

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN THE NOVELS OF  
ERICH MARIA REMARQUE

A Focus on Perspective

by

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# Abstract

## Narrative Strategies in the Novels of Erich Maria Remarque A Focus on Perspective

This study analyses and presents the formal qualities of the novels of Erich Maria Remarque. The aim is to show that these works cannot justifiably be classified as lowbrow literature or *Trivalliteratur*, a negative criticism which has adhered to Remarque's name since he wrote *Im Westen nichts Neues* in 1929. As a result, Remarque has rarely been the subject of scholarly interest; his name is, in fact, seldom found even in general works on modern German literature. The relatively few studies which have been carried out on Remarque and his oeuvre mostly express surprise about this author's continued exclusion from academic discourse, but although these studies voice their disagreement with the labelling of Remarque as an author of *Trivalliteratur*, no serious attempts have, thus far, been made to create an argument against this tag.

By analysing Remarque's narrative strategies in depth, this study seeks to establish such an argument. Particular attention will be paid to the narrative perspective, although other aspects of form – structural and textural – will be incorporated in the examination. Due to the interdependence which exists amongst not only the individual formal elements, but also between the form as a whole and the novels' contents, the strategies Remarque employs will be considered in the context of the novels in their entirety. The analysis will furthermore form the basis for the consideration as to whether Remarque's narrative techniques remain comparatively unvarying throughout the novels – does the author adhere to an *Erfolgsrezept?* – or whether they reflect some degree of development.

Although Remarque experimented with several literary genres in addition to the novel – short stories, poems, plays and film scripts – this study essentially focuses on the major novels which comprise what may be termed his *Hauptwerk*. It was on the basis of this part of his oeuvre that Remarque gained fame, but subsequently also the part that instigated the accusation of triviality. When evaluating the validity of the widespread condemnation of Remarque's authorial abilities, it is thus of limited relevance to examine relatively unknown aspects of his oeuvre. Such material is therefore largely excluded, although it is used for comparative purposes where appropriate. For the sake of general clarification, but also in order to identify signs of development, the novels are analysed chronologically.

The range of works on the topic of literary interpretation and assessment is extensive. This study, although acknowledging also other approaches, especially favours the comprehensive and logical method proposed by Boa and Reid's in *Critical Strategies*.

The opening chapter of this study offers a brief outline of Remarque's life and oeuvre. It thus serves as an introduction to the author and his work. The chapter proceeds to

explore different definitions of the term *Trivilliteratur*, but also considers the various factors which led to this widespread and persisting classification of Remarque. This chapter furthermore considers the relatively few studies which can be found on Remarque, and stresses especially those relating to his narrative strategies. Their limited number testifies to the level of neglect in this area and which Remarque's work in its entirety has continued to be subjected to.

The six chapters comprising the main body of the study each analyse one or two of Remarque's major novels. Aside from the point-of-view, they examine the author's most striking utilization of other narrative tools in relation to the individual novels. These tools, of course, vary in accordance with the themes and messages of the books. Throughout the study, the narrative strategies are considered against the reception of Remarque's novels which, in addition to comparisons to the work of other authors, serve to place Remarque in the context of his literary contemporaries and the time at which he wrote his novels.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	page 1
<b>Chapter 1:</b> <i>Im Westen nichts Neues</i>	page 44
<b>Chapter 2:</b> <i>Der Weg zurück and Drei Kameraden</i>	page 85
<b>Chapter 3:</b> <i>Liebe Deinen Nächsten and Arc de Triomphe</i>	page 138
<b>Chapter 4:</b> <i>Der Funke Leben and Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben</i>	page 181
<b>Chapter 5:</b> <i>Der schwarze Obelisk and Der Himmel kennt keine Günstlinge</i>	page 239
<b>Chapter 6:</b> <i>Die Nacht von Lissabon</i>	page 293
<b>Concluding remarks:</b>	page 324
<b>Bibliography:</b>	page 330