

The need for
repetition:
hemingway's sparse
landscape in a
farewell to arms



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In his novel *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway uses parataxis extensively. With this structure Hemingway avoids making causal connections in his narration; this is one of the most famous aspects of Hemingway's writing. But the unpredictability that the anti-causal nature of the narrative suggests, is counteracted by another, less apparent, narrative tool of Hemingway's. The unpredictability is counteracted by the extensive repetition that Hemingway employs in the novel, repetition that finally evinces a world that is somewhat knowable. The central event in the novel is the war, and Hemingway constructs the war to be defined by repeated actions. Just as he constructs the whole war to be comprised of a couple of moves, repeated ad infinitum, Hemingway also designs the narrative so that it is defined by recurring events. This begins with the character's actions as it corresponds to the war, a war which forces them to complete the same social behavior over and over. Hemingway extends this repetition so that it soon invisibly and quietly pervades all of the character's behavior, even small private behavior. Eventually even the words of the novel are seen to return frequently. As Hemingway builds this world in which everything returns, he builds a world in which even the reader is able to predict events, dialogue, and descriptions. Hemingway's technique is not overt, and to see the technique it is necessary to closely analyze the actions of the characters, that Hemingway designed, with no haphazard, at each level. After a thorough exploration of Hemingway's technique, the reason that Hemingway creates this somewhat knowable world surfaces. Hemingway presents war as a series of repeated actions from the first chapter. The most noticeable action is the marching mentioned in the first paragraph, when the narrator, Frederick Henry, remembers that "Troops went by the house and down the

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road." The marching of the troops is so ubiquitous that the narrator oddly makes reference to it twice in the next sentence: " We saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching." Hemingway's repeated mention of the action reflects the repeated action of the soldiers, who do not even stop when the sun goes down; as Henry notes, " Sometimes in the dark we heard the troops marching" (3). All of the above mentioned marching has come in the late summer, but it continues into the autumn when " the men, passing on the road, marched" (4). In the two pages of the first chapter the narrator mentions the marching troops no less than five times, and by doing this Hemingway allows the war to be defined by little other than these peripatetic soldiers. Whenever Hemingway brings the reader into proximity with the war after this chapter, he always inserts the anonymous troops making their way to a usually unspecified endpoint. Because of the few actions that the soldiers complete, the reader slowly comes to expect soldiers to be marching each time they are seen. While Hemingway allows his narrator, Henry, to make one reference to an aspect of war outside of these marching soldiers in the first chapter—the " flashes from the artillery" in the distance—it is the soldiers, and their endlessly repeated personal actions, that give the war form in the chapter. So Hemingway makes it in the rest of the novel, where each person involved with the war finds himself with an assigned task that he repeats endlessly. Frederick Henry is sent driving his ambulance back and forth between the front and an ever changing base. Before even putting down his bags after returning from a long leave caused by an injury sustained at the front, Henry is told by his commanding officer, " You can go and take over the four cars on the Bainsizza." (165). Rinaldi, <https://assignbuster.com/the-need-for-repetition-hemingways-sparse-landscape-in-a-farewell-to-arms/>

Henry's friend who operates on the injured soldiers that Henry delivers, complains that "All summer and all fall I've operated. I work all the time . . . I never think. No, by God, I don't think; I operate" (167). Hemingway, more subtly, makes certain behavior, that is immediately related to these wartime tasks, also repeat itself. The meals that the men eat while on the road is inevitably of two kinds. The spaghetti in the "basin of spaghetti" late in the book (191), is probably eaten in the same methodical way as in the early moments of the book, where Henry explains that the only variation was in the way the men ate the spaghetti, some "lifting the spaghetti on the fork until the loose strands hung clear then lowering it into the mouth, or else using a continuous life and sucking into the mouth" (7). When the men are not eating spaghetti they are invariably eating bread and cheese; both meals are eaten with red wine. Only once does Hemingway allow his characters to eat something besides spaghetti or bread and cheese: when Henry and his men are stuck in a small farmhouse Piani finds a "long sausage," that they eat (217). Even considering this lack of variety, at one point the gustatory element is the one element that does allow the soldiers to differentiate between different actions in the war. Even nominally different actions (advances and retreats) become the same except for the type of wine that is drunk. During one retreat, an ambulance driver accompanying Henry says, "I like a retreat better than an advance. On a retreat we drink barbera" (191). Hemingway constructs a world in which only the type of alcohol consumed allows the soldiers to differentiate between the two distinct maneuvers. But Hemingway extends the effect of the repetitive nature of war beyond behavior directly related to the war. Henry and the other characters all fall into patterns of behavior that become predictably

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frequent. The two actions that are the most ubiquitous are the drinking of alcohol that occurs whenever anyone gets a free moment, and the newspaper reading that Henry does whenever he is alone. When Henry is injured, the priest from Henry's base brings him three presents. It is no surprise that two are "a bottle of vermouth," and "English papers" (69). When Rinaldi paid Henry a visit earlier that day his gift was a "bottle of cognac" (63). Even once Henry reaches the Milan hospital after his injury at the front, Hemingway forces the behavior of both Henry and Katherine Barkley, his soon-to-be wife, into regular repeated patterns. After Henry describes a few representative days, mentioning the riding in carriages, the eating at the Gran Italia, the return to the hospital, and the nightly trysts, Henry quietly says, "The summer went on that way" (117). By this point in the novel Hemingway can give us one sequence of a pattern and we don't need to know anymore, we only need to know that it went on that way.' As more and more moments repeat themselves Hemingway fades the lines protecting the uniqueness of moments. Unexpected acts are seen to repeat almost verbatim. When he first arrives at the Milan hospital Henry finds himself looking out the window: "The swallows circled around and I watched them [flying] above the roofs" (87). Katherine soon arrives, and when she does Henry has little time to look out the window, but when he is next alone he looks out the window and "watched the swallows over the roofs" (113). His solitary swallow watching is one of the few diversions from Henry's constant paper reading, but Hemingway makes even this oddly specific diversion a repetitive action. Hemingway places another unexpected repeated action in chapter 23. The night before Henry is to return to the front after his injury leave, Katherine and he are heading to a hotel in Milan.

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On the way they see another couple in an alleyway where the soldier was “ standing with his girl in the shadow of one of the stone buttresses ahead of [Henry and Katherine]. They were standing tight up against the stone and he had put his cape around her” (147). While Henry responds to the couple by saying, “ They’re like us,” Katherine quickly responds by saying, “ Nobody is like us,” trying to assert the uniqueness of their union. A few moments later, however, the two find themselves standing “ in the street against a high wall,” Henry tells us how Katherine “ pulled my cape around her so it covered both of us” (150). This odd repetition seems to be completed with some agency on the part of the characters, but the fact that this overt recurrence of a specific event is not acknowledged by Hemingway underscores the expectedness of such repetition. Hemingway mixes this repetition with an odd derivative of repetition, foreshadowing. Moments imagined recur in the book’s reality with little agency from the characters. Soon after he meets Katherine in a small Italian town, Henry dreams of the couple having a more romantic and private rendezvous. The imagined event has a few salient characteristics: in the dream they meet in Milan and go to a hotel where they are taken to their room in “ the elevator and it would go up very slowly clicking at all the floors and then our floor.” Once in the room they drink wine brought by room service (39). Oddly enough, when Henry is injured at the front, he is taken to a hospital in Milan, the same hospital to which Katherine happens to have been transferred. At the end of Henry’s time in Milan the two go to a hotel for a night. They go up to their room by elevator and “ the elevator passed three floors with a click each time.” Once they are in the room, they order dinner and St. Estephe wine (151-153). After all the repetition in the book, the world seems to become a somewhat

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knowable place; if the essential actions are repeated ones, it follows that there is better chance of guessing future actions. This suspicion that the world that Hemingway created is somehow knowable is confirmed through the just mentioned, and other, less explicit, moments of foreshadowing. After he is injured, but before he meets up with Katherine, Henry speaks of the feasibility of facial hair and one of the officers asks him, " Why don't you raise a beard?" (77). While this remark is made in passing, and would be impossible as a soldier, once he has escaped from the army, Catherine independently asks Henry, " Darling, would you like to grow a beard?" (298), a plea with which Henry complies. While Katherine is in childbirth Henry eerily sees what will soon happen when he asks himself, " What if she should die?" (321). Henry has no reason to think that Katherine should die, there has been little complication when Henry asks this question, and as he reminds himself, " People don't die in childbirth nowadays" (320). Yet even with this knowledge he is unable to erase the belief that she will die. In the end she does die, and it is from an unexpected hemorrhage that results from complications that arise only after Henry convinces himself that she will die. Henry and Katherine's entire relationship is essentially foreseen before there is any reason to even make predictions. Soon after they meet, moments after Katherine slaps Henry for attempting to take the first kiss, Katherine says in half jest, " You will be good to me, won't you? . . . because we're going to have a strange life" (27). How right she is. Katherine is able to make this prediction from previous knowledge. It seems that in many ways Henry and Katherine's entire relationship is a repeat of the relationship Katherine was in that preceded the novel, a wartime relationship in which marriage is held off because of uncertainty. Katherine can predict what a strange

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relationship Henry and hers will be because of her prior experience with such a relationship. This observation illuminates an important point about the foreshadowing. It does not arise through any prophetic powers. Instead, very simply, it arises because, if actions repeat themselves, it is easier to predict what will happen. Hemingway produces such repetition in the novel that even his characters have some power to see what will happen to them in the future. But this does not explain why there is repetition in the first place. To answer this question it is good to look at the way Hemingway introduces repetition in the words of the novel. The dialogue is rife with repetition such as when, in complementing Henry for a good idea, Aymo, another ambulance driver, says, "That's Pretty good, Tenente." In response Henry says, "That's pretty good" (210). More important than the repetitive dialogue is the repetition of a few simple adjectives. The word 'lovely' is used endlessly to describe either Henry or Catherine, such as when Henry notes that Catherine "looked lovely in bed" (258). But it is also used by Rinaldi to describe himself when he says, "I am becoming a lovely surgeon," (167) and by Catherine when ironically referring to a rainy night: "It's a lovely night for a walk" (267). The oft-mentioned simplicity of the narrative stems greatly from the excessive repetition of such simple words. The word lovely, like the words good and splendid and nice are used so frequently that the reader comes to expect them anytime an adjectival description is given. It seems that the characters have no choice but to use these words to describe things. This same idea applies to the repetition of actions. Henry did not grow a beard because it was cosmically ordained. He grows it because there are so few ways to reinvent oneself within the spartan lifestyle required by war.

Likewise, Henry does not find himself watching swallows because a higher
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force made him so that he should. Instead he watches swallows because there is little else to do when lying in a hospital bed. The reappearance of the swallows affirms that there are few options for other action above Italian rooftops. Hemingway thus creates a world in which repetition is destined to occur, not because of some larger cosmic scheme, but rather because in the simple world that Hemingway has created)a re-creation of the simple world that Hemingway saw around him)the few things that can possibly occur, have a high probability of recurring because there are so few of them.