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ILLUSIONS OF GLORY: WORLD WAR I AND WESTERN LITERATURE

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Abstract:

Fed by false illusions of glory, World War I was considered as a just war from both sides. However, the war had a great impact on human beings. It affected not only those who were in the battlefield, but also those who were staying back. It dragged countless people of every walk of life directly and indirectly into the overall conflict. Instead of providing solution to problems it proved a source of innumerable issues that led to World War II, which are still unresolved. It plunged Europe into an abyss.

KEY WORDS:

Western Literature , European literary , illusions of glory.

INTRODUCTION

A survey of important European literary works suggests how these works condemn war as cruel and needless adventure. This brief article will provide an insight in to the impact of World War I on some major European writers and their work. The essay will be useful for the students of modern English literature. Before I come to the question of the impact of the war on Western writers, it is important to give some background of the war and its overall impact on the society.

The earliest roots of World War I, the world's first major international conflagration, rest in a number of closely linked factors. Economic pressure, population growth, and rapid industrialization created an atmosphere of intense competition for scarce or limited resources. This led to an increased competition for overseas colonies. This is not to suggest, however, that the struggle among the European powers for colonization of Africa, Asia and other parts of the world started in the 20th century. The competition for the colonies had already begun in the 19th century, but now intensified. This led to a very complex system of imperialistic alignments between European powers. This new dispensation brought with it in the early twentieth century, as W.K. Ferguson and G. Bruun rightly posit:

...a threat of more serious conflict, of an armed struggle among the great powers growing out of their clashing activities and claims. The tension already existing among the European nations was intensified by Jingoism, colonial rivalry and commercial competition; the result was the natural increase in armaments which in turn increased fear and suspicion. The consequences of this spirit of jealousy were to be global, on a scale hitherto unimagined.¹

Thus, in addition to "commercial competition" and "colonial rivalry," Jingoism also played an important role in setting the stage for the world's first major conflict between the world powers.

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ILLUSIONS OF GLORY: WORLD WAR I AND WESTERN LITERATURE

Understandably then, the outbreak of a general European war in 1914 ultimately involved all the major nations of the globe, marking the opening of a new and unsettled era. Enormous destruction and tragic sacrifices resulted. According to William L. Langer, the main rivals like Britain and Germany suffered tremendous losses. Britain suffered approximately 947,000 deaths and 2.12 million other casualties; Germany had 1.8 million dead soldiers and 4.2 million wounded; France lost some 1.38 million people and Italy about 460,000.² There was also huge economic loss to all concerned. Britain's economic losses amounted to 7,800 million dollars; Germany's 8,400 million; France's 5,400 and Italy's 2700.³ Other countries all over the world also suffered huge losses in terms of men and financial resources as this bloody war went on for four years until 11 November 1918. People all over the world were thoroughly exhausted by this conflict and relieved by its conclusion and the universal feeling was that, "the first war had been the war to end wars... a future war seemed unthinkable."⁴ History proved that the claim was a wishful thinking. In a twenty year time the Second World War broke out in Europe, which brought unprecedented destruction in the world.

The Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations which came in the aftermath of the war, solved very few problems and created many more. Both victors and vanquished had suffered material losses as already indicated but the conflict also left behind a very dark legacy of fear, insecurity and bitterness. From the miseries of war the world in general and the European countries in particular emerged into a desperate era of political turbulence, economic confusion, fear of future conflict, deep psychological wounds, all of which contributed to the general collapse of traditional, social and moral standards and values. Not only Europe but the whole of Western civilization underwent radical change. On the moral level specially, as Norman Davies argues, "... one has to note the extreme contrast between the material advancement and reconstruction of Europe at this time and the terrible regression in the civilisation in political, social and intellectual terms."⁵

Davies further goes on to say that in broad sociological terms a new spirit or attitude was at work:

Over ten million soldiers were dead-mostly young married men or bachelors. Casualty rates were specially high among junior officers in the 20-30years' bracket... in not only loss of life but even in the break down at a number of other levels... [and] they were the true 'lost generation'. The burden of their war service, of their loss, and of their injuries had to be borne by their families, especially by the women folk. Women during war had been conscripted into jobs left vacant by soldiers. They worked in the factories, in offices, and in many occupations previously closed to them... for many girls this opened the road to social liberation, as symbolised by the fashion for short hair and for smoking in public. The change was reflected also in the advance of women's suffrage and new gender relations with a more open climate of sexuality open to women. The social and psychological costs of these changes were to be enormous.⁶

Thus Europe's cultural life was deeply affected by the War and its aftermath, heightening the collapse of traditional values and doubts in old notions of faith and order.

In intellectual terms the initial of time of anxiety and pessimism of the years between 1914-1930s was set by Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918). The issue of moral integrity was raised among the intellectuals by Julien Benda's *La Trahison des Clercs* (1927), where he challenged many of the conventional principles of faith in contrast to Communism. In the social sciences as Davies again points out:

The Frankfurt School exerted a huge influence opened in the early 1920s and closed by the Nazis in 1934, it sheltered a circle of intellectuals in the field of Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology. Figures such as Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) discussed the effects of modern science and technology and their relationship with human affairs.⁷

In the fine arts, traditional styles disintegrated because they no longer had much relevance to the bitter experiences of the new generation who wished to find new forms of expression to relate/depict their world view. Artistic experiments such as Symbolism, Cubism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Abstractionism now emerged. Major names of artists of this period include Marc Chagall (1899-1985), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Amadeo Modigliani (1884-1920), Paul Klee (1879-1940) and Salvador Dali (1904-1989).

In the field of literature, the post-war devastation and disorientation was eloquently presented by great European and American writers in different genres. These include names and works such as T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1920), *The Stream of*

ILLUSIONS OF GLORY: WORLD WAR I AND WESTERN LITERATURE

Consciousness writings of Virginia Woolf such as *To the Lighthouse* (1927), D.H Lawrence's controversial novel *Lady Chatterley's Lovers* (1928), Brecht's play *Threepenny Opera* (1929), Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924) as well as the writings of existentialists such as Jean Paul Sartre and Franz Kafka. The Theatre of the Absurd also began to emerge as a force in modern drama at this time. In America, the poetry of Ezra Pound and the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald need no introduction. Of course, Ernest Hemingway represents the best of American talent and inspiration combined with European experience and ethos, and is very much part of this list.

I will briefly discuss some of the major writers here. In English literature, T.S Eliot's *The WasteLand* probably the most significant poem of the first half of the 20th century. It has its roots in the European conflict (1914-1918) and the subsequent developments. It depicts the conditions of post-war Western civilisation in all its decadence, cynicism and immorality very effectively. The earlier wastelands of classical times are contrasted with the modern wasteland and it is found to be infinitely more sterile and empty of hope. Eliot underlines how far Western man had come from religion and had lost any hope of spiritual rebirth and revival. Stephen Coote explains that "to Eliot, however, all forms of Secularism seem ultimately doomed to disaster, and it appeared that only the Church-militant continuously influential and unclouded by liberalism-could offer a satisfactory view of mankind striving to build a better world, the city of God."⁸ This is why he appeals for a return to Christianity and Christian values, to "come in under the shadow of this red rock" (*The WasteLand*, I, line 26).

Without doubt, Eliot is a traditionalist who saw the solutions to the western problems in returning to the old order. He saw too much chaos in the society and absence of authority. James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, on the contrary, for instance, thought that there was too much authority and power, which have made real individuality impossible. Their work is testimony to this claim.

The frustration of hope in the post-war era, the disappearance of any central Divine power and the breakdown of social structures and limits with their tremendous impact on everyday life are very well portrayed in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*. Moving alternately inside the minds of people and outside in the disintegrating physical realities, Woolf uses this Stream of Consciousness technique very well indeed. Mrs. Ramsay, the central character in this novel, confronted by the increasing chaos and disorder of the time cries out, "How could any Lord have made this World? she asked with her mind. She always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice but suffering, death, the poor."⁹ In other words, she rejects this world, and is skeptic about meaning in life: the existence is painful and farcical.

In several of his poems, W.B Yeats also highlights many of the fears and concerns of this time. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," he laments the condition of modern warfare which is impersonal and without mercy. The age of chivalry had died. Similarly, in a very personal lament on the death of Lady Gregory's son in the war in "The Wild Swans at Coole," he seems suddenly to feel very old, out-dated and it seems to him as if an entire civilisation of gentlemanly values and standards has collapsed and disappeared forever, yet to be replaced by any sense of order. This lack of order or stability deepens into a fear of the future and what it might hold in poems like "The Second Coming," where an anti-Christ or beast-like figure is prophetically visualized.

Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is one of the major works of world literature in this category, i.e., as a depiction of World War I. The entire novel presents a very gloomy and sordid picture of the war, which is foregrounded by the love scenes between Henry and Catherine Barkley. The novel tells a story of wartime society, where hopelessness, exploitation, meaninglessness, and all sorts of perversion prevail. It is Hemingway's testament and expression of the 'reality' or 'realities' of war in general and World War I in particular, and one of the finest novels ever written in this genre, at any time.

A Farewell to Arms, as already suggested, is a major work, a classic in world literature for its depiction of WWI. It is a critique of World War I, and war in general. War was, in Hemingway's view, the most 'important' subject or background as he informed F. Scott Fitzgerald, because it allowed a writer to (a) condense action into a brief span, and (b) to highlight dramatic contrast with the romantic interest, or love story.

To conclude, the artists and writers of this era had been seriously traumatized by the experience of the war and its horrendous aftermath and tried to give expression to their horror in creative forms. They played an important role in highlighting many of the themes, as already discussed, revealing their fears and concerns. Many of these themes- of decline, loss of hope and faith, insecurity, meaningless existence, fear of the future, and so on - are recurring motifs in the majority of the literary works of this period. In the above account I have tried to highlight only some of them.

ENDNOTES

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ILLUSIONS OF GLORY: WORLD WAR I AND WESTERN LITERATURE

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