

# Symbolism in a farewell to arms research paper

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



## **General Purpose: To analyze**

Specific purpose: To analyze for my audience the use of symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's novel A Farewell to Arms

Central idea: The novel contains many instances of symbolism; the symbolism primarily corresponds to Hemingway's feelings about war and the people who are in wars.

### I. Introduction

#### **A. Hemingway uses symbolism throughout the novel**

1. He condemns warfare.
2. He admires people who serve during wartime.

#### **B Thesis and preview of main points**

The symbolism expresses Hemingway's condemnation of warfare and his admiration of the soldiers, ambulance drivers, medical personnel, and others.

1. Rain symbolizes death.
2. Physical objects symbolize different intangible qualities.
3. Catherine's labor and death symbolize the experience of war.

### II. Main body

#### A. Rain is associated with death.

1. Rain brings cholera and death at the beginning.
2. Catherine expresses her fear of rain as associated with her own death.
3. Frederic leaves the hospital after Catherine's death and walks through rain.

#### B. Physical objects symbolize emotional issues.

1. Riding crop

2. Military badges

3. Hair

4. Alcohol

C. Catherine's death represents the different parts of war.

1. The prolonged labor corresponds to the sense of war taking too long.

2. The extreme pain she experiences relates to both the emotional and physical pain people in war endure.

3. Her death from hemorrhage takes place despite assurances from authority that everything will be fine.

III. Conclusion

### **A Three major uses of symbolism are present in the novel.**

1. Rain and weather

2. Physical objects

3. Labor and death

B. Effect on reader is to internalize Hemingway's attitudes toward war.

### **November 22, 2012**

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway uses symbolism throughout the novel as a way to express both his condemnation of war and his admiration for the people who actually fight in wars. Using symbolism enables him to highlight different aspects of the war without having to rely on characters express these opinions. Hemingway relies on three major symbols in the novel. Weather, particularly rain, typically symbolizes death that occurs throughout the novel. Certain objects symbolize the way characters respond

to the war. Finally, the protracted labor and childbirth that Catherine endures symbolizes the war itself. The images associated with the symbolism create enduring scenes in the novel, reinforcing Hemingway's portrayal of the horrific cost to humans from war.

Hemingway's attitude toward war is well documented. His 1948 introduction to the novel explicitly addresses the issue of war, and in the direct style typical of his fiction, he very bluntly states, " Since 1933 perhaps it is clear why a writer should be interested in the constant, bullying, murderous, slovenly crime of war" (Hemingway ix). He goes on to say he believes that " wars are fought by the finest people that there are," (Hemingway x) and he condemns those people who initiate wars because of the profits they will make from them. In *A Farewell to Arms*, this duality of opinions is present throughout. He presents war as a terrible waste of life, but the people who actually fight in war demonstrate heroic qualities.

The first major use of symbolism begins in the first chapter of the novel, when much of the text describes weather (Hemingway 1-4). The narrator, Frederic Henry, describes how initially the trees are dusty from lack of rain, but in the fall so much rain occurs that the trees lose all their leaves and become bare, and the wood itself looks black because of the rain. He includes descriptions of the various problems associated with the rain, such as muddy roads, wet weapons, and officers getting splashed by mud.

Hemingway paints a verbal landscape quite deliberately; as noted by one scholar, he consciously attempted to use visual art techniques in his novels (Wilhelm 64). He then goes on to discuss the rain that starts in the winter, which caused cholera and led to the death of 7, 000 people. It is in these first

few pages that Hemingway establishes the connection between rain and death, so that readers can consciously or subconsciously react to other instances of rain in the novel with a sense of impending death.

The next major discussion of rain occurs in a conversation between Frederic and Catherine Barkley (Hemingway 108-110). As they are talking, the mist turns into rain and eventually Catherine remarks on the rain, asking if the rain will make any difference in how he loves her. She eventually admits to a fear of the rain, and expresses that her fear is because she sometimes sees herself dead in the rain. Shortly after that discussion, another episode of rain takes place, resulting in Frederic becoming seriously ill for two weeks. Rain is again featured prominently when Catherine and Frederic go to a hotel, and she becomes depressed because she feels cheapened by the setting; the rain is present again when they leave the hotel after discussing plans for Catherine's pregnancy (Hemingway 132-138). In some ways, the rain can be interpreted here as foreshadowing the results of the pregnancy.

Another instance of the rain symbolism appears when Frederic is at the Bainsizza, after his talk with Gino (Hemingway 151-160). Over the course of several pages, rain is mentioned as again causing illness and rain is falling while shots are being fired. During these scenes, Frederic's internal monologue is about the incongruity of abstract words such as honor and so forth being used to describe wartime actions and beliefs, while there are very specific damages done to very real and tangible things such as homes and roads. Shortly afterwards, Frederic thinks about Catherine and how the winds have brought not a small rain, but a big rain that lasted all night and which seems to bode ill for Catherine. He thinks of her as being physically

uncomfortable because of the pregnancy and remembers her words about the rain not making any difference in their love.

When Frederic and Catherine row across the lake to go to Switzerland, again it is raining off and on again during the trip (Hemingway 230-237). The atmosphere of the trip contributes to the ominous feel of the scene, with them in the boat when it is dark; they literally cannot see exactly where they are going. The wind and rain combine to make this trip even more dangerous than usual, so that there is a real sense of impending danger. There is a certain irony as well, in that they are trying to escape one fate and yet the rain symbolizes that they cannot ultimately escape their destiny.

The final instance of the rain symbolism occurs in the final scene of the novel. After Frederic has endured the long wait during Catherine's labor, learned that the baby was stillborn, and watched Catherine die from hemorrhaging, he leaves the hospital to walk back to his hotel in the rain (Hemingway 284). At this point, the rain clearly symbolizes all the death he has seen during the war itself and also the death he has just seen of his family. Rain in the novel does not always signal an immediate death, but rain does not ever occur when characters are experiencing even brief moments of joy or pleasure. Hemingway consistently juxtaposes rain and either death itself or a sense of impending death, such as in battle.

In addition to the use of rain, there is also ongoing use of physical objects to symbolize intangible things such as love, identity, and safety. Catherine's riding crop represents the love she had lost and her inability to let go of the memory of her dead fiancé. The military badges of stars that the doctor wears represent his identity as an expert. The stars that Frederic tears off

when he leaves symbolize his transition from accepting the war to acknowledging its horror. The beard Frederic grows and the hair Catherine lets hang loose symbolize their temporary isolation from the war. The alcohol that Frederic consumes represents the desire to escape the war. The use of these physical objects corresponds to Hemingway's writing style in general. In the novel, he generally writes about very concrete things, such as guns, wounds, alcohol, and so forth, instead of devoting much text to emotions and ideas. Catherine, for example, talks about love a little when she and Frederic first get together, but she immediately dismisses it as being left over from her previous relationship.

When Frederic first meets Catherine, he notices, " She was carrying a thin rattan stick like a toy riding-crop, bound in leather" (Hemingway 16). He asks her why she carries it, and she explains it belonged to the man she was supposed to marry, who was killed in action. During their conversation, it becomes clear that Catherine still has feelings for the man who died. Her unwillingness to let go of the past becomes apparent during the first private meeting Frederic and Catherine have, when she demands that he tell her he loves her. At that point, she clearly regards Frederic as just a substitute for her dead fiancé, and in fact Frederic's thoughts reveal his awareness that they are playing a game of some sort where they pretend to feel something they do not really actually feel. One critic describes this interaction as Catherine's way of working through her grief (Tyler 81). The stick she was carrying when they first met corresponds to her love for this man; the stick is literally the only physical thing she has left of him since his death. It represents that when she and Frederic first meet, she is not emotionally

available. Its absence later signifies that Catherine has let go of the past and is willing to love someone else.

Another physical object used for symbolism is the military badge, a star, that the doctor who operates on Frederic's leg has (Hemingway 83-94). Prior to this doctor's arrival, Frederic has listened in dismay as three other doctors, who seem incompetent to him, assess his injury and insist that he must wait for six months until they can operate on his leg. Frederic's thoughts during their dialogue show he regards them as idiots who cannot be trusted to treat his injury properly. After he requests another doctor and the new doctor arrives, Frederic feels confident in him because the military star shows he is a higher ranking officer, and thus a better doctor (at least from Frederic's perspective). The new doctor reviews his injury efficiently and quickly announces that the surgery can take place the following day. He sounds knowledgeable and informed; Frederic trusts him because of the star he wears.

In another passage, the military stars are mentioned as a symbol for the qualities associated with being an officer (Hemingway 107). A character states that the soldiers always touch their stars if somebody mentions getting killed and there is also discussion of the status associated with having military stars. The stars are awarded as the officers rise through the ranks, and also given to symbolize acts of heroism. When Frederic decides to desert the Italian army, he removes his stars. He states, " I had taken off the stars, but that was for convenience. It was no point of honor. I was not against them. I was through. I wished them all the luck. There were the good ones, and the brave ones, and the calm ones and the sensible ones, and



they deserved it. But it was not my show any more” (Hemingway 200). When Frederic removes the stars, that removal represents the metamorphosis his character has undergone. At the beginning of the novel, Frederic felt compelled to join the Italian army, even though he was American, because he believed in the cause for which they were fighting. Now, after having seen what war does to people, watching the needless deaths, injuries, and loss, and having witnessed officers shooting their own troops for no good reason, Frederic is not the same person he was at the beginning. He had identified with the other soldiers and officers, but he can no longer do so. He wants to live; he wants not to be a part of the carnage any more. When he removes the stars, it signifies he is changing who he is and what he believes in, and that he no longer wants to have the same responsibilities he did while he was actively in the war.

There are references to hair in the novel that also serve to symbolize intangible things. During Frederic’s recuperation, when he and Catherine are having their love affair, he mentions that he likes taking down her hair, stating that he would “ take out the last two pins and it would all come down and she would drop her head and we would both be inside of it, and it was the feeling of inside a tent or behind a falls” Hemingway 98). By describing the sensation as one of being inside a tent or behind a waterfall, Frederic establishes that he associates her hair being down as symbolizing them being protected and hidden so there is a barrier between them and the rest of the world. Catherine wears her hair up when she is on duty; Frederic takes it down when they have sex. The difference between her hair being confined and being loose is parallel to what occurs at those times; she has wartime

responsibilities when her hair is pinned up but is free with Frederic when it is loose and flowing. For a few moments, Frederic can hide in her hair and pretend the war does not exist, that it is only the two of them and they are safe. But the nature of that safety is only temporary. Once they have finished having sex, Catherine has to put the pins back in her hair and put it up again to resume her duties. The barrier is not permanent; it is only there for a little while. The temporary nature of this barrier corresponds to the temporary nature of their relationship. For a while they have each other and are happy, but ultimately Catherine dies and Frederic is left without anything of hers; not even their baby survives.

When Frederic and Catherine are together during her pregnancy, she asks if he would like to grow a beard and he agrees because it will give him something to do (Hemingway 256). He later references it confirming that he had in fact grown out his beard. The beard is something he would not have grown while he was still actively on duty; early in the novel he mentioned the gas masks he and other soldiers sometimes had to wear and that wearing one with a beard would be difficult. The beard represents freedom from the restrictions of being involved directly in the war; it means he can live normally at least for a while and escape the various stresses and dangers of warfare.

In many scenes in the novel, Frederic drinks alcohol and there is much discussion among the soldiers about wine and other spirits. He sometimes drinks to excess, such as when he was on leave and was too drunk to visit the priest's family. The alcohol generally represents his desire to distance himself from the pain and stress of what he has seen occurring around him.

He also uses it when he is injured and transferred to a different hospital (Hemingway 70-78). Because of the delay in the doctor arriving to review his case and prescribe any medications for the pain, he is in unbearable pain and so gets Rinaldi to smuggle in a bottle of vermouth. The vermouth helps him deal with the pain, and works effectively enough that he falls asleep with the bottle in his bed. When the nurse discovers the bottle, she expresses a wish that he had told her about it, so she could have shared it with him. This wish represents her desire, understandable enough in the circumstances, to escape her current reality and exist for a while without injuries, without pain, without death all around. Frederic uses alcohol so much that he is accused of drinking excessively to avoid returning to active duty (Herndl 38).

The last major use of symbolism in the novel is Catherine's labor and death (Hemingway 268 - 284). The expectation is that she will have a normal labor and delivery, but the nurse warns them when they go to the hospital that first labors can often be protracted. As she is going through labor, several times she has intense contractions that require anesthesia. Frederic goes for a meal, and has a long internal monologue about childbirth, trying to reassure himself that Catherine will not die and that she is lucky to live in a time where the doctors and nurses can give her something effective for pain. But after he returns, the doctor informs him that Catherine's labor is not progressing well, and they may have to take steps to end the labor. The anesthetic they had been using on her no longer relieves her pain. There seems to be a high degree of correlation here between Catherine's labor and what a war is like. In war, government authorities generally reassure the public that it will not last long and there will be minimal loss of life. Yet, the

reality of war is most often not that safe and sanitary. It lasts longer than expected, it brings horrendous pain, and eventually the anesthetic (telling people it is necessary) wears off, leaving people to suffer without comfort. Catherine's death also symbolizes the death of soldiers and others during the war. One scholar notes the resemblance of her labor and death to "trauma narrative" (Dodman 249). It occurs when the officials are not expecting it. The doctor had reassured Frederic that the surgical procedure was quite as safe as regular labor, and yet the massive hemorrhage she has indicates it was not safe after all. It involves massive loss of blood, just like other deaths that have occurred in the novel where soldiers bleed out after having been shot or hit by bomb fragments. She is not afraid of death but angry at it, corresponding to the qualities that Hemingway ascribed to soldiers of being brave in the face of death. She assumes for these scene characteristics that Hemingway often gave more to male characters; as noted by Hewson, the novel reveals some of Hemingway's uncertainties about gender (51) and Traber considers Hemingway to be critical of traditional gender roles by giving her these characteristics (28). When death does come, it happens fairly quickly and seems to be random, just bad luck. Her labor and childbirth could just as easily have gone well, but did not. Like war, there is also nothing positive to show for it at the end. The baby was stillborn, representing what Pozorski refers to as "a past that cannot be easily left behind" (75), and so Frederic is left with nothing tangible from his relationship with Catherine, only memories of a brief period of happiness followed by tragedy. This tragedy is so profound that Merrill, for example, argues the novel should be read as a tragedy (571).

Hemingway's use of symbolism at times seems a little heavy-handed. For example, the use of rain to portend death is so obvious that it is as if he is dropping anvils on the audience's head. Similarly, Catherine's labor and death seem to be very obvious pieces of symbolism, as do the various physical objects such as the military stars and hair. His use of symbolism is not in any way subtle. Yet, the symbolism is largely effective. Hemingway's prose style is very direct; he uses a fairly simple vocabulary and simple sentence structure; these are the reasons his prose style is so easy to parody and so recognizable. His style is noted for its " brevity, simple diction, and understatement" (Hollenberg 306). Had he chosen to use more obscure symbolism, he would have compromised his writing style and ended up with text that did not fit the rest of the novel. In terms of the intent of his symbolism, he makes it quite clear throughout the novel that war is a hellish experience for people, who nevertheless often display the best side of themselves when in danger. Ultimately Hemingway's use of symbolism enhances the narrative of *A Farewell to Arms* and leaves the reader with a vivid sense of the horrors of war.

## **Works Cited**

Dodman, Trevor. " Going All to Pieces": " A Farewell to Arms" As Trauma Narrative." *Twentieth Century Literature* 52. 3 (2006): 249-274. Print.

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2012. Kindle Edition.

Herndl, Diane Price. " Invalid Masculinity: Silence, Hospitals, and Anesthesia in *A Farewell to Arms*." *Hemingway Review* 21. 1 (2001): 38. Print.

Hewson, Marc. " The Real Story of Ernest Hemingway": Cixous, Gender, and

<https://assignbuster.com/symbolism-in-a-farewell-to-arms-research-paper/>

A Farewell to Arms." Hemingway Review 22. 2 (2003): 51. Print.

Hollenberg, Alexander. " Recalcitrant Simplicity: Thin Characters and Thick Narration in A Farewell to Arms." Narrative 20. 3 (2012): 301-321. Print.

Merrill, Robert. " Tragic Form in A Farewell to Arms." American Literature 4 (1974): 571. JSTOR Arts & Sciences I. Web. 21 Dec. 2012.

Pozorski, Aimee L. " Infantry and Infanticide in A Farewell to Arms." Hemingway Review 23. 2 (2004): 75-98. Print.

Traber, Daniel S. " Performing the Feminine in " A Farewell to Arms." Hemingway Review 24. 2 (2005): 28-40. Academic Search Complete. Web. 21 Dec. 2012.

Tyler, Lisa. " Passion and Grief in A Farewell to Arms: Ernest Hemingway's Retelling of Wuthering Heights." Hemingway Review 14. 2 (1995): 79. Print.

Wilhelm, Randall S. " Objects on a Table: Anxiety and Still Life in Hemingway's " A Farewell to Arms." Hemingway Review 26. 1 (2006): 63-80. Print.