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# Irony and The Modern Psyche

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Evidence from The Great War and Modern  
Memory

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In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argues that irony played a vital role in the shaping of the modern psyche. His argument is based on the fact that a fundamental shift took place in contemporary literature during the First World War. This was initially represented by the overtones of irony found in the imagery, symbolism, and meaning within the literature that emerged from the trenches of the Western Front. Fussell's contention is that this ironic overtone was gradually transferred onto the modern psyche itself, until it eventually became a dominant characteristic. Before the war, certain themes and beliefs were common throughout western society. Class structure was well established, themes of bravery and nationalism were well entrenched, and there was an overwhelming belief in the continual and ultimate progression of mankind.<sup>1</sup> All of these common beliefs were shattered by The Great War. In their place, a deep sense of irony developed. Skepticism, despair, and fatalism became the new norms. This is why Paul Fussell suggests that the irony found in contemporary World War I literature helped to shape the modern psyche. Through his use of primary sources, poetry and numerous other contemporary literary forms, Fussell successfully supports this argument. Initially, the horrors of the war changed the way literature was written because those who actually wrote it required a new way to express the conditions they faced. Older/traditional themes and styles no longer seemed to accurately represent reality. This literary shift then gradually permeated the rest of society as a whole. The result was a new and modern psyche that viewed the world in a more cynical – and ironic – way. *The Great War and Modern Memory* has been able to accurately identify this trend. Similarly, Paul Fussell has been very successful at substantiating his argument that the ironic conditions of WWI had a lasting effect on the modern psyche.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Brewster Smith, "Nationalism, Ethnocentrism, and the New World Order," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 32, no. 4 (1992): 81

## Literature Shaping Life – Life Shaping Literature

In order to understand why Fussell contends that the irony found in WWI literature had a fundamental impact on the modern psyche, it is first necessary to accept that literature can have a direct impact on the collective human consciousness and experience. In his 1954 article, *The Relationship of Literature and Society*, Milton C. Albrecht confirms Fussell's assumption.<sup>2</sup> In fact, a reciprocal relationship does exist between life and literature. By understanding this, and by accurately drawing parallels between the ironic tone of WWI literature and the modern psyche, Fussell has managed to successfully identify a societal trend. [The Great War and Modern Memory] is important because of its ability to reformulate or re-inscribe pre-existing ways of understanding."<sup>3</sup> Fussell makes his intentions clear early on in the book. "I have tried to understand something of the simultaneous and reciprocal process by which life feeds material to literature while literature returns the favor by conferring forms upon life."<sup>4</sup> His ability to identify and collect materials which clearly demonstrate and support this hypothesis has been very successful.

### WWI – The Shift

"Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends. In the Great

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<sup>2</sup> Milton C. Albrecht, "The Relationship of Literature and Society," *American Journal of Sociology* 59, No 5 (1954): 430

<sup>3</sup> Leonard V. Smith, "Paul Fussell's The Great War and Modern Memory: Twenty Five Years Later," *History and Theory* 40, no. 2 (2002): 242

<sup>4</sup> Paul Fussell. *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), XV

War eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot.”<sup>5</sup>

The irony of war becomes clear when reading Fussell’s interpretation of the collected literature. The imagery, tone, and symbolism found in the poetry and writings generally suggest results that were wholly unexpected - and ends that deeply contradicted - their stated goals. Despite the fact that all previous wars had been hellish in their own way, Fussell notes that the First World War was so horrific that it spawned new literary forms, and a new – more cynical - way of thinking. World War I was so terrible that – as Fussell puts it, “it was no longer possible describe war in traditional literary ways.”<sup>6</sup> This meant that previous themes like “the heroic and chivalrous soldier rushing off into battle for king and country” were gradually discarded. The futility of the stagnant stalemate across ‘no man’s land’ – and the egregious loss of life - changed the way literature was written. In return, the literature and experience of the war helped to change the modern psyche itself.

### **The End of Progress**

The First World War was a turning point in history. It marked the end of the innocent optimism that had come to dominate Western society during the pre-war years. Fussell notes this fact and successfully provides the evidence to support it. “The Great War was more ironic than any before or since...It reversed the idea of progress.”<sup>7</sup> This notion of progress had been at the very heart of the Western mindset since the beginnings of the Industrial revolution. A main irony of The Great War was the fact that mankind had technically and culturally “developed” to such an extent that it was capable of bringing about the wholesale obliteration of an entire generation. The ‘progress’ that had been made by

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Fussell, 7-8

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Fussell, 40

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Fussell, 8

society was now being used to destroy society itself. Fussell notes this ironic development on several occasions. “Hiram Stevens Maxim...began manufacturing his guns in 1889...He was knighted for his efforts.”<sup>8</sup> The irony here is quite clear; the man received a Knighthood for developing and perfecting a machine that sent countless millions to an early grave. The initial waves of young men who flocked to their country’s banner with such jingoism were quickly dealt a harsh and ironic lesson. This lesson was taught to them by the very machines and technologies within which society had placed its faith. There were very few glorious and traditional charges-to-victory in the war. In fact, as Fussell notes, even nature and the environment itself presented a clear irony which contrasted the ghastly scenes before the soldiers. “The war created an ironic and sad contrast between Man’s works and God’s”<sup>9</sup> In another passage, Fussell notes that “Even the weather cooperated to intensify the irony”<sup>10</sup>. This ironic imagery – of beauty blotted out by destruction – is a common theme in the literature from this period. Soldiers could not help but see it everywhere they looked. Their writings – in turn – then began to permeate the collective thinking of society as a whole. Irony was seen everywhere, and with it, a deep sense of distrust and cynicism gradually conquered the optimism and faith in progress that had been a stalwart of the modern psyche for so long. Fussell successfully supports this claim in the book by showing that ironies existed everywhere – even in the sky, fields, and bare broken trees.

### **Irony of Ironies**

Of course, to find irony in the First World War, one need not delve deep into the literature of the period at all. In fact, one of the most popular euphemisms of the day demonstrates Fussell’s argument clearly. World War I became known as the “War to End All Wars”. This is especially ironic

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Fussell, 42

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Fussell, 55

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Fussell, 29

given the fact that many scholarly arguments have been made which place blame for the Second World War squarely on the doorstep of the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>11</sup> Therefore the 'war to end all wars' was actually a motivating factor for an even more destructive and brutal endeavor which would begin less than 20 years later. The irony here is quite clear and Fussell is quick to point it out. "The irony which memory associates with the events, little as well as great, of the first world war has become an inseparable element of the general vision of war in our time."<sup>12</sup> This argument of a new and general ironic vision of the world - created by the events and literature of the First World War - is well supported by Fussell in the book. It is also supported by history and by many events and people that have come after. "On the shoulders of the war poets stand more recent writers – Norman mailer, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon – among others –who have dominated fictional accounts of later 20<sup>th</sup> century disasters."<sup>13</sup> These writers have continued the ironic tradition that emerged from the First World War. Moreover, their writings accurately represent the sense of irony within collective mindset and modern psyche that continues to this day. The innocence has not returned. It too seems to have perished somewhere in the mud between 1914 and 1918.

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell correctly identifies a literary shift towards irony and cynicism. He also accurately notes the fact that this change in the literature eventually came to dominate the collective modern psyche as well. Just as literature can be shaped by life, it too can alter the collective consciousness. Fussell successfully identifies and substantiates this argument in his analysis of World War I literature. The conditions found on the battlefields of the First World War were fraught with tragic ironies. These ironies then inspired a shift in the literature. He also successfully

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Bessel, *Germany After The First World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 15

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Fussell, 37-38

<sup>13</sup> J.M. Winter, "Catastrophe and Culture: Recent Trends in the Historiography of the First World War," *Journal of Modern History* 64, No 3. (1992). 528

showed how this new outlook was carried over into the collective modern consciousness. The First World War represented a watermark in modern history. It caused the death of a universal belief in progress and improvement. The modern psyche would never again allow itself to remain so innocent and beyond suspicion. The ultimate irony of the Great War was the fact that it failed to live up to its original promises. Millions were killed, and those who remained suffered casualties of the soul. Ultimately, the most universal casualty of the war was the way society viewed itself. Modern literature – and modern people – came out of the war with a deep sense of irony. This is a condition that remains true to this day. For this reason, Paul Fussell has succeeded in his aims. His book stands as a reference point for a moment in history from which nothing would ever again be quite the same.

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