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The Process of War Disillusionment in Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front: A Freudian Perspective

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Abstract. This study examines the process of war disillusionment in Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, tracing how the idealistic convictions instilled in its protagonist before enlistment collapse under the pressure of trench warfare. The analysis draws on Sigmund Freud's concept of disillusionment, developed in *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* (1915), which accounts for the erosion of confidence in moral progress and civilized authority once such convictions are contradicted by lived experience. Using a descriptive qualitative method within a psychological literary approach, textual evidence was gathered through close reading and interpreted through this Freudian lens. Two questions guided the inquiry: what causes war disillusionment in the novel, and how it becomes visible through the protagonist's evolving consciousness. The findings indicate that disillusionment originates from four interlocking sources: the failure of trusted authority figures, direct exposure to death and violence, the disintegration of civilizational and institutional ideals, and a widening psychological rupture from a pre-war identity. This disillusionment is expressed through the collapse of moral and patriotic conviction, a progressive narrowing of emotional responsiveness, an estrangement from a former self, and the disappearance of any coherent vision of the future. The study concludes that war disillusionment unfolds as an accumulating psychological transformation rather than a single rupture, reshaping how the individual understands identity, morality, and human existence.

Keywords: Disillusionment, Moral collapse, Psychological disillusionment, Trauma narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Literature The First World War is remembered less for the territory it redrew than for the interior damage it left in the men who survived it. Close to twenty million military and civilian lives were lost in the conflict (UN World Conflicts Report, 2023), but the figure alone does not capture what the war did to the generation of young men who lived through it. Many of them had grown up trusting that heroism, national duty, and the moral order of civilization were solid and dependable ideas, only to discover in the trenches that none of these ideas could survive contact with the war they had been sent to fight. The gap between

what these men had been taught to expect and what they actually encountered produced a distinct psychological condition, one in which idealism collapses, trust erodes, and a lasting sense of disillusionment settles in. This condition has continued to occupy a central place in the literature that emerged from the war, as writers who had been soldiers themselves searched for a form capable of registering what had been lost.

Few novels engage this collapse as directly as Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front (1929). Writing from his own experience as a German soldier on the Western Front, Remarque builds the novel around the gradual undoing of Paul Bäumer, a young student who enlists still believing in duty, honour, and the moral authority of the adults who encouraged him to go. As the narrative advances through gas attacks, bombardments, and the deaths of friends, these beliefs are not simply weakened but dismantled altogether, leaving Paul without the framework of meaning he once used to understand himself and his world. The novel is, in this sense, less a chronicle of combat than a study of what combat does to conviction. It is precisely this quality that makes the novel such a productive text for tracing the psychological architecture of disillusionment rather than only its symptoms.

The theoretical basis for this study is drawn from Sigmund Freud's 1915 essay Thoughts for the Times on War and Death, specifically the section commonly known as The Disillusionment of the War. Freud proposes that modern individuals place considerable trust in the idea that civilization represents genuine moral progress, and that laws, institutions, and shared ethical codes are proof of this progress. War, he argues, exposes how fragile this trust actually is, since it reveals how quickly states and individuals can revert to conduct that the appearance of civilization was assumed to have left behind. For Freud, disillusionment is not a passing disappointment but a structural collapse: the discovery that deeply held convictions about humanity and its institutions do not correspond to how the world actually behaves. This account offers a precise vocabulary for describing the mechanism through which Paul Bäumer's early convictions are dismantled by his exposure to modern industrial warfare.

Disillusionment as a subject of literary analysis has drawn renewed scholarly attention in recent years. Husain, Andries, and Posumah (2025) examine Jake Barnes's disillusionment in Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, showing how the collision between prewar idealism and postwar reality produces a lasting loss of faith and an inability to recover a stable sense of purpose in the protagonist. In a related vein, Arianto (2023) investigates the existential crisis experienced by the protagonist of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's Journey to the End of the Night, tracing how repeated confrontations with disorder and violence dissolve the character's sense of meaning and direction. Both studies confirm that psychological collapse in war-related fiction follows an identifiable structure rather than functioning as a vague or purely emotional response to hardship, and both apply a psychological lens to trace how belief systems disintegrate under pressure. Neither study, however, engages directly with Remarque's novel, and neither applies Freud's specific account of disillusionment as its interpretive framework. Existing scholarship on All Quiet on the Western Front has tended to concentrate on its anti-war message, its historical context, or its formal construction, leaving comparatively little room for a sustained account of the psychological mechanism driving Paul's transformation.

This study addresses that gap by asking two questions: what causes war disillusionment in All Quiet on the Western Front, and how this disillusionment is reflected in the novel. In answering these questions through Freud's framework, the study aims to contribute to the field of literary psychology while offering a reading of Remarque's novel that treats

disillusionment not as a background theme but as the central psychological event the narrative is organized to describe.

METHOD

This This study adopts an extrinsic literary approach, which reads a literary work in relation to factors beyond the text itself, including its psychological and historical dimensions (Gerdin, 2016). A descriptive qualitative design is employed, since the research aims to interpret the meanings embedded in a literary text rather than to measure or quantify variables (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Sugiyono, 2023). This design suits a study of disillusionment because the phenomenon under investigation surfaces through narrative detail, dialogue, and shifts in a character's perspective rather than through data that could be reduced to numerical form.

The primary data source is Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front (1929 English translation by A. W. Wheen, Little, Brown edition), a 296-page anti-war novel that follows Paul Bäumer's psychological trajectory through the trenches of the First World War by way of first-person narration, sensory description of combat, and dialogue that repeatedly interrogates the legitimacy of the war itself.

The interpretive framework applied throughout the analysis is Sigmund Freud's concept of disillusionment, presented in Thoughts for the Times on War and Death (1915). Freud describes disillusionment as the collapse of previously held ideals and beliefs once they are confronted by a reality that directly contradicts them, a process rooted in the specific historical circumstances of the First World War rather than in a general theory of the psyche. Because this framework was formulated to explain the very historical conditions Remarque's novel depicts, it offers a precise and historically grounded lens for identifying how Paul Bäumer's idealism is dismantled and for tracing how that dismantling registers in his consciousness.

Data collection proceeded through repeated close reading of the novel to identify passages, dialogue, and narrative details relevant to the two research questions. Data were then classified into two categories, the first comprising evidence of the causes of disillusionment and the second comprising evidence of how disillusionment is reflected in Paul's thoughts, attitudes, and behaviour. Each category was analyzed by first establishing its literary significance within the novel and then interpreting it through Freud's concept of disillusionment, before conclusions were drawn in relation to the study's research questions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following discussion is organized around two concerns: first, the conditions that give rise to Paul Bäumer's disillusionment; second, the ways this disillusionment becomes visible in his consciousness, speech, and conduct as the narrative unfolds. Before either concern is addressed, it is worth noting that Paul enters the novel already equipped with an idealized understanding of war, instilled through his schooling and the patriotic culture surrounding him. It is against this initial idealism, rather than against a neutral starting point, that the erosion analyzed below takes place.

3.1 The Causes of War Disillusionment in *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Four conditions can be identified as driving forces behind Paul Bäumer's disillusionment: the failure of the authority figures he once trusted, his unmediated exposure to death and violence, the disintegration of the civilizational and institutional values he had been raised to respect, and a widening psychological rupture between his present self and the person he had been before enlistment. These conditions do not operate

independently of one another; each prepares the ground for the next, so that Paul's disillusionment accumulates rather than arrives all at once.

3.1.1.The Failure of Authority Figures

The earliest and most foundational blow to Paul's idealism comes from Kantorek, his schoolmaster, whose patriotic rhetoric persuades his entire class to enlist before they are prepared for what enlistment will actually demand of them. Remarque stages this persuasion as a scene of collective submission rather than individual conviction: *"During drill-time Kantorek gave us long lectures until the whole of our class went under his shepherding to the District Commandant and volunteered. I can see him now, as he used to glare at us through his spectacles and say in a moving voice: 'Won't you join up, Comrades.'"* (Remarque, 1929, p. 12). Kantorek is not presented as a villain in any conventional sense; he is instead a figure whose authority over his students functions through repetition and appeal to shame rather than through argument, evident in the detail that even a reluctant boy such as Josef Behm ultimately enlists because refusing would have marked him a coward in front of people whose opinion he could not afford to lose. The scene establishes enlistment less as a personal decision than as a form of peer conformity manufactured by an adult the boys had no reason to doubt.

Paul later reflects on this misplaced trust with a bitterness that measures the full distance between expectation and outcome: *"For us lads of eighteen they ought to have been mediators and guides to the world of maturity, the world of work, of duty, of culture, of progress – to the future. We often made fun of them and played jokes on them, but in our hearts we trusted them. The idea of authority, which they represented, was associated in our minds with a greater insight and a manlier wisdom. But the first death we saw shattered this belief. We had to recognize that our generation was more to be trusted than theirs. They surpassed us only in phrases and in cleverness. The first bombardment showed us our mistake, and under it the world as they had taught it to us broke in pieces."* (Remarque, 1929, p. 12). The passage works through a reversal: the young men who were supposed to be guided instead discover that they possess a more accurate grasp of reality than their guides. Remarque locates the failure of Kantorek's generation specifically in language, in their command of "phrases," rather than in any genuine insight, which strips their authority of its last remaining justification once the war begins.

Read through Freud's (1915) account of disillusionment, this episode exemplifies the mechanism by which trust placed in authority collapses once that authority proves unreliable. Freud observes that individuals invest their sense of stability in the belief that those who instruct and govern them possess a wisdom greater than their own; when this belief is contradicted, the resulting damage extends well beyond disappointment in a single figure; it unsettles the entire system of values that authority had been used to justify. Paul's loss of confidence in Kantorek therefore functions as the opening event in a broader collapse, one in which every subsequent authority he encounters, military or civilian, is measured against a trust that has already been broken once.

Taken together, these two moments show that Paul's disillusionment does not begin on the battlefield but in the classroom, where an adult he had no reason to doubt sends him toward an experience that adult cannot describe accurately. The failure of authority thus supplies the initial fracture from which the remaining causes of disillusionment extend.

3.1.2. The Direct Experience of Death and Violence

Where Kantorek's failure operates at the level of belief, the deaths Paul witnesses operate at the level of the body, offering him evidence that cannot be argued away. The death of Franz Kemmerich, a classmate Paul has known since childhood, is staged with a deliberate absence of dignity: his watch is stolen while he lies unconscious, and hospital orderlies are already waiting to claim his bed before he has died. Remarque renders the moment with clinical precision: *"Here lies our comrade, Kemmerich, who a little while ago was roasting horse-flesh with us and squatting in the shell-holes. He it is still and yet it is not he any longer."* (Remarque, 1929, p. 12). The line performs a quiet dissolution of identity: Kemmerich remains physically present even as the person Paul knew has already effectively disappeared, a distinction the narrative insists on rather than resolves. There is no framing of heroism or sacrifice here, only the administrative indifference of a system already moving on to the next occupant of the bed.

A second scene extends this same erosion beyond human death into the register of the natural world, when Paul and his comrades listen through the night to the screaming of horses wounded in an artillery barrage: *"The cries continue. It is not men, they could not cry so terribly. 'Wounded horses,' says Kat. It's unendurable. It is the moaning of the world, it is the martyred creation, wild with anguish, filled with terror, and groaning. Detering stands up. 'God! For God's sake! Shoot them!'"* (Remarque, 1929, p. 68). Remarque assigns the emotional break not to a newly arrived recruit but to Detering, a farmer and the man in the group most attuned to animals, whose composure gives way precisely because his prior relationship to horses gives this suffering a specificity the others cannot access in the same way. The moment expands the scope of the violence beyond the human battlefield, suggesting a suffering so encompassing that it implicates the whole of "creation" rather than one army or one side.

From the standpoint of Freud's (1915) argument, these scenes constitute the concrete confrontation between illusion and reality on which his entire account of disillusionment depends. Freud maintains that disillusionment intensifies in proportion to the gap between an idealized expectation and the reality that contradicts it, and that this gap becomes most acute when it is registered through direct, repeated experience rather than abstract reasoning. Kemmerich's undignified death and the horses' unbearable cries supply exactly this kind of experience: each incident adds another layer of evidence that the heroic narrative of sacrifice Paul once accepted has no correspondence to what war actually produces. The cumulative effect of these encounters is to convert disillusionment from an idea Paul might have entertained into a conviction grounded in what he has personally seen and heard, a distinction that gives the remaining stages of his psychological collapse their force.

1.1.1 The Collapse of Civilizational Values and Institutional Beliefs

Paul's disillusionment deepens further once he begins to recognize that the institutions responsible for upholding moral order are themselves complicit in producing cruelty rather than restraining it. This recognition crystallizes in a conversation among the soldiers about Corporal Himmelstoss, a former postman whose access to a small measure of military authority transforms him into a petty tyrant. Kat, the most experienced and clear-eyed member of the group, offers a blunt diagnosis: *"And if you give a man a little bit of authority he behaves just the same way, he snaps at it too. The things are precisely the same. In himself man is essentially a beast, only he butters it over like a slice of bread with a little decorum. The army is based on that; one man must always have power*

over the other." (Remarque, 1929, p. 43). Kat's function within the novel is that of an unsentimental elder whose judgments carry weight precisely because he has earned them through experience rather than education, which makes his verdict on human nature especially difficult for Paul to dismiss.

This diagnosis is later absorbed into Paul's own reflection during a period of hospitalization, in one of the novel's most despairing interior passages: *"I am young, I am twenty years old; yet I know nothing of life but despair, death, fear, and fatuous superficiality cast over an abyss of sorrow. I see how peoples are set against one another, and in silence, unknowingly, foolishly, obediently, innocently slay one another. I see that the keenest brains of the world invent weapons and words to make it yet more refined and enduring. Through the years our business has been killing; – it was our first calling in life. Our knowledge of life is limited to death. What will happen afterwards? And what shall come out of us?"* (Remarque, 1929, pp. 263–264). The passage is structured around a contradiction between Paul's age and his experience: twenty is meant to signify the beginning of adult life, yet Paul describes a consciousness already emptied of everything except death. The reference to the world's "keenest brains" devoting themselves to weapons rather than to human welfare turns Paul's despair outward, implicating the institutions of science and state rather than locating the failure in himself.

Freud's (1915) account of disillusionment identifies precisely this kind of realization, the recognition that institutions entrusted with upholding civilized values behave, once tested by war, no differently from the brutality those values were supposed to have overcome, as one of the deepest sources of psychological damage. Kat's claim that authority merely legitimizes an underlying brutality, and Paul's own despair at seeing intelligence redirected toward killing, together dismantle the belief that civilization represents genuine moral advancement rather than a thin and easily discarded veneer.

What emerges from this stage of Paul's disillusionment is not merely disappointment in particular individuals but a broader loss of faith in the institutional structures, military, scientific, and civic, that had once given his sense of order its coherence.

3.1.4. Psychological Disconnection from Pre-War Identity

The fourth condition behind Paul's disillusionment surfaces not on the battlefield but during his return home on leave, where he discovers that the distance separating him from his former life cannot be closed simply by physical proximity to it. Paul registers this discovery with a directness that borders on confession: *"I imagined leave would be different from this. Indeed, it was different a year ago. It is I of course that have changed in the interval. There lies a gulf between that time and to-day. At that time I still knew nothing about the war, we had been only in quiet sectors. But now I see that I have been crushed without knowing it. I find I do not belong here any more, it is a foreign world."* (Remarque, 1929, p. 168). The word "gulf" does much of the work in this passage, suggesting a rupture too wide to cross rather than a distance that time might gradually narrow. The home Paul returns to has not changed; what has changed is his capacity to recognize it as home at all.

This same rupture is voiced collectively when Paul's friend Kropp names what has happened to their entire generation while the two convalesce together in a military hospital: *"The war has ruined us for everything. We are not youth any longer. We don't want to take the world by storm. We are fleeing. We fly from ourselves. From our life. We were eighteen and had begun to love life and the world; and we had to shoot it to pieces. The first bomb, the first explosion, burst in our hearts. We are cut off from activity, from striving, from progress. We believe in such things no longer, we believe in the war."* (Remarque, 1929, p. 87). Kropp's language converts a personal observation into a generational diagnosis, and the closing admission, that war itself has replaced every other object of belief, gives the disillusionment a completeness that individual loss alone could not convey. Elsewhere the same rupture is compressed into a single line: "We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men, we are crude and sorrowful and superficial – I believe we are lost" (Remarque, 1929, p. 123), a formulation that collapses youth and old age into the same sentence to capture a generation aged by experience without having been permitted to mature by ordinary means.

Freud (1915) treats this kind of rupture as one of the most consequential effects of disillusionment, since it strips the individual not merely of particular convictions but of the entire framework through which a coherent sense of self had previously been organized. Paul's inability to reoccupy his pre-war identity, and Kropp's admission that their generation no longer believes in anything beyond the war that destroyed them, together describe a condition in which disillusionment has moved from an intellectual recognition into an altered mode of being.

Considered alongside the three preceding causes, this psychological disconnection completes rather than simply extends the process of disillusionment: authority has failed, death has confirmed that failure, institutions have proven complicit, and Paul is finally left without even the memory of a self that once believed otherwise.

Considered as a sequence rather than as isolated incidents, these four causes reveal disillusionment in the novel as a cumulative process rather than the product of any single traumatic event. Each cause builds on the one before it: the failure of authority opens Paul to doubt, direct exposure to death confirms that doubt through experience, institutional collapse generalizes it beyond any one figure, and psychological disconnection completes it by severing Paul from the identity that had made his original convictions possible. This structure supports Freud's (1915) broader claim that the deepest disillusionment arises not from a single blow but from the steady accumulation of contradictions between what an individual has been taught to expect and what experience actually delivers.

1.2 The Reflection of War Disillusionment in *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Having traced the conditions that produce Paul's disillusionment, the discussion now turns to how this disillusionment becomes visible in the narrative, that is, how it registers in Paul's moral outlook, his emotional responsiveness, his sense of self, and his relationship to the future.

Four such reflections can be identified, each corresponding to a distinct dimension of the psychological collapse traced above.

1.2.1 The Collapse of Moral and Patriotic Convictions

The clearest reflection of Paul's disillusionment appears in the shell-crater scene, where Paul is trapped overnight beside Gerard Duval, a French soldier he has stabbed and who dies slowly beside him. Forced into prolonged proximity with the man he has killed, Paul is compelled to recognize him as an individual rather than an enemy: *"But you were*

only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called forth its appropriate response. It was that abstraction I stabbed. But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand-grenades, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship. 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." (Remarque, 1929, p. 223). The scene works through a substitution: Duval's weapons, which had justified his death as an enemy, are replaced in Paul's mind by his wife, his face, and the ordinary fellowship that might have connected them under any other circumstance. The confession that the enemy was always "an abstraction" rather than a person exposes the entire ideological apparatus that had made killing possible as a construction rather than a truth.

This collapse of certainty extends into conversation once Paul returns to his unit, where the question of moral legitimacy is raised without any of the confidence that once accompanied it: *"We are here to protect our fatherland. And the French are over there to protect their fatherland. Now, who's in the right? ... but our professors and parsons and newspapers say that we are the only ones that are right, and let's hope so; – but the French professors and parsons and newspapers say that the right is on their side, now what about that?"* (Remarque, 1929, p. 205). What makes this exchange notable is not the question itself but the fact that none of the soldiers, Paul included, can answer it. A year earlier, under Kantorek's influence, the answer would have arrived without hesitation; its absence here measures how completely the earlier moral certainty has been hollowed out.

Freud (1915) identifies this loss of moral certainty as one of the clearest markers of disillusionment, since it signals the point at which an individual can no longer sustain the belief that the values used to justify his own actions hold any special claim to truth once the same values are found mirrored on the opposing side. Paul's recognition of Duval's humanity and his inability to answer Kropp's question both trace the same collapse, the discovery that the moral architecture authorizing the war was never as solid as it had been made to appear.

The disillusionment reflected here is therefore not simply grief over a single death but the erosion of the entire moral vocabulary, duty, enemy, fatherland, that had previously allowed Paul to make sense of his participation in the war.

1.2.2 The Progressive Loss of Emotional Capacity

A second reflection of disillusionment appears in Paul's diminishing capacity to feel, most starkly rendered during an infantry advance across open ground: *"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 to kill."* (Remarque, 1929, p. 116). Remarque's choice of the words "trick" and "magic" is significant here, since both suggest that what animates these men is no longer will or purpose but an inhuman momentum operating independently of anything resembling ordinary human agency. The men described are not afraid; they have moved past fear into a state the passage refuses to name as anything other than a kind of living death.

This numbness is reinforced by Paul's account of the randomness governing survival at the front: *"It is this Chance that makes us indifferent. It is just as much a matter of chance that I am still alive as that I might have been hit. … No soldier outlives a thousand chances. But every soldier believes in Chance and trusts his luck."* (Remarque, 1929, p. 101). The key term in this passage is not fear but "indifferent": Paul does not describe survival as a source of relief or death as a source of terror, but registers both with the same flattened affect, a response that signals how completely the value once attached to living or dying has been drained away.

Freud (1915) links this kind of emotional flattening directly to the aftermath of disillusionment, arguing that once the beliefs organizing an individual's emotional responses collapse, the feelings themselves lose their structure and become numb rather than simply diminished. Paul's description of soldiers who continue to function only through "some dreadful magic," and his own indifference to the arbitrary logic of survival, both illustrate this process: what has been lost is not courage but the underlying conviction that life and death still carry meaning worth reacting to.

This progressive numbing constitutes one of the quieter but more devastating reflections of Paul's disillusionment, since it removes the emotional responsiveness that would otherwise allow him to register the full weight of what he continues to witness.

1.2.3 The Loss of Identity and Connection to the Past

A third reflection of disillusionment emerges when Paul, home on leave, sits in his childhood bedroom attempting to recover the person he had once been through the books that used to define him: *"I want to think myself back into that time. I want that quiet rapture again.*

… The breath of desire that then arose from the coloured backs of the books, shall fill me again, melt the heavy, dead lump of lead that lies somewhere in me and waken again the impatience of the future, the quick joy in the world of thought, it shall bring back again the lost eagerness of my youth. I sit and wait." (Remarque, 1929, p. 172). The scene is built around an expectation that fails to be met: Paul waits for the old feeling to return, and the narrative simply lets him wait, refusing him the recovery he is hoping for. The image of a "heavy, dead lump of lead" lodged inside him gives concrete, almost physical form to a loss that cannot be reasoned or wished away, situated exactly where his former eagerness used to be.

Freud (1915) describes this incapacity to return to an earlier emotional and cognitive state as one of the defining features of disillusionment, distinguishing it from ordinary sadness or homesickness, which at least imagine the possibility of restoration. Paul's failure to reconnect with his books is not a failure of effort; it is evidence that the war has permanently altered the psychological structure that once made those books meaningful to him, leaving the room and its objects intact while the self that inhabited them has effectively disappeared.

This scene therefore reflects disillusionment not as a change of opinion but as a rupture in continuity, the loss of the very self that would have been capable of holding the earlier convictions in the first place.

1.2.4 The Abandonment of a Meaningful Vision of the Future

The final and most complete reflection of Paul's disillusionment appears near the end of the novel, once he has become the last survivor among his closest companions. Sitting alone, he registers his own condition with a calm that reads less as peace than as

depletion: *"I am very quiet. Let the months and years come, they bring me nothing more, they can bring me nothing more. I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear. … the life that has borne me through these years is still in my hands and my eyes. Whether I have subdued it, I know not. But so long as it is there it will seek its own way out, heedless of the will that is within me."* (Remarque, 1929, p. 295). The statement that the future "can bring me nothing more" does not read as despair in any dramatic sense but as simple fact from a consciousness that has already been emptied of everything the future might have promised. The closing image of a life that persists independently of Paul's own will suggests that what remains in him is closer to biological continuation than to hope.

This absence of a future is sealed by the death of Kat, the one companion Paul had trusted completely, killed by a small splinter while Paul carries him toward help believing him still alive: *"Kat is dead. Do I walk? Have I feet still? I raise my eyes, I let them move round, and turn myself with them, one circle, one circle, and I stand in the midst. All is as usual. Only the Militiaman Stanislaus Katczinsky has died. Then I know nothing more."* (Remarque, 1929, p. 291). The word "only" carries the full weight of the passage, registering both the world's complete indifference to the loss of a single human being and Paul's own numbed capacity to record catastrophe without visible rupture. The phrase "I know nothing more" closes the scene not merely as a description of unconsciousness but as an image of a mind that has been drained of everything it once held.

Freud (1915) treats the disappearance of a coherent future as among the most complete expressions of disillusionment, since it marks the point at which an individual no longer possesses the belief structures needed to imagine, desire, or plan beyond the immediate present. Paul's admission that the coming years hold nothing for him, together with his numbed response to Kat's death, describes exactly this endpoint: survival continues, but without any of the content, aspiration, belief, or connection, that had once made survival worth anticipating.

This final reflection completes the pattern traced across the previous three: moral certainty gives way to confusion, emotional responsiveness gives way to numbness, a stable identity gives way to estrangement, and finally the future itself gives way to an emptiness that even Paul's own will cannot resist.

Taken together, these four reflections, moral collapse, emotional numbing, identity rupture, and the loss of a livable future, do not appear in the novel as separate episodes but as stages of a single unfolding condition. Remarque does not present disillusionment as a sudden awakening but as a gradual and cumulative diminishment, in which each experience strips away something Paul cannot recover, until what remains is a man moving through the war without the beliefs, feelings, or expectations that had once made that movement meaningful. This is precisely the structure of disillusionment Freud (1915) describes: not a single dramatic reversal but an accumulating loss that ultimately reorganizes how an individual understands himself, his relationships, and his place in the world.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine what causes war disillusionment in Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front and how that disillusionment is reflected across the novel, using Sigmund Freud's concept of disillusionment as its interpretive framework. In response to the first question, the analysis identifies four interlocking causes. The failure of authority figures, embodied in Kantorek, introduces the initial fracture in Paul Bäumer's idealism by revealing that the adults he trusted possessed rhetorical skill rather than genuine insight. Direct exposure to death and violence, most vividly rendered through the deaths of Kemmerich and the wounded horses, converts this fracture into a conviction grounded in lived experience rather than doubt alone. The collapse of civilizational and institutional values, articulated through Kat's assessment of human nature and Paul's own despairing reflection in hospital, generalizes this conviction beyond any single figure to implicate the structures of authority as a whole. Finally, Paul's psychological disconnection from his pre-war identity, most evident during his leave at home, completes the process by severing him from the very self that had once made his earlier convictions possible.

In response to the second question, the study finds that this disillusionment is reflected through four corresponding transformations in Paul's consciousness and conduct. His encounter with the dying French soldier Duval, together with his inability to answer his friend's question about who is really in the right, reflects the collapse of the moral and patriotic convictions that had once justified his participation in the war. His description of soldiers as "insensible, dead men" and his flattened indifference toward chance and survival reflect a progressive loss of emotional capacity. His failed attempt to reconnect with his childhood books during leave reflects a rupture in identity that separates his present self from the person he had been. And his admission, late in the novel, that the years ahead "can bring me nothing more," compounded by his numbed response to the death of Kat, reflects the disappearance of any meaningful vision of the future.

Considered together, these findings support Freud's (1915) broader claim that disillusionment is not the product of a single traumatic event but an accumulating psychological process, one in which each new contradiction between idealized belief and lived reality strips away a further layer of conviction until nothing of the original framework remains. Remarque's novel demonstrates this process with unusual precision, tracing a trajectory in which the devastation of war is measured not only in physical loss but in the systematic dismantling of everything a young man had once used to understand who he was.

This study contributes to the field of literary psychology by demonstrating that Freud's historically specific account of disillusionment offers a precise and productive framework for reading war fiction, one capable of tracing the mechanism of psychological collapse rather than simply describing its outcome. It further contributes to the study of All Quiet on the Western Front by offering an account of the novel organized around the internal architecture of disillusionment itself, complementing existing scholarship that has tended to foreground the novel's anti-war message or its historical and formal qualities. Future research might extend this framework comparatively, examining how disillusionment operates across other literary depictions of war and personal catastrophe to determine whether the accumulating structure identified here holds as a broader pattern within the literature of psychological collapse.

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