

War Life and Trauma in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*

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Abstract

This paper provides a thorough analysis of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), which appears to present two distinct images of the war: one at its beginning, when soldiers are fervently optimistic, idealistic, romantic, and hopeful, and another at its conclusion, when they have firsthand experience of the conflict and have grown realistically disillusioned. *A Farewell to Arms* is a book about World War I that perfectly captures the essence of the American attitude to the conflict. Its protagonist, Frederic Henry, is a real American who is on a quest to defend democracy for the weaker Italians, using his sense of superior knowledge.

Keywords: War, Trauma, Soldier, Experience, Life

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Ernest Hemingway is one of the most influential writers of twentieth century American literature. His books address the predicament of humanity in a world beset by perpetual conflict, a void in morality and spirituality, despair, and emptiness. Hemingway's heroes' continuous obsession in such a world is survival. The hero must embrace the Hemingway code, or the Hemingway attitude, to survive. This code holds fast to the achievement of grace under duress as well as against violence, pain, and death. To thrive, one needs to be as tough on themselves as they are towards the outside world. Hemingway consistently maintains this quality in his writing.

The focus of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is Lieutenant Frederic Henry, a young American who enlists in the Italian Ambulance Corps in World War I. He serves as both the book's protagonist and narrator. World War I did not have the romantic quality of earlier wars. This type of war is distinct. In this war, one can achieve better effectiveness with machine guns or artillery than with a sword. Henry's experiences throughout the war totally demoralised him. He views the conflict as the most startling illustration of the insanity of the universe. Henry shows his protest by leaving the chaotic world of war for a different one where love is the primary value in a society where the old values have faded and pointless deaths have become commonplace. He flees from war in protest of it, and he demonstrates the worth of love as an alternative by trying to marry Catherine Barkley.

Hemingway's experiences in both combat as a participant and as a war correspondent had a significant impact on and defined his literary persona. For him, the fighting soldier who displays his better traits in the face of senseless cruelty and horrific wartime brutalities becomes a metaphor for the tragic hero. He so gains insight into three main aspects of war from his experience there: first, that it is a universal human experience; second, that it entails unspeakable cruelty; and third, that it has the power to motivate people to respond bravely and heroically to their own plight.

The themes of romantic love and the realities of war are equally explored in *A Farewell to Arms*. The brutal realities of war are balanced by Henry's love for Catherine Barkley. He plunges into the Tagliamento river as the reality of war becomes untenable, fleeing the conflict and, like John Andrews before him, claiming his much - heralded "separate peace" (210) to himself. The division between the war's actual conditions and its purported grandeur, where love flourishes, is what predicts Henry's flight from the conflict. Thus, this is a new battle, not one viewed through the prism of a romanticised past, in which swords - those antiquated emblems of earlier conflicts - are no longer relevant in both reality and symbolism. Hemingway thus states in *A Farewell to Arms*. "I had witnessed nothing hallowed, magnificent, or holy, and the offerings resembled Chicago's stockyards in that the meat was buried rather than used for any other purpose" (161-62).

Henry is a foreign-born American. During World War I, he rises to the rank of lieutenant in the Italian Ambulance Corps. He prefers to be fully submerged in sensations during the early stages of his activity, drinking and wrenching. Henry says he's going "to the smoke of cafes and nights when the room whirled and you needed to look at the wall to make it stop, nights in bed, drunk, when you knew that that was all there was" (17) instead of accepting the priest's invitation to stay with his family in the clear, dry, and cold mountains. Instead of going to the priest's house as arranged, he just roams over Italy, stopping at taverns and brothels. His early actions seem to be a type of total lack of concern for anything. Unlike the other commanders who just mock him, he respects the young Abruzzi Chaplain, but his humanity has not yet awakened. A comprehensive list of the characteristics of contemporary warfare is provided in *A Farewell to Arms*. "Since you are gone, we have nothing but frostbites, chilblains, jaundice, gonorrhoea, self-inflicted wounds, pneumonia, and hard and soft chancres," (16) Rinaldi says to Henry early in the novel, who has just returned from a leave of absence. Rock pieces injure someone every week. Their physical decline serves as a useful diversion from their boredom. However, this gloomy list of depressing incidents appears to be closer to the reality of war and the negative effects that follow.

Lieutenant Henry is the protagonist of this story about combat, disillusionment, and the eventual escape from all these things. He also serves as the story's fictitious and moral point of view. Regarding Henry in terms of literary fact, there are two Henrys: Henry, who lived after Caporetto's retreat, and the early Tenente, who lived prior to it. All the factors, pressures, and drives that ultimately result in Henry's escape are contained between the two Henrys, or the two time periods that define the parameters of his main action, his escape.

The early Henry is a remarkable young man with some understanding of the world of suffering and the brutality of war. Little is known about Henry's life prior to joining the military. All we know about him is that he is a young American who chose to serve in the Italian Ambulance Corps and that he may have some unknown stepfather back in the United States. Henry's attitude towards war is a little reckless at the beginning. His involvement in the conflict has been largely ineffective. "I was in Italy... and I spoke Italian" (25) is the sole justification he gives for his involvement in the conflict. He did not enter the war because he thought the Italian people were admirable or because he loved being a soldier. He was not anti-Austrian or patriotic in any way. Not even he was afraid he would die in it. His attitude towards combat says it all: "Well, I knew I would not be killed." It speaks to his immaturity, egotism, and his playacting approach to life. not throughout this conflict. It was unrelated to me in any way. "To me, it didn't seem any more perilous than fighting in the movies" (38). But Henry and Catherine are not yet fully and completely in love at this point. All that remains is a kind of lustful curiosity and a readiness to turn his relationship with Catherine into a chess match. However, without fully realising it, Henry had already made the first tentative move towards his "separate peace" (210) from the moment of their first meeting.

As the book progresses, the narrative reveals Henry is growing awareness within the recognisable war or twentieth century setting. However, this is merely a human realisation of the need for a relationship that transcends sexuality rather than an awakening to her ideals, her capacity for love, or her suffering. Henry gets the order to report for ambulance duty less than a week after he meets Catherine for the first time. A trench mortar explodes close to him, his drivers, and his soldiers as they crouch in a hollow and eat macaroni and cheese. Henry sustains head and knee injuries, while Passini is killed.

Henry's horrific death and excruciating agony totally change him. Henry, in contrast to Fleming, who, following his wounds, leads a charmed life of fiery daring, is now aware of the importance of interpersonal relationships in human relationships. Henry touches Passini's body after he passes away. Despite having severed knees, Henry attempts to dress and save the man. Despite his injuries, Gordini gives up his desire to allow Henry to be taken to safety first. Lieutenant Henry thus has a fresh perspective on interpersonal relationships involving friendship, love, and compassion. He now criticises the "rotten game" (33), and he moves on to a new stage of his life.

The two major themes of the book - love and war - are deftly weaved throughout the narrative as we read it. Although these two topics seem odd to go together, Hemingway's work manages to blend them together since their paths run precisely parallel. Henry suffers an excruciating wound at Fossalta, and as he recovers in the Milan hospital, he becomes enamoured with Catherine Barkley. But after recovering, Henry finds himself in a horrific retreat and must return to the front once more. The combined German and Austrian divisions' crushing of the Italians at Caporetto prompts a general withdrawal. The Italian rear guards open fire on its own soldiers, underscoring the senselessness of war even further. One cannot tell the Germans and Austrians from the Italians by this point in the rain - soaked gloom. Soldiers and peasants fled together on the muddy roadways. The peasants have joined the military, "carts loaded with household goods," as they march "under the rain, guns, horses pulling waggons, mules, motor trucks" (164). Young Fleming was wounded by a soldier on his own side during the general retreat, which elevated him to the rank of warrior. By shooting and injuring the deserter from his own squad and giving his sergeant, Bonello, the command to kill, Henry too becomes a warrior. He goes so far as to say that a commander is necessary to raise the soldiers' spirits.

As the novel's topic progresses, we learn that "there is a positive reaction in favour of something conceived as good, the life together of a man and woman who love each other, against something conceived as bad, the war" (Beach's *American Fiction: 1920 - 1940*, 84). Henry has learnt to value and appreciate every minute because he could die at any time. This position becomes even more evident during the Caporetto withdrawal, a later phase of the battle. Henry was injured once, so he is aware of the potentially fatal condition. He no longer views war with the same carelessness and realises that it is evil and pointless at the book's conclusion. He so attempts to consummate his connection with Catherine Barkley to protest war and to demonstrate the alternative significance of love. His protest is a lover's protest a war - torn world that tries to sabotage his pleasure in showing love.

In the book, the kind of love that thrives in these circumstances serves as a symbol for the ugly side of war. After committing the crime of deserting, Henry flees the war and gives his everything to Catherine Barkley. Henry therefore observes, "I was not made to ponder. I was meant to be a food. Yes, my god. Consume, sip, and drift off to sleep with Catherine ... and never leave her side again" (204). At this moment, he starts to envision starting a new life with her. By doing this, he allows love to lure him in. He steps into this trap completely aware of what he is doing, rather than falling victim to it unintentionally. He looks to love to rescue him from his plight - not just as a deserter, but as an emotionally destitute man. Love appears to offer a new beginning and a different way of interacting with the outside world. It will grant him the happiness that has eluded him thus far.

In the light of the unheroic element of fighting as depicted in *A Farewell to Arms*, the romantic image of the warrior ideal from the nineteenth century is shown to be worthless. Because he finds no connection between old values and the realities

of today, the Hemingway hero rejects the finality of conventional values. This rejection has implications not just for traditional attitudes towards values but also for the underlying basis of those values.

As Peter Aichinger notes, “bravery did not matter, devotion and self-sacrifice did not matter in a war of this type and magnitude” (11). Unintentional and needless deaths had become the norm. This book presents and explores combat through the story of a calm person who despises the role of ruthless fighters. Henry decides to go into battle on a whim.

The world shown in *A Farewell to Arms* is one where devastation is the predominant theme. It is replete with allusions to devastation and loss. Here, Henry creates “a separate peace” (210) in reaction to the tragedy of war and the magnitude of what he has gone through. His attempt to escape a ludicrous and chaotic experience either from his incapacity to understand the nature of battle or from his need to protect his own skin. He becomes estranged from the society he belongs to as a result. According to Peter G. Jones’ *War and the Novelist*, Lieutenant Henry’s sense of reason has been so brutally outraged by his wartime experiences that he is driven to calculated detachment. This means that the novel expands “the boundaries of the war novel to include a philosophical dilemma” (8).

A careful reading of *A Farewell to Arms* persuades the reader that the protagonist, Ernest Hemingway, is likewise looking for a different set of values that would help him get by in a violent, cruel, and hopeless world. Henry’s distaste for war and his ongoing quest for a life - sustaining principle through emotional engagement in man - woman relationships are reflections of this feeling of yearning for order. Thus, the novel’s two fundamental themes - war and love - obviously highlight the need for order in an otherwise chaotic and meaningless world. In the future, he would work towards establishing such an order by firmly believing that man can survive in a world that loves violence. The way that the world of vegetation crumbles serves as an objective fact that portrays the state of men in battle. Hemingway thus writes:

There was fighting for that mountain too, but it was not successful and, in the fall, when the rains came the leaves, all fell from the chestnut trees and the branches were bare and the trunks black with rain. The vineyards were thin and bare - branched too and all the country wet and brown and dead with the autumn. (7 - 8)

Individuals and society are impacted by this breakdown in the vegetative world. One could argue that Catherine’s example of personal disintegration is exemplified by her painful sense of loss, which she shares with Henry during their first meeting, regarding the boy she loved being “killed on the Somme” (22). In general, Hemingway’s view of Henry lying in the field hospital with a fractured knee serves to highlight the horrific spectacle of thousands of lives being ruined by the war.

Like other characters in the book, Henry’s friend Passini is fed up with the carnage and devastation caused by war. Thus, he declares, “War is the worst thing there is” (49). He desires that one side “do anything to stop it (war)” (49) in his desire for peace and order, but unfortunately, he becomes a target of enemy attack. It creates a terrible sense of waste and futility. The image is gruesomely realistic, and shock and horror are the first feelings that come to mind. The story that Henry discovers in the newspapers while recovering in Milan adds to this. It states that the Italians lost 150,000 troops on the Bainsizza plateau, 40,000 on San Gabriele, and 40,000 on the Carso. The numbers show a concerning amount of loss.

In Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, Henry turns to love instead of fighting. He starts to see war as the ultimate manifestation of folly in the world. He is utterly demoralised by the terror of dying and the anguish of suffering during combat. Henry expresses his disapproval of a society where the ancient ideals have faded and where pointless deaths are commonplace by escaping this chaotic world of conflict and entering another one where love is the primary value.

To conclude, *A Farewell to Arms* shows a soldier’s slow realisation of the meaninglessness of the traditional definition of bravery in combat. Henry flees from battle after becoming totally demoralised by its heinous and heartless actions, which result in the loss of human life being wasted. As a result, he runs for his life to protest war, and he validates his protest by developing an emotional bond with Catherine Barkley, a British nurse. In any other case, his protest is a lover’s protest a war-torn world that prevents him from enjoying an act of love.

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