

## BEAUTY AND THE BEAST--WAR

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Seminar: Images of War

[Assignment: All Quiet on the Western Front is both emotionally and intellectually provocative. In large part such intensity results from Remarque's interest in challenging our assumptions about important human issues--for instance, love, despair, beauty, duty, death. Choose one of these issues and write an extended definition of it based on the evidence in the novel. In other words, how do characterization, setting, and plot help us to understand the concept of love, despair, etc. with greater depth and precision?]

(1) Most people have thoughts, expressions or actions that help them forget about some unhappy situation, whether it is from the past, present or future. Paul Baumer, the main character in All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque, uses imagery of beauty to help him push aside the war around him. The images of beauty both demonstrate Paul's need for creativity and help him to escape the ugliness of war, but at other times they simply help remind him of the horror of his existence.

(2) Paul Baumer uses images of beauty to camouflage the reality and horror of war. While relaxing on the latrine, Paul and his comrades settle down to play a game of skat. Paul's need to be creative, like he was before the war, surfaces at any moment he is not in combat. He allows his imagination to recognize the beauty around him. Paul says, "These are wonderfully care-free hours. Over us is the blue sky. On the horizon float the bright yellow, sunlit observation balloons, and the many little white clouds of the anti-aircraft shells" (13). Observation balloons are used to find the enemy's location. Consequently, they could drop the bombs strategically to kill the enemy (him). The way that Paul describes the observation balloons and anti-aircraft shells hardly illustrates the threat that they present to his and his comrades' lives.

(3) Shortly afterward, Paul reflects on the day and how he and his friends could have been killed. "It might easily have happened that we should not be sitting here on our boxes to-day; it came damn near to that. And so everything is new and brave, red poppies and good food, cigarettes and summer breeze" (14). It does not take long before his reflection on the fighting is subdued by his want and need to observe the beauty around him.

(4) Paul recognizes beauty again when he spots two butterflies playing in front of his trench. Just before this, Paul's regiment is forced back to the second line. If the soldiers have not died or gone crazy before this, they are forced to harden themselves to the situation.

Their want for self-preservation grows to such an extent that Paul says, "If your own father came over with them you would not hesitate to throw a bomb at him" (103). To escape this madness, Paul looks for deliverance in beauty. He discovers two "brimstone-butterflies, with red spots on their yellow wings" who "settle on the teeth of a skull . . . They have long since accustomed themselves to the war" (115). These butterflies show the soldier that there is still hope for them after the war. They, too, can surpass the horrors of war and live fully. Before this, the soldiers have not witnessed such a closeness between beauty and war. The skull of a victim of war serves as a resting place for war's enemy--peace.

(5) The more often Paul finds comfort in the beauty around him, the longer he can endure the obstacles to come. While Paul is at the front, a bombardment sends many smaller shells into his regiment's path. He says, "It reminds me of flocks of wild geese" (58). Once again, Paul's imagination turns a horrifying situation into something bearable. Also, while watching French rockets go up, Paul again recognizes beauty: "Balls of light rise up high above it, silver and red spheres which explode and rain down in showers of red, white, and green stars" (57). The image of fireworks reveals how Paul's mind and heart have not been snuffed out because of the war.

(6) In the summer of 1918, a few months before the end of the war, Paul says, "The days stand like angels in blue and gold, incomprehensible, above the ring of annihilation" (246). Paul recognizes the angels as his salvation but they are incomprehensible to him. Like royalty, they are out of reach. As much as Paul wants salvation from war, he is unable to experience it fully. Although Paul cannot understand hope when destruction is all about, he still has the capacity to recognize beauty.

(7) As the end of the war draws closer, "wild, tormenting rumours of an armistice and peace are in the air, they lay hold on our hearts and make the return to the front harder than ever" (247). Thus, Paul feels that his generation is lost; they know that they cannot ever have true peace again: "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" (225). Although Paul is approaching physical and mental death, there is still hope for him because his creative spirit continues to live whether he wants it to or not.

(8) The role of beauty is not something to be taken for granted by the average soldier. Beauty defies the blood, sorrow, hurt, and killing that war creates. Through beauty, the soldier can forget his deepest fears for the time being and reflect on all that is good. As long as his imagination and yearning for creativity are still alive, there is hope.