A FAREWELL TO ARMS

Ernest Hemingway

INTRODUCTION

A Farewell to Arms was first published in 1929, and is set in northern Italy during World War I (1914–1918). It is a semi-autobiographical novel based on Ernest Hemingway’s own experiences as an American in the Italian Red Cross during the latter stages of the war. Like his protagonist, Frederic Henry, Hemingway was wounded by trench mortar fire and purportedly fell in love with a Red Cross nurse while recovering. Hemingway wrote often about war, including his novel For Whom the Bell Tolls on the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. In 1961 he committed suicide at the age of 62 after a life-long struggle with depression.

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

The novel starts with Frederic Henry’s life during a relatively quiet time on the Italian/Austrian front, focusing on his friends and their drinking and womanising. He is a lieutenant in the Italian Army’s ambulance corps. Henry briefly meets a British nurse, Catherine Barkley, but is soon wounded in a mortar shell attack and evacuated to the American hospital in Milan. Catherine arranges a transfer there, and they fall in love as he recuperates from his injury. Catherine finds herself pregnant; soon after Henry is sent back to the war front. The Italians are forced to retreat and Henry must lead his ambulances and crew to safety. He fails to do so, killing an Italian army engineer for refusing to assist them with their mud-bound vehicles. He is
then forced to walk. But Italians are shooting their own officers as revenge for their defeat. Before being executed, Henry jumps into the Piave River to escape and deserts the army. Eventually he makes his way back to Catherine who is holidaying at the Italian lakes. They row across Lake Maggiore to Switzerland, where they spend several months awaiting the birth of their baby. Catherine and their son die in child-birth.

**BACKGROUND & CONTEXT**

World War I was fought between 1914 and 1918 on several fronts, primarily in Europe. The Allied Powers included France, Britain, Russia, Italy, the United States and Australia, among other countries; they fought against the Central Powers, including Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey). The novel is set on the Italian/Austrian front and opens in the summer of 1916; the Italians have captured Gorizia from the Austrians and the front remains static for almost a year. After the Germans join the fighting there, the Italians are forced to retreat at the end of 1917. Lieutenant Henry is an American citizen who has joined the Italian Army ambulance corps. He had been studying architecture in Rome and simply wanted to be part of the adventure. He does not represent his country, nor does he have any particular loyalty to Italy. Initially, the United States remained neutral in the conflict. It eventually joined the war on the side of the Allies in April 1917, although it took them some time to train and mobilise troops.

In 1918 the Germans almost succeeded in winning the war on the Western front in France, but exhausted German human and military supplies, coupled with the large number of fresh American troops, led to German defeat and Allied victory. The war ended on 11 November 1918. The Italians finally defeated the Austro-Hungarians at the Battle of Vittorio Veneto in October 1918.

Prior to World War I a sense of gallantry often accompanied ideas about warfare, but the loss of over fifteen million soldiers and civilians in World War I put pay to any romanticism about conflict. This is reflected in the novel when
Henry tires of the war and no longer believes in the sense of adventure that made him join up.

**STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE & STYLE**

*A Farewell to Arms* is part war novel and part romance. It has graphic and detailed descriptions of the life of soldiers at the front. Henry’s dramatic escapes from death in the mortar explosion, from the German Army during the retreat, and then from the Italians turning on each other, create a sense of adventure and suspense. More than that, it is a love story between two outsiders in Italy who want to find happiness amongst the horror and death of war. The novel has a tragic ending, suggesting that happiness is impossible in a world beset by death.

The narration is in the first person, from Lieutenant Henry’s point of view. This means we are limited by what he sees and feels. We view events on the front with the non-partisan detachment of a foreigner. Moreover, we can only know Catherine through his perception of her, rather than have any insight of our own into her internal thoughts. Some readers may scorn Hemingway’s portrayal of Catherine as being two-dimensional, unrealistic and stereotyped as a result.

Hemingway’s writing style was modern and ground-breaking for its time. He uses short sentences and plain vocabulary to create a journalistic tone intended to give events a sense of realism and immediacy. Indeed, Hemingway started his career as a journalist for the Kansas City Star and followed their style guide, which asked for short sentences and vigorous, positive language. His style was much admired and imitated by writers of the twentieth century, particularly the Beat Generation.

The novel is divided into five ‘Books,’ rather like ‘Acts’ in a Shakespearean tragedy. The first book traces Henry’s life in Gorizia at a time when the war is going moderately well for the Italians. This section ends with his injury in a mortar shell attack. The second book focuses on his time at the American
hospital in Milan and his developing relationship with Catherine, ending with their sad separation when Henry has to return to the Italian front. Book Three involves the Italian army’s retreat to Udine and Henry’s escape from execution. Book Four portrays his reunion with the pregnant Catherine and their voyage across Lake Maggiore to freedom in Switzerland. Finally, Book Five depicts their cosy life in Montreux as they await the birth, but ends with Catherine’s tragic death. The last two books are relatively brief, which speeds the action to the final climax of Catherine’s demise. Each book ends with a dramatic escape or injury, thus heightening the sense of action. You can also see that the novel overall oscillates between Henry’s life at the front and his life with Catherine, underscoring her role in the novel as his escape from the death and horror of war. However, Death converges on their idyllic relationship in the final book, resulting in Henry’s over-riding cynicism about life in general.

Hemingway uses foreshadowing to great effect in the novel. Catherine’s fear of rain, in which she sees herself and Henry dead, creates a sense of foreboding (p.114). Indeed, Hemingway uses the melancholic atmosphere of rain during several deaths, such as that of Aymo (p.191), and in the very last line of the novel when he leaves Catherine’s body (p.293). The narrator, Lieutenant Henry, has of course ‘written’ his story after the fact; that is, in telling his story he already knows its heart-rending outcome and so the whole of the narrative is infused with this knowledge.

CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

Lieutenant Frederic Henry

Henry is a young American who is studying architecture in Rome when he decides to join the Italian Army. He does this less out of a belief in the aims of the war itself, or out of any loyalty to Italy, but because he thinks, as a student of the world and a traveller, that it will be an adventure. He has a good rapport with his fellow officers and his men in the ambulance corps, speaking fluent
Italian and joining in on their jokes and activities. His leadership role does not stem from any great medical knowledge but his rank and class in society. His wealthy American family sponsors his travels. In spite of his youth, his men follow his orders, although during the retreat they splinter as a group, using individual methods to survive. At times it seems the team works just as well without him.

Early on in the text, there is a strong sense that Henry is very young. Rinaldi frequently calls him ‘baby’, while Catherine refers to him as a ‘good boy’. Yet his youthful naivety in joining the war is replaced by a growing cynicism; eventually he believes he was a ‘fool’ for ever going to war (p.227) and that glory is an obscene word (p.165). Similarly, he grows up in his relationships with women. Used to immature adventures with prostitutes, he experiences the euphoria of a deep and meaningful love with Catherine, only to have it taken from him in the most brutal of ways. By the end of the novel, Henry – the baby – has figuratively died. The birth of his child, which should be hopeful and positive, has been transformed into one more experience of death until that is all Henry can see in the world: ‘they killed you in the end. You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you’ (p.289).

**Catherine Barkley**

Catherine is a British VAD, or nurse’s assistant, who is working at a hospital in Gorizia helping wounded soldiers. Her fiancé has been killed fighting in France, and she is still grieving for him when she meets Henry. Catherine is initially coy with Henry, seeing him as another one of the many men who flirt with the nurses, and the memory of her loss is still raw. Their dialogue at this stage seems false and superficial. Both are aware that they are game-playing, ‘like the moves in a chess game’ (p.24). As Henry says, ‘This was a game, like bridge in which you said things instead of playing cards’ (p.29). When they meet again at the American hospital their relationship deepens and they appear to be genuinely in love. Henry has an earlier discussion with the priest in which he says, ‘I don’t love’. The priest responds by foretelling that when Henry loves he will know true happiness (p.66). When he sees her again in
Milan, Henry realises he has fallen for Catherine: ‘When I saw her I was in love with her. Everything turned over inside of me’ (p.84). So Henry’s love for Catherine is highly significant; in her he has found a brief moment of happiness.

At the American hospital their relationship becomes physical and Catherine becomes pregnant. There was great social stigma attached to unmarried mothers in the early twentieth century, yet Catherine approaches her pregnancy calmly and philosophically, almost as if she expects the death that awaits her. Her reaction is contrasted with the shame and tears expressed by her friend, Ferguson. Catherine is not even in a hurry to marry Henry, but talks of them as already married, calling herself a ‘good wife’ (p.261). As Henry is the narrator it is difficult to know what is going on inside her head. Her behaviour suggests, however, that the grief she has been through, and the things she has seen as a nursing assistant, have led to a cynical view of the world and that she does not expect much from life, except suffering.

Lieutenant Rinaldi

An Italian army surgeon, Rinaldi is Henry’s best friend at the front. The two share quarters and drink together, and are the same age. Initially, Henry is just as keen as Rinaldi on visiting the brothel, but when he falls in love with Catherine he sees women less as sexual objects and begins to believe in a more romantic notion of male and female relations. When Henry returns to the front after his time in Milan, he finds that Rinaldi has begun to crack both physically and mentally due to his extreme workload with casualties. He is also drinking too much and believes he has syphilis. Rinaldi is a warning for Henry against the extremes of their earlier behaviour; he represents what might have happened to Henry if he had remained at the front, or if he had not had the redeeming love of Catherine.

The Priest

In contrast to the drinking and womanising soldiers is the taciturn priest. He is
ridiculed by the other men who tease him about his chastity. Henry treats him with more respect, admiring him for his simplicity and quietness. The priest is from peasant stock and represents a noble side of Italian life that Henry admires. Yet Henry ignores the priest’s request to visit his family in the Abruzzi region. Later he is embarrassed about this, but Henry does not wish to be the priest’s intimate friend. Henry is not a religious man and cannot believe in God, as the priest obviously does. For Henry, this is a godless world. No god can step in to halt or diminish the horrors of the war. Note that scenes with Rinaldi are often followed by scenes with the priest, emphasising that each character offers alternate world views, and that in the end neither is acceptable to Henry.

THEMES, IDEAS & VALUES

Bravery

Henry’s embarrassment over being awarded a medal for the mortar attack in which he is injured and Passini is killed indicates that he does not think of himself as brave. He thinks it rather ironic to be given a medal for an injury; something over which he has had no control. Adding to the irony is that they were engaged in eating cheese when the shell exploded, hardly a heroic activity. Indeed, Henry’s war has not really turned out to be the adventure he sought. He displays no brave heroics, nor does he save anyone.

It is also apparent in his narration that he recognises his failure to get his three ambulances and their men safely away from the approaching German army during the retreat. Instead, they end up stuck in the mud after taking a side road at Henry’s instigation. His shooting of the Italian engineer who walks off without helping them dig out the ambulances shows him to be an officer mindlessly enforcing discipline, as evidenced by the fact that he must shoot the man in the back. Bonello adds to the indignity by finishing the engineer off after initially forgetting to cock the pistol (p.182). Perhaps the bravest thing Henry does is to jump into the river when it’s his turn to be summarily shot, yet
this is more a sign of desperation (p.200). Thus, Henry’s narrative has a tone of disappointment and self-irony that he is never able to prove himself a hero.

On the other hand, it could be argued that Henry is brave as he does not highlight the pain or suffering of his leg injury, seeing it as merely an inconvenience, and then an opportunity to be with Catherine. This is a form of physical stoicism which Catherine shares. Catherine seems rather accepting of her situation throughout. She does not complain during their arduous journey across the lake. But it is Henry’s description of her suffering during childbirth that emphasises her bravery in the face of death. She declares she is ‘not afraid’ (p.282) and Henry calls her his ‘brave sweet’ (p.292). It is almost as if Henry is envious of something he himself has not come close to experiencing. Overall, he depicts Catherine as the braver of the two.

**Detachment**

Henry is an outsider in the Italian army in spite of the fact he has excellent Italian language skills. The fact that he is an American means he does not share the Italians’ patriotic view of the war. He tells Catherine that he joined simply because he ‘was in Italy’ and ‘spoke Italian’ (p.21). He is a keen observer of all that goes on, but in the Ambulance Corps he feels himself distant from the real action: ‘… I knew I would not be killed. 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.35). Early on he is able to take a holiday from the war in the winter months when snow prevents fighting. Like his country before 1917, Henry has sympathy for the Allies, yet feels little direct involvement; in other words, he is *neutral*. Yet his detachment goes deeper than his nationality or job role and grows as the adventure of war wears thin. As the war proceeds his enthusiasm for it declines. Conversely, his involvement with Catherine increases. Finally, he dismisses the Italian plight altogether by going absent-without-leave from the army and absolving himself of any attachment or loyalty to the Italians: ‘I was not against them. I was through … it was not my show anymore’ (p.206). He chooses love over any
misguided notion of glory in war, investing his emotional attachment in a person, rather than an empty cause.

**War is ultimately futile**

At the start of the novel Hemingway’s description of the Italian landscape lends a romantic or exotic gleam to what one soon realises is a war front. Henry’s love for the Italian countryside is palpable, but when the war begins to go badly the mud and rain take over, washing away any beauty in war.

In a similar vein Henry’s cynicism about war grows. He experiences fear and death many times, such as during the mortar attack. The graphic description of his being taken away in an ambulance, with the man above him on a stretcher suddenly haemorrhaging and bleeding to death over him, is one image that emphasises war’s horror (p.57). The propaganda invoking glory, honour, and patriotism that accompanied the call to fight in World War I is shown to be empty. Indeed, Henry remarks in the face of Gino’s patriotism:

> I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them ... and had read them on proclamations ... and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory ... (p.165)

Not even the Italian characters have much faith in the war in its final year. The priest is tired of it, and Rinaldi asserts that it is ‘killing’ him and that he is ‘very depressed by it’ (p.150). The Italian front descends into farce during the retreat with Italian firing on Italian out of fear, disorientation and retribution. The chaos and betrayal in the retreat make any sense of honour ironic. As the title of the novel implies, Hemingway sees little point in the use of arms, or of war in general.

**Love is a primary purpose in life**

Love is the only thing that saves both Henry and Catherine from the futility of war and their detachment from its goals. The death of Catherine’s fiancé has
given her little reason to continue living and caring for others, but Catherine finds new purpose in her love of Henry. She declares Henry her ‘religion’ (p.104). Henry has no faith in God, and does not choose Rinaldi’s non-committal path to love, but he finds faith in his love for Catherine. She becomes the only meaning in his life, so that the two of them are ‘one’ and anyone else is an outsider. Henry’s friendships with his Italian colleagues fall away as his involvement with Catherine deepens. Finally he leaves them altogether. When Catherine dies, Henry’s purpose in life seems over. Hemingway emphasises the importance of love as a shelter against the disasters of human experience such as war, while demonstrating that it can be just as catastrophic.

**Purity**

There is a sense that Henry’s love for Catherine absolves him of the dirtiness of war. She is physically contrasted through her fairness with the prostitutes in Gorizia with their ‘thick full lips and black eyes’ (p.168). She is like an angel to their less than angelic natures. In making love to Catherine in Milan Henry decides that he is now ‘clean inside and outside’ (p.95). Her relative purity is also embodied in her long flowing hair which cascades over him like a protective ‘tent’ (p.102). Her job as a nurse’s assistant is nurturing and protective, a comfort to him amongst the meaningless transactions of war. Her death then takes on an extra level of tragedy as it equates with a loss of purity and faith in the world.

**Roles of women and men**

Hemingway depicts a world in which the spheres of women and men are very much divided. Men are involved in war. There are two types of women: prostitutes or angelic nurses. The role of women is thus comforting in both forms, and is not to be muddied by any involvement in the fighting. In an instance when women do find themselves in the war two peasant sisters who get caught up in the retreat make the soldiers uncomfortable and test their self-control (pp.174–5). A modern reader might question this simplistic
assignation of roles for women, just as they might may question the duty of a man to fight, and the implicit assumption of sacrifice, in order to prove himself brave. Furthermore, they might question a masculinity that is based on womanising and drinking. Catherine’s role is not only to be a comforter but to give birth. Thus she is contrasted with the realm of men, which is patrolled by death. The worlds of men and women collide, however, when the acts of giving birth and creation are ruined by Catherine’s demise.

DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

Texts are able to be ‘read’ or interpreted in different ways if you have enough evidence and logical thinking to prove your point. For instance, we can read Henry’s shooting of the engineer in several ways based on what we understand of the text and of his character. It is rather ironic that the only soldier Henry kills in the war is someone on his own side. It seems hypocritical in the face of the later incident when the Italians are shooting their officers. Taking Henry’s viewpoint, we might see the injustice of this slaughter of the officers, yet he has not had the slightest bit of sympathy for the engineer.

So, one way to read this event is to see Henry as fulfilling his duty as an officer and enforcing rules in an effort to stave off chaos in the retreat. In this way it is the calm and definitive action of a soldier in control of his emotions. On the other hand, we know that Henry has been searching for adventure and is determined to be brave. In this way, the shooting is a sign of his own insecurities, of his own need to feel himself involved in killing.

Similarly, it is possible to interpret Catherine and Henry’s relationship in various ways. As stated above (see ‘Themes, Ideas & Values’), we can read their romance as giving them purpose and a reason to live. Alternatively, we could see their relationship as folly and a convenient escape for both characters. Read this way, Catherine is trying to avoid her grief for her fiancé by throwing herself into another relationship with another man just as likely to be killed. She lives for the moment, refusing to believe there is a future in anything. Henry, likewise, is escaping the fear and male brutality at the front
by believing himself to be in love with a very feminine and comforting woman. Their love, rather than true, suits their own needs and helps them run away from their own deficiencies and fears, not to mention their duties.

ESSAY TOPICS

1. ‘Because the story is narrated from Lieutenant Henry’s point of view, we are limited in what we understand about other characters.’ Discuss.

2. ‘Both Catherine Barkley and Frederic Henry are resigned to the fact that their love cannot last.’ To what extent do you think this is true?

3. ‘Both Catherine Barkley and Frederic Henry are desperately lost and lonely outsiders.’ Do you agree?

4. ‘Lieutenant Henry is certainly not as brave as he makes himself out to be.’ Discuss.

5. ‘A Farewell to Arms shows the futility of life in the face of war.’ Discuss.

6. ‘A Farewell to Arms demonstrates that war is a place for men, not women.’ Do you agree?

7. ‘Frederic Henry is an adventurer who believes in nothing but self-preservation.’ Discuss.

8. ‘A Farewell to Arms shows the importance of friendship above all else in the face of war.’ To what extent is this true?

9. ‘A Farewell to Arms showcases a paradox in war: the sense of adventure and the horror.’ Discuss.

10. ‘Frederic Henry lives in a godless world devoid of faith.’ Discuss.

Analysing a sample question

‘A Farewell to Arms shows the importance of friendship above all else in the face of war.’ To what extent is this true?

This question is asking you to consider the role of friendship as a means of
coping with war. How can it help someone who is at war, and are there limitations? You also need to think about whether this is the only important factor, or if there are others. You should show your versatility by focusing on other characters, as well as Henry.

You can consider:

- The positive aspects of Henry’s friendships with Rinaldi and the priest – what does he gain from each of them? How does it help him to cope?
- The negative aspects of Henry’s friendships with Rinaldi and the priest – how and why does he reject each of their points of view?
- The fact that Henry survives the war better than Rinaldi.
- Henry’s friendships with his corpsmen – how do they demonstrate camaraderie? How do they look out for each other? Does this loyalty help any of them in the end?
- Does Henry abandon his friends? What leads him to leave them and can he be blamed for this?
- Are there any other minor characters who help him escape and why? For example, consider the opera singer, the hospital orderly, the hotel barman.
- Can Henry’s relationship with Catherine be considered a kind of friendship? If it is more than that, then love is a more important factor than friendship. How does she help him survive the war?
- What is the nature of Catherine’s friendship with Ferguson? How is this important to her? When and why does their friendship end?

THE TEXT

FURTHER READING

*A Farewell to Arms* 1957, dir. Charles Vidor and John Huston, MGM Pictures. Starring Jennifer Jones and Rock Hudson.


