
**AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S *A FAREWELL TO
ARMS* (1929)**

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is the mirror of society. It is an essential part of society. Like every person a writer also is influenced by the society he lives in. Then he can apply his imagination and creativity in his works to enlarge his vision of life. Whatever he writes is the expression of his own personality. Thus every work of art comes into existence not only from society and nature, but also from the inner world of the artist. The artist, in his creation, gives expression to his own feelings, emotions and ideas.

As a novelist Hemingway appeared on the literary scene during the period of disillusionment, of utter disappointment, frustration and disenchantment. It was an era of tension created by wars, and civil and domestic violence. The world of stability was not for Hemingway. During his lifetime, he was influenced by the First World War, the Turkish War, the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. Hemingway had taken part in, or witnessed most of the major or minor wars of his time and he valued those experiences most. His personal experience of war formed the raw material for most of his fictional creations. In 1925, speaking about war, Hemingway told Scott Fitzgerald quite emphatically that:

It was one of the major subjects and certainly one of the hardest to write truly of, those writers who had not seen it were always very jealous and tried to make it seem unimportant or abnormal or a disease as a subject, while really it was just something quite irreplaceable that they had missed. (Ernest Hemingway, *Green* 74)

Thus, according to Hemingway, the experience of war provided a great adventure to a writer. Hemingway's own participation in the two World Wars enabled him to give a literary reality to one of the major experiences of his generation and the generation that followed. He drew considerably from his own experiences for writing his novels and short stories. However his range of subject matter is not wide and he returns again and again to the same kind of material

related to war and violence. In fact almost in all his major works, war becomes the background and love grows there under the shadow of war.

A Farewell to Arms was published in 1929 and instantly marked Hemingway's most distinctive success as a literary artist. The novel tells a story of an intense war time love-affair between Frederic Henry, an American volunteer serving in the Italian army and Catherine Barkley, an English nurse. The novel is based on Hemingway's personal experience of war on the Italian front in 1918 and so, it is an autobiographical novel. "A *Farewell to Arms* is a romanticized fictional version of some of the things that had happened to him personally ten years before" (Carlos Baker, *Writer as Artist* 104). Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley in the novel represent Hemingway and his beloved English nurse Agnes von Kurowsky respectively. Hemingway's dealing with love and war reveals his insight into the complexities of the world of violence as well as the intricate working of human heart in love.

Hemingway had participated in the World War-I as a Red Cross ambulance driver. On 8th July 1918, carrying a supply of cigarettes, chocolates and post-cards to the Italian soldiers at Fossatta di Piave, he was seriously wounded by fragments from an Austrian mortar shell which had landed just a few feet away. For sometime he was given up for dead but later he recovered. The doctors took out as many as 227 pieces of metal from his legs, and his suffering was severe. He wrote from hospital, "My wounds are now hurting like 227 little devils driving nails into the saw" (Leicester Hemingway 49). But the most important sensation that Hemingway experienced on that eventful night was that of the soul leaving his body the moment the trench mortar hit him. Hemingway thought he might die. "I died then, I felt my soul or something coming right out of my body like you'd pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by one corner. It flew around and then came back and went in again and I was not dead any more (Leicester Hemingway 56).

This traumatic experience did shatter his illusions about personal strength and fearlessness. It rather added to his doubts about courage and endurance. Now Hemingway realized that fear is an inescapable part of man. He accepted the harsh truth that he too was mortal. John Atkins writes: "The numbing sensation of fear is a central feature of Hemingway's works. Its expression rises quite naturally out of his war experience, but something congenital and deeper in his personality gives it a special significance" (135). Hemingway's own lack of inner self-assuredness finds its way into the characterization of Frederic Henry.

Frederic Henry, Hemingway's fictional projection in this novel is a non-combatant ambulance driver and is more of a spectator than a participant in the war. Even though he has no passion and enthusiasm for war, he performs his duties efficiently and conscientiously. War does not seem dangerous to Henry and taking risks does not seriously bother him. He believes he would not get killed in this war. He says, "Well, I knew I would not be killed. Not in this war" (Ernest Hemingway, *Farewell* 35). But later he, like Hemingway, is severely hurt in the leg because of the explosion of a trench mortar shell and becomes a victim of war. Now when he is hit, he finds that he is really in the war after all. Henry's feelings after this hit are quite similar to those of Hemingway when he was hit by the trench mortar shell. Hemingway presents Henry's feelings in the following words:

I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind. I went out swiftly, all of myself, and I knew I was dead and that it had all been a mistake to think you just died. Then I floated, and instead of going on I felt myself slide back. I breathed and I was back. (Ernest Hemingway, *Farewell* 52)

A Farewell to Arms is thus mainly constructed out of "emotional encounters, the selection of which is presided over by a dominant emotion (fear of death)" (Adair 49). Though the effect on Lieutenant Henry's overall attitude is not directly stated, the terror and shock are relentlessly conveyed by Hemingway with the realism of detail. In fact, Henry's experience of war is a common experience of the Americans. He even becomes a universal figure and his story becomes the story of a man caught up in the devastating experience of war which disturbs the normal course of life and brings it to the brink of complete ruin. Thus it becomes clear that in Hemingway the 'hero' meant not the simple 'protagonist' but he is the man who stands for many men.

In *A Farewell to Arms* Hemingway has dealt with his own first adult love-affair with an English nurse Agnes von Kurowsky. This love-affair had taken place at the base hospital in Milan during his recuperation there in the late summer and autumn of 1918. Agnes provides the background for Catherine Barkley. She is a nurse who is in love with her patient. War has disturbed the normal routine of life. It has changed the course of many persons' lives. Catherine is one of them. If Henry is hurt physically, Catherine is hurt emotionally. The death of her fiancé with

whom she was engaged for eight years gives her an emotional jolt. Such is the mental state of Catherine when she meets Henry.

Their love flourishes amidst the ruins and destruction caused by war. It is important to point out that theirs is not the love at first sight. Hemingway has presented Henry as taking this love-affair casually because Agnes had jilted Hemingway by refusing to marry him. In a letter, she had written to him that she was in love with an Italian officer whom she would like to marry. So, in the beginning, Henry's attitude to love is most casual. For him making love with Catherine is just a pass-time; he is not at all serious in his love affair with Catherine. He takes their relationship very lightly. For him it is no more than a game of chess "in which you said things instead of playing cards." (Ernest Hemingway, *Farewell* 28)

However, it was Hadley Richardson, Hemingway's first wife, who provided all the important traits for the portrayal of Catherine. She was a submissive, sacrificing shadow of her husband, who desired only total identification with Hemingway and his requirements. In a letter to Hemingway, before they married, she had written: "I want to be your helper - not your hinderer - wouldn't for anything have your ambitions any different and admire them so. So anything you suggest that means putting work in secondary place has no backing from me" (Sokoloff 21-22). We find Catherine possessing very similar traits in the novel. She is exquisitely simple, extremely gentle, deeply sincere, intensely emotional and admirably brave. Her conception of love is the complete surrender of herself to the man who had captured her heart. She merges herself with her lover. She says to Henry: "There isn't any me. I'm you; Don't make up a separate me" (Ernest Hemingway, *Farewell* 109).

Hadley had made Hemingway realize the worth of women in real life. It was his association with her that lent an element of security and stability to his life. So, having experienced true love, Hemingway could also now give a more imaginative twist to his love-affair. That is why with the passage of time, Henry also develops genuine feelings for Catherine. He is ready to marry her, but she loves him so much that she is not bothered about the formality of marriage. She thinks that she is already married to him and is already his wife. It shows her deep emotion of love and companionship towards Henry.

Then in the later part of the novel Hemingway recalls his life with Pauline, his second wife. Hadley never had a caesarean child. It was Pauline who had delivered Patrick through a

caesarean operation just when Hemingway was writing this novel. The manner of Catherine's death was perhaps suggested to Hemingway by this experience. A.E. Hotchner remarks:

This was the realistic sludge of his relationship with the Red Cross nurse that was refined out of the romantic concept of Catherine. After their hospital love affair, the nurse was replaced with the romantic times he had with Hadley during their trips to Switzerland, and it was Hadley who then became Catherine, only to give way to Pauline to provide the caesarean that brought on the dramatic end of Catherine's life (102).

The tension which Hemingway went through during Pauline's pregnancy provided the material for Fredric Henry's plight. Catherine dies courageously and attains an almost heroic stature. There is no crying on her part. But her death is the most shocking incident Frederic experiences in the novel. Note, for instance, his response to the idea of Catherine's possible death. "Now Catherine would die. That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told the rules, and the first time, they caught you off base they killed you" (Ernest Hemingway, *Farewell* 311-312).

Henry's feelings about death here are almost like those of a paranoiac and he has never had them before. His complaint against death, however, does not necessarily imply his belief in nihilism; it only expresses the hero's love of life. Catherine's death has a special significance for Henry. It makes him deeply aware of death as supreme fact of life. He returns alone to the hotel, a winner who is taking nothing away from the gambling table, but as self-vulnerable to the hurts of the world. Henry gradually learns about war, love and finally death as an end of life.

Thus, Hemingway has made use of many incidents from his own life to describe the incidents in the novel realistically. But the novel is not pure autobiography. There is quite a lot of difference between the actual events in Hemingway's life and those in the novel. Once he was wounded, Hemingway did not return to or participate in the war. In this novel, he has attempted a deep and objective study of his emotion of fear. It was for this reason that he went on to imagine the outcome of a return to the front after recuperation while being fully aware of his own inner shortcomings and fear. As Robert Little points out: "When he sits down to write the experience, he has the rare power to take himself back into the mood when things were happening the outcome of which he did not then know" (304).

Frederic Henry's return to the front and his participation in the retreat of Caporetto are purely fictional. Aware of his own capabilities, or the lack of them, Hemingway realized that he would

have run away had he had to face death merely for his accent. Therefore, Fredric Henry is portrayed as a run-away. He deserts the army for the military policy is bent on executing him merely because of his accent. They suspect him of being a German in Italian uniform. Having once realized the value of life, both the creator and creation become passionately involved in life and self-preservation. Now Henry does not want to read the account of the war in the news paper. "...I had the paper but I did not read it because I did not want to read about the war. I was going to forget the war. I had made a separate peace" (Ernest Hemingway, *Farewell* 233).

In the novel, Hemingway has used his own experience to show the effect of war and the problems generated by it on other significant characters such as Rinaldi and the priest and other soldiers also. When Henry has recovered from his injuries, he rejoins his post in Gorizia and is asked to go to Bainsizza to take charge of the ambulances stationed there. There again he finds other people who had been at war much too long badly affected by it. Tragedy of the war has affected the spirits of Rinaldi and the priest. Rinaldi looks too tired of war. He tells Henry: "This war is killing me," Rinaldi said, "I am very depressed by it" (Ernest Hemingway, *Farewell* 159). Even the stoical priest has begun to feel the havoc war is causing. Now he wants to go back to Abruzzi. He says: "It has been a terrible summer," said the priest... "Many people have realized the war this summer. Officers whom I thought could never realize it realize it now" (Ernest Hemingway, *Farewell* 169). The army officers relieve themselves of the shattering tension of war by cracking vulgar jokes at the priest. "Priest every night five against one" (Ernest Hemingway, *Farewell* 6) shouts the priest-baiting captain, adding much to the gaiety of his company. So pressing is their need for laughter that they derive pleasure even from accusing the priest of masturbation. Rinaldi and Henry's going to the girls at the Vila Rossa shows the extent to which they are bored with their way of life during war. Their indulging in drinking and sex reveals their desire to affirm their personal identity.

Thus, undoubtedly, Hemingway has used his own experience of war in the novel *A Farewell to Arms*. But being an artist, he was not satisfied with giving the factual description of war like a historian. He also showed the impact of war on those who were involved in it. Through his personal experiences, Hemingway has tried to create a literary history of war and its physical and psychological effects on him and his generation. In this connection, Maxwell Geismer points out: "Perhaps no other contemporary writer, in fact, has brought us so many vivid studies of the war's impact on the defenseless human temperament" (130). In fact, *A Farewell to Arms* is a powerful

parable of survival in the face of pervasive death. It is perhaps one of the best war novels of the century which brings out the truth about war and life in our time as it is based on the personal experience of the writer.

ABSTRACT

Literature and society are the two sides of the same coin. They are complementary to each other. A writer is influenced by the surrounding of his society and in turn reflects the society and his understanding of it in his works. So, essentially all literature is autobiographical in nature. Ernest Hemingway had experienced war and its aftermaths himself. He has used this experience to present all the sufferings, difficulties and happenings of life in a realistic way in his novels. So, undoubtedly, Hemingway's novels are rooted in his experience and response to life. *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) is also based on author's own experience of war and for this reason alone holds a unique place among the war-novels. In this novel Hemingway has blended beautifully the two themes of love and war. His protagonist Frederic Henry has much of him. Hemingway himself, like his Henry, had suffered a leg injury in the war and was sent to Milan for treatment and recovery. It was in a hospital in Milan that he fell in love with a young American nurse Agnes von Kurowsky whom he has painted as Catherine Barkley in the novel. However, the novel is not purely autobiographical in nature. Hemingway has followed an objective method for presenting the subjective experience and has made his accounts more beautiful with his imagination and artistic gifts. He had made use of his personal experience only to project his understanding of life as he saw it. It won't be an exaggeration to say that one can learn a lot about the human heart and human mind from this novel.

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