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The Fight Against Death: How War Creates Nothing and Destroys Everything

At 10:40 in the morning on November 11th, 1918, four soldiers were sitting out the last half hour of the conflict known to them as the war to end all wars. However, American Henry Gunther, Frenchman Augustin Trebuchon, and Canadian George Lawrence Price would all be dead within a half hour. Gunther was camped out in a French town near the front lines. Earlier in the war, his title of Supply Sargent was stripped from him after he was caught writing a letter complaining about life in the trenches. Soon after his demotion, his fiancée left him. Meanwhile, Trebuchon, a runner for the French Army, was given a message to deliver to the front lines. At the same time, Price and his company were crossing a bridge while taking a town controlled by the Germans. Trebuchon was the first to fall. At 10:45 am, he was shot in the chest while delivering his message (O’Mara). Ten minutes later, Price peeked out from behind cover. He, too, was shot by a German sniper and died at 10:58 (Goodmurphy). As Price fell, Gunther began to charge at a German machine gun post, seeking glory in the last moments of the war. Both his comrades and the German gunners yelled at him to fall back, but he continued and was shot in the head by German machine gun fire. The time was 10:59 (Klein). War has destroyed all but our memories of these men. Enrich Maria Remarque, both a German WWI veteran and the author of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, has had some experience with the destruction caused by war. Born in 1898, Remarque was drafted into the German army at age 18. Here, he experienced the horrors that would give rise to his most famous book, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. This book takes place on the German side of the front and follows German Soldier Paul Baumer and his group of friends as they try to survive the First World War. One by one, his companions are taken from him, until it is only him and his friend Tjaden. Erich Maria Remarque in *All Quiet on the Western Front* highlights that war is a machine that destroys all involved through setting, character, and conflict.

Starting off, Remarque uses a rapidly changing setting to display the chaos caused by war. Paul is swept across the western front, and travels between relief camps, front lines, no-man’s land, training camps, and trenches. He also visits his hometown during leave, as well as two villages near the front and a hospital. “Rapid changes of scene take the reader to the front—sheltering from shell-fire in a cemetery, under gas attack, behind the lines—on leave to a Germany that cannot conceive of life at the front, into contact with Russian POWs, and to the hospital, where the consequences of war are among the severest and clearest.” (“All Quiet on the Western Front.” Novels for Students) These rapid location changes show the reader how the war affected Germany as a whole, both the average citizen, as well as those who fought for their country. The damage caused to the citizens is shown during one scene where a village is being evacuated. “We are marching in column; the French certainly will not fire on a town in which there are still inhabitants. But a few minutes later the air screams, the earth heaves, cries ring out; a shell has landed among our rear squad.” (Remarque, Ch. 10, Par. 30) The people were forced to evacuate, and while leaving, their homes and way of life were shelled. The soldiers’ suffering can be seen when Paul and Albert visit a hospital after they were hit by shrapnel from a blast during the evacuation of the town. “Day after day goes by with pain and fear, groans and death gurgles. Even the Death Room is no use anymore, it is too small; fellows die during the night in our room” (Remarque, Ch. 10, Par. 205). The hospital is overflowing with casualties of the war. Men with shattered arms, amputated legs, and open stomach wounds are all around. The destruction seen throughout the book’s various settings reflects the destruction of war.

Next, Remarque shows how war can destroy through the main character Paul Baumer. The book starts long after Paul joined the war, and he has already been horribly mentally scarred. At the beginning of the book, Paul tells the reader that he is being broken by the war. “We are none of us more than twenty years old. But young? Youth? That is long ago. We are old folk” (Remarque, Ch. 1, Par. 106). Near the end of the book, he is completely broken to the point that he identifies as being nothing. “Let the months and years come, they can take nothing from me, they can take nothing more. I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear. The life that has borne me through these years is still in my hands and my eyes. Whether I have subdued it, I know not. But so long as it is there it will seek its own way out, heedless of the will that is within me.” Paul does not care if he lives, does not care if he dies, as he is lost to the world. Critic Modris Eksteins perfectly summarizes Paul’s sentiments. “He accused a mechanistic civilization of destroying humane values, of negating charity, love, humor, beauty, and individuality. Yet Remarque offered no alternatives. The characters of his generazione bruciata – the Italian notion of a “burned generation” is apt – do not act; they are merely victims.” (Eksteins) The main character’s entire generation has been burnt by the war, and they will not be able to function in society once they return. By the end of the book, Paul is no longer thinking, but simply acting on impulse: “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. A man is walking along without thought or heed; - suddenly he throws himself down on the ground and a storm of fragments flies harmlessly over him; - yet he cannot remember either to have heard the shell coming or to have thought of flinging himself down.” (Remarque, Ch. 4, Par. 26) During the fighting, Paul’s personality and will to live are destroyed, and his pure animal instinct is the only thing motivating him to survive. Throughout the war, Paul is transformed from a German schoolboy excited to serve his country and egged on by his schoolmaster to an unfeeling husk that only knows how to survive. From Paul’s perspective, he is no longer fighting for his country against the French and British. Instead, he is fighting for his life.

The final way Remarque shows the damage caused by war is through conflict. In the book, the main conflict is World War One. At the beginning of the war, Paul views the Allied powers as the enemy, but as he learns more about his enemy, he sees that they are not much different then himself. During an argument between friends, Kat, Paul’s mentor figure, claims that there is no good reason for a French laborer to attack a German schoolboy. They only do so because of their leaders and commanders. Shortly after this conversation, Paul is caught unaware in no-man’s land during an attack. A Frenchman jumps into the crater where he is hiding, and Paul stabs him. He then is trapped in the crater overnight by heavy shelling and begins to learn more about the man. Paul says to the dead man’s corpse: “If you jumped in here again, I would not do it, if you would be sensible too. But you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called forth its appropriate response. It was that abstraction I stabbed. But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me.” (Remarque, Ch. 9, Par. 146) Paul realized that he had ended the man’s life only because his leader told the German soldiers to attack the French. In his criticism of the book, Christopher M. Armitage says “They believe that the real enemy they are fighting are not the French and the British, but death itself. The only value that sustains them is a sense of comradeship with those who have endured the same miseries as they.” Paul stops seeing the men he is fighting against as the enemy and begins to find that the only enemy they are fighting is death. In a brutal twist at the end of the book, death wins, and Paul is shot just weeks before the end of the war. “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.” (Remarque, Ch. 12, Par. 12 - 13) At the end of the book, Paul, as well as all his friends except for Tjaden, have lost. This twist to the classic story of war heroism told time and time again shows that war takes without thinking, even taking the protagonist. This final paragraph, likely written by Tjaden, shows Paul’s peace in death. Near the end of the book, Paul had begun to lose touch with himself and the world around him, no longer caring about the outcome of the war, just his second-to-second life. He knows that now that everything has been taken from him but his life. Once he is shot, he knows that he truly has nothing left to lose and lays with a peaceful look on his face.

Through the war, Paul Baumer learned the true effect of war. He learned how war destroys everything. Remarque uses setting to show a ruined Germany, with caved in school buildings and torn up towns. Paul’s character is also used to shows how war can destroy a soul. Because the story reflects Remarque’s experiences of war, it represents the real scars of war. Like Baumer, Remarque likely saw his comrades laying facedown in the mud with severe wounds. He likely saw men reduced to mush by shrapnel from a shell. He may have regretted killing someone, empathized with the enemy, wanted to know more about the men behind the guns. By the end of the book, the reader is shown that the real enemy is not the French or the British. Instead, the true enemy that all soldiers are fighting against is death. At the end of the book, even Paul loses the fight against death, leaving his friend Tjaden as the only surviving member of their friend group. The entire class of schoolboys had been turned into either cripples or dead men. War is a terrible thing. It can reduce a bustling town into a heap of rubble in days. It can turn a man into a pile of meat in seconds, and it destroys entire cultures, peoples, and countries. However, when diplomacy does not work, it can be a necessary evil. Henry Gunther, Augustin Trebuchon, and George Lawrence Price should have lived long and fulfilling lives, but they were cut short when they lost their fight against death. Hopefully, humanity will eventually be able to evolve past spending human lives to resolve our useless infighting and be able to live at peace with one another. But until that time, there will be thousands, if not millions of stories just like the one of Paul Baumer.

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