

# An Analysis of Whether Henry in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is a Hero or Not

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**Abstract**—Hemingway, one of the greatest American novelists in the 20th Century, is known for the depiction of tough guys. But in his *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), he portrays the main character, Frederic Henry as a deserter. Henry dreams of being a hero, but he doesn't become one. In this essay, we will analyze the question that whether Henry is a hero or not from three perspectives. First, as a commander, he is not a traditional American hero, as he has failed in his mission and lost the lives of his soldier due to his arbitrary command. Second, he refuses to think and does not use his conscience to make moral decisions, so he cannot be called a philosophical hero. Last, his inability to confront the trauma of war, his avoidance of the past and reality, and his apparent calmness to preserve his dignity as a man, make him not a Hemingwayan code hero.

**Keywords**—*A Farewell to Arms*, traditional American hero, philosophical hero, code hero

## I. INTRODUCTION

*A Farewell to Arms* tells the story of Frederic Henry, a young American who volunteers to join in the army in northern Italy during the late First World War. Wounded by a shell on one of his missions, Henry is nursed in a Milan hospital by a British nurse, Catherine, and the two fall in love. After recovering from his injuries, Henry returns to the front line and, after witnessing the brutalities of war, he leaves his unit and joins Catherine to escape to Switzerland, where she dies in childbirth.

*A Farewell to Arms* is particularly notable for its autobiographical elements [1]. And the narrator, Henry, is a different kind of main character. He is a failed commander; he is not a superb marksman and he is even a deserter from the war. But in the face of the pain of life and the death of his lover, Catherine, he seems to show a resilience. The sense of contradiction that runs throughout the novel makes audience constantly ponder the question, whether Henry is a hero or not. Saul Bellow notes that Hemingway had a strong desire to portray a tough guy. Critics mostly refer to the main characters in Hemingway's novels as code heroes. And the heroes in American war-set novels fall into two main categories, the traditional heroes of American society, and the philosophical heroes [2]. So, to answer the question we mentioned before, we can analyze whether Henry is a traditional American hero, a philosophical hero, a Hemingwayan code hero or not.

In the narrative of American history, significant importance has been attributed to resilience and the valorous traits of triumphing over adversaries. The revered figures extolled in American society are expected to possess the courage, sagacity, and prowess to rescue the vulnerable from perilous situations [3, 4]. Henry is deeply influenced by

American culture's worship of heroes and is obsessed with personal heroism. At the very beginning, he has romantic dreams of being a hero. On three separate occasions in the novel, he is asked why he joined the army. On the first two occasions, he tries to brush the question off by saying he doesn't know or changing the subject. On the third occasion, when pressed by a hotel attendant, Henry finally replies, "I don't know. I was a fool then" [5]. When he answers this, he is in effect admitting that he has had heroic dreams of being able to fight to the death on the battlefield, otherwise he would not have been so excited as to enlist in the Italian army before the United States officially declared war on Germany. However, in the retreat, Henry is not a competent commander and fails to display the traditional heroic qualities. His task is to lead three ambulances to a safe place. Due to Henry's arbitrary decisions and terrible judgement, a wrong road is chosen, causing the ambulances to get stuck in the mud. Henry asks two sergeants to help him cut some branches to get the ambulance out of the mud. But "the two sergeants took a look at it and checked the wheels carefully. Then, without a word, they left" [5]. Clearly, they have made an accurate judgement from experience that it would be difficult to get the ambulance out of the mud, and Henry is still trying in vain. Almost irritated after several orders fail, Henry shoots the one who is talking the most but missed. When another attempt fails and all three ambulances end up trapped in the mud, Henry finally realizes mistake. Eventually they have to abandon the ambulances and head towards Udine on foot. But again, due to his poor judgement, Henry and his soldiers' back road is cut off by the Germans and the group is left in a desperate situation. He then decides to take a shortcut around to the south of the city to try to keep his men safe. During the transfer, Henry's soldier, Private Elmo, is killed by a bullet.

As a commander, Henry often resorts to arbitrary decisions, leading to failures in safely navigating his men through dangerous situations. His leadership lacks the clarity and strategic acumen necessary to ensure the well-being of his troops. Additionally, as a soldier, Henry's marksmanship skills leave much to be desired. He struggles to demonstrate the precision and accuracy expected of a skilled marksman on the battlefield.

Furthermore, Henry's bravery pales in comparison to that of the Italian soldiers who bravely refuse to engage in combat, standing firm in their convictions despite potential consequences. Moreover, Henry's actions lack the sensibility exhibited by soldiers who, in the heat of battle, make tough decisions such as firing upon their own comrades, as seen in instances where Elmo is shot or Henry himself is captured.

In light of these shortcomings, it becomes apparent that Henry falls short of embodying the qualities traditionally associated with an American hero. His inadequacies as a leader and soldier undermine his ability to inspire admiration or serve as a model of heroism.

## II. PHILOSOPHICAL HERO

There is another definition of a hero in American culture, which could be called a “philosophical hero” one who recognizes the inadequacies of the real world and has the courage to rebel against them. Plato mentions a famous parable of the cave in the *Ideal State*. A man who has been living in a cave is freed from his chains and comes into the sunlight, realizing that he has been living in a deception before. He resolutely goes back to tell others the truth he has learned, but is not understood. And he is put to death. These brave men were called philosophical heroes by Henry David Thoreau. From what we can see that philosophical heroes are brave enough to question authority, promote individuality, and celebrate spirituality [6]. Many of the soldiers in American war novels who choose to flee the battlefield go through a process of not thinking and losing their personal moral judgement, to trying to think about their personal actions, facing up to their conscience and their moral responsibilities. However, in *A Farewell to Arms*, Henry does not reach such heights. Like many others, he refuses to think and face to reality.

Prior to sustaining his injury, Henry appears indifferent to the gravity of his duty, showing little motivation beyond a desire for leisure. He exhibits a lack of contemplation regarding the possibility of death or any inclination to abandon the war effort:

Before he got injured, Henry just wants to laze by in his duty. He never actually thinks about death or quitting the war:

“Well, I knew I would not be killed. Not in this war. It did not have anything to do with me. It seemed no more dangerous to me myself than war in the movies. I wished to God it was over though. Maybe it would finish this summer” [5].

It can be seen that Henry at this time is naive. He does not know the terrible consequences of war or what it has brought to people, nor does he want to think about them. When his wounds heal, Henry returns to his post, but only to carry out his duties mechanically. When he is ordered to retreat, he is puzzled but says, “Since you told me to go, I’ll go” [5]. Henry has the same attitude to war and life before he flees the battlefield: “I felt so depressed that I never thought about it, never.” After Henry loses faith in the war, although he felt that everything was futile and empty, he does not actively think about his responsibilities. After his escape, Henry cut off the star from his uniform and says:

“Anger was washed away in the river along with any obligation. Although that ceased when the carabinieri put his hands on my collar. I would like to have had the uniform off although I did not care much about the outward forms. 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 and I wished this bloody train would get to Mestre and I would eat and stop thinking. I would have to stop” [5].

For Henry, all he wants from the war is not to pursue the truth and assume moral responsibility, but to show his valor through war and become a hero admired by all. When this dream cannot realize and his life is threatened, he chooses to retreat. This can also be seen in Henry’s attitude towards Etorre. Like Henry, Etorre has been wounded in this war. Etorre even shows his wounds to his friends. He describes his wounds in detail and doesn’t seem to care about what the wounds might bring to his life. To him, the wounds are like undecorated medals that will show others his achievement and bravery in the war. Through his description of his killing experience and his wounds, the cruelty and loss of humanity in him is obvious. Etorre has become something like a “killing machine” that sees killing his daily work and death his achievement. Catherine despises him very much for his cruelty and pride. She accurately recognizes what he really is: “an incomplete human being who has been turned into a monster by war and killing.” Henry on the other hand, doesn’t share her averseness. He sees Etorre as some kind of war hero. Because of his job, he is mostly away from the real actions of fighting and he has never killed anyone all these years. So in his eyes, Etorre’s actions seem like a very honorable part of war. Henry flees from the war. And if he has tried to face his moral responsibility, he could have been called a philosophical hero. However, as Henry emerges from the river and climbs onto a train, he becomes too hungry and his thought starts to wonder. His mental activity is as follows:

“You lost a few cars and a few people, just like a shop inspector who lost some of that department’s goods in a fire without insurance. You are now gone and no longer have any responsibility or liability. If you shoot the inspector after a fire then of course the inspector won’t go back when the shop reopens. They might go back to another job, as long as there is another job and the police don’t catch him” [5].

Henry employs a metaphorical justification for his desertion, underlining that after sustaining a minor wound in the line of duty, he no longer feels morally bound to serve in the army. His comparison of the soldiers under his command to commodities in a shop hints at a disturbing detachment from the humanity of individuals like the deceased Elmo. While ensuring their safe conveyance to their destination, akin to delivering three ambulances unscathed, is perceived by Henry as merely fulfilling a task, he appears devoid of empathy for their experiences, thoughts, and emotions. It becomes evident that Henry’s decision to flee the war lacks noble intentions such as defending truth with conscience, promoting justice, or challenging corrupt authority. Instead, resembling a shop inspector evading responsibility or undue harm, he absconds solely to evade potential repercussions or unjust punishment. Thus, while Henry’s actions may be rationalized through metaphor, they ultimately reveal a moral void and a failure to engage with deeper ethical considerations.

In this sense, Henry is far from being a “philosophical hero” who dares to defy decadent authority and take personal

moral responsibility.

### III. HEMINGWAYAN CODE HERO

Hemingway is a writer obsessed with courage, with any activity that demonstrated manhood. He fought in two world wars, hunted lions in Africa and caught big marlin in Cuba. He shows his courage at all times in his whole life and likes to be called as "Papa Hemingway". And even his death is legendary. When he felt his creativity waning, he shot himself, leaving a perfect "tough guy" behind him.

Hemingwayan code hero can always be uncompromising, even in the face of difficulties and adverse circumstances. Philip Young sums up the Hemingwayan hero as demonstrating grace under pressure, which means the control of honor and courage in a life full of angst and pain [7]. Like Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, the Hemingwayan code hero is a steadfast, brave, restrained man who, even in the face of defeat and death, sticks to his principles, behaves calmly and does not easily show his fear or sorrow.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Henry appears to be a calm and tough Hemingwayan hero. Although he has lost his faith in the war, he still persists in his duty as a soldier. However, instead of facing up to the trauma of the war, Henry takes an attitude of avoidance. Death and injury in war cast a shadow of fear on everybody involved. To get rid of it, a lot of people just take up drinking. In the numbness caused by alcohol, people can temporarily forget about the pain and fear. So, it is necessary to note the role alcohol plays in the life of Henry. Before he gets injured, Henry drinks a lot of alcohol. He drinks alone and with his friends and co-workers. It seems that he cannot live a day without a drink of alcohol. It is understandable that he drinks so much just as a way to lose the feeling of emptiness and boredom. But after he gets wounded, he still drinks a lot. As is known to all, drinking is very bad to people with severe physical wounds. It may slow their healing process or even hurt their already-weak body. Still Henry cannot give up drinking. He would pay the porter in the hospital to sneak in various kinds of alcohol secretly for him and his comrades in arms would also bring him bottles of wine as gifts. Obviously, he knows about the harm drinking can do to his wound. Still, he would drink just like he used to. That is clearly because of his fear and hopelessness. At that time, he is wounded and resting in the hospital. But he knows very clearly, he would recover some day and then be sent back to the frontline. That is something he fears the most: to be sent away from the arms of his beloved love and back to the front filled with blood and fire. Alcohol can dull his senses and make him forget about the pain, physical and mental. Thus, it becomes his best way to escape from the war. After Henry's escape, he laments, "I was born not to think, I only eat. Oh God, yes. Only eat, drink, and sleep with Catherine" [5]. For Henry, just eating, drinking and sleeping is a way of confronting his trauma and refusing to face up to the harsh realities of his life. Only by focusing on the minutiae of ordinary life, without any deeper reflection on reality, could he maintain his apparent calmness and so-called "grace under pressure".

### IV. REASONS WHY HENRY IS NOT PORTRAYED AS A HERO

Many critics agree that Hemingway was passionate about

depicting the wildness and bravery of men, and that his male protagonists were uncompromising heroes. However, based on the above, we can see that Henry, the main character in *Farewell to Arms*, is not a hero. But why? Through Hemingway's own experience, we may find the answer.

When he was young, Hemingway enlisted in the Italian Army and worked as an ambulance driver. During this war he was seriously injured and taken to a hospital to be treated, where he fell in love with Agnes von Kurowsky, a Red Cross nurse seven years his senior. They had a romantic relationship which did not end well, the experience of which provided him with the idea of the novel *A Farewell to Arms*. War gave Hemingway a number of horrible things such as insomnia, injury and pain. Hemingway was injured a lot of times during wars and suffered from several incurable injuries, which gave him constant pain and agony. In 1961, at the age of 62, Hemingway "quite deliberately" shot himself with his favorite shotgun. From his experience, we can understand that *A Farewell to Arms* is a more serious and sorrowful accusation of the destruction war brings to society as well as individuals. Hemingway wanted to convey that there are no romantic heroic stories in war, and that war only has a destructive effect on the world.

### V. CONCLUSION

We seem to be used to war novels in which the main characters are all heroes, who win every battle, or die heroically, or return triumphantly. But *A Farewell to Arms* made me start to realize that the people in war are more ordinary people who feel scared too. In the novel, Henry is taken to the first-aid station because of his injuries, he sees more wounded people and then, he forces himself to endure his pain and tells to the doctor, "I'd better wait. There's nothing too wrong with me, you'd better to go ahead and help those who are more seriously injured than me." The English doctor knows that Henry's injuries are very serious and when confronts with Henry's words, he scolds him "Don't pretend to be a damn hero." What the doctor says is very thought-provoking. He directly points out that Henry is like many common people, who have a dream of being a hero but ultimately cannot escape the ordinary.

The novel unfolds over a decade after the depicted events, as narrated by Frederick Henry. Through his recollections and introspection, Henry comes to acknowledge his past errors. He realizes that due to his misjudgments and tendency to avoid difficult truths, he fell short of embodying either the archetype of a traditional hero on the battlefield or that of a philosophical hero who bravely challenges authority in pursuit of truth and moral integrity.

Lamentably, Henry's lack of courage to confront the harsh realities of war and the profound trauma it inflicts, as well as his failure to take accountability for his actions, renders him incapable of even meeting the criteria for a Hemingwayan code hero. Despite his experiences and the passage of time, Henry remains trapped in a state of moral ambiguity and personal stagnation, unable to transcend his limitations and fully embrace the qualities of courage and resilience emblematic of the heroes he aspires to emulate. Thus, while the narrative provides a platform for reflection and self-awareness, it also serves as a poignant reminder of the consequences of succumbing to fear and moral inertia.

Altogether, through the disillusionment process of Henry, a conclusion can be drawn: to Henry, war is like a monster that has consumed too many good things and taken away so much from the whole of human race. It not only kills people on the battlefield, but also kills those far away from it, leaving no one in a really safe position. Besides deaths, it also brings wounds to many people alive. The wounds are both physical and mental: physically, millions of people get injured, shedding blood and losing limbs; mentally, even more people get hurt, having nightmares of the horrible consequences of war that haunt them for the rest of their lives. Henry is just one of these war victims. He not only receives severe wounds on his body, but also gets mentally. The dust of the times falls on each individual and becomes a mountain. Henry believed in war at first, but it hurt him. He believed in love again because it promised to make up for all that the war had taken away, but love died too.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Wang completed the writing of the paper, while Guo actively participated in the research discussions and provided valuable suggestions. The two authors collaborated closely, making revisions and improvements to the paper together. All authors had approved the final version.

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