

Ernest hemingway ` a farewell to arms`

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With its relatively simple plot, sparse language, and seemingly traditional background of love and war, Ernest Hemingway's third novel, "A Farewell to Arms" stands as one of the most highly regarded novels of the twentieth century.

Beneath the traditional surface of the novel revolutionary narrative techniques and penetrating appraisals of political and social themes interact to produce, perhaps, the most richest and profound work of Hemingway's career.

The themes and emotions of "A Farewell to Arms" are stated indirectly, through an unreliable narrator, but beneath the familiar-seeming surface of the story, like an iceberg, "which Hemingway often took to be the apt image of his art." (Bloom 10)

One important technique Hemingway uses in "A Farewell to Arms" is to tell the story from a 1st person narrative point of view. This allows for the inclusion of ambiguity and unreliability in the story, so that the reader can never be exactly certain (as one can in omniscient narration) of the nature and specificity or meaning of the events that are being recounted.

The first step toward this ambiguous and unreliable narrative is to create a character with an outward traditional "face:" that of a soldier; but with a non-traditional inner-self: "the book is cast in the form which Hemingway has apparently delimited for himself in the novel-diary form.

It is written in the first person, in that bare and unliterary style[...] in that tone which suggests a roughly educated but sensitive poet who is prouder of his muscles than of his vocabulary." (Meyers 121)

The poetic narrator caught in a war that he is only ambivalently engaged in at an emotional level, and then caught up in a whirlwind love-affair that he may or may not be faking, generates an enormous degree of novelty in Hemingway's characterization. The fact that the narrator spends a great deal of his time contradicting himself or acting in direct opposition to his expressed beliefs endows "A Farewell to Arms" not only with verisimilitude, but also with a multi-layered theme, one which must be searched for by the reader as he or she follows along with Frederick Henry's own quest.

Henry says he is in love with Catherine, but then immediately remarks: "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. Like bridge you had to pretend you were playing for money or playing for some stakes." (Hem 30-31)

This dynamic use of theme marks one of several innovative narrative techniques at work in the novel. By subsuming even his character to the (hidden) theme of the novel, Hemingway allowed for an intense degree of reader-identification and thematic resonance. The theme of the novel is probably most directly and explicitly stated by Frederick Henry's observation that:

"If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them.

The world breaks every one and afterward 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." (Hem)

This theme, one of bitterness, regret, and mortality -- where heroism and courage are met only by death is decidedly not a traditional theme for war novels or love stories.

By digging deeply beyond the surface layers of the novel, an astute reader will find that the aforementioned traditional themes of the heroic soldier and the happy lovers gives way to a more probing, penetrating -- and accurate -- view of love and war, at least in light of Hemingway's personal beliefs and experiences.

Beneath the romantic surface is a brutal truth of death and regret and waste and sadness: " For a war novel, however, *A Farewell to Arms* ends rather surprisingly, with the strangled and stillborn death Of Frederic's and Catherine's infant, and Catherine's subsequent death by hemorrhaging." (Pozorski)

In fact, this theme is foreshadowed and hinted at throughout the course of the novel by way of Henry's unreliable narration and also by way of the use of symbols and wordplay through the novel's rising action. Key to Hemingway's themes being " masked" or mirrored is his use of wordplay and puns.

The title of course operates as a "pun" of sorts: "A Farewell to Arms involves a play on words relating both to Frederic Henry's desertion from the Italian army and to his later leave-taking of Catherine Barkley after her death in Switzerland." (Harrington 59)

However, there are other instances of puns and wordplay which specifically point out to the astute reader that Henry's surface level narration cloaks the deeper more desolate themes recounted above.

"One highly revealing play on words in *A Farewell to Arms* involves Frederic's returning to the front before his knee is completely healed. He has only "partial articulation" in the wounded leg (96), a pun that captures his reticence and failings as narrator... Similarly, while making their diagnosis, the doctors in Milan "[t]est [Frederic's] articulation" (96), which matches the reader's task in working through this intricate text." (Harrington 59)