
Analysis of The Novels, A Farewell To Arms And All Quiet On The Western Front, With A View On Quest For Normality

How far does the literature of the First World War depict a search for normality despite the fact that the war has questioned 'civilised values'?

For many of those who took part in the First World War, 'normality' was not found until much after the war. Shortly after the publication of novels such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *A Farewell to Arms*, many of its readers spoke out in defence of war literature, stating that these novels represent an 'Erlosung', or release, from the traumas of war. It can be considered that the literature itself of this nature can help find this normality, and sort out "the tangled memories and emotions of the Great War, and to come to terms with them." (Barker 1979, p. 48).

Since such novels based in the war are considered to be helpful to veterans, it is important to note that there are a number of events in these novels whereby a person is in search of a new purpose. Most remarkably is a statement from *All Quiet on the Western Front*, where Paul states "We are not youth any longer. We don't want to take the world by storm. We are fleeing 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." (Remarque 1929, p. 42). Here, there is a very strong sense that, for the young men, the war has taken its toll on them, and is no longer the adventure that they sought. With a transition from youth to men, it appears that they want to return to the normality that there was before their deployment.

This idea is also applied in *A Farewell to Arms*. As Frederic's relationship with Catherine grows, he too can see that he is no longer a young man in the war, but an adult who longs to escape the violence and start a normal life with Catherine. He goes to great extent to do this, notably refusing to be operated on so that he can remain injured and avoid the frontline: "I threw away the goddam truss so it would get bad and I wouldn't have to go to the line again." (Hemingway 2014, p. 30)

It is interesting that Frederic should battle his purpose in the war with alcohol. Seen as a form of escapism, there is no doubt that Frederic drinks to forget. It may be that alcohol reminds him of home while blocking out the trauma. In a similar fashion, Paul and Kat go hunting for a better meal, and arrive with horse-flesh, which they cook and eat. The mere fact that the young men are searching for a better food is an example of just how strong they wish to return to normality, yet the fact that they feast upon horse-flesh does indeed question their 'civilised value'.

This too is explored in both novels, particularly with the act of killing. Frederic shoots and kills a Sergeant who refuses to help him push the ambulance out of the mud. The fact that both men are fighting for the same side, and Frederic shows no remorse in killing him is evidence of the truth that 'civilised value' is diminished with those involved in the war. On the other hand, Paul murders a British soldier in self-defence, yet it is only after a realisation of what he has done that he states "I would give much if he would but stay alive" (Remarque 1929, p. 105). Although it is clear that Paul has been completely transformed by the war, there is still a great sense that he is very much human; he acts as if the dying soldier were a normal person on the streets of his hometown, and refuses to see him as the enemy. It is the realisation that this man had a wife

and daughter that sparks the 'civilised' in Paul, and it may be argued that a return to normality is sometimes not sought after, but comes naturally from within.

A natural movement of the normal is also strong in the relationship between Frederic and Catherine. Most particularly is the fact that Frederic did not wish to start a relationship with Catherine, since he states that he had "treated seeing Catherine very lightly" (Hemingway 2014, p. 35). As his natural feelings developed, revealing in him a longingness for normality, he starts "feeling lonely and hollow" (ibid) on the days that he is unable to see her. Such withdrawal symptoms are evident that Frederic was yearning a return to normality in what is otherwise a much uncivilised war.

Paul's visit to his home whilst on leave highlights the toll of the war on the individual. Feeling disconnected from the start, he discovers that that he does "not belong here anymore, it is a foreign world." (Remarque 1929, p. 79) With his dad constantly quizzing him on the war, and his old schoolmaster insisting that they know nothing of the bigger picture of the war, Paul concludes that "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." (ibid). It is clear that the definition of 'normality' has been altered for Paul; it is no longer the safe environment of the home, but the violence of the frontline.

It is clear that Paul had mistook his return home for one very much like it was prior to the war. Barker argues that "[Paul] Baumer's generation tries to find a way back to normality, even though the impossibility of the task is just as clear from the outset." (1979, p. 57). Though this is very true, perhaps the "impossibility of the task" is not as clear to the young men as argued. Most likely, if Paul knew that his return home would cause him distress, he would not have returned. At the end of the trip, Paul can see that "It will be like this too, if I am lucky, when the war is over and I come back here for good. I will sit here just like this and look at my room and wait." (Remarque 1929, p. 80). He is clearly aware of the effects the war has had on him, and is perhaps at this point more conscious of the fact that a return to normality is unlikely.

Despite this, Paul does bring a taste of home to the frontline. He gives Kat and Kropp some potato-cakes and jam that his mother made. It is interesting to see Kat's reaction as he takes a bite. He immediately knows that these were made by Paul's mother, and says that he "can tell by the taste." (Remarque 1929, p. 96). For the soldiers, a bite of homemade food is a return to normality, and more interestingly exposes the food conditions of the war. We can assume that Kat is accustomed to food of a poorer taste, and can therefore contrast quality tastes.

Catherine in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, is also a character that is arguably in search for normality. Though her role in the Great War is secondary, she has been deeply affected by its outcome. After the death of her fiancé at the Battle of the Somme, she moved to Italy to find solidarity. Yet here she reprised her role as a nurse and found little solidarity in serving for the war. She tells Frederic that she was going to cut her hair off when she heard about her fiancé's death, and this because she "wanted to do something for him." (Hemingway 2014, p. 16). During her relationship with Frederic, she arguably fights for normality, which she hopes will be fulfilled by escaping the war. After the pair meet in Stresa and flee to Switzerland, they live together and "exist exclusively in and for their love." (Donaldson 1990, p. 97).

Frederic and Catherine's 'search for normality' is fulfilled in Switzerland, yet an evaluation of their lives in the snowy mountains may show that normality was never fully rewarded. Hovey

argues that “They have not only pulled out of the Great War; they are also cut off from their own families and all friends” (ibid). Though their life has become far more civilised, it is hardly a return to normality. It is perhaps very much a form of escapism, which runs parallel to the actions of the fictitious Victor Frankenstein; he too escapes to the Alps in search for normal life after infusing life on his creation, but only finds isolation. On Frederic and Catherine, Hovey is also of the view that “They have no idea, purpose, plan; they never consider returning to the world to live in it in any role. They are not trying to learn or understand or grow.” (ibid). While this is completely true, Hovey’s idea can also be applied to the general society of the First World War; civilians and soldiers had little purpose but to survive the war, with a far less importance being applied to ‘understanding and growing’.

Certainly, in both novels, there is evidence of strong efforts being made in the search for normality. While Frederic’s attachment to Catherine flourishes, Kat and Paul’s interest in women still remains, in what is generally a male-dominated war. The men in Paul’s company make a trip to the river in an effort to meet French girls; this is solid element of the normal as it displays the soldiers in their most natural state. Not only are they a large part of the Great War, but they also remain true to their human side.

By the end of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul’s search for normality and survival throughout the war comes to an end when he is found dead. The unknown narrator insists that “he could not have suffered long; his face had an expression of calm, as though almost glad the end had come.” (Remarque 1929, p. 140). A closer reading of Paul’s calm state at his death may reveal more about the character; it can be argued that perhaps there was nothing else for Paul to live for, he had become so affected by the war that normality was far beyond his reach. It would be fitting then that Paul should die in that state, as if relieved that his torment is over. In the end he is reunited with the peace that death provides.

Catherine and the baby’s death at the end of *A Farewell to Arms* is also significant to the search for normality. ‘Normal’ for Frederic would have meant living peacefully with his wife and child after what he experienced during the Great War. However the fact that this peaceful ending is taken from him may be a reflection that normality at the end of the war cannot simply be achieved. Despite Frederic’s escape from the war, he could not escape to a normal lifestyle. At the novel’s abrupt ending, Frederic is alone again and has gained nothing. Through her death, he mirrors the occurring deaths of the war: “Now Catherine would die. That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you.” (Hemingway 2014, p. 279). Even at Catherine’s death, Frederic cannot escape the war; he feels it necessary to reminisce on the reality of the system, and adds to the impression that he will never return to normality.

There appears to be a very strong theme of the ‘search for normality’ in First World War literature. Most characters placed in front of a violent setting are attempting to flee the violence. It appears that Army personnel are the ones who suffer most in what can be considered an unnatural world. Often they are seen searching for elements of a normal lifestyle through food, social welfare and even a purposeful injury and subsequent hospital care.

Even after the war, normality is not restored. Frederic leads a very much open lifestyle, while Paul is killed and his comrades will never return to the same state before the war. This was an issue often commented on by survivors of the war. Remarque himself stated that “The shadow

of war hung over us, especially when we tried to shut our minds to it.” (Barker 1979, p. 33)

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