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# The Narrative Similarities Between Under Fire and All Quiet on the Western Front

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### The Narrative Similarities Between *Under Fire* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*

From the unnamed narrator of Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*, to the character of Paul Bäumer in Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, first-hand accounts from the perspectives of men fighting in the front lines brought to light to the collective public the uncertainty, terror, and monotony of daily life in the front trenches during World War One. Through their use of the themes of the primeval nature of soldiers, the vast separation between the front and rear, and the great folly of war itself, Barbusse and Remarque capture the generational and historical tragedy of the First World War and make a case for a pacifistic future.

The soldiers' return to a primal nature during the war recurring throughout both books. Barbusse uses this theme of the men's return to the primal to demonstrate one way in which the men fighting in the war were brought together. At the beginning of the book, the unnamed narrator of *Under Fire* describes Tulacque's acquisition of an old-fashioned axe, and his brandishing of it "like some Neanderthal" living in the earth of the carved-out trenches (Barbusse 12). The narrator further describes the character of the men as one of simple mindedness, of men who have fallen back on "their primal state" (Barbusse 18). Instead of facing the uncertainty of the future, or attempting to reflect on the war itself, the men turn instead to their "immediate concerns" of thirst, hunger, and pests, and the men proceed to "cling to them" with all their might (Barbusse 214). And it is this primal state that unites the soldiers, giving them all the "appearance of the cavemen" (Barbusse 212). These men once had "a station in life," but the war snatched up the farmhand and the salesman and thrust them into the dark trenches of the front (Barbusse 17). Despite their different backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences, the war brought all of the men together and reset them to their base instincts, language, and habits. The war reshaped the men, changing them physically and emotionally, and ultimately forged deep bonds of

comradeship between the men. But instead of comradeship born out of mutual respect, or noble and high birth, the bond was forged by the men's communal degradation by forces outside of their control.

Remarque, however, uses this return to the primitive to illustrate the war's physical and emotional toll on the soldiers, specifically in regards to the fighting in the front trenches. The soldiers in the front live by their "animal instinct," trusting in their second sense to guide them to safety from the falling shells (Remarque 43). And the men who do not possess "this second sight," the children sent to the front lines with no training and experience, are simply "shot down like hares" by the enemy (Remarque 44 and 98). This return to primitiveness is displayed only upon arrival at the front, when the men instantly become "human animals" (Remarque, 44), and in the charge when the humans become "wild beasts" with minds filled only with "fear and madness and greed of life" (Remarque 85-6). But this primitiveness is only "in an artificial sense" (Remarque 200); it is a primitiveness thrust upon them and with potential adverse effects for their future lives and psyches. The men are not primitive for "regeneration," but for the purposes of survival, whether mentally or physically (Remarque 200). For Remarque, the primitiveness of the front lines did bind men together; the primitive served instead as a necessary tool for the survival of the soldiers fighting on the front. While both Barbusse and Remarque write on the primitive state of the men during the war, Barbusse focuses more on the uniting factor of this new Neanderthalic state, and Remarque focuses on how the very nature of the war forced the soldiers to embrace the primitive or to die.

The juxtaposition of the two separate worlds of the front and the rear is a central theme of both books. Barbusse, going as far as to refer to the front and rear as "two foreign countries," critiques the callousness, ignorance, and naïveté of the people at the rear (Barbusse 277). In a

village close enough to the front that the war has become commercialized, citizens complain that the war is a "trial" and berate the soldiers for expecting special treatment; one villager rhetorically asks if the soldiers expect the villagers "to ruin ourselves" for the sake of the war (Barbusse 65). Volpatte, back from leave, angrily recounts the multitude of "shirkers in the rear," resplendent in all the "comforts of wealth and peacetime," yet still putting on the pretense of living in the constant fear and uncertainty of the front (Barbusse 101 and 103). On leave in a sizable village, the only sign of the "immense war" is a cartoonish "childish assemblage," and the villagers show only a slight understanding of life on the front (Barbusse 273). The men who avoided serving hide behind the platitudes of "each man to his own job," while a woman fantasizes on the beauty of a charge, and of the angelic death of a heroic soldier (Barbusse 275). The woman's tale of men falling down to the earth with "a smile," is in contrast with the earlier death of Bertrand, whose last moments before his death on the front gave him the appearance and manner "of a clown" (Barbusse 275 and 247).

This juxtaposition of the death of a clown, and the death of the ideal soldier, captures the larger disconnect between the opposing worlds of the front and the rear. Faced with this disconnect between the lives of those in the rear and their own at the front, the soldiers are left only with bitterness and defeatism, since, as Volpatte angrily states, that in a short time the soldiers "may all be bloody dead!" (Barbusse 278). Barbusse views the front and the rear as further evidence of "a Difference between people"; a divide between those who would sacrifice themselves and everything that they had, and those who would march over them, content in their money, their health, their un-marred innocence, and their lack of loss (Barbusse 277).

Remarque, on the other hand, focuses mainly upon the symbolism of the drill, as well as the rear's incomprehension of the war. As Bäumer and the other soldiers soon realize, the pomp

and frills of the drill cease “only in the front-line” (Remarque 35). The young soldiers in the front have “suddenly learned to see” the world; the men realize that the empty heroic words and the pomp of the drill serve only to hide the images of “the wounded and dying” (Remarque 12). When Bäumer goes on leave to visit his family, he encounters a commanding officer in his hometown who ridicules his "front-line manners" and demands that Bäumer perform drills as punishment for his insolence (Remarque 121). The presence of the military drill symbolically marks the end of the front and the beginning of the rear. Later, when faced with civilian's lack of true understanding of the war's progress or conduct, Bäumer coolly states that the war "may be rather different" from their wild imaginings; imaginings that cause the men to conclude that Germany is close to a decisive and total victory, if the front-line soldiers simply "shove ahead" through no man's land (Remarque 124). The military pomp and splendor of the young men's dreams and their teacher's lectures is revealed to be only for the illusionistic benefit for those at the rear; the seemingly educated older generation spins uneducated conjecture about the war in order to avoid recognizing the war's physical and emotional toll. The old social system of respect and obedience towards the great, the older, and the supposedly wiser, was crushed by the reality the front; a reality which further contrasts the attitudes and beliefs of the rear. While Barbusse and Remarque each examine different aspects of the front and the rear, both books critique the vast gap between the world inside the front line and the world behind the lines.

Both Barbusse and Remarque examine the tragedy of a war that pitted humanity against itself. Barbusse reflects on the inherent sameness of the two armies. In the depths of the first-aid post, a wounded aviator feverishly recounts the view of the two armies; from the air, each army became “a reflection of the other,” alike in shouts of prayer and shouts of hate (Barbusse 260). After the last battle in the book and after the inundation of the trenches, the few remaining

soldiers that rise from the marshy earth are outfitted in “the same uniform of filth and misery” (Barbusse 299). And for a period of time after the flooding, soldiers from either side tolerate each other’s presence; the men are too tired and miserable to have any cause to fight one another. Barbusse portrays both of the armies as a single entity, composed of the same workers of the war and alike in misery, yet still set on consuming each other in one great mechanized, futile war.

Remarque reflects on the similarity between men of either side, but also on the tragedy that a generation of men must fight and destroy each other. In his time at the camp on the moors with Russian prisoners of war, Bäumer comes to the realization that one single command turned these men into enemies, and that a single command “might transform them into our friends” (Remarque 142). With their “childlike faces and apostles’ beards,” the Russian soldiers are portrayed as innocent and helpless, not the faceless and menacing enemy of the front lines (Remarque 143). However, Bäumer still perceives the prisoners abstractedly as silent, suffering creatures; he does not view them as fully human. Sympathy arises only when he is in close proximity with a French soldier, taking shelter in a shell hole during an artillery barrage. Bäumer must face the thought that the soldiers opposing each other no-man's-land can only truly see each other face-to-face as also being men “too late” (Remarque 164). Alone with a dying man who stabs at his psyche with “time and my thoughts,” Bäumer can only briefly reflect on the tragedy and human misery caused by the war before being once more thrust into the mindlessness of the trench (Remarque 163). As Bäumer later remarks, “war is war”; the desire and hunger to live outweighs the desire to humanize and sympathize (Remarque 169). It is far easier, in fact essential, to actively dehumanize the men across no-man’s-land. Instead of the “great adventure” promised to them, the men are sent into a war filled with misery, hunger, and hopelessness (Remarque 132); they are sent to blindly fight an enemy with whom they have much in common.

Though Barbusse sees the war as a singular army, and people, consuming itself, and Remarque sees the war as a tragedy that ruined his generation for little to no gain, both authors rail against the war which pitted comrades against comrades.

These two books, inspired by first-hand accounts, left their mark on our later understanding of the First World War. The themes of the front-line primitiveness, the soldiers' unkindly view of those in the rear, and the soldiers' perception of the folly of war contradicted the romanticized, patriotic, politicians' take on the war. To many at the time, both *Under Fire* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* critiqued a war that became a generational blight called for a greater future peace. Today, the first world war is remembered for the horrific conditions of the trenches, the vast differing experiences of the front and rear--the planned attacks on civilians came in the next world war--and the wonder that a single assassination was a catalyst for a great calamity. However, each author took a different analytical approach, and the author's forecast different effects that the war would have on their worlds. And so the authors lay out two separate interpretations of world war one: on one side, the war serves as an example of class struggle with the perpetually downtrodden sent off to fight a war brought about by warhawks, those with a monetary stake in war, and petty crooks; on the other, the war set an entire generation adrift, with no prospects, no ambition, and with innocence replaced by cynicism.