Smarty Pants

Mr. Barrington

English 12

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*War and Independent Thought*

In war, as in life, individuals that mindlessly adhere to regulations and standards set by those who occupy positions of higher power are at a much greater risk of being manipulated. Erich Maria Remarque’s novel “*All Quiet on the Western Front*” describes the lives of young German soldiers during WWI and the horrors they faced. Told from the perspective of Paul Baumer, a young German man in his early twenties, Remarque depicts the changing mindsets of the soldiers throughout the war and the obstacles and pressures they endured, both internal and external. The movie *The Book Thief*, directed by Brian Percival, tells the story of an orphaned German girl named Liesel who is adopted and taught how to read and write by her new father. Set in Nazi Germany, Liesel’s parents hide a Jewish man in their basement with whom she forms a strong bond over their common passion for literature, which is a discernible contrast to the extremely intolerant and discriminatory political climate unfolding in the country. Loosely inspired by George Orwell’s novella “Animal Farm”, Pink Floyd’s 1977 studio album “Animals” is a critique of society in which different classes of people are represented by dogs, pigs, and sheep. Much of the record consists of three lengthy tracks that each address a specific animal, cynically describing the group of people they symbolize and criticizing their respective behaviours. Finally, in an article titled “*DISINFORMATION AND DEMOCRACY: THE INTERNET TRANSFORMED PROTEST BUT DID NOT IMPROVE DEMOCRACY*”, Anya Schiffrin discusses the fight against the spreading of disinformation and propaganda online. The article highlights the tremendous influence the internet has on public opinions and explores the potentially harmful effects an uneducated population may have on a democratic society. These four sources share common themes such as the dangers of conformity, the perils of youthful innocence, and the despotic, tyrannical nature exhibited so often by those who are of a higher status. **Most importantly however, they all demonstrate the significant need for critical, free thinking. Remarque portrays and displays this concept very clearly to the reader in “*All Quiet on the Western Front*” through the interactions between the young soldiers and authoritarian figures they must obey leading up to and during the war. An individual’s lack of independent, critical thought enables those who occupy positions of power to control and manipulate them.**

By controlling someone’s influences and general knowledge, one can exploit them. Although the soldiers in “*All Quiet on the Western Front*” are certainly not unintelligent, their unbridled innocence and optimism allowed their schoolmaster, Kantorek, to take advantage of them while at school before the war began. Kantorek preyed on the boys’ youthful ignorance and enthusiasm, lecturing them incessantly about the benefits of the looming conflict and encouraging his students to volunteer for the war until they did so. Paul and his fellow classmates did not question the guidance of their schoolmaster, as they identified him as a representation of trusted authoritarian power. They believed that simply because he was older and more experienced, he was wiser. However, after their first exposure to the harsh, unforgiving reality of war, the soldiers realize that all their presumptions about the front are false. A feeling of betrayal begins to permeate through the small group of comrades, as they discover all they had been taught was merely disinformation and pro-war propaganda, used to generate excitement for the war. Given that the boys had no other sources of information to turn to, nor any alternate perspectives to challenge their ideas of war, they became easy targets for their schoolmaster to push his personal moral ideologies upon in class. Kantorek proves himself to be a hypocrite through his actions as well, because although he perpetuates the pro-war mentality that was popular at the time, he does not volunteer for the war. This mindset was common throughout the older generation too, and as Paul remarks despairingly, “There were thousands of Kantoreks, all of whom were convinced that they were acting for the best – in a way that cost them nothing” (Remarque 12). Paul’s attitude highlights how figures of authority could no longer be trusted in the eyes of the soldiers, as even though they pushed the new generation into the war, they remained at home while the young men involved in the conflict perished.

Furthermore, Kantorek’s pro-war mentality and merciless manipulation of his students reflects the combatting governments’ attitude toward their soldiers during times of war throughout the novel. The governments brainwash their citizens with nationalist propaganda to arouse a strong feeling of patriotism and bring about an eagerness for conflict within them. They convince the people that they are fighting for a noble cause, such as to defend their fatherland, and ostracize those who refuse to participate in the war. The individuals who do choose to engage in the conflict are rapidly depersonalized and trained to conform to authoritarian standards and regulations. Now compliant and submissive, the soldiers obey orders without hesitation which only allows their superiors to further manipulate them. By exploiting the soldiers’ fear of the opposition and the unknown, those in power convince them that the men they are fighting are their enemies, and the soldiers do not question the commands they have been given. However, as the war progresses, Paul and his comrades learn that what they have been told about the opposition could not be further from the truth. Through his experience at the Russian camp, as well as the time spent with a dying French soldier in a shell-hole, Paul begins to understand that the men he has been fighting against are not monsters, that they are simply working-class people with families and loved ones of their own.

While observing the Russian prisoners in the camp, Paul has an epiphany and realizes that his perception of them has been drastically influenced by his superiors’ fearmongering. This realization is portrayed in the novel as Paul thinks to himself: “A word of command has made these silent figures our enemies, a word of command might transform them into our friends” (Remarque 193). From the perspective of those in power, the soldiers are collectively nothing more than a killing machine whose parts are replaceable. They have been completely stripped of their identity, dehumanized, and are nothing more than savage, wild beasts who must fight for their own survival. Ironically, the naïve, brainwashed soldiers have been exploited, manipulated, and controlled by their own fatherland, the very one which they defended so valiantly to protect. Now, without the same enthusiasm or motivation to participate in the conflict, Paul and his comrades begin to contemplate the purposes of the war as well as challenging and questioning the pro-war mindset. They discuss at length the justification for war expressed to them by their fatherland and ask themselves who is truly benefitting from it, for it is not the soldiers, nor their families at home. The war does not benefit the winners or the losers. It is nothing more than an unforgiving, ruthless beast that claims the lives of the innocent and benefits those who occupy powerful government or military positions. The boys, now soldiers, have been taken advantage of and exploited by every form of authority they encountered in their young lives, as they were too young and inexperienced to see through the disinformation and propaganda being presented to them.

Despite being set in Germany during WWII as opposed to during WWI, Brian Percival’s flim *The Book Thief* encapsulates the themes of innocence, tyranny, and conformity that were apparent in *All Quiet on the Western Front* as well. Liesel, the main protagonist of the movie, is a young orphaned German girl who is adopted by a man and his wife in Nazi Germany. While at school, she learns about Nazi ideologies as well as being forced to sing anti-semitic songs, however she is too young to comprehend the horrors of what she is being taught. Liesel and the other children are naïve and innocent, and therefore susceptible to the hate and discrimination being disseminated throughout the country. The Nazis exploit the children’s lack of understanding regarding the real world in order to brainwash them with Nazi morals and ethics, as well as propagate pro-war, nationalist principles upon them. The communal book burning portrayed in the movie is significant, as it is an excellent example of the Nazi methodology on display. By burning all sources of information that don’t align with their perspective, the Nazis limit the potential influences and knowledge the public has access to, keeping them uneducated and easily manipulatable. Furthermore, it shows that it is not only the children who are being brainwashed and influenced by Nazi propaganda, because men and women of all ages were convinced that Hitler and the Nazi party were going to restore Germany to its former self, as it was before WWI. Because of the economic crisis Germany endured following WWI, the Nazis preyed on people’s emotions and frustrations, unifying the country under an extremely nationalistic political regiment and harsh authoritarian rule in the form of a dictatorship. They exploited the fear and turmoil much of the German population faced and designated the Jewish people as the primary scapegoat responsible for their problems. By inciting a feeling of pride and vengeance within its people, the government generated excitement and enthusiasm for the war, convincing the young men that they were fighting for the right cause. Unfortunately for the soldiers, little did they know that their lives were disposable in the eyes of the authority they obeyed so diligently. As death, the narrator in the film state: “It’s always been the same, the excitement and rush to war. I’ve met so many young men over the years who have thought they were running at the enemy, when the truth was, they were running at me” (Percival 51:18). Death highlights the delusion of the exploited soldiers through his words, as although they believe they will return from the war as heroes for defending their fatherland, the majority will perish, never to go home again. These ideas of blind conformity and expendable human lives is further exemplified in the film when Liesel’s town is being bombarded and Death remarks that “The bombs were coming thicker now. It’s probably fair to say no one was able to serve the Fuhrer as loyally as me” (Percival 1:43:57). Despite the soldiers’ belief that they are serving the Fuhrer and providing an honourable service to their country, their sacrifices mean nothing to those in power. They are merely pawns from the government’s perspective and are replaceable. Like the boys in Remarque’s novel, the German people have been taken advantage of, brainwashed, and exploited by the authoritarian figures and groups that they believed were looking out for their best interest. The population’s uncertainty and confusion regarding the future of their fatherland allowed the Nazis to spread their influence and manipulate the people’s thoughts, therefore controlling them.

The consistent themes established in both the novel and the movie, such as naivety, brainless conformity, and abuse of power, do not exclusively pertain to times of war. Pink Floyd’s studio album “Animals” explores these concepts in everyday society by likening different classes of people to animals. Written by David Gilmour and Roger Waters, the record is just over forty minutes long and primarily consists of three extensive tracks entitled “Dogs”, “Pigs (Three Different Ones*)*”, and “Sheep” respectively. Throughout the album, the dogs represent the determined, cutthroat businessmen and professionals, the sheep represent mindless followers, and the pigs represent individuals who have plenty of wealth, authority, and power. In “Dogs”, Gilmour addresses the theme of conformity through his lyrics as he directly compares working men to dogs because of their loyalty and submissiveness to the pigs who they work for. This is exemplified towards the end of the track as Gilmour describes the characteristics of an individual dog:

Who was told what to do by the man

Who was broken by trained personnel

Who was fitted with collar and chain

Who was given a pat on the back (Lines 34 – 37).

These lines demonstrate to the listener how the dogs conform to the pigs’ expectations and orders without reluctance, are rewarded for obeying commands, and have been trained to fit the prevailing system. They have been stripped of their individuality and are just another wolf in the pack, savagely scratching and clawing at one another to get ahead of their canine brethren. Because the dogs are perpetually in turmoil, continuously backstabbing one another to gain an advantage, they live in constant fear that another individual will take their position. Therefore, in order to please the authoritarian pigs and retain their posts, the dogs must conform and become perfect, submissive servants. This servant mentality, coupled with the mounting pressure of fellow competition, leads them to believe that the only way they can remain ahead of their peers is through indisputable loyalty and obedience towards the superior pigs who are in control of the dogs’ fate. A dog will spend his entire working life this way, striving for the respect and appreciation of their superiors. However, when he is old, grey, and unable to work, the pigs simply replace him with another. Once again, just like the German soldiers in WWI and WWII, the dogs are disposable in the eyes of the heartless pigs who rule over them.

“Pigs (Three Different Ones*)*”, written by Roger Waters, describes those who occupy the highest positions of society and possess vast amounts of wealth and power, as pigs. Greedy, gluttonous, and cold, the pigs only care about their own well-being and disregard those who are economically inferior to them. As Waters depicts the pigs, their lack of emotion is highlighted as he says: “You radiate cold shafts of broken glass/You like the feel of steel” (Lines 21 and 23). This use of imagery conveys to the listener how harsh and unfeeling the pigs are. They are malevolent individuals who exploit the lower classes in order to remain on top, and do so while maintaining an insincere, sophisticated appearance on the outside. Lastly, on the track “Sheep”, mindless followers are compared to sheep, who are famous for devotedly following the herd and the shepherd who leads them. In the song, the shepherds (who are also pigs), are powerful religious and political figures who control the sheep, keeping them oblivious to their bleak situation. The shepherds prevent the clueless sheep from revolting by manipulating their simple minds and preventing them from thinking critically about the dangers that surround them. The sheep have been brainwashed into thinking that their masters are leading them in the right direction, but the shepherds are simply using the sheep for their own benefit. This relation between the shepherd-like pigs and the sheep is exemplified by Waters’ lyrics:

Through pastures green He leadeth me the silent waters by

With bright knives he releaseth my soul

He maketh me to hang on hooks in high places

He converteth me to lamb cutlets (Lines 16 – 19).

These lines demonstrate the sheep’s naivety and stupidity, as even when they are in mortal danger, they are too unintelligent and blind to see it. Furthermore, they show that the sheep are disposable in the eyes of the pigs who lead them, but the sheep are unable to realize this until it is too late. Overall, the album demonstrates that when individuals simply conform or follow without thinking, they are easily manipulated and controlled by those who possess power and wealth.

Finally, although a lack of critical thought will certainly affect the individuals themselves, it also greatly impacts our society, as well as our democratic system. Anya Schiffrin, a professor at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, discusses the harmful impacts on democracy that could arise through the spreading of potentially false information online in her article; “*DISINFORMATION AND DEMOCRACY: THE INTERNET TRANSFORMED PROTEST BUT DID NOT IMPROVE DEMOCRACY”.* The internet has completely transformed protest by making it easier for groups of individuals with similar beliefs to unite within online communities and make their voice heard. Even the implementation of simple systems such as comment sections and like to dislike ratios allow the public to express their thoughts and opinions clearly. However, the ability to rapidly communicate ideas and information to a wide audience is not without its drawbacks. Since the internet is an accessible platform for anybody to share information, it has become completely oversaturated with content, and overloads the it’s users with information. This is problematic as there is so much content at one’s disposal, that they can choose to view whatever content or news aligns with their own moral ideologies and political agendas, regardless of accuracy, truth, or scientific evidence. As Schiffrin states:

“Citizens are increasingly turning to the Internet, a forum for distributing information that does not adhere to typical standards of truth, scientific inquiry, and evidence-based news and information. At the same time, the institutions that have typically distributed information to citizens are being usurped” (6).

This quote articulates well the idea of traditionally reliable sources of information such as news organizations being potentially overpowered by easily accessible online alternatives, despite not being necessarily accurate. Perhaps more worrying however, is the possible weaponization and propagation of misinformation and disinformation, to manipulate one’s thoughts and beliefs. Distinguishing between true and false information online has become much more difficult for the average citizen, and “If misinformation and fake news campaigns truly do frustrate citizens' attempts to educate themselves--or, even worse, actively manipulate citizens into believing false information--then the very foundations of democracy are at risk” (Schiffrin 6). A successful democracy’s very foundation depends on an educated populace, as voters must be well informed so they can actively participate. Therefore, if voters’ decisions are being manipulated by online propaganda and biased disinformation that is being presented to them by demagogues and fake news campaigns, it will only have a negative impact on the democratic society. One must be able to think critically about what they are being told, and not simply obey and follow the false information mindlessly, otherwise they may be manipulated and controlled. Furthermore, it is important for one to be educated, and to be able to think independently without relying on others for perpetual guidance. Democracy is at stake.

In conclusion, the ability to think independently and critically is invaluable. As portrayed in all four sources, those who were naïve and innocent, such as the soldiers in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Book Thief*, the dogs and sheep in “Animals”, and the uninformed voters portrayed in Schiffrin’s article, were all easily manipulated by figures of authority. Individuals who occupy positions of power use propaganda and disinformation to control the lower classes, and those who mindlessly conform and follow their superiors’ word are exploited. By limiting their freedom, education, and influences, powerful people can impose their own beliefs and ideologies upon the innocent, beating down their optimism and spirit, and converting them into submissive, compliant followers. Therefore, in order to combat propaganda and exploitation, the people must embrace critical thinking and educate themselves about the world around them. They must think for themselves as opposed to blindly repeating what they have been told by others, for an individual’s lack of independent, critical thought enables those who occupy positions of power to control and manipulate them.

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Writing Rubric

Name:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 2-2.5 | 3-3.5 | 4-4.5 | 5-5.5 | 6 |
| Depth of Discussion   * Arguments * Supporting Details * Insight into the topic | No understanding of the question.  Thesis is not stated.  No support of your arguments. | Understanding of question is not clear.  Thesis may not be stated but it is present in the writing sample.  Struggle to support your arguments. | Good understanding of the question.  Thesis could be stronger and your references are good but needs to support your argument a bit more. | Clear understanding of the question.  Effective argument and clear stated thesis  Argument could be clearer in writing sample. | Outstanding understanding of the question and thesis is well supported.  Effective argument or level of insight. |
| Writing   * Flow (Sentences make sense) * Paragraph Construction * Style | Lack of organization and no flow.  Points do not support your overall.  Clarity is not clear in the sample. | Organization is present, but do not directly help the flow of ideas.  Points need to elaborate and better support your overall argument.  Clarity is not clear in the sample. | Writing is organized and straightforward.  Paragraphs have errors in them but are not to distracting.  Points could be clearer in the writing sample. | Writing style is good.  All the paragraphs and sentences work well in the writing sample but there are some errors.  Clarity is clear but could be improved. | Effective writing style.  All the paragraphs and sentences work well in the writing sample.  Clarity is quite clear |
| Grammar   * Sentence Structure * Grammar | Tons of errors and grammar mistakes that distract the reader. | Lots of errors and grammar mistakes that distract the reader. | Some errors and grammar mistake but does not distract the reader to much in the writing sample. | Few errors and grammar mistake but does not distract the reader to much in the writing sample. | Error Free  Limited grammar mistakes. |
| Language   * Word Usage | Language is weak. | Language is very basic | Good use of language | Strong use of language. | Clear use of a sophisticated language. |

**6/6 marks**

**Observations in the paper:**

This was a well researched essay. The only thing would be to avoid one long paragraph on a page. Try to avoid long paragraphs that go more than one page. It is best to break them up into one or two paragraphs in a research paper. Overall, this is a sophisticated and well thought out essay. Well done!