

Note: This essay was given a final grade of 92% (A) because of problems with apostrophes and an unclear reference. The errors have not been corrected here.

All Grown Up on the Western Front

Kris Marks: March 20, 2002.

On April 27, 1930, "All Quiet on the Western Front" premiered in theaters across the nation. Based on an acclaimed novel of the same name by World War I veteran Erich Maria Remarque, "Front" was one of the most popular films of the 1930's and has endured to this day as a treasured piece of classic cinema. The film's high quality resulted in a significant profit for Universal International during the first year of release, despite the film's then-high 1.25 million dollar production cost and a growing economic depression (Crafton). In fact, "Quiet" was so well done that it was banned by the German government over concerns that it's negative image of military service would dissuade citizens who saw it from joining the German army. That ban remained in effect until 1952, well after the second great war had ended (Crafton).

Director Lewis Milestone captured the war experience well, probably drawing from his own tour of duty as an assistant director for the U.S. Army Signal Corps during World War I, shortly after he fled Russia before the war (Maltin). Milestone worked as an assistant director with prominent directors such as Frank Capra and Howard Hughes in the Signal Corps and for several studios, after which he went out on his own to make some 40 films and a half dozen television programs in a career that spanned 50 years (Beaver). "All Quiet on the Western Front" won

Milestone his second (and last) academy award for Best Director and won an Oscar itself, the first "talkie" ever recognized as Best Picture. The film was also ranked 54th on the American Film Institute's listing of Top 100 Films, a list compiled some 68 years after its release (Internet Movie Database).

"All Quiet on the Western Front" is a shocking coming of age story that follows a group of young boys from their carefree days as schoolboys through their enlistment in the German army during the Great War, World War I. The film takes a brutal look at their lives and the impact war makes upon them; aging young men by years in a matter of minutes, by decades in a matter of weeks, and bringing them to their deaths in precious few years. "The soldiers go in fresh from school, knowing nothing except the environment of hopeful youth, at nineteen and twenty, and they come to a premature maturity with the war their only home. (Book of the Month)"

As the film opens, we are introduced to a group of innocent, idealistic students in a school somewhere within Germany. Classes have ended so that the instructor, Professor Kantorek, can convince the boys to sign up for military service, appealing to their patriotic sides with talk of battlefield glory and the honor of dying in combat. So even before reaching the war's front lines we already see one character it affected: a teacher commissioned to instruct young people has abandoned his educational motives to become a war monger, risking the lives of the pupils under his care in support of a conflict miles away. Kantorek even

begins to resemble Adolph Hitler, someone who would not be well known for another five or six years (Johanson).

Another character impacted by the war but not involved in the actual conflict is Himmelstoss, a kindly postman from the town where the boys grew up. Early in the film we see good natured Himmelstoss cracking jokes with local citizens and making light of the day's news. Once they get into basic training the boys are amused to find Himmelstoss as their drill sergeant and make light of his serious looking uniform and mean facial expression. But their amusement fades fast when they soon learn that the postman is no good natured friend here where training requires a forceful hand and strict discipline. Our small group of students lose their youthful arrogance and ideas of glory quickly as Himmelstoss sadistically forces them exercise in the mud with clean uniforms on and run obstacle courses until their legs and lungs ache. The drill sergeant tells them gleefully that he intends to "make soldiers out of you, or kill you!" The war changed Himmelstoss drastically, almost to the point that we no longer recognize him as being the same person (Dirks).

Whatever remained of the boys' idealism after that incident was destroyed with the death of the first member of their group. Behm -- the student most hesitant to enlist, the last to sign up after being taunted by his companions, and the most terrified during battle -- was the first one to meet death on the battlefield. Things only worsen as another group member, 19 year old Franz Kemmerick, panics during a long session of shelling and runs out of the trenches where he is struck by flying

shrapnel. Kemmerick survives the initial injury and is placed in a hospital where the other group members visit him as he lays dying. After Franz passes one of the other students takes his boots to replace his own worn footwear -- an unthinkable act during normal times made acceptable by the necessities of war. The boots are then passed from soldier to soldier as each person who acquires them is killed.

The change in these young soldiers is made all the more obvious when one of them, Paul Baumer, visits his family while on leave. He feels less connection to his family than to the soldiers from his unit because of shared experiences on the front lines. His father takes him to a local bar where he shows Paul off to his drinking buddies and makes wild boasts about the war that Paul realizes have no basis in reality. But Paul's father ignores his son's comments, dismissing him with a demeaning comment, "Oh! You don't know anything about it." Paul quickly leaves the table, unnoticed by his father and his father's friends (Dirks).

Paul then goes back to the school where he had originally been, discovering to his horror that old Professor Kantorek is still busy trying to convince a new crop of young boys to sign up for the war. Using the same rhetoric as before, Kantorek tells them all how glorious it is to die for the fatherland, to be an Iron Youth of Germany. Paul's change becomes crystal clear at this point where he is contrasted with the young students who are in the position were he once was. He tries to tell the young recruits about the horrors of war, about how combat is simply trying to kill and not be killed yourself. "There are millions out there dying

for their country, and what good is it?" he asks them, pointing out how useless the entire conflict is on an individual basis. But the students choose not to believe Paul, making him so frustrated with the home front that he decides to just return to the front lines four days earlier than necessary. The war has made such an impact that he would rather deal with bullets and death than try to explain it to people who have no understanding. As Paul later explained to his friend Kat, "At least we know what it's all about out here. There are no lies here."

The film clearly shows changes in the character and personality of all its characters, changes brought on quickly by the hardship and stress of wartime. Even those few who survived the conflict physically were drastically changed by it forever. This is best explained by the prologue of the original book: "This story is neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war... (Dirks)"

Primary Source:

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