

Fussel, Paul. The Great War and Modern Memory. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975

The *Great War and Modern Memory* is a Comparative Literature perspective on World War I. Author Paul Fussel argues that the culture of the war has not been documented well and that contemporary society has been shaped by the memory of the Great War's absurdity. He uses literature from the era and personal correspondence to support this argument.

The beginning of the book focuses on the birth of the absurd. Fussel believes there was an innocence in the collective consciousness of European society before the war that couldn't immediately make sense of the violence and stupidity of trench warfare. He depicts this naiveté with examples of personal writing totally free of cynicism or irony. Neither "ejaculating breathlessly" nor "thinking of you hard" was viewed with humor by the innocent couple in this correspondence. This straight-forward cultural mindset was ill-equipped to deal with the irony of the war. Sir Douglas Haig is portrayed as the epitome of the incompetence of the old attitude in the new world. Although he was earnest, the situation required wit and invention—he had none. Fussel humorously imagines that Haig wouldn't even consider a feint in maneuver because it would be "unsporting." The lack of creativity led to a predictable assault on German lines that cost the lives of 60,000 men in one day. The Somme offensive would be remembered by the soldiers as "The Big Fuck Up." To further emphasize the absurdity of this loss of life, Fussel recalls that many of these soldiers celebrated an ad hoc Christmas in No Man's Land with German soldiers the year before. With temporary peace achieved so easily by the soldiers, the suicidal attack loses all rationality.

The trenches were the defining landscape for the emerging consciousness. Although they have become neutered in common parlance today, they were very real and very scary for the soldiers in the Great War. About six feet deep, they were dug to zigzag across the land. Taken as a whole the trenches were long enough to circumvent the earth. The most memorable aspect of the trench to many of the soldiers was the blue sky above. Surrounded by dirt, the overhead clouds and blue sky were the only thing you could look at for days on end. The resulting sky-worship was in part fueled by the prominence of natural landscape writer John Ruskin. His book *Modern Painters* had a big influence on entire generation. The last aspect of the trench aspect that Fussel examines is the reversal of the traditional roles of day and night. Because enemy fire was only a threat during the day, repairs and other activities that would get you out of the trench took place at night. During the more perilous day the soldiers were much less active.

Fussel uses literary figures from the Great War to demonstrate the Europe's transition into modernity. He justifies his use of these men as representatives by explaining the importance of literature at the time. With no television, movies, or radio the written word had a near monopoly on leisure entertainment. Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, and David Jones are each given a brief biography and synopsis of works. Their overall influence was to create a

much darker fiction. The past hero-archetypes and pastoral poems were no longer adequate to describe the world around them. This legacy has lasted until the present day, where finally a “virtual disappearance...of the concept of prohibitive obscenity” has allowed us to finally reveal the “full obscenity of the Great War.”

Nels Abrams
University of New Orleans