

## LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

2006 MASSACHUSETTS LEVEL THREE — HONORABLE MENTION

Dear Herr Erich Maria Remarque,

The most remarkable stories of war are not the ones that glorify war and portray it as a sport for patriots and heroes. Instead, the best stories are like yours, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which instead give tell us about war's horrors and its utter lack of meaning.

My generation has a peculiar manner of thinking about the prospect of war. Most children raised in industrialized nations have not experienced or been affected by war directly. We hear countless stories from older generations, from movies, from the media, and even from videogames (a source of entertainment of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century). Unfortunately, they are frequently positive accounts of adventure and heroism, where the enemy is purely evil and unworthy of humanity.

It is typical of youngsters and adults alike to seek excitement and adventure in life, as Paul and his classmates did in your story. I, like many other young adults, have enjoyed games where we simulate war, or even simple exercises such as target shooting with a nonlethal weapon. Many others also feel the same patriotic feelings as the German youth did. However, unlike many others, I do not have such feelings of nationalism, the driving force behind the wars of the world. I have lived in several different nations in the course of my childhood. Through frequent travel, I had lost the concept of nationalism which so many in the world hold dear to themselves. I realized that your novel was not only a clear depiction of the horrors of war, but also the cost of nationalism.

As I read your novel, I saw the evil that a nationalistic war had done to the world in 1914. Young men were sent to fight "for their country" in a war that killed millions. They who had such potential to create a better and safer world were instead sent to be sacrificed in front of machine guns by politicians and leaders who cared for nothing but personal gain. These young men who otherwise had no reason to hate each other were forced to kill each other.

I was nearly in tears when I read Paul's soliloquy to the French poilus he had stabbed and killed. He sorrowfully said: "Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy? If we threw away these rifles and this uniform you could be my brother just like Kat and Albert." I then finally realized the true goal of war: to strip people of their humanity and convert them into machines of hatred. The generation of Kaiser Wilhelm and Paul's teacher Kantorek had sent Paul's generation to kill or die.

Not only was I saddened by the reality of your story, I also saw that in the modern day we have not ended our reckless behavior. Since the days you fought in World War I and wrote your novel, we have not changed much. The leaders of the world continue to manipulate their subjects to fight each other in pointless battles, deluding them with ideals such as freedom and scaring them with an exaggerated or twisted image of their enemy. On each side, the leaders tell the masses that their nation or ideology is under attack by a corrupt enemy, and that by defeating their enemy, they are helping their own cause. Many young men and women have heeded to their call for action, fighting for their leaders and their "cause." Yet ultimately, only those leaders who control the nations themselves stand to gain from this reckless kind of fighting.

Herr Remarque, I was glad to read a novel with a point of view different from those who tend to glorify war. You present to us the true meaning of nationalism and war in a world led by selfish and cruel leaders. Your book has taught me to further appreciate peace and the fortune of those of us who do not have to go through what you and your comrades did. Ever since I read your novel, I have pledged to always champion the cause of peace. I thank you for the enlightening message that you have given to future generations. I also regret to tell you that we of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have failed you. We have, as past generations have done, fallen into the deception that is nationalism. I apologize to you on behalf of our generation.

In solidarity,

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