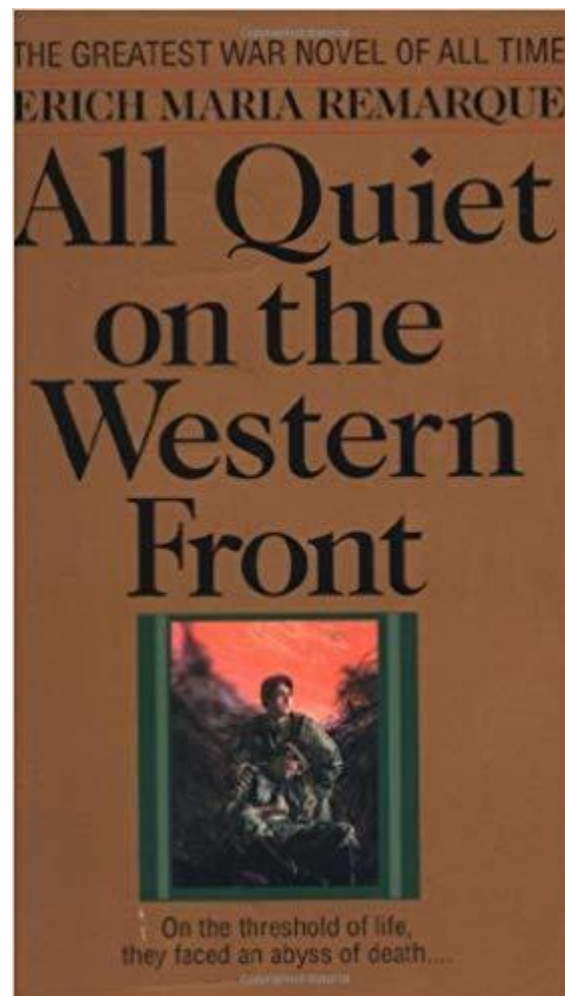


**The Voices of a Lost Generation:
The Gap between Promise and Fulfilment in Remarque's
*Im Westen nichts Neues (All Quiet on the Western Front)***

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Quiet-Western-Front-Erich-Remarque/dp/1441482652>

Abstract

Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970) is one of the most widely known German authors in the twentieth century. Remarque has bitter experiences in the trenches on the Western Front. The novel "Im Westen nichts Neues" translated in English as *All Quiet on the Western Front* is concerned with the German soldier's suffering during the First World War both in physical and psychological level.

The present paper intends to showcase the seamy side of war, voices the agony and trauma of the soldiers and lays bare the gap between promise and fulfilment. Having joined the army Paul and his comrades very soon realize that the air of patriotism that has urged them to enlist their names as soldiers in the battlefield was false. They are immediately confronted with the harsh realities of war. While recalling his schooldays, Paul remembers how his teacher Kantorek has urged them to enlist their names in the Front. The bloody war-mongers have had their families – children, wives and career. But Paul and his cohort have not yet tasted the nectar of familiar familial ties. In the novel Paul is desperately trying to save himself from the deadly artillery onslaught. Paul, the child, is thus seeking protection from the mother earth. Remarque poignantly sketches the hardship involved in the fighting. Thus, in *All Quiet on the Western Front* Remarque gives an in-depth analysis of the grim reality of trench warfare, the unmitigated horror that the war actually unfurls. The novel buttresses the fact that the sufferings of the soldiers are indeed intolerable. The soldiers are representatives of ‘a lost generation’ – a term coined by Gertrude Stein. In the novel Paul acts as Remarque’s mouthpiece. Paul represents the fragmented selves of the soldiers. The novel portrays the conflict between the horror of war and the intensity of soldiers’ friendship. The mutual bond among the soldiers in trench warfare is the only romanticised aspect in Remarque’s otherwise unromantic novel.

Keywords: First World War, trauma, agony, death, lost generation

Erich Maria Remarque

Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970) is one of the most widely known German authors in the twentieth century. Remarque has bitter experiences in the trenches on the Western Front. Most of his novels are influenced by his First World War experiences. Remarque’s notable works – *The Road Back* (1931), *Three Comrades* (1937), *Flotsam* (1941), *Arch of Triumph* (1946), *Spark of Life* (1952), *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (1954), *The Black Obelisk* (1957), *Heaven Has No Favourites* (1961) and *Night in Lisbon* (1964) – have made Remarque a highly popular novelist.

All Quiet on the Western Front

The book that brought Erich Maria Remarque into the limelight was *All Quiet on the Western Front* which was published in 1928. The original novel “Im Westen nichts Neues” was written in German. It was Arthur Wesley Wheen who translated the German version as *All Quiet on the Western Front* that brought a revolutionary change in the entire world. The novel is concerned with the German soldier’s suffering during the First World War both in physical and psychological level. The present paper intends to showcase the seamy side of war, voices the agony and trauma of the soldiers, and lays bare the gap between promise and fulfilment.

“War is a massive and complex phenomenon” (qtd. in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, 39). Remarque’s realistic depiction of trench warfare has struck a chord in the heart of those who survived after the war. In *All Quiet on the Western Front* the novelist describes the excruciating mental and physical agony of the soldiers. Paul Baumer is the narrator of the novel. He narrates the ghastly and ghostly experience of his own and the other members of his group of soldiers who fought on the Western Front during the First World War. Paul and his three friends Leer, Kropp and Muller who were of the same age and from the same class enlisted their names as soldiers. Tjaden, a locksmith, is the biggest eater of the company. Haie Westhus is a peat-digger. Detering is a peasant who often thinks of his wife and family at home. Stanislaus Katczinsky who is better known as Kat is Paul’s mentor and the unofficial leader of the group. He has survived the bloody war because of his shrewdness and cunning. During the war Paul and his comrades take rest after being relieved

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Pintu Karak, Ph.D. Research Scholar

The Voices of a Lost Generation: The Gap between Promise and Fulfilment in Remarque’s *Im Westennichts Neues (All Quiet on the Western Front)*

from the front lines. After two weeks of continuous fighting Paul's company of 150 men has been reduced to 80 men. They did not even get enough food. The living soldiers think they would get the food of 150 men but the cook openly refuses to do so:

Eighty men can't have what is meant for a hundred and fifty. (p.6)

In the battlefield Paul and his friend Kropp are severely wounded. Kropp's legs would be amputated. It means that he would never be able to pursue his ambition of being a forester. Having joined the army Paul and his comrades very soon realize that the air of patriotism that has urged them to enlist their names as soldiers in the war was false. They are immediately confronted with the harsh realities of war.

Universal Appeal

Remarque's novels have universal appeals. They not only delineate the German aspect but also give a pen-picture of the misery of all people who were directly or indirectly associated with the war. Whereas the novel *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* is concerned with the life of the soldiers on the eastern Front in the early 1940's, *The Three Comrades* deals with life of the soldiers in Germany during the Great Wars. The novel *The Road Back* is a sequel to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In the very outset of the novel Remarque makes his stance quite clear:

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. (p.4)

Remarque was worried about the brutal impact of war on young and innocent minds. Some were compelled to leave their study in order to join the war. The budding youths did not have previous experiences about war. They were completely separated from the normal flow of life. They were deprived of the golden touch of their dear and near ones – their parents, brothers, sisters, wives and above all children. They did not get the opportunity to pursue their materialistic goals. The novelist is thus concerned with the universal language of suffering.

Nightmarish Situations

The novel, as Harold Bloom points out in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front*, is 'a succession of nightmarish situations and unrelieved gloom' (29). In the novel Paul and his friend Kropp are victims of all-consuming and corroding effect of war. Kropp's legs would be amputated. It means that he would never be able to pursue his ambition of being a forester. Paul is also anxious about the poor condition of his classmate Kemmerich who has got a serious flesh wound in his thigh while fighting on the Front. He is now admitted to St. Joseph's Hospital. His friends miss him very much. While recalling his schooldays, Paul remembers how his teacher Kantorek has urged them to enlist their names in the Front. He actually brainwashes the budding youths by uttering patriotic slogans and reminding his pupils that it is their duty to save their country from foreign invasion, to protect it from the oncoming danger. Even though some pupils are reluctant to enlist their names, they are forced to join the battlefield. Kantorek, the schoolmaster, is described as 'a stern little man in a grey tail-coat, with a face like a cunning mouse. He was about the same size as Corporal Himmeltoss, the "terror of Klosterberg."' (9) Although a small man in size, he used to create a lot of trouble into his students. He was a vile man who goaded his pupils to join the army. Glaring at his pupils through the spectacles, he told –

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Pintu Karak, Ph.D. Research Scholar

The Voices of a Lost Generation: The Gap between Promise and Fulfilment in Remarque's *Im Westennichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*)

“Won’t you join up, Comrades?” (9). A shrewd fox that he is, Kantorek thus coaxes the poor and simple ones to sacrifice their lives for some good causes. On the other hand, Kantorek and his cohort remain busy gratifying their selfish needs. The narrator also realises that people like Kantorek “surpassed us only in phrases and in cleverness ... While they continued to write and talk, we saw the wounded and dying. While they taught that duty to one’s country is the greatest thing, we already knew that death-throes are stronger”. (10)

The Disillusionment of Paul

Remarque’s novel portrays the disillusionment, dissolution and disenchantment of a dreamer Paul. Paul is nostalgic when he ponders over his glorious childhood. He thinks that youth is gradually slipping away. Paul’s early life is cut off from the moment he joins the army. He comes to the fatal realization that he has no ‘background’ – no foot to hold on to. His present is besmeared with boredom and monotone, disillusionment and disappointment. The bloody war-mongers have had their families – children, wives, hobbies and career. But Paul and his companions have not yet tasted the nectar of familiar familial ties. Whenever they try to ‘look back’ to the past days, they find themselves in total desolation:

The war swept us away. For the others, the older men, it is but an interruption. They are able to think beyond it. We, however, have been gripped by it and do not know what the end may be. We know only that in some strange and melancholy way we have become a waste land. All the same, we are not often sad. (p.13)

Man is essentially bestial in nature. When man is given a little authority, he wants to exercise his dominance over others. Man delights in tormenting the other. In *All Quiet on the Western Front* human personas are chewed up by a mechanistic force and are only thought as able bodies. During a temporary break in the fighting, both sides get time to repair trenches and recover bodies. In ‘Chapter Four’, that is, in the graveyard scene Remarque gives a detailed description of the devastating war arising from the artillery bombardment:

Our faces are neither paler nor more flushed than usual; they are not tenser, nor flabbier – and yet they are changed. We feel that in our blood a contact has shot home. That is no figure of speech; it is fact. It is the front, the consciousness of the front, that makes this contact. The moment that the first shells whistle over and the air is rent with the explosions there is suddenly in our veins, in our eyes a tense waiting, a heightening alertness, a strange sharpening of the senses. The body with one bound is in full readiness. (p.27)

In the novel Paul is desperately trying to save himself from the deadly artillery onslaught. Paul, the child, is thus asking protection from the mother earth. Earth is now Paul’s ‘only friend, his brother, his mother’ (28). Remarque poignantly sketches the hardship involved in the fighting. As per Remarque, every soldier should try to save his own life, thereby forgetting their patriotic duties towards their homeland.

A True International

Remarque is considered to be a German writer who is truly international. “Remarque is a genuinely international figure, while remaining a German writer, interpreting German and European problems for a world audience” (6), declares Brian Murdoch in *The Novels of Erich Maria Remarque*. The well-known novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* becomes a yardstick against which other war novels are measured for a long time. Remarque left Germany after Hitler had come to

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Pintu Karak, Ph.D. Research Scholar

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power. Like *Der Weg Zurück* which is translated in English as *The Road Back*, Remarque's *In Westen nichts Neues* showcases the harsh reality of life and death during and after the First World War. He was condemned by the Nazis for 'betraying the front-line soldier' and his novel was burnt in public in 1933. It is the devastating war that has shattered, battered and tattered every good aspect in Paul. The soldiers are terribly afraid of the harrowing experience of war and unhygienic condition of life at the front. They have lost the opportunity to love the world. They opine that they are disconnected from pursuing their goals in their lives until the war ends. It is significant to note that despite difficulties, Paul and his companions develop cordial relationship among themselves. They become associated with a happy family in spite of the contemptible behaviour of Himmelstoss. They discuss what they would like to do if the war ends suddenly. Paul's companion in the battlefield Detering retorts that he would like to go back to his farm work. The soldiers of Paul's group calculate that there are only twelve men left out of the twenty from their class after joining the army. Seven are dead, four are wounded and one becomes mad.

"No one would want to claim for the novel a place in the ranks of first-class literature" (quoted in Murdoch, 46), declares Alan Bance. Throughout the novel the individual private soldier Paul Baumer sees himself as part of a group. The novel is told in first person plural. Some critics opine that the presentation of the war by a single individual cannot depict a vivid picture of the war. The fictional time of the novel begins in 1917. In the novel Baumer and the other soldiers are hopeless, helpless and hapless. Brain Murdoch reiterates:

The comradeship in *Im Westen nichts Neues* is born of mutual help in battle...Baumer comments that none of them is young, even if they are only nineteen or twenty. Their youth has been taken away from them, and they feel that they are – this is a common literary motif with other writers, too – a betrayed, a lost generation. (p.53)

Baumer tells one of his friends that 'the war has ruined us for everything' (p.67), that 'We're no longer young men. We've lost any desire to conquer the world. We are refugees...we believe in the war' (p.67). The novel actually started with the reference to the survival of eighty soldiers among 150 men, but the sixth chapter ends with the return of only thirty-two soldiers. The soldiers only believe in chance and they have lost their rationality:

We have lost all feeling for one another. We can hardly control ourselves when our glance lights on the form of some other man. We are insensible, dead men, who through some trick, some dreadful magic, are still able to run and to kill. (p.53)

The soldiers have turned into dangerous animals. They are not fighting; they are as if defending themselves from annihilation. They are not throwing their grenades against human beings. It is ironical that the war mongers remain aloof from the bloody effect of the front-line war. Baumer stabs a French soldier named Gerard Duval. The French soldier's consequent death brings a shocking realization in Baumer who repents for whatever he has done.

To Conclude

Thus, in *All Quiet on the Western Front* Remarque gives an in-depth analysis of the grim reality of trench warfare, the unmitigated horror that the war actually unfurls. Although Remarque's great novel is written in the German language, it is often thought to be a part of the canon of British literature. In the novel Paul is Remarque's mouthpiece. Paul represents the fragmented selves of the soldiers. The novel buttresses the fact that the sufferings of the soldiers are indeed intolerable. The soldiers are representatives of 'a lost generation' – a term coined by Gertrude Stein. There lies a huge

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Pintu Karak, Ph.D. Research Scholar

The Voices of a Lost Generation: The Gap between Promise and Fulfilment in Remarque's *Im Westennichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*)

gap between promise and fulfilment, aspiration and achievement. The novel portrays the conflict between the horror of war and the intensity of soldiers' friendship. The mutual bond among the soldiers in trench warfare is the only romanticised aspect in Remarque's otherwise unromantic novel.

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