

WAR: THE END OF YOUTH

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(1) In the novel All Quiet on the Western Front, Remarque presents a view of youth which is quite different from society's traditional ideas. The term "youth" conjures up images of vigorous, smiling adolescents. In the public eye, even the young men who go to war are happy and energetic--proud to fight and die for their country. Remarque, however, paints a much bleaker picture. The term "youth" in All Quiet can be interpreted only in the strictest sense of a person's age. War sweeps away the innocence and exuberance associated with youth. Fighting kills the spirit of youth and forces adolescents to behave like beaten old men. The energy is drained from their bodies and replaced by bitterness and stark realism. Young men question ideals basic to their societies and no longer blindly accept traditional reasons for fighting a war. As Paul Bäumer, the young narrator of All Quiet, explains, the freshness and naiveté of youth cannot be applied to soldiers. Regardless of the soldiers' ages, war scratches out of their lives all youthfulness.

(2) Traditionally the term "youth" is associated closely with authority. The young are educated by their elders and are expected to accept and respect their teachings. This aspect of youth, however, quickly dissolves during war. Paul becomes disillusioned with his father and Kantorek, his schoolmaster, the two main authority figures during his civilian life, because of their foolishly, stereotypical beliefs about war. They speak of situations they have not experienced and beliefs they cannot support. Paul realizes how, without thinking for themselves, youth adopt the beliefs of those in

authority. "The idea of authority, which they represented, was associated in our minds with a greater insight and more humane wisdom The first bombardment showed us our mistake, and under it the world as they had taught it to us broke into pieces" (pp. 16-17). The war ends Paul's youth abruptly and thus ends his dependence on his elders' advice. He realizes that he will make decisions for himself without an authority figure to directly influence him. His youthful acceptance becomes a thing of the past.

(3) The exuberance of youth is also crushed under the strain of battle. The young men who go to war proud and willing to defend their country soon realize the futility of fighting over plots of earth. At one point, Paul says he never would have believed so many men could be killed over 100 meters of land. The intense patriotism young people exhibit when entering battle is quickly smothered after a soldier's first encounter with the countless bodies and the painful suffering. Senseless bloodshed quenches the high spirit of youth, leaving the young soldiers feeling old and defeated: "Iron Youth. Youth! We are none of us more than twenty years old. But young? Youth? That is long ago. We are old folk" (p. 21). The soldiers no longer feel the excitement of youth. They see the world through the unemotional eyes of old men who have lost their drive for life to pain and constant compromise. Funneled into killing, the energy characteristic of youth becomes self-destructive.

(4) Finally, the boys who survive to return to society are cheated out of the remainder of their youth. Though they are still young, they cannot relive the years they have missed during combat. When he returns home on leave, Paul realizes that he has traded his youth for survival--a decision which

cannot be revoked.

The backs of the books stand in rows . . .
I implore them with my eyes: Speak to me--take
me up--take me, Life of my Youth--you who are care-
free, beautiful--receive me again--I wait, I wait
. . . . Nothing--nothing--A terrible feeling of
foreignness suddenly rises up in me. I cannot find
my way back, I am shut out though I entreat earnestly
and put forth all my strength. (p. 152)

The young soldiers can never function in their former emotional roles again because they have lost their capacity to hope for the future. The years they have forfeited during the war have slipped away forever, carrying with them the soldiers' optimism for society and its values.

(5) The surviving generation of a war is forced to live in a way radically different from that of the preceeding or following generations. The traditional characteristics of youth are destroyed: innocence, acceptance, and energy are siphoned off and used destructively in battle. As a result the end of youth is cruelly abrupt; young soldiers are robbed of years and experiences they can never recapture. Although they are physically in the prime of their lives, mentally they have been disillusioned and broken--stripped of their youth forever.