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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Erich Maria Remarque's

All Quiet on the Western Front

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Eva Richardson



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General Introduction to the Work

About the Novel

ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT is a novel detailing the experiences of a young German, Paul Bäumer, and his fellow soldiers on the German Western Front during World War I. Remarque's novel vividly describes the horror of life on the front line and the psychological impact a war has on a generation of young men. The novel contains elements of the *Bildungsroman* and elaborates on a number of themes.

New Historicism Applied to *All Quiet on the Western Front*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.

Activity One

Examining Life on the Western Front

1. Copy the handout: Life on the Western Front Fact Sheet.
2. Divide the class into small groups.
3. Have the students write a one to two page sheet of inferences about what life must have been like on the Western Front based ONLY on the novel itself and without referencing outside sources. In their reports, they should answer the following questions:
 - What was the layout of the front? What were its various parts?
 - How did the soldiers occupy their time when not engaged in battle?
 - What were some of the problems the soldiers faced that were not directly connected with the battle?
4. Distribute the handout: Life on the Western Front Fact Sheet.
5. Have the students compare their notes from the novel to the fact sheet. Then, have them answer the following questions:
 - What, if any, are some of the key differences between how Remarque depicts daily life on the Western Front and the accepted historical account?
 - Based upon the similarities and differences that you note, what may have been Remarque's intent in displaying events as he did?
 - What were some of the elements of life on the Western Front that Remarque emphasizes? Why might they be significant?
 - What might have been Remarque's overall intent for the novel?
6. Reconvene the class and have the groups discuss their answers.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *All Quiet on the Western Front*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining Guilt and Responsibility in the Novel

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Guilt and Responsibility Questions.
2. Divide the class into four groups or a number of groups divisible by four.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following sections to review:
 - **Chapter Six:** Starting with “The moment we are about to retreat...” to “...before we clear out.”
 - **Chapter Eight:** Starting with “It is strange to see these enemies of ours so close up...” to “...behind them are rooms full of peace.”
 - **Chapter Nine (A):** Starting with “Already it has become somewhat lighter...” to “Now we must wait, wait.”
 - **Chapter Nine (B):** Starting with “These hours...The gurgling starts again...” to “I must be a printer, I think confusedly...”
4. Have each group perform a close reading of the passage, noting all references to guilt and regret.
5. Next, have each group answer the questions on the worksheet pertaining to their section.
6. Reconvene the class and divide it into new groups. Each group should consist of at least one student from each of the previous ones. Have each student share their previous group’s findings.
7. Have the new group answer the “Cumulative Reading” questions together.
8. Reconvene the class and have the groups present their answers.

Marxist Approach Applied to *All Quiet on the Western Front*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea was called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of society) would be placed in the hands of the masses who actually operated production, not in the hands those few who owned it. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theories by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, ideologies



Activity One

Examining Class Conflict in Wartime

1. Divide the class into four groups or a number of groups divisible by four.
2. Assign each group one of the following sections of the novel:
 - **Chapter One:** starting with “Kantorek had been our schoolmaster...” to “...and alone we must see it through.”
 - **Chapter Two:** starting with “By threes and fours our class was scattered...” to “...the finest thing that arose out of the war—comradeship.”
 - **Chapter Three:** starting with “That was our corporal’s favorite game...” to “He’s coming to the front!”
 - **Chapter Nine:** starting with “There’s a great deal of polishing being done...” to “The good ones were merely for the inspection.”
3. Have each group answer these questions about their section:
 - In your passage, who represents the powerful and who represents the powerless?
 - What is the conflict in this passage?
 - What techniques or mechanisms do the powerful use to oppress the powerless?
 - How are both the powerful and the powerless depicted? Does the narrator appear to champion one side of the conflict? How do you know?
4. Reconvene the class and have each group share its responses. Then, as an entire class, have your students answer and discuss the following questions:
 - How are the conflicts in the passages similar? How are they different?
 - How do the powerless react to their conflict with the powerful? Do they seek support in others with similar circumstances, or do they alienate themselves? Do they passively accept their situation or fight against it?
 - How do the conflicts represent the greater, underlying class conflict?