

## THE EXPERIENCE OF WAR IN HEMINGWAY'S "A FAREWELL TO ARMS"

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**Abstract:** *The present paper highlights the idea that the war had been futile and horrible. This is what Hemingway outlines in "A Farewell to Arms", an opinion which many Americans agreed with. The cry of the writer in the post-war years was for liberty: liberty of the individual to express himself, to hope, to dream. After such a devastating experience, Hemingway wanted to deconstruct the idealistic perception of war, showing the emptiness of words such as: glory, honor, courage as compared to the sharp reality of war. The tragic dimension of the novel stands in the feeling of the individual's living in an insecure world, a world to which he belongs but in which he has no longer a place.*

**Key words:** *war, Lost Generation, failure, defeat, rain, deception, love, irrational.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is very important to know the historical context, which was the starting point, the generating element of Hemingway's experience. The World War I was also known as the *Great War* because it was a war on a scale previously unimagined in modern history.

The war broke out after the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand ignited an already tense territorial feud between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. France, Great Britain, and Russia joined as the Allied powers against the Central Power alliance of Austria-Hungary and Germany. Eventually, America joined the war on the side of the Allies after Russia had withdrawn and the *Lusitania*, a British passenger ship carrying 128 American citizens, had been sunk.

The conflict has lasted for four years; it has cost \$350 billion claiming the lives of twenty-two million people. Technologically, it was the most advanced war ever seen because of the number of new inventions introduced: biological weapons, mortar, improved artillery, machine guns, and barbed wire.

*A Farewell to Arms* is a book about war and love, about the experience of war focusing mainly on the terrible effects of war. The prose

is hard and clean, the people come to life instantly and ring true.

The novel is built with scrupulous care. A short introductory scene at the very start presents an ominous conjunction of images – of rain, pregnancy, and death – which set the mood for, and prefigure, all that is to follow. Then the action is tied into a perfect and permanent knot by the skill with which the two main themes are brought together. As the intentionally ambiguous title suggests, the two themes are love and war.

### 2. THE TERROR OF WAR

The disaster of what World War I represented was a defining experience for writers belonging to Hemingway's generation, who served in the military.

As M. Cunliffe notices, one of two things seemed to have happened in the *Great War* to the American writer of the 1920s: '*either he enlisted before the arrival of the first main American forces (like Faulkner did, joining the RAF and Hemingway, John Dos Passos, E.E. Cummings in ambulance units) and in which case he tended to conclude that war was a nightmare which ought not to involve him, or like Scott Fitzgerald failed to go overseas*' [2].

The *Great War* laid its dark shadow across the modern American literature. This *Lost Generation* both characterized the postwar generation and the literary movement it produced. In the 1920s, writers such as Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein – who was the first to use this phrase – described the false ideals of patriotism that led young people to war, only to benefit from materialistic elders.

These writers' tenets that the only truth was reality, and thus life could be nothing but hardship, strongly influenced Hemingway. Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920) describes this *new generation*. They had 'grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken' [5].

As the title of the novel makes clear, *A Farewell to Arms* concerns itself primarily with war, namely the process by which Frederic Henry removes himself from it and leaves it behind. A close reading of the novel will show that Hemingway's view about war is clear; it is a source of terror and uncertainty, it alienates the human being, it is unjust and useless: 'You did not know what it is about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you' Chapter 40, Book IV [4].

As Peter Conn states 'no other writer had before felt that the World War was such a turning point in USA history' [1].

The war was an ocean away and the domestic attitude towards it was shaped by patriotic songs, slogans, romantic stories from faraway Europe. This contrasted to the idea that Hemingway wanted to present, and that is why he repeatedly outlines in the unfolding of his novel through the use of descriptive scenes of artillery bombardment during the Italian retreat, the devastating impact that a war can have on individuals: it causes anxiety, terror, disorder, despair.

### 3. HEMINGWAY AND THE DEATH EXPERIENCE

When he was aged eighteen, Hemingway worked as a newspaper reporter learning his trade on the Kansas City Star, and like many other young Americans, he wanted to go off to

Europe to find experience and see the excitement of adventurous action. Hemingway's initiation in this new job was sharp and shocking.

As he had defective eyesight, he could not join the army, so he decided to enroll with the American Red Cross Field Service for ambulance work. He was severely wounded on July 8, 1918 on the Italian front. During his convalescence in Milan, he had an affair with nurse Agnes von Kurowsky.

He happened to be the first American to be wounded in Italy. He was hailed a hero, and was awarded an Italian Silver Cross of war for his courage. Ambulance drivers were very important personnel and played a very important part in the war. They had to risk their lives and go into battlefields to pick up the wounded, and surrounded by gunfire they had to carry them back to the ambulance and then to hospitals.

Fighting on the Italian front inspired the plot of *A Farewell to Arms* in 1929. It tells the story of Lieutenant Frederic Henry, a young American ambulance driver serving in the Italian army during World War I. Henry falls in love with the English nurse Catherine Barkley. After he is wounded at the front by a trench mortar shell, she tends to him in the hospital during his recuperation, and their relationship develops.

Indeed, war itself is a major theme in Hemingway's works. Hemingway would witness first hand the cruelty and stoicism required of soldiers he portrayed in his writing when covering the Greek-Turkish War in 1920 for the Toronto Star. In 1937 he was a war correspondent in Spain; the events of the Spanish Civil War inspired *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hemingway fought against war and fascism and criticized the so called *American way of life*. He saw the horrors and tragedy suffered by both soldiers and civilians. In the preface to a collection of war stories *Man and War* (1942), he wrote about World War I that it had been 'the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged, butchery that has ever taken place on Earth'.

Hemingway stressed the importance of truth in fiction: 'A writer's job is to tell the truth. His standards of fidelity to the truth should be so

*high that his invention, out of his experience, should produce a truer account than anything factual can be*'. This principle can be easily noticed in *A Farewell to Arms*. Hemingway's effect on modern American literature is difficult to gauge, but tangible nonetheless. Different authors have claimed him as an influence. He tried to tell the truth about his times, to correct the lies which former generations told, whether wittingly or unwittingly.

This is indeed an autobiographical novel but there are some differences which have to be made. Firstly, the key events of the novel take place in 1917 at a time when Hemingway himself was still at school in Oak Park. This is evident because the story is structured around the disastrous retreat from Caporetto, when the Italian forces '*cracked*' and the Australians and Germans broke through the frontline. Secondly, Lieutenant Henry goes to the war not with Henry's naïve idealism, but with a social and political awareness, an ironical style of observation.

The affair with Catherine Barkley has an obvious relationship to Hemingway's romantic relationship with Agnes von Kurowsky, but Catherine is British, the hero's affair with her achieving here sexual fulfillment and leading to a pregnancy.

#### 4. WAR AND ITS CHAOTIC UNIVERSE

The novel *A Farewell to Arms* starts with a description: '*In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains*' [4], but the summer is a summer of war, the terrain is military, the river is a frontier, the mountain is a battlefield.

The nature in this case is not a romantic element, but stands for all that is insecure, dangerous. There is *a sense of defeat, failure, nothingness, emptiness* all along the novel, conveyed especially by the image of the rain (with all its tonal associates: mist, wet, damp, river, fog) and by images of impurity, of death and misery, corruption. From the first chapter to the last word, the novel is flooded with rain and other images of water. Ironically, *rain* often signifies fertility in literature but here stands for sterility. Hemingway uses *rain* as a symbol of

tragedy, destruction and death. It rains when Frederic parts with Catherine, it rains during the enemy's offensive, and it rains during the great retreat and when Frederic has seen his wife dying [3].

War is part of the landscape as well as an anomaly upon it. This book has very little combat, but it is filled with the effects of war. The town, Gorizia, functions normally even though there are people dying in and around it. More people die from diseases than in combat.

The war is involved in everything, it is everywhere. Even when Henry and the others are having dinner together and making fun of the priest, war is always in the background.

Life goes on through the confusion of war. Men chase women and they carry out their war duties simultaneously. Battles must be fought in the fairer weather and winter is just about ending.

The real business of war starts and men begin to reveal how they feel about it. The ugly part of war begins with the shelling and shooting. Fred's legs are torn apart by an explosion that also kills one of his men. Even Henry has been taken away from the front, he is never really away from the war. His wound is a constant reminder of its carnage.

Everyone is lost by being involved in the war. Ending it will not make it that much better.

Rain serves in the novel as a potent symbol of the inevitable disintegration of happiness in life. Catherine and Henry lie in bed listening to the storm outside. As the rain falls on the roof, Catherine admits that the rain scares her and says that it has a tendency to ruin things for lovers.

After Catherine's death, Henry leaves the hospital and walks home in the rain. Here, the falling rain validates Catherine's anxiety and confirms one of the novel's main contentions: great love, like anything else in the world – either good or bad, either innocent or deserving – cannot last.

Throughout the story *war* and *love* run symbolically parallel. Love itself like war is a male game: '*I knew I did not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her. This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards*' Chapter 5, Book I [4]. The moment of wounding is the

moment of transformation, lying in the hospital, his life changes. Love is like a diversion that distracts lovers from the outside world.

His convalescence over, he returns to the front and soon finds himself part of disorganized retreat. There is the threat of an Australian counter offensive, and has been done 'in vain'. His conversation with the soldiers causes him to meditate on many questions. He becomes aware of the terrible difference between words and deeds: '*I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes staining in the rain, almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted word came through and had read them, on proclamation, now for a long time and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it*' Chapter 27, Book III [4]. This represents a turning point in Henry's idea about heroism and the meaning of war. Together, Henry and Catherine manage to overcome the great sense of fear and loneliness that they feel in the presence of other people.

What follows in the unfolding of the novel is a chaotic withdrawal – Italians fire on Italians, and back in the Italian lines the *carabinieri* halt and randomly shoot officers for having become separated from their troops – and demoralization of an entire army, in flight through roads blocked by refugees and winter mud.

The Italian troops cannot hold their lines though they have orders to fight to the last man. The soldiers who retreated are accused by the army police of being deserters and traitors. In the confusion created, Henry is seized under the suspicion that, as a foreigner, he is a German in Italian uniform, but he manages to escape execution by throwing himself in the waters of a river. Now Henry is in danger as a deserter and a fugitive. He acquires civilian clothes and reunited with Catherine escapes arrest rowing by night thirty-five kilometers up the lake past the border posts into the neutrality of Switzerland, where peace seems to prevail. But although it will be a happy and calm winter for Henry and Catherine, the imminence of danger

can be felt. Their love will end exactly where it had begun, in the hospital ward.

Elaborate emotions and close psychological detail create the tragic tone of the novel. The permanent sense of danger, the impossibility to escape, the concern with personal survival deconstruct the idealistic perception of the idea of war.

The world governed by war is a *hostile, irrational* one, one where the individual feels completely abandoned by God and one in which the positive values are no longer present: '*If people bring you so much courage to this world, the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks everyone afterward; many are strong at the broken places. But those who do not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too, but it will be no special hurry*' Chapter 34, Book IV [4].

The novel also ends in the same atmosphere of sterility and death with which it began. What Henry realizes in the end by watching the woman he had so much loved dying is that both love and war lead to losses for which there is no compensation. The rain that now falls on Henry as he leaves the hospital signals the same destructive forces – forces that render one powerless, speechless, and hopeless.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The novel *A Farewell to Arms* provides an unblinking portrayal of men and women behaving with '*grace under pressure*', both physical and psychological, and somehow finding the courage to go on in the face of certain loss. However, *A Farewell to Arms* is not a novel glorifying war. Instead, it is a tragic love story whose farewell is from Frederic to the women whose arms held sanity in the crazy world of the *Great War*.

There is a certain mood felt in the novel, that there is a moral advantage in defeat as the individual's spirit cannot be conquered. Hemingway's hero does not panic in front of disaster.

One of the most memorable novels to come out of WWI was *A Farewell to Arms*. Against

the background of the terrible disaster that overtook the Italian armies at Caporetto in October, 1917, a love story is told, namely the love story of an American lieutenant in the ambulance service and an English nurse. At the cost of tremendous humiliation, suffering and loss, the military defeat is reversed, but for the young officer and the woman he loved, there is nothing but the heart-beats of tragedy.

The poignant note struck by Hemingway in this novel may be heard in most of his later works, until his life, too, came to end in tragic disillusionment.

It remains to say something about Hemingway's world – his experience caused his imagination to create books. It is, of course, a very limited world that we are exposed to through him. It is, ultimately, a world of war – war either literally as armed and calculated conflict, or figuratively, as marked everywhere with violence and a general hostility.

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