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Romanticized Brutality and the Misconceptions of War

All Quiet on the Western Front is a war novel written by Erich Maria Remarque and published in the year 1928. One clear theme which makes many appearances throughout the book is struggling to understand and experience the differences between the romanticism of war and what many see and hear about as children, and the brutal actuality of the incomprehensible pain and violence that is brought on by the terrifying realities of what armed combat really is. This situation of being shown one image as a child and experiencing something totally opposite when thrown into the real thing is most definitely the situation with the members of the “Iron Youth,” who were, at first, almost completely naive to what they were about to see, about to be a part of, and everything that they were going to lose. No one can truly understand the vicious realities of war, or differentiate well between the romanticism and the reality, until they have experienced being in the trenches and fighting themselves, clearly proven by the young men in Remarque’s outstanding novel, All Quiet on the Western Front.

In the book, Kantorek calls the young soldiers the “Iron Youth.” This name is strikingly ironic because there really is nothing “iron” about the men. They are barely adults, they bleed, they cry, they fall, they die. They are basically children, and when Kantorek first calls them the “iron youth,” they have experienced nothing of war. Even Paul, while watching Kemmerich die, reflects upon how childlike and naive to the cruelty of battle they truly were when they first went

to war; he says, "I glance at my boots. They are big and clumsy, the breeches are tucked into them, and standing up one looks well-built and powerful in these great drainpipes. But when we go bathing and strip, suddenly we have slender legs again and slight shoulders. We are no longer soldiers but little more than boys; no one would believe that we could carry packs. It is a strange moment when we stand naked; then we become civilians, and almost feel ourselves to be so."

(29) In this quote, Paul expresses how their adult appearance is an act, that they are quite unprepared for war, that at the end of the day, they are still nervous kids who know very little, like many children who are falsely educated about the terrors of armed conflict in the real world.

The soldiers are hardly well-prepared for the horror that they experience in the trenches. They really know only the fairytale fallacy that has been shown to their naive, innocent, childlike minds. They are, in certain ways, like any other young kid who is educated about how heroic the soldiers who go off to fight for their nations are, how wonderful it is for their proud friends and families when they return home, and how great it must be to be paraded around and celebrated like a soldier is. Early in the novel, Paul expresses how the soldiers were in awe of the smallest things that were a downgrade from their expectations, such as the latrine. When talking about their earliest days as recruits and how things have changed since then, he says, "I well remember how embarrassed we were as recruits in barracks when we had to use the general latrine. There were no doors and twenty men sat side by side as in a railway carriage, so that they could be reviewed all at one glance, for soldiers must always be under supervision. Since then we have learned better than to be shy about such trifling immodesties. In time things far worse than that came easy to us." (7) In this quote, Remarque quite possibly makes the reader feel disgusted and uncomfortable, giving the reader room to wonder about how much worse it got for the soldiers as

time went on, and feeling even possibly sad at the thought that something so private as using the restroom in front of so many other people, including people who were there specifically to watch them, would eventually become mild and nonchalant to the men, but, as Paul stated, time did go on, and things did get much worse.

Over the course of the novel, the ways that the men act and speak changes significantly. While they do become more accustomed to the loss of their men and their innocence and do not act quite so shocked at every individual event that presents itself throughout the horror story of World War I on the Front, they also become more serious about what they are there to do, and realize more and more how easily their lives could be taken from them at any given moment. The soldiers are so young, and losing such purity and life at such a young age is an absolute tragedy. Paul speaks of how tragic it is towards the end of the book; he states, "I am young, I am twenty years old; yet I know nothing of life but despair, death, fear, and fatuous superficiality cast over an abyss of sorrow." (263) Many say that life starts when one reaches adulthood and begins to make their own decisions with much less if any help at all. From the moment these men were pushed into adulthood, they went to war, making some of their first years of freedom and living tragic, painful, and scarring, and affecting their hearts and minds for the rest of their lives.

The men could not have predicted how horrendous their experience at the Front and at war would be, it is highly unlikely that anyone could predict such pain and suffering. Although the shock and unpreparedness probably and almost most definitely had a lot to do with what the soldiers were shown and taught as children and even as teenagers and young men about the romanticized versions of the brutality that is armed battle to such a large extent, it is impossible to know if educating them about the reality of it all would have made the complete difference. It

likely would have prepared them more so than what they were given, but whether it would have completely removed all of the shock and terror of the bloody experience is doubtful. The tragedy of war in the eyes of soldiers is something that one who has not experienced it themselves can only imagine, especially if all they were shown of war were the happy families with soldiers who survived and the pride that soldiers who made it home brought home with them. The reality is forever hidden, until experienced by one in the flesh.