

# The Magnitude of Heroism in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Other Novels

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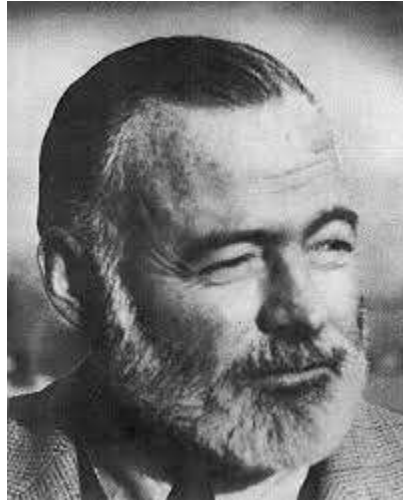
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Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)  
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## Abstract

This paper analyzes heroism as central theme in Hemingway's work. Most of his novels are primarily studies of death or simply researches regarding the lost generation. They are essentially the portrayal of a hero, the man who through the force of some extraordinary qualities sets the standards for those around him. Hemingway has always kept four subjects in his mind when writing. These four subjects which have always fascinated Hemingway are fishing, hunting, bullfighting and war, in which all have shown some type of international aspects, but most of Hemingway's novels are studies of death. They are portrayals of a hero, but a hero who struggles and perceives of death progressing on the path of heroism.

**Keywords:** Al Valore Militare, Heroism, Luck, Struggle, Tragedy.

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## Hero and Death

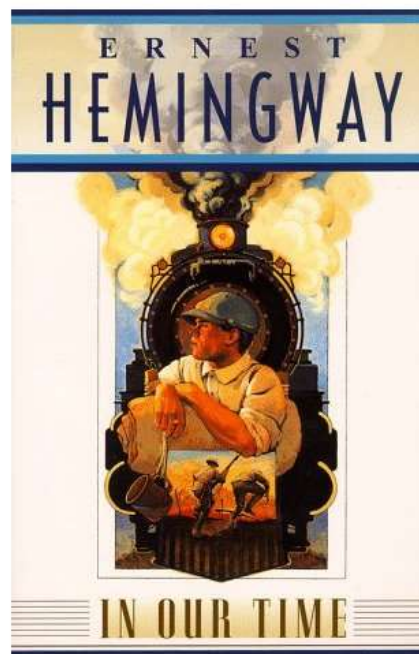
What truly is Hemingway's writing, especially in the portrayal of a hero with the notion of death? To be a hero is to dare more than other men; to expose oneself to greater dangers and therefore, to be more greatly vulnerable to the risk of the possibilities of death and defeat, (Connolly, p.226).

Hemingway said "My favorite characters are men who deal with death and accept its risk". To understand why Hemingway lets his novels revolve around the concept of death, one must look at his life and observe how the meaning of death affected Hemingway himself.

## Parents of Hemingway

In 1928 Hemingway's father Edmonds Hemingway committed suicide. It is said that he had much bad luck and not all of it his own making. Many thought that Hemingway's next theme would actually be fear. Throughout Hemingway's childhood he remained unhappy. He was only compatible on the surface toward his parents. His mother nudged him towards music, preferably church music. His father put a fishing rod in his hand at the age of three and a rifle at ten.

## Struggle with Parents



Hemingway's first novel shows Hemingway's own struggle with his parents through the eyes of Nick Adams. For example, in one of Hemingway's short stories, *In Our Time*, it reads: "Your mother wants you to come and to see her, the doctor said. I want to go with you, Nick said .....I know where there's a black squirrel. All right, said his father. Let's go there. "The last lines from the story, *The Doctor and the Doctor's wife*" from *In Our Time* show how Hemingway's struggling relationship with both parents was a struggle for him to choose between his mother with music, or his father with fishing and hunting", (Baker, p.29).

### **Nick Adams – Representing Hemingway**

In the novel, *In Our Time*, Hemingway creates the character of Nick Adams in order to depict himself. Nick's youth is wild and free, just as Hemingway himself lived and led a life of a vagrant, coming face to face with violence and evil on the road. Nick Adams spends his summers in Michigan among the Native Americans, where he sees life in the raw.

Just as Nick sees life in the raw so too does Hemingway. Ernest Hemingway, loving neither his family nor school ran away twice from home. He led a life of a vagrant; he worked on farms, washed dishes in restaurants, and hopped on freight trains. Nick who is in fact the reflection of Hemingway witnesses a doctor-father performs a caesarean operation with a jack knife.

Nick meets an Indian girl with brown legs, flat belly and hard little breasts who initiates him sexually at a very young age. Nick also cuts a freshly caught trout into pieces and uses the chunks as bait to catch more trout. He is living in a savage world of sacrificed animals. These are the years of apprenticeship for a boy who wants to be strong, yet has weaknesses, which is specifically an equivocal attitude towards his father. Nick who is a portrayal of Hemingway is grateful to the doctor for the rifle and hunting lessons, but he resents his father's weaknesses towards his mother and his conventional ideas about sex, (Waldmeir, p.66).

### **Hard Style to Tell Hard Stories**

Hemingway in his writing uses a particularly hard style to tell hard stories. He depicts characters in his stories such a bloodied prize fighters, hired killers, disemboweled bull fighters, crippled soldiers, hunters of wild animals and a deep sea fisherman. Hemingway portrayed his characters as heroes, but they all in some way or the other, dealt with the perception of death. Hemingway himself said, "My favourite characters are men who deal with death and accept its risks". To understand why Hemingway wrote about death in his writing, one must try to understand how the events in Hemingway's life formed his style and temperament which gave birth to this obsession with death.

### **A Vagrant on the American Road**

Because Hemingway's relationship with his parents was not good, it caused him to run away from home twice. Hemingway then became a vagrant on the American road. After living as a vagrant for a couple of years, in 1917 when the USA entered World War I, Hemingway tried to enlist. But he was rejected because of a bad eye. But one would wonder why Hemingway would enlist and put himself in harm's way in the war. Many Americans would have prayed that they would not get themselves drafted into the war. And yet even though Hemingway was not drafted, he voluntarily enlisted and was lucky they did not accept him because of a bad eye. But that did not stop Hemingway from going to Europe during World War I. He decided to volunteer as an ambulance driver with the American Red Cross. He basically put himself into bloody battles where he could have gotten himself killed.

### **Got Himself Severely Injured – Dealing with Death**

Hemingway managed to get himself severely injured for which the Italians honored him with the Italian *Al Valore Militaire* medal. Over a hundred steel fragments were taken out his leg. When his leg was almost blown off, Hemingway said he died then.

It almost appears as if Hemingway wrote about characters that in some way or another deal with death, because Hemingway himself wanted to die, (Baldwin, p.657). After the war was over Hemingway returned to Key West, Florida. There he wrote several other books which included, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Death in the Afternoon* and *Green Hills of Africa*. But it seems like Hemingway felt dissatisfied with himself.

### **Hunting in Africa, Trip to China, Settling Down in Cuba**

In Africa he hunted with very rich people who were dull, drank too much and played too much backgammon. Hemingway himself had drunk too much. He later became depressed primarily because of his two failed marriages. But in 1940 at Cheyenne, Wyoming, he remarried writer Martha Gellhorn. Together they took a trip to China and then settled in Cuba. After a while, some signs of suicide were becoming apparent. In 1942 Hemingway offered his yacht pilot to the United States Navy, in which he volunteered to serve as a one man suicide squadron. Hemingway wanted to cruise by himself to attract enemy submarines, and then, when one of them stopped him he would blow up the submarine and himself. The Navy refused to allow him to do that.

### **Signs of Suicide and Death**

Hemingway again showed signs of suicide and death. Clearly, volunteering his own self to attract enemy submarines, and to sacrifice his own life just to do the U.S. Navy a favor, shows that Hemingway was begging to die. Hemingway, in his writing about death, resorts to the use of vast symbols rather than metaphors. As Baker says, "A world is not wholly without values when it recognizes aesthetic values" (p.42). The writer, like the hunter and the soldier, respects his code

and by his word-magic, succeeds not in capturing time which to Hemingway would mean recapturing horror, but in killing it.

Hemingway also said, “All stories, if continued far enough, end in death and he is not a true storyteller who would keep that from you”. Hemingway in most of his writings dealt with the theme of heroism, but most importantly, death. Death is the recurrent theme in many of his novels, in which the fear of it terrorizes Hemingway, until at last he is forced into it himself by committing suicide. The perception of death is eminent in many of his novels along with his own biographical background. Such novels as, *Death in the Afternoon* is a climax of death, which moves on to *A Farewell to Arms*. Other novels also focus on death: Death also by gangs in *The Killers*, and the man who is dying of gangrene in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, and of the fear of death in *Hills like White Elephants*, (Baker, p.76).



### Same Type of Simple Literary Style

Hemingway’s recurrent theme throughout most of his novels is death. But, mostly in all of his novels he uses the same type of simple literary style. Hemingway said, “Great American writers of the past are colonial writers, that is, English writers who happened to have been born in America. I recognize Edgar Allan Poe’s skills, but he is dead. I dislike the rhetoric in Melville; he cannot read Thoreau. As for Emerson, Hawthorne, Whittier, and company, they were English colonials, who do not know that a new classic does not bear any resemblances to classics that have preceded it”.

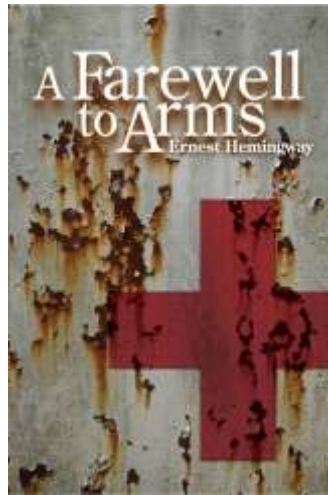
### Questioning Hemingway’s Point of View

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This basically sums up the type of writer that Hemingway was. Some critics question Hemingway's point of view: "I question this point of view. Even though a new classic may not imitate the older ones, it is indebted to them. Hemingway himself is the best proof of that. He absorbed the simplicity of rhythm, syntax and vocabulary which constituted Mark Twain's freshness" (Baker, p.47-51).



### **Frederic Henry – the Hero**

Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver and a lieutenant in the Italian army is the narrator and protagonist of the novel. The focus of the novel revolves around his love for Catherine Barkley as well as his steady disillusionment with the war, Henry is characterized initially by a sort of detachment from life – through well-disciplined and friendly, he feels as if he has nothing to do with the war. These feelings of detachment are pushed away when Henry falls in love with Catherine and begins to realize the hostile nature of the world. In this way, Henry serves the function of a character who becomes initiated into Hemingway's philosophy of an indifferent universe and man's struggle against it.

Frederic Henry is a young American studying in Italy when World War I breaks out. He volunteers as an army ambulance driver. He is commissioned and sent to the northern mountains where Italy is fighting Austria. In the fall of 1916, the snows come early and the Italians put off any more attacks until next year. Henry is given leave. The chaplain urges him to visit his family who live in the country, but Henry goes to Rome and Naples, where he drinks and chases women. He returns from leave dissatisfied and guilty over squandering his time and money.

Henry learns from his roommate, Rinaldi, that British nurses are now stationed in the area hospital and that Rinaldi has his eye on one, an English woman named Catherine Barkley. Rinaldi drags Henry along to visit the nurses.

Catherine and Henry are instantly attracted to each other. Rinaldi is mildly put out, but he recovers. When not driving an ambulance, Henry calls on Catherine. He considers their

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relationship a wartime flirtation, a little better than making love to one of the girls at the Villa Rossa, the officers' brothel, but hardly anything more permanent. He does, however admit to himself that he felt 'lonely and hollow', one time when he got drunk, and missed seeing her.

Catherine's attitude is more complex. She seems to want affection, but is vulnerable, because the previous year an English boy she had been engaged to was "blown all to bits" in France. She encourages Henry and just before he goes to the front she gives him a St. Anthony medal for protection.

At the front, the Italian offensive begins. Henry and four drivers take shelter in a dug out that comes under Austrian bombardment. A canister shell hits, and Henry's legs are severely hurt. He tried to help a stricken driver only to have the man die before the bleeding could be stopped. The other drivers less severely wounded, carry Henry from the dugout. He is taken to an aid station and then to an army hospital. Rinaldi and the chaplain visit him. He hears the good news that he will be moved to an American hospital in Milan and that Catherine has been transferred there.

In Milan Henry convalesces. And when Catherine visits him, he realizes the minute she walks into the room that he loves her. She volunteers for night duty so that they can spend their nights together. Henry's surgery is a success, and before long they can go out to restaurants, take carriage rides, and go to horse races. Henry wants to marry her, but Catherine refuses. "How could we be any more married?" She asks. His recovery almost completes, Henry plans convalescent leave with Catherine. Then one night Catherine tells him she is pregnant. The next day he wakes up sick and is diagnosed as having jaundice. His nurse assumes that he is brought it on himself by drinking too much in order to avoid front- line duty, and she reports him. His leave is denied and he is ordered to report to the front as soon as he is well enough.

Frederic Henry returns to war. By now things are going badly for Italy. What begins as an orderly withdrawal soon becomes chaos. Henry drives his ambulances away from the advancing Germans until the road clogs. Deciding to circle around the stalled column, he cuts out of line and takes a side road. The ambulance gets stuck in the mud. He and the other drivers, who have been transporting troops, abandon the vehicle and walk to safety. Henry and the remaining men rejoin the main column. Finally, at a bridge across the swollen Tagliamento River the retreat slows. On the other side of the bridge a group of Carabinieri (Italian MPs) are arresting high-ranking officers, giving them summary trials and shooting them for desertion. Henry escapes death and flees.

Back at the hospital he finds out that Catherine is on leave in Stresa, a lakeside town near the Swiss border. Having decided to desert, Henry borrows civilian clothes and goes to Stresa and meets Catherine. The bartender in their hotel warns him that he is to be arrested and offers a boat so that they can escape across the lake to natural Switzerland. Catherine has a long and difficult labour. Her doctor resorts to anaesthesia; after she suffers for hours he decides on a

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caesarean. The baby is delivered dead. Henry visits Catherine. Catherine has had “one hemorrhage after another”,(p.235), and there is no hope. He watches her die. He tries to say good bye to the dead body but realizes it’s like talking to a statue. He leaves and walks back to the hotel in the rain.

### **The Major Motifs of Heroism in *A Farewell To Arms***

The novel dramatizes the war struggles using the traditional screen narratives devices of a love story and individual heroism. Hemingway discards romantic values of heroism and goes after spiritual love instead. He shows a deep concern for the natural stages of human development such as birth, marriage and death. In the opening chapter, war and death are juxtaposed against nature and life. There are trees but they are coated in dust and the leaves fall of early because of it. The thick, green leaves not found on the trees are used by the troops to conceal guns in the trucks. The clear and swift – moving river water - is juxtaposed against images of rain and mud as well as slow-moving troops. The image of fertility is compared to soldiers carrying artillery in front of their bellies. The situation here is bleak.

The beginning chapter sets up a tired mood, with troops trudging incessantly through the mud. It is also soured by irony “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”, (p.8). The description of a ‘permanent rain’ is intended to create a feeling of helplessness. The 'only' in the second sentence conveys a sense of the war’s tragedy. The weariness of the war is mirrored by the troops themselves.

The narrator begins the second chapter with the comment that “the next year there were many victories”,(p.8). That is all. It is blunt and detached as if the victories no long matter and nobody knows what they are fighting for. Later a shell explodes in front of Henry and instead of reacting emotionally , he simply describes the smell of the explosion : one of the “blasted clay and stone and freshly shattered flint”. The narrator of the story and the protagonist are two different people, as can be seen in the soliloquy on pages 13 and 14.

### **An Older Henry – The Narrator of the Story**

The protagonist is Henry Frederick during the events narrated in the book, but the narrator is clearly an older Henry, the one speaking after the events. The soliloquy itself revolves around an ‘it’ that separates the narrator from the Protagonist: it is the something which “I did not know then although I learned it later”. It is something the priest had always known and which Henry was always able to forget. What Henry refers to is still debated among scholars, but the most prominent opinion seems to be that the ‘it’ refers to a questioning of ‘faith’. The argument is that over the course of the novel Henry has developed a tragic vision of sorts – a knowledge



that the world is different (there is no good) and that life is ultimately meaningless. A few scholars have argued that and that life is 'it'.

### **Is Death Not Final?**

Some say it is the opposite – Henry has come to the realization that he has a soul and that death is not final. The interpretation of the novel presented here will favor the former which is more consistent with the trends that run through Hemingway's other novels. Many things can be discovered about Catherine in her first conversation with Henry. She tells that she had a fiancée she was engaged to for eight years, at which point he went into the war and died: "he was killed and that was the end of it." Henry's "I don't know" which follows her tale, expresses his uncertainty regarding the existence of an afterlife.

In contrast, Catherine is sure there is none: "That's the end of it," she assures him. Catherine expresses regret that she didn't marry him because she was afraid of the consequences, but now realizes the meaninglessness of the consequences. Life here does what it wishes to do, and here living is the struggle against circumstances. The motifs of heroism are resonant in almost all the characters of the novel, however, with a significant difference. The viewpoints differ from one character to the next. The hero speaks for the majority, "All thinking men are atheists", (p.10). Hemingway was concerned primarily with the daily life of ordinary people. These qualities give his novels a gritty, almost documentary look.

### **A Moving Expression of Heroism**

We find in *A Farewell to Arms* a moving expression of the heroism, idealism, and tragedy of war. In addition to the battle scenes, in *A farewell to Arms* tells about life within the warring factions. It describes the bleak features of war and the emotional farewell between Henry and his Catherine. Henry is a great soldier. But he basically represents the family man who is called on to defend his country and, in so doing, loses his wife. His figures convey a sense of grandeur and power, and arouse strong emotions in many spectators, in size, strength, and emotional intensity; these figures go beyond real people.

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