Erich Maria Remarque

Essay Questions and Answers

# Does *All Quiet on the Western Front* suffer from lack of plot and characterization?

***Answer***: If a story is to be called a plotted novel rather than a simple narrative with no claim to greatness, every incident is essential. Its removal would cause more than a mere gap but a collapse of the whole. Is this true in the case of *All Quiet on the Western Front*? Does this story spring from a series of planned connected incidents and from the interaction upon one another of characters set down in this chain of events? Does it lead up to a climax and then descend logically and gracefully to an artistic conclusion? Or do we simply witness the gradual destruction of youth by the war machine, even as we might witness the stages in the demolition of a building as it could be brought to us by a master of summary, scene , and description?

Each side can be argued. Certainly, there is a climax in this story. In successive stages Paul suspects that there will be no return for him, even though he should survive the war. But conviction and climax come on his visit home during leave.

Also there is characterization, sometimes broad, occasionally brief, but usually vivid. The cowardly cook, the splendid company commander, the contemptible corporal of the training camp, and the arrogant major encountered on leave are all real people to the reader. Also, in some cases, they are in themselves responsible for the action of the story. Paul and his schoolmates would not have enlisted were it not for their headmaster, later a ridiculous figure upon the moor. Nor, except for him, should one of them have died so soon. In general, however, characterization has nothing to do with action here as it does in other great works of fiction. Iago, in *Othello*, for example, could have accomplished nothing without Othello's potential for homicidal jealousy and Desdemona's almost incredible naivete. But here the stage was set for these boys long before they cidal jealously and Desdemona's almost incredible naivete. But here the stage was set for these boys long before they were born, when an Iron Chancellor paved the way for a Prussian military machine, and then, like Frankenstein, let the monster break from his control. Neither are the incidents linked in an interdependent pattern. Kantorek's ferocious patriotism, the cruelty of Himmelstoss, Bulcke's stinginess, and the death of Kemmerich are all incidents contributing to action, but disconnected ones. They do not follow in planned development as do the feud, edict against further fighting, insult, duel, and death of Tybalt, which led up to the climax in Romeo and Juliet. Nevertheless, despite their lack of connection and their capability of omission, with only resultant gaps rather than collapse, these incidents are presented by Remarque with a selection and narrative power that gives us an unforgettable impression of war's power to destroy even its survivors