

# Arch of Triumph Short Guide

## Arch of Triumph by Erich Maria Remarque

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# Characters

Arch of Triumph develops two major characters, Ravic and Joan. Ravic, a skilled surgeon whose real name is Ludwig Fresenberg, served in World War I where he met Sergeant Katczinsky, hid two of his friends from the Gestapo, was caught and brutally interrogated by Haake, and then sent to a concentration camp from which he escaped to become a Paris refugee, a man without a passport or a country.

Ravic saves Joan Madou from suicide after the death of her lover, and he and Joan fall in love because each needs the other as stabilizing influences in a rapidly changing world. As with the Paris lights and world peace, their love affair is doomed by the ominous approach of war, and the end of their affair begins when Ravic, who aids a seriously injured construction worker, is questioned by the police and then deported because he does not have a valid passport. Three months later, Ravic slips over the border and returns to Paris only to find that Joan, who often says that she would be lost without him, is living with an actor. Deeply hurt, Ravic begins to put Joan out of his thoughts and life despite her repeated attempts to resume their affair.

When Joan is fatally wounded by her new lover and the bullet lodges close to her spine causing slow paralysis, Ravic saves Joan from an excruciatingly slow death by giving her a lethal injection when the pain becomes too great.

Another important character is Haake, the Nazi Gestapo interrogator who brutalized Ravic and Sybil, Ravic's first love who hangs herself in a concentration camp. Ironically, Haake appears periodically in Paris on secret missions, and once Ravic recognizes him, he begins plotting his revenge, a secondary plot line that supplies tense excitement in the narrative. After murdering Haake, Ravic feels purged, especially of his painful memories of Sybil: "Haake's death had freed Sybil's face from its look of death ... At last he could have peace." Yet, in another ironic twist, Ravic's revenge and peace occur on the day before World War II begins, and the next day he is sent to a French internment camp.



## Social Concerns

Arch of Triumph is a continuation of the theme that Remarque used in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), *The Road Back* (1931), *Three Comrades* (1937), and *Flotsam* (1941): the effect of war on peoples and nations. However, instead of World War I, Arch of Triumph is mainly about the precipitous times during which the world hurtled towards World War II. Set in Paris in 1939, the story focuses upon the Jewish and anti-Nazi refugees who escaped from Germany before the Nazis had gained complete control of the country.

Socially, the refugees are victims of the Nazi political regime and so are the first to suffer the effects of World War II. Dr. Ravic, Boris Morosow, Rosenfeld, Aaron Goldberg, and countless others have slipped into France without valid passports and thus live as fugitives, knowing that if they are caught by the French police, they will be deported. Since they cannot return to their native countries and France does not want them, they live in limbo, and this existence becomes more threatening and terrifying with the inevitable approach of World War II.

Similar to Paul Baumer and Ernst Birkholz, these refugees stand on yet another threshold between two worlds, a world of peace and a world of war.

## Techniques

As in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Road Back*, Remarque uses a simple, direct story line, but in developing the plot of *Arch of Triumph* he uses the third person point-of-view and focuses upon Ravic and Joan instead of a group of characters. The doomed love affair between Ravic and Joan mirrors a wider sense of doom as evident in Kate Hegstroem's cancer, Aaron Goldberg's suicide, and the Hotel International's Jewish, Polish, and Russian refugees. In addition, Haake's frequent trips to Paris symbolize the inevitable approach of World War II and the Nazi occupation of Paris. The novel ends on a doomsday note as Paris' once bright lights go off and Ravic and the other refugees are trucked off to concentration camps; "There was no light anywhere ... It was so dark that one could not even see the Arc de Triomphe."

# Themes

Although war hovers in the background of the narrative, the major theme of *Arch of Triumph* is a love affair between Ravic and Joan Madou, another refugee. Since each needs the other as a stabilizing element in an uncertain life, they fall in love, have a romantic vacation in the Antibes, but from the beginning their love affair is both temporary and doomed because of his refugee status and because of the oncoming war. In fact, their doomed love foreshadows the fate of Paris which is tottering on the brink of World War II; or, as Kate Hegstroem, who is dying from cancer, says: "Two wars within twenty years — that's too much. We are still tired from the first."

Variations of doomed love affairs will appear in Remarque's *The Black Obelisk* (1957), *The Night in Lisbon* (1963), and *Shadows in Paradise* (1972).

# Adaptations

In 1948, Universal Motion Pictures produced a black-and-white version of Arch of Triumph which starred such famous actors and actresses as Charles Boyer (Ravic), Ingrid Bergman (Joan), Charles Laughton (Haake), and Louis Calhern. Generally, because it was so artificially melodramatic, the film was a commercial and artistic failure, but as one review noted, it was "an interesting one."

## Literary Precedents

The doomed love affair and the brink of war in *Arch of Triumph* recall Robert Jordan's and Maria's affair in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), Hemingway's novel about the Spanish Civil War which foreshadows World War II. In addition, the characters' search for stability and meaning in life in *Arch of Triumph* may loosely parallel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Hemingway's story about the Lost Generation. Hemingway's characters, especially Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley, have been traumatized by World War I and so have Ravić and Joan. In another sense, the carefree life before World War II in *Arch of Triumph* may loosely parallel James Jones's plot in *From Here to Eternity* (1951), and both novels, of course, end somberly with the beginning of the war.





## Related Titles

In a succinct passage from *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Baumer, the protagonist, underscores the novel's social implications: "Through the years our business has been killing; it was our first calling in life. Our knowledge is limited to death. What will happen afterwards? And what shall come of us?" These two questions are not only at the heart of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and the "Lost Generation" that emerged out of World War I, but they also become the basis for Remarque's later novels.

*Shadows in Paradise* (1977), Remarque's last novel, continues to examine the effects of war on peoples and nations. Similar to those in *Arch of Triumph*, the characters in *Shadows in Paradise* are refugees who live in New York in the closing years of World War II.

Moreover, some of them live in a New York hotel similar in ambiance and clientele to the Hotel International (*Arch of Triumph*), and their lives also have been changed by the war. Ironically, although they live in a paradise — New York and California with their lavish parties, bright lights, exquisite shops, and freedom — they are the metaphorical shadows who are not yet American citizens and who cannot return to their native countries because of the war.

Not only does Remarque recast the love theme from the *Arch of Triumph*, but he uses similar characters and situations. For example, Ravic was a surgeon and haunted by memories of the Gestapo and Nazis while Ross is an art connoisseur who gains his knowledge of and appreciation for art after escaping from a concentration camp and hiding from the Gestapo in the Brussels Museum. In addition, Ross lives in a hotel similar to the Hotel International, and one of his close friends is the Russian Melikov with whom he drinks vodka and reminisces.

Similarly, some of the refugees commit suicide, and Betty Stein dies from cancer — her attending physician is Ravic who has been freed from the concentration camp by Kahn. Instead of being a night club singer as was Joan Madou, Natasha Petrovna is a fashion model, and although she does not die from a tragic accident, she loses Robert at the end of the novel.

As in *Arch of Triumph*, the major theme of *Shadows in Paradise* is love although the setting and the names have been changed. Robert Ross, an anti-Nazi refugee, meets and falls in love with Natasha Petrovna, a Russian refugee. Also, just as is the affair in *Arch of Triumph*, the love affair between Ross and Natasha is only temporary and is doomed because he feels obligated to return to Germany after the war to help rebuild it. Once back in Germany, he realizes that his love for Natasha has been the most important event of his life, but he also knows that he will never return to New York.

In *Shadows in Paradise*, Remarque deals with the closing months of World War II, and he certainly captures the difference between Europe, which was ravaged by the war, and the United States, which seems removed and untouched by the war. With its bright



lights, shops, restaurants, and freedom, New York life goes on as if there were no war. Moreover, California is even farther removed from the war as evidenced by Ross's comment that California is a "strange vacuum somewhere between Japan and Europe," a fact further underscored when Hollywood produces B-grade anti-Nazi movies that, according to Ross, do not convey the real horror of Nazism. New York, California, and by extension, the United States are paradises, but the refugees are the shadows; as did Remarque's other fictional characters, these too stand on the threshold between an old and new world, and they must establish meaning and purpose to their lives.

If Paul Baumer's questions at the end of *All Quiet on the Western Front* — what shall happen afterwards and what shall become of us? — are prologues to all Remarque writes after his first novel, then *Shadows in Paradise*, his last novel, becomes the epilogue. Ross returns to Germany where no one remembers belonging to the Nazi party or accepts responsibility for what has happened. Life goes on, and, as Ross learns: "One can never go back; nothing and no one is ever the same."

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