



Death of a Hero

Richard Aldington , Christopher Ridgway (Introduction)

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First published in 1929, *Death of a Hero* was described by its author as both a jazz novel and a memorial to a generation. The hero is George Winterbourne. Leaving the Edwardian gloom of his embattled parents behind him, George escapes to Soho, which buzzes, on the eve of war, with talk of politics, pacifism and free love. He paints, he marries, he takes a mistress: the perfect hero of his time, whose destiny -- like all those of that lost generation -- is the bloody nightmare of the trenches.

Death of a Hero Details

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Allison says

A really oddly written war book but ultimately very moving. The first 2/3 is a wackily, sometimes salaciously written set up for who the guy is and how Victorian and Edwardian England formed him and society in all manner of dysfunctional ways which make war possible. The last 1/3 is our man George in the war itself and it's some of the best writing I've read on the pointless savagery and mind and nerve destroying, soul crushing nature of the whole thing. A weird but stimulating and sickening read.

Elena says

This book is about British society of the XIXth - beginning of XXth century and about the 1st World War. The author shows how terrible it was to be a soldier. The book was really impressive. I gave 5 stars to it 'cause i like the way Aldington expresses human emotions. But you should be ready - the story is quite depressive and sad.

Jonathan says

This is a book of contrasts. The title and start of the novel tells the reader that the central character, George Winterbourne is a soldier in the First World War, killed a week before the signing of the armistice. Published in 1929, it is one of the many novels from the war which in part helped define its historical significance by presenting characters who were seen as victims rather than victors. Not only this, but also, with the increasing mechanisation of warfare, their actual significance to the outcome of the war was vastly reduced. And many of them realised this.

After telling us about George's demise, the narrator takes us back to his earlier life, his background, childhood and young manhood, his parents, friends, wife and mistress. This part of the book is very funny, almost a social comedy, but as we already know the outcome there is an obvious pathos to it. The humour is dark, the characters who stay in England pathetically ill-informed and unable to comprehend what is about to happen. When the war begins, and carries on, they still have no idea what it is really like; to them the British Tommies are heroic gentlemen, and the Germans are barbaric scum. The final section of the book deals with George's time in the trenches in France, first as a Private, and then as an Officer, a suitably more somber time, filled with some of the most graphic details of life and death on the Western Front that I have read.

On leave in 1917 George returns to England where he cannot settle into a 'normal' existence, sleeping during the day and walking around London at night. The following passage made me realise (yet again it seems), that things do not change very much:

'He spent the night aimlessly wandering about the streets and sitting on Embankment benches. He noticed that there were very few occupants of the benches - the War found work for everyone. Odd, he reflected, that in War-time the country could spend five million pounds sterling a day in trying to kill Germans, and that in peace-time it couldn't afford five million a year to attack its own destitution.'

Having recently been told that NATO have informed Britain that we won't fulfill our commitments to them at our current level of spending, it made me consider that the Business of war hasn't changed much over the years, even as we approach the 100th anniversary of the end of that war.

Douglas says

This book initially came into my hands when I was fifteen years old, and found, by chance, the first unexpurgated edition in a bookstore in Paris. For decades it was censored in England on account of the sheer venom that Aldington brought to his depiction of pre-World War One British society, and of the war itself as conducted by the British High Command. The novel tells the story of George Winterbourne (as in Winterborn), a young modernist British painter who before the war lives marginally in London, focused mainly on his art, and has relationships with two young women: Elizabeth (who becomes his wife) and Fanny (who doesn't, but with whom he continues his liaison). With the coming of war, he on principle joins up as an enlisted man, though his education would entitle him to become an officer. Eventually, the sheer attrition rate of officers obliges him to become one. The novel graphically and eloquently depicts both the hypocrisies of British pre-War society, and the horrors and follies of the War itself. While it was censored in Britain, it became very popular in the Soviet Union: ironically, given that Aldington considered himself an anti-communist.

As I was living in France at the time, this book more than any other I can think of helped me to get a sense of the extremity of horror and societal upheaval that lay behind the vast and silent cemeteries of Verdun, the Somme, and Ypres, and that had helped shape the twentieth century.

Erin says

Do not buy this edition! It's the redacted version. A sensible adult can read the word Bugger and still be okay. Do yourself a favor and read Aldington's original, unbawdlerized text in this edition: Death Of A Hero

Zoë Sierens says

3.5

Elliott says

Most World War 1 literature in popular culture seems to begin and end with All Quiet on the Western Front, which I hesitate to refer to as "overrated." Perhaps the best way to refer to it is "overused," but, it's hard then

not to look back to All Quiet... when reading any of piece of literature about the First World War. In any instance I think then that Richard Aldington ought to be just as widely read as Remarque and I'll explain why.

Remarque concentrates on a group: Paul Baumer's friends are picked off until there's just Paul, and then he too is claimed by the war at the very end of the novel. The tragedy being that Baumer's death as with his comrades is just so common that it doesn't even warrant mention in the reports of the day: everything is merely "all quiet." There of course is the tragedy: a life is so cheap that in spite of all the experience that one life has it is completely meaningless in the context of the war. Remarque obviously wants the reader to imagine themselves within the same situation. Remarque goes for empathy.

Now, Remarque's book is excellent, don't get me wrong and this empathy works very well.

The problem is that where Remarque has his group of characters go from close friends doing very unmilitary things together: chasing girls, hanging around town, so on and so forth, there is a time before when getting together with a group of your closest friends to fight and kill other groups of close friends was not even a remote thought.

Aldington meanwhile has his main character George Winterbourne who's very alone. He has few close friends, he has romantic partners sure enough, but he is not really attached to people. He easily acquires and loses many people with only passing notice. Even his wife and mistress aren't very close with him since they each have their own other sexual partners aside from George. George's parents meanwhile are the proverbial 'phonies' of Holden Caulfield-speak. His father is a bit of a Quixote character who simply exists on a separate plane of existence from his son, while his mother rather likes the consecutive ideas of: a son; a son in the army serving his country; and a dead son having served his country. These she likes not for any of her son's accomplishments, but for the attention that they give her. These phases of George Winterbourne's life are mere tools for her own purposes.

That relationship cuts to the heart of the book, and the difference between Remarque and Aldington.

Remarque would fully acknowledge that this group of youth he portrays are used as tools, but his focus is on the breaks between individuals that this war causes, the loss of life as national tragedy, that is his focus.

Aldington is not interested in this. His focus is that on how the individual is used, how the individual progresses from body to corpse, and corpse to memory. George was not important for any social reasons, George was important because he was a soldier pointing his gun in the correct direction. His death is important because it goes back to and help props up that authority which sent him there in the first place. You can see this with the banality of the corpses in the final scenes-they are at best obstacles in ones path whether they are French or German is immaterial. It is a numbers crunch.

Again, this is something that Remarque would no doubt totally agree with, but since his focus is elsewhere it is not fleshed out nearly so well. Aldington's message is that it wasn't necessarily that society lost its humanity, rather it's more likely that it never had any in the first place.

Dan says

A largely autobiographical novel about a British soldier, George Winterbourne, and his experiences in WW1 as an infantryman and then an officer. The novel is broken into thirds. The first part is about George's parents and his own childhood before the war at the beginning of the 20th century. The Winterbourne's are faux nobility and an odd family with a manipulative mother. In the middle of the novel we see George strike out on his own to London as an author and then marry a young woman named Elizabeth. George and Elizabeth end up in an open marriage and each take different lovers that makes for some unique situations.

The final third of the novel addresses George's experiences while fighting on the front lines for the British.

He starts as infantryman and serves seven months in France, then is sent home to officer's school where he returns six months later. This part of the novel is very vivid and shocking much like All's Quiet on the Western Front.

The writing style used by Aldington is a mix of beautifully poetic paragraphs interspersed with realism and its shocking descriptions of trench warfare. At times there is very choppy dialogue. Aldington was a poet so this may explain the lack of continuity between sentences and his reluctance to use many conjunctions to extend sentences.

So the novel is a little quirky but so authentic in disposing of and railing at many of the Victorian sentiments seen in novels just a decade or so earlier. This novel was banned on its publication in 1929 because of vulgar language, sexual dalliances and graphic descriptions of trench warfare. There is probably little in this novel that would be objectionable to a teenager today. Aldington is an excellent narrator although the dialogue is pretty average. Here is an example of his views in a wonderful prologue.

Under the heading "Killed in Action," one of these later lists contained the words:

"Winterbourne, Edward Frederick George, A/Capt., 2/9 Battn. R. Foddershire Regt."

"The small interest created by this item of news and the rapidity with which he was forgotten would have surprised even George Winterbourne; and he had that bottomless cynicism of the infantry subaltern which veiled itself in imbecile cheerfulness, and thereby misled a good many not very acute people. Winterbourne had rather hoped he would be killed, and knew that his premature demise in the middle twenties would be borne with easy stoicism by those who survived him. But his vanity would have been a little shocked by what actually happened."

So I give this novel 4.5 stars, if you like war novels probably five stars.

Robert Muir says

I don't know why the author chose to chart the hero's family history back two generations given the amount of the book it takes up. It is unfortunate that he wasted about two thirds of the book rationalizing, moralizing and philosophizing on specific people, their attitudes and their times before actually beginning on the subject matter of the piece. That last third of the story is very good, but not good enough to make up for the boredom that one must experience before reaching it. By the time I'd reached the halfway point I had decided on the number of stars I would give this novel.

Vasyl Shymanskyi says

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legolasik says

I enjoyed this book despite the tinge of misogyny (well, maybe not a tinge, because the specific attitude to women almost made me drop the book in the beginning). But it was worthwhile, still. This book is everything I think about the world today.

LeAnn says

I found this book to be very tedious. It took me forever to make my way through it. Maybe I just don't get old school British satire, maybe it just bores me. I don't know. One thing that frustrated me is that this book is described as a war novel but the first 2/3 or so of the book is spent talking about the various characters lives, or chronicling the two generations of family. And what's with the asterisks?? I still don't understand if this edition was actually using them to leave out certain parts of the book or if it was just a gimmick, either way, highly annoying.

Mark Johnson says

The Lost generation. How many times did you hear this definition in regards of people who in their youth went through the battles of World War I and were never the same as a result? Struggles of those young men were commemorated in works of many authors, most noticeable, Hemingway and Remarque. Even though those novels are undeniably classic, as far as I remember they never explore the reasons behind the tragedy of this generation, only consequences and everyday life's misery of lifeless men and women. Richard Aldington was the first who introduced the term, and for me, the one who goes full way to explain, why this generation was doomed long before the war.

Death of a Hero spends a lot of time exploring and condemning failings of the old-fashioned British society starting from the imposing of broken and dishonest model of family and relationship between men and

women and ending with patriotism and mindset of being the cog in the Imperial machine. George Winterbourne, whose life and death is the focus of the novel, is the young artist, intelligent and sensitive person, whose life was slowly ruined from the very beginning. Combination of low key family abuse and manipulation, an education system that values unquestioning following of orders and not an individuality, abandoning of the hypocritical concepts of a relationship without working alternatives – all of those things shaped George's character into this introverted, reserved person, that was deeply disillusioned in the world and the majority of people. The observation of humanity at its lowest during the war was just the last straw that eventually drives him to the possible suicide.

Death of the Hero has one of the most brutal and terrifying depictions of war that I can recall. Aldington doesn't spend a lot of time in glorification of soldier's brotherhood like Remarque or in the introspection about heroism and life during the war as Hemingway did. He just depicts war from the perspective of one lonely man, that never fits anywhere during peace and whose will for life was just sucked out of him in the cold muddy trenches of the Western Front. The most depressing thing of all here is the fact that this was supposed to be the War to end all wars. But again, Aldington close his novel with the poem, realization, that all this pain and suffering and death was for nothing. Since World War I we saw multiple lost generations and unfortunately, this will happen again.

I want to acknowledge the style of writing on this novel, that Aldington himself describes as jazz novel. I enjoy it a lot, it is fluent and filled with pages of author's introspection between the story itself. It reminds me of my own rare attempts on writing so I feel connected with this manner.

In conclusion, I think that *Death of a Hero* is a great novel with a lot of depth, interesting analysis of the society of its historical period, progressive viewpoint on its issues and powerful antiwar message.

Bobiczdoh says

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Jeff Lacy says

This novel is about George Winterbourne who is drafted into the British Army during WWI, and as an infantryman, is sent to the Western Front, France, to fight and survive as best he can in the trenches. Due to

attrition he becomes a lieutenant along the front lines. During battle in the trenches as they are beating back retreating German troops out of their trenches, George, seeing many of his troops dead astound him, pushes himself up to run and gunned down by German machine gun.

Great characterization. It makes the development of the plot inevitable, believable, authentic. Makes one think about the lunacy of trench warfare. However, to war generally, the novel makes intelligent, thought provoking points about the sanity of war by nations, and how war changes the soldiers fighting it.
