

2024 Classical Literature Scholarship—2nd Place

Ellie Griffin

A Choice

The beginning of freshman year was when I became aware of how much hatred existed in the world. When the world had shut down because of Covid-19, I was at first elated. No school meant no waking up early, no going to school for eight hours, and no struggling to keep up with my peers. As I woke up each day and logged online to attend virtual school, I fell into a habit of opening a computer from the second I woke up, to the moment I went to bed. I had all day to spend on a computer, and the entire internet at my fingertips, and I spent countless hours browsing the internet, only leaving my room when it was absolutely necessary. Despite being in such close contact with my family, I avoided them, choosing to stay in my room and stay online.

Weeks and months of seeing only hate passed. The problem with being able to see anything online, is that you only see the worst of the world. And I was being fed story after story of hatred, anger, and fear. That was when I first became depressed, and began to struggle with my belief in God. If God truly did love the world, why would he allow such horrific things to happen? If the world was truly a good place, why could I only see pain in it? As I entered sophomore year, I was still flooded with ideas of loathing, and being back in school wasn't helping me to abandon them. Quarantine was over, yet I had never felt more alone. That's when my class was assigned to read *All Quiet On The Western Front*. As I read, I originally felt that the book was only reinforcing what I had begun to believe, that the world was not beautiful but painful. As I read on though, I realized that Erich Remarque was not telling a story of hate, but rather a story of the importance of loving the world and choosing to see the good over the bad. *All Quiet On The Western Front* helped me to abandon the message of hate that I had chosen to live, and instead choose to love the world, and to see the good in both it and its inhabitants.

The first half of *All Quiet On The Western Front* displays horrific acts of violence between the French and Germans, as death runs rampant. We see Paul struggle with not only losing his friends to infections, bullets and bombs, but losing his connection to the world as he begins to avoid any emotion that could come from his circumstances. He cuts off his emotions so he can view the people he is fighting as “the enemy”. He can’t continue to dehumanize the “enemy” though, as he sees firsthand the Russian soldiers' humanity as they sit inside the camp's prison and sing to keep each other company. Even in the midst of war, there was still human connection to be found.

When Paul stabbed Gérard Duval, the Frenchman and his “enemy, I remember crying. I was once again hiding from the world in my room, crying. Quarantine had allowed me to virtually see the worst of the world, just as Paul had seen the worst of the world in the trenches of World War One. And just like Paul, I had blocked off my emotions and chosen to see only pain. Paul's cries of “Comrade” to his enemy were him choosing to be good. And I too had to make a choice. A choice of continuing down my path, or changing to see good.

Even in the midst of one of the world's bloodiest battles, there was still good to be found, good of the comradery found between Paul and his friends, the Russians as they lay prisoner, and Paul as he fought to save his friends, and his “enemies.” As I sat in my room that night, I made the choice that I would no longer allow myself to be swept along in the flood of pain the world carried. I would choose to fight against it and see the good in the world. I wouldn't seek out stories of pain anymore, but seek for the stories of love and joy, and do my best to be a source of good for my friends and family. Erich Remarque's book helped me to choose to see the beauty of God, the world, and my family.