

A Farewell to Arms= Themes=

Love as a response to the horrors of war and the world=

Hemingway repeatedly emphasizes the horrific devastation war has wrought on everyone involved. From the opening account of cholera that kills "only" 7,000 men to the graphic description of the artillery bombardment to the corrupt violence during the Italian retreat, *A Farewell to Arms* is among the most frank anti-war novels.

But Hemingway does not merely condemn war. Rather, he indicts the world at large for its atmosphere of destruction. Henry frequently reflects upon the world's insistence on breaking and killing everyone; it is as if the world cannot bear to let anyone remain happy and safe.

Indeed, whenever Henry and Catherine are blissful, something comes along to interrupt it - be it Henry's injury, his being sent back to the front, his impending arrest, or, finally, Catherine's death from childbirth. With such misery confronting them at every turn, the two turn to each other. Catherine, especially, plunges almost too easily into love when she first meets Henry. She admits she was "crazy" at first, most likely over the fairly recent death of her fiancé, but Henry, too, succumbs to the temptations of love. Love is a pleasurable diversion (see *Games*, below) that distracts lovers from the outside world; the two often tell each other not to think about anything else, as it is too painful. Hidden within the shelter of Catherine's beautiful hair, Henry and Catherine feel protected from the cruel outside world.

The major problem with such escapist love is, as Henry and other characters point out several times, one does not always know the "stakes" of love until it is over, or that one does not know about something until one has lost it. Henry hardly allows himself to think of life without Catherine while he is in love, and once he does lose her, it seems unlikely that he will recover.

Grace under pressure and the Hemingway hero=

Although less important in this novel than in his 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway maps out what it means to be a hero. Chiefly, the "Hemingway hero," as literary criticism frequently tags him, is a man of action who coolly exhibits "grace under pressure" while confronting death. Henry's narration is certainly detached and action-oriented - only rarely does he let us into his most private thoughts - and he displays remarkable cool when shooting the engineering sergeant. Characters in the novel strive for this grace under pressure in an otherwise chaotic world. Even when the men eat spaghetti (and especially when they eat macaroni in the dugout during the artillery bombardment), they try to exercise mastery over a single skill to compensate for the uncontrollable chaos elsewhere. Dr. Valentini is another example of a skillful, confident Hemingway hero.

The Hemingway hero also eschews glory for a more personal code of honor. Unlike the selfish and boastful Ettore, Henry is not greedy for accolades, nor is he stupidly sacrificial. He judiciously determines what is worth the sacrifice, and decides that the war is no longer

worthwhile. Even after he makes his "separate peace," however, he feels slightly guilty over letting his friends continue the battle without him.

Rain and destruction=

From the first chapter to the last word, the novel is flooded with rain and other images of water. The rain almost always heralds destruction and death; it impinges upon whatever momentary happiness Henry and Catherine have and turns it into muddy misery. Ironically, rain often signifies fertility in literature but here stands for sterility, as it does in much post-WWI literature.

However, water is positive in other ways. Henry receives symbolic baptisms when he bathes and, more prominently, when he twice escapes from the authorities via a river and a lake. Frozen water is kinder to him and to soldiers in general; snow usually prevents fighting, and Henry and Catherine are happiest during their snowy winter in Switzerland.

Diversions=

Nearly all the characters in the novel try to divert themselves with pleasurable activities from the horror of war. The soldiers play card games, drink heavily, and carouse in brothels; Rinaldi is the poster-boy for this hedonistic excess. Henry goes along somewhat, but his biggest diversion is love itself; he and Catherine treat it like a game at first, flirting and teasing each other. Above all, ignorance is prized during the war; if one does not think about the war, then one cannot be unhappy during the ongoing pursuit of games and diversions.

Abandonment=

The novel deploys several instances of abandonment, intentional and forced, in the realms of love and war. After the death of her fiancé, Catherine understandably fears abandonment by Henry, and he makes every attempt when separated to reunite with her. Even Helen fears abandonment by Catherine. In the war, we see several cases of abandonment: the engineering sergeants, who abandon Henry and the other drivers; Bonello, who abandons the drivers to give himself up as a prisoner; the Italian retreat, a large-scale abandonment; and Henry's escape from army. However, Henry's abandonment is completely justified (he was going to be executed if he did not), and it is less a desertion than what he calls a "separate peace." Ultimately, he decides that not abandoning Catherine is far more important than not abandoning the war, though he does feel guilty over leaving behind Rinaldi and the others at the front.

Journalistic style of omission=

As is typical in a Hemingway work, Henry's narration is spare, detached, and journalistic. Contrary to what the reader might expect, the effect often heightens emotion. For example, Hemingway ratchets up the connotations of death and violence by omitting explicit mention of blood when it drips on Henry in the ambulance.

Hemingway shows his range when he occasionally uses a near "stream-of-consciousness" narration for Henry. In these few cases, Henry's thoughts are ungrammatical, awkwardly

worded, and repetitive - much as the mind works, especially under such chaotic circumstances. A notable example is the long second-person narrative passage in Chapter XXXII after Henry has divorced himself from the army. By addressing himself as "you," Henry shows how he has separated from his former self through his "separate peace."