

A farewell to arms essay

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The character of Frederic Henry in *A Farewell To Arms* is a complex character as is Ernest Hemingway. World War I enticed an entire generation of young men, from both the German and Allied sides, who, as prompted by such works as Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, saw war as a glorious rite of passage for those who wanted to become men and to distinguish themselves. However, WWI was unlike any war ever before seen in the world. New weapons such as the machine gun, tanks, airplanes and nerve gas, while coupled with 19th century techniques of warfare, the death count would surpass nine million people and an entire generation of young men would be lost.

America, in only one and a half years of fighting, would lose more than 110,000 soldiers. The war, it was soon realized by the men who fought it, was for no great motivation besides honor for one's own country and even that soon lost its appeal. Even historians today are puzzled as to the start of the war and which side really was the aggressor. A sense of disillusion towards war soon followed and the character of Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* exemplified such dissolution that was so prevalent in the world at the release of the book in 1929. Henry is neither for nor against the war.

He does not concern himself with such weighty issues. All he knows is that he loved dearly, the hospital nurse which brought him back into the land of the living in the hospital in Milan and in Catherine, has found somebody who as desperate for love as he is to escape the war. However, with the death of their child, and of Catherine as well, while in the backdrop of what was at the time, the deadliest war in human history, a feeling of forlornness and

skepticism in such things as honor, faith and duty to country seen to forever affect Henry as it would Hemingway for the rest of his life.

The life experiences of Henry is monopolized by strong senses of adulation, followed by sustained depression, disillusion and yearning for what he shall never be able to recapture again. A Farewell to Arms was such a successful book upon its release, aside from its superb writing and excellent development of its characters, but also because it represented the strong feelings of disillusion and isolationism that was so overly present in America in between WWI and WWII. The large majority of Americans wished to stay out of European wars forever, never to be brought into a fight which America did not feel was theirs to claim in the first place. However, what has kept A Farewell to Arms so popular in the last seventy five years, has been the ability of its millions of readers to put themselves in the place of Henry as he falls in love for a woman who at first, does not return his affections; something which almost everybody has experienced and which makes him feel more alive than ever before, while being surrounded by more death than ever before.

Even though the lust for fame and glory soon would leave Henry as he saw first hand, the horrors of war, his experiences in the war, at least during the time when he and Catherine were together, was a positive one. A young man in love can often times, be completely oblivious to the ugliness that surrounds him. However, the harder one elevates his senses while in love, the harder he must come down from such feelings of euphoria if the love does not last. Therefore, it is the death of Catherine more than it is his

experience in the war which forever leaves Henry disillusioned. After the death of Catherine, Henry laments: " 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 was done with the meat except to bury it. There were man words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity..

Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates." [1] There is such wisdom in such laments that those who have been in love and for whatever reason, that love was taken away or left voluntarily, a real and lasting pain will always come over that individual. In the process, one who has experienced such traumatic events, but especially when one as young as eighteen, which would have been the age of Hemingway in World War I, cannot help but have the event affect their notion of other things in their life and to reexamine what they hold dear. If a love as strong as this can be taken away so easily, regardless of its severity,, then what in life is stable and can be trusted and counted upon? Henry would later say: " It is only in defeat that we become Christian." [2] This has been especially true for millions of Christians who became Christians in adult hood.

One realizes, either through a transidential epiphany of their own or due to traumatic event which promotes the individual to search for something more lasting than what is seen on this earth. Along with the effects of disillusion, one of the most important metaphors in the book is the presence

of rain after Catherine had died from complications while in labor with their child. Henry has lost not only the love of his life, but the offspring of that love. That traumatic event, in the midst of hundreds, if not thousands of those in his company who are dying for a purpose which no one can clearly identify, such events cannot help but leave the individual forever adversely affected. Frederic, after the death of Catherine, walks back to the hotel, the rain beats upon his body.

Before the death of Catherine, Henry has stated that he likes the rain and understands that in war, men will die. However, as Henry is not motivated by a chivalric notion of duty and honor within war and does not seem to care to any great deal, the outcome of the war, only that he remains alive, the death around him does not seem to affect his fondness for the rain. His fondness for the rain takes a dramatic shift after the death of Catherine. He found in Catherine, when he could in nobody he had ever known before, a redeeming quality of good and purity within Catherine and like most young men who are in love with a beautiful women, seem to raise her up to a status to that of an angelic being who is beyond approach and all that is good in his life, revolves around his love for Catherine. Now that love is gone forever and like Hemingway who married four times in the pursuit of replicating such a love, only to be unsuccessful, finds himself a tragic figure who must reexamine his once trouble free life of his youth. His feelings about the rain would never be the same. The rain signifies the fact that death, like the rain, hits everyone when it falls from the sky.

Upon being in the middle of a storm, those who do not yield themselves to the shelter, as there is no shelter offered against death, one will always become infected i. e. Wet and damp, as a byproduct of the rain. It would be this disillusion which would affect Henry, as it would Hemingway, for the rest of their lives. Henry cannot be anything other than a tragic figure whose pessimistic outlook on life is understandable, yet yields a life long depression which he is not soon to shake. Henry accurately sums up his belief and leaves no one to mistake his outlook on life when he states: "The world breaks everyone and afterwards many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills.

It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry."^[3] It is completely understandable that Henry feel this way. People who have been involved in much less have felt in a similar fashion. Anyone who has put their heart and soul into loving somebody who completes them and who redeems their fragile faith in the goodness of the world, only to have that single strand broken, has felt the same and can relate to an unmistakable degree, the pessimistic views on life that Henry feels. It is doubtless that Henry would ever love with such reckless abandon again. In the end, a final lament is given by Henry: "Poor, poor dear Cat.

And this was the price you paid for sleeping together. This was the end of the trap. This was what people got for loving each other. Thank God for gas anyways. What it must have been like before there were anesthetics?"^[4] It would be a final and complete anesthetics which would forever end the pain

and suffering, at least in this world, for Hemingway when in 1961, he would take his own life with a single gun shot to the head.

How much different the life of Hemingway would have been and the joy which would surely follow, had Catherine, or the real life Agnes von Kurowsky had lived. This can only be speculative but if every person is meant, designed and fashioned by God for companionship of a single person, then both Henry, Hemingway and all others who fail to find that one true love, are all tragic figures whose pessimism towards life is a tragic, yet understandable offspring of such chances missed. A Farewell to Arms has remained required reading for high schools and universities all across the world because of its true and very touching aspects of life and trials of the human heart. One does not need to have fought in a world war in order to be able to grasp a hint of what Hemingway was experiencing. All one has to do is prescribe to the troubles of life and they too will be affected in a similar way. The human heart is a complex thing; more complex than the most recent invention or gadget which people hurry to buy. It can be as resilient as steel and as soft and absorbent of everything around it as a piece of cloth. Henry discovered this the hard way and as the novel continued in the life of Hemingway for the next forty years, the reader is told that there is no happy ending and that the only thing which lived happily ever after was the memory of a brief but intense romance between two people, who for a short time in their lives, loved completely.

When Tennyson said: " It is better to have loved and lost, then to have never have loved before; Some ask if he correct in such assertions? It seems in the

tragic, yet complex figures of Henry and Hemingway, the jury is still being sequestered. Works Cited Hemingway, Ernest. A Farewell To Arms. New York: Century Press 1952 WORKS CITED [1] Hemingway, Ernest. A Farewell To Arms. New York: Century Press 1952 pg. 165 [2] Hemingway, Ernest. A Farewell To Arms.

New York: Century Press 1952 pg. 170 [3] Hemingway, Ernest. A Farewell To Arms. New York: Century Press 1952 pg. 179 [4] Hemingway, Ernest.

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