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Dual Meaning in the Title of a *Farewell to Arms*: Theme of Love and War

Mariya Aslam

Ph.D. Scholar, University of Jammu, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Abstract:

Hemingway has skillfully blended twin themes that are being reflected in the dual meaning of the title. The novel is about a love affair between the Henry and Barkley against the backdrop of the World War I. Love in the middle of a war could be dangerous. Risk of death and separation is at zenith in every passing moment; still love knows no bars and restrictions. It can act as a source and joy and contentment during war and for few moments can provide solace and for some moments can take away from the fret of harsh brutalities of war.

Keywords: Arms, war, love, retreat

1. Introduction

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899 – 1961), an American author whose writing style had a strong influence on twentieth century fiction and many of his works are considered as classics. In 1954, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) is set during the Italian campaign of World War I and is a first person account of Frederic Henry, an American who works as a Lieutenant in the Italian Army as ambulance corps. The novel is about a love affair between the Henry and Barkley against the backdrop of the World War I. *A Farewell to Arms* has been called by Reynolds as "the premier American war novel from that debacle, the story of Fredric Henry's wounding, Catherine Barley's unwedded pregnancy, the Italian disaster at Caporetto, the lovers' desertion of duty, and Catherine's death in childbirth spoke to America's rejection to war and its own political isolation during the 1920s"(31). The title of the novel, *A Farewell to Arms* has been borrowed from George Peele's poem *A Farewell to Arms* which was written in 16th century. Its meaning can be interpreted in two ways because of the dual meaning of word 'Arms', one is weapons or armaments and another is the upper limb of the human body that connects shoulder to the hand. The title of the novel suggests Hemingway's intention of blending two major themes of the novel; theme of war and theme of love.

2. A Farewell to War

In the very beginning of the novel, Hemingway focuses reader's attention towards the brutalities and ugliness of war and people's indifferent attitude towards it. He states that "Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees" (3) and that "with the rain came the cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it in the army"(4). It focuses on the indifferent attitude of people towards death in war, be it with guns, bombs or by disease. Now, our protagonist, Henry Friedrich, an American citizen working in Italian Army as a commander of a group of ambulance drivers during World War I. He seemed to have joined Italian army neither because of some nationalistic zeal nor for monetary reasons but only to serve suffering people. He never felt a sense of belonging there, we felt him say that "I knew I would not be killed. Not in this war. It did not have anything to do with me"(39) and later we find him say, "I wished them all the luck. There were the good ones, and the brave ones, and the calm ones and the sensible ones, and they deserved it. But it was not my show any more and I wished this bloody train would get to Mestre and I would eat and stop thinking. I would have to stop."(248)

These lines reflect that neither had he related himself with the Italian war nor he has any plans to continue war, he had already decided to renounce it. Brutalities of war desensitize humans, one such episode can be seen in the novel when dying man's blood stream down on his face and referring to the drops of blood he said, "The drops fell very slowly, as they fell from an icicle after the sun has gone."(66) The depiction of the war certainly shows the resentment and rejection towards it. Many other characters besides Henry also detest war. The Priest says, 'I hate the war'(75) and Rinaldi says that "This war is killing me, I am very depressed by it."(177)

The famous Caporetto Retreat in the novel presents a detailed and vivid account of the chaotic situation of the war when civilians also get involved. Soon after this Henry makes his final choice of bidding a farewell to arms when confronts the possibility of getting shot as a deserter or traitor by some self righteous Italian soldiers; he jumps into the river and thus makes a deliberate choice of farewell to war, to arms.

3. A Farewell to Love

The theme of love is the second major theme of the novel, first being the theme of war. Hemmingway portrayed Henry as a man in search of order and values. In book I we find him going from one brothel to another yet feel discontent. Neither friendship nor army provides him any discipline or solace that he tends to seek. When he first met Catherine Barkley, an English nurse working with Italian army; he merely wanted to exploit her body and did not intend to love her. As he says, "God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with her"(100) but reluctantly he fell so deep in love with her; the extent of his emotional involvement to Barkley can be made out from his reply to Count Greffi's question, "What do you value most?" Henry replies, "Someone I love"(279) and also when he says that "I knew I did not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her. This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards"(32). But later as the novel proceeds we find him say that "I loved her very much and she loved me" (115) and "Besides all the big times we had many small ways of making love" (121). Her love brought solace, contentment and order in his life. His escape from the harsh realities of the life was in the arms of his beloved. When Henry lies wounded and priest ask him about love for God. His reply seems to be unsatisfactory for the Priest and he defines love as "When you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve"(77). This definition of love later aptly suits for Barkley when in the later course of the novel we find intense care in his love, this can be made out by his desire of marrying her as soon as he learns about her pregnancy and also that while escaping death, his prime concern was her security and her safety so that she could give birth in all comfort. And if a comparison be made between his love and that of Rinaldi, who has amoral indulgence with prostitutes, his love takes more pure form. Towards the end of the novel when he becomes aware that she would die, he prays for the first time that "I'll do anything for you, if you won't let her die" (353). He made a deliberate farewell to war but farewell to the arms of his beloved was being forced upon him when Barkley dies in childbirth.

4. A Perfect Fusion of Both the Themes

A Farewell to Arms is a novel in which two distinct themes have been blended perfectly; the theme of love and war, as the title suggests. Love in the middle of a war could be dangerous. Risk of death and separation is at zenith in every passing moment; still love knows no bars and restriction. It can act as a source and joy and contentment during war and for few moments can provide solace and for some moments can take away from the fret of harsh brutalities of war. Both the themes are introduced by the author in first few chapters of Book I. Book I begins with the introduction of lull in war. First four chapters create a scene of hallows of war which chapter five initiates the theme of love when Rinaldi promises Lieutenant Henry to introduce him to Barkley. The meeting begins with flirtation and later ends up in true love. Another important thing that blends both the themes is he indifferent attitude towards love and towards war in the beginning but later gets involved in both. A close look at the plot of novel provides a simultaneous progress of both the themes. At times, one theme dominates other yet both run along. For instance, in Book I, both the themes have been introduced; by the end of Book I Catherine falls in love with Henry but he is more into the war and after being wounded is shifted to the hospital and reunion takes place. Now when we shift to Book II, theme of love seems prevalent but war is not completely forgotten. In Book III, disillusionment of war, frightened soldiers and retreat and his bidding adieu to war takes place. Barkley finds reference in his thoughts, so love is not completely being forgotten yet takes a secondary place. Book IV deals chiefly with the theme of love and reunion of two lovers yet shadow of war also haunts Henry and it becomes substantial when in the middle of night they had to flee from Stressa to Switzerland in fear of being caught as he deserted the army. Book V chiefly deals with the theme of love, accounts of war only find place in Henry's thoughts about the fate of his friends.

Hemmingway has artistically fused both the themes. His intention of blending twin themes can be made out from his skilful selection of the title, which refers to both the themes.

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