Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I in *A Farewell to Arms* *

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Abstract

The main focus of this study is to make a detailed analysis of Ernest Hemingway’s novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, with the following objectives: to establish how he condemns war and militarism as brutal, cruel, needless, and fed by the false illusions of glory. Using his personal, first hand experiences in World War I, Hemingway demonstrates how love, in contrast to war, is a positive and affirmative force that has the ability to transcend hatred and violence. This work also compares and contrasts *A Farewell to Arms* with some of the other main literary writings in English about World War I. Its goal is to provide some insight, in socio-political and historical terms, about World War I, and to analyze its impact on Western society and culture in general.

A great deal of literature was written in the twentieth century by men of high intellect, lofty ideals and sound wisdom in order to show that war is a futile and destructive pursuit. In English and American literature, both in poetry and prose, even if we restrict ourselves to writings about the two World Wars we can list names of great writers such as Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke, Norman Mailer and many others who wrote about this theme. Even from the German side, Erich M. Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) ranks as a classic.

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anti-war novel. Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) is also in this list of classics, a tale of World War I, and a love story of considerable romantic charm. Indeed, this novel is a unique and special work, which enjoys popularity even today all over the world and it has also been filmed a number of times.

The earliest roots of World War I (1914-1918), the modern world’s first major international conflagration, rest in a number of closely linked factors. First, economic pressure and population growth in Europe combined with rapid industrialization created a situation where intense competition existed for limited scarce resources. This led to an increased competition for overseas colonies, a competition, which had already begun in the 19th century, but now intensified. This in turn led to a very complex system of imperialistic alignments between European powers. This new dispensation brought with it in the early twentieth century,

... a threat of more serious conflict, of an armed struggle among the great powers growing out of their clashing activities and claims. The tension already existing among the European nations was intensified by Jingoism, colonial rivalry and commercial competition; the result was the natural increase in armaments which in turn increased fear and suspicion. The consequences of this spirit of jealousy were to be global, on a scale hitherto unimagined.(1)

Thus, the outbreak of a general European war in 1914 ultimately involved all the major nations of the globe. Britain suffered approximately 947,000 deaths and 2.12 million other casualties; Germany had 1.8 million dead soldiers and 4.2 million wounded; France lost some 1.38 million people and Italy about 460,000.(2)
There was also huge economic loss to all concerned. Britain’s economic losses amounted to 7,800 million dollars; Germany’s 8,400 million; France’s 5,400 and Italy’s 2,700. Other countries all over the world also suffered huge losses in terms of men and financial resources as this bloody war went on for four years until it ended on November 11, 1918. People all over the world were thoroughly exhausted by this conflict and were relieved by its conclusion and the universal feeling was that, “the first war had been the war to end wars … a future war seemed unthinkable.”

Both victors and vanquished had suffered material losses as already indicated but the conflict also left behind a very dark legacy of fear, insecurity and bitterness. From the miseries of war the world in general and the European countries in particular emerged into a desperate era of political turbulence, economic confusion, fear of future conflict, deep psychological wounds, all of which contributed to the general collapse of traditional, social and moral standards and values. Not only Europe, but the whole of Western civilisation underwent radical change.

Europe’s cultural life was deeply affected by the War and its aftermath, heightening the collapse of traditional values and doubts in old notions of faith and order. In intellectual terms, the initial of time of anxiety and pessimism of the years between 1914-1930s was captured by Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918). The issue of moral integrity was raised among the intellectuals by Julien Benda’s *La Trahison des Clercs* (1927), where he challenged many of the conventional principles of faith in contrast to Communism.

In the fine arts, traditional styles disintegrated because they no longer had much relevance to the bitter experiences of the new generation who wished to find new forms of expression to relate/depict their
world-view. Artistic experiments such as Symbolism, Cubism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Abstractionism now emerged.(8) In the field of literature, great European and American writers in different genres eloquently presented the post-war devastation and disorientation. These include works such as T.S Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), Pirandello’s play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1920), Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), D.H Lawrence’s controversial novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), Brecht’s play *Threepenny Opera* (1929), Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1924) as well as the writings of existentialists such as Jean Paul Sartre and Franz Kafka. The Theatre of the Absurd also began to emerge as a force in modern drama at this time. In the United States of America, the poetry of Ezra Pound and the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald need no introduction.

Ernest Hemingway represents the best of American talent and inspiration combined with European experience and ethos, and is very much part of this list of post World War I writers. The artists and writers of this era had been seriously traumatized by the experience of the war and its aftermath and tried to give expression to their horror in creative forms. They played an important role in highlighting many of the themes of the period that expressed their fears and concerns.

Many of these themes of decline, loss of hope and faith, insecurity, meaningless existence, fear of the future, and so on — are recurring motifs in the majority of the literary works of this period. Some of them can be seen reflected in Hemingway’s works in the post-World War-I scenario. In *A Farewell to Arms*, however, since it is a novel about a war in which the author participated, the focus remains more on the actual experiences of the conflict itself.

Hemingway’s own life has become something of a “modern myth”(9)
so that it is not easy to separate its facts from the fiction that surrounds his biography. He is one of those writers who are considered larger than life, through their actions and writings developing a public image or persona which is full of glamour and which continues to interest and move us even now. Indeed, even those people who have never read his works are fascinated by his adventurous life and exploits.

It is probable that domestic circumstances were responsible for the early development of Ernest Hemingway’s outdoor, nature-oriented discipline or code. While his childhood was quite pleasant and happy, his parents were temperamentally incompatible. His father Dr. Hemingway was quiet, reserved, outdoors loving, and subject to fits of depression, genetically inherited. Ernest’s mother was cultured, sophisticated, fond of high society and somewhat overbearing in manner. Often, to escape her harsh criticism, Dr. Hemingway would seek escape in the nearby forests and countryside, usually accompanied by young Ernest. Thus from this early period, the child could note the disharmony and differences between his parents, and because he was close to his father, come to dislike his mother’s attitude. To some extent, especially in his youth, his negative impression of his mother was to color his relationships with other women, and also resulted in his inability to remain happily married for long to any of his wives.

Otherwise physically robust but with some weakness in eyesight, the young Ernest Hemingway was good at sports but not particularly brilliant in academics. He was good in English, fond of reading all manners of stories and in writing, but was generally indifferent to other subjects. On graduating from high school his father wanted him to proceed to college for higher education but Ernest had other ideas. He wanted to learn to write, or go off to join the forces, as World War I was already underway and American soldiers were
Abul Wafa Mansoor Ahmad Abbasi

participating as allies of Britain and France. When his parents did not grant him permission to do so, he left home and joined the staff of the *Kansas City Star* as an apprentice reporter, in 1917. At the *Star*, he had to write about everything that went on in the city i.e., reports on crime and police beats, on hospitals, the train station etc. In this process he had to report on stolen goods, accidents, deaths, the arrival of famous people through the Union Station and so on. This was good basic training in observation, simple and direct reporting and in recording statements and conversations. These skills would later become the basis for his own and unique style.

By late 1917, Ernest Hemingway was eager to go to Europe to participate in the conflagration of World War I, especially when fighting had reached a climax. He was irritated by the monotony of his existence as a reporter and wanted to face the real hazards of war. He was already attempting to write short stories and planning to make literary writing his full time career. At this point, Hemingway still had a very rosy picture of war and soldiers. He tried a number of times, to enroll as a volunteer soldier but was rejected repeatedly due to his defective left eye. Finally, he applied for a position as a Red Cross ambulance driver when they asked for volunteers, and we learn that “Ernest was among the first to step forward.”(10) He was thus accepted in the US Army and by June 1918, assumed his duties on the Austrian Front in Italy. This was the beginning of Ernest Hemingway’s introduction to the reality of war, in what is commonly known as the ‘war to end all wars.’ He was now exposed to its brutality and meaningless suffering in a sudden and shocking manner.

In July 1918, a shrapnel shell hit Hemingway during bombardment by the Austrian artillery, injuring his knee and foot. In this injured state he displayed unusual bravery and endurance in rescuing an Italian driver and carrying him to safety. Hemingway was decorated with
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

military honors. “Ernest was the first American to be wounded in Italy during the First World War and all the newspapers in the Chicago area gave prominence to his story.”(11) The story about Hemingway had made him more famous than any story penned by him during the First World War.

Meanwhile, Hemingway had been shifted from the field hospital to a proper civil hospital in Milan. Hemingway was now being acclaimed as a war hero at a time when he was mentally reevaluating the notions of war and recoiling from it in disgust. Something else, which occurred in Milan added to his rejection of war, i.e., he met and fell in love with Agnes Von Kurowsky, a volunteer nurse in a military hospital. Agnes herself had suffered the loss of her fiancé in the war, and was bitter about it.

What was a pleasant interlude for Agnes was a deeper involvement for young Ernest, who felt deeply for her and proposed marriage but Agnes refused the offer very politely. In a couple of months, Hemingway also got over this romantic involvement and the incident was closed at one level. However, in his fertile and creative imagination the incident evolved and combined with other factors and fused with his war experiences to form the basis of a wonderful tale of war and love, which was to eventually become the great novel, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929).

A brief discussion of some of Hemingway’s major works relevant to our context of World War I and its aftermath and the way he treats these subjects, would be useful. Thus, *Fiesta, A Farewell to Arms* and some of his earlier stories, written uptil or before 1938, are briefly treated here. *Fiesta (The Sun Also Rises)* published in 1926, is the first major work to be considered. It was Hemingway’s first important novel. It certainly has significant undertones to be noted. When it
was first published, the book received great acclaim and was enthusiastically bought by readers in Europe and America.

The main protagonist of *Fiesta* was Jake Barnes – an expatriate American working as a journalist in Paris in the 1920s, who received a wound in the First World War which made him impotent. Now, he is caught up in a frantic, wild social life, in an effort to drown his sorrow and depression resulting both from this accident and from the terrible memories of the war. A number of his acquaintances are shown including a naive and somewhat foolish young American, Robert Cohn who did not fight in Europe during the war but is trying to ‘pretend’ and ‘feel’ like those who did. Also, we have the heroine, Lady Brett Ashley, a beautiful woman who has been in love with Jake for some time but his condition has permanently frustrated their relationship.

Other characters in *Fiesta* also suffer from various personal problems and are similarly trying to lose themselves via excess and extravagance. When Jake Barnes, Robert Cohn, Brett Ashley and some others travel to Spain to attend the bull fighting festival in Pamplona, all the hidden tensions, frustrations, anger and instability bursts out into emotional chaos. In the end, when Brett Ashley has had unhappy affairs with both the fake Robert Cohn and charismatic bullfighter, Pedro Romero, she meets Jake again in Madrid and they both realize the similarity of their condition, how they have been ‘destroyed’ by the war in physical and emotional terms. Each is embittered by the thought of the happiness that has been denied them but tries to bear this tragedy patiently.

The novel *Fiesta* has obvious autobiographical undertones. Like Hemingway, Jake Barnes fought in Italy and was wounded there, although Hemingway recovered from his less serious wound. Brett Ashley is in some ways like Agnes Von Kurowsky, whom Hemingway
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

met in Milan during his hospital stay, loved briefly but could not marry.

*Fiesta* is cynical and bitter in tone. The escapism and desperation of the people of Hemingway’s generation, those who fought in the war, or were in one way or the other affected by it, and even those who wanted to fantasize about it (like Robert Cohn) is very moving. It highlights the emotional, if not physical, scars and wounds of the entire Western civilization plunging into a collective madness, an orgy of sex, violence, alcoholic nightmares and moral collapse. What Hemingway is essentially suggesting is the lack of direction and meaning to life during that period; where faith and belief and older notions of love, courtesy and gentility had lost credibility to a large extent and pre-war values, standards and traditions no longer applied.

Out of some 49-50 short stories written by Hemingway until 1938, there are eight that deal directly or indirectly with World War I. These, published together in the collection, *Ernest Hemingway: The Short Stories* (1938), include: “A Very Short Story,” “Soldier’s Home,” “In Another Country,” “Che ti dice la Patria?” “A Simple Enquiry,” “Now I Lay Me,” “A Way You’ll Never Be,” and “A Natural History of the Dead.”

“A Very Short Story” is indeed quite short, only about two pages in length. It seems to be more like a semi-autobiographical note than a story, based on Hemingway’s own brief romance in the Milan hospital during World War I. Hemingway changes the venue from Milan to Padua, both in Italy, and he does not give the name of the main character, the wounded soldier who represents Hemingway himself. Agnes becomes the nurse, Luz. This story simply narrates how the soldier and nurse fell in love and wanted to get married. However, after some time the narrator returned to the United States and got a
letter from Luz saying that she could not marry him, as she was romantically involved with an Italian army officer and realized that her brief affair with the narrator had only been “a boy and girl love,” not a mature one. This story is very close to Hemingway’s real experience and he also received a similar letter from Agnes Von Kurowsky and it is a simple, sad statement about a temporary wartime romance that does not last long. As this story was written earlier, around 1922-23, we can assume that the idea was adapted and developed into the more complicated and fuller account of the Frederic Henry – Catherine Barkley affair in *A Farewell to Arms*.

Another Hemingway short story, “Soldier’s Home,” does not deal with war directly but with the impact of war on soldiers returning to civilian life. The main protagonist/character, Krebs, is a soldier who has returned to his home in Kansas, after fighting in World War I. Other soldiers have also returned and after the early welcome of the soldiers by the public, they are now trying to settle down to a ‘normal’ life, with work and domestic responsibilities. Krebs has a very hard time because he has been through many hardships and shocks, and seems to be caught up in his own psychological problems. This makes him inactive and passive. He just sits at home and plays with his little sister and is not ready to go out to work. He becomes increasingly introverted and is no longer on speaking terms with his father who wants him to take up a job and family responsibilities. His mother loves him but cannot understand him or his problems and she asks him to pray, to which he replies that he cannot pray or believe in any god. He also tells her, finally, that he does not love anyone any longer and has lost the capacity to love. He leaves home in the end, to take a reporter’s job in Kansas City (something Hemingway also did) and thus breaks his family ties forever. This is a very strong story, on an important theme, that of the difficulties of soldiers in trying to achieve normalcy after their war experiences, when they no longer feel or
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

believe in anything.

“In Another Country” is one of Hemingway’s most famous stories, describing a brief episode in a military hospital in Italy, during World War I. There are a number of wounded soldiers recuperating in the hospital. Two of them become friends and often talk to each other, a nameless narrator (representing to a large extent Hemingway) and an Italian major whose hand is badly crippled. One evening they are talking, and the major is very sad. He asks the narrator what he will do after the war and the narrator answers that he will return to America, try to get a job and get married. At this the major becomes very angry and tells the narrator not to get married, as that would be a big mistake. The narrator cannot understand the major’s emotional outburst. Later, the narrator finds out that the major loved a woman and wanted to marry her but was reluctant to do so while he was still serving in the army. He later married the woman he loved as he thought that now they could at last have a normal domestic life, but shockingly, his wife developed pneumonia and died suddenly that very day. The story reflects another dimension of hopelessness – that of the misery of Fate, or in Hemingway’s view, the “biological trap” in which all humans are caught. No one can escape death. This story captures an episode that Hemingway changed later and placed in *A Farewell to Arms* in the form of Catherine’s death at the end of the novel, leaving Frederic Henry to bear the loss quietly.

“Che ti dice la Patria” is an Italian phrase which can be interpreted as “What does the country say/give to you?” It is a story set in the period after World War I, when two American tourists (the narrator and his friend, Guy) are traveling in Italy. There is a lot of poverty, misery and sadness after the war. Restaurants are very expensive and many people have turned to illegal activities just to survive, such as the women who are running a brothel. The fascist party under Mussolini
Abul Wafa Mansoor Ahmad Abbasi

is on the rise and the tourists feel that it has created a very oppressive atmosphere in Italy. The story is a simple political comment on the period between the two World Wars.

“A Simple Enquiry” represents a very disturbing side of war; the story is a short one, depicting a scene of World War I in Italy, at some military camp. An Italian major tells his adjutant to send his young orderly, Pinin, to his room. When Pinin comes, the major makes him a homosexual proposition but the orderly is frightened by this shocking advance. The matter comes to nothing but both Pinin and the major know that the matter has not really ended. The major can abuse his authority to compel Pinin to accede to his demands, without there being any way out for the poor orderly. Hemingway here points to the existence of perversion and abuse of military authority, quite common in such a brutal situation. There is no evidence of any kind to show if Hemingway himself faced any homosexual experience during World War I. However, from his conversations with friends about his war experiences we can understand that such activities were quite common among the soldiers, far away from the company of women most of the time, and under continuous psychological stress.

(12)

In “Now I Lay Me,” we have the narrator and another soldier, called John resting on the floor of a house on the Austrian front. They are resting before a battle and talk about all the girls they have known and loved and what they will do after the war is over and they return home. It shows how, during even the times of war, the thoughts of men are focused on girls and home and the simple joys of normal, civilian life. Similarly, in “A Way You’ll Never Be,” we meet an American officer, Nick Adams (who appears in other stories too as representing Hemingway), discussing various matters with some Italian officers during an offensive in the war. Many descriptions are
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

given of dead and wounded soldiers, and of the obscenity of their lives in the trenches and on the march. We also get a general picture of the inefficiency and mismanagement of the forces and the resultant hardships for troops.

“A Natural History of the Dead” is also an observation made by the narrator of the story, on all the death and misery of soldiers and the animals such as horses and mules used by the army during war. At times they are compared in such terms that we cannot differentiate between them anymore and it seem as if Hemingway does this deliberately to show that war is not a romantic or glorious business but a very sordid affair. This last story closes with the depiction of a dirty field – hospital and the shouts of a wounded soldier, as the doctors try to amputate his limbs. It is a shocking scene.

Ernest Hemingway’s 1926 novel *A Farewell to Arms* is central to this paper. While the earlier *Fiesta* took up the post-World War I condition, in a very bleak, almost existentialist light, *A Farewell to Arms* takes up the actual experience of war – the First World War, specifically – based on Hemingway’s own experience in this world conflagration and offers a somewhat less bleak prospect.

Lt. Frederic Henry, the hero, is an American working as a volunteer ambulance driver (like Hemingway) on the Austrian front, in Italy. He is, like most soldiers, was lost in a life of violence, automatic reactions, and wild living to temporarily forget the dangers of his situation. When he is wounded and taken to hospital in Milan (again like Hemingway) he meets the English nurse Catherine Barkley (a character largely based on Agnes Von Kurowsky) and they gradually fall in love. This, of course, is imaginative and not autobiographical. Catherine’s love begins to change Frederic Henry and full awareness comes to him when he returns again to the front and realizes the
false, cruel and meaningless nature of war in comparison with the positive qualities of love. At this point he decides to make his ‘separate peace’ and bids ‘farewell’ to the arms of war to seek the arms of his beloved Catherine. He deserts the army, joins Catherine, and they both escape into a life of brief happiness in Switzerland (a politically neutral country) where she becomes pregnant with his child. This is the end of that loving interlude, Catherine dies while having a cesarean operation and their child is also born dead. Frederic is left alone, now bidding ‘farewell’ to Catherine’s arms, too. While, of course, the ending of this novel is especially tragic and it seems that fate conspires against human happiness - that people are biologically ‘trapped’ - there is also a positive side to this tragedy: Frederic Henry has learnt the value of love and the worthlessness of war.

Hemingway was an eye-witness of the world wars and, therefore, with his artistic skills, he depicts [the] morbidity and ferocity [of war] in an unrivaled and unsurpassed manner. He says, “What really happened in action, what the actual things were which produced emotion that you experienced” [signifying that] personal experience is very essential for producing an effective work of art. (13)

This statement holds quite well for Hemingway’s art. Hemingway’s own statements, and those of some of his colleagues and close friends, reinforce the above view with reference to the origins of the novel A Farewell to Arms (henceforth referred to as AFTA). For instance, the writer A.E. Hotchner quotes this statement by Hemingway when asked about how he came to write this novel:

All the other writers who were sort of in my mob [in Paris] there, had already written books about the war,
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

and like the last girl on the block who hasn’t married, I felt my time to write a war book had come . . . so when I finally got around to doing my war novel, I found that the only country left [not used as locale] was Italy . . . none of them knew anything about the war there. (14)

So, we see that (i) Hemingway had an idea of writing a war novel based on his war experiences; (ii) that many other contemporary writers also wrote about their experiences, on various fronts of the war, with varying success; (iii) that Hemingway was the only one of these authors to have knowledge and experience of the Italian front; and (iv) he subsequently based his novel, *AFTA*, in this locale or setting. Thus, it would be pertinent to say that *AFTA* is not simply a record of personal experiences but more than that: it is an imaginative depiction of the war, on a particular front, as experienced by Hemingway and others, and turned by Hemingway’s art into a creative expression, or symbol, of war in general.

Hemingway has also been “castigated by some critics” (15) for his great concern with violence and depiction of violent action in his novels and other works e.g., of bullfighting, big game hunting, fishing, fighting etc. – since many of these critics thought he was only portraying an immature, common place attitude without touching on deeper levels of truth about the human condition. However, Matthew defends him on the grounds that, “it is not a criticism that can possibly be directed against *A Farewell to Arms*. Fishing, drinking and watching bullfights might by considered too superficial to be the stuff of tragedy, but love and death are not parochial themes.”(16)

War was a very important subject to Hemingway because it comprised “a fictive apotheosis regarding both subject matter and narrative
Abul Wafa Mansoor Ahmad Abbasi

structuring,“(17) Hemingway stressed in a letter to the fellow American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald,

Like me to write you a little essay on the Importance of Subject? Well, the reason you were so sore you missed the war is because war is best subject of all. It groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a life-time to get it.(18)

*AFTA* is thus a story of wartime society, where “hopelessness, disillusionment, pollution, diseases, sexual perversion, moral degradation, pessimism, purposelessness, spiritual barrenness and wild bouts of drinking prevail as legitimate offspring of war.”(19) It is Hemingway’s testament and expression of the ‘reality’ or ‘realities’ of war in general and World War I in particular, and one of the finest novels every written in this genre, at any time. For instance, the novel opens with that description of hopelessness and desolation, which is now considered a classic, memorable passage of modern literature:

. . . in the bed of the river, there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun . . . troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year.

. . . (*AFTA*, 1)

(This and all subsequent references quoted parenthetically in the text are from the Triad – Grafton edition of *A Farewell to Arms*, pub. London, 1985).

We are reminded of the draught and sterility of modern civilization by this passage in the manner as T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. However,
Eliot’s poem, the promise of rain does not come with any salvation either, for the ‘renewal’ of the earth and of the inhabitants in Hemingway’s cruel world, at war in *AFTA*, there seems to be no hope or salvation with simple formulae like “da, da, da” as Eliot believes; indeed, the rain brings further disaster and misery and suffering. “At the start of the winter came the rain and with the rain came the cholera . . . and seven thousand died of this in the army.” (*AFTA*, 8)

Catherine Barkley is also afraid of the rain, and she says “some time I see me dead in it” (*AFTA*, 93), which is symbolic - even prophetic - of the way she will die in the end; thus “the Rain becomes a conscious symbol of disaster” (20) in *AFTA*. It keeps falling dismally throughout the Caporetto retreat, it falls when Catharine is in labor in the hospital in Switzerland and is having a baby, it is falling when she dies and is still falling when Frederic Henry walks away alone in it, having bidden farewell to his love.

In the early part of the novel when Frederic Henry returns back to the front after his leave, Rinaldi reminds him of the morbid reality of war and some of its side-effects apart from the casualties of the battle, “since you are gone, we have nothing but frostbites, chilblains, jaundice, gonorrhea, self inflicted wounds, pneumonia and hard and soft chancreys.” (*AFTA*, 13) This description a far cry from the popular image of war and soldiers, generated by military propaganda, where a lot of fake glory and heroism is shown. A similar incident that *AFTA* depicts is that of the man suffering from a painful hernia, yet another means of unveiling the brutality and meaningless adventure of war, completely disregarding any human concern. Frederic Henry asks the man, “Why don’t you go to hospital?” to which he replies helplessly, “they won’t let me” (*AFTA*, 29). Small problems do not matter to the military authorities and there is no respite for ordinary people with their complaints and suffering. All that they need is men:
to fight, despite their ailments, and to become cannon fodder.

Hemingway depicts a horrifying, realistic picture of the shelling-scene and its impact on the minds of ordinary soldiers who had to face it:

Through the other noise, I heard a cough, then the chuch chuch then there was a flash, as a blast-furnace door is swung open and a roar that started white and went red and on and on in a rushing wind. I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and felt myself rush bodily out in the wind. I went swiftly, all of my self and I knew I was dead and it had been a mistake to think you just die. (AFTA, 44)

Only a person who has actually experienced the sensations of terror and near-death in a war can write like this, with such accurate realism. The pathos reaches another height, in the continuations of this theme when Passini is hit badly and, on the verge of death, moans in agony, “Oh! mama mia, mama mia, oh Jesus shoot me, Christ shoot me mama mia. Oh purest Mary, shoot me. Stop it. Stop it, stop it. Oh Jesus lovely Mary stop it. Oh, oh, oh” (AFTA, 44). There is no glory in dying like this and the readers feels utter disgust and pity.

Hemingway exposes the savagery of war very effectively. Our repulsion for war increases when we read vivid descriptions such as: “I felt something dripping regularly, then it pattered into a stream . . . the man on the stretcher over me has a hemorrhage” (AFTA, 49). In the same way, we have accounts of the losses of life, spoken very casually by officers in the club, “the Italian had lost one hundred and fifteen thousand men on the Bainsizza Plateau and San Gabriele . . . they had lost forty thousand on the Carso besides” (AFTA, 98). Are these men puppets? Toys in a game? One cannot register such losses
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

in one’s mind. These instances convince us of the “author’s scrupulous observation of the facts of war.” (21) Bennett comments, “I seriously question whether this description has been equaled . . . no flush and no fever in this novel but the sane calmness of a spectator who combines deep sympathy with breath and impartiality of vision.” (22)

Finally, we have the dramatic handling of the Caporetto retreat, when even the soldiers are fed up and rebellious, calling the conflict a “Rotten war,” “a bloody war” and that “there is nothing worse than war.” The details here all emphasize the mean sordid and antiheroic aspects of war and, “. . . such discussion of the moral implications of it as the readers hear from the characters all confirm the inherently evil impression of the institution.” (23) When the Allied retreat starts, it brings increased suffering and humiliation, especially for the deserters. A comprehensive passage follows, revealing the truth of the retreat. When a man is shot by the military police, Passini says,

Now they have a guard outside his house with bayonet and nobody can come to see his mother, father and sister and his father loses his civil rights and cannot even vote. They are without law to protect them. Anybody can take their property. (AFTA, 40)

This is echoed in another similar statement, “. . . they come after you. They take your sisters” (AFTA, 40). Thus, the powerless deserters are treated very badly indeed. Henry and his fellow deserters suffer very greatly in their own flight and face many obstacles. They lose Aymo and Bonello gives up their company. When Henry sees the shooting of the lieutenant colonel, his disgust reaches a climax – “the questioners had all the efficiency, coldness and command of themselves of Italians who are firing and are not being fired on.” (AFTA, 61) When the execution command is given for the lieutenant
Abul Wafa Mansoor Ahmad Abbasi

... colonel, the commanding officer of the military police makes a typical, trite reproach, “it is you and such as you that have let the barbarians on to the sacred soil of the fatherland” (AFTA, 161), all of which sounds truly empty and verbose.

The military police single out officers from the retreating columns and accuse them of deserting their men; some are shot and some taken away. Henry can no longer face the thought of being away from Catherine who is constantly in his thoughts as a solace and retreat, as a haven of peace in this general chaos. When he is stopped at a checkpoint Henry is scared that he will be mistaken for a spy. He escapes by jumping into the Tagliamento River and floating away under the cover of a log of wood. After a tiring and hazardous journey, he reaches Milan, to find that Catherine and her friend Miss Ferguson have gone to Stresa. He follows her there and is reunited, and they both plan to escape from Italy and the war into neutral Switzerland.

Henry’s plunge proves to be a milestone. This “Plunge into the flooded Tagliamento has . . . the significance of a rite. By this ‘baptism’ Frederic is reborn into another world.” (24) At this point, having bidden ‘farewell’ to arms (of war) he goes in search of Catherine’s soothing arms, to whom he must bid his second ‘farewell’ in due course. Carlos Baker has this to say about the farewell theme with reference to Cowley:

Malcolm Cowley saw the title as symbolic of Hemingway’s [own] farewell to a period, an attitude and perhaps to a method also. His earlier books had virtually excluded ideas in favour of emotions. Now there were signs of a new complexity of thought demanding expression in subtler and richer prose. (25)
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

On joining Catherine at Stresa, Henry has “made a separate peace” (*AFTA*, 173) and “tried to forget that war” (*AFTA*, 173). This interweaving of two contrasting themes, love and war, is certainly a fine achievement of Hemingway’s, handled very finely too. However, some critics felt that this weakened the story and reduced its coherence:

The weakness of the love, if it has one, springs from the author being in two minds about his purpose in writing it. He seems to be undecided whether he is writing a description of war as his hero saw it, or the love story of his hero. The heroine is a nurse, or a sort of nurse, a heroic character. The love story is quite as fine as the war story, but a divided aim is bound to have some deleterious influence. In *A Farewell to Arms*, either the military background should have been less, or there should have been more of sexual passion, or the two should have been more cunningly intermingled . . . Alternate layers of war and love are scarcely satisfactory. (26)

Robert Penn Warren, however, rejects this criticism with the argument that:

*A Farewell to Arms* is a love story. It is a compelling story at the merely personal level but it is much more compelling and significant when we see the figures of the lovers silhouetted against the flame streaked darkness of war, of a collapsing world, of ‘nada’. For there is a story behind the love story. That story is the quest for meaning and certitude in a world that seems to offer nothing of the sort. (27)
Abul Wafa Mansoor Ahmad Abbasi

In stylistic terms, we could say that Hemingway ‘foregrounds’ the lovers against the background of war and this creates a stark contrast, which is deliberate and effective on the writer’s part. Moreover, one can atone Henry from any guilt because Hemingway here chooses an entirely different morality for his hero and heroine, first, because life is everything, and afterwards there is only Nada, nothingness; so the will to struggle to fight, to endure and to survive in the face of all odds, is important. Also, war has changed everything, in all spheres of life. Pre-war standards and norms no longer apply.

Throughout the novel Henry’s love for Catherine Barkley develops and evolves in a regular process, along with his contempt and hatred for war. His attitude towards Catherine in this beginning of AFTA was exploitative, “...since he is bed ridden, she must come to him, a practice which symbolizes his role then and later as an acceptor, not a giver, of services.” (28) Henry himself confesses that, “God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with her. I had not wanted to fall in love with anyone. But God knows I had.” (AFTA, 70) Catherine, by contrast, was, from the onset, completely sincere in her love. She was willing to negate her very identity for him – “I want what you want. There is not any me any more. Just what you want” (AFTA, 79); and again, “I’Il love you in the rain, and snow and in the hail and what else is there?” (AFTA, 93). As Suhail says, “The manner in which the intensity of their passions is brought out is wonderfully unambiguous and sharp.”(29)

In Switzerland, at last, both Henry and Catherine feel they can be unreservedly happy together, able to forget the war and await the birth of their child in peace. Their peace is now about to be shattered. Henry rushes Catherine to the hospital when the time of birth comes but complications develop. After twelve hours labor, she is still unable to give birth. The doctor reluctantly decides on a caesarian operation.
Hemmingway’s Depiction of World War I

Henry realizes the intensity of their love during this time of stress and thus, also “learns the true definition of the sentiment of love.” (30) It is almost identical to the definition earlier given to Henry by the priest, “when you love, you wish to do things for, you wish to sacrifice for, you wish to die for.” (AFTA, 57) Though Henry does not really believe in God, he now starts to pray automatically for Catherine’s life. (AFTA, 234).

By this time the baby come out, it is stillborn. Catherine is hemorrhaging very badly. Henry’s prayer is futile and desperately childish in Hemingway’s world, for “No messiah comes to save her.” (31) We are, ultimately, all “biologically trapped” and no matter what, whether in war or peace must die. That is the inevitable end. Henry is left alone, by her side, and “it was like saying goodbye to a statue.” (AFTA, 236) In this lament, so restrained and understated, there lies great sorrow, which “opens like an abyss.” (32)

The novel AFTA is essentially set against the background of World War I. The depiction of the war covers most of it and it impinges into every life and in most of the thoughts and activities of the characters. The accounts of the war as depicted by Hemingway are very realistic being largely based on Hemingway’s own experiences and/or on those of other people close to him during the First World War in Italy. Even the ‘parallel’ action of the Fredric Henry-Catherine Barkley love affair is related to the need to escape the clutches of war, and all its misery, suffering and destruction, in order to make a separate peace, and to find a meaningful existence in the general chaos generated by the war.

At the same time AFTA is also a love story, Hemingway’s romanticizing of a small experience of his own, which now becomes, under the skill of his pen, a universal tale of tragic love under
extremely hard conditions and danger. This aspect of the story, that of love amidst the scenes of war, is no less important and is well fore-grounded. It does not seem a ‘weakness’ at all, as Bennett claimed, but a strength of this classic work lifting it beyond just a war-narrative, to the level of an epic of human emotions, hopes and struggles; it can be said to be comparable in its own way to Tolstoy’s great epic, *War and Peace* (1865-69). This love story also serves a special purpose, that of highlighting or accentuating the importance of love as a force, an “antidote” to the brutality and violence of war; even though the reality of death cannot be escaped but love can turn someone as wild and reckless as Lt. Frederic Henry into a caring lover, an individual who becomes disgusted with war, makes his separate peace and enjoys a brief moment of happiness in the arms of his beloved.

*AFTA* is, therefore, a finer work compared to Hemingway’s earlier writings, in terms of maturity of thought as well as stylistic, technical development and is probably a better representation of the larger concerns of war and love, vis-à-vis his other, later great novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). In *AFTA*, the much larger, more serious conflict of World War I cannot be escaped at any cost. War is always present, in the novel even when the lovers have escaped to Switzerland, its echoes are there. Indeed, the violence of the war complements or heightens the brief, happy love of Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley before tragedy engulfs them. There is a sort of irony in the fact that the lovers are able to escape the (supposedly) larger threat, the more obvious one, to be only stricken down by a small, sudden one. However, that is not entirely unexpected. In Hemingway’s literary world, death is always around the corner, waiting to attack and ‘break’ or ‘kill.’

*AFTA*, is Hemingway’s special war novel and it is also more than
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

that, a story of love amidst the agonies and suffering of war. In a letter to A.E Hotchner Hemingway himself referred to *AFTA* as “. . . my *Romeo and Juliet.*” What did Hemingway imply? Essentially that he was taking Shakespeare as a standard in producing his own comparative story of love amidst strife. (33) Indeed, in terms of both the modern tragedy of love in an ironical atmosphere and in the setting of the story in Italy we can draw many comparisons between Hemingway’s and Shakespeare’s tales. However, *AFTA* has something more to say in the context of modern conflict than *Romeo and Juliet.*

Much of recent criticism on *AFTA* has dealt with addressing some of the deeper or more complex dimensions of the novel. Scott Donaldson, in his introduction to *New Essays on A Farewell to Arms* (1990) posits that such was the impact of this work that “it was difficult to place this new kind of writing . . . *Farewell* violated conventional standards in various ways and roused objections . . . It used the vulgar language of the troops. It depicted an illicit love affair in basically sympathetic terms [and] it presented a disturbingly vivid account of the Italian Army’s collapse in 1917.”(34)

In other words, in *AFTA* Hemingway challenges many of the existing notions and conventions of his time, when some of the traditional standards of the pre-war era still prevailed, in taking up a taboo subject openly and forcefully. Today many of such shocking incidents might not seem shocking at all. In Hemingway’s own time they were major leaps away from a conformist attitude in literature and marked a new style and voice for the public throughout Europe and America. Several writers of that period were also experimenting with new and shocking realism and virtually changing western literature in the bargain. As the title of the novel itself implies, at one level it offers a statement about war; and he has little respect for the false impressions and clichés about patriotism and military glory, which proved to be an illusion in
face of harsh reality. In a significant scene Frederic Henry comments that,

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain . . . so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations . . . there were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. (AFTA, 133)

This is one of the strongest condemnations of militarism in modern literature. Ousby writes:

Hemingway turns in contempt from phony abstractions and this movement always from military virtues describes both the hero’s and books movement away from the world of war to the world of romantic love. Henry is finally sickened by the cruelty and muddle of the fighting . . . his own wound reminds him of the death and he yearns for a more satisfying and less lonely life. He finds that in his romance with Catharine. To begin with he is callous and casual but after the war has sobered him, his attitude grows serious. Love, as he says, is the only way in which
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

man can overcome his loneliness. (35)

We can, like others before us, further compare *AFTA* to another classic novel of World War I, *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque as both novels are accounted to be the best depiction of the experiences of soldiers in the First World War. Remarque, of course, wrote his account from the German perspective. Hemingway, on the contrary, writes from the Allied perspective. Both these novels were published in the same year, 1929. Both caught the public imagination immediately and forcefully through their vivid and horrifying accounts of war. However, in the case of *All Quiet on the Western Front* the novel is set entirely in the trenches. There is hardly any romantic interest, beyond some minor encounters between the soldiers and some prostitutes, only highlighting further the frustration and loneliness of men without the company of normal women or relationships. The scenes of war and fighting, the condition of the military hospitals, the diseases and suffering, the obscenity and brutality of the troops in life or death conditions are as powerfully depicted as in *AFTA*. Perhaps the two major factors differentiating between these novels are (a) Hemingway’s use of much lighter and effective language and (b) more importantly, the love dimension. It is in fact the Frederic Henry-Catherine Barkley relationship with all its implications that ultimately makes *AFTA* the more complex and richer work.

Two other works of English literature, which one would like to briefly mention here are Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and T.S.Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* (1922). The reason is that both these works deal with the effect of World War I and its aftermath in very distinctive ways. In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf uses a stream of consciousness style and focuses on the lives of the Ramsay family and those of some of their friends in order to indirectly show
how the Great War impacted ordinary lives. Within her analysis even the moods, seasons and landscapes undergo a drastic change after the war. An old world, an old society within its own standards, values and traditions and with a genteel, leisurely attitude towards life, is forever altered and destroyed. Places and times, which once had meaning and relevance, are abandoned. The entire world is changed, families are broken and left bereft, minds are affected and only memories of older times now remain like yellow leaves in autumn or decaying photographs in an old album. Woolf, in her own way, expresses the post World War I condition of not only England but all of Europe, and we get the feeling that old yellow Europe is now dead and its civilization cannot be revived and made green. In *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot concentrates on the spiritual crisis emerging in post World War I Europe as a result of the breakdown and collapse of the traditional values of Western civilization. For Eliot all the signs – the wild excess, decadence, disbelief, immorality – are symbolic of the sterility, and death of the old world and all that it represented. For Eliot the only solution to the condition of civilization lies in returning into the shade of religious belief and practice.

Of course, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waste Land* cannot be properly compared to *AFTA*. However, *AFTA* in both its description of the hopelessness of soldiers in existential nightmares and in its doomed and momentary love affair points the way towards the kind of society and people that are depicted by both Woolf and Eliot. In the case of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, it would be very interesting to trace out the common influence that the poet and scholar Ezra Pound exerted on shaping some of the ideas of both T.S.Eliot and Ernest Hemingway. Indeed, according to Hotchner, Pound’s influence also extended to another famous American writer James Joyce. Pound developed certain very fixed ideas about the post-war condition which he symbolically linked to the mythological readings into works such as
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

Fraser’s *The Golden Bough*, whereby certain images of sterility between the classical Waste Land and the modern Waste Land could be effectively compared. (36) Hotchner further goes on to say, quoting a conversation with Ernest Hemingway, that:

> This was a curious and exiting revelation, explaining in some way as he did, some of the processes which reappear as symbols in *A Farewell To Arms*, ... which he had imbibed from his association with Pound ... some of which association were also refined in to different form, by Eliot and Joyce. (37)

Certainly Hemingway used some of symbols and images differently from either T.S. Eliot or James Joyce. For example, the image of draught combines with that of a perilous rain in contrast to Eliot’s symbolism. In the case of Eliot the Waste Land is sterile and the rain of faith and belief can enliven it. In Hemingway’s view, the rain brings no relief. Indeed, torrential rain is as bad if not worse than drought. Hemingway does not posses the faith that offered hope or solutions to Eliot. His only hope and belief is in the human ability to endure, to show “grace under pressure.”

All in all, if we take *AFTA* as a work of art, we can say that in it Hemingway portrays what is probably the best and most realistic account of World War I in modern fiction and which has comparative resonance with other works of fiction and poetry at that time. Further, he gave a special dimension to this timeless classic by showing the importance of love as a human emotion that, to some extent, might be considered a temporary escape or ‘antidote’ to the brutality of war. This love enables Frederic Henry to become a stronger and better person even out of the tragedy of Catherine’s death, because he has learnt the value of courage, selflessness and fortitude in the face of
Abul Wafa Mansoor Ahmad Abbasi

the inevitable biological trap. Through Catherine’s example Frederic Henry also grows and develops from a reckless young man, into a mature ‘code hero.’ This evolution is at the very center of what Hemingway has tried to pass on to us in this novel.

In a sense, Hemingway’s depiction of war in AFTA as well as other works is emblematical. In this respect we can agree with Walsh that, “Only a handful of American novelists, perhaps John Dos Passos, James Jones, and Norman Mailer, can rival the scope of Ernest Hemingway’s fictional study of war.”(38) It would not be wrong to say that along with the above-mentioned American writers Hemingway has taken war generally in symbolic mode. Among human experiences the practical experience of war has always been a very vivid one, historically from the time of Homer’s Iliad down to present times. Writers have chosen to write about war and to give harrowing accounts of it. In the 20th century the experiences of World War I and World War II proven to be especially fertile in providing material for literature and arts, highlighting the savage aspects of warlike conflict.

In this perspective, Hemingway’s emblematical or symbolic use of the various tragedies that war brings upon people is especially noteworthy. He does not just portray war as savage or brutal but as something even more – in fact, an experience that alters people and societies in many complex ways. One might venture to say that Hemingway takes his depiction of war (especially in AFTA) beyond the confines of literary narrative form, into the dimension of social reality. While, of course, he is not a social critic in the conventional sense, his war writings including AFTA do present a great deal of thought provoking material about the reality of war shorn of its false glamour and glory. The depiction of the lives of men in hard situations is one of the basic tenets of Hemingway’s art and in AFTA he combines this with unique and sensitive handling of battle on the Italian front.
Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I

It would be pertinent to say that Hemingway underwent special kinds of personal experiences in Italy during World War I. These stimuli combined in Hemingway’s creative imagination to form the basis of a wonderful story of love and war, to eventually become one of the most memorable novels ever written in that setting or at that time. As a writer and as an artist, Hemingway remained intensely committed to maintaining creative integrity or honesty, so he portrayed the war as realistically as possible and he also similarly depicted an ‘honest’ love under war conditions, without all the falsity and sentimental hypocrisy that writers usually depict when writing about such a theme. Very simply, *AFTA* is Hemingway’s war novel as well as his *Romeo and Juliet*, that is, his unique interpretation of the universal themes of love and war.

**End Notes**


4. Ibid, 1.


7. The Frankfurt School exerted a huge influence opened in the early 1920s and closed by the Nazis in 1934. It sheltered a circle of intellectuals in the field of philosophy, psychology and sociology. Figures such as Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) discussed the effects of modern science and technology and their relationship with human affairs, ibid, 953-954.

8. The names of some of the major artists of this period include Marc Chagall (1899-1985), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Amadeo Modigliani (1884-1920), Paul Klee (1879-1940) and Salvador Dali (1904-1989).


Hemingway’s Depiction of World War I


22. Bennett, in Meyers, 132.


26. Bennett, in Meyers, 132.

27. Warren, in Bloom, 54.

Abul Wafa Mansoor Ahmad Abbasi


31. Ibid, 32.

32. Mann, in Meyers, 147.

33. Hotchner, Papa Hemingway, 49.


35. Ibid, 239.

36. Hotchner, Papa Hemingway, 58.

37. Ibid, 58.

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