

The Theme of War and Love in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*

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Abstract

A Farewell to Arms, in the first place, deals with Hemingway's personal experiences of the First World War. The theme of war enters in the novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, through Frederic Henry. Frederic Henry is the hero of this novel. He is an American who has enrolled himself in the Italian army that is fighting against the combined armies of Austria and Germany during the First World War. Henry is posted on the Italian-Austrian border, and is a Lieutenant in the Italian Ambulance Corps. As we find him in the beginning of the novel, he is a person who is fond of food and fun, music and sex, who wants to visit brothels rather frequently, who has absolutely no faith in religion or in the other final values of life, and who doesn't seem to be taking life at all seriously. The theme of love enters in the novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, through Catherine Barkley who is the heroine or principal female character in the novel. Although we meet her somewhat late in the novel, she leaves a deep impression upon us by virtue of the strength of her character. In the company of Catherine, Frederic is a changed man at the end of the novel whose attitude towards life has undergone a complete metamorphosis.

Keywords – war, violence, destruction, death, love, faith, religion, values of life.

Introduction:

Ernest Hemingway occupies a distinctive place in the history of American fiction, and it is only in the fitness of things that in recognition of his merit he has been awarded the Nobel prize for literature. He wrote a number of novels and short stories, and in almost all of them we come across a similar kind of theme with suitable modifications or changes. Hemingway's novels and short stories seem to be only an exercise in action; they appear to be something informative, but on closer analysis they reveal deeper layers of meaning, association or impression. The first important aspect of the theme that we get in Hemingway's novels relates directly to war and violence. In novel after novel, he gives us an account of the destruction that is caused by war. According to the novelist, war does not merely mean physical destruction; in his opinion, it does have also its own spiritual, psychological or ethical implications. We may say that Hemingway is painfully conscious of the adverse effect of war on human psyche. The second important aspect of the theme that we encounter in his novels takes us to the value of love, peace and friendship in the contemporary world. Judged from this point of view, his novels may be described as the novels of quest and search for the finer values of life. The last important aspect of the theme running through Hemingway's novels points to a certain kind of myth that the novelist creates in them and that has its own relevance and justification.

The Theme of War in the Novel

A Farewell to Arms, in the first place, deals with the novelist's personal experiences of the First World War. The theme of war enters in the novel through Frederic Henry. Frederic Henry is the hero of this novel. He is an American who has enrolled himself in the Italian army that is fighting against the combined armies of Austria and Germany during the First World War. Henry is posted on the Italian-Austrian border, and is a Lieutenant in the Italian Ambulance Corps. As we find him at the beginning of the novel, he is a person who is fond of food and fun, music and sex, who wants to visit brothels rather frequently, who has absolutely no faith in religion or in the other final values of life, and who doesn't seem to be taking life at all seriously. He is shocked to find that the Italian army is in a state of utter disorder and confusion, and he naturally wonders if Italy would at all be able to resist the offensive launched by the combined armies of Austria and Germany. However, even though he feels shaken inwardly, he doesn't care very much for what is to happen later, because he considers life to be only a game or sport. At one point he says in the novel:

“This was a gain, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards. Like bridge you have to pretend you were playing for money or playing for some stakes. Nobody mentioned what the stakes were. It was all right with me.”

Here Hemingway says something very meaningful about Frederic Henry's experience of this world. For a long time Frederic thought and behaved with absolutely no sense of responsibility and form. He looked upon life a kind of wild sport which was meant for fun and pleasure. It was not until he encountered Catherine Barkley in his life that he could become conscious of something new about himself. Catherine Barkley made him realize for the first time what love did really mean or how serious human life really was. Frederic Henry contrasts the cheapness and levity of his immediate past life with the growing seriousness of his present life. He says that before he had met Catherine Barkley, his life was something like the game of Bridge which people play for the sake of money or stakes and in which everything is so uncertain. The game of bridge, says Frederic Henry, is a game based on trickery, fraud and pretence. Such was his life before his meeting with Catherine Barkley. It is at this time that through his surgeon-friend, Rinaldi, he comes in touch with an English nurse named Catherine Barkley. Initially, as his nature, he feels inclined to think that Catherine too is just one of those women he had met earlier in his life, but their relations develop and mature, he realizes that she is basically, essentially different from other cheap and frivolous women.

In the course of a major offensive that is launched by the Austrian-German army on the Italian border, Frederic Henry gets severely wounded and has to be taken to a hospital at Milan for proper medical care and treatment. It is at this very hospital that Frederic and Catherine get closer and closer still to each other. In the mood of calm introspection Frederic feels that Catherine does have the real grains of goodness and greatness in her. Henry is already a somewhat changed person, and when he re-joins his army unit, he finds that the Italian army is already on retreat. He too, like thousand of others, joins the band of retreating troops, and before he is captured by the Italian police on the suspicion that he is a German in civilian clothes, he jumps into the flooded river Tagliamento, and crosses over to the other side. Frederic Henry is now a partially free man who can regulate his life in accordance with his own needs and cravings.

Frederic Henry joins Catherine Barkley at Stresa where she is working at a hospital as a nurse. She is pregnant, although the two have not got married either officially or according to standard rights. However, Frederic has absolutely no hesitation in accepting the unborn child as his own, and he decides to lead a normal and happy life at this place in the company of Catherine. Unfortunately, since at Stresa he stands

in danger of being arrested by the Italian military police, he and Catherine move on to Lausanne in Switzerland in search of peace, shelter, freedom and happiness. It is indeed one of the cruellest strokes of fate that Catherine Barkley dies in the course of her giving birth to the child. Frederic Henry is a lonely man, living in complete isolation, all sad and sorry, dazed and bewildered, because while on the one hand he has abandoned war as a meaningless and mad exercise, on the other Destiny has snatched away his mistress from him, we are not at all astonished when we find Frederic offering prayers at the close of the novel for the safety of Catherine's life, though these prayers go in vain.

The Theme of Love in the Novel

The theme of love enters in the novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, through Catherine Barkley who is the heroine or principal female character in the novel. Although we meet her somewhat late in the novel, she leaves a deep impression upon us by virtue of the strength of her character. It is generally said that Hemingway's attitude towards his female characters is different from his attitude towards male characters. A number of critics tell us that Hemingway looks upon his female characters with definite kind of levity and that he regards them as something inferior to their male counterparts. There may be some amount of truth in these statements, for a number of Hemingway's female characters are either cheap or frivolous women and seem to be meant for mere fun or enjoyment. At least, we may say with the considerable degree of confidence that his male characters appear to be more heroic, more dynamic, and more impressive than his female characters. In the case of Catherine Barkley, however things take a different turn because her character has an appeal and endurance peculiarly its own. Catherine is certainly different from Brett Ashley of *The Sun Also Rises* and from Maria of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In any case Catherine's character demands a careful consideration of certain positive human qualities in order to be able to understand and appreciate it in full measure.

Catherine Barkley is introduced to us in the novel as a nurse who works at a hospital looking after wounded soldiers in war-torn Italy. Frederic Henry comes in touch with her and he gets wounded in war and, thus, has to remain in hospital for quite some time. At first, he feels disposed to look upon Catherine Barkley as a common and ordinary woman, is easily accessible, but gradually he comes to realize that she is made of extra ordinary stuff and that there is something compelling or fascinating about her. Catherine is not a garrulous woman; she doesn't speak much, yet she tries to get Frederic initiated into a new interesting phase in life. We may say that in the company of Catherine Barkley life opens up several new possibilities and dimensions to Frederic Henry. It is true that Frederic returns to war after recovering from his wounds, but he gets disenchanted with war and its violence. Since he finds that the enemy forces have penetrated deep into Italy, he seeks an escape from war to peace, from death and destruction to life and health. It is as a result of this realization that he eludes the Italian police net, jumps into the river, Tagliamento, and swims across to peace and freedom. Frederic bids a farewell to arms, the world of war. Hemingway says: "There is nothing as bad as war. We in the auto ambulance cannot even realize at all how bad it is. When people realize how bad it is they cannot do anything to stop it because they go crazy. There are some people who never realize. There are people who are afraid of their officers. It is with them that war is made."

Here Hemingway says that every kind of war originates from a feeling of hatred and fear. The novelist is clearly of the view that there could be nothing as bad as war. People engaged in war operations may not be able to realize the cruelty and badness of war, but the fact remains that war is something inhuman and beastly. There could perhaps be no hesitation in saying that war is a mad gamble with life and that it has

absolutely no meaning except the meaning of death and destruction. It is really interesting to find that Ernest Hemingway himself was engaged in war operations during World War I. We may, therefore, say that whatever the author recounts here forms part of his personal experience.

Frederic Henry joins Catherine Barkley at Stresa where she has been living for some time. But because they feel insecure at that place, they cross over into Switzerland to live there in a state of perfect peace, comfort and liberty. Catherine's companionship gives a new thrill, a new delight, a new sensation to Frederic Henry. He regards Catherine as the very image of an abiding faith in the relevance and beauty of life. It is indeed tragic that at a time when Frederic was looking upon life as a new phenomenon, as a discovery of new truth and meanings as it were, Catherine dies in the process of childbirth. Frederic gets shocked and dazed, for he could not be prepared for this kind of calamity, and yet in spite of all his feelings of helplessness and despair, we find him very much a sober and self-possessed person.

Catherine Barkley does have her own distinctiveness, her own magnanimity, her own culture that almost overwhelms Frederic Henry. In *The Sun Also Rises* Brett Ashley strikes us very much as a society woman who looks upon life as some kind of game and sport. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, in spite of all her courage, sense of determination and love for action, Maria appears to be rather a wanton character, too masculine to leave in the female world. Catherine Barkley is a quiet, gentle and responsible lady whose character does have its own dignity and charm. We can very well say that she is a noble character. It is true that she does not believe in any kind of textbook religion, and yet it may be said about her that she evolves her own religion which consists in an honest faith in life. There is something about her that transforms Frederic; in relation to him we may describe her as a powerful catalytic agent. There are critics who believe that Catherine Barkley's character partakes of some of the qualities of a typical Hindu woman. Whatever may be the truth about her, it may be said with a reasonable degree of certainty that Ernest Hemingway has created a memorable female character in the form of Catherine Barkley.

Catherin Barkley is a British lady, while Frederic Henry is an American soldier. There are bound to be several points of differences between them because of their racial and national cultures, yet Hemingway tries to drive this point home to us that above and beyond all cultures there is something like human culture that unites Catherine and Frederic in the deepest bond of friendship and love. Catherine Barkley is the outstanding representative of this very human and humane culture.

Conclusion

A Farewell to Arms, no doubt, presents to us a myth for action, but it is a myth that has its own far-reaching implications. Hemingway intends to tell us that human life is a bundle of conflicts and tensions, that in this world we have to encounter death and destruction everywhere, as a result of which life seems to be a hopeless game or a meaningless affair. But amidst all this confusion man has to have faith in life. This is possible only if and when man faces the challenges and sufferings of life with courage and endurance. Hemingway's gospel is the gospel of conviction, of resistance, of courage and endurance. Seen in this light this novel does not seem to be cynical or nihilistic in nature, but a positive affirmation of the greatness, sanctity and glory of life. We may say that the theme of encounter or confrontation that we come across in Hemingway's novel does impart to them what we may call an existentialist bias.

Hemingway – A Novelist of ‘Lost Generation’

It is generally said that Hemingway is a novelist of ‘lost generation’. The ‘lost generation’ stands for the 1920s when people had not only been wounded physically by war and violence but also injured

psychologically and spiritually because of a feeling of dread and fear, uncertainty and confusion. The first world war had spelt total disaster in the form of a collapse of all established and traditional values. It is for this reason that Hemingway's heroes initially appeared to be sceptics or cynics. And yet, Hemingway is not a novelist of 'lost generation' because finally his novels bring out the gospel of faith in such human values as love and endurance.

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