

CHAPTER
29

Section 2

LITERATURE SELECTION *from All Quiet on the
Western Front*

by Erich Maria Remarque

Erich Maria Remarque was a German novelist who fought in World War I. His novel All Quiet on the Western Front provides a vivid description of the fighting as seen through the eyes of a 19-year-old German soldier named Paul Bäumer. In the following passage, Bäumer and Stanislaus Katczinsky or "Kat," the 40-year-old leader of the group, face intense shelling and artillery fire near the front line. What impressions of fighting in World War I does this passage convey?

Mist and the smoke of guns lie breast-high over the fields. The moon is shining. Along the road troops file. Their helmets gleam softly in the moonlight. The heads and the rifles stand out above the white mist, nodding heads, rocking carriers of guns.

Farther on the mist ends. Here the heads become figures; coats, trousers, and boots appear out of the mist as from a milky pool. They become a column. The column marches on, straight ahead, the figures resolve themselves into a block, individuals are no longer recognizable, the dark wedge presses onward, fantastically topped by the heads and weapons floating off on the milky pool. A column—not men at all.

Guns and munition wagons are moving along a cross-road. The backs of the horses shine in the moonlight, their movements are beautiful, they toss their heads, and their eyes gleam. The guns and the wagons float before the dim background of the moonlit landscape, the riders in their steel helmets resemble knights of a forgotten time; it is strangely beautiful and arresting.

We push on to the pioneer dump. Some of us load our shoulders with pointed and twisted iron stakes; others thrust smooth iron rods through rolls of wire and go off with them. The burdens are awkward and heavy.

The ground becomes more broken. From ahead come warnings: "Look out, deep shell-hole on the left"—"Mind, trenches"—

Our eyes peer out, our feet and our sticks feel in front of us before they take the weight of the body. Suddenly the line halts; I bump my face against the roll of wire carried by the man in front and curse.

There are some shell-smashed lorries [trucks] in the road. Another order: "Cigarettes and pipes out." We are getting near the line.

In the meantime it has become pitch dark. We skirt a small wood and then have the front line immediately before us.

An uncertain, red glow spreads along the sky line from one end to the other. It is in perpetual movement, punctuated with the bursts of flame from the muzzles of the batteries. Balls of light rise up high above it, silver and red spheres which explode and rain down in showers of red, white, and green stars. French rockets go up, which unfold a silk parachute to the air and drift slowly down. They light up everything as bright as day, their light shines on us and we see our shadows sharply outlined on the ground. They hover for the space of a minute before they burn out. Immediately fresh ones shoot up to the sky, and again green, red, and blue stars.

"Bombardment," says Kat.

The thunder of the guns swells to a single heavy roar and then breaks up again into separate explosions. The dry bursts of the machine-guns rattle. Above us the air teems with invisible swift movement, with howls, pipings, and hisses. They are the smaller shells;—and amongst them, booming through the night like an organ, go the great coal-boxes and the heavies. They have a hoarse, distant bellow . . . and make their way high above the howl and whistle of the smaller shells. It reminds me of flocks of wild geese when I hear them. Last autumn the wild geese flew day after day across the path of the shells.

The searchlights begin to sweep the dark sky. They slide along it like gigantic tapering rulers. One of them pauses, and quivers a little. Immediately a second is beside him, a black insect is caught between them and tries to escape—the airman. He hesitates, is blinded and falls.

At regular intervals we ram in the iron stakes. Two men hold a roll and the others spool off the

barbed wire. It is that awful stuff with close-set, long spikes. I am not used to unrolling it and tear my hand.

After a few hours it is done. But there is still some time before the lorries come. Most of us lie down and sleep. I try also, but it has turned too chilly. Near to the sea one is constantly waked by the cold.

Once I fall fast asleep. Then waking suddenly with a start I do not know where I am. I see the stars, I see the rockets, and for a moment have the impression that I have fallen asleep at a garden fête. I don't know whether it is morning or evening. I lie in the pale cradle of the twilight, and listen for soft words which will come, soft and near—am I crying? I put my hand to my eyes, it is so fantastic, am I a child? Smooth skin;—it lasts only a second, then I recognize the silhouette of Katczinsky. The old veteran, he sits quietly and smokes his pipe—a covered pipe of course. When he sees I am awake, he says: “That gave you a fright. It was only a nose-cap, it landed in the bushes over there.”

I sit up, I feel myself strangely alone. It's good Kat is there. He gazes thoughtfully at the front and says:

“Mighty fine fire-works if they weren't so dangerous.”

One lands behind us. Two recruits jump up terrified. A couple of minutes later another comes over, nearer this time. Kat knocks out his pipe. “It makes a glow.”

Then it begins in earnest. We crawl away as well as we can in our haste. The next lands fair among us. Two fellows cry out. Green rockets shoot up on the sky-line. Barrage. The mud flies high, fragments whizz past. The crack of the guns is heard long after the roar of the explosions.

“Mighty fine fire-works if they weren't so dangerous.”

Beside us lies a fair-headed recruit in utter terror. He has buried his face in his hands, his helmet has fallen off. I fish hold of it and try to put it back on his head. He looks up, pushes the helmet off and like a child creeps under my arm, his head close to my breast. The little shoulders heave. Shoulders just like Kemmerich's [a fellow soldier who is in the hospital]. I let him be. So that the helmet should be of some use I stick it on his behind;—not for a jest, but out of consideration, since that is his highest part. And though there is plenty of meat there, a shot in it can be damned painful. Besides, a man

has to lie a whole month on his belly in the hospital, and afterwards he would be almost sure to have a limp.

It's got someone pretty badly. Cries are heard between the explosions.

At last it grows quiet. The fire has lifted over us and is now dropping on the reserves. We risk a look. Red rockets shoot up to the sky. Apparently there's an attack coming.

Where we are it is still quiet. I sit up and shake the recruit by the shoulder. “All over, kid! It's all right this time.”

Activity Options

1. **Recognizing Facts and Details** Make a chart to note sensory details—ones that appeal to the five senses—that bring Bäumer's experiences alive. Share your chart with a group of classmates.
2. **Recognizing Point of View** Pretend that you are Paul Bäumer. Write a letter home to your family, describing your war experiences and your state of mind. Share your letter with classmates.