



Fredric henry –a bundle of contradictions –a reading of a farewell to arms

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Abstract *This paper attempts to discuss the contradictory nature of the protagonist in the novel A Farewell to Arms written by Ernest Hemingway. Frederic Henry – The protagonist has always been full of contradictions. He never accepts full responsibility of anything. But at the same time he was never indifferent to the needs of his fellow combatants in the war. At times he displays complete indifference about the war in which he has involved and other times he serves them, sometimes even risking his own life. A Farewell to Arms has been narrated from the perspective of Frederic Henry, an ambulance driver in the Italian army, and pertains to his experiences in the war.*

Narration

Henry is a young American in Italy, serving as an ambulance driver during World War I. Henry takes a winter leave from the front. When he returns to the front, he meets Catherine Barkly, who mourns the death of her fiancé from the war last year, is newly arrived with a group of British nurses who are to set up a hospital near the front and quickly falls in love with her. Frederic suffers fatal injuries when a mortar shell explodes over his dugout and is sent to an army hospital in Milan for an operation. Catherine transfers to his hospital and helps him recuperate from the surgery. Before Henry returns to the front, Catherine reveals she is pregnant. Back at the front, the Germans and Austrians break through the Italian line, and the Italians are forced to make a lengthy retreat. Henry travels with some other drivers, two Italian engineering sergeants, and two Italian girls. When the sergeants abandon the drivers, when their car gets stuck, Henry shoots one of them, and another driver finishes him off. At a bridge over a flooded river, the corrupt Italian military singles out Henry

as a lieutenant and accuses him of treachery leading to the Italian defeat. Knowing he will be executed, Henry jumps into the river and manages a breathtaking escape. Later Henry meets Catherine and they shift to an idyllic town in the Swiss spending an isolated and peaceful life that winter. They spend their time preparing themselves for the arrival of their baby. They move to the town of Lausanne in the spring to be close to its hospital, and Catherine soon goes into labor. But in the process Catherine and her baby die with Frederic being at her bedside. He tries to say goodbye to her, but it is like saying goodbye to a statue, and he walks back to his hotel room in the rain.

When the war breaks out, Henry is in Rome studying architecture and he comes to Italy and volunteers as an ambulance driver. Unlike a man of action, he is not only indifferent to the fighting at the front, but also indifferent to the fate of the combatants. At the beginning of the novel, Frederic Henry suffers from lack of awareness of life, its purpose and significance. He does not know why he has been enlisted in Italian army, or what



he is fighting for. When war breaks out between Austria and Italy, Henry has joined the war neither because he likes war intently nor he has any deep-rooted affinity with the Italian soil. To quote it in his own words:

'You're the American in the Italian army?' she asked.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Tell me. Why did you join up with the Italians?'

'I was in Italy,' I said, 'and I spoke Italian,'¹³

It is evident from his words that Henry completely lacks a perceptible ambition or a clear purpose in life for enlisting his name and taking part in the war. He had joined the Italian army neither for devotion nor for any love for the people of Italy. He had committed this act under a state of confusion. Even the role he plays and the position he holds in the war is not important. As he is in the ambulance corps, he is responsible for "removing the wounded and the sick from the dressing stations, hauling them back from the mountains to the clearing-stations, and then distributing them to the hospitals named on their papers". (p. 16). Even the role that he plays in the war is also of not much significant. As a non-combatant, his role is more or less of a spectator in the war.

Henry expresses this in his words; "It evidently made no difference whether I was there to look after the things or not." (p.16) For the question that why he had to be with the Italian army being an American, he had no answer:

'You're not an Italian, are you?'

'Oh, no.'

'What an odd thing – to be in the Italian army.'

'It's not really the army. It's only the ambulance.'

'It's very odd though. Why did you do it?'

'I don't know.' I said. 'There isn't always an explanation for everything.' (p.18)

This act is well described by Leo Gurko as "Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* is an uncommitted man. He does everything with as little emotion as possible, holding himself in reserve. When asked why he, an American, volunteered for service in the Italian army, he answers jokingly, that as he was in Italy and spoke Italian. But it is not altogether a joke. Why indeed did he volunteer? Not because he admired the Italians or enjoyed the military life. Not because it would advance his career—he is studying architecture. Hemingway himself has joined up because the war was glamorous, because he had a taste for adventure and wanted to get away from home. None of these motives is present in Frederic Henry. One is forced to conclude that his action is really motiveless, or at any rate without a formal motive. It is a private response to a world that makes no great sense. Since the universe is plan less, individual conduct might just as well be."¹⁴

Further it is his duty to work out the spots to park the vehicles near the river and whenever he does it, it has given him a false feeling of soldiering, "They would, of course, be selected by the infantry but we were supposed to work it out. It was one of those things that gave you a false feeling of soldiering." (p. 17) His attitude towards war is purely that of a spectator, refusing to be involved. He has neither patriotism nor hatred for the



Italians. In fact, the war and his involvement in it are as unreal experiences to him as anything else in his thoroughly meaningless and unconnected life. In one of his conversations, Henry expresses to Catherine that he was disinterested in the war and its proceedings. This is a contradiction in the life of Henry, for he has joined war with a great interest and within no time he starts exhibiting his disgust and displeasure towards it. In his own words; he says 'let's drop the war.' 'It's very hard. There's no place to drop it.' 'Let's drop it anyway.' (p. 94)

But on the contrary, showing much contradiction in his tendency, Henry at times, expresses some kind of artificial and superficial bravery which is very opposite to his earlier expression about death in the war. In his interaction with his war colleague Passini. he says that defeat in war is worse than anything in the world.

'I believe we should get the war over,' I said. 'It would not finish it if one side stopped fighting. It would only be worse if we stopped fighting.'

'It could not be worse,' Passini said respectfully. 'There is nothing worse than war.'

'Defeat is worse.'(p.42)

Henry's attitude towards war is noteworthy, as it throws some light on his character. For him "war is a ghastly show" (p.18) and it was "rotten" (p. 31) He is contemptuous of war as it threatens his existence. This is because he is afraid of death, and war means death. The fear of death haunts Henry so much that he sometimes deceitfully tries to console himself, tries to instill some kind of false

confidence into himself, as "Well, I knew I would not be killed. Not in this war. It did not have anything to do with me. It seemed no more dangerous to me than war in the movies", (p.33) in the end this self-assurance that nothing would happen to him in this war fails to comfort him. So he wished God that it was all over.

Henry, sometimes, out of fear of death, said to himself, "I wished that I was with the British. It would have been much simpler. Still I would probably have been killed. Not in this ambulance business. Yes, even in the ambulance business. British ambulance drivers were killed sometimes." (pp 32-33)

From the above lines of the novel it is clearly evident that Henry always had the fear of death. He feared that he would be killed soon if he was with the Italian army. He sees more safety with the British army. But again he says that some ambulance drivers from British side were also killed. This observation had made him insecure with both British as well as Italian army. Then he wished God that the war was all over. "I wished God it was over though. Maybe it would finish this summer."(p.33)

Harvey Curtis Webster claims in his article "Hemingway and the pursuit of Death" that all Hemingway characters live with the fear of death which he calls "apprehension".

Even though Henry's position in the war is so negligible as a non-combatant, he possesses a heroic quality. He has a capacity for strong emotion and responds fully to the experiences that present themselves to him.

Even though, he shows disbelief and disinterest in war from the beginning, at times shows bravery,



sacrifice and intense humanity and concern towards his colleagues, the combatants in the war, by bringing food for them when outside there was a heavy shelling from the Austrians. He had done this act in a highly life threatening situation, at the cost of his life. He is very contradictory in this act and it is purely a sign of his sense of sacrifice in which he loses his belief at a later stage in the novel.

'What is there to eat?'

'We have a little pasta asciutta,' the major said.

'I'll take what you can give me.'

The major spoke to an orderly who went out of sight in the back and came back with a metal basin of cold cooked macaroni. I handed it to Gordini.

'Have you any cheese?'

The major spoke grudgingly to the orderly who ducked back into

.the hole again and came out with a quarter of a while cheese.

'Thank you very much,' I said.

'You'd better not go out.'

'Come on,' I said to Gordini.

'You better wait until the shelling is over,' the major said over his shoulder.

'They want to eat,' I said.

'As you wish.' (pp. 46-47)

Henry has not been convinced by the advice of the Major since his sole concern was the hunger of his associates rather than his personal safety. Hence, he could not wait until the shelling is over and returns immediately:

After this, Henry and his colleague Gordini run outside across the brickyard. A shell bursts short near the river bank. Then there is one that they do not hear coming until the sudden rush. They both go flat with the flash and bump of the burst and hear the singeing off of the fragments and the rattle of falling brick. Gordini gets up and runs for the dugout. And Henry goes after him, holding the cheese, its smooth surface covered with brick dust. Inside the dugout are the three drivers sitting against the wall, smoking.

'Here, you patriots,' I said. (p. 47)

And when Henry had been hit by an Austrian trench mortar shell he had been severely hit along with his associates, but with all the courage and selfless attitude even in the mouth of death, Henry tries to help other wounded and dying soldiers. He doesn't even accept help from his friends and the British ambulance corps telling that there are some others to be lifted who are even more seriously wounded. The following conversation of Henry when he was hit, throws light on his genuine character and selfless attitude.

"I tried to get close to Passini to try to put a tourniquet on the legs but I could not move. I tried again and my legs moved a little. I could pull backward 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. I had on wool stockings but Passini wore puttees. All the drivers wore 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. I sat up straight and as I did so something inside my head moved like the weights on a doll's eyes and it hit me inside in back of my eyeballs. 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 was not there. My hand went in and my knee was down on my shin. "(FTA, 55)

And in such worst conditions also Henry shows his genuine concern towards his fellow soldiers.

"Someone took hold of me under the arms and somebody else lifted my legs." "There are three others," I said. "One is dead." "Its Manera. We went for a stretcher but there wasn't any. How are you, Tenente?" "Where is Gordini and Gavuzzi?" "Gordini's at the post getting bandaged. Gavuzzi has your legs, Hold on to my neck, Tenente. Are you badly hit?" "In the leg. How is Gordini?" "He is alright. It was a big trench mortar shell." "Passini's dead." (FTA, 56)

When men of the British ambulance come to carry him to the dressing room he says, "I'd rather wait. There are much worse wounded than me. I'm all right" (FTA, 58) If one can still say, as Chaman Nahal does, that the hero "is not only indifferent to the fighting at the front, but he is also indifferent to the fate of the combatants," the conclusion must be based on the contradictory nature in Henry. (Chaman Nahal, 52).

Philip Young defines Henry as an American culture hero whose "pattern of

complicity, bitterness, escape approximates the nation's involvement in European war." ¹¹ In the opinion of John Stubbs, "*A Farewell to Arms*" is Hemingway's novel about the discovery of the smallness and powerlessness of human beings in a world indifferent to their well-being and about the defenses they construct to protect themselves from the crippling effects of such a discovery.¹² The novel does not merely depict the "crippling effects" and "the defenses" against them as is indicated here. It also shows how they overcome those "effects" by moral fortification and stoicism.

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