if you give a man a little bit of authority he behaves just the same way, he snaps at it too. The things are precisely the same. In himself man is essentially a beast, only he butters it over like a slice of bread with a little decorum. The army is based on that; one man must always have power over the other.

Related Characters: Stanislaus Katczinsky (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

As they discuss Himmelstoss's nature, the soldiers wonder how he could have originally been a mere postman.

Kat explains that his is a fundamental human response to the sudden acquisition of power. Kat presents a model of human nature that is deeply antagonistic and opportunistic. Likening man to a "dog" highlights, already, his animalistic qualities, and he completes the parallelism by saying a man "behaves just the same way." Himmelstoss's actions are therefore entirely sensible: he had little access to power as a post-man—the analog for potatoes—but the moment he gained the "meat" of authority in the army, he immediately adapted to the role. For Kat, this logic undergirds the entire structure of the military; it is the way that men, once in roles of power, are able to exercise control despite their background and lord it over others.

What is peculiar about this passage is the way that it does not assign blame to Himmelstoss: We might expect such an abuse of authority to induce criticism from the soldiers, but Kat actually presents his behavior as natural and thus permissible. Saying that "man is essentially a beast" casts displays of power simply as accurate representations of human nature—whereas other social courtesies are just the false "butter" placed on this metaphorical "bread." Once more, Remarque implies that the soldiers gain better insight into human nature from their war experiences. As a result, they do not morally condemn their superior for his authoritarian practices, but contextualize and rationalize those actions.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ At the sound of the first droning of the shells we rush back, in one part of our being, a thousand years. By the animal instinct that is awakened in us we are led and protected. It is not conscious; it is far quicker, much more sure, less fallible, than consciousness. One cannot explain it...It is this other, this second sight in us, that has...saved us, without our knowing how.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

As the soldiers glimpse the onset of a military attack, Paul describes their psychological transformation. He explains that they become more instinctual and animalistic in moments like these.

Here, we see Remarque attempting to give the reader access to the interior psychology of how it would feel to be on a battlefield. To do so, he describes a process of temporal disjoint, in which the human mind returns "a thousand years" into the past. This sensation of time travel pertains not to the external reality of the soldier, but rather to his evolutionary development—specifically a return to a more primitive, animalistic nature. Paul implicitly divides human psychology here into "conscious" and un-conscious processes: the first controls normal human endeavors, while the second takes control during moments of stress that demand instinctual action.

Although Paul presents the unconscious impulses as animalistic and evolutionarily older, he does not consider these qualities to be entirely negative. Indeed, it is those precise behaviors that "saved" them—without even requiring conscious, careful consideration. Beyond offering a realistic depiction of the mind during battle, then, this passage also rehabilitates a more instinctual type of intellect. Thus Remarque corroborates the idea that the war reveals a deeper reality of human existence without social artifice.

❝ Kat looks around and whispers: "Shouldn't we just take a revolver and put an end to it?"

The youngster will hardly survive the carrying, and at the most he will only last a few days. What he has gone through so far is nothing to what he's in for till he dies. Now he is numb and feels nothing. In an hour he will become one screaming bundle of intolerable pain. Every day that he can live will be a howling torture. And to whom does it matter whether he has them or not—I nod. "Yes, Kat, we ought to put him out of his misery."

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer, Stanislaus Katczinsky (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

When Paul and Kat realize that the new recruit will only live for a short time, they consider what to do. They agree the most ethical choice would be to end his misery by shooting him.

This conversation demonstrates how deeply moral standards can shift in the context of a war. Although normally killing a comrade would be considered awful, the two characters actually decide that it would be the more humane thing to do in this context. Instead of conforming to a normal system of ethics that considers certain actions unacceptable regardless of context, the soldiers adopt a more utilitarian approach to the world: they are willing to engage in otherwise barbaric practices if they would grant a sense of peace to the solider.

Beyond verifying the way that ethics are warped in a war environment, this passage also brings up the question of anonymity in war. When Paul notes, "to whom does it matter" if he lives for additional days, he insinuates that life is primarily meaningful when it is observed and verified by external observers. Yet this young man would be dying without family or friends to validate his pain, or even his existence. Paul therefore contends that human life is itself a factor of social context—a context notably lacking in the anonymous conditions of modern war.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"When I think about it, Albert," I say after a while rolling over on my back, "when I hear the word 'peace-time,' it goes to my head: and if it really came, I think I would do some unimaginable thing—something, you know, that it's worth having lain here in the muck for. But I can't even imagine anything. All I do know is that this business about professions and studies and salaries and so on—it makes me sick, it is and always was disgusting. I don't see anything at all, Albert."

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker), Albert Kropp

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

The soldiers take turns imagining what they would do in peacetime. Whereas others describe extensive fantasies, Paul surprisingly does not idealize that future.

His issue stems from the sense that nothing in the future could potentially justify the pain experienced by "having lain in the muck." That is to say, Paul imagines that any post-war world would have to be miraculous enough to compensate for the pain the soldiers are currently experiencing in the trenches. So when he "can't even imagine anything" that would measure up to that desire, he feels a corresponding disillusionment with what that future would offer. His issue, in particular, is with the professional options that would be available—which Paul sees as a bureaucratic morass of "business about professions and studies and salaries." After the intense, pragmatic reality of the war these social conventions seem paltry and artificial.

Though Paul presents this idea as an individual contention with his future, it also speaks to a broader societal disillusionment. One of the critical justifications for wars is that they will, in the long term, bring about preferable post-war conditions—that the soldiers are fighting for a better future: a utopia that lies beyond the trenches. By denying the idea that the future would be such a utopia, Paul is implicitly negating the merit of the war itself. He is thus voicing a developing sense among soldiers that not only was the experience of battling deeply disturbing, but also that the ends reached by the war would themselves be no more noble than before, and could never justify the means of reaching them.

We sit opposite one another, Kat and I, two soldiers in shabby coats, cooking a goose in the middle of the night. We don't talk much, but I believe we have a more complete communion with one another than even lovers have. We are two men, two minute sparks of life; outside is the night and the circle of death. We sit on the edge of it crouching in danger, the grease drips from our hands, in our hearts we are close to one another…What does he know of me or I of him? formerly we should not have had a single thought in common--now we sit with a goose between us and feel in unison, are so intimate that we do not even speak.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker), Stanislaus Katczinsky

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

While Kat and Paul roast their captured geese, Paul expresses a deep sense of connection to his comrade. He notes that the conditions of war have brought them together in a profound way.

This passage returns to the theme of comradeship in the novel—and how one the war's only redeemable aspect is the way it forges close connections between the soldiers. What is unique about Paul and Kat's interaction here is that it requires little verbal communication and no common background. Saying, "formerly we should not have had a single thought in common," Paul emphasizes the very divergent backgrounds of the two characters—which are somehow transcended by their involvement in the war. Without other artifacts of social artifice, the sole presence of a "goose" is sufficient to connect them.

Remarque emphasizes the characters' departure from normal societal norms with repeated references to solitude, abstraction, and darkness. Paul does not not see himself and Kat as true individuals but rather as "two men, two minute sparks of life"—general representations of humanity that stand in front of "the night and the circle of death." Though this image is frightening, it also provides the necessary conditions for them to connect. For "communion," in such a context, can form from the simplest and most universal experience of sharing a meal.

A little soldier and a clear voice, and if anyone were to caress him he would hardly understand, this soldier with the big boots and the shut heart, who marches because he is wearing big boots, and has forgotten all else but marching. Beyond the sky-line is a country with flowers, lying so still that he would like to weep. There are sights there that he has not forgotten, because he never possessed them—perplexing, yet lost to him. Are not his twenty summers there?

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Paul stops considering the specific lives of soldiers he knows and instead ruminates on the general idea of a soldier. He points out how they march routinely and without any regard for their future or past.

This image presents soldiers as mechanical and thus unaware of their surroundings. That he is resistant to the comfort of a "caress" because he "has forgotten all else but marching" demonstrates that the routine operations of the war have hindered his ability to receive human affection. Hope lies, for this soldier, in potentially seeing "a country with flowers"—a beautiful setting that would reinvigorate the emotion in his life (or break his heart and make him "weep"). That Paul considers "his twenty summers" to be in that metaphorical field presents it as a receptacle for the years that have been stolen by the war. In this way, he imagines the generation to have become mechanized by the events that transpire, but also to hold within them the capacity to regain lost emotions.

Remarque deviates from his normally realist style in this passage to shift to a more allegorical register. Though the reflection on "a little soldier" is induced by an interaction with a specific person, the descriptions apply to a more generic warrior. Thus what would otherwise refer just to one person instead becomes a diagnosis of a generation.

Chapter 6 Quotes

It is just as much a matter of chance that I am still alive as that I might have been hit. In a bombproof dug-out I may be smashed to atoms and in the open may survive ten hours' bombardment unscathed. No soldier outlives a thousand chances. But every soldier believes in Chance and trusts his luck

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

While on the front, Paul reflects on how his life is dictated by randomness. He is deeply pragmatic but also continues to believe in a form of fate.

Though the reader might assume that arriving on the front would bring great fear to the soldiers, Paul points out that the danger they experience there is not dissimilar to that felt at other military moments. Ignoring statistical methods of comparison, he examines individual anecdotes, observing that a "bombproof dug-out" does not grant complete protection, just as being "in the open" does not signal one for death. Each moment is instead taken to be one of the "thousand chances" that will eventually cumulate to make death highly probable. Here, then, Paul adopts a more scientific or statistical view of events—until he switches gears in the final sentence.

Saying, "But every soldier believes in Chance and trusts his luck" contains two layered points: Paul simultaneously expresses disdain or distance from viewpoints that adhere to faith, while also implicitly grouping himself in the "every soldier" cohort that holds these views. Thus he points out how one can hold a set of seemingly contradictory opinions on death and chance—believing in statistical accuracy at the same time as adhering to fate.

We could never regain the old intimacy with those scenes. It was not any recognition of their beauty and their significance that attracted us, but the communion, the feeling of a comradeship with the things and events of our existence, which cut us off and made the world of our parents a thing incomprehensible to us—for then we surrendered ourselves to events and were lost in them, and the least little thing was enough to carry us down the stream of eternity.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

While on sentry duty, Paul has a set of visions from his childhood. He describes the gulf between his current

experience and those memories.

These reflections build on Paul's earlier image of the marching soldier: Just as that character was separated from twenty years of emotional memories, Paul's cohort is severed from "the old intimacy" with childhood experiences. They feel this distance from both their more innocent youth and from the pre-war society that cultivated those innocent experiences. The effect of the war is to cause Paul and the other soldiers to lose contact with that innocence.

Yet Paul makes clear that the attraction to those memories is not induced by the specific content of the memories themselves, but rather by the feeling of coherence in identity they create. In desiring "the feeling of a comradeship," he brings up the motif of communion that has pervaded the novel so far, but applies it to coherence within a single person. That is to say, Paul has felt his life to be broken into discontinuous pieces, in which the current moment of the war causes him to have "surrendered" to the present. Remarque thus points out how it is the emotional distance from one's past that induces a war-torn identity crisis.

> We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men, we are crude and sorrowful and superficial—I believe we are lost.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Paul continues reflecting on his childhood. He reiterates how deeply his generation has been fractured by the events of the war.

This description returns to the paradox of the soldiers' age, as once more Paul references both their youthful qualities and their burdens of experience. That they are "forlorn like children" speaks to a juvenile helplessness and despondency in the face of the war, while being "experienced like old men" affirms both the wisdom and the trauma they have gained while serving. Extending the contrasting terms, Paul says they, "are crude and sorrowful and superficial": a combination of grizzled, deep emotions and exterior surfaces. In this way, the emotional ages of the soldiers contrast with their physical ones, leading to a disjoint between interior and exterior identities as conditioned by the war.

Yet why do these contrasting sets of qualities give rise to the statement, "I believe we are lost"? Paul seems to imply that in holding opposite sets of characteristics within themselves, the soldiers are deprived of a coherent sense of self. Thus the lost generation is not so much a literally dead or abandoned generation, but rather a psychologically disjointed one, in which paradoxical identities have led to a lack of coherence in the self.

> The terror of the front sinks deep down when we turn our backs upon it; we make grim, coarse jests about it, when a man dies, then we say he has nipped off his turd, and so we speak of everything; that keeps us from going mad; as long as we take it that way we maintain our own resistance.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

As he prepares to go on leave, Paul ponders the behaviors that soldiers tend to take up when they leave the front. He observes that the humor others perceive as characteristic of soldiers is a defense mechanism for dealing with the horrors of war.

Characteristically, Paul responds to and denies a reader's expectation of why soldiers behave in a certain way. We might assume that leaves offer solace from the front—and that the soldiers' humor therefore reflects that joy. But Paul explains that a leave only causes "the terror of the front" to become more poignant and painful, for it throws into relief the horrors just experienced. Humor becomes, then, a way for the soldiers to sterilize and to write off their horrific experiences. For instance, using the phrase "nipped off his turd" to refer to a solider's death misdirects the actual emotional pain of such an event instead toward an adolescent joke. That this behavior "keeps us from going mad" casts it as a psychological need instead of flippant humor, and the emphasis on "resistance" corroborates the heft of the satire. Thus Remarque cautions us from making rapid assessments of a soldier's personality or idiosyncrasies, and to examine more closely what may be psychologically motivating even something as simple as humor.

On the platform I look round; I know no one among all the people hurrying to and fro. A red-cross sister offers me something to drink. I turn away, she smiles at me too foolishly, so obsessed with her own importance: "Just look, I am giving a soldier coffee!"—She calls me "Comrade," but I will have none of it.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

On leave, Paul finds himself uncertain about how to interact with civilians. He is uncomfortable here with the attention he receives because of his uniform and position.

This passage demonstrates how Paul's war experiences have a detrimental effect on his more "civilian" interactions. Though the red-cross sister's actions should be taken as a sign of kindness and generosity, Paul receives them only in negative and skeptical terms. That he sees her as"obsessed with her own importance" verifies that his mind has mutated her altruistic behavior into a selfish one. Thus Remarque uses the leave scene to demonstrate the novel's opening point that the war had induced a deep psychological toll on the characters.

The theme of anonymity resurfaces as well in this passage. Paul's reaction is partially conditioned by the fact that he knows "no one among all the people." The sister's action comes off as fraudulent specifically because of her use of the term "Comrade"—which implies a senseless affiliation and false connection between the two. Thus it is the hypocritical combination of being fundamentally unknown but falsely recognized that causes Paul agitation, as well as the disconnect he feels between himself and all the civilians around him, those who know nothing of his experiences and still think of the war in terms of patriotism and heroism.

I feel excited; but I do not want to be, for that is not right. I want that quiet rapture again. I want to feel the same powerful, nameless urge that I used to feel when I turned to my books. The breath of desire that then arose from the coloured backs of the books, shall fill me again, melt the heavy, dead lump of lead that lies somewhere in me and waken again the impatience of the future, the quick joy in the world of thought, it shall bring back again the lost eagerness of my youth. I sit and wait.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

While on leave, Paul thinks back on his youthful love of books. He imagines what it would be like to experience that energy when reading once again.

His scene with the books demonstrates how distant the war-torn Paul is from his earlier identity. Remarque emphasizes this point through Paul's off-kilter emotional response to the books: Instead of "the same powerful, nameless urge," he feels a far simpler sense of being "excited"—a less nuanced and more direct response. What Paul desires, instead, is a psychological sense of quietude and intensity, an emotional reaction that would stimulate him to care more actively about his future. For him, this hope is identified with literature and with youth, two things to which he has become dulled by the war experience.

It is worth pausing on the fact that Paul experienced this poignancy from books. Remarque implies that this novel itself could serve a parallel purpose for the reader, perhaps returning a sense of "the lost eagerness." This pragmatic or even didactic end to the novel would seem to contrast with Remarque's earlier explanation that it was purely a case of realism. But perhaps the two interpretations can be brought together, in which we see that this text, even in plain realism, presents an aesthetic world more moving than the daily experiences of a soldier.

I ought never to have come here. Out there I was indifferent and often hopeless; I will never be able to be so again. I was a soldier, and now I am nothing but an agony for myself, for my mother, for everything that is so comfortless and without end.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

As Paul prepares to depart his leave and return to the front, he reflects on the time away. Instead of seeing it as an enjoyable respite, he believes the war has only made home into something oppressive.

The difficulty of Paul's leave centers on how he has constructed a separate soldier identity on the front. This self was "indifferent and often hopeless"—hardened to the cruel conditions of the war but able to receive them with relatively fewer emotions. He could explain away those feelings as being "a soldier," but in this new context of home those feelings instead make him "but an agony for myself." That is to say, they undermine his sense of a coherent identity and instead transform him into an unspecific negative energy.

It is Paul's social circles, in particular, that condition this self-hating sentiment. For not only is he "an agony for myself" but also for "for my mother"—implying that the familial repercussions are what he finds especially damning. He is unable to fully appreciate the care offered by others *and* applies negative energy back to them. Indeed, the comforts that he should have felt while at home instead become "so comfortless and without end." Reentering the safe physical space does not at all serve to reawaken his emotions, but rather points out how extensive the gulf is between these identities. Remarque thus emphasizes how the war constructs a separate soldier-ego, which cannot be reconciled with Paul's earlier life.

> I am frightened: I dare think this way no more. This way lies the abyss. It is not now the time but I will not lose these thoughts, I will keep them, shut them away until the war is ended. My heart beats fast: this is the aim, the great, the sole aim, that I have thought of in the trenches; that I have looked for as the only possibility of existence after this annihilation of all human feeling; this is a task that will make life afterward worthy of these hideous years.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Paul expresses empathy toward the toiling Russian soldiers, but he catches himself in the act and resolves to delay these thoughts until after the war has ended.

The fact that Paul feels a need to separate his emotions speaks to the intense psychological requirements of being a soldier in this horrific war. Though he ruminates on the humanity of the Russian soldiers in a compelling way, he notices that those thoughts will not fulfill a pragmatic purpose in the war and thus they will lead him toward "the abyss." He demands instead that he "shut them away" and instead fixate on "the sole aim" of the war—which can only view the Russians as enemies to be defeated. Thus Paul must harshly separate his emotions and thoughts in order to stay sane and competent in the war.

Yet despite emphasizing the need for these partitions, Paul also maintains that his conclusion is essential to recall after the war's end. Indeed, his belief in the Russians' humanity becomes part of "a task that will make life afterward worthy of these hideous years"—precisely what he had struggled to pinpoint earlier when imagining the post-war conditions. The task, Remarque implies, is concerned with recognizing the arbitrariness of war and thus empathizing with soldiers even from the opposite faction. Paul's conclusion therefore speaks both to the need to prevent these thoughts in order to survive the war and to the merit they could have in a different world.

> Now I hear muffled voices. To judge by the tone that might be Kat talking…These voices, these quiet words, these footsteps in the trench behind me recall me at a bound from the terrible loneliness and fear of death by which I had been almost destroyed. They are more to me than life, these voices, they are more than motherliness and more than fear; they are the strongest, most comforting thing there is anywhere: they are the voices of my comrades. I am no longer a shuddering speck of existence, alone in the darkness;—I belong to them and they to me; we all share the same fear and the same life, we are nearer than lovers, in a simpler, a harder way; I could bury my face in them, in these voices, these words that have saved me and will stand by me.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker), Stanislaus Katczinsky

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

During a nighttime patrol, Paul is caught off guard by a bomb and hides alone. Hearing the voices of German soldiers brings him solace and causes him to reflect on the importance of his comrades.

Though Paul has previously described the strong connection he feels to the other soldiers, this passage offers a striking instance of that link. First he cannot make out the speakers, calling them merely "muffled voices"—but then he notes that they are potentially from Kat, an identification that anchors him in a moment of turmoil. In particular,

recognizing specific voices restores a sense of identity to Paul, for he returns from "the terrible loneliness and fear of death": a void of broad forces that do not conform to his specific personality. He finds comfort in these "voices of my comrades," Remarque indicates, because they help him regain a specific sense of self.

To make this point, Remarque returns to the image of a "speck of existence" contrasting with the wide "darkness" of the world. Previously, Paul had felt solace in being a speck right beside Kat, but here his comradeship actually allows him to escape that narrow definition of life. Instead, the words and bodies of his comrades are fully fleshed-out, a set of complete humans rather than mere light points. Thus Paul's connection to the other soldiers defines his sense of self in a way that saves him from the solitary void.

> This is the first time I have killed with my hands, whom I can see close at hand, whose death is my doing. Kat and Kropp and Müller have experienced it already, when they have hit someone; it happens to many, in hand-to-hand fighting especially— But every gasp lays my heart bare. This dying man has time with him, he has an invisible dagger with which he stabs me: Time and my thoughts.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker), Stanislaus Katczinsky, Albert Kropp, Müller

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

While a cohort of enemy soldiers retreats, Paul stabs one instinctively. He notes that this is the first man he has killed with his own hands.

This experience forces Paul to confront the violence inherent in the war for the first time. Nesting the clause, "whose death is my doing" under the statement "this is the first time" may strike the reader as odd—for Paul has certainly been responsible for death before. Yet this is the first time that that action has taken place directly in front of his eyes. Previous acts on the front have not required direct confrontation with another human. In this way, Paul realizes that he associates culpability not with actual violence but instead with perceived and proximal violence.

Beyond emphasizing the distancing, desensitizing effects of this anonymous and horrifying war, this passage affirms Paul's deep capacity for empathy. He feels a reciprocal emotional pain for the dying man: His "gasp" affects Paul's heart; his "invisible dagger" is a parallel weapon applied to his mental state ("thoughts") and temporal existence ("time"). In this way, Remarque verifies the way that Paul feels an intense emotional response to the other soldiers. Though he may seek to repress this impulse in order to be an operational soldier and stay sane amidst the violence of war, the moments in which it arises are deeply affecting.

> "Comrade, I did not want to kill you…But you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction…now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand-grenades, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship…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? If we threw away these rifles and this uniform you could be my brother just like Kat and Albert. Take twenty years of my life, comrade, and stand up—take more, for I do not know what I can even attempt to do with it now."

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker), Gérard Duval

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

Paul finds the pocketbook of the dying soldier and learns more about his identity. He reckons with the way this new knowledge increases his feelings of guilt.

Once more, Remarque reveals a deep empathetic capacity hidden within Paul. Whereas before, Paul viewed the soldier as "an abstraction," learning these facts about his identity has turned him into "a man like me." Thus specific information has given him not only an individual human role, but more directly a deep similarity to Paul. This shift in perspective alters the objects on which Paul focuses, from the accoutrements of war instead toward his relationships and even a potential connection between the two: "our fellowship." Extrapolating a feeling of comradeship is particularly significant considering how Paul has previously described the deep meaning he feels from his relationships with other soldiers on his own side.

Though this passage focuses on a single interaction, it also carries a broader social critique. That Paul asks, "Why do they never tell us," posits an overseeing force that obscures human information on other soldiers and that takes on a

censoring role. The implication is that he "could be my brother" if only different streams of information made his full identity more available to Paul. Thus the comradeship that Paul finds with his fellow soldiers is shown to be, in part, a social construction from larger forces wishing to divide groups of individuals.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ Thus we live a closed, hard existence of the utmost superficiality, and rarely does an incident strike out a spark. But then unexpectedly a flame of grievous and terrible yearning flares up.

Those are the dangerous moments. They show us that the adjustment is only artificial, that it is not simple rest, but sharpest struggle for rest.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

Ruminating on the abstract condition of being a soldier, Paul points out the paradoxical nature of his unit's existence. To survive, they must focus on purely pragmatic concerns, but they also encounter occasional intense moments that reveal great emotional depths they otherwise try to ignore.

Paul divides the soldiers' lives into two distinct psychological experiences: the first is the set of practical concerns focused solely on staying alive, while the second is a more intense, emotional relationship to the self and world. Casting the first as "utmost superficiality" might seem to trivialize it, but Paul actually regards the poignant experiences as the negative ones: "Those are the dangerous moments" because they distract the soldiers from the external concerns that must take precedence in war, and can easily lead them to despair or madness.

That Paul sees the pragmatic existence as "artificial" is thus not to be taken as a negative assessment. Rather, he sees pragmatics as a necessary lie for the group to tell themselves in order to survive and stay sane. It may not be "simple rest" but it is a necessary "struggle" to eventually approach that state. In this way, Paul revises the earlier criticism of split human psychology: He affirms his two-part existence but here contends that it is necessary given the situation.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ And men will not understand us—for the generation that grew up before us, though it has passed these years with us already had a home and a calling; now it will return to its old occupations, and the war will be forgotten—and the generation that has grown up after us will be strange to us and push us aside. We will be superfluous even to ourselves, we will grow older, a few will adapt themselves, some others will merely submit, and most will be bewildered;—the years will pass by and in the end we shall fall into ruin.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

Paul fantasizes about returning home after the war has ended. He reminds himself, however, that those whom he returns to will be unable to understand what the experience had meant to him.

These reflections return to the motif of the "lost generation" to which Paul belongs. Those in the older generation were firmly anchored in their lives before the war began, and those in the newer one will have been too young to have experienced the hardships of war. As a result, Paul reasons, neither side will be able to make sense of the soldiers' memories or identities. Not only will they be pushed aside by these generations, but they will "be superfluous even to ourselves"—socially unnecessary, misunderstood, and suffering from the effects of trauma and existential despair. The deep irony, here, is that they were integral to society during the war, but the exact skills needed in that moment will render them irrelevant in peacetime.

It is worth noting that Paul himself will never experience this fate, for he dies in the novel before the arrival of peacetime. The technique of placing these thoughts in his protagonist's mind is another example of how Remarque transforms an anecdotal tale into a broader reflection on the generation. For Paul is predicting a broad social fate that he himself will never witness.

He fell in October 1918, on a day that was so quiet and still on the whole front, that the army report confined itself to the single sentence: All quiet on the Western Front. He had fallen forward and lay on the earth as though sleeping. Turning him over one saw that he could not have suffered long; his face had an expression of calm, as though almost glad the end had come.

Related Characters: Paul Bäumer

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's final scene, a third person narrator recounts a soldier's death. The unnamed man passes unexpectedly and peacefully.

This passage marks a stark shift from the narrative style of the rest of the novel. It departs quite suddenly from Paul's first-person narration to enter the mind of an unknown external observer. Its tone begins as efficient and unemotional, mimicking the "army report" it mentions, until the last sentence introduces a more poetic perspective. In particular, the phrase "as though" presents a creative mind regarding the body, attributing emotions and thoughts to the vacant scene. One could imagine this to be the perspective of the person who discovered the soldier, or perhaps that of Remarque himself.

Indeed, this passages epitomizes the mix of emotional distance and proximity that occurs throughout the novel. That the army report encapsulates the soldier's death in one sentence would speak, generally, to the way that military service reduces the complexity of human life to a simple set of data. But by making that sentence the very title of this novel, Remarque presents his own text as an attempt to restore complexity and value to a single soldier's life: to expand the aphoristic line into a full, realistic, human story.

While it is obviously tempting to assume this soldier is Paul, Remarque notably refers to the soldier only as a general "he." Here, we see Remarque bringing together several of the thematic developments of war's anonymity. Paul is dehumanized through the distanced tone of the narrator and the army report, yet that same incognito quality also makes him a literary symbol, a microcosm of what it would have meant to fight in World War I. Thus Remarque concludes the novel by both turning Paul into a universal type and critiquing that exact process. He simultaneously makes Paul stand for the lost generation and demands that the reader examine, through the realist apparatus of the novel, an intricate and deeply singular character.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

When the novel begins, the Second Company of the German army has just returned to their camp after two weeks of fighting on the frontlines. Their unit has sustained heavy casualties. Paul Bäumer, the novel's nineteen-year-old narrator, reports matter-of-factly that over half of the Company's 150 men were killed the previous day in a shell attack.

More than half of the Second Company has been killed, a horrific number, but Paul's matter-of-fact tone suggests that this is something that doesn't even faze the soldiers. Apparently they are used to such catastrophic losses.

Good food is scarce on the front, so Paul and his friends quickly make their way to the camp's mess tent. Because so many men have died, there are enough extra rations for the soldiers to have double portions. Initially, the cook refuses to give the men the surplus food, saying it is against regulations. The men argue heatedly until the company commander intervenes, telling the cook to distribute the extras.

The deaths of other soldiers offer meager benefits for those who survive, like the chance for more food. Such practical, physical concerns are all the surviving soldiers have. The cook, meanwhile, blindly follows the rules—rules set by those running the war, which show no compassion for those fighting on the front lines.

After eating, Paul and his fellow soldiers pay a visit to the group latrines together. Paul recalls how, when he first joined the army, he was embarrassed about using the latrines in front of the other soldiers. Now, however, such behavior has come to seem completely natural, even enjoyable.

Before the war, Paul saw the group latrines as disgusting and embarrassing. The fact that he doesn't any longer shows how much worse life in the trenches must be. It also reveals his comradeship with his fellow soldiers. He is comfortable with what he once would have considered animalistic.

Paul and his friends spend their first afternoon back relaxing, playing cards, and reading letters from home. One of the soldiers, Albert Kropp, has received a letter from his former teacher, Kantorek. We learn that four of the men were schoolmates back in Germany: Paul; the clear-headed Kropp; the brainy but practical Müller; and Leer, the most worldly of the bunch. All of the students had originally joined the army at Kantorek's urging. (A fifth classmate, Joseph Behm, had resisted at first; finally, under pressure from Kantorek and his community, he reluctantly enlisted as well. Behm was killed horrifically in an early battle.)

A teacher, an authority figure whom the boys respected, urged them to join the war effort. Though his students volunteered for active duty, they were under immense pressure to do so. Behm's senseless death early in the war immediately made clear the realities of war to the boys, destroying any romantic illusions (planted in their heads by Kantorek) that they may have had. It also illustrates the randomness of who lives and who dies in the trenches.

Paul says that there were "thousands of Kantoreks" in Germany: people who believed they were doing the right thing by encouraging young men to join the military. This older generation filled young men's heads with romantic notions about honor, but failed to prepare them for the savagery of war. As students, Paul and his friends looked to Kantorek for guidance. Now, however, their eyes have been opened to the harsh truth. Though men like Kantorek continue to bluster about patriotic duty, Paul knows there is "nothing of their world left."

Age is supposed to bring wisdom, but Kantorek's generation seems more naïve than the young men they were meant to guide. For Paul and his friends, the war has revealed how empty concepts like patriotism and valor really are. The "Kantoreks" back in Germany, however, still haven't gotten the message.

In addition to the four students, Paul's group of friends also includes some older soldiers: the skinny locksmith Tjaden; the gigantic peat-digger Haie; the married peasant Detering; and the resourceful Katczinsky (Kat), who at age forty is the group's unofficial leader.

The war brings men from all walks of life together. Before the war, a well educated, middle-class student like Paul would likely never have even known a simple peasant like Detering.

Later that day, the soldiers go to visit their wounded friend Kemmerich in the hospital. Though he does not seem to realize it yet, his leg has been amputated and he is obviously dying. His friends try to cheer him up, but they are already planning to divide up his possessions. Müller tries to persuade Kemmerich to give them his beautiful **leather boots**, but Kemmerich resists. Eventually, Paul steps on Muller's foot, getting him to drop the subject.

The visit with Kemmerich highlights how the war has forced the soldiers to temper any sympathy they feel with the practical need to survive. They visit Kemmerich to comfort him, but when they see that he's likely to die, they also want his boots. Paul still has the decency to stop Müller from being too cruelly practical.

As the soldiers leave the hospital, Paul thinks about the letter he must soon write to Kemmerich's mother when her son dies. The men walk back through the camp to their huts, preoccupied and mostly silent. Only Kropp becomes visibly upset, tossing away his cigarette and swearing. Müller tries to distract him by asking about the contents of Kantorek's letter.

Though the men are clearly disturbed by what they saw in the hospital, they avoid openly discussing it. Angry outbursts like Kropp's are quickly deflected and hidden from the others, suggesting that exposing such emotions threatens their survival.

Kropp tells them that Kantorek's letter calls his former students the "Iron Youth," a title that makes the men smile bitterly. Paul says that while most of them are under twenty years of age, they do not feel young or strong anymore. Their horrific experiences in the war have made them old before their time.

Kantorek's nickname for the young soldiers reveals how out of touch he is with the realities of life on the front. "Iron" suggests an indomitable strength that is made a mockery by modern warfare that wipes out half a company, while "Youth" suggests an innocence that the men lost long ago.

CHAPTER 2

Paul thinks about how, as a student, he had aspired to become a writer. Now, however, those dreams seem incomprehensible to him. Unlike the older soldiers, who left behind families and jobs, Paul and his friends went to war before their lives had really begun. When the war ends, they will have nothing to return to.

The war has not just threatened and destroyed the lives of the young soldiers, it has also destroyed their dreams. It has made them foreign to themselves. Paul no longer feels a connection to his past, and is equally unable to imagine a peaceful future.

Paul recalls his first experiences of army life as a young recruit. He and his former classmates Kropp, Müller, and Kemmerich trained under the command of Corporal Himmelstoss, who forced them to do humiliating chores and endure rough punishments. Though the soldiers hated Himmelstoss and eventually began to figure out ways to act out against him, Paul says that the corporal's strictness trained them to be "suspicious, pitiless, vicious, tough"—qualities that are essential to survival in the trenches.

Himmelstoss trained the men in ways that helped them survive the war, but he did not train them to become the sorts of valorous warriors they initially expected to become. He made them "suspicious, pitiless, vicious, tough"—words that better describe animals than romantic heroes. Romantic heroes wouldn't survive in the trenches of WWI.

Paul goes to visit the dying Kemmerich alone in the hospital again the next day. Paul's war experiences have mostly numbed him to human suffering, but he is unprepared for the pain and grief he feels as he sits by his friend's bedside. Paul tries to conceal his distress by assuring his friend that now Kemmerich will be sent back to their home village to recover. But his friend simply tells Paul to give his precious boots to Müller, indicating that Kemmerich has realized the truth about his condition.

On the battlefield Paul is able to desensitize himself to the pain of others, but in the more civilized realm of the hospital, he realizes that he isn't yet as numb to the horrors of war as he'd like to believe. Talking about home proves to be more painful than comforting for both men, as it reminds them of a past they can never return to.

After a long and painful struggle, Kemmerich finally dies. Though Paul feels a surge of intense grief, there is no time to properly mourn for his friend. The orderlies must immediately remove the dead body to make room for another soldier. In a daze, Paul collects Kemmerich's few possessions and leaves the hospital.

Kemmerich's death throws Paul off-kilter, but for the more experienced hospital orderlies it's business as usual. It's almost like the war is a kind of unstoppable machine, churning out death.

As Paul heads back to his hut, he finds himself walking faster and faster until he suddenly breaks into a sprint. As he runs through the camp, hardly aware of his surroundings, Paul forces himself to stop thinking about Kemmerich. Instead, he focuses on his breathing and his beating heart, reminding himself that his own body is still strong, healthy, and alive.

Running allows, and forces, Paul to concentrate on his physical reactions, helping him shut out his thoughts and emotions about Kemmerich's death. By running, Paul is purposely reducing himself into an animal, a body.

When Paul reaches the hut, his friend Müller is waiting outside for him. Paul doesn't say anything about watching Kemmerich die. He simply hands the boots over to Müller without speaking, and they go inside to try them on.

Once again, the men avoid expressing strong emotional responses. Instead of dwelling on Kemmerich's death, they concern themselves with practicalities—whether the boots fit.

CHAPTER 3

Reinforcements have arrived, most of them new recruits who have never seen battle. They are only two years younger than Paul and his former classmates, but they seem like helpless children. In comparison to these hapless "infants," the experienced soldiers consider themselves to be "stone-age veterans."

Time passes differently on the front—for the veteran soldiers, two years seems like a lifetime of experience. Paul and his friends have been forced to grow up too quickly; their superior experience, however, is also a source of pride.

When one new soldier complains about the bad army food, Kat teases him and then gives him some beans and beef he has traded another soldier for. He instructs the new recruit to bring him a cigar or tobacco next time in payment. Kat was a cobbler before the war, but he has adapted perfectly to army life. Paul says Kat has a "sixth sense" for locating good food and supplies wherever the Second Company goes. Kat's friends never go hungry, even when the rest of the Company has to make do on limited rations.

Cobblers mend shoes and other goods, making use of whatever materials are at hand. Kat's pre-war profession required him to be a creative problem-solver. In the army, that resourcefulness allows him to thrive. Kat is shrewd but he is also generous with those he cares about. He is something of a father figure for Paul and the other younger men, who lack Kat's practical life experience.

Paul recalls some of Kat's most spectacular discoveries, marveling at the man's almost supernatural ability to find food in the most unlikely places. Once, while camping in a poor, impoverished village, Kat managed to obtain two loaves of bread and a bag of horsemeat—an unimaginable feast for the hungry soldiers. Paul describes how Kat had carefully cooked the meat and shared it amongst his friends. Kat's true "masterpiece," though, was once bringing back four boxes of lobsters—though Paul admits that the men might have preferred a simple steak.

Kat is a source of wonder to Paul, who views the older man with a combination of awe and affection. Kat makes it seem like there's more to life than simply surviving: he shows Paul that it's possible to flourish, to enjoy oneself, and to create family bonds even in the midst of the war's devastation.

The narrative returns to the present day, where the men are relaxing in the sun after a long morning of drills. They were forced to practice saluting for an hour after their fellow soldier Tjaden failed to salute a superior officer properly. Kat complains that the officers spend too much time enforcing military etiquette and too little time preparing the men to fight. He lets off a fart, expressing both his comfort and his contempt for the officers' petty concerns.

The saluting incident speaks volumes about German military leadership. The officers are preoccupied with personal rank and power. As a result, they focus on trivial details instead of thinking about the big picture. The idea that authority narrows one's worldview is a common theme in the novel. Those with the least power (the common soldiers) are often the most in touch with reality.

As the men take bets on an air-fight unfolding above, Kat and Kropp begin to argue about how the war should be fought. Kat believes that if the officers were paid and fed the same amount as the common soldiers, the war would be over in a day. Kropp, on the other hand, says that war should be conducted like a popular festival or bullfight. Instead of sending out vast armies to fight and die for them, the leaders of both countries would enter the arena to participate in single combat. Whoever survived would win the war with a minimum of casualties.

Both Kat and Kropp's proposals would make those in power accountable for the decision to go to war. Their thinking is that if the great political and military leaders were forced to endure the horrific conditions in the trenches, they'd quickly find a reason to end the war and return to their comfortable lives. Similarly, single combat would bring the war to a fast and relatively bloodless conclusion. Either way, they see their leaders, essentially, as corrupt and power-hungry men willing o sacrifice the commoners in search of even more power.

The men soon drop the subject of war, instead reminiscing about their experiences as new recruits in the training camp. Kropp reminds them of their training corporal Himmelstoss's favorite drill, which required the men to repeatedly practice how they would change trains at the Lohne railway junction. Though training involved long hours of instruction, physical exercise, and chores, it was paradise compared to the front. Paul says the men "dare not" think back any further, as that would involve discussing their lives before the war.

Though they hated it at the time, now the men see training camp as a kind of pleasant childhood. They fondly remember the mindless drills as part of a simpler, more innocent time, before they knew what was in store for them at the front. Thinking about their real childhoods would bring up dangerous emotions. It's as if their lives now begin and end with the war—the men can't, or won't, imagine a time before they were soldiers.

The air-fight ends when the German airplane is shot down. Kropp, who has lost the bet, grudgingly hands over the last beer to the victorious Kat. Paul is still thinking about Himmelstoss, who was a postman before the war began. When Paul wonders aloud how the man became such a bully, Kat replies that every man is "essentially a beast," who conceals his true nature with "a little decorum." As soon as a man gets a little power, however, he inevitably abuses it, and in the process reveals his animalistic character.

For the pilot of the German plane, the outcome of the airfight may be a matter of life and death; for Kat and Kropp, it's simply a chance to win or lose a beer. Their bet seems callous, but it is ultimately harmless, since they have no actual power over who lives and who dies. The real animals are the generals and other leaders, the men who do have such power, to exercise (and abuse) as they wish.

Suddenly, Tjaden runs up to the men with an announcement: Himmelstoss has been sent to serve on the front. Though none of the men like Himmelstoss, Tjaden has a special grudge against him. During their training, Himmelstoss devised a cruel method for "curing" Tjaden of his chronic bedwetting, which he wrongly believed was pure laziness. He assigned Tjaden to a bunk bed with another bed-wetter named Kindervater, and then forced the men to trade off sleeping in the lower bunk. The plan was a failure, but it instilled in Tjaden a fiery hatred for the corporal.

Himmelstoss's method failed because it was based on a flawed understanding of Tjaden's problem. Himmelstoss is not a keen judge of character, and like many of the superior officers in the novel, he seems to be incapable of grasping the bigger picture. He tries to solve everything with force, leading only to pain and humiliation.

Paul recalls how the men had finally gotten back at Himelstoss after weeks of plotting. One night, they snuck up on him as he walked back to the barracks from the pub. Throwing a sheet over his face so he could not identify them, the men proceeded to give Himmelstoss a savage beating with a whip. At one point, Paul remembers, Haie and Tjaden became so brutal the others had to drag them away to get a turn. Himmelstoss trained the men to act ruthlessly; the attack demonstrates that they internalized the message. After hearing the story of their triumph over the corporal, one old veteran described the soldiers as "young heroes."

The beating illustrates the truth of Kat's claim that a little power inevitably brings out men's animalistic instincts. Though Himmelstoss tormented the men for weeks, their premeditated attack seems far more violent than anything he inflicted upon them. In training them for war, Himmelstoss inadvertently gave the soldiers a means of rebelling against his tyrannical rule. The old soldier's comment recalls the "Iron Youth" title from Kantorek's letter, but suggests a different, much more cynical view of heroism.

CHAPTER 4

In the evening, the men of the Second Company are required to go up to the front to help build barbed wire fences along the trenches. The trucks cannot use their headlights for fear of being shot, so the ride is bumpy and the men are often nearly thrown off. Paul says the men are not concerned, however, as a broken arm is "better than a hole in the guts" and may even allow them to return home to recover. The usually moody Muller is in particularly good spirits, as he is wearing the new **boots** he has inherited from their dead friend Kemmerich.

Muller's cheerfulness seems odd given that the men are heading directly into the line of fire, but it indicates how good the soldiers are—and must be, just to stay sane—at compartmentalizing their emotions. He's focused on his new boots.

The trucks pass by a farmhouse, where Paul hears geese cackling. He glances at Kat, who has had the same thought: the geese would make an excellent supper for the hungry soldiers.

Kat's fatherly influence on Paul is evident here. Good parents teach their children how to survive in a difficult world (often by example). In noticing the geese cackling, Paul is demonstrating survival skills learned from Kat.

When the men finally arrive at the artillery lines, Paul notices that the gun-mounts are camouflaged with bushes, giving the scene an almost festive appearance. The illusion is quickly shattered, however, as the air fills with smoke from the guns. The men's good spirits vanish in an instant. The veterans are not afraid, but the young recruits become agitated. Kat patiently explains to them how to identify different types of bombs by the sound of the explosions. Though the English usually start firing promptly at ten PM, tonight they have begun attacking an hour early. According to Kat, this is a sign that the enemy is preparing to launch a heavy bombardment.

The bushes are part of the natural landscape, and for a moment when Paul sees them he catches a brief glimpse of what the French countryside might look like during a time of peace. But these bushes are only an illusion, concealing the ugly machinery of war. When the battle begins, the men are immediately all business again. Kat once again assumes a leadership role, guiding the terrified young soldiers through their first experience on the front.

Paul describes the transformation that takes place in the soldiers when they reach the front. The men may not visibly display any signs of fear or concern, but they experience an inner transformation, becoming tense and alert. Every word the soldiers say to each other seems to take on new significance, especially Kat's prediction about the impending bombardment.

Given Kat's experience and general know-how, it's clear that his words must be taken seriously. On the front, the men enter a state of complete alertness—just as a weaker animal must constantly be on guard against a more powerful predator.

The soldier's relationship to his environment also changes on the front. According to Paul, no man is closer to the earth than the soldier, who becomes a kind of mother for the men who fight and die on her soil. The mud of the trenches shelters the soldier from shellfire, stifles his cries of fear, and eventually covers his body in the grave.

The war creates new kinds of bonds between people and their environments, which Paul struggles to explain to those who lack firsthand experience. Describing these bonds as familial relationships is one way of 'translating' them into more comprehensible terms.

In the trenches, survival requires a mixture of luck and instinctual reaction. The animal instinct for survival, Paul says, "far quicker, much more sure" than conscious thought. For example, a soldier may throw himself to the ground without even realizing why—only to realize after that he had just narrowly avoided a hail of shrapnel.

Higher thought has no place on the battlefield. There's no time for reflection—if your reflexes aren't fast enough, you die.

The lorries continue towards the front. The sight of the troops filing silently along the road strikes Paul as strangely beautiful, like "knights of a forgotten time" marching off to battle. As they approach the frontline, the night sky is lit up by bursts of light from exploding rockets. The bombardment Kat predicted has begun. Paul watches as the enemy's searchlights illuminate a tiny, insectlike figure in the sky: an unlucky airman, who is immediately shot down.

Knights are associated with concepts like chivalry and valor. As Paul has mentioned before, however, these ideas of gallant war are utterly destroyed in the face of modern technology and its capacity for random and anonymous destruction. The airman's death is a perfect example of how insignificant a single soldier's life is in the grand chaos of World War I.

The men quickly complete their task of building the barbed wire fences, but must wait until the lorries return to take them back to camp. Most lie down and try to sleep despite the noise. Paul briefly drifts off and wakes up disoriented. For a second he thinks he has woken up in a beautiful, peaceful garden. He realizes suddenly that his face is wet with tears. Kat soothes him, telling him he was simply frightened by a nearby explosion. The bombardment draws closer.

Paul's tears seem to be a reaction to a sudden shock rather than evidence of conscious fear. At the same time, his ability to respond to a beautiful garden in such an emotional way is very human, indicating perhaps that the war has not yet managed to fully transform him into a savage animal or a mindless machine.

Paul spots one of the new recruits lying terrified on the ground. Reminded of his dead friend Kemmerich, he lets the frightened young soldier crawl under his arm for comfort. The ever-practical Paul also places a helmet over the soldier's rear—not as a joke, but because it would be a painful place to be wounded. When the bombardment ends, Paul realizes the young man has had an accident. Kindly, he tells the soldier that it's happened to many men before, and sends him off to clean himself up.

In this interaction, Paul takes on the fatherly role previously filled by Kat. He provides comfort, but also passes on practical survival lessons to the new recruit (who represents a new generation in the military 'family'). Paul also once again demonstrates the soldier's typical lack of embarrassment towards bodily functions, which are not treated as something shameful.

As the noise of the bombardment dies down, the men hear the terrible cries of horses that have been wounded. The soldier Detering, a peasant farmer who loves animals, becomes agitated, shouting for someone to put the horses out of their misery. He aims his rifle at one of the wounded horses, but Kat stops him from firing. The men must lie still and wait for the others, listening to the maddening sound of the horses' death agonies.

Paul often depicts the soldiers as innocent pawns in a war run by rich and power-hungry men. But the animals have even less control over their fates than the men. The soldiers may have become desensitized to the prospect of human death, but the senselessness of the horses' suffering disturbs even the most emotionally stoic.

Finally, just before dawn, the men are able to return to the lorries. Kat is nervous, a bad sign. His instinct turns out to be correct, as shells begin to fall on the men as they walk through a graveyard. Searching blindly for cover, Paul discovers the shells have burst open the graves. Without hesitation, he crawls into an open coffin for protection. Kat calls out a warning that the enemy is using poison gas, and Paul helps a new recruit pull his gas mask on just in time.

The significance of this grim setting is clear: the men are forced to face their own mortality while surrounded by death. Also, in battle, societal taboos against disturbing graves or touching dead bodies fly out the window. Paul will do whatever it takes to survive, even if his actions might seem horrifying to the reader.

The first few minutes of the gas attack are tense, as the men wait to discover whether their masks are airtight. Paul breathes cautiously, watching the clouds of gas sink into the shell-hole as a second bombardment begins. Nearby, a soldier is wounded when a coffin falls on his arm, crushing it. Finally, just as the men feel they are close to suffocating, the gas dissipates and they can remove their masks. The field is littered with corpses "killed once again" when they were thrown from the coffins; but Paul says that each one saved one of the surviving soldiers.

The uprooted coffins are an ambiguous symbol. They are quite literally containers of death; they also bring death, in the case of the soldier whose arm is crushed. At the same time, the coffins provide shelter for the living soldiers, shielding them from a similar fate. It seems significant, too, that the corpses are tossed out of the coffins—a kind of bizarre rebirth that is also a second death.

Kat and Paul go over to help bandage the injured soldier's wounds. Paul realizes it is the young recruit he comforted earlier. The young man has been horrifically wounded in the hip and arm; Paul says he will live in "howling torture" for only a few days at best. Kat and Paul quietly decide to put the young man out of his misery by shooting him, but a group of soldiers arrives before they can do so. They put the wounded man on a stretcher and return to the lorries.

To Kat and Paul, shooting the soldier isn't an act of further violence, but one of mercy. The decision isn't even a difficult one—though they don't explicitly say so, they know they would want their fellow soldiers to do the same for them. And yet the army—in the form of the other soldiers—offers no such mercy.

The Second Company has lost five men and had eight more wounded. Two of the men have perished in upturned graves, and are simply buried in the same spot. As the men board the lorries it begins to rain; Paul thinks about the rain falling monotonously all over the world, over the living, the wounded, and the dead alike. Exhausted from the long, sleepless night, he and the other soldiers fall into a restless half-sleep.

The dead men aren't even granted the dignity of individual burial. Their deaths are truly anonymous, perhaps even more so than if they had died in the trenches. The 'monotony' of the falling rain reinforces the sense that all is bleak, grey, and meaningless.

CHAPTER 5

The men are infected with lice from living in the squalor of the camp and trenches. Killing the bugs one by one is too time-consuming, so they have rigged up a contraption involving a tin lid and a candle. The men gather around the tin to pick off lice and gossip. Word in the camp is that Himmelstoss, their much-hated former training corporal, has just arrived at the front. Tjaden, who has a particular grudge against the man, is busy planning what to say when he sees him again.

The soldiers' mundane, mechanized killing of lice symbolizes the way technological advancements were harnessed in World War I to kill men more quickly, efficiently, and dispassionately. Himmelstoss's arrival at the front seems to suggest a coming confrontation between the men and their former tormentor.

Muller suddenly turns to Kropp and asks him what he would do if there were peace again. Kropp bluntly tells him there won't be peace, but Muller is persistent. Finally, Kropp replies he would get drunk, because "what else should a man do?" Kat becomes interested in the conversation, adding that he would take the first train home to his family. He takes out a photo of his wife and passes it around. Now Paul joins the conversation too, pointing out that Kat, unlike the young students, actually has a family to return to.

It's odd that Muller insists on a serious answer, as the men usually avoid talking about the future. Kropp's evasiveness may also reveal his uncertainty about what that future holds—getting drunk sounds like escapism, not celebration. Kat's contribution also highlights the age disparity between the young students and the older veterans. The older men have established lives waiting for them back home. The younger men have nothing.

Müller won't let the subject drop. He wakes up Haie and asks him the same question. Haie seems confused at first, then answers cheerfully that he'd find a pretty woman and a real bed. When Muller asks him what he'd do after that, Haie becomes serious and says that he would stay in the army and serve out his time. Though Paul is incredulous, Haie explains that for a peasant laborer, army life in peacetime doesn't seem so bad—at least you get regular meals, clean clothes, and respect from your home villagers.

Haie's remark reminds Paul that that the soldiers come from a wide variety of economic and social backgrounds, even if they share a common experience in the trenches. If Haie survives the war, he will still belong to the lower working class, whereas Paul and the other students will return to the world of upper middle class.

Kat points out that it's a moot point—Haie is a common soldier, not a noncommissioned officer, so he'll never get to live out his dream even if the war ends. Haie looks at him sadly and says nothing, clearly still thinking about the life he might have had. Tjaden, when asked what he'd do in peacetime, describes his fantasy of beating Himmelstoss to a pulp. Detering answers that he would simply go on with the harvest.

The soldiers' differing responses to Müller's question further highlight their vastly distinct backgrounds and philosophies towards life. Detering's response is notable: the peasant's matter-of-factness shows that he doesn't have the luxury of analyzing life as deeply as Paul and his cohort can.

Himmelstoss appears at the camp and awkwardly approaches the group of men. He is met with outright hostility, and he and Tjaden exchange insults. Himmelstoss finally commands Tjaden to stand up. Tjaden ignores his superior officer and instead passes gas. Himmelstoss storms off, threatening to have Tjaden court-martialed for his impudence. After the corporal leaves, Tjaden and Haie laugh about the altercation—Haie laughs so hard he dislocates his jaw. Kat warns Tjaden that he may be disciplined harshly, but Tjaden is carefree.

The scramble for survival in trench warfare has eroded many of the soldiers' senses of deference to authority. Tjaden—the bedwetter during boot camp— is now fearless in his defiance of his superior officers, perhaps because he perceives that he has less to lose for acting that way.

Müller and Kropp tally up the casualties their school class has suffered: twelve out of twenty are either dead, wounded, or in a mad-house. The men then imitate Kantorek and quiz each other on scholarly knowledge, which they conclude is useless to them on the front.

The knowledge that the educated soldiers valued so highly in their civilian lives is no help to them on the front. This is yet another affirmation of the change in perspective that will leave them unable to readjust to the lives they had.

Having realized the uselessness of their schooling, the men worry about what jobs they will work once they return to civilian life. Paul confesses that peace-time seems like an unattainable concept, and that he is sickened by the thought of a career and a salary. The men agree that their generation has been "ruined...for everything" by their exposure to the horrors of war.

After the intense life-and-death mayhem of the frontlines, and the feeling of being betrayed and use by those in power, no civilian activity seems meaningful, and the soldiers worry that their exposure to such absolute suffering will leave them desensitized for a lifetime.

Himmelstoss and a fat sergeant-major look for Tjaden to discipline him. He receives three days of open arrest as punishment, which Paul describes as "quite pleasant."

Tjaden's insubordination isn't effectively disciplined because the officers cannot inflict worse punishment than what the soldiers already endure.

At Kat's suggestion, Paul breaks into a barn to steal two geese. He tries to kill the birds quickly, but they cackle, and a guard dog comes to subdue Paul. After staying still for a long time, Paul shoots at the dog with a revolver and escapes with the geese. He and Kat pluck and roast the geese, and plan to make cushions with the feathers that read "Sleep soft under shell-fire."

This goose-rustling adventure reminds a reader that Paul is still very much a young man. And yet there is casual violence in the stealing of the geese—the murder of the guard dog—which indicates that Paul is also no longer just a young man. He has been changed by the war.

As the two men sit in the dead of night and cook their geese, Paul reflects that they have a profound bond—he and Kat represent sparks of life surrounded by a lifeless night. In a sleepy daze, Paul lovingly watches Kat baste the roasting goose, and he laments the way soldiers harden their hearts. He wakes up, apparently weeping. Kat comforts Paul and the two eat together, each insisting that the other enjoy the best pieces. The two bring the leftovers to Kropp and Tjaden, and the men eat gratefully.

This scene is a brief respite from the horror of the frontlines. The trying circumstances have made Paul attuned to his common humanity with Kat, and the hardship they have suffered together prompts them to treat one another generously, with love.

CHAPTER 6

The company is sent to the front two days earlier than usual, after hearing rumors of a new offensive. On their way, they pass a large stack of brand-new coffins. The men joke about the spectacle, but they understand that the coffins are meant for them.

The new coffins foreshadow death and suffering to come. The soldiers are being sent to the front with the expectation that many of them will be slaughtered. The men know it and their leaders know it, and yet the men still do their "duty."

When they reach the front, the men notice that the enemy artillery has been reinforced. Worse yet, the German artillery is so worn out that they often shoot into their own trenches, occasionally wounding men.

The soldiers' unrest is heightened in anticipation of an enemy attack. The casualties from friendly fire show a breakdown in basic order.

Paul recognizes that life on the front is uncertain, and that chance alone determines whether he lives or dies. He has a detached understanding of the risks he faces: "no soldier outlives a thousand chances," he says, "but every soldier believes in Chance and trusts his luck."

Frontline warfare has given Paul a detached, fatalistic view of life and death. He understands that his survival is simply part of a larger numbers game—one of luck rather than skill—and that his luck can only take him so far.

The company's trench is in deteriorating condition, and it is infested with fat, revolting rats that the men call "corpse-rats." Tired of the rats eating their bread, the men make a pile of bread and use shovels to kill any rats that come near it.

The vermin grow fat off the dead bodies of the common soldiers, which can be taken as a metaphor for the powerful who also grow even more powerful on the backs of the soldiers who die for them.

Rations of cheese and rum are handed out to the soldiers, but the men understand them to signify hard times ahead. The men receive more ammunition, and set to remove serrated blades from their bayonets, because the enemy will brutally kill any German found to be using a saw-blade bayonet.

The temporary comforts of rum and cheese do little to calm the soldiers, and they occupy themselves in mindless work to escape their anxiety.

The uneasy German soldiers hear the enemy fortifying its lines, but no major moves are made by either side. Kat is dejected—he predicts intense violence to begin soon—and this worries Paul, because Kat is an experienced frontline fighter. Only Tjaden remains unsuspicious and content during the lull.

As the lull in fighting drags on, the tension builds, and the soldiers' mind-numbing anxiety mounts.

After a few more days of uncertainty, the men relax slightly. Then, in the middle of one night, their lines are shelled heavily. The men are shaken; some of the new recruits are even vomiting. The bombing continues. The men become numb and silent, and their trench is nearly destroyed.

The sudden violence hardens the veterans and stuns the recruits. The depiction of the recruits shows what Paul and his friends must have looked like in their first experiences of the front—and creates an understanding of why they had to become so detached as a defense mechanism to preserve their sanity.

Attempts to bring food and ammunition to the trench fail because the enemy barrage cannot be traversed. The men grow hungry, and they cannot sleep at night. The next morning, the trenches are beset by an onslaught of fleeing rats. A rat-killing melee ensues, and the exhausted men stop just short of striking one another in the confusion.

The men begin to lose their basic human necessities, and the rats' predatory advance shows that more animalistic rules are beginning to govern behavior.

The company continues to wait. At midday, one of the new recruits begins convulsing and tries to escape the front. Paul says the recruit suffers from claustrophobia, and the other soldiers beat the raving man in an attempt to restore his sanity. The other recruits witness this episode fearfully, and Paul pities them for being thrown inexperienced into such a harrowing bombardment.

The circumstances are obviously proving too much for the new recruits, who haven't been combat-hardened like Paul and his comrades. The men continue to act like animals—instead of trying to reason with the raving recruit, they simply beat him into submission.

The dugout Paul is inside sustains a direct hit, and only barely remains intact. The claustrophobic recruit goes insane and butts his head against a wall. Others begin to rave. Paul and Kat try to distract themselves with card games but cannot focus.

Constant bombardment continues to erode the soldiers' sanity, and even experienced soldiers cannot detach themselves from the danger at hand.

The bombardment lets up, and the soldiers understand that an enemy attack is now coming. They throw grenades into the no-man's-land between the trenches and recognize a charging line of French soldiers. Paul sees an enemy soldier fall into barbed wire with his hands clasped in front of him; when Paul looks again, only the stumps of the soldier's arms remain hanging in the wire.

The horrors Paul witnesses become ingrained in his memory; the French soldier's clasped, severed hands offer a cynical image of a prayer gone unheeded.

The company begins to retreat. Paul makes eye contact with an enemy soldier, and the connection momentarily removes him from the entire "circus" of violence around him. Paul then throws a grenade at the man and runs toward the rear.

The brief moment of human connection between Paul and the enemy soldier suggests that the common soldiers are not actually true enemies. But the rush of mindless fighting continues and the need to survive overcomes any other thought.

The mayhem has turned the men into animals defending themselves against annihilation. The soldiers continue to flee, and Paul reaches a manned German trench. From this point, the Germans begin to drive back the enemy advance. Paul and his comrades follow the retreating French and brutalize any stragglers, and the Germans reach the enemy line at roughly the same time as the retreating French do. The Germans clear out the French frontline and quickly retreat with provisions.

When they are pushed to their limits, the men lose their humanity and instead become solely concerned with fighting to survive. Their brutal treatment of the retreating French shows that the harrowing circumstances have utterly stripped them of their reason.

Paul and his comrades return to their frontlines. They are so drained by their experience that an hour passes before anyone speaks. Gradually, they regain their usual demeanor, and begin to enjoy the French provisions they have looted.

As the immediate danger fades, the men's humanity returns, and they begin to enjoy the basic necessities they had ignored in the chaos. Of course, these necessities are things they have taken from the men they have killed.

Paul is placed on evening sentry duty. During the night he is haunted by unsettlingly calm visions from his childhood and hometown. He laments that the desires of his youth are now lost to him. Even if Paul and his fellow soldiers were to return to the scenes of their youth, their exposure to the "hard facts" of life would make them indifferent.

Paul tries to retreat from the constant commotion of the front by delving into his calm memories, but he is permanently alienated from his past life. He is confident that warfare has changed him forever.

The back-and-forth attacks continue for days. Paul's company tries to collect the dead, but some of the injured are too far away to retrieve, and the soldiers are forced to listen to their agonized cries. One man screams for days, but cannot be found. His cries become steadily weaker and more delirious until they taper off into a death rattle.

The dying man's haunting, impossible-to-locate cries add to the impression that the men are surrounded by death and agony. Despite the men's best efforts, the chaos of war leaves them unable to aid their suffering comrade

After another brief lull in fighting, a bombardment begins. Inexperienced recruits die in droves, and Paul notices that their faces have the expressionlessness of dead children. Paul comes across Himmelstoss cowering in a trench, pretending to be injured. He yells at Himmelstoss, but the officer will not budge. A lieutenant orders a charge, and Himmelstoss eagerly runs ahead. Paul tries to teach the new recruits the skills that will keep them alive, but they are unable to learn quickly enough and repeat the same mistakes.

Paul's experience in combat has even alienated him from the less-experienced soldiers—he sees in them an innocence that he can't find in himself. While the younger men suffer, Himmelstoss proves to be a two-faced coward, intent only on protecting himself and impressing his superiors.

Haie suffers a significant wound and fears for his life. Finally, Paul and his fellow soldiers are relieved from the frontlines. At roll call, Paul discovers that only 32 of the original 150 men in the Second Company are still alive.

The hundreds of coffins the soldiers saw on their way to the front have proven necessary. Trench warfare has exacted an astoundingly devastating toll on Paul's comrades.

CHAPTER 7

Paul's company is taken to a depot in order to reorganize and accommodate more than 100 reinforcements. As the men relax during their time off, Himmelstoss, shaken by his time in the trenches, approaches the group and tries to make amends. Paul accepts Himmelstoss's attempts to reconcile, especially because Himmelstoss helped Haie when he was injured in battle. Tjaden is skeptical at first, but is won over when Himmelstoss gives the men extra rations he has obtained through his new job as a cook.

Trench warfare is a human equalizer: the horrible conflict has brought Himmelstoss to the same level as the other soldiers. He realizes now the true horror of the war he was "preparing" them for in boot camp, and that his efforts to cover them up through cruelty are trivial in comparison to what they would actually face.

Paul reflects that while he and the other soldiers manage to distract themselves while they're on leave, they never really forget what they witness on the front. They loaf on leave, Paul supposes, because they need to live without burdening themselves with any inappropriate emotions. What outsiders view as good humor in the soldiers is in fact a necessary barrier—the soldiers crack jokes because they would otherwise fall apart from bitterness. Paul realizes that once the war is over, he will need to deal with the feelings he now keeps repressed.

Paul's trauma can no longer be completely repressed—he is becoming more and more aware of his need to devise new ways to keep himself from intellectually processing what he and his comrades have witnessed.

Paul and Kropp come across a poster for an old army performance in which a pretty girl stands beside a sharply-dressed man. They stare at the poster with longing, but with some resentment, and they rip the man out of the picture.

Paul and Kropp cannot restrain their jealousy and alienation from the luxuries of civilian life.

The men are housed in a small town, and some of the town's inhabitants remain. In the evenings, when the men go swimming, three French women walk by the river and look at the naked soldiers. In spite of a language barrier, the men and women flirt, but each group is forbidden to pass to the other side of the river. The girls are excited by the prospect of being brought food by the soldiers, and the men make a plan to swim across to the girls' house that night.

Flirting with the French women is one of the most organic social interactions the soldiers have, but the each party is still using other to fulfill a basic need: the women are using to soldiers to get food, and the men are using the women for sexual fulfillment. Wartime has made flirtation into just another way to use other people. Though it is notable that Paul and his friends are fighting against the French but sleeping with these French girls, and shows just how made up the conflict between the common German's and French men really is.

Paul, Leer, and Kropp sneak over to the girls' house and fraternize with the women. Paul has a passionate romantic encounter with a petite brunette, and he hopes that the girl's embrace will take him out of the "war and terror and grossness" that surrounds him. After a while, the three men leave, and Paul finds himself unhappy despite Leer's high spirits.

Paul's attempt to escape the war through sex fails. He cannot keep his physical and spiritual needs separate from the trauma of war—his monolithic stress rears its head even in moments of tenderness.

Paul is given a pass for a seventeen-day leave. After his leave, Paul will not return to the front immediately, and will report instead to a training camp. He buys his comrades drinks at the canteen, and he wonders if he will see them again after his six-week hiatus. Paul tells his French lover about his departure, and is disappointed to see that she seems uninterested.

Paul's leave and training-camp summons slightly alienate him from his fellow soldiers, and this detachment is what prompts him to wonder if he's experienced this camaraderie for the last time. Paul learns that for the French girl the sex was a means to an end—the food he brought her, and perhaps the simple pleasure of sex; she did not care much at all about him.


Impatient to leave, Paul begins his journey home. As he draws nearer to the place he grew up in, he is struck by nostalgia. But when he reaches his hometown he realizes that he cannot recognize the people he sees on the streets. He returns home, and his eldest sister answers the door. Her voice overwhelms Paul, and he is brought to tears. Paul sees his mother, who has become bedridden and sickly. His family feeds him well—Paul guesses that they've saved the food for months, as they have had trouble getting food.

Returning home confirms Paul's worries about his detachment and alienation from civilian life—he is unable to comfortably re-assimilate into his pre-war life.

Paul feels strangely detached from his home, and feels as if there is a "veil" between himself and his family. His mother asks him how the war is, and he feels that she could never understand an honest answer. Instead of telling his mother about the horrors he's witnessed, Paul simply tells her that things are not so bad.

Because his experience on the front has so profoundly affected him, Paul cannot verbalize the hardships he has endured. This only compounds his alienation from civilian life—it's not just that he doesn't fit, he can't even explain how he doesn't fit.


While aimlessly walking through the streets of his hometown, Paul is reprimanded for failing to salute a major. The major demands Paul's information, and tells Paul that he won't tolerate "front-line manners." The major makes Paul march and salute, and Paul is indignant. Once he gets home, he casts his uniform aside and puts on civilian clothes, which are now too small for him. Paul's mother is pleased to see him in civilian clothes, and while his father wants Paul to stay in uniform to meet family friends, Paul refuses.

The encounter with the major highlights the absurdity of formal military convention. Such decorum is useless in the struggle for survival that takes place on the front lines.

Paul feels repulsed by the curiosity people have about his military service, and appreciates his mother for asking no questions. Paul worries that if he tried to verbalize his experience, he would no longer be able to suppress it. Some aspects of domestic life prove difficult, as well: tram cars sound like screaming shells. An old schoolteacher ropes Paul into having a cigar with him, and people at the table patronize Paul and praise the war effort. When Paul expresses reservations about the success of the war, the teacher implies that Paul doesn't understand the nuances of the conflict.

Some of the older generation of German civilians are hypocritical, and presume to understand the war better than the soldiers themselves. Paul receives the paradoxical treatment of being simultaneously condescended to and treated as an invaluable asset to the war effort.

Leave is different from what Paul expected, and he takes this to indicate that he himself has changed. He is put off by civilians' presumptuousness, and prefers to be alone. His war experience has left him unable to understand how the civilians compartmentalize their lives and intellectualize their feelings.

The hardship of the frontlines has consumed Paul's identity—unlike the civilians, he doesn't have the luxury of being able to tune out the suffering of war and continue with a routine existence.

Sitting in his childhood room, Paul longs to feel as though he belongs, and wishes for the intellectual hunger he used to feel when he stared at his books. He thumbs through his books, and is unmoved by the words he sees before him. He hopes that his disenchantment during his brief time at home isn't enough to indicate a fundamental change in his personality.

Paul's inability to recover his drive to read or learn represents yet another way that his identity has been remolded by his time on the front. In the face of the death and horror he has seen, his former intellectual pursuits seem meaningless.

Paul goes to visit Mittelstaedt at the barracks, and discovers that Kantorek has been given a role as a subordinate officer to Mittelstaedt. Mittelstaedt tells Paul that he has rejected the schoolmaster's attempts to be friendly, and instead criticized him for pressuring his students to enlist in the army. He takes Paul to the parade ground, and Paul looks on as Mittelstaedt reprimands a shabbily dressed Kantorek for keeping his uniform in poor condition. Then, Mittelstaedt makes Kantorek perform several ridiculous exercises. Paul is delighted to see the schoolmaster's role reversed.

While Paul enjoys seeing Kantorek taken to task for his thoughtless, empty patriotism, this scene also carries a more somber overtone. With this depiction of how pathetic the once-dignified teacher has become, readers are shown that the war effort has held ramifications not just for people of Paul's generation.

Leave, for Paul, is "a pause that only makes everything after it so much worse." He begins to dwell on his imminent departure. His family goes to a slaughterhouse to get bones to make soup, but the bones run out before they can get any, and Paul brings his rations to his mother so that she may have something decent to eat.

Yet again, Paul's experience in the trenches can't be forgotten, and it prevents him from enjoying any aspect of his life.

Paul goes to visit Kemmerich's mother. She is an anxious mess, and demands that Paul tell her how her son died. Paul tells her that Kemmerich was shot in the heart and killed instantly, but Kemmerich's mother sees through the lie. Paul refuses to drop the story, and swears its truthfulness on all that is sacred to him, simply to appease Kemmerich's mother.

Paul's willingness to lie under oath to Kemmerich's mother can be interpreted in a number of ways—that he no longer holds anything sacred; that he knows that the truth could only hurt her; that he senses that she couldn't possibly understand the horror of the front lines and therefore spares her from it.

It is Paul's last evening at home. Late that night, his mother comes into his room, and Paul pretends to sleep. They exchange awkward parting words, and Paul laments that he can no longer place his head in her lap and weep. She urges him to be careful and try his best to avoid fighting, and he asks her to get well before he returns. Paul returns to bed, furious that he came home on leave: on the front, he had been "indifferent and often hopeless," but now, he sees himself as "nothing but an agony for myself, for my mother, for everything that is so comfortless and without end."

Rather than being a relaxing respite, his trip home has reminded Paul of what he and his family have lost because of the war, and what they still stand to lose if he is killed or injured. He both finds no solace at home, but also is reminded that he cannot think solely of himself, making it harder for him to hide behind his detached exterior.

CHAPTER 8

Paul arrives at the training camp, and recognizes few people. The camp is in idyllic countryside, and Paul chooses to spend much of his time alone, reverently observing nature.

Paul's experience at the camp will be a time for introspection, and his solitariness sets the stage for deeper realizations.


Adjacent to Paul's camp is a prison camp for captured Russians, who must sift through the Germans' garbage to find food. Paul wonders what horrible refuse the men must be reduced to eating, as the German rations are quite thin themselves. Paul feels pity for the wretched prisoners, and notices that they have honest, peasant-like features that resemble those of the people of the German countryside. Some of the soldiers in Paul's camp will kick the Russian prisoners out of spite, but most simply ignore them. In the evenings, the Russians come to the German camp to barter their possessions for food, and the Germans shrewdly trade for the superior Russian boots.

The sight of the Russian soldiers prompts Paul to think about the differences between himself and his enemy. The prisoners' wretchedness makes it difficult to feel any animosity towards them. Paul is realizing that the common soldiers are, largely, all the same. That he is killing men just like him, toward whom he holds no real animosity. At the same time, these men all exploit each other in the name of practical survival (i.e. getting better boots).

Paul reflects that the Germans and the Russians understand one another very little. He observes that the Russians seem more friendly with each other than the Germans do, perhaps because of their abject state. Imprisonment has made the Russians feeble and apathetic, and Paul can only see them as suffering creatures. If he knew more of their lives, he might be able to find sympathy for the men. Paul laments that Russians are the enemy simply because someone in power commanded it to be that way. In truth, officers are more of an enemy to recruits than the Russian soldiers are to their German counterparts, even though the Germans and Russians would fire upon one another immediately, if commanded to do so.

The pitifulness of the Russian soldiers makes Paul aware of the animal-like suffering that warfare inflicts upon all people involved in it, his comrades and the enemy soldiers. To Paul, these men have been stripped of most of what makes them human, which makes it difficult for him to be wholly sympathetic to their state. At the same time, Paul understands that he and the Russian prisoners have much more in common than he does with his superiors, who think nothing of ordering men like him—and the Russians— to their deaths.

Paul becomes frightened by these thoughts, and decides to repress them until the war is over. He gives some of his cigarettes to the Russians, and is comforted by their glow.

Paul realizes that this profound introspection could make his time as a soldier harder to endure, so he tries to distract himself by being generous to the prisoners.

Nearly every day sees the death of a Russian prisoner, and Paul is placed on guard duty for one of the burials. After the funeral, Paul listens to one of the prisoners play violin and reflects that hearing the music outside makes it sound thin and melancholy.

The way Paul reacts to the music shows that his emotional reactions to the war are becoming harder and harder to push to the back of his mind and escape.

Because he already was given a leave, Paul gets none on Sundays. On his last Sunday before returning to the front, his father and eldest sister come visit him. The have little to talk about, and Paul's relatives confirm that his mother has come down with cancer and will be operated on soon. His mother is in a crowded, inexpensive wing of the hospital; Paul's father, poor and overworked, is worried about finances but afraid to ask the surgeon what the operation will cost, because he fears it might make the surgeon unwilling to operate. Paul thinks of his father's dismal and grinding work routine, and tries to lighten his spirits with humor.

The dehumanizing cycle of sickness and poverty that Paul's family has to endure isn't all that dissimilar to the dehumanization Paul experiences in the trenches. Paul seems to recognize this similarity, since he cracks jokes to distract his father in much the same way as the soldiers use humor to distract themselves.

Paul's father and sister leave him with jam and potato-cakes his mother has made. Paul tries some of the food, but has no taste for it, so makes up his mind to give it to the Russians. Paul then remembers that his mother must have been in great pain when she made the cakes, and decides to give only two of them away to the prisoners.

Paul's conflicting emotional attachments to his home and to the prisoners force him to compromise. By giving away only some of the food his family has given him, he reconciles his generosity with his sentimentality.

CHAPTER 9

Paul travels back to the frontlines to rejoin his regiment, and is pleased to find Tjaden, Müller, Kat, and Kropp all alive and well.

The health and safety of Paul's comrades is a blessing and a surprise, and it staves off some of Paul's concerns about being alienated from his fellow soldiers upon his return.

The regiment cleans up its equipment in anticipation of a visit from the Kaiser. When the Kaiser arrives to inspect the troops, Paul is underwhelmed by his appearance. Tjaden muses that despite the Kaiser's prestige, he goes to the latrine just the same as other men. When the other men pressure his position, Tjaden plays dumb, and the others unwittingly outline the uselessness of the war. Paul is noncommittal, and notices that Tjaden is pleased to have triumphed in an argument against the more patriotic volunteer soldiers.

Tjaden's irreverent criticisms of the powers that be highlight the illogical and dehumanizing nature of modern warfare. The Kaiser is the men's ultimate leader as the leader of their country, and as a king was held to be something more than a man. But Tjaden has become so disillusioned by the war—or, perhaps, has been made to see so clearly by the war—that he can see the Kaiser as just a normal man. And in seeing the Kaiser as a normal man Tjaden raises the question of why, if he is just like them, they are fighting and dying for him at all.

Despite rumors of being moved to Russia, the regiment is sent up to the front line. On their way up, they pass a landscape of craters and shattered trees. Some of the trees hold dead soldiers, and in one of them, Paul sees a legless, naked corpse.

The regiment's redeployments to the front are often accompanied by sinister omens of coming violence, and the dismembered soldiers in the trees is perhaps the grisliest yet.

Paul volunteers to go on a patrol to assess the strength of the enemy's position. A bomb lands near him and catches him off guard; he is gripped with terror of being alone and helpless in the dark.

Paul's experience alone in the night sparks existential dread. Without the support of his comrades, the trauma of war is too much to handle.

After some time spent paralyzed in his hiding place, Paul hears the voices of the other German soldiers on patrol, and finds them deeply comforting. The presence of his comrades rescues Paul from the brink of loneliness and darkness, and he reflects on his closeness with and reliance on these men.

Comradeship is the only thing that keeps Paul anchored through the grinding uncertainty of trench warfare.

A bombardment begins, and Paul realizes that an enemy charge will soon follow. He pretends to be dead, and spreads himself out in the muddy water in a shell-hole. The enemy charge is repulsed by the Germans, and a wave of retreating men runs past Paul, but one stumbles onto him. Paul, without thinking, immediately begins stabbing at the man. He then retreats to another side of the hole and watches the man agonize. Paul becomes nauseated by his bloody hands, and sees in the dying man's eyes a powerful and primal fear. He comforts the man, gives him water from the puddle, and bandages his wounds.

Paul's proximity to the man he has killed forces him to come to terms in a much more personal way with the destruction he's wrought. Making eye contact with the man helps Paul understand that he and the enemy soldier are no different from each other. The technology of World War I made killing impersonal. But now, when it becomes personal for Paul, he finds himself sickened by it, and wants to do everything he can to reverse it (though of course he is unable to).

The dying enemy soldier gurgles for hours. It is the first time Paul has killed anyone with his hands, and he has never before seen the destruction he has inflicted up close. In the afternoon, the man dies. Disturbed by the silence, Paul begins to talk to the body. He speaks of his sympathy for the man's situation, and confesses that he had no real desire to kill—for Paul, killing is no longer an abstraction, and is instead a very real act. He retrieves the dead soldier's pocketbook. In it, he finds letters, as well as portraits of a woman and little girl. He finds that he has killed a printer named Gérard Duval, and out of an optimistic hope to correspond with Duval's family, jots the man's address down before returning the notebook.

When Paul is forced to sit and watch the results of his actions, he becomes much more aware of the extent of misery that war is capable of causing. New technology allowed him to attenuate the experience of violence, which let killing turn into an "abstraction," but stabbing the enemy soldier proves to be a much more real encounter with death. With knowledge of the dead man's life story, Paul is now able to experience full-fledged sympathy for the man, instead of just seeing animal suffering.

The sunset comes, and Paul senses his time to escape. His desire to live flares and he quickly forgets about the dead man. He sneaks towards his line, and worries that his comrades may not recognize him and fire upon him. Finally, he comes across Kat and Albert, who have come out with a stretcher to look for him. He tells the men what has happened, but neglects to mention the dead printer.

After a disturbing confrontation with mortality, Paul's more animal instincts kick in, and his basic desire for life gives him the energy to find cover.

The next morning, Paul can no longer keep the man he has killed a secret. He tells Kat and Albert what he has done, and they reassure him. Paul decides that he was only speaking nonsense in the shell-hole. They watch as a sergeant enthusiastically snipes at enemy soldiers, treating the affair as a game. The men conclude that Paul has no reason to lose sleep over what he has done.

Once again surrounded by the German war machine, Paul finds it easier to justify his actions as natural results of warfare. The impersonal detachment from suffering that trench warfare provides lets Paul set his human anxieties aside.

CHAPTER 10

Paul, Kat, Albert, Müller, Tjaden, and Detering are sent to guard an abandoned village. They find a suitable position to set up a dugout and move mattresses in from the houses to be more comfortable. The men then find fresh food—including two young pigs—and prepare a splendid dinner for themselves. An enemy balloon spots the smoke from their cooking and begins to shell the men, but they continue to prepare food in spite of the danger. The men return to their dugout for a decadent meal that they share with two wireless operators and a stray cat. Afterwards, the men enjoy cognac, cigars, and coffee. Unable to fully digest the sumptuous meal after living off of rations, all the men end up with indigestion. The men spend nearly two weeks undisturbed in the village, living a "charmed life." They enjoy the ample supplies and pretend to be aristocrats. Finally, they are taken away from the village, and bring furniture and provisions along with them.

The men are so committed to enjoying the luxury they have discovered that they literally risk their lives to continue preparing the meal. However, despite their commitment to enjoying themselves, the men are not overcome by greed: they share their bounty with every human and animal there to receive it.

A few days later, the men are sent to evacuate another village. As the men watch the miserable villagers pass by, their formation is shelled. Paul is wounded and must help a severely injured Albert to safety. Paul is then sent to surgery, where he fights madly not to be put unconscious.

Paul fights not to be made unconscious because war has taught him that his agency is the only thing that he can trust to protect his interests. He can't trust the army for which he is fighting.

Paul and Albert bribe a sergeant-major with cigars in order to get on the next hospital train. On the train, Paul is delighted to see clean linen and friendly nurses, and is nearly too embarrassed to place his dirty body on the sheets. That night, Paul needs to go to the bathroom, but he and Kropp feel uncomfortable telling the young nurse what they need. They soon overcome their bashfulness and lose their inhibitions about asking for help. Albert has a fever and is scheduled to be placed in the nearest hospital, and Paul fakes a fever so that he and Kropp can stick together.

Austere trench life has made the men reluctant to take advantage of anything but their most basic requirements. They initially demur from asking for the nurses' help because they have learned only to impose when absolutely necessary. Finally, Paul's feigned fever illustrates the lengths he will go to in order not to be separated from his comrades.

The two injured men are placed in the same room in a Catholic hospital. The men have a hard time falling asleep, and are woken by early-morning prayers, and they demand that the nuns close the door. The nuns do not accommodate the men, so they shatter a water bottle on the door and the ruffled nuns satisfy the men's request. A hospital inspector arrives later that day to find out who threw the bottle, and before Paul can report himself, another man takes responsibility. The man, Josef Hamacher, explains that after a head injury, he has been given a "shooting license"—a certificate that says he is sometimes not responsible for his actions—which he uses whenever he pleases.

To the injured soldiers, Catholic ritual now seems superfluous to their basic needs. The men are willing to commit sacrilege because it furthers their fundamental health. The civilian nuns are disgusted and unsympathetic because they are incapable of understanding the soldiers' rationale, which is based on the horrors that the soldiers have experienced but which the nurses have not.

There are eight men in Paul and Albert's room. On the third night, a man named Franz Wächter begins to bleed heavily. The night nurse doesn't respond to many calls, and Franz loses a lot of blood before he is attended to. He is moved to the Dying Room, which is reserved for moribund patients. Another occupant of the room, Peter, is also sent to the Dying Room, even though he resists fiercely.

The men's caretakers are not in touch with the soldiers' needs, likely because of the wide gulf in experience between the frontline fighters and the civilians.

Paul receives an operation because his bones will not grow back together. The hospital surgeons look forward to practicing unnecessary procedures on new admits to the hospital. Meanwhile, Kropp must have his leg amputated, and threatens to kill himself at his first opportunity. Many men cycle through Paul's room, but Peter surprisingly manages to return from the Dying Room.

Even the hospital cannot provide a safe and understanding environment for the soldiers. These circumstances make the men in Paul's room rely on one another for support, just as soldiers do in the trenches.

In Paul's room is a forty-year-old, Lewandowski, who has spent ten months in the hospital. He receives a letter from his wife in Poland telling him that she will be coming to visit him, and is overjoyed, because the couple has been apart for two years. The soldiers provide a lookout while Lewandowski has sex with his wife in his hospital bed, and Lewandowski and his wife gratefully share food with the men.

The men in the hospital arrange for Lewandowski's rendezvous because their experience at war has taught them that normal decorum is less important than basic human needs and basic human connection.

Paul is given convalescent leave. He returns home, parting with Kropp, whose recovery is going relatively smoothly. Paul returns home to find his mother in much worse shape than before, and she is reluctant to let him leave. He is then recalled to his regiment and leaves for the frontlines.

Paul's second trip home is even more discouraging than his first, which likely reflects Paul's own spirits and the German army's worsening condition.

CHAPTER 11

Paul has begun to think of war as a chronic illness, like cancer or tuberculosis. Germans suffer frequent casualties, and men's thoughts are governed simply by whether or not they are in danger. The brotherhood of being a soldier equalizes and homogenizes men with different pasts, and it leads to a simultaneously "heroic and banal" condition in which men try to appreciate every hour they can, because their lives are so uncertain.

Trench warfare has so dehumanized the men that they no longer have the luxury of thinking about anything but basic pleasure and primal danger. At the same time, for facing these pressures at all the men are heroic and every instant they are alive gains a greater intensity.

Pragmatic considerations are, to Paul, the "real problems" that are necessary to consider. The men all live on the same plane of primitive survival, concerned with nothing other than preserving their survival. They have been turned into "unthinking animals" so that they can use the "weapon of instinct," and they can be almost completely indifferent to the horrors they witness. However, this indifference is not total—men will sometimes be struck with a grave emotional yearning, which Paul thinks illustrates that the soldiers' have not become entirely primitive creatures. Instead of being naturally primitive, the soldiers are "primitive in an artificial sense, and by virtue of the utmost effort."

Survival dictates that the men must shed nearly every attribute that makes them human beings. However, this can never be completely achieved—the men strain to forget their human desires, and being animalistic ultimately takes a severe toll on their spirits.

In spite of the steps the soldiers take to diminish the effects of war, the men begin to break down. Detering passes a **blossoming cherry tree** and becomes fixated on it. He takes branches off the tree and carries them with him, to remind him of his orchard at home. Paul notices Detering acting strangely and packing up his gear, and advises the peasant not to act foolishly, but Detering deserts the army soon after. Instead of fleeing to Holland, which is a safer refuge for deserters, Detering makes the mistake of returning to Germany. A week later, he is caught by the military police, and the rest of the men hear nothing further of him.

The great effort required to suppress all but their most basic, animalistic needs has begun to take its toll on the men. Detering is finally unable to control his need to escape, but he acts on this rational impulse in an irrational way, by simply returning to his home without thinking out the consequences. Detering's capture symbolizes the dangers of simply trying to resume normal life after fighting in the trenches. On the flip side, Detering has risked his life for the army, but the army offers him no leniency or understanding. He is just a cog to them, a cog who is not allowed to make decisions for himself.

Müller dies after being shot from point-blank range in the stomach. He agonizes for half an hour, and is conscious of his intense suffering. Before dying, Müller gives Paul his pocket-book and his **boots**—the very same boots that once belonged to Kemmerich. Paul promises that once he dies, the boots will be passed to Tjaden.

Even in life-and-death moments, the men remain focused on practical matters and devoted to one another's basic well-being. Paul has no trouble understanding that he is a mere vehicle for the passing-on of desirable boots as much as he is a human being.

The German soldiers are emaciated and afflicted with dysentery, while Americans and English are well-equipped and in good health. Fresh German recruits are in poor health and die by the thousands—Kat muses that "Germany ought to be empty soon." The men are convinced that the war will never end, as even seriously injured men are sent back to the front from the hospitals by cowardly surgeons who give in to the army's demands for men.

Morale in the German ranks is fairly dismal, and justifiably so. Miserable living conditions, couple with the constant death of their comrades, make the men unable to imagine another sort of life. The war is clearly being lost, and yet so many men are dying for this now lost cause (which the men already largely seemed not to believe in).

Paul and his comrades are especially horrified by the tanks that assault them. Because the tanks are so impersonal and unfeeling, Paul thinks that they "embody for us the horror of war."

World War 1 marked a dramatic advance in impersonal, efficient killing—which likely amplified the trauma suffered by soldiers.

Paul's Company Commander, a courageous man named Bertinck, is killed, though he fights against the enemy until the very end. Leer is struck by a shrapnel fragment and bleeds out from his hip. Paul reflects that Leer's excellence in math class was little use to him.

Paul continues to lose more and more of his closest friends as the situation deteriorates further. These men once had hopes, ambitions, and talents—the war has rendered all of that meaningless. They are just bodies, to kill and be killed.

The summer of 1918 is particularly brutal, and the Germans know they are losing. They lack soldiers and ammunition, but continue to fight and die. The beautiful weather and rumors of an armistice make the men even more pained to return to the front.

The lovely weather and hope for peace make the ongoing warfare and death seem even more senseless and impractical.

Kat, Paul's last friend left in the army, is shot in the shin as he and Paul transport food together. Paul carries Kat back to medical care, while Kat suffers brutally. The two reminisce over the time they roasted geese together, and exchange addresses so that they can correspond. When the two finally reach medical care, Paul discovers that Kat was struck in the head by a tiny piece of shrapnel, and is already dead. An orderly is so surprised by Paul's devotion in carrying Kat such a long distance that he asks if Kat is Pauls' relative.

Paul's heroic efforts to save Kat, his last friend, are in vain, which represents the seeming powerlessness of a single soldier in the trenches. The orderly thinks Paul and Kat are related because he cannot understand the camaraderie between soldiers that forces Paul to so valiantly strive to save Kat. And in fact, Paul's connection to Kat is so strong it is like being a relative. They are, in the deepest sense, brothers.

CHAPTER 12

Autumn arrives, and Paul is one of the few "old hands" left on the front. He is the last remaining man out of the seven in his class. Many seem to be hopeful, as there is talk of an armistice. Paul conjectures that men will revolt if their hopes for peace are dashed.

Times have never been more desperate for the Germans—Paul recognizes that they are distraught enough to revolt if there is no end to the war in sight.

Paul is placed on a two-week rest after swallowing some poisonous gas. He spends his days sitting outside in the sun and thinking of a peaceful journey home. He cannot think beyond his immediate desires to return, however—after the yearning for home, he is aimless.

Paul's time fighting the war has crushed his spirits, and now, without any comrades, he is acutely aware of how listless and unmotivated he is.

Paul realizes that men will not understand the returning soldiers. The war will be forgotten, and things will go back to normal for all those who were too young or too old to see combat. "We will be superfluous even to ourselves," Paul reflects, and the former soldiers will "fall into ruin."

Paul's thoughts encapsulate the concept of the "lost generation"—those who fought in World War 1 will be unable to move past what they've endured, and others will be unable to understand them.

Perhaps, Paul hopes, his melancholy will fly away once he returns home—maybe his desire to learn and explore the future has not been completely lost in bombardment and despair. Paul realizes that the passage of time can take nothing from him. He is alone and hopeless, which allows him to confront time's passage fearlessly. His vivacity will express itself in spite of the reservations his mind may have.

Without comrades, Paul is left with nothing to lose. He senses that it is possible that his absolute abjection could be a source of hope—if things cannot get worse for him, perhaps they may manage to get better. Though this is a rather desperate hope.

A third-person narrator describes a soldier—presumably, but not explicitly Paul—being killed in October of 1918, on a day that was otherwise so safe that it earned a report of "all quiet on the Western front." The dead man lies as if he is asleep, and his face wears a calm expression, "as though almost glad the end had come."

As Paul loses hope and any reason to care about living on, his narration falls away in favor of an impersonal third person narrator. That narrator treats Paul as just another anonymous casualty of the war. Paul's relative lack of importance—his death happens during a "quiet" day—contrasts sharply with his central role through the rest of the novel, and highlights the fact that Paul really is just one of millions of men, on both sides of the war, who had lives and futures that were senselessly destroyed by the war, by the striving for power by nations and leaders that ultimately cared nothing for the men in the armies who were destroyed.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Sobel, Ben. "*All Quiet on the Western Front*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 16 Sep 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Sobel, Ben. "*All Quiet on the Western Front*." LitCharts LLC, September 16, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/all-quiet-on-the-western-front.

To cite any of the quotes from *All Quiet on the Western Front* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front. Ballantine Books. 1987.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front. New York: Ballantine Books. 1987.