

Sex and religion in a farewell to arms



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In Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic Henry finds in his relationship with Catherine Barkley – a relationship they think of as a marriage – safety, comfort, and tangible sensations of love: things that conventional religious devotion and practice had been unable to offer him. Frederic does not love God, he is only “ afraid of Him in the night sometimes”, the result of guilt felt after indulging in the immoral sexual pleasures of the brothel (72). Frederic and Catherine have no religion save their love for one another, yet he retains a kind of ingrained religious sensibility. Sex is something at the center of both Catholic tradition (in terms of dogma) and Frederic and Catherine's relationship, and is a source of mental conflict for Frederic. Their love for one another becomes like a replacement for religion, their ritual practice being sex; yet, Catherine's death at the end of the novel is a direct result of their pre-marital sexual relations. Though Frederic cannot fully shake religiously inspired sexual guilt and anxiety, he continues to engage in pre-marital sex. At the novel's close, he is blindsided by a great loss and is forced to recognize, too late, that his great love – his religion – could not last and that the pre-marital sex that was its ritual could provide happiness only temporarily, such sexual activity without fail resulting in emotional and physical degradation. The Italian Catholicism present in *A Farewell to Arms* is hostile to pre-marital sexuality. Aymo's two “ probably very religious” virgin Catholic peasant girls have a strong emotional response to Aymo's using the word “-----”, “ the vulgar word” for sex (197, 196). They misunderstand his meaning; one begins to sob for fear. Frederic's sexual improprieties are sources of much emotional and spiritual turmoil, and affect him in a way not wholly dissimilar to the Catholic girls, their fear inspired by their desire to not violate the tenets of their religion. Frederic fears God in the night, guilty

about what the priest refers to as “ passion and lust” (72). Rinaldi teasingly describes Frederic’s actions upon returning home from the brothels: He tries “ to brush away the Villa Rossa from [his] teeth”, to “[brush] away harlotry with a toothbrush” (168). There is a stigma attached to sexuality because of the cultural prevalence of Catholic beliefs, the repercussions of which (guilt) can affect even those who do not necessarily believe in or follow the precepts the religion. The religiously inspired feelings of guilt and fear notwithstanding, Frederic does not have an affection for God or Catholicism. “ I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, sacrifice and the expression in vain,” he says (184). These abstractions are unrelatable: “ I had seen nothing sacred” (185). Where the abstract is obscene, the concrete had dignity. To Frederic’s mind, Catholicism cannot offer him anything tangible, and is therefore of no use to him, it has no meaning. However, his love for Catherine is something that can be made tangible and intimately relatable through sex – their sex then attaining something of the status of religious ritual. Their love is based not on sacrifice, but on need, emotional and physical need that can be satisfied by their relationship. However, Frederic’s “ religious” love for Catherine must compete with his peculiar tendency to hold, unthinkingly, to elements of the Catholic tradition. Catherine, however, is adamantly opposed to the institutional religious thought to which Frederic partially clings. Their “ marriage” is exclusively a private one, though Frederic says “ I wanted to be really married to Catherine” (114). She sees their private marriage as perfectly whole: “ I couldn’t be married any more” (114). She dubiously promises that they will be married eventually, seemingly to placate Frederic: when he is in the hospital, they will marry some time after the war; when she is pregnant in

Switzerland, they will marry once she is thin again. Frederic experiences guilt about he and Catherine's premarital sex and her pregnancy. When Count Greffi, a non-devout man, brings up religion after billiards, Frederic says that religious feeling comes to him "only at night"; Greffi responds, "Then too you are in love. Do not forget that is a religious feeling." (263), the "Do not forget" reads like a warning against, one, taking for granted the religious potential in his love for Catherine and, two, becoming too fully consumed by feelings of guilt. To Greffi's reminder Frederic responds, "You believe so?" as if uncertain. One night after Catherine had gone to sleep, Frederic lay awake "for quite a long time thinking about things and watching Catherine sleeping" (301). Fergy, Catherine's nurse friend, expresses disgust at Catherine's lack of shame about the pregnancy, shame that any decent Christian girl would have: "You have no shame and no honor... If you had any shame it would be different" (247). Catherine thinks of she and Frederic's love as "innocent and simple" and totally without sin: "I can't believe we do anything wrong," she says (153). It is in the final pages of the novel that the ideas about sex and religion are most poignantly realized. They arrive at the hospital, and Catherine is asked to supply certain data, including religion and name, to an employee: "She said she had no religion and the woman drew a line in the space after that word. She gave her name as Catherine Henry" (313). One can make no mistake about the meaning of this juxtaposition: religion is replaced by her full and deep love for Frederic – their "private marriage"; it is a clear affirmation of her rejection of religion and its replacement by their love. As complications compound and the danger of the childbirth becomes immediate, Frederic begins to muse; Hemingway provides us with his stream of consciousness: "So now they got

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her in the end. You never got away with anything.” He views their pre-marital sex as something he had hoped they would “[get] away with”, something sinful. He continues: “ Get away hell! It would have been the same if we had been married fifty times” (320). His moral dilemma is here made clear. He first feels that her dying is punishment for their sin, yet he quickly attempts to rationalize it as a natural phenomenon. He remembers Rinaldi’s syphilis, the result of his irresponsible womanizing (327); Frederic once was afflicted similarly, with gonorrhoea (299). Before Catherine dies, Frederic asks, “ Do you want me to get a priest...?” She replies, “ Just you,” affirming her faith in their love, their religion (330). Frederic leaves the hospital some time after and “[walks] back to the hotel in the rain” (332). Ironically, it was the crux of Frederic and Catherine’s relationship that resulted in its demise. They rushed in to sex perhaps, treated it with too much lightness, Frederic’s Catholic inspired guilt suggesting the inevitable end all along. You are thrust into the world and told “ the rules”, but “ the first time [you’re caught] off base they kill you” – a man never has a chance; love never has a chance. Frederic and Catherine were caught off base and they were killed; their religion, their private marriage, was ended. She died, and he was left with nothing – before they ever “ had time to learn” (327).