
7:3 World War I Literature Homework

World War I Literature:

When war broke out in Europe in 1914 most people were enthusiastic. The last major war on the Continent had been the Napoleonic Wars a century earlier and nearly all Europeans knew of war only from books which regularly romanticized and glorified combat. For many young men war was seen as an adventure and a way to impress people with one's heroism and courage. And, as the English war poet Robert Brooke put it in 1914, war was seen as a way to escape from a "world grown old and cold and weary."

The combatants found out quickly about the reality of war. Living for months at a time in cold, damp, rat-infested trenches, with death all around them, soldiers quickly discovered that war is anything but romantic and heroic. The soldiers were part of an impersonal war machine and they soon realized that they were only a cog in that machine.

Reading contemporary accounts of World War I can help give us an idea of how World War I affected an entire generation. The impact of the war was so profound that in the 1920s Gertrude Stein appropriately called the World War I generation "lost."

Assignment:

Read the attached material and you will quickly understand why General William Tecumseh Sherman said that "war is hell." Write a two or three page paper explaining two things: First, explain why the vast majority of the soldiers in World War I did not mutiny, run away, or feign injury (although some did) to avoid combat. Why did the soldiers keep fighting even though their experiences were so horrible? Cite evidence from the readings to support your conclusions. Consider aspects of the answer that may not be obvious in the readings. Secondly, after reading this material, explain why so many Europeans and Americans were pacifistic in the 1920s and 1930s. Why, in many people's minds, was almost anything preferable to war?

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Material:

The Front Lines:

“Forward Joe Soap’s Army, marching without fear
With our own commander, safely in the rear.
He boasts and strikes from morn till night and thinks he’s very brave,
But the men who really do the job are dead and in their grave.”

An extract from a British song sung by soldiers in the front lines.

“[Before going over the top] Each man tried to come to terms with the fact that in a few minutes he was likely to be killed or horribly maimed. Every instinct screamed to stay where one was, to hide, to run back. . . .One had one’s family, one’s friends, one’s expectations, one’s dreams. Surely it was madness to risk all this in a mad dash across No Man’s Land. . . .Each man struggled with his intense fears and nearly all triumphed simply because they would rather be dead than be revealed to their fellows as cowards.”

Historian John Ellis, Eye Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I, 1989.

“The German that I shot who died afterwards was a fine looking man. I was there when he died, poor chap. I did feel sorry but it was my life or his. . . .To tell you the truth I had a tear myself. I thought to myself perhaps he has a Mother or Dad, also a sweetheart and a lot of things like that. I was really sorry I did it, but God knows I could not help myself.”

Excerpt from a letter written by a soldier to his girlfriend.

“One of our men was shot by a sniper. . . .His passing didn’t seem to cause much stir. . . .The business of the hour had to go on. A dead man is no use to the army. Get him out of the way as quickly as possible. War is a terrible thing and so few realize it.”

Excerpt from a soldier’s letter to his wife. The soldier was killed the day after he mailed this letter.

“Samson lay groaning about twenty yards beyond the front trench. Several attempts were made to rescue him. He had been very badly hit. Three men got killed in these attempts. Four men were also wounded. His own orderly [finally] managed to crawl out to him. Samson waved him back, saying he was riddled through and not worth rescuing; he sent his apologies to the company for making such a noise. . . .At dusk we all went out to get the wounded. The first dead body I came upon was Samson’s, hit in seventeen places. I found that he had forced his knuckles into his mouth to stop himself crying out and attracting any more men to their death.”

From a report by a British officer.

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Fiction:

“The bombardment has stopped and a heavy barrage now falls behind us. The attack has come. . . .

We recognized the distorted faces, the smooth helmets: they are French. They have already suffered heavily when they reach the remnants of the barbed wire entanglements. A whole line has gone down before our machine guns. . . .

We have become wild beasts. We do not fight, we defend ourselves against annihilation. It is not against men that we fling our hand-grenades, what do we know of men at this moment when Death with hands and helmets is hunting us down—now, for the first time in three days [after a heavy bombardment by French artillery] we can see his face, now, for the first time in three days we can oppose him; we feel a mad anger. No longer do we lie helpless waiting on the scaffold, we can destroy and kill, to save ourselves, to save ourselves and be revenged. . . .

We have lost all feeling for one another. We can hardly control ourselves when our hunted glance lights on the form of some other man. We are insensible, dead men, who through some trick, some dreadful magic, are still able to run and kill.”

Excerpt from Erich Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front, 1928.

Poetry:

“I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum.
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye.
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you’ll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.”

Siegfried Sasson, Suicide in the Trenches, 1918

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“At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow’ring sun,
Smoldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of gray, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Founders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!”

Sigfried Sasson, Attack, 1918

“Bent double, like beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;

