

The Road Back Short Guide

The Road Back by Erich Maria Remarque

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Contents

The Road Back Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Techniques.....	4
Themes/Social Concerns.....	5
Adaptations.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Copyright Information.....	8



Characters

The Road Back extends the "rites of passage" theme of *All Quiet on the Western Front*; this becomes evident as the novel opens with a "Prologue" that begins with "What is still left of Number 2 Platoon." Once Armistice is declared, the survivors recall their dead comrades who include Baumer, Kat, Haie, Brandt, and Muller. In addition, the narrator is nineteen-year-old Ernst Birkholz who is similar to Baumer in thought and temperament and who relates his and his friends' feelings and experiences after the Armistice as they return home from the hell of war.

Moreover, whereas Baumer explains the effects of war on him and his comrades, Birkholz explains the aftereffects of war on him and his friends. Birkholz for example, feels isolated from his immediate family — his mother, as did Baumer's, fails to understand that war has changed her boy into a man. At home Birkholz is very restless and constantly seeks his comrades with whom he feels more comfortable, relaxed, and for whom he feels stronger bonds than with his own family. These feelings, of course, echo Baumer's experiences when he was home from the front.

Just as combat took its toll on Birkholz's friends, so, too, do the aftereffects of the war. George Rahe, haunted by the ghosts of war, returns to the now peaceful battlefield where he blows his brains out; Ludwig Breyer mourns that "we are all lost" and slashes his wrists; during a demonstration against profiteering and swindling, Max Weil is machine gunned by soldiers commanded by Lieutenant Heel, Birkholz's and Weil's former commanding officer. Although alive, the disabled are also reminders of the war and its effects — Hans Trosske has lost both feet to frostbite; Kurt Leipold has an artificial arm; and Paul Rademacher, who had received "two cuts with a trenching tool," has lost his left eye, nose, part of his mouth and all of his teeth, and three fingers.

These particularized examples represent the hundreds of thousands who must be cared for and who often march and carry placards that protest: "Where is the Fatherland's gratitude? — The War Cripples are starving." Despite the suicides and the disfigured, Birkholz, Willy Homeyer, Tjaden, Ferdinand Kosole, and even Bruno Muchehaput, the battalion's expert sniper who has killed over twenty men, survive the chaos of homecoming and put meaning and purpose in their lives. In a metaphorical sense, each constructs his own road back.

Techniques

In *The Road Back*, Remarque answers the questions posed by Baumer in *All Quiet on the Western Front* about what will happen to the youth who were caught up in World War I. In its simple structure, *The Road Back* recounts the traumatic times Birkholz and his friends experience. They return to a chaotic world in which inflation and profiteering are rampant and food is scarce. The returning soldiers are indeed superfluous, especially the disabled.

Within the narrative, suicide becomes the only solution for many like Ludwig Breyer and George Rahe; moreover, conditioned to killing and violence at the front, Albert Trosske, upon learning that his girlfriend has been unfaithful, calmly shoots her lover. Still, Remarque wishes to emphasize that despite the war and its aftereffects, life goes on, and thus people must re-establish purpose and meaning to their lives, an affirmation that becomes evident in Tjaden's marrying the butcher's daughter, in Willy Homeyer's becoming an excellent teacher, and especially in Birkholz's decision not to commit suicide and to build his own road back.



Themes/Social Concerns

Regarding the effects of World War I on German youths who were caught up in the chaos, Paul Baumer asks, "What will happen afterwards?"

And what shall become of us?" These questions furnish the social concerns for *The Road Back*, Remarque's second novel. In fact, as its title suggests, the novel relates what happens to Baumer's friends who survive the war and return to a home which, of course, they will find changed not only because of their own experiences and maturity, but also because of the war's effect on their country and civilization. Returning home, they see that their towns are besieged by socialist protesters who fire on their own people when demonstrations turn threatening; that inflation is rampant and food scarce except on the black market; and that the young ex-soldiers are indeed isolated from family, wives and sweethearts, and the older generation. In *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), Baumer says that he and his friends "have become a wasteland"; in *The Road Back*, the wasteland image becomes even more pronounced as the veterans try to find meaning and purpose in their lives. At the same time, however, *The Road Back* has a more affirmative ending than *All Quiet on the Western Front* in that *The Road Back* concludes with Ernst Birkholz, the nineteen-year-old narrator, affirming that although part of his life has been devoted to hating and killing, the past will become the basis for building a road back: "It will be a road like other roads, with stones and good stretches, with places torn up, with villages and fields — a road of toil . . . And I may . . . often stumble and fall. But I will get up again and not just lie there; I will go on and not look back."

Adaptations

In 1937, United Artists produced a black-and-white film version of *The Road Back* starring Richard Cromwell, John King, Andy Devine, Noah Beery, Jr., Spring Byington, and Slim Summerville (Summerville also starred in *All Quiet on the Western Front*). Reviews tended to praise the film for its impressive sequences but conclude that it did not reach inspiring heights as did *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Literary Precedents

As is *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Road Back* is a war novel in one sense, but since it deals with how Birkholz and his friends adjust to the postwar world and re-establish purpose and meaning to their lives, the novel is closely aligned with those novels that are concerned with similar situations — Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), John Dos Passes' *1919* (1932), and William Faulkner's *Soldier's Pay* (1926).



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994