



***Grand Illusion***  
**(France, 1938, 114 minutes)**  
**Director: Jean Renoir**  
**Study Guide**

**Synopsis**

One of the most celebrated antiwar films ever made- Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusions* filters its indictments through the interactions and sacrifices of characters that are divided by class more than national borders. This escape story concerns French soldiers held in a World War I German prison camps. All the soldiers at the prison camp come from different social classes. A friendship based on mutual respect and rank develops between the German von Rauffenstein and the French Captain Boeldieu. And there is a romance between the French escapee Marechal and the German woman who takes him along with the Jewish character, Rosenthal. Renoir made the film in 1937 as WWII seemed unavoidable. Referring to his film as "a statement of man's brotherhood beyond political borders," he hoped it would be a message for German soldiers to ignore their hyper nationalists leaders. Unfortunately it never had a chance – all prints of the film were confiscated and only after WWII it was it re-discovered and restored.

**Themes in the film**

Europe in World War I and II  
National Boundaries  
Anti-Semitism  
Class issues  
Rules of war and the Geneva Convention

**Study Questions**

- What countries fought in WWI and on what side of the conflict?
- How were prisoners of war treated in WWI?
- How do you think soldiers from the allied countries got along in the POW camps despite the differences in language, ethnic background, classes and political beliefs?
- How do the types of combat in WWI differ from WWII? From wars waged in the present day?

**Discussion Questions**

- Why did von Rauffenstein feel such remorse for shooting Boeldieu, even though they were supposed to be enemies in wartime?
- In what ways did you see class differences highlighted in the film?

- The only battle scene in the film is when one high-ranking officer shoots another of the same rank. What do you think the director was trying to say about war in choosing this as the only battle scene?
- It is the Jew, Rosenthal, who acts as translator between the German country girl and the French soldier Marechal as they fall in love. Since the film was made right before the start of WWII, what meanings could the director have been trying to convey here?
- At the end of the film, Marechal and Rosenthal escape Germany through high snow. German soldiers are about to shoot them until they realize that the escapees have crossed the boundary into Switzerland. What do you think this scene says about country boundaries, war and national identity?