

doi: 10.15584/dyd.pol.20.2025.24
Artykuł oryginalny

Data nadesłania: 3.10.2025 r.
Zaakceptowano do druku: 27.10.2025 r.
Opublikowano: 29.12.2025 r.

AGNIESZKA KONDRAK

Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce

ORCID: 0009-0001-0033-1286

E-Mail: akondrak@o2.pl

The Characters of Parents Facing War Trauma According to E.M. Remarque

Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the trauma of the First World War from the perspective of the main protagonist's parents. The impact of the First World War on social change is outlined and shown in the light of Erich Maria Remarque's *The Road Back*.

Key words: World War I, mother and father motive, *The Road Back*, Erich Maria Remarque

Parents facing war trauma according to E. M. Remarque

The First World War became a global conflict that radically changed the course of history, not only in military terms, but also socially. Many men died prematurely in the trenches, and the soldiers who returned home struggled with physical and psychological wounds for the rest of their lives¹. The First World War even contributed to differences in the understanding of mourning within the family of the deceased. Art often referred to mothers – mourners, ignoring the figure of the father in the tragedy caused by the death of a son at the front. Importantly, the issues of the changed psyche of soldiers and post-traumatic stress disorder are overlooked. The war affected all areas of life, including literature. The tragic events shaped generations of writers and determined their views². Erich Maria Remarque's novel *The Road Back* depicts the attempt of a group of soldiers who fought in World War I to return to a normal, war-free life. Pacifist tendencies are a clear message of the work. Particularly noteworthy are the supporting characters, the mother and father of the main character, used by the author to reveal hidden meanings concerning both the past and social change.

¹ O.R. Simmet, *Verschiedene Deutungen des gleichen Krieg: Wie Jünger und Remarque den Zweck ihrer Grabenerfahrungen ausgraben*, 2018, p. 2.

² S. Fishman, *The War Novels of Arnold Zweig*, „The Sewanee Review” 1941, 49.4, p. 433.

The Shadow of the Great War

Descriptions of historical events are usually limited to the duration of the conflict and the warring parties, causes, consequences, territorial scope and number of soldiers killed. Purely historical details are not enough if we want to look at a given case holistically. Szymański, presenting the scale and effects of World War I, considers it an unprecedented event in history³. The researcher emphasises the significant importance of social changes caused by this armed conflict. Ross Wilson, focusing on the repercussions of the war, points out that the memory of it remains alive⁴. The English researcher, like Szymański, refers to the perspective of memory. This historical event still evokes extreme emotions today. In addition to armed conflict and the death of soldiers, the First World War caused significant socio-cultural changes, transforming the role of women, the structure of the family and the upbringing of children. Women took over many jobs previously performed by men and began working themselves. The patriarchal family model was consigned to oblivion. Society was suddenly faced with new problems, previously unknown on such a scale: the death of large numbers of soldiers, invalids, unable to work and function normally. On the one hand, physical disabilities (amputations, wounds, faces disfigured by explosions) affecting men returning home became a challenge in life, and on the other hand, a more serious problem – war trauma⁵. No one could have predicted the cruelty, mass death and psychological devastation. Men fighting on the front lines, constantly exposed to the risk of losing their lives and health, saw their comrades-in-arms die. The harsh, even inhuman conditions in the trenches, hunger, lack of privacy, rats and ubiquitous disease meant that the generation fighting on the fronts of the First World War was called the ‘lost generation’. Gabriela Švábová characterises the participants of Great War, whose youth was marked by a close experience of death. The trenches taught them dehumanising behaviours - killing, dying and violence. It is worth noting that most soldiers died between the ages of 18 and 24⁶. To this day, questions remain about the meaning of war and the lives lost by soldiers. A second, rather overlooked issue is the existence of soldiers who survived the war; they faced difficult tasks. After all the horrors of war, they had to return home, leaving behind the spectre of death, killing and suffering, which was simply impossible. The trauma led many of them to commit suicide. Society did not realise the extent of the tragedy experienced by their loved ones.

³ W. Szymański, *Modi memorandi. Pamiętanie i przeżywanie Wielkiej Wojny wtedy i dzisiaj. Próba komparatystyczna*, „Litteraria Copernicana” 2018, 33, p. 29.

⁴ R.J. Wilson, J. Ross, *Nadal trwa: trauma i pamięć I wojny światowej*, „Teksty Drugie” 4 2018, p. 218.

⁵ S. Michl, J. Plamper, *Soldatische Angst im Ersten Weltkrieg: Die Karriere eines Gefühls in der Kriegspsychiatrie Deutschlands, Frankreichs und Russlands*, „Geschichte und Gesellschaft” 2009, 35.2, p. 220.

⁶ G. Švábová, *Die Verlorene Generation in den Werken von Erich Maria Remarque*. Online. Bachelor’s thesis. Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc, Faculty of Education, 2014. Available from: <https://theses.cz/id/1tkr2x/>, p. 13.

The character of a parent facing the trauma of war

In popular awareness and literature, there is an image of a mother⁷ in mourning⁸. Erich Maria Remarque, in his novel *The Road Back*, created a different image – that of a mother entangled in the tragedy of war; a mother who, although she did not lose her son in the war, does not recognise her child. This literary image, often overlooked in testimonies, is an important study of the effects of war. Soldiers returning from war were no longer the same people; the war had destroyed their psyche and made it impossible for them to return to normality⁹. It is often forgotten that soldiers' families had to learn to live with strangers – their own. Remarque presents this problem in *The Road Back*.

The author introduces the reader to the family environment of Ernst, the main character, after his return from the war. The estrangement between Ernst and his parents, which reflects the social situation at the time, is evident during the ceremonial welcome dinner. Remarque's creation of the characters closest to the main character contains a wealth of information that indirectly reveals the social changes caused by the Great War.

The first meeting with his parents takes place during a formal dinner to celebrate their son's return home. It is immediately apparent that Ernst has a warmer relationship with his mother than with his father. An important feature of the parents' characters is that the author attributes different problems to the mother than to the father. Remarque presented this scene at the beginning of the soldier's 'return' to his family home for a reason. In this way, he shows the audience the main character's relationships with his loved ones, who are created as representatives of information important to the message of the work.

⁷ Discussions about the tragedies of the Great War bring to the fore the memory of fallen soldiers, while their families are rarely mentioned. Silke Fehleemann outlines an important aspect of the consequences of war: the struggle to commemorate fallen soldiers has marginalised the groups that should be at the centre of mourning. The public discourse barely takes into account the victims' loved ones, as evidenced by the topos of „silent mourning”, referring to the imposed form of remembrance of the dead through „silence”. The pain of losing a son was attributed exclusively to mothers. Fathers were not seen through the prism of experiencing the pain caused by the death of a child. In the public consciousness, they were treated rather as ordinary citizens or potential soldiers. As a result, both parents were excluded from political and public memory. In literature and the visual arts, the parent is almost exclusively portrayed as mourning the loss of a child. But the loss affected both the mother and the father. The cult of the grieving mother is documented by numerous war memorials, such as *Pieta* or *Mater Dolorosa*. Silke Fehleemann writes more about this in *'Stille Trauer'. Deutsche Soldatenmütter in der Zwischenkriegszeit ('Silent Grief'. German Soldiers' Mothers in the Interwar Period)*.

⁸ S. Fehleemann, *'Stille Trauer'. Deutsche Soldatenmütter in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, „Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung”, 2009, Vol. 34, No. 4 (130), *Premature Death: Patterns of Identity and Meaning From a Historical Perspective / Vorzeitiger Tod: Identitäts- und Sinnstiftung in historischer Perspektive* 2009, p. 331.

⁹ S. Kaygin, *'Kriegstrauma' als eine der bedeutendsten Herausforderungen in der Antikriegsliteratur am Beispiel von Erich Maria Remarques Roman Im Westen nichts Neues*, „Diyalog Interkulturelle Zeitschrift Für Germanistik” 6.1 2018, p. 57.

Firstly, the mother in the novel *The Road Back* is a reminiscence of yesterday. Thanks to her figure, the reader pays attention to the aspect of the past and the former 'self' of the main character. This strategy allows for a comparison of the present with the past (Ernst's character and behaviour, his consciousness before and after his war experiences). Remarque shows, from an outsider's perspective, how war has diametrically changed someone close to him. A clear example of this is the scene in which the main character leaves the house and his mother offers to help him down the stairs by bringing him a lamp. In addition to the mother's tender care for her child, the aspect of the changes that war has brought about in the man comes to the fore here. The protagonist is surprised that his mother wants to light up a small section of the corridor. After all, he has been functioning in the dark and in the trenches, so he sees no point in bothering to fetch a lamp to take a few steps¹⁰. This confrontation with reality, free from war, is shocking and painful for the protagonist and his loved ones. What is more, there is a clear discrepancy between the behaviour of someone who has no direct experience of war and the habits of a soldier who miraculously escaped death. The poor mental state of the main character is also evidenced by the hallucinations that appear in the novel, such as dream illusions in which he returns to the peaceful times of his childhood, suddenly shakes off these visions and puts on his soldier's uniform again. This sudden change reveals the inner struggle of a man who has returned from the front and is trying to find remnants of his pre-war state of mind. It is not without reason that the author ends this scene with the sentence: 'Ich trage eine Uniform'¹¹, which explicitly indicates the protagonist's physical return from a war that has irreversibly changed his life, behaviour and psyche, but he still carries the past within him.

Ernst's subsequent conversation with his parents plays an important role in the analysis of the characters' psyche. Remarque describes the changes caused by the war, both from the perspective of the soldier and his loved ones. The first of these is the metaphorical transformation of a child into an animal. The fragment of the conversation about the change in the relationship between the son and his mother is characterised by extreme emotionality. It is a clash with reality: the protagonist has changed, he is no longer the previous Ernst, his mother does not recognise him. The conversation is universal in nature: it does not only concern the Birkholz family, but all families whose men took part in the war. Change means trauma, i.e. a mental state caused by external factors that threaten life and health, leading to profound changes in human functioning¹².

Aber jetzt begreife ich, weshalb ich für diese schmale verhärmtete Frau anders bin als alle Soldaten der Welt: ich bin ihr Kind. Ich bin es immer für sie geblieben, auch als Soldat. Sie hat im Kriege

¹⁰ E.M. Remarque, *Der Weg zurück*, Köln 2014, p. 83.

¹¹ Ebenda, p. 84.

¹² H. Kienzler, *Debating war-trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in an interdisciplinary arena*, „Social Science & Medicine” 2008, 67, p. 219.

nur einen Knäuel gefährlicher Bestien gesehen, die ihrem bedrohten Kinde nach dem Leben trachteten. Aber ihr ist nie der Gedanke gekommen, daß dieses bedrohte Kind eine ebenso gefährliche Bestie für die Kinder anderer Mütter war¹³.

It is not without reason that the woman became the moving spirit behind this conversation, as society attaches particular importance to the relationship between mother and child. The author has created a moving scene, showing the mother's pain and, by extension, the suffering and difficult situation of soldiers' families, the trauma of the soldier himself and the changes taking place in those who fight in war. The comparison of the child to a beast takes on special significance, emphasising the scale of the tragedy. Through the character of the mother, the author reveals the message of what war has done to the kid. The scene of the conversation between mother and son is characterised by both concern for the child and the helplessness of both interlocutors. In response to the statement about his change, the boy replies: 'Ja, denke ich bitter, ich habe mich verändert. Was weißt du denn noch von mir, Mutter? Es ist nur eine Erinnerung, nichts mehr als eine Erinnerung an einen schwärmerischen, stillen Jungen von früher'¹⁴. The above scene is key to the message that Remarque implies in this character: his mother, as one of the closest people to Ernst, makes him understand that he has become a different person. This change is difficult for her; she tries to rediscover her former son, but it is impossible. The protagonist's later words about memory perfectly sum up how the war has hurt the soldiers.

Through the character of the main character's mother, Remarque also characterises the difficult conditions in the country during the Great War. Through allusions and understatements, the author informs us that the main character's family was affected by hunger. The situation of the civilian population in the country during World War I was referred to as the 'home front'. The war affected every social group, and its reach did not spare the civilian population. The contribution of women working as nurses¹⁵ cannot be overestimated, but neither can that of those who had to struggle with the country's exhausting economic conditions – hunger, supporting their families and households¹⁶. The leitmotif of the novel *The Road Back* is the portrayal of the psyche of soldiers returning from the front to 'normality', but through the secondary character of the mother, the author also refers to the situation of civilians fighting on the 'home front' at that time.

¹³ E.M. Remarque, *Der Weg zurück*, p. 157. „But now I understand why I am different from all the soldiers in the world to this thin, miserable woman: I am her child. I have always remained so for her, even as a soldier. During the war, she saw only a pack of dangerous beasts threatening the life of her endangered child. But it never occurred to her that this endangered child was just as dangerous a beast to the children of other mothers”. [Trans. Agnieszka Kondrak].

¹⁴ Ebenda, p. 158. „Yes, I think bitterly, I have changed. What else do you remember about me, Mum? It's just a memory, nothing more than a memory of an enthusiastic, quiet boy from the past”. [Trans. Agnieszka Kondrak].

¹⁵ D. Riesenberger, *Zur Professionalisierung und Militarisierung der Schwestern vom Roten Kreuz vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, „Militaergeschichtliche Zeitschrift” 1994, 53.1, p. 72.

¹⁶ D. Ute, *Frauen in: Enzyklopadie Erster Weltkrieg*, Hirschfeld, Gerhard, Gerd Krumeich, Irina Renz, eds. *Enzyklopadie Erster Weltkrieg*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009, p. 116.

Remarque imparts a number of messages through the character of the father. The first of these relates to sociology, showing the relationship between father and son as an example of family ties being broken as a result of war. It should be noted here that in both of Ernst's relationships, with his mother and with his father, there are misunderstandings between the parents and the child. The war changed the soldier to such an extent that he became a stranger to his loved ones. This can also be observed in the opposite situation. A soldier who has returned from the front feels alienated among his relatives. However, there is a difference in the relationships described above: in the first case, the mother shows more empathy and compassion for her child and tries to renew her relationship with him, while the second case is characterised by distance between father and son.

Already during the welcome dinner, we learn that there is no close bond between the men. We sense the father's distance and lack of understanding of Ernst's behaviour. It should be remembered that the civilian population was unaware of the cruelty that took place during the fighting. The following scene serves as an example of such a misunderstanding: „Nun erzähl mal, was du alles erlebt hast, Ernst«, sagt mein Vater. »Erlebt-«, erwidere ich und denke nach, »erlebt habe ich eigentlich gar nicht. Es war doch andauernd Krieg, was soll man da schon erleben«¹⁷. Ernst cannot find an answer to his father's question 'what did you experience in the war?' War events are indescribable, and the discrepancy between soldiers and civilians, who do not understand (and do not know) what soldiers had to experience at the front, becomes clear here. This division will appear repeatedly in the novel, showing the wall built by war, the trauma that will never be healed. The war contributed to the breaking of bonds between people who were once close. Remarque proves that war destroys everything, even human relationships, and that indirect trauma also affects people who did not take part in the fighting on the front lines.

Remarque also uses reminiscence to depict the father-son relationship. In contrast to the mother's comparison of the past with the present, the father's perspective more clearly outlines the pre-war hierarchy and social division. The scene in which the father talks to his son about his future after Ernst has resigned from his job as a teacher is of considerable importance for understanding the transformation of the main character. The character's internal monologue refers to the former authority of his father: 'der früher über mein Dasein bestimmte'¹⁸. The young soldier reflects on the decline in values and the complete change in life priorities: his father is no longer the most important person, because the non-commissioned officer is higher than him in the hierarchy. What is more, he no longer sees him as the person responsible for his safety; he claims that the head of the family would not receive special treatment on the battlefield, but would rather have to be looked after¹⁹.

¹⁷ E.M. Remarque, *Der Weg zurück*, Köln, 2014, p. 78. „Now tell us what you've been up to, Ernst“, says my father. „Been up to“, I reply, thinking, „I haven't really been up to anything. It was war all the time, what could you possibly get up to?“ [Trans. Agnieszka Kondrak].

¹⁸ Ebenda, p. 282. „Who used to determine my existence“ [Trans. Agnieszka Kondrak].

¹⁹ Ebenda, p. 283–284.

Ernst no longer saw his father in the context of family relationships; he transferred all values to the conditions of life in the trenches. In his eyes, his father was no longer the person who raised him, but someone who did not take part in the fighting, and even if he had, he would have been a burden to the company, partly because of his age. Empathy and family closeness did not survive the events of the war.

Another message hidden in the character of the father is the indication of the discrepancy between the issue of individual and mass death and how they are treated in the consciousness of civilians and soldiers. Ernst's conversation with his father reflects two worlds: a life marked by war and a pre-war consciousness untainted by the horrors of the front lines of World War I. This is illustrated by a conversation at the table when the main character's father mentions the death of a government councillor. Ernst seems absent during the conversation; the news does not impress him, although he probably knew the person. The calculations of fallen soldiers that appear in his head testify to the dehumanisation of death; death is no longer individual, it has become mass. The protagonist thinks exclusively in terms of the front line: what matters is the number of people killed and the type of shot that killed them²⁰. The protagonists distinguish between two completely different types of death: dehumanised, mass death and ordinary, individual death. For Ernst, death was commonplace; the number of casualties and the fear of being hit by a bullet were part of everyday life on the front line. For his father, death is something disturbing; in his imagination, a person dies, someone familiar, death is an unpleasant event of an individual leaving the world. These two perceptions of death emerge from the experiences of individual characters. Remarque presents this conversation as an example and introduction to the later differences that arise from the soldiers' war trauma, showing that war dehumanises death and the value of human life.

Remarque uses the character of the father to refer to changes in the social hierarchy. 'We are all equal' – in post-war life, this belief was inherited from the conditions at the front. There, divisions were abolished: age, status, education, social background – all these things no longer mattered. After returning home, it became a major problem for soldiers to readjust to the divisions that still existed among civilians.

Remarque depicts this in a scene where the father reprimands his son. The remark refers to smoking cigarettes. Ernst's reaction is telling: he accepts the reprimand with an ironic smile. Further words: '(..) muß ein bißchen über ihn lächeln, weil er soviel Wesen davon macht. Früher hätte ich allerdings auch das nicht getan. Aber die Scheu vor älteren Leuten hat sich im Schützengraben verloren. Da waren wir alle gleich'²¹ serve as the essence of the impact of war on the socio-cultural

²⁰ Ebenda, p. 79.

²¹ Ebenda, p. 82. „(...) I have to chuckle a little at him because he makes such a fuss about it. I wouldn't have done that in the past, though. But my shyness around older people disappeared in the trenches. We were all equal there”. [Trans. Agnieszka Kondrak].

worldview. The father as an authority figure no longer exists in the protagonist's consciousness. After his wartime experiences, the family hierarchy is no longer important to him.

Conclusion

The First World War left a mark on the memory of generations, and the trauma associated with it left a mark on culture for many years²². Much has been written about what soldiers had to deal with, even after returning home, but the difficulties faced by their families are rarely mentioned. The image of the mother and father in their relationship with the soldier returning from the war is accurately portrayed in Erich Maria Remarque's *The Road Back*. The main theme of the book is the struggles of a young soldier and the idea that the road back to normality is very long²³. A noteworthy subplot in the book is Ernst's relationship with his parents. The author of the novel has hidden in these characters themes related to cultural and social changes, the trauma of soldiers, and the concept of death. *The Road Back* is the quintessential pacifist novel and proof that war causes destruction and leaves trauma not only in those who are directly involved in it. The changes and difficulties also affect loved ones.

Reference list

- Antkowiak A., *Erich Maria Remarque: Leben und Werk*, Berlin: Volk und Wissen Volkseigener Verlag, 1978.
- Fehlemann S., "Stille Trauer". *Deutsche Soldatenmütter in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, „Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung” 2009, Vol. 34, No. 4 (130), Premature Death: Patterns of Identity and Meaning From a Historical Perspective / Vorzeitiger Tod: Identitäts- und Sinnstiftung in historischer Perspektive 2009, pp. 331–342.
- Fishman S., *The War Novels of Arnold Zweig*, „The Sewanee Review” 1941, 49.4, 433–451.
- Fromm E., *Studien über Autorität und Familie. Sozialpsychologischer Teil*, E-Book Copyright © Edition Erich Fromm 2016 by Rainer Funk.
- Hirschfeld G., Krumeich G., Renz I., eds., *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009.
- Kaygın Ş., *Kriegstrauma' als eine der bedeutendsten Herausforderungen in der Antikriegsliteratur am Beispiel von Erich Maria Remarques Roman "Im Westen nichts Neues"*, „Diyalog Interkulturelle Zeitschrift Für Germanistik” 2018, 6.1, 52–60.
- Kienzler H., *Debating war-trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in an interdisciplinary arena*, „Social Science & Medicine” 2008, 67, 218–222.
- Michl S., Plamper J., *Soldatische Angst im Ersten Weltkrieg: Die Karriere eines Gefühls in der Kriegspsychiatrie Deutschlands, Frankreichs und Russlands*, „Geschichte und Gesellschaft” 2009, 35.2, 209–248.

²² R. Wilson, *Nadal trwa: trauma i pamięć I wojny światowej*, p. 218.

²³ A. Antkowiak, *Erich Maria Remarque: Leben und Werk*, Berlin: Volk und Wissen Volkseigener Verlag, 1978, p. 51.

- Remarque E.M., *Der Weg zurück*, Köln: Kiepenheuer&Witsch, 2014.
- Riesenberger, D., *Zur Professionalisierung und Militarisierung der Schwestern vom Roten Kreuz vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, „Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift” 1994, 53.1, 49–72.
- Simmet O.R., *Verschiedene Deutungen des gleichen Krieg: Wie Jünger und Remarque den Zweck ihrer Grabenerfahrungen ausgraben*, 2018.
- Švábová G., *Die Verlorene Generation in den Werken von Erich Maria Remarque*, <https://theses.cz/id/1tkr2x/>.
- Szymański W., *Modi memorandi. Pamiętanie i przeżywanie Wielkiej Wojny wtedy i dzisiaj. Próba komparatystyczna*, „Litteraria Copernicana” 2018, 3(27), 27–42.
- Wilson R.J., *Nadal trwa: trauma i pamięć I wojny światowej*, „Teksty Drugie” 2018, nr 4, 218–235.

Obraz rodziców wobec traumy wojennej według E.M. Remarque’a

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie traumy pierwszej wojny światowej z perspektywy rodziców głównego protagonisty. Należy do wpływu pierwszej wojny światowej na przemiany społeczne i ukazano je w świetle *Drogi powrotnej* Ericha Marii Remarque’a.

Słowa kluczowe: pierwsza wojna światowa, motyw matki i ojca, *Droga powrotna*, Erich Maria Remarque

Agnieszka Kondrak, lic. filologii polskiej i germańskiej, mgr lingwistyki stosowanej, doktorantka SD UJK w dziedzinie literaturoznawstwo, zainteresowania naukowe: współczesna literatura polska i niemiecka, psychologia, filozofia egzystencjalna.