

# Reading of Wolfgang Borchert's *The Man Outside*

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300- or 400-level students; gen ed. Multidisciplinary; one 75 minute class period

## Instructional goal:

This assignment invites students to consider the experience of veterans and the definition of “veteraness” comparatively, in a very different cultural and historical setting from that of the previous discussions, namely that of defeated German soldiers returning home after WWII, as portrayed in Wolfgang Borchert’s play *The Man Outside* [*Draußen vor der Tür*]. This setting both expands and implodes the parameters of the previous discussions of veterans and veteran’s policy.

## Points for Contextualization:

On the one hand, in Germany the traditional definition of “veteran”, still operative today, is simple and straightforward—only military members with combat experience outside the Fatherland are counted as such. (From 1954 until the beginning of the current war in Afghanistan, the reconstituted German army trained hundreds of thousands of soldiers but produced no veterans.) But on the other hand, at the end of WWII numbers of wounded civilians rivaled those of the German military. The issue of war trauma, so frequently discussed in the context of veterans issues in this country, is no longer veteran-specific but generalized to the entire population. Further, at the time of the action in this play, the German army no longer exists; hundreds of thousands of soldiers are making their way home, often on foot. Control of what remains of the German state is divided among the victorious allies; veterans’ organizations are forbidden during the years immediately following the war. So far as there is any social policy at all, it prioritizes the health and safety of civilians. Finally, the veterans in this play are defeated veterans, but unlike their counterparts from WWI, they have the added burden of having served the most brutal and odious regime in modern European history, raising questions of Moral Injury/culpability.

Wolfgang Borchert, was a critic of the Nazi state, twice condemned to death and twice sent to the Eastern Front, where he was wounded and acquired the liver disease from which he died soon after the war.

## The assignment itself incorporates the following steps:

1. Prior to class, students will read a brief biography of Borchert’s war service and resistance to the Third Reich. Then they will read the play itself with a set of “study questions.” These questions should include some typical of literary study (e.g., Why is the river Elbe personified? How does the final scene tie together themes raised in the previous? What is the “responsibility” which Beckmann would hand back to his commanding officer?). But they should also include questions which foreground the protagonist’s veteran status and its special relevance. (What is the difference between a “soldier” and a “veteran”? And does that make a difference anywhere in the play? Why is Beckmann designated “one of them” in the list of *dramatis personae*? One of whom?)

2. When class convenes, the instructor should briefly contextualize the play's setting in postwar Hamburg with the help of period photography. Then students should select characters to dramatize portions of the play by reading aloud—preferably Scene III and/or Scene V-- reading their parts in class. (Be careful to leave 35-40 minutes for discussion.)
3. After the dramatic reading, students may begin discussing the study questions discuss whether the dramatization has altered their understanding of the play/characters and of veterans. More general questions could be added to the study questions (How might defeat—or victory—affect a society's view of its veterans and what is owed them? What remains of the concept of "veteraness" once war trauma has been generalized to an entire population?)
4. Optional: the instructor might assign a one-page paper, hopefully written soon after class, in which students discuss their response to the class discussion, answering questions such as "What did the discussion miss?" or "Did the reading/discussion alter your understanding of the term "veteran," and if so, how?