

BLIND DUTY VERSUS MORAL DUTY

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[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, duty, beauty, death. For this assignment, 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 (what people say, do, think), setting (descriptive detail, imagery) and plot help us to understand the concept of love, despair, etc. with greater depth and precision?

Extended definition encompasses the rhetorical techniques of narration, description, analysis, division and classification, and comparison and contrast. Consequently, this assignment calls for you to use whichever of these techniques seem appropriate. As in any writing task, technique is only a means to an end; it cannot be the end--purpose--of your essay. In planning and writing this paper, then, you need to create a situation in which full explanation (extended definition) is necessary and useful.

In formulating your thesis, you might ask yourself this question: how does the experience represented in *All Quiet* provide special insight on the concept that could help people in or out of a war situation to understand the concept properly?]

Patriots often say that they will die for their country. They say it is their duty to defend their country's interests, at any price, even the price of their own life. People may say and feel this, but are they being true to themselves? What does it mean when they say it is their duty? Duty is defined as a course of action that is required of one by position. One's duty could be to uphold a social custom, to honor a moral obligation, or to perform an assigned task. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque narrows this broad definition of duty down to two important points of human life: blind duty to one's country from social obligation, and duty to fellow men from moral obligation. Through the actions of Paul Baumer and his comrades, duty to one's fellow men is shown to have greater value than duty to one's country.

Admittedly, a strong feeling of social obligation enticed many men to enlist in World War I. This feeling can be so strong that one dares not stray from the actions of the crowd for fear of being ridiculed. As Baumer says, ". . . he did allow himself to be persuaded, otherwise he would have been ostracized" (11). People thought that it was their duty to fight for their country; even parents were willing to send their children off to war. "But no one could very well stand out, because at that time even one's parents were ready with the word 'coward'" (11). Baumer recognizes this feeling of duty is strictly from a feeling of obligation, totally blind. In other words, "No one had the vaguest idea what we were in for" (11).

Paul Baumer enlists for the love of his country. He feels that he is obligated to fight for his country, and if need be, die for it. Baumer states, however, that "While they taught us that duty to one's country is the greatest thing, we already knew that death-throes are stronger" (13). At first, he feels tremendous pride in his country, and feels that he would do anything for it:

We loved our country as much as they; we went courageously into every action; but we also distinguished the false from the true, we had suddenly learned to see. And we saw that there was nothing of their world left. We were all at once terribly alone; and alone we must see it through (13).

At this point, Baumer realizes that his sense of duty is blind, and without true definition. He has no clear goals defined when he enters the war. He does not know exactly why he has entered the war, but his strong sense of duty propels him through the war.

Later in the war, Baumer and some of his comrades still do not know why they are fighting. "Then what exactly is the war for?" asks Tjaden" (205). They have entered the war out of pride and sense of duty alone. Baumer tries to rationalize "the years at the Front behind us: —against whom, against whom?" (140) They will never get any personal gratification out of the war. In fact, after fighting for a while they realize what they first expected from the war was not realistic. "We didn't want the war, the others say the same thing—and yet half the world is in it all the same" (206). After they realize what they got themselves into, they discover that their blind sense of duty betrayed them. At first they felt that their country needed them to fight. Now, they feel that their country does not need them at all; they feel that the war has no cause. Tjaden says privately to his comrades, "It isn't any use to the Kaiser either. He has everything he can want already" (205).

Not only does the war teach Baumer and his comrades about their sense of social duty, and how misleading it can be. It also teaches them about duty to each other. All feelings of individual glory are put aside; they are all in it together, and they must help each other to survive. Baumer tries to help one of his comrades dragging behind by telling him, "Up, Alber, if once you lie down you'll never get any farther. Quick, I'll hold you up" (241). Furthermore, when the new recruits come to the front line, they are not prepared to fight; they are scared, and they desperately need first-hand training:

We sharpen their ears to the malicious, hardly audible buzz of the smaller shells that are not easily distinguishable. . . . We show them how to take cover from aircraft, how to simulate a dead man when one is overrun in an attack. (133)

These sorts of skills are not taught at training camp; they are taught on the front line. Each experienced soldier takes it upon himself to teach the new soldiers these skills necessary for survival.

Likewise, this sense of duty to each other helps bring soldiers closer, and even helps very uncommon people become close. Katerzinsky, an older man, befriends Baumer, and they will do anything for each other. Baumer is "eager to help him" when Katerzinsky is wounded (289). Baumer even goes so far as to say that he loves Katerzinsky.

In this anti-war novel, Remarque shows that he values duty to others much more than duty to one's country. In fact, Remarque places no value on duty to one's country because it is very destructive. Baumer agonizes, "This is the first time I have killed with my hands, whom I can see at close hand, whose death is my doing" (221). When Baumer enlisted in the war, his feeling for the war was very nationalistic. After he starts fighting and kills a man, the war is brought down to a personal level, and Baumer is unable to deal with this. "Those are dangerous moments. They show us that the adjustment is only artificial, that it is not simple rest, but the sharpest struggle for the rest" (274).

Additionally, the war strips Baumer and his comrades of their youth and innocence. The government transforms them into killing machines for its own imperialistic desires. Baumer realizes, "First we are soldiers and afterwards, in a strange and shame-faced fashion, individual men as well" (272). The war has transformed Baumer so much that he feels he can never be normal again. He feels the war has made him savage, and he can never fit in with society again.

Like tradesman we understand distinctions, and like butchers, necessities. . . . We might exist there; but should we really live there? . . . We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men, we are crude and sorrowful and superficial—I believe we are lost. (123)

Remarque shows two very distinct definitions of duty: blind duty to one's country and duty to others. He shows some signs for hope during the war in the strong value people place on duty towards each other. Each soldier helps others as much as possible and as often as possible. Many of Baumer's comrades would have died if they were not looking out for each other. Blind duty to one's country is shown to be very misleading and destructive. Soldiers are swept away in this powerful feeling, and believe that they are able to lay their lives on the line for their country. This feeling is empty and changes once they are actually on the front. In a traumatic time, personal duty will always prevail over social duty.