

## Unseen extract 2: *All Quiet on the Western Front*

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Read the extract carefully. It is taken from *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, first published in 1929. It is narrated by Paul Bäumer, a young man of nineteen who, along with friends, joins the German army voluntarily after listening to the stirring patriotic speeches of his teacher. The extract comes towards the end of the novel, after Paul has endured horrific fighting.

### Sample question

Explore the significance of the futility of war in this extract.

Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways that Remarque shapes meanings.

### Extract

Our artillery can't really do much – they have too little ammunition, and the gun-barrels are so clapped out that they can't shoot straight, and scatter stuff towards us. We haven't enough horses. Our new drafts are pitiful lads who really need a rest, unable to carry a pack but able to die. In their thousands. They understand nothing of the war, they just go over the top and allow themselves to be shot down. One single airman knocks off two whole companies of them just for fun, when they were just off a troop train and had no idea about taking cover,

'Germany must be really empty,' says Kat.

We are quite without hope that there could ever be an end to this. We can't think nearly so far ahead. You might stop a bullet and be killed; you might be wounded, and then the next stop is the military hospital. As long as they haven't amputated anything, sooner or later you'll fall into the hands of one of those staff doctors with a war service ribbon on his chest who says. 'What's this? One leg a bit on the short side? You won't need to run at the front if you've got any guts. Passed fit for service! Dismiss!'

Kat tells a story that has done the rounds all along the front, from Flanders to the Vosges, about the staff doctor who reads out the names of the men who come up for medical inspection, and, when the man appears, doesn't even look up, but says, 'Passed fit for service, we need soldiers at the front.' A man with a wooden leg comes up before him, the doctor passes him fit for service again –

‘And then,’ Kat raises his voice, ‘the man says to him, “I’ve already got a wooden leg; but if I go up the line now and shoot my head off, I’ll have a wooden head made, and then I’ll become a staff doctor.”’ We all think that’s a really good one.

There may be good doctors – many of them are; but with the hundreds of examinations he has, every soldier will at some time or other get into the clutches of one of the hero-makers, and there are lots of them, whose aim is to turn as many of those on their lists who have only been passed for work detail or garrison duty into class A-1, fit for active service.

There are plenty of stories like that, and most of them are more bitter. But for all that, they have nothing to do with mutiny or malingering; they are honest, and they call a spade a spade; because there really is a lot of fraud, injustice and petty nastiness in the army. But isn’t it enough that regiment after regiment goes off into a fight which is becoming increasingly pointless in spite of everything, and that attack after attack is launched, even though our line is retreating and crumbling?

Tanks, which used to be objects of ridicule, have become a major weapon. They come rolling forward in a long line, heavily armoured, and they embody the horror of war for us more than anything else.

We cannot see the gun batteries that are bombarding us, and the oncoming waves of enemy attackers are human beings just like we are – but tanks are machines, and their caterpillar tracks run on as endlessly as the war itself. They spell out annihilation when they roll without feeling into the shell holes and then climb out again, inexorably, a fleet of roaring, fire-spitting ironclads, invulnerable steel beasts that crush the dead and the wounded. Before these we shrivel down into our thin skins, in the face of their colossal force our arms are like straws and our hand-grenades are like matches.

Shells, gas clouds and flotillas of tanks – crushing, devouring, death.

Dysentery, influenza, typhus – choking, scalding, death.

Trench, hospital, mass grave – there are no other possibilities.

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