



Hemingway and First World War : The Study of *A Farewell to Arms*

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Abstract:

The American people entered the Twentieth century with enthusiastic optimism . The future seemed to hold almost limitless potential for good .AS yet there was no indication of the two world conflicts to come,nor of the threat of global destruction. In much of the view of American society as well as that of European society , 1914 , was that of the “golden age”--- a period of peace, prosperity and optimism, shattered only by the experience of war. However, the reality was different.

Keywords: *Golden age, global waorld, World war*

Although World War I profoundly affected Hemingway, he did not write much which was explicitly concerned with the war before 1928. *A Farewell to Arms* had the violence and the trauma of the war as dominant theme, yet the war was not directly written about. The story dealt with the trauma of the war and the way to face the past nightmare and the present post-war world. It was as though he was not ready to face the painful memories of World War I in his fiction. On his return from war he had been excited and eager to talk about his experiences. He gave a number of lectures recounting what all he went through. Apparently talking about the war was not of satisfactory state because in one of the portions he deleted from the *Big Two Hearted River*, Nick thinks “That was what had made the war unreal. Too much talking”. This much was evident that one day Hemingway would have to write about the war. It was taken up in *In Our Time* but touched, as Stephen Cooper says “Obliquely “(40) though the destructiveness of modern warfare is the central theme *In Our Time*, yet only five vignettes and one story are about soldiers at the front in World War I - amounting to not more than seven pages in the book. The details are vivid in the vignettes and all are found in the first half of the book, giving the war experiences the central importance in the book.

Finally, in 1928-29, Hemingway was able to write down not only his experiences of the First World War but also, along with, his feelings about it. He takes up Italy as a projection of the action of World War I. Hemingway’s own experiences in the war, which became the basis for *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), began in May, 1918 when he left Oak Park to report for duty in New York with the Red Cross Ambulance Service and ended in May 1919, when he received a letter in Oak Park that she was in love with someone else. It was one of the most significant years

of his life during which for the first time he tasted the excitement and adventure of going to war and that too in a foreign land as also he experienced the horror and destructiveness of modern warfare. *A Farewell to Arms* is no doubt based on Hemingway's own experiences but it could be wrong to say that whatever Frederic Henry goes through was what Hemingway had himself experienced. The reflection of Hemingway the man in his hero is not definite. Michael S. Reynolds's has painstakingly pointed out that Frederic's experiences differed significantly from that of Hemingway's(4). For instance, the story of *A Farewell to Arms* ends approximately two months before the time Hemingway arrived in Italy in June 1918. No doubt, his being in Italy and participating in the war gave him firsthand knowledge of the Italian countryside but the use of secondary sources for the action of the novel gave an objectivity to the story which could not have been possible if the entire story had been autobiographical. Frederic Henry is certainly not Hemingway. Secondly, as Delbert Wylder has pointed out, it should be kept in mind that Frederic is looking back and recounting the events of the past(42). He has already gone through the war and is looking back on a tragic and painful experience and is trying to come to terms with the impact of the war on his life. He is, in the words of Walter Allen, making an attempt "to get down to some kind of bedrock in a world that has been stripped off all meaning for him."43 It is basically Frederic's personal tragedy. Political factors are present, no doubt, but they are there by virtue of being a part of the war — the same was part of the war — the same war which had shattered his idealism and beliefs pertaining to the world.

Though Hemingway based *A Farewell to Arms* in Italy, Frederic himself is an American, having his concepts, attitudes and opinions completely in symphony with the American ideals of liberty, equality and self-determination. The entire action of the fictional construct is in Italy but yet through the experiences of Frederic Hemingway never fails to keep America in view. The setting is in Italy, the other characters are Italian, yet Frederic being the narrator reacts to situations, people and places as a true American. The United States had gone through a terrible war and like Frederic, the American soldiers had to learn the hard lesson of how to cope with the impact of this soul shattering experience. The Italian's and their politically motivated reactions are projected through the Italian characters while Frederic, by his personal reactions, gives the American point of view. He does not explicitly express any political ideas as such but his concepts become clear from his ruminations and his reactions. The reason why Frederic joined the war efforts is never really made clear. He is asked three times during the course of the novel as to why he joined the Italian army but his answer is evasive and never clear and direct. Catherine Barkley asks him at the onset, he replies "I don't know. There isn't always an explanation for everything." The next afternoon, the head nurse at the hospital in Gorizia asks Frederic why he joined the Italian army rather than the British, his reply again is, "I don't know", adding "Could I join now?" When the head nurse insists on the answer, he replies, "I was in Italy, and spoke Italian"(p.22). Rather than being the correct answer, this rejoinder of Frederic's, in Stephen Coopers words, appears to be "more an effort to appease the curiosity of the head nurse so as to bring her questions to an end." He diverts her and begins off a discussion on the Italian language. The third time the question is repeated when the bar man tells Frederic that he would leave Italy before he would go to war and then asks Frederic why he went to war. The answer is basically the same, "I don't know. I was a fool"(p.255). His noncommittal answers have sparked off reactions in critics like Malcolm Cowley which erroneously find Frederic's attitude towards life "spectatorial." Such views appear to be based on John Alderidge's generalising the American Volunteers in World War I:

“They were attracted by the romance of serving in a foreign country with a foreign army... with... little compulsion beyond the thrills they expected to encounter along the way. But they wanted at the same time, to remain disinterested and aloof; they wanted to experience the excitement of death without the pain of it. They wanted above all to be free to move on whenever their jobs stopped paying off in thrills.”⁴¹

This view is too general to cover all the American volunteers in the European war and has very little relevance to Frederic as John Alderidge considers him to be a representative of the volunteers. In the novel we don't find Frederic showing any expectation of coming across ‘thrills’ on the war front nor does he experience any ‘excitement of death without the pain of it’. He has a near encounter with death and endures the full impact of the “pain” of the event.

It is not that Frederic doesn't know the answer to the question relating to the reason why he joined the Italian army or that he has forgotten the motive over a passage of time. He appears intelligent and responsible in the course of the novel, so it could not be that he joined the Italian army on an impulse. What seems the most plausible reason is the reply Frederic gave to the barman at Stresa which hints at disillusionment with the war, “I was a fool.” As such no exact reason is given for his joining the Italian army but his attitude and tone of his statements suggest that when he joined the war he thought it was for a good and just cause and over the time disillusionment set in over the course of his experiences in the war. All the war propaganda the Allies showered the Americans with was surely one reason of the increased mass hysteria among the people to join the war. The Americans did not take the German atrocities and the German threat to civilization lightly and the general aim was to make the world a place safe for democracy. This was one reason that the post-war disillusion struck the people so heavily. Stanley Cooperman correctly points out that “the intensity with which propaganda had been first accepted, however, was a vitally important factor in the subsequent revulsion against all verbalized value.”⁴⁸ All the propaganda was taken at its face value. With the war all the high sounding words and phrases had lost their meanings and all sounded hollow to the American soldier. Frederic's thoughts in the following passage amply illustrates this:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain. He had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, 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 were done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or heaven were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. (pp.184-185).

The passage suggests a process of disillusionment. The Americans had joined the war with a lot of enthusiasm and ideals but facing the reality, all their idealism and lofty ideas were shattered. Hemingway shows clearly that Frederic had all reasons to be disillusioned with the

war and all those abstractions and ideals, espoused by those who defended and promoted the war. At another time Frederic recalls how he had once seen an antcovered log on fire in the camp:

I remember thinking at the time that it was the end of the world and a splendid chance to be a messiah and lift the log off onto the ground. But I did not do anything but throw a tin cup of water on the log, so that I would have the cup to empty to put whisky in before I added water to it! Think the cup of water on the burning log only steamed the ants (p.328).

His throwing water on the ants reveals his frustrated idealism. He had joined the army with visions of heroism but he realises to his disillusionment that there was no place in war for such things. But it should be remembered as Bhim S. Dahiya points out that ‘Frederic’s report of the incident, however, comes at a moment when Catherine is dying in the hospital, so it is coloured by his mood at the moment.’⁴⁹ His cynical attitude does not mean that he doesn’t care for his men. Throughout the novel he is concerned about his soldiers and blames the ruling class for throwing millions to their death.

“A Farewell to Arms shows the war in a negative light but it is simply not an anti-war novel. Frederic is an American and lives by his American beliefs and ideals. Democracy is an accepted form in his way of thinking. He is genuinely concerned about the men under his command and feels for them. After being hit by an Australian trench mortar, Frederic wants to know who was hit and how badly. He tries his best to help.

I tried to get closer to Passini to try to put atourniquet on the legs but I could not move. I tried again and my legs moved a little. I could pull backwards along with my arms and elbows. Passini was quiet now. I sat beside him, undid my tunic and tried to rip the tail of my shirt. It would not rip and I bit the edge of the cloth to start it. Then I thought of his puttees but Passini had only one leg. I unwound the puttee and while I was doing it I saw there was no need to try and make a tourniquet because he was dead already. I made sure he was dead. There were three others to locate (p.55).

Ambulances are disposed by him carefully and turned over to a British officer. During the retreat he does his best to carry out the orders given to him to take ambulances loaded with hospital equipment to Pordenone, and to keep his men together and alive throughout the ordeal. The chaos of the retreat does not permit him to be successful. He fails, losing all his ambulances and two drivers out of three. When one of his drivers, Aymo, is killed, he reacts humanely: “He looked very dead. It was raining. I had liked him as well as anyone I ever knew. I had his papers in my pocket and would write to his family”(p.214). Not once does it come to Frederic’s mind that he should desert the army in spite of his disillusionment with the war and its political motives, unlike the ambulance driver, Bonello, who deserts the group with the intention of surrendering so that he can stay in the relative safety of an enemy prison camp.

Frederic bids farewell to military arms as well as arms of love, once again wrong because Frederic loves Catherine even more often this act. Richard B. Hovey’s comment summarises the act aptly, “It is not an act of self- regarding desertion but an act of commonsense.”⁵⁷ It is a sheet act of survival and in the words of Wirt Williams, “forced on him by circumstances.”⁵⁸ The choice is clear — either be killed for no fault or escape. Desertion is forced upon him due to conditions which are completely out of the control. Had the Carabinieres not interfered on the

way, Frederic would never have deserted the army. His thoughts, while riding a freight train concerning the floor walkers and discrimination against them makes his position clear regarding his desertion of the army.

“You had lost your cars and men as a floor walker loses the stock of his department in a fire. There was, however, no insurance. You were out of it now. You had no more obligation. If they shot floor walkers after a fire in the department store because they spoke with an accent they had always had, then certainly the floor walkers would not be expected to return when the store opened again for business. They might seek other employment; if there was any other employment and the police did not get them” (p.232).

Frederic is never easy after his forced act of desertion. He is miserable, guilty and restless as he has nothing to do. If he had not been so loyal and committed to his work, he would not have suffered.

In the novel Frederic never really defines his social or political leanings. Not once does he in the course of the novel state explicitly any political commitment. His attachment is based on an emotional level, having a personal devotion to his duty. His behavior and attitude give an idea of his traditional American democratic beliefs. He is loyal, fair, believes in equality and self-determination. He needs comradeship and the satisfaction of working for a common cause. He is committed to the country he has fought for. He is aware of man's brutality, stupidity and is disillusioned with abstract ideals and slogans of the war, yet cannot easily get over the commitment he has made to the war. Thus, Hemingway's writings of the time around the First World War, even those apparently about Europe, reveal the writer's response to the American scene of the time. His disgust with the puritanic climate of the mid-west, his impatience with the old world, his anxieties for a new order, and his all-out efforts to oppose the forces of destruction show his firm commitment to the humanistic values based on the new and modern outlook rooted in science and secularism.

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