

International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme—Extended Essay

**Criticism Towards Expectations of Masculinity and the Idea of
Patriotism Used in the Great War**

Research Question: How does *All Quiet on the Western Front* reveal the expectations of
Masculinity and Patriotism during the early 20th century?

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Introduction

The novel ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ by Erich Maria Remarque is an account of a 20-year-old soldier, regarding Paul Baumer’s experience during the First World War, written in a first person perspective. Remarque himself also fought in combat during the Great War, in which he was injured five times. As he recovered from his wounds, he was inspired by his wartime experiences, through which he came to the realization of how laughable war is, to produce one of the best known war novels of all time.

The novel discusses the main ideas of masculinity and patriotism throughout. “Repression of emotion was what was expected of men in the trenches” (Popular Experience and Cultural Representation of the Great War, 1914-1918). They are also expected to be tough, muscular and to protect their families at all times, “The emotional blackmail of using children to shame their elders into fighting was, in fact, employed by most of the belligerents.” (David Welch 2014). The fact that Remarque especially focuses on these two ideas is perhaps due to his observations of the public’s expectations for young men during wartime. He acknowledges that the public underestimated the impacts of war on the whole generation of naïve youth, often expecting all male adolescents to be courageous and active in volunteering as soldiers or to always be ready to sacrifice their lives for the fatherland.

Remarque also comments on how patriotism acts as a superficial excuse used by the government to exploit the innocence of young men, who are mislead into fighting this futile war. There is evidence to suggest that he hopes to speak up for all of those who regretted joining the war just for the sake of peer pressure and patriotism, that the novel “will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells,

were destroyed by the war.” Seeing how he describes a young soldier “looked as slight and frail as a child” (Remarque, Page 29), he also criticizes the education system as well as the high military command who used propaganda in deceiving the youth to join the war, exploiting their innocence and to wastefully sacrifice their lives for an unimportant cause.

The author condemns the high military command who show no bravery at all, the people who cower behind desks while tricking the young men to enlist. Remarque exposes how many soldiers have to face an opposite reality when arriving at the front line, emphasizing the importance of how the entire generation is lost due to the high command and the education’s manipulation. Remarque also denounces the idea that “patriotism is unquestioning loyalty to the nation” (The New York Times 2003) as established in the early 20th century, resulting in young men blindly marching to their deaths.

Through depiction of various characters, it is evident that Remarque hopes to dismantle the wartime expectations of masculinity. He does this to ultimately stop these expectations from existing since these expectations exacerbates the amount of casualties. By dispelling such notions, he hopes that no one in the future shall risk their lives for facile reasons.

The Pity of War

Remarque portrays some characters to be strong and capable of meeting the public's expectations of masculinity, while others who do not are characterized as weak and reluctant. Regardless, both end up dying in the end, which not only acts as a criticism to the unrealistic expectations but also serves to undermine the nature of war itself. The author hopes to arouse his readers for sympathy towards the soldiers and to ultimately erase such expectations set for men, to prevent the pointless tragedies presented in this novel from reoccurring.

From the start of the novel, the author introduces Franz Kemmerich, whose death quickly follows. Kemmerich, as a typical German youth, has a small stature and therefore undermines public expectations; he “looked as slight and frail as a child” (Remarque, Page 29) when the public expects soldiers to look muscular and battle-hardened. Remarque comments on the ridiculousness of the public's expectations on what the boys should become, “we became hard, suspicious, pitiless, vicious, tough- and that was good, for these attributes were just what we lacked” (Remarque, Page 26). At a very young age of 20, the German youth are expected to acquire these attributes, which is illogical as they should be studying and enjoying their youth back home. Although it could be argued that these attributes are to make them adaptable at war, Remarque still affirms the idea that sending young men to fight is immoral. The expectations from society are further presented when the boys were told to fight for the Kaiser and Fatherland, and are eventually deceived into risking their lives for nothing. He also comes to the realization as to how similar they are with Kemmerich, “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.” (Remarque, Page 29) This not only suggests a degree of

sympathy towards these innocent boys, but also criticizes the education system in luring them to their deaths by glorifying patriotism and bravery.

Young men were often forced to enlist under societal pressure in-order to be considered a “real man”. A minor character named Josef Behm, who is aged under 20 years old, suffers a tragic fate because of this. He initially refuses to enlist, “but he did allow himself to be persuaded, otherwise he would have been ostracized” (Remarque, Page 11). The fact that he joins the army because of societal pressure reveals the extent of cruelty and oppressiveness of the public’s expectations. This also reflects how innocent youth were being sent to a place where “no one had the vaguest idea what we were in for” (Remarque, Page 11). He enlists into the war and suffers for a long time after being mortally wounded; he dies eventually under enemy fire. Although Behm is a character who appears briefly, he plays a significant role in demonstrating the common tragedy of young men being forced to enlist; it shows how young men are being sent to war due to pressure given by their teachers and parents, as “even one’s parents were ready with the word ‘coward’” (Remarque, Page 11). Remarque conveys how implausible it is that the youth do not have the right to decide on their own fate, and to reflect how lives of millions of soldiers are wasted as they succumb to these ludicrous expectations.

Remarque further conveys the society’s oppressive ideals for men through the least significant characters in the novel. Paul recounts the time when he sees a soldier “has buried his face in his hands, his helmet has fallen off.” (Remarque, Page 61) Details including how the soldier is unwilling to face the brutality of war suggests how unready they are as teenagers to face the pandemonium of war. Paul tries to restore the soldier’s spirit, but the soldier “like a child creeps under my arm, his head close to my breast.” (Remarque, Page 61)

The instinctive response gives the impression that most youth are not prepared to face what they are made to expect from war. The comparison of the soldier with a child comes to show how society's expectations of men's behavior in battle is therefore nonsensical. Apart from feeble characters, some characters in the novel are portrayed to be rather masculine in a way. Remarque characterizes Haie Westhus as being strong and tall, a young adult who acquires the physical attributes of what is considered "masculine" at the time. Despite having a robust physique, he is fatally wounded and "drags off with a great wound in his back through which the lung pulses at every breath" (Remarque, Page 134). This comes to show how such expectations serve no purpose in reality, and even a masculine physique cannot withstand bullets and gunfire, proving that the existence of such expectations are simply pointless and damaging.

The author further exhibits the point that expectations for men during time is simply inconceivable and unrealistic through the squad leader Katczinsky. He is characterized as "cunning, and hard-bitten, forty years of age" (Remarque, Page 3), and his composure during an enemy bombardment proves himself to be a soldier with "a sixth sense" (Remarque, Page 37). This shows how he is fully capable of controlling his emotions even on a battlefield, displaying his toughness and is very fitting as a squad leader and fulfills society's expectation of being a tough man physically and mentally. He remains calm in many situations, "he sits quietly and smokes his pipe -a covered pipe of course." (Remarque, Page 60) The fact that he smokes a covered pipe suggests he is experienced enough to acknowledge the dangers of revealing his position, demonstrating his awareness of his surroundings which fulfills yet another trait of being wise and cautious. When Paul wakes up in an enemy bombardment, Katczinsky tells him "that gave you a fright. It was only a nose-cap, it landed in the bushes over there." (Remarque, Page 60) Katczinsky proves not only to be a 'role model' of a

masculine soldier, but also a reliable companion. Despite acquiring all of the “masculine traits”, he ultimately dies from a stray splinter of shrapnel. The author uses irony through the seemingly indestructible Kaczynski by dying in an accident, indicating the lack of purpose in the expectations, and that all men in the end have the same fate when engaged in war. Characteristics like being tough, cautious and caring are present in Kaczynski, yet his overly idealistic representation is a great example of the unreachable expectations levelled at soldiers.

The author pities the loss of men engaged in war, for their bravery and strength or weakness is wasted in the acts of war. Through the deaths of the characters, it reflects how each character is not valued in the end regardless of the attributes they acquire, and that a tragic outcome is inevitable whenever it comes to war.

Lions led by Donkeys

Apart from the public's expectations of masculinity, the author also puts the high military command and the education system to blame for sending the German youth into the war. Characters like Himmelstoss and Kantorek represent the authoritarian figures, the ones who promote enlisting with the reason of protecting the Fatherland while they themselves stay behind cowering. Remarque criticizes the counterfeit courage of these authoritarian figures, as well as their cruelty towards German youth no matter physically or mentally, symbolizing a major bad influence they have on the German youth.

In Paul's account of events, he receives a letter from their teacher Kantorek which reads "We are the Iron Youth" (Remarque, Page 18). His immediate reaction is anger, along with a complaint of "Yes, that's the way they think, these hundred thousand Kantoreks! Iron Youth! Youth! We are none of us more than twenty years old. But young? Youth? That is long ago. We are old folk." (Remarque, Page 18) His honest exclamation suggests their anger towards being fooled, as well as the immorality of sending them to war, exposing them to the horrors of death and barbarism. The fact that he calls themselves old folk is a complaint to the public's foolishness as well as their own, the public having ridiculous expectations and no sympathy, them believing in being truly patriotic by enlisting.

Patriotism is not only criticized because of it being the main excuse used in propaganda, but Remarque also exposes the excessive, unwarranted power that most officers would get in the military system. Corporal Himmelstoss represents the non-commissioned officers at war who often treat privates poorly during training not only to prepare them for battle but also for his own amusement. The author portrays him to be a man who lusts for

power, “As soon as they get a stripe or a star they become different men, just as though they’d swallowed concrete.” (Remarque, Page 43) The following quote “And if you give a man a little bit of authority, he behaves just the same way, he snaps at it too. The army is based on that; one man must always have power over the other” (Remarque, Page 44) conveys the absurdity of the military system, where everyone of a higher rank abuses the one below in the name of patriotism. They realize that “It’s simply that the company commander’s head has been turned by having so much power. And nobody blames him. On the contrary, he is praised for being strict.” (Remarque, Page 44) It is apparent that Remarque puts focus in this area of discussion, most likely because of his own experience during wartime and how he finds the system ridiculous. He questions the real purpose of the army system and whether or not disobeying one’s superior is actually an act of being a non-patriot. Later on in the novel, Paul understands the reason for the harsh training, “We did not break down, but adapted ourselves; our twenty years, which made man another thing so grievous, helped us in this.” (Remarque, Page 26) Although Himmelstoss is a manifestation of vile authority, his job is to train them into tough soldiers and mold them into fearless combatants who fight for victory. This is exactly what takes away the innocence and youth from the young men, so quickly training them to become what is expected of so-called “masculinity”. The author strongly objects to this idea through Paul’s perspective, “We are not youth any longer” (Remarque, Page 88), the short sentence puts an emphasis on their loss of innocence, which incites sympathy from readers.

Through the characterization of authoritarian figures, the author not only criticizes the military system’s use of deception with patriotism, but also displays how the expectations of masculinity are also present within the military. Although Himmelstoss appears to be terrifying during training that the soldiers “have trembled at the mere sound of his

voice...”(Remarque, Page 24), his actions on the field proves his cowardice that he tries to mask. In one instance Paul “ran at him blindly and gave him a mighty jab in the stomach and knocked him down” (Remarque, Page 24) in a bayonet training session, Himmelstoss reports him to his senior but was laughed at and told to “keep his eyes open” (Remarque, Page 24). The fact that Himmelstoss constantly abuses the young men yet cannot take pain himself proves himself to be a hypocrite; however, not only does Himmelstoss himself expects his inferiors to be tough, but his superiors laugh at his unmanliness when he reports Paul. This just shows how everyone in the community is influenced to expect men to be tough, and to not show signs of weakness. When the group takes revenge on Himmelstoss by giving him a beating, Paul laughs afterwards and comments “Himmelstoss ought to have been pleased; his saying that we should each educate one another had borne fruit for himself. We had become successful students of his method” (Remarque, Page 49), which shows his disapproval for the expectations by using a sarcastic tone.

Himmelstoss’ demanding character is later on contrasted with his own cowardice shown on the battlefield, where he hides in a dugout pretending to be wounded while everyone fights with blood, sweat and tears. His rank as a corporal does not change his level of combat, and rather makes him seem even more petty considering his job was to train young men into tough men. Even though Paul himself is a victim of being expected to be masculine, he also expects Himmelstoss to show courage in combat. “You lump, will you get out – you hound, you skunk, sneak out of it, would you?” (Remarque, Page 132) indicates his frustration towards the corporal’s act of cowardice, showing no pity or understanding even when he is also a soldier himself. As time goes by, the soldiers seem to show pity towards Himmelstoss and both parties reach mutual understanding. Himmelstoss treats the young men

better, showing empathy towards them, hence realizes the absurdity of how men are expected to be emotionally detached.

Kantorek represents the propaganda and education during the time, always glorifying soldiers' bravery and emphasizing the need to protect the German Fatherland, yet has absolutely no military experience. Kantorek is characterized as hypocritical, due to the fact that he encourages the naïve German youth into fighting this meaningless war, hence leading to the deaths of all these young men, yet he fears going to battle. Remarque expresses intense hatred and disappointment towards the education system through Paul's narrative. Paul speaks of how unbelievable it is for teachers to talk about the glory and greatness of war when it appears to be an opposite reality; teachers are supposed to be role models and assert positive information for the young minds. The author points out that the education is the root of all evil and the reason for the loss of young lives, "There were thousands of Kantoreks, all of whom were convinced that there was only one way of doing well, and that way theirs. And that is just why they let us down so badly." (Remarque, Page 12) Kantorek persuades the youth to enlist by praising the idea of patriotism, which is a betrayal towards the dreams of young men who hope to achieve glory, which can never be obtained. Patriotism is generally positive, yet Remarque totally subverts the reader's expectations of the concept. He implies that patriotism is glorified in a way that people think they are protecting their country by enlisting, when in reality they are sacrificing themselves to be a "true patriot". As the group of young men fight for survival, they realize their main goal is to "save ourselves, to save ourselves and to be revenged." (Remarque, Page 113) Their fight is no longer for their country or glory, but for the sake of surviving the battle.

The idea of patriotism is also discussed later on in the novel among the group of soldiers, one of whom raises the question “We are here to protect our fatherland. And the French are over there to protect their fatherland. Now who’s in the right?” (Remarque, Page 203) His criticism towards the authoritarian figures are expressed through the conversations between the group. ““And generals too,” adds Detering, “they become famous through war.” “Even more famous than emperors,” adds Kat. “There are other people back behind there who profit by the war, that’s certain,” growls Detering.” (Remarque, Page 113) The discussion ends in a bitter and distressing tone, questioning the real purpose of war and the real meaning of patriotism. However, not all authoritarian figures are portrayed to be evil and deceptive. An example for this would be Lieutenant Bertinck. Although an auxiliary character who is mentioned very briefly, his character radiates generosity as well as bravery. He is caring towards his own company, for example allowing his men to get extra rations when Ginger the cook tries to reserve the food. He ultimately dies trying to save his company from a flamethrower attack. His courage and bravery fully justifies his masculine character, thus proving that there are still some authoritarian figures who are selfless and brave. His tragic death makes the readers sympathize with him, which serves to remind readers of how war leads to deaths of many honorable and innocent people.

The Kaiser is the ultimate authoritarian figure who is also to be blamed for starting the war, as “every full grown emperor requires at least one war, otherwise he would not become famous” (Remarque, Page 206). His appearance is a disappointment to the soldiers, due to the fact that he seems to lack every aspect of masculinity that is expected from a nation’s leader that these soldiers are fighting for. When Paul has high expectations of the Kaiser, he finds out that not only physically short, but also his voice undemanding and timid, “I imagined him to be bigger and more powerfully built, and above all to have a thundering

voice.” (Remarque, Page 202) This comes to show how masculinity could be reflected by one’s physical appearance, and that most people would associate others with a smaller-looking physical built as less masculine. Remarque’s mediocre descriptions of the Kaiser reflects how it is ridiculous to expect all men to show different forms of masculinity when even a nation’s king appears to be physically weak.

The main purpose of Remarque’s publication is to re-educate future readers of the futility of war, for which his experience has led to the conclusion that it has been no more than a demonstration of power and the need for masculinity, to satisfy the needs of the leaders at the expense of the countless number of human life.

Conclusion

While exploring the research question: How does *All Quiet on the Western Front* reveal the expectations of Masculinity and Patriotism, it is evident that Erich Maria Remarque conveys his distress through the characterization of both the soldiers and the authoritarian figures. His precise characterization of different characters contrasts their behavior, revealing the true human nature and how society's expectations of men are ridiculous and implausible. He criticizes society's ignorance in not realizing the true horrors of war, yet expecting youth to enlist. He expresses frustration often in Paul's narrative, protesting about the greed of authoritarian figures for fame and power, willingly sacrificing the lives of millions of men. He also condemns the "Kantoreks" during wartime, having no military experience but still deceiving the innocent youth into joining the meaningless war. He expresses pity and grief by saying how the youth are told that enlisting into the war guarantees glory, and that enlisting shows a person's courage and bravery as well as one's patriotism. Remarque dismantles the expectations of masculinity and the use of patriotism through how all characters end up dying in the war whether or not they fulfill societal expectations of being tough and strong, and serve to undermine the nature of war itself.

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