

Discussion Questions for *All Quiet on the Western Front*

1. Paul Baumer says at one point in his narrative that:

. . . Two years of shells and bombs—a man won't peel that off as easy as a sock.

We agree that it's the same for everyone; not only for us here. But everywhere for everyone who is our age; to some more, and to others less. It is the common fate of our generation.

Albert expresses it : 'The war has ruined us for everything.'

He is right. 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. (87 – 88).

How does this feeling of being cut-off from the rest of the world come about? How much of this feeling is due to the war? How much is due to a rite of passage that everyone feels as a teenager?

2. Later in the story, Paul writes that "Their stillness is the reason why these memories of former times do not awaken desire so much as sorrow—a vast, inapprehensible melancholy. Once we had such desires—but they return not. They are past, they belong to another world that is gone from us," (121).

What have Paul and his friends lost? Innocence? Love? The ability to remember their prior lives? Their sense of humanity?

3. One page 123, Paul says that "We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men, we are crude and sorrowful and superficial—I believe we are lost."

Does this feeling seem to confirm Gertrude Stein's assessment that the post-war generation is "The lost generation?"

4. When Paul journeys home after receiving his furlough, he is troubled by the reception he receives from a number of people. At one point, he says that "There is a distance, a veil between us," (160). What do you think has caused this distance between he and his former acquaintances, as well as his family?

5. Alone in his room, Paul thinks about his former life, when he can find enjoyment in his studies. At one point, he says that

I want to feel the same powerful, nameless urge that I used to feel when I turned to my books. 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. (171).

In your opinion, does Paul believe that he will ever enjoy the love of learning that he once had? Why or why not? Please use passages from the text to support your opinion.

6. When Paul encounters the Russian prisoners, he recognizes that they are human beings, like him. While thinking about these prisoners, he muses that he would have to shoot them if they were again in battle. He then stops and considers:

I am frightened. I dare not think this way no more. This way lies the abyss. It is not now the time but I will not lose these thoughts. I will keep them, shut them away until the war is ended. My heart beats fast: this is the aim, the great, the sole aim, that I have thought of in the trenches; that I have looked for as the only possibility of existence after this annihilation of all human feeling; this is a task that will make life afterward worthy of these hideous years. (194).

Do you believe that Paul lives up to this ideal in the rest of the story? Does his killing of the man who stumbles into his trench nullify these thoughts? Do you think that his goal is noble, even if he is faced with the possibility of killing other men?

7. Several times in the novel, Paul and his friends mention that the war was brought about by nameless men who are power hungry. Do you agree with their assessment? Do the combatants on both sides see things the same way? Are all wars brought about by nameless men who want to be famous? Can both sides be right about the reason for going to war, for defending their fatherland?
8. In portions of the narrative, Paul relates that several of his teachers and former drill instructors were martinets, and caused the common soldiers a great deal of trouble. At one point, he mentions that the men who were of little importance in civilian life acted more important in the military. Have you ever experienced a time when power “went to someone’s head?” Is Paul’s observation about the nature of power in powerless people correct? Why do you think that this is so?
9. During the course of the novel, Paul mentions that the army is run on a system of drills, marches, and routines, and that the soldiers resent these practices. Does it seem strange that

drills should be conducted during the course of the fighting? What was your reaction when Paul and his comrades lose their new uniforms after the inspection by the Kaiser?

10. Has this book changed your perception of war? Are we inured to the concept of war, with coverage in the newspapers, radio and television? Have CNN and the nightly news programs caused us to become desensitized to the horrors of warfare? Does this book make a case for the notion that war is senseless?

11. Why do you think the book was so unpopular when first published?