

Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms: Summary & Analysis

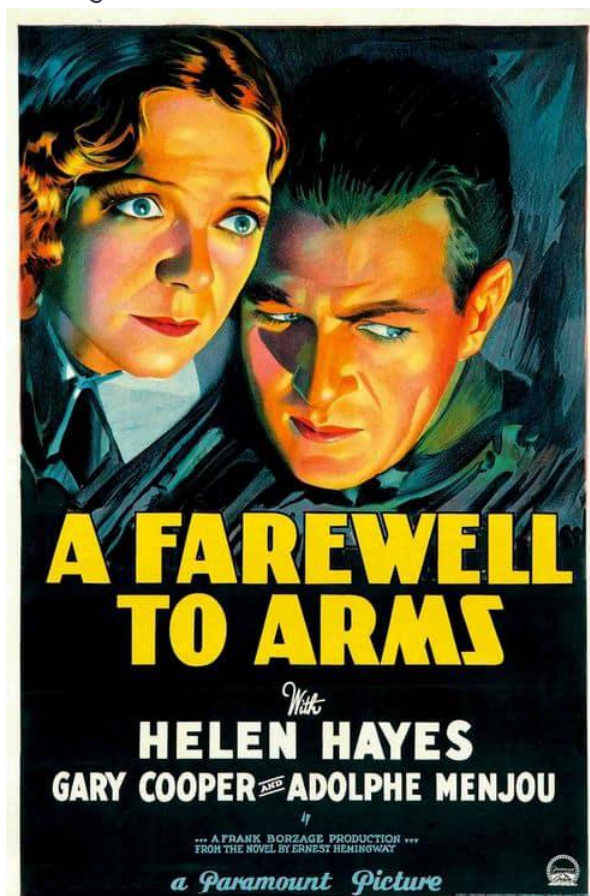
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A Farewell to Arms, by Ernest Hemingway, is a typical love story. A Romeo and his Juliet placed against the odds. In this novel, Romeo is Frederick Henry and Juliet is Catherine Barkley. Their love affair must survive the obstacles of World War I. The background of war-torn Italy adds to the tragedy of the love story. The war affects the emotions and values of each character. The love between Catherine and Frederick must outlast long separations, life-threatening war-time situations, and the uncertainty of each others' whereabouts or condition. This novel is a beautiful love story of two people who need each other in a period of upheaval. Frederick Henry is an American who serves as a lieutenant in the Italian army to a group of ambulance drivers. Hemingway portrays Frederick as a lost man searching for order and value in his life. Frederick disagrees with the war he is fighting. It is too chaotic and immoral for him to rationalize its cause. He fights anyway, because the army puts some form of discipline in his life. At the start of the novel, Frederick drinks and travels from one house of prostitution to another and yet he is discontent because his life is very unsettled. He befriends a priest because he admires the fact that the priest lives his life by a set of values that give him an orderly lifestyle. Further into the novel, Frederick becomes involved with Catherine Barkley. He slowly falls in love with her and, in his love for her, he finds commitment. Their relationship brings some order and value to his life. Compared to this new

form of order in his life, Frederick sees the losing Italian army as total chaos and disorder where he had previously seen discipline and control. He can no longer remain a part of something that is so disorderly and so, he deserts the Italian army.

Frederick's desertion from the Italian army is the turning point of the novel. This is the significance of the title, A Farewell to



Arms. When Frederick puts aside his involvement in the war, he realizes that Catherine is the order and value in his life and that he does not need anything else to give meaning to his life. At the conclusion of this novel, Frederick realizes that he cannot base his life on another person or thing because, ultimately, they will leave or disappoint him. He realizes that the order and values necessary to face the world must come from within himself. Catherine Barkley is an English volunteer nurse who serves in Italy. She is considered very experienced when it comes to love and loss since she has already been confronted with the death of a loved one when her fiancé was killed earlier in the war. The reader is not as well

acquainted with Catherine's inner thoughts and feelings as we are with those of Frederick. The story is told through Frederick's eyes and the reader only meets Catherine through the dialogue between her and Frederick or through his personal interpretations of her actions. Catherine already possesses the knowledge that her own life cannot be dependent on another. She learned this lesson through the death of her fiancé. Her love for Frederick is what her life revolves around, yet she knows not to rely on him to be the order in her life. Had she been dependent on Frederick for the order in her life, she would not have been able to allow him to participate in the war for fear of losing her own stability with his death. The theme that Hemingway emphasizes throughout the novel is the search for order in a chaotic world. Hemingway conveys this through Frederick's own personal search during the chaos of World War I.

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Catherine has found strength within herself to lead her through life. This is what Frederick must come to realize. Through his involvement with Catherine, Frederick slowly finds his own inner strength. Frederick's affair with Catherine prompts him to leave his wild life of prostitutes and drink. He becomes aware of an element of stability in their affair and realizes that the war that he was involved in was too chaotic, so he deserts the army. He and Catherine make a life for themselves totally isolated from everything and everyone else. Frederick believes that his life is now completely in order and that his values are in perspective, yet he still seems discontented. He continuously has to convince himself that he has "a fine life." He has not yet reached Catherine's level that enables her to be perfectly happy in their love and yet not dependent on it for all comfort and support. Frederick still has to find that within himself. Until the conclusion of the novel, Frederick still

relies on Catherine as the source of order in his life. With the end of their affair when Catherine dies giving birth to their stillborn love-child, Frederick realizes that he cannot depend on any one person, such as Catherine, or any thing, such as religion, war, or frivolity, for order and discipline. Hemingway describes Frederick's enlightenment best in the final paragraph of the novel when Frederick sees Catherine's corpse for the first and last time. Frederick's reaction was that "it was like saying good-bye to a statue." Frederick realizes that Catherine was only a symbol of the order and strength in his life. Strength to face life must come from within him and only he will be able to get himself through his own life. He will have to learn to depend on himself.

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Frederick realizes this and is able to get on with his life on his own. "After a while [he] went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain." He did not mourn or feel like his own life had ended with her death, rather he was able to continue on with his new found inner strength and face his world alone. This novel succeeds in getting Hemingway's message across. Frederick's realization causes the reader to reflect on his/her own life and on what institutions they depend on in their own lives.: