Separation on and after the Western Front

by Hilary E. Brentin

Assignment Description: Develop a paper on a theme in All Quiet on the Western Front.

Of the many possible themes that one can find in Erich Maria Remarque’s 1929 novel All Quiet on the Western Front, one that emerges early and remains strong throughout is that of separation. There are six major distinctions of separation in the novel: between soldiers and authority; soldiers and civilians; young and old men; enemies; soldiers and their futures; and between soldiers and themselves. The type of separation that one would expect to be the strongest—between enemy soldiers—is in fact the category of least antagonism. This essay follows the theme of separation through the novel, with emphasis on separation of self.

Paul Bäumer, the narrator, is eighteen years old at the start of the war. The conflict with authority is first mentioned regarding his recruitment. Paul’s school teacher, Kantorek, fills his students’ heads with romantic visions of the glory of war (9). Men like Kantorek, with no idea of what war is like, nonetheless promote the unrealistic romance of battle and lead unsuspecting boys to death. These authority figures had the trust of young men, who believed they were wise. This belief is “shattered” when the boys enter the war; Paul’s conclusion is that the older generation is not to be trusted, for the older men had built a world view that crumbles with the “first death” the young soldiers witness (11).

Doctors are also authority figures that are not to be trusted. When Paul’s friend Kemmerich, who has had a leg cut off, is dying in an army hospital, he pleads with a nearby doctor to help. The doctor replies heartlessly, “How should I know anything about it, I’ve amputated five legs to-day” (31), and surgeons amputate “at the slightest provocation” (244). Paul refuses chloroform when he is wounded for fear his limb will be removed, and the attending doctor intentionally worsens the wound to test Paul’s self control (245). Additionally, doctors use the war as a cover to perform experiments on soldiers with no fear of reprisal; soldiers at the hospital where Paul stays are bullied into submitting to surgery for flat feet and emerge from the operating room crippled for life (262).

The most vivid example of separation from authority is represented by Paul’s superior officer during training, Corporal Himmelstoss. He is a prime example of the brutality of military authority towards the troops, which causes separation among ranks. Himmelstoss singles out Paul and three

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1Erich Maria Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929).
of his friends for persecution. Among his punishments: Paul has to make the corporal’s bed fourteen times in a row, clean the mess hall with a toothbrush, clear snow with a hand broom and dustpan, and stand at attention in the bitter cold (22-3). Himmelstoss humiliates and works Paul and his friends to exhaustion; this is made even more unfair by the fact that he has not yet been to the front. The army gives men like Himmelstoss—who had been insignificant in civilian life—a sudden opportunity for power, which they wield ruthlessly (43). Despite this inhumane treatment, Paul recognizes that without it, he would not have survived so long at the front, and that it brings him closer to his fellow soldiers (25-26).

Older soldiers, however, are also separate from the young ones who do not have families of their own. These married soldiers with children, so Paul believes, have some semblance of stability and normalcy to cling to while away from home, and have a better chance of reintegrating once the war is over. The war is only an “interruption.” Paul, a young, unattached soldier, is unable to “think beyond” the war, as there is no continuity for him (19).

On the front lines, the soldiers become “wild beasts,” filled with irrational hatred towards the enemy. The desire to live separates German soldiers from French, English, and Russians (113). It is this self-preservation instinct that causes Paul to kill a French soldier at the front lines (219). After calming down, Paul tries to save the man, but it is hopeless. It takes the man a long time to die; as the man suffers and finally expires, Paul realizes that they are in the same situation, and repeatedly calls him “Comrade” (223-7). He discovers photographs of the Frenchman’s family, correspondence, and name—Gérard Duval—as guilt steadily consumes him (228-9). Only when Paul thinks of his own survival again, as night approaches, does the guilt fade (229). When he returns to his friends, they comfort him by saying it could not be helped, and killing is what he is supposed to do (231-2).

Nonetheless, this experience opens Paul to the idea that all soldiers are in the same situation and their differences are trivial compared to their shared daily experience of fear and boredom in the trenches. While he guards Russian prisoners of war, he concludes that an enemy soldier is more of a friend than a superior officer (196). Only “a word of command” makes these men Paul’s enemy, and could as easily make them allies (195). This separation between German, French, English, and Russian soldiers is only a façade.

Examples of separation between soldiers and civilians occur multiple times while Paul is home on leave. He finds that he has to downplay the horrors of war to fit in with his family and neighbors. People ask him questions about the front to confirm their own ideas about war, and do not want to hear the answers Paul would give, if he could put his feelings into words (167). His mother, the only one who does not ask questions, is dying of cancer and he doesn’t want to worry her (163, 166); his father wants him to wear his uniform around town (166); old men in a bar dismiss Paul’s opinion about military strategy by saying Paul “know[s] nothing about it” (169). Despite Paul’s frustration with the inability of civilians to listen and comprehend him, he himself perpetuates the sanitized view of war by not telling the truth about what he has seen, especially when he visits
Kemmerich’s mother. She wants to know if her slain son died in pain, but Paul cannot bring himself to tell her that her son lost a leg and indeed died an agonizing death (182-3).

Not only is he unable to connect with anyone other than fellow soldiers, peace time is meaningless for Paul now. He cannot help but come to the conclusion that he is forever separated from the future he would have had without the war. Though he would like to be normal and forget the war, he cannot, and thus civilian life is “so narrow;” he cannot understand how trivialities like school and work “can fill a man’s life, he ought to smash it to bits” (171). When Paul thinks of peace time, he “doesn’t see anything at all” (87); the war has caused him and his generation to become a “wasteland.” (19)

Above all, Paul experiences separation from himself – that is, the person he used to be before joining the military. He mentions feelings of self-alienation throughout the novel, but it is when he enters his old room while on leave that this is most apparent. Paul’s pre-war self is “preserved” by the room, which is filled with books that he expects to temper the effects of the war and bring back his old self (172-3). They do not; he waits to feel differently, but the books are only “words, words, words” and do not speak to him anymore. His only source of identity, which he “cling[s]” to, is his identity as a soldier (174-5).

During his military training, Paul is made “hard, pitiless, vicious, [and] tough” (25). When he and his friends blindfold and beat Himmelstoss, the transformation is complete; though they rebel against an authority figure, they use his methods to do so (48). As soldiers, young men relinquish their individuality for the state (21) and purge themselves of emotions that do not belong in battle (139-40). They become like animals at the front, acting on instinct, for that is all that can prevent death (140).

Paul, speaking for all young soldiers in World War I, experiences separation from authority, civilians, the older generation of men, his future, and himself. The only separation he does not feel is that between enemies; his exposure to enemy soldiers proves to him that they share more than he ever will with a non-soldier. Paul believes he will never be able to heal these fractures that were caused by the Great War; the person he became to survive the war is out of place in peace time. In this way, the most important type of separation Paul and his young peers feel is from themselves.

Works Cited