

All Quiet on the Western Front and the Postwar Generation

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At first glance, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* may appear a traditional coming-of-age novel, or Bildungsroman, which follows the story of German youth Paul Bauer, a soldier on the Western front during the First World War. In general structure and point of view the novel adheres quite uniformly to traditional notions of the coming-of-age genre: it is a first-hand account by a young protagonist who, by the conclusion, learns something about himself and/or the world.¹ Upon further inspection, however, Remarque's *All Quiet* seems to oppose or subvert conventional Bildungsroman tropes through a series of thematic reversals—namely, by placing life in stead of death, home in stead of the foreign, and the past in stead of the present. These inversions effectively transform the structure of the canonical coming-of-age novel into an unfamiliar literary form, mimicking the deconstruction of social and political traditions that took place throughout European society in the years immediately following the First World War. The appropriation of these literary, social, and political structures ultimately demonstrates the insufficiency of existing prewar institutions to support the evolving needs of the postwar generation.

The traditional Bildungsroman often begins with a traumatic or transformative event—such as the loss of a loved one, one's home, or one's self—and incites the protagonist's quest for physical, social, spiritual, or intellectual development. *All Quiet*, however, begins not with this conventional moment of trauma, but with a tranquil scene in which protagonist Paul and his comrades rest happily at camp, “satisfied and at peace” five miles behind the front line.² This mood reversal undermines the plot structure of the conventional Bildungsroman by removing the protagonist's catalyst for growth and leaving him without direction or purpose. This structural

¹ Chris Baldick, "Bildungsroman."

² Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1.

deviation successfully exposes the sense of aimlessness experienced by members of the postwar generation—those who grew to adulthood during World War I and are embodied in *All Quiet* by Paul and his fellow soldiers. Paul's lack of purpose is explored more explicitly throughout the novel, as when he speaks of his former schoolmaster, who had persuaded Paul and his classmates to enlist:

“The idea of authority, which [he] represented, was associated in our minds with a greater insight ... But the first death we saw shattered this belief ... The world as [he] had taught it to us broke in pieces.”³

Here, Paul describes the moment in which his investment and belief in the war was lost. While the authority figures in Paul's life teach that duty to one's country is the noblest of aims, the reality of the war—horrific, unending, and without a clear goal—dismantles this belief. Paul's realization here reflects that of many soldiers obligated to fight in the Great War, who were much less inclined to view the war as a sporting and heroic effort.⁴ By the end of the war's first year, the European public's patriotic fervor surrounding the conflict had been replaced by a questioning sobriety.⁵ By examining *All Quiet* within the traditional plot structure of the Bildungsroman genre, we see the loss of direction and purpose experienced by the soldiers of the First World War, as well as those who remained on the home front.

All Quiet also subverts traditional notions of the coming-of-age genre in its inversion of the home with the foreign or unfamiliar. Normally, the young protagonist leaves home for un-

³ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 10.

⁴ Felix Gilbert, *The End of the European Era*, 107.

⁵ Felix Gilbert, *The End of the European Era*, 122.

known places or the “real world” in search of knowledge or identity. However, Paul in *All Quiet* begins in an environment that is entirely strange to the average reader—in the trenches along the Western front, somewhere in France—and only experiences a sense of alienation, ironically, upon returning home to his family. When visiting home on leave, Paul describes the landscape as “disturbing, mysterious, and familiar,” and remarks that a sense of strangeness will not leave him—he is not himself in that “foreign” world.⁶ At the front, however, and at camp, Paul feels at home. He says, “But it will soon be all right again back here with Kat and Albert. This is where I belong,” and settles back into his routine of playing cards and joking with his comrades.⁷ By reversing the role of the home and the foreign in the Bildungsroman tradition, *All Quiet* speaks to the intensely disorienting effects of the war on the Lost Generation. The young soldiers of World War I acclimate themselves so intently to the culture of war that their own home countries and towns become distant and even disturbing to them. This structural reversal of the coming-of-age trope, therefore, demonstrates the sense of transplantation that the postwar generation felt upon returning from combat, transformed to the point of dissociating from previously held conceptions of home.

While in the conventional Bildungsroman the young protagonist is usually able to accept and then reintegrate into popular society by the end of his transformative journey, such is not the case for Paul in *All Quiet*. Paul expresses a disconnect between his own generation and the two immediately preceding and following it, explaining:

⁶ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 124.

⁷ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 156.

“And men will not understand us—for the generation that grew up before us … already had a home and a calling; now it will return to its old occupations … and the generation that has grown up after us will be strange to us and push us aside.”⁸

While men older than him will have wives and jobs to return to when the war is over, Paul and others his age, fresh out of school, have not built lives or identities outside the horror of war to which they can revert. By omitting Paul’s reintegration to European society, *All Quiet* attests to the entirely unique and unstable position of the postwar generation. Due to the deaths of between eight and ten million men throughout the course of the First World War, the usual transition from one generation to the next did not take place in European postwar society.⁹ Instead, national leaders during the interwar period were mainly men who had come into power before the First World War, and reintegration was made even more difficult for demobilized soldiers by a period of postwar unemployment, caused by the slow shift of industrial production from wartime to peaceful uses.¹⁰ All matters of peacetime, “professions and studies and salaries,” have become obscure and inaccessible to the postwar generation.¹¹ The appropriation of the coming-of-age narrative is therefore the means by which *All Quiet* attests to the struggle of reintegration that soldiers in the Great War faced upon their return from the front lines.

Remarque’s *All Quiet* continues to subvert the coming-of-age tradition in its narrative style—namely, in its use of the present tense in place of past tense. Conventionally, Bildungsro-

⁸ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 225-6.

⁹ Felix Gilbert, *The End of the European Era*, 138.

¹⁰ Felix Gilbert, *The End of the European Era*, 136.

¹¹ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 68.

mane are written in the past tense, from the perspective of the protagonist after he has become completely matured or achieved self-actualization. However, the entirety of *All Quiet* is written as though Paul experiences an ever-present state of warfare: “The earth bursts before us. It rains clods. I feel a smack. My sleeve is torn away by a splinter. I shut my fist. No pain … A hole is torn up in front of me … I’ll get into it.”¹² Through narrative sequences such as this, in which Paul’s train of thought is exactly that of a man in the heat of battle, it becomes clear that Paul experiences eternally the horrors of the front. This narrative point of view, in which Paul experiences the past trauma of war as though it were occurring in the present, represents a symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) known as *intrusion*.¹³ We see other manifestations of PTSD in *All Quiet* as Paul’s thought process devolves into a primal stream of consciousness. Through the use of fragmented sentence structure—“A wounded man? I yell to him—no answer—a dead man”—Paul demonstrates signs of *hyper-arousal*, in which there is a constant anticipation of danger. These periods of intense fear alternate, however, with periods of what is referred to as *constriction*, in which Paul withdraws into himself, becoming numb or emotionally detached. This symptom becomes most obvious upon Paul’s visit home, during which he prefers to be left alone, but also in his descriptions of himself and his fellow soldiers, to whom he attributes the “dullness” and “indifference” of animals. Signs of constriction appear also in Paul’s flat, unfeeling tone: “We push on to the pioneer dump. Some of us load out shoulders with pointed and twisted iron stakes … The burdens are awkward and heavy.”¹⁴ These instances of cognitive

¹² Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 50-1.

¹³ Jane Robinett, “The Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience,” 296.

¹⁴ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 44.

disjunction, symptomatic of PTSD, exemplify the horrific psychological effects of the First World War on the soldiers who fought in it. It is through the use of the present (as opposed to the traditional past) tense that we see Paul is doomed to experience the trauma of war continually, as many of those soldiers fortunate enough to return home from the front also were. *All Quiet's* subversion of the coming-of-age conventional narrative style, then, is the means by which the novel reveals the extreme psychological distress that survivors of the Great War were made to suffer.

The undermining of the Bildungsroman genre in Remarque's *All Quiet* ultimately reflects the dismantling of other established structures in European society during and after the First World War—specifically, established military, political, economic, and social institutions. Through the reorganization of these structures becomes apparent a new order that began with the buildup and outbreak of the war, embodied first by the transformation of warfare itself. With the First World War came “innovations in the techniques and conduct of the war,” such as the use of scouting planes, hand grenades, machine guns, poison gas, and submarines, as well as the emergence of trench warfare.¹⁵ While the first several months of warfare carried on in the traditional manner—infantry marching along the roads, cavalry scouting enemy positions, and soldiers storming villages—these conventional forms of combat were no longer suitable to the desired ends of the conflict. The horses of the cavalry and non-aerial forms of reconnaissance became extraneous and ineffective. New modes of organization, strategy, and weaponry became necessary to engage in (the emerging concept of) *total war*. As a result, the First World War ushered in a period of transformation for the European industrial complex. There grew an increase of import-

¹⁵ Felix Gilbert, *The End of the European Era*, 105.

tance in raw materials and manpower, European export trade came almost to a halt, and manufacturing efforts became heavily focused on the production of war materials.¹⁶ To meet the rising demand for soldiers, age limits for military service were extended and women became employed in jobs previously reserved for men. These dramatic transformations illustrate the incapacity of existing military and economic structures to meet the demands of a new kind of warfare and, consequently, a new kind of military economy, and are paralleled by *All Quiet's* appropriation of the popular coming-of-age genre.

In the same manner, and partially as a result of these changes in military and economic organization, European society underwent significant political and social innovation. The necessity for emphasized military production led to the establishment of government ministries and price regulations in order to better control the economy. With the entry of more women into the workforce, wages among women increased in general as well as in relation to men's wages.¹⁷ Suffrage expanded all across the continent, and Europeans in general held freer opinions about sex, manners, and morals. Women wore shorter skirts, bobbed hair became the fashion, and the rate of contraceptive use and abortions increased. In the education system, "pupils' councils" were established that the new generation might study "only what pleased them."¹⁸ Popular art, too, underwent a great transfiguration with the rise of cubist and expressionist forms, "architecture [that] twisted houses inside out," and surrealist literature. For many writers, "traditional language and imagery not only were insufficient to express what they felt but also seemed to con-

¹⁶ Felix Gilbert, *The End of the European Era*, 134-5.

¹⁷ Felix Gilbert, *The End of the European Era*, 107.

¹⁸ Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 299.

ceal reality,” particularly with regard to the unspeakable suffering of the war.¹⁹ This sentiment parallels that evidenced by Remarque’s *All Quiet* in its reluctance to adhere to existing literary forms of expression due to their inappropriateness in the wake of the First World War. However, while *All Quiet* merely appropriates the existing Bildungsroman genre while still operating within it, postwar writers, painters, and other intellectuals demonstrate a total rejection of prewar artistic genres in favor of newly imagined ones. Regardless of the degree to which emerging political, social, and intellectual forms renounced or merely adapted pre-existing institutions, however, all demonstrate a break in continuity due to the changing needs of the postwar European population. As the established coming-of-age genre became insufficient to express the disorientation and psychological suffering seen in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, so, too, established means of political, social, economic, and military organization became insufficient for European postwar conditions.

¹⁹ Felix Gilbert, *The End of the European Era*, 136-7.

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