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## Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*: War Personified as an Authoritarian Figure

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**Abstract:** The dictatorial regime of armed conflicts has enforced one of the most uncontrollable plagues on humanity. This life-threatening pandemic has moved creative writers like Ernest Hemingway to probe its tragedies in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Weighing Frederic Henry's narrative with characterization, this essay examines the totalitarian regime of the "Lord War" on human beings.

**Keywords:** War, Infanticide, Frederic Henry, Catherine Barkley.

**Résumé :** Le régime dictatorial des conflits armés a imposé à l'humanité l'un des fléaux les plus incontrôlables. Cette pandémie menaçante a poussé des écrivains comme Ernest Hemingway à sonder ses tragédies dans *L'adieu aux armes – A Farewell to Arms –* (1929). Pesant le récit de Frederic Henry avec la caractérisation, cette recherche examine le totalitarisme du "Seigneur Guerre" sur les humains.

**Mots-clés:** Guerre, infanticide, Frederic Henry, Catherine Barkley

### Introduction

Peoples from all times have abhorred overcontrolling and threatening regimes as totalitarianism and dictatorship. The opponents hold cogent arguments from such inalienable rights as life, liberty, happiness, education, freedom of expression, etc. to sustain their claims. In the American context, the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), and the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) were all fueled by spirits of welfare for all. Still, prior to and after those achievements, another enduring system, war, has continued denying humans the very basic rights they strived for.

In the course of history, enlightened spirits have warned the darkened masses against war in multiple ways. In this realm, Ernest Hemingway is not left out. He produced a famed meticulous novel, *A Farewell to Arms* as a means of awareness raising with regard to war. If

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“literature is the history of life and human relations” (Colum in Oliver 113), then Frederic Henry’s narration – that is what *A Farewell to Arms* is about – fits this understanding. To reach this literary grandeur, Owen Wister argues that in *A Farewell to Arms*, “landscape, persons, and events, are brought to such vividness as to make the reader become a participating witness” (in Oliver 113). Put differently, Hemingway uses a writing style that leads the reader onto a nearly authentic world to better grasp the true spirit of war, that is “the failure of norms in the face of reality” (Berman 106). In this sense, Berman acknowledges that in the presence of war and other armed conflicts, standing ethics, values, and traditional norms are easily dented by them who were taught to confess that war safeguards security for all; verily, war masks and disavows its violence and cruelties with sentiment and idealism (Norris 47).

Emphasizing the narrative progress, Jennifer Haytock maintains that the novel’s opening imagery anticipates how the “soldiers will give birth not to a living being but to violence and death” (in Bloom 82). Diane Price Herndl backs Haytock in attributing the performance of masculinity to the wounded soldiers by matching hemorrhage to the ejection of semen. Concretely, most characters lose more than they ever expect (240). Frederic, for instance, ends up “not a soldier, not fighting for the Allies’ eventual success, wounded but not wounded in heroic action, without the girl, not married, not a father, not at home in the States or in Italy, the country he began fighting for” (Strychacz 279). In this perspective, *A Farewell to Arms* is duly “a novel about the innocence of the common soldier in war” (Wagner-Martin 77), as most servicemen engage with very few knowledge about the demands of their mission. Interestingly, this paper contradicts Berman when he holds that *A Farewell to Arms* is not a war book but a post-war book (115). He fails to view the references Hemingway consulted before creating his World-War-I fiction. The Italian debacle at Caporetto and the response of the fascist government toward *A Farewell to Arms* are forceful examples of the nature of Frederic’s narrative (Reynolds 111).

Thence, I engage to explore Hemingway’s 1929 novel, exhibiting war as one of the most malevolent tyrants to eliminate by means. In this respect, I probe Frederic’s narrative with characterization lenses to highlight how armed conflicts deprive humanity from such similar inherent rights as those humans have been battling for.

That creative writers either (un) consciously use devices to convey their message is a well-known fact among literary critics. As a result, initiated scholars read between the lines to unveil hidden facts. Similarly, to discuss Hemingway's representation of effects of war, I pore over his characters' construction, exhibiting them, via their dialogues—streams of consciousness—, actions, and motivations.

### 1. Physical Damage

Fatal to and part and parcel of any armed conflicts are casualties: the wounded and the killed. *A Farewell to Arms* is replete with representations of any battle-scarred case: "horrific descriptions of the physiology of dead male and female bodies, of battlefield trauma" (Norris 45) resulting from "battered heads, broken bones, auto accident, gun shot wounds to the spine, leg, stomach, head, horn wounds, gangrene, venereal disease, dysentery" (Reynolds 114). In fact, Hemingway's war heroes are all marked by their tragedy: "The Battler" in *In Our Time* has a mutilated face with only one ear on his head, *The Sun Also Rises* identifies Jake Barnes with erectile dysfunction, and Robert Jordan gets a crushed leg in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic loses a knee, so do two ambulance drivers in his corps, Passini and Aymo. Prompted by their humanitarian goal, Passini and Aymo overlook the atrocities that the war embodies. These atrocities that never spare anything are, naturally, not lovely to them either despite the rationale substantiating their commitment. Under the aegis of war, "fire represents combat death, with soldiers like ants incapable of directing their movements towards a place of safety where there is no danger" (Norris 59).

In Frederic's narrative, the obscurity and the hiding in a dugout do not prevent trench mortars from reaching the ambulance men. The narration reads:

There was a great splashing and I saw the star-shells go up and burst and float whitely and rockets going up and heard the bombs, all this in a moment, and then I heard close to me some one saying "Mama Mia! Oh, mama Mia!" (...) It was Passini and when I touched him he screamed (...). One leg was gone and the other was held by tendons and part of the trouser and the stump twitched and jerked as though it were not connected. He bit his arm and moaned,

“Oh mama mia, mama Mia,” then, “Dio te salve, Maria. Dio te salve, Maria. Oh Jesus shoot me Christ shoot me mama mia mama Mia oh purest lovely Mary shoot me. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Oh Jesus lovely Mary stop it. Oh oh oh oh,” then choking, “Mama mama mia.” Then he was quiet, biting his arm, the stump of his leg twitching (...). I unwound [Passini’s] puttee and while I was doing it I saw there was no need to try and make a tourniquet because he was dead already. (54, 55)

The occurrence of the tragedies in this excerpt testifies that Passini is the first humanitarian actor to be caught in the claws of the terrible war. Owing to the inexorability of the conflict, another ambulance driver, Aymo, will hold the same lot. Frederic reports:

The drivers were ahead of me (...). Two more shots came from the thick brush and Aymo, as he was crossing the tracks, lurched, tripped and fell face down. We pulled him down on the other side and turned him over (...). He lay in the mud on the side of the embankment, his feet pointing downhill, breathing blood irregularly (...). He was hit low in the back of the neck and the bullet had ranged upward and come out under the right eye. He died while I was stopping up the two holes. (213)

Desperately enough, the devastating wind of the clashes has blown through the windscreen of the ambulance. Every single subject proves feeble before the overpowered circumstances of the conflict. The scenery foreshadows the desperate romance between Frederic and Catherine in a world fraught with the malevolent spirit that war nourishes.

The aimless killings in the foregoing are preceded by the death of seven thousand soldiers (4). Though their lot derives straight neither from bullets nor bombings, I argue that their conscription paved the way for them to contract the cholera and, consequently, death. Were they not committed amidst the clashes, they could not die of the cholera. The absence of any single civilian, dead of the cholera, is a cogent fact<sup>65</sup>.

Prior to the humiliating fictive Caporetto retreat, the narrator believes that Italians had lost “one hundred and fifty thousand men on the Bainsizza plateau and on the San Gabriele [and] forty thousand on the

<sup>65</sup> Historically, World War One recorded 37,508,686 casualties representing 57.6% of the mobilized forces.

Carso” (133)<sup>66</sup>. As already alluded to, not all war casualties suffer death. All the same, the wounded are no pitiless. They experience a whole range of body wounds, as the narrator aptly reports: “Multiple superficial wounds of the left and right thigh and left and right knee and right foot. Profound wounds of right knee and foot. Lacerations of the scalp (...) with possible fracture of the skull” (59). On his own part, Frederic is not spared by the threats of the explosion and consequently, his capacity to save others is substantially thwarted. He says: “My legs felt warm and wet and my shoes were wet and warm inside. I knew that I was hit and leaned over and put my hand on my knee. My knee wasn’t there. My hand went in and my knee was down on my shin. I wiped my hand on my shirt and another floating light came very slowly down and I looked at my leg and was very afraid” (55-6).

As Passini and Aymo, Frederic was not involved in the immediate clashes. He is much known as an ambulance driver whose responsibility, along with the ambulance personnel, is to drive the casualties to the hospital. As a driver, the paining wound at his knee hinders him from fulfilling properly the duty for which he forsook his studies.

While the decaying atmosphere generated by the war outside is shown through the marks of explosions, blood adumbrates that fetid abode inside the ambulance: “I felt something dripping. At first, it dropped slowly and regularly, and then it pattered into a stream. I shouted to the driver. He stopped the car and looked in through the hole behind his seat. ‘What is it?’ ‘The man on the stretcher over me has a hemorrhage’” (61). Hemorrhage accounts for the flow of blood which pattered into a “stream,” a metaphor for the situation prevailing within the ambulance. This vehicle is expected to be a glimpse of hope for the wounded. However, owing to the wind of the war blowing through any opening, the soothing cabin of the ambulance metamorphosed into the digesting stomach of the giant war. Instead of bringing casualties to hospitals, the ambulance has become the Charon carrying the dead across the Styx, here the battlefield, to Hades, no more to hospitals.

The description of the damage on the human body is not restricted to the immediate sphere of the conflict. Even innocents and civilians are usually included among the victims. For instance, during the

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<sup>66</sup> However, during the factual retreat itself, historical documentations show that Italy lost 320,000 human lives.

Vietnam War, the use of napalm has tortured not only soldiers but also handicapped civilians and made this war different from earlier ones. Concretely put, the My Lai Massacre on March 16, 1968 during the Vietnam War, testifies that babies are sometimes direct victims of atrocities favored by armed conflicts. Ronald L. Haeblerle, an army combat photographer, offered a firsthand testimony of the outrage in the underneath picture. The reference to journalist Mike Wallace's CBS News television interview with soldier Paul Meadlo who participated in the massacre gives better clues to grasp the decay that conflicts lay on children, and babies (Duncan). The facts collaborate the demise of Catherine's baby in *A Farewell to Arms*.

[...] Q: So you fired something like sixty-seven shots?

A: Right

Q: And you killed how many? At that time?

A: Well, I fired them automatic, so you can't know how many you killed 'cause they were going fast. So I might have killed ten or fifteen of them.

Q: Men, women and children?

A: Men, women and children.

Q: And babies?

A: And babies.

In the foreground, the poster exhibits corpses on a deserted untarred grassy road. These bodies, scattered on the ground, are seemingly protected from escaping by a wired green bush on each side. The absence of any horizon in the background shows that there is no hope for anyone to live, either children or even babies. Yet, if ever they find any hope, their physical body cannot escape the threats of the war.

## 2. Physiological Deprogramming

The physiological prints of war are principally embodied by Catherine Barkley. As a V.A.D. (Volunteer Aid Detachment) (25), Catherine is primarily introduced as a nurse (18). As such, she is reported to attend on the wounded at the American hospital of Milan as a "nurse" since "[t]hey had not got nurses yet from America" (77).

The narrator said little about the womanhood of Miss Barkley. Nonetheless, some instances serve as clues to scrutinize it. First, Catherine suffers from no sexual dysfunction. She is therefore physiologically fit to fulfill her sexual duties which are the most crucial ones for a woman according to Judith Fetterley who posits: "Any woman who wishes to

think of herself in other than sexual terms is denying her humanness and trying to be a superhuman, a goddess, for humanness in women is synonymous with being sexual” (62).

Properly complying with Fetterley’s convenient expression of humanness in women, Catherine apparently overlooks using “a douche, a sponge, a cervical cap, or a diaphragm in conjunction with a lactic or boric acid spermicide, methods widely available in 1917 (...) [or] an intrauterine device (...) such as a loop made of cat gut or silver” (Reynolds 112). Consequently, she becomes pregnant only a few months after her first encounter with Frederic (137) and bore the foreign body in her womb. Yet, the icky and crappy atmosphere set by the war which metamorphoses foreign bodies into “ugly, nasty, [and] brutal” (94) entities, overpowers Miss Barkley’s female duties. This elucidates why her umbilical cord chokes the fetus to death during a protracted labor (312-27). Miss Barkley fails to “catch death;” on the contrary, she is caught by death,<sup>67</sup> spread by the horrors of the war (331).

Catherine’s travail lasts about twelve hours with more than ten in hospital rooms. Although she is oxygenated, this vivifying gas proved inefficient in the presence of the desolation enforced by the war. Even if Frederic swells thus the quantity, it fails to work efficiently. Catherine’s body no longer responding duly to the treatment, life cannot be transmitted. She fails to achieve a comprehensive womanhood / motherhood, just as Pilar in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises* miss their status: they all have neither remained Victorian women nor become new ones (Strychacz 281).

The complication of Catherine’s delivery calls upon the expertise of three doctors whose sagacity primarily contributes to soothing her pains. However, none of the on-lookers could delight in the outcome of the surgery. Catherine passed away some moments later and their infant never breathed:

[A nurse] came out in the hall with me. I walked a little way down the hall.  
“What’s the matter with the baby?” I asked.  
“Didn’t you know?”  
“No.”  
“He wasn’t alive.”

<sup>67</sup> When a woman is laboring in the Ewe Culture (Togo, West Africa), they say “nyɔ nua le ku lɛm” which literally translates “the woman in catching death.”



“He was dead?”

“They couldn’t start him breathing. The cord was caught around his neck or something.”

“So he’s dead.”

“Yes. It’s such a shame. He was such a fine big boy. I thought you knew.”

“No,” I said. (326-7)

Based on the potentialities of Wolfgang Iser’s “actual reader,” I term the death of the infant an infanticide (Abrams 257). Indeed, Catherine’s baby is killed. He is hanged, smothered, and choked to death by his mother’s umbilical cord. The prevailing forces of the war are the outstanding vectors of chaos and desolation pushing the protagonist to realize that they “were all cooked” (Hemingway 134). Likewise, Catherine reiterates the damage acknowledging that everything is “going all to pieces” (322). For Frederic, “to have a final farewell to arms, he must lose all obligatory social ties, must escape the social contract embodied in wife and child” (Bloom 85). Having already suffered great loss in the war, Catherine foresees and fully understands the human devastation that war generates, a fact Frederic is yet to acknowledge. As things are falling apart under the destructive feet of war, Catherine’s womb is metamorphosed. On the one hand, it has become the battlefield where her fetus, a belligerent struggling for life, and her sorrowful travail which epitomizes war itself, challenge each other to a conflict in which the fetus is defeated. On the other hand, Catherine’s womb is used as a natural mortuary for her child, since the baby is stillborn. Besides, her umbilical cord, the role of which is to offer the fetus all necessary nutrients for a normal growth, is cursed by the maleficent powers of war. It is altered into a rope which chokes the fetus to death. Pozorsky summarizes this view positing:

The fate of the infant is not only horrific, but also unbelievable (...). Further, this is no simple stillbirth. The infant was choked by his umbilical cord – hanged like the infantrymen in the service (...). The fact is, the infant was suffocated by hanging – by an inadequate oxygen supply (...). The cord *was* caught around the infant’s neck, preventing air from getting into his lungs, and therefore, preventing him from making a sound and from testifying to his own life and simultaneous death. (82)

The suffocation of Catherine’s child can be traced back to many identic causes. A general analysis of war discovers credible inputs by an



anonymous columnist who pores over the damages of the Persian Gulf War on human beings. Thus reads the column:

A new set of symptoms loosely called the gulf war disease is said to be killing and maiming infants. Wives of men who serve in the war against Iraq say they have experienced pain after sexual intercourse. Some say the men's semen burns their skin. Some believe the men carry toxic chemicals in their bodies that are passed on by their sperm to cause birth defects.

Groups allege that up to 65 percent of the children born to gulf war veterans have birth defects. The possible cause: a combination of chemicals used in the desert by the United States, Iraq and other countries or, possibly, a combination of those chemicals that cause a harmful reaction in certain people. ("Lingering Effects of War" 14B)

If the reproductive mechanisms are so affected by war, I believe that the fruit of both the reproduction and the travail is primarily jeopardized. Stillbirths, as in *A Farewell to Arms* and/or child death as in other cases are, no longer, collateral damage.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, physiological dysfunction is another striking ailment that characters experience with war. The narration reads in a sarcastic tone: "At the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came the cholera. But it was checked and, in the end, only seven thousand died of it in the army" (4). The choice of the conjunction "but" and the adverb "only" in the last sentence is remarkable. The "but" implies that despite the technical sanitary facilities that could have been corely damaged by the war, the authorities put their foot forward to "check" the cholera. However, the narrator's use of "only" undermines the value of soldiers' lives. He suggests, I hold, that the cholera should kill more military men than it did mainly on the basis of the disastrous weather caused by a "permanent rain." The sense of destruction and doom and the rate of destructiveness which the cholera scientifically carries besides the utter chaos of the war makes the narration insinuate that more individuals should die. He expects corpse galore believing that health care conditions no longer prevail under the tremendous pressure of the war. The absence of hygienic generates the cholera, an epidemic which would kill numerous people. This explicates the death of seven thousand military men which Frederic reports ironically using "only." Schneider (15) shares this view

thinking that the fact that the cholera is checked, is viciously undercut by the irony that *'only'* seven thousand died of it in the army.

The callous environment of the war contains not only the cholera but also jaundice and malaria. After Frederic has been wounded by a trench-shell, he is sent to the hospital in Milan. The hospital of Milan, primarily built to accommodate and aid American casualties of the war was inaugurated by three boys, all civilians who were not involved of the clashes. Their inauguration of the hospital is a suitable technique Hemingway chooses to unveil the fact that the tentacles of war catch any single presence anywhere. There, Frederic encounters

three other patients (...), a thin boy in the Red Cross from Georgia with malaria, a nice boy, also thin, from New York, with malaria and jaundice, and a fine boy who had tried to unscrew the fuse-cap from a combination shrapnel and high explosive shell for a souvenir. This was a shrapnel shell used by the Austrians in the mountains with a nose-cap which went on after the burst and exploded on contact. (107-8)

This report mentions three civilians. First, a thin boy from the Red Cross. He left Georgia, USA, bearing a humanitarian goal of assisting to fellow humans engaged in the decaying circumstances of the war. Still, his mettle and free will are impotent opposite to the crappy might that emanates from the confrontation. He contracts malaria and is therefore reduced to inactivity.

Second, a nice thin boy from New York, USA, too. The readership knows nothing about him apart from the malaria and the jaundice he suffers from. He is also a civilian who is not involved in the hostilities. Notwithstanding, the chaotic bacteria that the war sprinkles, soak this innocent teenager too.

The third case, that of a boy who “tried to screw the fuse-cape from a combination shrapnel and high explosive shell for a souvenir” is very appalling. The scenery, as reported, is related to a boy who is presumably a novice in the realms of weaponry or an innocent lad eager to play with everything at hand. In either case, he epitomizes the victims of explosive weapons such as land-mines that are frequently noticed on battlefields years later.

Reporting on the persisting effects of war in Mozambique, Caitlyn Bradburn writes in the same perspective: “Even ten years after the end of

war in Mozambique the people there are still suffering (...). The landmines, which are found and marked in every village, can't be removed because there is no money for such an expensive project" (Bradburn). Though the narrator does not allude to landmines, the circumstances he presents can be traced to those the Mozambicans face even ten years after the war in their country. Similarly, the exposure of the fine boy to high explosive shells equates that which Vietnamese underwent. The aftermaths of the conflict in their country have been recorded for years later. Kevin Clarke observes the following about the Vietnam War:

The end of a conflict can be only the beginning of the trauma for small nations emerging from war. Cluster bombs and landmines will continue their daily work perhaps for decades, while the long-term effects of radioactive ordnance remain to be determined (...). Direct exposure to Agent Orange leads to cancer and disfiguring ailments among its victims and has proved wretchedly persistent, generating miscarriages and horrible birth defects and anomalies. There may be as many as 800,000 Vietnamese, including 150,000 children, who suffer from serious health problems or congenital deformities related to it. (Clarke 38).

On the battlefield, combatants are never spared from contracting diseases. When Frederic is back to the front from his Italy tour, his friend Rinaldi tells him: "Since you are gone we have nothing but frostbites, chilblains, jaundice, gonorrhea, (...) pneumonia and hard and soft chancres. Every week someone gets wounded (...)" (12). The foregoing substantiates the utter pandemonium that reigns during wars. It also portrays a whole range of diseases mixed with wounds insinuating that both types of hardship are so close to each other that if one can contract a disease without any wound, the opposite is not always verified, specifically on a battlefield. Frederic's case illustrates this stand better.

In fact, despite the successful surgery Frederic goes through after his wound at the knee, he becomes sick of the jaundice, as he narrates it:

It turned cold that night (...). I felt sick in the night and in the morning after breakfast I was nauseated.

"There is no doubt about it," the house surgeon said.

"Look at the whites of his eyes, Miss."

Miss Gage looked. They had me look in a glass. The whites of the eyes were yellow and it was the jaundice. I was sick for two weeks with it. For that reason we did not spend a

convalescent leave together. We had planned to go to Pallanza on Lago Maggiore. (142)

An ambulance driver is wounded and later, contracts jaundice during his convalescence: a putrid footprint of the war. The romantic outgoing he sets with his girlfriend ('we' in the passage) is canceled given the havoc the conflict establishes everywhere. Also, it is outstanding to consider the local setting in which Frederic gets the jaundice: the hospital. Despite the available medical care added to the regular checkup, the maggotty force of the war gets into the hospital to challenge the system and gives Frederic a nosocomial: a jaundice. It indexes the control war has over human beings.

### Conclusion

What must be acknowledged about war is not the objective of a restoration of good order and welfare, which is fake in reality. It is, instead, the chaos that is inherently connected with military engagements. Collateral outcomes stand as more jeopardizing circumstances than those prevailing prior to the presence of the servicemen. Aymo, Rinaldi, Frederic, and both Catherine's late fiancé and she bear witness to it in *A Farewell to Arms*. The purpose of this literary investigation has been to showcase the malevolent fate – the true spirit – that war conveys by fathoming its scars on humans. All in all, this endeavor has demonstrated that war and other like armed conflicts are more devastating than benefiting. They leave current and future generations with indelible scars ranging from physical damage through physiological deprogramming. In view of these, it is worth revisiting military solutions by replacing them with negotiation. For no single just war ever warrants and safeguards justice in war.

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