

Natural symbolism, death, and language



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Ernest Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) uses nature to structure the novel and provide symbols that replace human emotions. Nature serves as a basic structure for the plot and the actions that occur. It also emerges as a source of symbols that replace human sentiment or feelings. Characters die and there is no mention of sadness or pain. Instead, Hemingway writes that it is raining, that it is autumn, or that peace has occurred when people are still at war. The replacement of emotions with symbols allows Hemingway to frequently understate what is really going on in the action. He further uses symbols to completely omit references to sentiments or feelings. Even more unsettling is the fact that these symbols often ironically represent the opposite of their meanings in common parlance. Not only symbols, but also individual words, come to be used in this way. This undermines the use of technical language throughout the novel and causes the breakdown of that language. Thus, symbols and words provide a basis for the structure of the novel and for the loss of the technical language. The structure of the novel occurs largely through natural symbolism, i. e. symbols drawn from nature. This is set up in the first chapter, which shows the rapid progression of the seasons from summer into autumn. Summer is identified with dryness and abundance, a plain "rich with crops" (3). This is immediately contrasted with autumn, where "the branches were bare and the trunks black with rain" (4). This miniature transition of the seasons relates to the larger transitions in the novel as a whole. For example, the first part of the novel takes place in relative dryness up until when Catherine informs Henry that she is going to have a baby. No sooner has she told him this news than the rains start, ending the dry part of the novel: "It turned cold that night and the next day it was raining" (142).

Thus the novel is separated into two segments in the same manner that the first chapter is separated into summer and fall. This separation of the seasons helps to set up the transition in the plot from good to bad. "Good" is represented by the dry season, "bad" by the wet season. Thus, the opening scenes describe the bed of the river as being "dry and white" (3), an image that changes drastically by the end, where the river has turned into a raging torrent. This contrast is explicated by the events that occur on hard versus soft surfaces. For instance, the first military operation (in which Henry is wounded) is fast paced, with the wounded are rushed away in trucks, and everything is described as being hard, including the road and operating table. This contrasts with the second military operation, a defeat, that takes place on wet roads, with vehicles stuck in the mud, and where rivers have to be crossed instead of river beds. Thus the world of the first half of the novel is a dry, sterile version of the wet and sickly world that follows it. Within this world, the dry part is the world of success; Henry wins Catherine and the army wins some battles. The wet world is the exact opposite: the army loses and is forced to retreat and Henry loses Catherine. The natural world thereby provides the setting within which Henry's personal and military experiences can take place. Natural changes from dryness to wetness are paralleled in the plot by both Catherine's pregnancy and the corrupt horse races. These scenes are juxtaposed onto each other through their side-by-side placement. They define the transition from love to "marriage" and advancement to retreat, respectively. Thus, after Catherine announces that she is pregnant, she and Henry consider themselves "married," thereby catapulting their relationship from casual to serious. Similarly, the war with Austria goes well for the Italians until Henry describes

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the corruption of the horse races, a corruption that permeates every level of the Italian army and political machine. After the horse races, the Italian army no longer is able to win battles; instead, the war turns into a retreat and becomes far more serious and deadly. This structure is complemented by natural symbols that substitute for emotions or feelings. The most important of these symbols is that of rain. Rain represents death and all the accompanying emotions of grief, pain, and despair. Death is both brought by rain and can be considered analogous to it. Catherine is the first person to make this analogy explicit when she tells Henry that she is afraid of the rain. " I am afraid of the rain because sometimes I see me dead in it" (126).

Although Henry dismisses her words at the time, they continue to haunt the novel up until she dies. Indeed, immediately after Henry visits her dead body in the hospital, the novel ends with the passage: " I...walked back to the hotel in the rain" (332). The novel thus ends with rain being used as a substitute for Catherine's death. Rain is also symbolically used by Hemingway to understate the obvious. For instance, when Catherine dies, there is no emotional outpouring. Instead, the novel ends with the word " rain" as the only hint of the emotional stress that Henry is experiencing. This form of understatement is ironically introduced right at the beginning of the novel: At the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came the cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it in the army. (4)In this passage, rain and death are linked for the first time, yet there is no emotional content connected to the fact that seven thousand men have died. This understatement is a key feature of the novel and will be used every time a death occurs. For instance, when Aymo dies after being shot, Henry informs the reader that, " He looked very dead. It

was raining.” Those two lines embody the full extent of the emotion that Henry shows. This form of understatement, where a symbol substitutes for emotions, allows Hemingway to omit key facts. A good example of omission occurs right after Henry has been wounded. He is placed in an ambulance and driven to the hospital while the man above him bleeds to death. “ The drops fell very slowly, as they fall from an icicle after the sun has gone” (61). This simple description omits all the pain and suffering and replaces them with the image of “ drops” from an icicle. Using symbols to replace death or emotions allows foreshadowing. Rain, for example, is frequently used to foreshadow death. Before getting killed, Aymo states, “ We drink [barbera] now. To-morrow maybe we drink rainwater” (191). Catherine’s death is foreshadowed in similar manner: she is terrified of the rain and states that she sometimes sees herself dead in the rain (126). Henry comforts her and stops her crying. However, Hemingway shows that this is a false comfort; in one of the very infrequent uses of the word “ but”, the chapter ends with the sentence, “ But outside it kept on raining” (126). Thus symbols are used to foreshadow the things they substitute for. An unsettling aspect of the novel is that symbols stand for the opposite of what they mean in common parlance. For example, rain is normally associated with growth, healthy crops, and a cleansing of the outside world. Instead, Hemingway uses it to mean death. He does the same thing with autumn and spring, seasons traditionally thought of as abundant in harvest and fecund, respectively. In the novel they come to stand for the rainy season, a time of death, retreat, and loss. The same inversion takes place with language; Hemingway uses words like “ peace” to denote someone deserting the army (243). By using the words and symbols in the opposite context of what they are expected to

mean, uncertainties are introduced. These uncertainties are caused by the fact that symbols and words do not have an inherent meaning that can be relied upon. This causes Henry to slowly start to mistrust language, and language as a whole is thus slowly undermined as the novel progresses. This causes the language of the novel to retreat away from simple technical language to a more abstract, questioning language. For example, the second half of the novel introduces questions into the text. This has the effect of undermining the manual-like nature of much of the novel, in which skills are constantly taught to others (such as how to eat spaghetti on page 7 or how to fish on page 256). These skills help to make the world understandable and uncomplicated; if there is a problem, someone can teach the other person how to fix it. Questions destroy the purity of this world because they introduce uncertainty into it. This uncertainty results in chaos, both for the army and for Henry's love affair. The first time a question is asked where no one has an answer is when Henry decides to take his cars off of the main road. One of the Sergeants asks, " You know the road?" and forces Henry to say, " No" (201). This uncertainty quickly takes over the text of the novel, causing Henry to insert his own questions, such as " Which side did [Catherine] sleep on?" (197), or " If you did not go forward what happened?" (216). This climaxes in the hospital scene where Henry almost goes insane with uncertainty: Yes, but what if she should die? She can't die. Why would she die? What reason is there for her to die? There's just a child that has to be born, the by-product of good nights in Milan. It makes trouble and is born and then you look after it and get fond of it maybe. But what if she should die? She won't die. But what if she should die? She won't. She's all right. But what if she should die? She can't die. But what if she should die? Hey, what

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about that? What if she should die? (320-321) The repetition of the questions in this paragraph hides the fact that this is actually an inversion of a manual. Instead of providing the answers to the questions, as he has throughout the novel, Henry is now posing the questions. This transition is mirrored by the brief but uncharacteristic moments of sentimentality that occur near the end (which I will spare the reader by not quoting), in which Henry “whines” about the fact that everyone eventually dies. The breakdown of language that occurs in the novel eventually leads Henry to state that he has “made a separate peace” (243). This oft quoted line embodies many of the fundamental themes of the novel. Foremost, it relates to the title, “A Farewell to Arms”, a phrase that can be interpreted as running away or deserting the army. Running away is exactly what Henry is doing when he makes his “peace”; after changing clothes, he refuses to read about the war in the newspapers, thus choosing “peace” by ignoring the war. This is a false peace, however, since Henry is soon caught up in fleeing to Switzerland with Catherine. This fake peace is highlighted by several other references to fakeness: for instance, Henry is described as a “fake doctor” (319). This fakeness shows that Henry cannot ‘will’ peace. The reason he fails to achieve a real peace is because the language changes as well. Language, and particularly the use of the word peace, is therefore inverted. Peace is a political term, a term that does not have a technical meaning. Henry realizes this when he overhears the carabinieri questioning the officers during the retreat. They use political language, “It is you and such as you that have let the barbarians onto the sacred soil of the fatherland” (223). Henry cannot adopt that language, and thus he chooses “a separate peace”, i. e. a peace that has nothing to do with politics. This peace can also be interpreted as his

choice of language; he denounces the political rhetoric and instead uses the technical language that he can trust. In this sense technical language is equated with peace, political language with war. The word "peace," (243) is further given an entirely different meaning by the line that immediately follows it. "I felt damned lonely and was glad when the train got to Stresa" (243). Stresa is where Catherine is located, and thus it seems that Henry is choosing love over war. In this case, "peace" merely means that he would rather be with Catherine than be in the war. This is in fact the choice that he makes, both by returning to Catherine and then fleeing with her to Switzerland. However, like the symbols, the word "peace" is falsely interpreted. The flight to Switzerland placed Henry and Catherine in a world where everything seems "peaceful". This false peace is two-fold: it is an escape from war, and it is an escape from sentimental language. Neither of them notice the falseness of the peace, or realize the impending danger. Catherine comments, "Isn't it fine rain? They never had rain like this in Italy. It's cheerful rain" (278). This is the first time that someone thinks of rain as a positive symbol and gives rain its more common definition. Unfortunately, this is a trick; the rain is related to death throughout the novel. Thus the rain, like the peace, is false in Switzerland. Catherine's complicated childbirth, which takes place during the rain, undermines her statement. Henry's use of language crumbles around the same time; he becomes overly sentimental and "whiny" and explodes with numerous unanswerable questions. It is therefore the fact that language, in the form of symbols and words, cannot be trusted that causes him to give up on his technical language. The combination of natural symbolism with death and language creates a powerful unity to the events of the novel. The deaths are foreshadowed by

the rain, which is used as a substitute for emotion. Thus the rain represents not only death, but also the grief, pain, and despair that accompanies death. It further represents a form of purging, a means of forgetting what has just happened. By having symbols stand for the emotional content of the plot, Hemingway cleverly removes the need to use extraneous language. This allows him to write much of the novel in the dry, technical language that he is famous for while still retaining the emotional content. It is important to notice that the breakdown of language at the end of the novel is not permanent. After having nearly given up his technical language, Hemingway returns to it in the final passage. Hence the novel ends with the word "rain" rather than the expected emotional outpouring.

Bibliography
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