



Research Paper

The ambivalent nature of life in *A Farewell to Arms* – Part I

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ABSTRACT: The present article focuses on Books I and II of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) dwells upon universal topics such as love, war, life and death. Looking through the author's prism, a different perspective of the first two parts of this masterpiece is provided. The author delves deep down in topics such as the ambiguity of life and eternal human values. Although life can undergo dramatic changes, these values are timeless. They are the building blocks of our future and the essential catalyst for the right moral conduct.

KEYWORDS: Life, Love, Death, War

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I. INTRODUCTION

Through the ages, love stories have travelled across time and love has always been a fundamental, universal topic in literature. Many different authors depict love through different types of literary works such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Wuthering Heights*. Ernest Hemingway is one of the authors that portray tragic love in wartime in the novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). The title of the novel implies Hemingway's intention of intertwining the two major themes – a farewell to the loving arms and a farewell to weapons. The wordplay farewell-welfare in the title also suggests the ambivalent nature of life.

Hemingway's artistic creation mirrors his personal experiences while serving in the Italian campaigns during the First World War. The narrative springs from his own life and the inspiration for Catherine Barkley was Agnes von Kurowsky, a nurse who cared for Hemingway in a hospital in Milan after he had been wounded. The novel is narrated from the first person perspective of Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver in the Italian army, during World War I. His friend introduces him to Catherine Barkley, an English nurse, whose fiancé recently died in the war. Soon enough, after Henry's knee is wounded, he crosses paths with Catherine in the hospital where she takes care of him. The extreme situation of war makes them fall in love. The romance and the war are intermixed in such a way that they are distinguishable and indistinguishable at the same time but Hemingway makes it clear that both love and war cause pain. Through Frederic and Catherine's love, Hemingway is able to establish the relationship between love and pain and clearly conveys the sense of destruction and barrenness caused by war. Ironically, the love between Henry and Catherine thrives in war and fades away in peace.

II. THE WAR – LOVE DICHOTOMY

The war-love fundamental dichotomy can be recognized in the very first lines. The idyllic summer picture is spoiled with dust. The serenity of the plain "rich with crops" (p.3) is also juxtaposed to the turbulent "brown and bare" (p.3) mountains. Weather is a powerful symbol and the juxtaposition of the fertile sunny summer and the infertile rainy autumn alludes to destruction rather than creation. Yet, we can sense war and in the darkness of the night, we hear "troops marching" (p.3). Although Chapter I is short, it is powerful enough to set the tone of the entire novel. Another significant symbol, introduced in this chapter, is rain – the omen of destruction and death. Rain is supposed to be the symbol of fertility and creation. Instead, it is the token of sterility and demolition. Rain is the recurring symbol of despair, disease, defeat, death and suffering throughout the novel. The narrator makes an explicit connection between rain and death by telling us that rain was followed by cholera. Death and dying are also central in the opening pages and the optimistic sunny picture quickly shifts to the muddy, grey and pessimistic rainy winter. There is a hint about the tragic end when the soldiers weighed down by weapons and ammunition are said to march "as though they were six months gone with child" (p.4).

The conciseness of Hemingway's style of writing does not prevent us from visualizing pictures and sensing emotions.

Chapter II introduces the cast of characters and the setting. We notice the same shift from the green summer to the grey winter. Snow equals peace to Henry because fighting becomes impossible, although it is a temporary, unstable situation. Snow and whiteness are symbols of purity; here they are in contrast with filthy love in the bawdy house. In the background of the blanket of white, we notice a variety of colors – green, yellow, grey and red. This is an allusion to the flag of Italy, where actually the action takes place. Green is believed to symbolize freedom and rebirth. White symbolizes faith and purity, while red is the symbol of love and passion. Yellow is the color of optimism and happiness. Furthermore, yellow is the color of physical illness – jaundice, malaria, and pestilence.

The dichotomy of the mountains versus the plains is also reiterated in parallel with another one – the church and the brothel. The two concepts intertwine when the priest invites the narrator to visit his mountain hometown while on leave, offering him a more spiritual way of living. The officers mock this suggestion: "He doesn't want to see peasants," one says (p.8). "Let him go to centres of culture and civilization" (p.8). Another officer offers the addresses of whorehouses, which is equal to culture and civilization to them.

Chapter III, which is key both dramatically and thematically, introduces Rinaldi, a surgeon and lieutenant in the Italian army. Rinaldi first reports on the presence in the occupied town of what he calls "beautiful English girls" (p.12), particularly a Miss Barkley. The heroine of the novel is introduced without much fanfare and set aside.

The primary symbol of death, snow, has gone upon the narrator's return to the front and it is springtime, which means that war will be resumed soon. "Next week the war starts again," (p.12) Lieutenant Rinaldi reports. Rinaldi makes it obvious that even though it is not wartime, all that happened during his leave was as dangerous as battlefield combat: "frostbites, chilblains, jaundice, gonorrhoea, self-inflicted wounds, pneumonia, and hard and soft chancres"(p.12). The narrator's leave suggests one of the topics of the novel – obliteration of war via alcohol and sex and the climactic event-the desertion. The nature of the narrator's involvement in the war is finally revealed in Chapter IV – he supervises a group of ambulance drivers.

War and love are constantly juxtaposed in the novel and another theme that runs is how terrifying and dangerous they can be that both characters need a drink or two of grappa before meeting Miss Barkley and Miss Ferguson. The protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) meets Miss Barkley, which propels the story's motion and the reader can almost feel their intimacy. The realistic unique Hemingway style corresponds with the conciseness of his message as we learn about Miss Barkley's loss of the man to whom she was engaged. The shadow of death hangs over their first meeting. Upon meeting, Catherine seeks solace for the death of her fiancé while Henry is doing anything to distance himself from the war. *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) is a war novel that shows how fragile love can be and how easily war endangers and destroys it; how it robs human life and happiness and has an impact upon human psyche. It is not a novel about bravery and glory; on the contrary, it reveals the cruelty of the most disgraceful massacre in human history.

The love affair between the narrator and Miss Barkley begins in Chapter V as they kiss for the first time. However, both of them have different scenarios. The protagonist looks upon their relationship as a chess game. On the contrary, Catherine seems to be looking for solace for her lost love. The shadow of desertion starts to haunt the narrative by the conversation between the head nurse and Henry. Catherine has already learned the lessons that war teaches and she is aware of its tragic consequences. She is aware of the fact that war brings disaster and death, while the narrator is naïve and yet not aware of this fact: "Well, I knew I would not be killed," he thinks. "Not in this war. It did not have anything to do with me. It seemed no more dangerous to me myself than war in the movies" (p.39). The next chapter is significant in terms of the plot because the narrator's pistol is introduced. In these peaceful chapters dominated by love, we are constantly reminded of the nearness of the cruel clutch of war, which is supposed to recalibrate our moral compass and reveals Hemingway's antiwar attitude. The faceless and nameless nature of war is also suggested because we learn the protagonist's first name at that point. It could be any soldier, any ambulance driver, someone who serves their duty and can easily be substituted by somebody else. Driving up the hills in Chapter VIII takes Henry closer to the battlefield and heroism. Catherine gives Henry a Saint Anthony medal – the saint patron of miracles, which foresees the dramatic action in the next chapter. In terms of symbolism, we face "snow mountains, that looked chalky white" (p.48) – another metaphor for death and dying. The same image occurs in another short story by Hemingway – "The Snows of Kilimanjaro". As soon as the main character sees the snowcapped Mt. Kilimanjaro, death comes for him.

The conversation between Henry and the four drivers in the dugout is another implication, which reveals their attitude to war and articulates Hemingway's own thoughts on war: "There is nothing worse than war" (p.53), Passini says. Unfortunately, he is the first one in the grip of war who is shot dead by an enemy trench-mortar shell. "The drops fell very slowly, as they fall from an icicle after the sun has gone" (p.66). – an allusion to the natural rhythm of life as the day follows the night, as life and death go together. We can almost

smell blood after the explosion: “The doctors were working with their sleeves up to their shoulders and were red as butchers” (p.60) and we can almost feel death coming “It was cold in the car in the night” (p.66). At that point, Henry’s war wound takes him away from the battlefield. Rinaldi’s visit at the field hospital is like a reunion with old friends. The conversation with the priest, who also visits the wounded hero, focuses on two main topics – war and religion. The priest is as alienated from the military conflict as Henry is from God. Hemingway takes us to the serenity of Abruzzi – the priest’s homeland. We can visualize the scenery starting with cool summer, then the beautiful spring and finally the lovely fall. The cycle of nature is incomplete, without winter, and the beautiful pictures are in contrast with the priest’s rotten life in the mess.

The field hospital is an unpleasant place and death lurks behind the screen or outside, in the garden. Lieutenant Henry is visited by Rinaldi the night before he is to be sent to the American Hospital in Milan. For better or worse, the universal gravity sends Henry and Catherine to the same hospital, which is a complete opposite of the field hospital.

The cosmic energy would ultimately channel Henry and Catherine’s love in the same direction. Upon arrival at the American hospital in Milan, Henry is the only patient. The presence of two nurses, the absence of the doctor and the lack of hospital smell suggest that the place barely performs the function it is designated for. The idea of Henry’s alienation from the war sneaks through the open shutters that let the sunlight in. The optimistic mood takes over the entire Chapter XIII as we can imagine “the white clouds and the sky very blue” (p.92), which represent serenity and peace. The two colors are also symbolic of purity, innocence and heaven.

The comic barber scene repeats the theme of alienation as the barber thinks Lieutenant Henry is an enemy instead of an ally. The next chapter reunites Henry and Miss Barkley and he openly declares his love for her. Hemingway’s character transforms and implicitly turns into a mature and wise man, worthy of Catherine. He quits his love game and confesses, “God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with her. I had not wanted to fall in love with anyone. But God knows I had . . .” (p.100) If war is a human act, love is not. Love is a divine act, a heavenly experience. If the nature of war is destructive, love is creative like God Himself. On the contrary, in the novel, love at wartime is as destructive as war itself. Hemingway delves deep down in human nature and goes beyond the themes of love and war, this is a story about life and death – the two sides of the same coin – eternity.

The very beginning of Chapter XV foreshadows the sequence of events that follow. It overflows with symbols and oppositions. The recurrent symbol of snow that foresees combat, this time means another combat, that for recovery. The contrast between the passive and the active is obvious in the visits of the three incompetent doctors and the competent cheerful Dr. Valentini, ready to operate on Henry on the next day. Chapter XVII, through the ominous absence of Catherine, and the conversation between Lieutenant Henry and Helen Ferguson is a prophecy of what would happen. The eternal continuum day – night is connected with love at wartime, marriage and birth. War lurks in the hospital thanks to the other patients, one of them a completely inexperienced soldier as Henry himself.

Nothing alludes to war in the next chapter as Henry and Catherine enjoy the summer together, visiting restaurants around Milan and drinking wine. Despite the fact that it is the season of war, their love thrives. The only direct implication of war is the absence of the wine waiter. The feeling of freedom is conveyed through the carriage rides and the figure of the horse – symbol of independence, courage and strength. Thematically, the topics of marriage and religion come to discussion. Catherine explains her own value system, saying, “You’re my religion.” (p.123). Although she sounds like an atheist, Catherine has her own religion, which is love. The ominous “I suppose all sorts of dreadful things will happen to us” (p.123) at the end of the chapter is another hint of disaster.

Chapter XIX alludes to war at the very beginning by the fact that “there were many victories in the papers” (p.125). This again reveals Henry’s alienation from war. His reflections on Napoleon’s military strategies refer to the aforementioned juxtaposition plains – mountains. Henry believes that “Perhaps wars weren’t won any more. Maybe they went on forever.” (p.126). In this background, Hemingway skillfully introduces characters who, like Henry himself, do not belong there: the Meyers – a gambling couple from America, two students of opera and Moretti – an Italian from America in the Italian army. Additionally, it turns out that the students have their American names but sing under Italian ones. At the end of the chapter, Catherine and Henry are together talking about these characters. Catherine dislikes Moretti because heroes are humble and the virtue of heroism should not be demonstrated. Their conversation is interrupted by the ominous sign of death – rain. Catherine, for the first time, reveals her fear of death. The protagonist and narrator Frederick Henry declares his love for Catherine: “I’ll love you in the rain and in the snow and in the hail and – what else is there?” (p. 135), which sounds like a premonition of imminent disaster and a marriage vow as well. The trichotomy moon-mist-rain is overloaded with symbolism and equals to rebirth-mystery-death. Although rain is the symbol of fertility and purity, Hemingway decides rain to be the recurring symbol of death, defeat and failure. The author implicitly adds meaning to convey his message to the reader although his symbols are sometimes ambiguous and mostly polysemous.

The presence of the Meyers and the other characters at the horse races does not prevent Catherine and Henry from separating from them. Delving deep down in Hemingway's implicit style, their separation foresees what is going to happen later in the novel. Betting on a horse that is unlikely to win refers to their life choice and their luck of the draw.

The end of the joyous summer will put Henry in a different situation. Thematically, Chapter XXI is important in terms of the plot as it leads us first to a turning point – Henry is ordered back to the front and second to the amorous climax – Catherine is three months pregnant. Not surprisingly, as three refers to the birth-life-death cycle. Once these scenarios give impetus to the succession of events, nothing could stop the avalanche of misfortunes.

The ambivalence of war lurks in the conversation between Miss Van Campen and Henry accusing him of self-inflicted jaundice caused by excessive amounts of alcohol instead of going to the front. Miss Van Campen's theory of contracting a disease in order to avoid combat at the battlefield suggests that Lieutenant Henry is not the only one in this war who looks for ways to avoid it. Gradually, the brutality of war enters the scene.

In Chapter XXIII Henry waves good-bye to the hospital and spends the night with Catherine. Although we do not know much about her, Hemingway explicitly reveals her atheist attitude to church by refusing to enter the cathedral. There is another couple, in contrast, who take shelter in the church. Henry and Catherine spend part of their last night in the shelter of a nice hotel where they feel like home. Rain is their companion all the time. Structurally, the departure that night sets the tone of the rest of the novel, which is constant move and change. The coziness of the hotel room is replaced by the hostility of the crowded train packed with soldiers. The end of Book II takes us back to the frontline, where Henry belongs. This time he is going to fight for his freedom, love and happiness.

III. CONCLUSION

Fascination with Hemingway is impossible due to his revolutionary style evoking thought on existential issues such as life and death, the brutality of war and the eternal human quest for happiness. In addition, he manages to adjust our moral compass in favor of everlasting values such as love, peace and nonviolence either on personal or societal level. We also witness the long way the protagonist passes to maturity, lessons taught by the darkest sides of life.

REFERENCES

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