

How do the authors present the theme of futility of war in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Testament of Youth*?

World War One is well-known for the horrific amount of men who died in it, many of whom did not fully believe in or understand the causes they fought for. War literature presents the modern reader with peoples' experiences from the period. Their views are integral in shaping our own opinions on war. Although war literature often differs in its composition, many themes are concurrent throughout the genre. *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Remarque and *Testament of Youth* by Vera Brittain, both portray the theme of futility of war. They are both drastically different in their portrayal, one an account from a German soldier and the other, an autobiography by a British woman; the ideas that they present on how war is futile presents a human wide consciousness of its futility and begs the readers to question the human nature of declaring and fighting war.

The First World War was dubbed '*the war to end all wars*' but it did not end all wars as the name might suggest, rather it simply set the pattern for new and even more mechanised killing. Remarque thoroughly explores the impersonality of killing and the idea of a mechanised war in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. One way in which he presents this idea is through a very matter of fact approach to fighting and injury such as: '*Kat and Kropp even make another sortie during the afternoon. In the process Kropp gets an earlobe shot off*'. Vera Brittain also uses a matter of fact approach in her writing rather than romanticising the injuries she witnessed. It is likely that Remarque's own experiences in the war heavily contributed to this novel; several of his other novels also dealt with the atrocities of the war and its aftermath. Injured by British shell-splinters at Passchendaele, Remarque witnessed first hand the brutality of war and hence this is a key theme throughout the novel. By presenting how brutal war was, he helps to destroy the false façade of the glory and honour of war and in a sense demonises the way in which it destroys the livelihoods of soldiers on the front and civilians back home. As a result, after the Nazis came to power, *All Quiet on the Western Front* was subject to their book burning.

Vera Brittain also destroys the false façade of the glory and honour of war after she learns of the death of her fiancé Roland. The loss of honour and glory is symbolised by Roland's returned kit. Notably, his badge, which would represent his honour and that of the army, was '*thickly coated in mud. He must have fallen on top of it, or perhaps one of the people who*

fetched him in trampled on it.' This suggests that the honour that the badge represents has been soiled by the war, the badge now symbolises "*the horror of war without its glory*". This is also ambivalent in the sense that she suggests he may have "*fallen on top of it*", rather than just presenting how the war is no longer honourable it also suggests that there was no glory in his death and that his death and that death and destruction is what the war truly symbolises. Vera Brittain has altered the cliché of falling on one's sword to illustrate how the soldiers did not die traditional heroic deaths, but like her own fiancé died for no military benefit. In addition, her reference of the returned kit as "*relics*" suggests that this is all that is left of her fiancé after the death and decay of the war. It represents her attitude towards the war, the return of the kit causes her realisation of "*all that France meant*", that France meant death and destruction for both sides. It is however ambiguous as there is a level of conceit in "*all that France meant*". She surprisingly compares France, which is often seen as cultural and beautiful, to death and destruction perhaps highlighting the idea that civilisation leans itself to war and that after this war is at end it will not be long until the next begins. This is a clever if not relatively elaborate way to express her view on the futility of war, that no matter what they say this war will not end all wars, it is a futile loss of life. Killing removes all honour and glory from both country and men and there shall be no benefit to either side on "victory" or "loss" because both ironically mean death.

The frankness in which she portrays these ideas is of high importance, but it also unnerved many of the original reviewers. James Agate wrote that it reminded him of a woman crying in the street. One can see how he may have formed his opinion and it illustrates Brittain's dramatic responses to the events yet I find him a little unjust in his criticism. *Testament of Youth* was 'the real book of the women of England'¹ and presents the strife of women during World War One. Virginia Woolf expressed the more widespread response, she mocked the story of how she lost her lover and the other clichés of war literature, she admitted that much about the book had interested her and in turn had left its mark on her own novel *The Waves* that had been influenced by Brittain's connection between feminism and pacifism².

Remarque expresses the theme of brutality of war through his clever use of irony, such as in the first chapter. On the opening page of the first chapter, the protagonist narrates: 'We haven't had a stroke of luck like this for ages'. The men feel lucky for receiving a double

¹ 'The Writer's War', Oliver Edwards, *The Times*, 19th November 1964

² Introduction of *Testament of Youth* by Mark Bostridge, February 2004

ration yet this is due to the fact they lost a large amount of men because *'the English guns kept on pounding [their] position'*. This is both an example of verbal and structured irony, which is used extensively throughout the novel. It is first perceived that the double rations are what are lucky, but the death of half the platoon provides the luck. It is structured irony also, because the remainder of the platoon know they are lucky in receiving the extra rations due to the death of half of their platoon, yet they do not understand its significance. They have been immune to the concept of death to survive. The reader however is presented with mass carnage and the idea of other humans revelling in this *'stroke of luck'*. This depicts how the men have been dehumanised by the war; they revel in the death of their own kin because it helps to save their own lives. This irony is key in presenting Remarque's view on how the war is futile.

Imagery is another integral part in Remarque's development of the theme of brutality of war and so how he presents war as being futile. Paul narrates, *'It's as if it is not the guns that are roaring; it's as if the very earth is raging.'* The war has become so brutal and the killing so impersonal that it is no longer as if there are two sides fighting each other but more as if the earth is fighting humanity. Remarque is also careful to make sure the use of the word 'enemy' is rare and instead Bäumer refers to *'the others'*, or to *'those over there'*. Vera Brittain is also hesitant to use the word enemy, instead stating that the men had been ordered to fire against the advancing "Germans". This reinforces the idea that the earth is fighting humanity. Both sides are experiencing terrible losses and appalling conditions. Vera Brittain describes how she *"saw the hand of a man who'd been killed only that morning beginning to turn green and yellow"* which demonstrates her use of imagery to graphically illustrate the horrors of war. The idea that both writers from opposing nations record the same details suggests that death itself is the enemy. If death itself is the enemy rather than the opposing side, the very fact that they are fighting is futile. There are no gains to either side, apart from the gain in numbers of death and casualties.

Remarque also focuses heavily on the dehumanisation process of front-line soldiers, and remarks upon how all conventions of society lose their place in war in place of pure human instinct for survival. One such scene that demonstrates this is when Bäumer, Kropp and Müller use the latrines, they: *'pull three if them together in a circle and make [themselves] comfortable'*. It is quite a peculiar image of three men making themselves comfortable whilst in each other's company using the latrines. It could be argued to be satirical, ridiculing how

society acts in demonising and hiding natural parts of human life. However, I am inclined to believe that Remarque is hinting at how the soldiers have been dehumanised. Due to the loss of their social upbringing they will find it difficult to integrate back into society should they survive the war. This suggests that Remarque views the war as futile because even should the men survive they will not be in a position to live how they used to and in a sense have perished. Brian Murdoch, the translator and author of the afterword suggests that the novel presents the war without heroism but through terror and the loss of human dignity and values. This reinforces the idea that the dehumanisation of the soldiers is important in presenting the theme of futility of war.

Whereas Remarque focuses heavily on the dehumanisation of men during the war, Vera Brittain concentrates profoundly upon the effects the war had at home through the themes of feminism and a prevailing sense of pacifism. Despite this, both Remarque and Vera Brittain focus on the effects on society by the war. Vera Brittain grew up in provincial comfort in the north of England, into a family that did not want her to follow her academic aspirations and so her experiences prior to the war evidently contribute to her feminist and pacifist ideology. She links her ideas of feminism to pacifism. Her aspirations to gain an education and then to work towards the war effort she had to confront her own susceptibility as a younger woman to the glamour of war. It became apparent that Brittain was ready to reject anything that identified war '*with grey crossed, and supreme sacrifices, and red poppies blowing against a serene blue sky*'.

Both *Testament of Youth* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, focus heavily on the theme of futility of war and as suggested by other critical appreciations of the texts, the focus on the novels concentrates heavily on illustration war without glory, without heroism. They both present death as the real enemy within war. Brittain focuses on the dismantling of the façade of an honourable and glorious war, and invokes her feminist and pacifist ideology (much of what she forms after her experiences of the war) to demonstrate this. Whilst Remarque also illustrates how war is not glorious, his use of imagery and irony help to form images of how brutal war was and how it affected the lives of the young soldiers fighting in it. The theme of brutality of war, and the dismantling of the façade both present Brittain's and Remarque's views on the futility of war.