

“PSYCHOLOGICAL DESTABILIZATION THROUGH CONTINGENCY: THE CASE OF REMARQUE’S ANTIWAR NOVELS”

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Abstract

This article investigates the psychological destabilization of characters in Erich Maria Remarque’s antiwar novels as a result of contingent, unpredictable events. Drawing on concepts from trauma theory, existentialism, and literary psychology, the study explores how the breakdown of order and the randomness of wartime experiences contribute to a fragmented sense of identity and emotional disintegration in Remarque’s protagonists. Through textual analysis of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Road Back*, the article reveals that contingency operates not merely as a narrative device but as a destabilizing existential force. These contingent experiences expose the fragility of the human psyche and deepen the antiwar message of Remarque’s fiction.

Keywords: Erich Maria Remarque, contingency, psychological destabilization, trauma, antiwar literature, identity, existentialism, war fiction

Introduction

The unpredictability of war and its psychological toll constitute a central motif in the literature of the 20th century. Few authors have depicted the mental consequences of contingent war events with the depth and intensity of Erich Maria Remarque. His antiwar novels, particularly *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and *The Road Back* (1931), portray the human psyche as highly susceptible to disintegration when confronted with the arbitrary and senseless violence of war.

Remarque wrote at a time when Europe was still processing the collective trauma of the First World War. As a former soldier himself, his works do not merely recount historical facts but reconstruct the emotional and mental landscapes of those whose lives were irrevocably altered by war. His protagonists are not heroic figures in the traditional sense; they are deeply wounded souls, often young and morally disoriented, trying to find meaning in a world governed by chaos. These individuals face not only physical dangers but existential instability rooted in sudden, senseless events that defy rational explanation.

In the context of literary studies, contingency refers to the disruption of logical causality — when characters’ lives are overturned by unforeseen circumstances that lie outside of their control. This concept plays a fundamental role in Remarque’s narratives, where unpredictability often leads to emotional fragmentation, loss of identity, and moral collapse.

The psychological effects of such contingencies are not transient; they linger in the characters' memories, behaviors, and worldviews long after the war ends.

Modern trauma theory has expanded our understanding of how such experiences affect the human psyche. Cathy Caruth, for example, emphasizes that trauma is often linked not only to the violent event itself but to the impossibility of fully processing it at the moment of occurrence (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 1996, p. 4). This inability to comprehend and contextualize the contingent nature of wartime trauma leads to long-term psychological destabilization — a process Remarque meticulously portrays in his fiction.

This article aims to explore the mechanisms through which contingency acts as a destabilizing force in Remarque's antiwar novels. It examines how his characters are shaped, wounded, and often broken by events that are not logically connected but appear suddenly and irrationally. Through this lens, Remarque's literature can be seen as both a personal testimony and a philosophical inquiry into the fragility of human identity in the face of chaos.

Theoretical Framework: Contingency and Psychological Trauma

Contingency refers to the intrusion of unforeseeable events that disrupt personal agency, control, and predictability. In the context of war, contingency is often manifested through abrupt loss, injury, death, or betrayal — all of which play significant roles in Remarque's fiction. The literature of trauma often describes such experiences as "psychologically dislocating," pushing individuals into states of dissociation and emotional fragmentation (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 1996, p. 4).

Psychologist Viktor Frankl emphasized that "unexpected suffering, without meaning, is the most devastating" (Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 1946, p. 74). This concept resonates deeply with Remarque's protagonists, who are frequently plunged into despair by the senselessness of death and the fragility of friendship under fire. The failure of reason to structure these experiences results in a destabilized psychological state that permeates Remarque's antiwar message.

Analysis of All Quiet on the Western Front

In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul Bäumer's psychological transformation is driven by constant exposure to random and brutal contingencies. The sudden death of his closest friend, Katczinsky, who dies not in battle but from a random shrapnel wound during retreat, illustrates the arbitrary nature of survival. Paul notes bitterly: "He had fallen forward and lay on the earth as though sleeping. If one looked at him for a long time, one could believe he was just resting" (Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929, p. 183).

This moment of contingency—unexpected, unjust, and meaningless—marks a psychological rupture. Paul becomes emotionally detached, a state commonly described as "numbness" in trauma studies. The randomness of death in the trenches undermines his moral framework, leaving him disoriented and spiritually hollow.

Furthermore, Paul's psychological breakdown is emphasized in scenes where his senses are overwhelmed by bombardment, noise, and chaos. His repeated reflection that "we are not youth

any longer” (Remarque, 1929, p. 20) underscores a generational trauma triggered by unpredictable violence and existential despair.

Analysis of The Road Back

In *The Road Back*, Remarque continues the theme of psychological destabilization, this time in the context of post-war reintegration. The protagonist, Ernst, returns to civilian life only to find that society is indifferent to the veterans' suffering. The randomness of war is replaced by the absurdity of peace, where his experiences are unrecognized and his trauma unspoken.

One key moment comes when Ernst recounts his sense of dislocation during a seemingly trivial social gathering: “Everything seemed too bright, too loud, too meaningless” (Remarque, *The Road Back*, 1931, p. 94). The unpredictable contrast between battlefield and peacetime further disorients his identity.

Remarque uses contingency not only to show the initial trauma but also its persistent aftershocks. Ernst's instability is not resolved by the war's end; instead, it reveals a deeper psychological wound — the loss of meaning and coherence in life. He becomes a symbol of a disillusioned generation, destabilized by events they never chose yet were forced to endure.

Contingency as Literary Strategy and Ethical Commentary

In both novels, contingency functions on two levels: as a plot mechanic and a philosophical statement. On the plot level, it introduces shock and unpredictability, mirroring the reality of war. On the ethical level, Remarque critiques systems that valorize war while disregarding its chaotic psychological impact.

Remarque's work echoes Albert Camus' notion of the absurd: “The absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942, p. 28). The random loss of friends, identity, and future mirrors this silence. By portraying war as a site of continual psychological destabilization, Remarque challenges romanticized notions of heroism and glory.

Conclusion

Erich Maria Remarque's antiwar novels are rich in their depiction of contingency as a catalyst for psychological destabilization. Characters such as Paul Bäumer and Ernst undergo profound emotional disintegration, not only due to the horrors of war but more so because of its unpredictable, senseless nature. Through detailed psychological realism and existential depth, Remarque invites readers to witness the long-lasting consequences of war beyond the battlefield.

Contingency, in Remarque's narratives, is not a passive backdrop — it is the very force that fragments the psyche, disrupts moral certainty, and erodes personal identity. The sudden loss of comrades, the absurdity of survival, and the collapse of previously held beliefs form a chaotic existential landscape in which individuals no longer recognize themselves or their place in the world. This psychological erosion is not temporary but lasting, carrying over into postwar civilian life and reshaping the individual's worldview.

In sum, Remarque's antiwar novels transcend the boundaries of war literature to become enduring philosophical explorations of the human condition under stress. The psychological destabilization of his characters invites readers to contemplate not only the trauma of conflict but the existential disorientation that results from a world governed by chance rather than reason. In doing so, his works continue to resonate with modern audiences facing similarly unpredictable and destabilizing global realities.

References

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