

Charles vidor and john huston's depiction of love between frederick henry and cat...

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A Farewell to Arms

One of the greatest love stories of all time, *A Farewell to Arms* (1957), a film adaptation of the book by Ernest Hemingway, recounts the romance between an American ambulance driver, Frederick Henry, and a British nurse, Catherine Barkley, amidst the horrors of World War One. The movie accurately depicts the real life events of Hemingway's life, key events on the Italian front, and the attitudes towards the war effort, but lacks in consistency with the actual book, in appeal to the audience, and the effect of the war on the relationship.

The pair first meets by the introduction of Frederick's friend, Major Alessandro Rinaldi. Afterwards, Henry is ordered to participate in the Italian offensive against Austria-Hungary in the Alps, where a falling mortar shell injures him. While recovering in a hospital in Milan, Henry has Catherine transferred to work in the same hospital so that they may continue in their budding love affair. Catherine soon discovers that she is pregnant, but the head nurse, Miss Van Campen, also discovers the couple's duplicity and sends Frederick back to the war front, separating the two.

After the humiliating defeat of the Italians at the Battle of Caporetto, Frederick and Rinaldi must flee with the locals from the invading German and Austrian armies. Along, the long and arduous march, many people and even children are left to die on the side of the road. Rinaldi also starts to lose his mind, as he questions the entire war and starts doubting the Italian army. His words are overheard by soldiers in a local army base and the

commandant assumes that Rinaldi and Frederick are both traitors, sentencing them both to death. Rinaldi is shot, but Frederick manages to escape by jumping in the river. He evades the police and finds Catherine. They flee to Milan, but realizing that they cannot stay for long, they must again flee to Switzerland by rowing across Lake Lugano. In Switzerland, Catherine delivers her child, but due to complications the child is stillborn and Catherine dies shortly afterward. The movie closes with Frederick walking aimlessly in the empty streets.

The story of *A Farewell to Arms* is set in the conflict of World War I. The war started on June 28th, 1914 with the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand in Sarajevo. While America wasn't in the war, Americans still felt the impact, as there were restrictions on travel, the stock market crashed before closing, and the import of goods from Europe was disrupted. It was only until April 6th, 1917 did America finally declare war when Germany resumed its submarine warfare. Congress passed the Selective Service Act which drafted four million men and these soldiers arrive Europe mainly just to help stop major drives by the German forces that threatened Paris. By the end of the war, more than 53, 000 American soldiers died, a relatively small number compared to the losses suffered in WWII and the Vietnam War.

However, Frederick Henry doesn't get involved due to a draft, rather through volunteering for the Red Cross, which was started by Clara Barton in 1881. Within weeks of the start of WWI, the Red Cross sent a ship to Europe with medical supplies and medical staff to help both sides of the war. After the

Americans officially entered the war, the organization grew exponentially, with President Wilson as the honorary chairman. He urged Americans to volunteer for the organization to meet the needs abroad. In all, the Red Cross spent over \$200 million in Europe, mostly on child-care and refugee work, and had over 31 million members.

While the movie diverts most of the focus from the war to the love story, it still has references to some famous events. Federick Henry is an ambulance driver sent to the Italian front, where there are a series of offensive battles at the border between Austria-Hungary and Italy in the Alps. Between June 1915 and March 1916, the Italian forces launched five separate assaults against the Austrians in the Isonzo region. While the Italians had aggressive officers and more men, the Austrians had the advantage of elevated positions. There were also a lot of weaknesses in the Italian army, so by 1915 more than 60, 000 Italians, which was one fourth of the entire army, were killed. A stalemate was soon reached and war support in Italy went down. The peasants shunned the war, refusing to obey the draft and the number of deserters increased, peaking at almost 60, 000 in 1917.

One of the worst humiliations for the Italians was the Battle of Caporetto in October 1917, which was depicted in the movie. German and Austro-Hungarian troops attacked the Italian army at Caporetto. Even though they had almost twice the manpower, the Italians were destroyed almost immediately and were forced to retreat. To make matters worse, the government collapsed and the prime minister and the military commanders were replaced.

Despite the lack of references to specific events in the war in the movie, it does portray the sentiment felt by soldiers and citizens during the effort. At the start of the war, Henry is asked why he volunteered to join the Italian army and he said that he wanted to “ have a look” at what war was really like. Many of the volunteers and citizens shared this sentiment, as they never experienced a real war before. They all had a romantic and fanciful notion –not a realistic one. However, after the Battle of Caporetto, the soldiers undergo dramatic change. It was clear that Henry and his comrades were all suffering physically and mentally from the hardships. Rinaldi in particular displayed signs of PTSD, as he exclaimed, “ what’s the use?” and “ what good are we to Italy?” during the long, arduous retreat. On this retreat, the Italian army must escape with the regular citizens and in the movie, there are bodies littered on the sides of the road, lost children screaming for their mothers, and a mother even dropping her baby on the road from exhaustion. In addition, Henry is also traumatized when Rinaldi is unjustly shot for being a supposed German infiltrator. A Farewell to Arms painted a graphic and startling new insight of the realities of war.

When first viewing the movie, the stereotyping of gender roles becomes immediately apparent, as it was almost characteristic of Hemingway’s style. The author was frequently criticized for the “ masculinity of his writing” and the perpetuation of female stereotypes. In the opening, the soldier’s attitude towards women is highly sexualized and inappropriate. The first encounter between Henry and Catherine is also seen as superficial, as Henry is drawn to Catherine by her looks. Catherine later says that she “ will be anyone that

[Henry] wants her to be” in order to reaffirm their relationship. As critic Frederic Busch notes, “ Hemingway’s women too often seem to be projections of male needfulness.”

The plot in the movie is actually based on a real-life story: Hemingway’s life. Hemingway, like Frederick Henry, was an ambulance driver for the American Red Cross in the Italian campaigns during the First World War. He volunteered in France before the entrance into war in April of 1917 and was later transferred to Italy at the start of July 1918. On July 8, 1918, he was wounded by an Austrian mortar shell, making him the first American to be wounded in Italy and a hero. Catherine Barkley was also based off of Agnes Von Kurowsky, a real nurse who cared for Hemingway in a hospital in Milan. However, there were also some discrepancies between Hemingway’s life and the story. Hemingway was only active with the Red Cross for 34 days and he never participated in the retreat from Caporetto, but it is portrayed so vividly in the book and the movie that even the Italian soldiers who were in the retreat couldn’t believe that Hemingway wasn’t there. Because of his negative experiences in the war, Hemingway’s was deeply shocked and traumatized. He “ hated war and hated all the politicians whose mismanagement, gullibility, cupidity, selfishness and ambition brought on the war and made it inevitable.” These sentiments show in many of Hemingway’s war books, such as *The Sun also Rises*.

The publishing of *A Farewell to Arms* brought Hemingway into the limelight of the literary world, as it was his first best-seller. It also inspired an entire genre of war novels, such as James Salter’s *The Hunters*, Raymond

Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, and James Ellroy's *LA Confidential*. Biographer Michael Reynolds describes the book as "the premier American war novel from WWI."

For a movie that is supposedly about WWI, it didn't weave the events of the WWI or its effects well enough into the main story. The nature of the war was supposed to mirror what happened in the relationship. However, in most of the movie, a casual audience member never would have known that the war was going on, so the disconnect is extremely unrealistic. The ending deaths of the child and Catherine don't seem like irony or a cruel reminder of the war period, but instead look like a hysterical mistake by the incompetent doctor. The director, David O. Selznick, also inserts too many scenic shots of sunsets, valleys, and natural scenery with no action, breaking up the tension in the main storyline. The main love affair itself, which apparently needs two and a half hours to develop, isn't even established as natural. The pair's sudden love seems forced and even slightly superficial. Overall, the movie, *A Farewell to Arms*, is neither captivating nor historically relevant, and I would not recommend it.