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All Quiet on the Civilian Front

In the book All Quiet on the Western Front Erich Maria Remarque stresses the effects of war on the soldiers fighting in it. The character that is most obviously impacted by the war is Paul, a soldier of nineteen and also the book's narrator. Paul can no longer return to society and civilian life after fighting in the war because he feels all his knowledge is useless in the context of war, it is impossible for him to connect with his childhood, and he feels he has no place in a society not based on war.

Paul believes that all of what he had considered "important knowledge" is useless when applied to war. Paul expresses the futility of ordinary thought and reasoning in the following passage describing the mind of a soldier at war, explaining, "By the animal instinct that is awakened in us we are led and protected. It is not conscious; it is far quicker, much more sure, less fallible than consciousness" (56). Paul speaks of an "animal instinct" that takes over the brain, causing all logic and reason to dissolve. In this frame of mind, or lack of one, Paul can clearly see the fallibility of logical thought. Paul learns from this experience to distrust all the formal learning of his lifetime, as he feels that only this "animal instinct" can truly protect a man. This manner of thinking makes it seem useless to return to a society based on logic and reason, which Paul feels he can no longer trust. Paul's feelings towards traditional knowledge can be better understood if we examine Paul's thoughts concerning his ex-teacher turned soldier, Kantorek. While on leave, Paul observes Kantorek performing military drills:

Nothing could look more ludicrous than his forage-cap and his uniform. And this is the object whom we used to anguish as he sat up there enthroned at his desk, spearing at us with his pencil for our mistakes in those irregular French verbs with which afterwards we made so little headway in France... –and now here stands Territorial Kantorek; the spell is quite broken, with bent knees, arms like pothooks, unpolished buttons and that ludicrous rig-out – an impossible soldier (176).

Paul states twice that nothing could be as "ludicrous" as Kantorek trying to become a soldier. To Paul, Kantorek, as a teacher, is a symbol of traditional learning. So truly, what Paul finds so ridiculous is general societies version of knowledge being applied to war. This point is further brought across when Paul mentions, "irregular verbs with which afterwards we made so little headway in France." Again, we see the uselessness of "school knowledge" during a war. It is also worth noting that Paul describes Kantorek as being "enthroned." Paul feels in a sense betrayed by the people he used to respect. It is as if everything he has been taught is completely abstract and inapplicable to the situations that Paul must face. He does not understand how a society can be based on and teach things, which to Paul seem useless. Everything that ordinary civilian society is based on is meaningless to Paul. For this reason, Paul finds it impossible to enter into a civilian society.

During Paul's childhood he was part of the society that he now rejects. However, the war has made it impossible for Paul to connect with his childhood. This is first made clear when Paul is home on leave and examines his childhood book collection:

Then I take one of the books, intending to read, and turn over the leaves. But I put it away and take out another. There are passages in it that have been marked. I look, turn over the pages, take up fresh books... I stand there dumb. As before a judge. Dejected. Words, Words, Words—they do not reach me. Slowly I place the books back on the shelf. Nevermore (173).

From the initial reading of this passage, it may seem that it does nothing more than to illustrate Paul's disinterest in traditional learning. However, the primary task of this quote is to show Paul's problems in reconnecting with his childhood and rejoining society. We can clearly see that Paul would like to understand his childhood as he makes an effort to look through each book and even goes so far as to examine the passages that he underlined as a child. Eventually Paul gives up stating, "I stand there dumb. As before a judge." Paul realizes he can not understand his childhood interests, and thus he knows it is impossible for him to understand his childhood. He feels "judged" in the sense that he has judged his ability to understand and return to the society of his childhood, and realizes that these are now impossible tasks for him. We see an echo of the "enthroned" educator, in the way that the word, "Words" is capitalized in this passage. This shows the respect Paul once had for words and for his childhood society, which the war has taken away from him. Paul examines his childhood and provides the reader with a clear relationship between the war and his inability to connect with his childhood in the following passage taken from the end of the book:

...when I stand once again beneath the poplars and listen to the rustling of their leaves. It can not be that it has gone, the yearning that made our blood unquiet, the unknown, the perplexing, the oncoming things, the thousand faces of the future, the melodies from dreams and from books, the whispers and divinations of women; it cannot be that this has vanished in bombardment, in despair, in brothels (294-5).

Paul makes this statement while overcoming gas inhalation in a field hospital. When he speaks of the poplars he is referring to a grove of trees that has become symbolic of his childhood. This quote, when taken as a statement, would be contrary to my thesis. In truth, this quote is a question that Paul poses to himself; the question of whether or not Paul can connect with his childhood. Paul speaks of the "unknown" and "perplexing" parts of life. Previously, it was proven that Paul believes that all that society is built upon is false and inconsequential. Therefore, Paul can find nothing "perplexing" as all that is "unknown" to him he deems useless and uninteresting. Paul wonders if he is still able to know true love. He answers this question for himself when he brings up the brothels where "love" is trivialized. This is all Paul knows of love and it is impossible for him to experience an emotion that he can only understand a cheap imitation of. Due

to the war, we see that not only does Paul distrust society, he also finds it impossible to connect with the earlier time when he was a part of civilian society.

Even if Paul could bring himself to return to society, he feels that once he did he would not be understood and would not have a place in civilian life. Paul very overtly states his fear of not being understood as the book draws to a close:

And men will not understand us—for the generation that grew up before us...had a home and a calling;...and the generation that grew up after us will be strange to us and push us aside. We will be superfluous even to ourselves...the years will pass by and in the end we shall fall into ruin (294).

Paul is expressing the feeling of anxiety and bewilderment that comes with being the lost generation in a war. He realizes that the older soldiers have “had a home and a calling” with which they can connect. Unlike the elder generation, Paul has no foundation in society, as he cannot connect with his childhood. Paul states that his generation will become “superfluous.” The only purpose in life that Paul has known is that of being a soldier. Having a civilian role seems ludicrous to him, because he feels that the only role he can fill is that of being a soldier. Since Paul does not agree with the foundations of the society, it would be impossible for him to have a civilian role within it. We see the final admission by Paul that he can’t function in society in the last paragraph of the book when Paul states, “Let the months and years come, they can take nothing more. I am so alone and so without hope that I can confront them without fear” (295). When Paul says how “alone” he is it is unequivocally made known to the reader that Paul feels completely ostracized from society. He has given up even the hope that he will be understood or have a civilian role in society. Paul makes the bold assertion that he can confront the rest of his days “without fear.” However, this comes only at the price of spending the rest of his life outside of society. Paul finds that without faith in society, or an ability to find a connection to it, he can not be understood or function in a civilian role.

After closely examining the book, it is obvious that Paul can not return to society. Unfortunately, the war has skewed Paul’s views to the point where what we would term “normal society” seems abstract and pointless to Paul. He believes that everything that is taught and believed by society has no purpose in the world because it has no purpose in his world. He is now so far disconnected from his childhood, it is impossible for Paul to understand how he ever functioned in society. Because Paul feels society is purposeless, he can not find a role in society for himself that would be purposeful. The war caused Paul to view life as an abstract phenomenon, rather than what it is; freedom to live. Paul finds it impossible to reenter society and lead a civilian life, and without a decrease in the number of wars, the same fate will befall many others.