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# A FAREWELL TO ARMS: THE CLASH OF LOVE AND RELIGION IN THE CHARACTER OF THE PRIEST

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**Abstract:** Investigating the interconnection between love and religion in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, in this article, the authors explore the conflictual nature of these concepts in the character of the priest. Harold Bloom cursorily remarks that the religious character of the novel, the priest, conveys the definition of love which is in contrast to lust and passion and Lieutenant Henry is greatly influenced by the priest. Here, however, we try to emphasize the conflicting sense of love in the character of the priest and maintain that the priest ambivalently waves aside Henry's sensual love for Catherine and exerts himself to lead them towards a consecrated love. The priest, implicitly, scorns the sensual love between Henry and Catherine and allusively ignores Henry's sensual love and redirects him into developing a religiously inspired love in his heart.

**Keywords:** *A Farewell to Arms*; Catherine; Ernest Hemingway; Fredric Henry; Religion; the priest.

**Resumo:** Investigando a interconexão entre amor e religião em *A Farewell to Arms*, de Ernest Hemingway, neste artigo, os autores exploram a natureza conflituosa desses conceitos na figura do padre. Harold Bloom observa superficialmente que o personagem religioso do romance, o padre, transmite a definição de amor que está em contraste com a luxúria e a paixão, e que o tenente Henry é grandemente influenciado pelo padre. Aqui, no entanto, tentamos enfatizar o senso de amor conflitante no caráter do sacerdote e sustentamos que o padre ambivalentemente afasta o amor sensual de Henry por Catherine e se esforça para levá-los a um amor consagrado. O padre, implicitamente, despreza o amor sensual entre Henry e Catherine e alusivamente ignora o amor sensual de Henry e o redireciona para o desenvolvimento de um amor religiosamente inspirado em seu coração.

**Palavras-chave:** *A Farewell to Arms*; Catherine; Ernest Hemingway; Fredric Henry; Religion; the priest.

## INTRODUCTION

There is no way to be married except by church or state. We are married privately. You see, darling, it would mean everything to me if I had any religion. But I haven't any religion. (*A Farewell to Arms*, 123)

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Modernism, known as a philosophical movement, caused lots of reactions to the ongoing issues during the First World War. Subsequent to the social and cultural upheavals brought about by the war, many modernists rejected their religious beliefs, despite that, some of them; namely T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, kept their faith in God and religion. In this regard, Stevens assumes that “[his] trouble, and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of believe in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe” (Bradshaw and Dettmar, 19). On the other hand, from the mid-nineteenth century, some scholars such as Charles Darwin and Karl Marx gave indication of secularization and pave the way for many modern writers to openly express their doubts about religion. To this extent, the religious side of Ernest Hemingway was twofold; on the one hand, he was a religious man and “[he was] taught behavior and religion by Dr. Chance” (Wagner-Martin, 6), but later, as Paul Johnson claims, “[Hemingway] not only did not believe in God but regarded organized religion as a menace to human happiness” (144). Considering it a novel of war and love, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), along with most of Ernest Hemingway’s novels, “does not go inside [of the characters] but projects actions outward” (Bradbury, 97). Hemingway with his terse and creative style, known as Iceberg Theory, in *A Farewell to Arms* distinguishes his unique style of writing in modern time versus his predecessors in the nineteenth century: “adjectives cut down to a considered few metaphors and even casual connectives cut away, objects functioning as subdued symbols [...] to produce an ironic realism or materialism” (Bradbury, 96). In this respect, possibly, Hemingway’s straightforward words and unchallenging style were of little comfort to unravel the torments of that period of time.

The First World War (1914-1918) and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) had a great impact on Hemingway’s literary life. Furthermore, both *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), like *A Farewell to Arms*, were set in Spain and the latter, specifically, delineates the Spanish Civil War. After all the adversities Hemingway had undergone sparked the development of the idea of the “lost generation” at the beginning of *The Sun Also Rises* and most of his later writings. Thus William E. Cain presumes “what Hemingway accomplishes in his fiction is evocative and highly suggestive, a matter of complicated feeling and insight, and the effects that he achieves are difficult to articulate” (37). Probably this “complicated feeling and insight” emanates from his complicated experiences and harsh moments during the war which is discernible in *A Farewell to Arms*.

Similar to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *A Farewell to Arms* “contends that love is the centering principle [in] Hemingway” (Armstrong, 79). A review of the novel reveals the fact that, for the author, “love” is hardly restricted to sensual affection. In the novel, each and every character confesses his or her love for a special thing or a person; some people like Rinaldi and Bonello love to fight for their country, another loves her dead fiancé, and someone else, the priest particularly, longs for his God. Very likely Hemingway “posits a world in which love illuminates all of life” (Armstrong, 76). From Hemingway’s viewpoint, Fredric’s friend, that is the priest, is the most callow character in the novel. He speaks about love of mother and love of God “[e]ver since [he] was a little boy” (AFA, 76), but he confesses that he is inexperienced in loving a woman: “I never loved any woman” (AFA, 76). And this non-religious and debatable love of Catherine dragged him into a whirlpool of emotions.

On the other hand, the thematic of religion, which has rarely been discussed, proves to be an important leitmotif in this novel and, along with love, helps to drive the plot forward. The priest is almost the only staunch advocate for God and religion, and is, in this regard, a foil to Fredric's and Catherine's conception of worldly love. However, the priest tries to push Fredric into the way of God and religion:

“[Y]ou do not love Him at all?” [the priest] asked

“I am afraid of Him in the night sometimes.”

“[Y]ou should love Him.”

“I don't love much.” (AFA, 77)

Although Fredric, Catherine, and the priest speak about their own loves, the priest constantly struggles to marginalize the couple's sensual love for each other. Indeed, the priest's platonic love for his mother and for God is in stark contrast with Fredric's earthly love for an opposite sex. Moreover, although, as Cain claims, “the great calamity is not as much war or death as love itself” (380), in the context of war, Hemingway strives to denounce the possibility of religious love. And that is why Debra A. Modellmog and Suzanne Gizzo presume that “[Hemingway] was conscious of his own sins, and he consistently remarked that his work was not worthy of being a part of the church” (352). Notwithstanding his “intentional sins”, Hemingway sheds a dim light on the religious side of his novel and he begs God for help through force of circumstance: “oh, God, get me out of here” (AFA, 59). Maybe this was a direct consequence of religious duality that he had approached in his training.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since its release in 1929, *A Farewell to Arms* has been well received as a novel of war and love. William Cain, for instance. Speculates that “it is a novel of love and war that on one level is straightforward and clear” (376). Marc Hewson articulates the juxtaposition of the love and war between men and women: “she warns that gender relations and identities, which are ‘always clearly a question of war of battle’ (‘castration’), must change if men and women are to relate without confrontation” (52). As Fredric himself “feel[s] trapped biologically” (148), William E. Cain believes

that the factor of biology is an important hint in the relationship between Fredric and Catherine: “the destruction of Fredric and Catherine's love involves love itself” (379). But Joel Armstrong contends that “love is the centering principle of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*; indeed, the narrative posits a world in which love illuminates all of life [and] attracting the characters with its beacon-like power” (79). In *Ernest Hemingway: A Literary Life*, Linda Wagner-Martin maintains that “Hemingway [employed] a kind of poetic ‘organ base’ of tone - a technique Ezra Pound would appreciate - to unite

the seemingly disparate sections of war and romance” (84), and *A Farewell to Arms* is “turned out to be another fiction about Hemingway’s long-beloved Catherine, the idealized woman character who in herself embodied both the fulfillment and the myth of perfect love” (85).

Some critics, such as Marc Hewson, presume that “Hemingway’s whole corpus might be considered a work of separation” (56). From the opening chapters of the novel Fredric notices that loving Catherine was not a planned decision and everything burst out like a game, bridge, as he says:

I did not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her. This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards. Like bridge you had to pretend you were playing for money or playing for some stakes. Nobody had mentioned what the stakes were. It was all right with me. (AFA, 30)

Linda Wagner-Martin contends that “*A Farewell to Arms* is a story about the victims of war - by implication, any war- and the victims as Hemingway draws them are both female and male” (80). The “war,” which Wagner-Martin mentions too, is not limited to the real war which the story is located in - the First World War - but the characters’ war of senses.

The correlation between love and religion are the principal and controversial issues at stake which are differently voiced by the priest. Related to the same issue, Wagner-Martin maintains that “in this novel [Hemingway] was showing the way both war and love trampled a young man’s belief in honor, sacrifice, truth, and romance” (84). And, as Harold Bloom maintains, the religious character of the novel, the priest, conveys the definition of love for the novel which is in contrast to “passion and lust” (28): “what you tell me about in the nights,” the priest says, “that is not love. That is only passion and lust. When you love you wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve” (AFA, 77). What makes the main difference between this article and Bloom’s work is the fact that Bloom believes Lieutenant Henry was greatly influenced by the priest while we try to emphasize the conflicting sense of love in the character of the priest. We assume that the priest waves aside Henry’s sensual love for Catherine and he exerts himself to misdirect them into a consecrated love.

## DISCUSSION

The protagonists of the novel, Catherine and Fredric, are the victims of religion and church; in that they are unable to stay with each other unless the church calls their marriage legal: “there’s no way to be married except by church or state. We are married privately. You see, darling, it would mean everything to me if I had any religion. But I haven’t any religion” (AFA, 123). In this way, Hemingway clearly maintains that this is the church which prevents his characters to love each other. Fredric understands this established fact and in response to it he claims that no religion has been established for him. On the other hand in a conversation about marriage with Luigi, Fredric asks him:

“Are you married, Luigi?”

“You know I am married.”

“Is that you did not want to be a prisoner?”

“That is one reason.” (AFA, 236)

According to Luigi’s response, Fredric concludes that it is the truth of love that hinders the soldiers like Luigi to be prisoners, because “a married man would want to get back to his wife” (236). Hemingway accentuates that being engaged to somebody, Catherine here, whether in a legal way or illegitimately, could be the convergence of Fredric’s and Luigi’s sensations. In this regard, Hemingway converges Fredric and Luigi in order to justify Fredric’s escape from the army. Subsequently, Fredric’s question about imprisonment and Luigi’s response illuminate Hemingway’s intention that sensual love is even above the other kinds of love, and even it is placed higher than love of one’s country. Hemingway does his utmost to persuade us that the only use of the church, to this extent, is to legitimize a marriage, as a sensual love, which again takes priority over all other kinds of love. However, William Cain claims that the novel’s church deputy, the priest, does his best in order to lead Fredric’s love astray: “the priest tutors Fredric not about God but about love, which he explains means sacrifice and service” (383). But this is not the actual love which Fredric is looking for. Fredric, absolutely exhausted with the church and religion, takes shelter in this new way of life and neither the priest nor the sense of patriotism could cope with his sensation.

The priest tries to convince Fredric that Catherine’s love or generally worldly love deteriorates love of God. When Fredric tries to persuade him that “[he doesn’t] love much,” he replies “that is not love. That is only passion and lust.” Then he says nobody knows love “unless they have it” (77). Moreover, Hemingway, as the omniscient narrator of the novel, treats the priest with disdain because from the very beginning he claims that, even from the standpoint of the priest, Fredric is a nice boy and he could be the best partner for Catherine: “that’s what the priest said” that he is “a very good boy” (33). When Rinaldi assails the priest: “[h]e is a good priest but still a priest... I want to make Federico

happy. To hell with you priest,” (184) maybe Hemingway directs the plotline in this way purposefully in order to defame the religious character of the novel.

In the closing paragraphs of the novel, Hemingway pointedly expresses his much-discussed opinion on religion, messiah, and the end of the world when Fredric speaks about the log on the fire:

Once in camp I put a log on top of the fire and it was full of ants. As it commenced to burn, the ants swarmed out and went first toward the center where the fire was; then turned back and ran toward the end [...] I remember thinking at the time that it was the end of the world and a splendid chance to be messiah and lift the log off the fire and throw it out [...]. But I did not do anything but throw a tin cup of water on the log [...]. I think the cup of water on the burning log only steamed the ants. (AFA, 350)

Although Hemingway was raised in the Congregational Church, his experience of the First World War altered his views on Christianity. In the story of the “ants” “messiah” personifies the omnipotence of Jesus Christ who is coming to set the people free from all miseries and earthly afflictions. Hemingway, equating himself with Jesus, tries to convince his audience that Jesus’s resurrection is not to resolve any problems. He assumes that even if there would be a resurrection, it would be like the cup of water which steamed the ants. Backing this current idea, Modellmog and Gizzo holds, “[Hemingway] never wanted to be known as a religious writer. [And his] sense of sin is reflected through his characters” (352). Human-beings, in the same way as the ants, fail to perceive the genuine way and neither they nor the religion could be an authentic messiah.

On the other hand, Fredric himself or his love for Catherine is blamed for the tragic ending of the novel. Cain brings Fredric’s love into focus and finalizes that “loving her was an assault on her, a declaration of war: his love sentenced her to death” (352). Except the biological aspect that is mentioned by Fredric, Hemingway blames church and the priest, specially, for Catherine’s death which symbolizes the death of love. From the beginning of the novel, when there is a squabble between the priest and the captain, the former ironically affirms that “if there is a war I suppose we must attack” (AFA, 14). He does not just speak about the martial war but the war in general. This real war is between the senses. Love for country, love for women, and love for God, and the two salient opposite senses, the clash between love and religion. Obviously, the priest states that whenever there is war, everybody must attack. Sometime before, he asserted that he is “happy” even without women (14). Seemingly the priest has vanquished the sensual love in his heart and aims to induce others to follow his path.

In understanding the conversations between Fredric Henry and the priest, the reader remains in an unsure state. “The priest is speaking of the love of God, which Henry cannot experience,” as Karen Magee Hamric restates, “but Henry can, by transforming that love to Catherine be happy also, if only until her death” (79). Like bullfighting in *The Sun Also Rises*, another of Hemingway’s most deservedly famous novel, *A Farewell to Arms* “provides a substitute for spiritual passion” (79). The priest understands the similarities between religious feeling and love for a woman and in the view of this fact he is vindicating Fredric that when you love you feel happiness. Apparently both Fredric and the priest

have the same feelings concerning the general concept of love, but neither of them could realize the other one's way to this happiness; the priest has spoken about the love of God since he was "a little boy" but Fredric asks for "loving women" (77). Similar to her lover, Catherine gives superiority to sensual love over any other definition of it. Holding up with her true sense of love she tries to convince Fredric that she is a faithful woman: "I'm not unfaithful, darling. I've plenty of faults but I'm very faithful. You'll be sick of me I'll be so faithful" (123). William Cain reiterates that neither Catherine nor Fredric has interest in God and "both he and she seek to serve in line with the exalted secularization that Hemingway assigns to the priest" (383). Unlike what Cain says about the priest, "who tutors Fredric not about the God but about the love" (383), I maintain that both the priest and the church, the God's deputies hinder their love and their relationship, and maybe that is the reason why Hemingway centers on a new love affair.

When Hemingway reprimands the character of the priest in this novel, it is not only because of his deadly dull attitude towards love. From the opening section of the novel, Hemingway warns us about the Pope's relation with Franz Joseph: "'The Pope wants the Austrians to win the war.' The major said. 'He loves Franz Joseph. That's where the money comes from'" (AFA, 7). He believes the Pope and the church are in a strong alliance with the king of Austria. The major, as an atheist, is sure that both the church and the Pope are against them and their front. Besides, Hemingway aims to elucidate why religion implicitly advocates the continuation of the war. All of his characters, including Fredric, speaks of the love of country and love for family. But although the priest advocates the country, by saying "if there is a war I suppose we must attack" (AFA, 14), his real intention is very unexpectedly equivocal. Except the martial attack, conspicuously, another kind of attack is noticeable by the character of the priest which is his attack on sensual love. Hemingway merges the religion with politics and contends that the presence of religion is for the sake of the king: "The priest was good but dull. The officers were not good but dull. The king was good but dull. The wine was bad but not dull. It took the enamel off your teeth and left it on the roof of your mouth" (AFA, 41). As it proceeds, Hemingway maintains allusively that neither the Pope nor the king is as cheerful as the wine. Neither the Pope nor the king could give him a true love, in a general sense and this is wine, in the epicurean sense, which serves him the true love. When Fredric and the priest speaks about the causes of the war the captain shouts "[p]riest not happy without girls" (14). From these opening lines of the novel he assures us that neither he nor his heroes are in search of religious love.

Helen Ferguson also voices Hemingway's attitude towards love and religion. In response to Fredric's invitation, who reminded us that "there is no [legal] way to be married except by church or state," Ferguson foretells that Fredric and Catherine will never get married:

“Will you come to our wedding, Fergy?” I said to her once.

“You’ll never get married.”

“We will.”

“No you won’t.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll fight before you’ll marry.” “You’ll die then, fight or die. That’s what people do. They don’t marry.” (AFA, 115)

Except the prophetic side of her speech, Ferguson verbalizes Fredric Henry’s action. She hints that in order to love each other you do not need to be married. Her statement is in stark contrast with the will of the church. Hemingway presumably does his best to suffuse his much loved characters with an anti-religious mind-set. Ferguson’s radical point of view towards the issue of marriage, ironically, warns Fredric that he has to fight for his love; otherwise, if he marries he will break it in near future. Her way of thinking establishes that Ferguson hardly has any sense of austere religiosity, too. And in that way Hemingway marginalizes the priest and sets the religious love opposites of Fredric’s and Catherine’s love.

Linda Wagner-Martin believes that “what Fredric Henry realized at the end of *A Farewell to Arms* was that happiness was evanescent, dependent only on luck” (84). The roots of this attitude by Wagner could be further explicated if we see that Fredric “always feel[s] trapped biologically” (AFA, 148). When Catherine breathes her last Fredric does his utmost to prove his love. When he asks Catherine “[d]o you want me to get a priest or any other one to come and see you?” (354) Catherine answers “[j]ust you” and she clings to Fredric when she is losing her life. In this fashion, Catherine remains more steadfast than Fredric and she never take refuge in God. Over and over she shows that her sensual love take precedence over the priest and love for God. She wants to know about the later partners of her beloved: “[y]ou won’t do our things with another girl, or say the same thing, will you?” (354) and all these expressions unveil her longing for her earthly love and her deep affection for Fredric.



## CONCLUSION

Having encountered a number of religious questions, Hemingway presents the character of the priest, the church and the Pope, to make their opposing voices heard, yet not to let them have the superiority in verbal fencing with the protagonists. Not only Fredric, but all the characters, give voice to Hemingway's abstract characters; the major calls himself an "atheist" (AFTA, 7), Ferguson hardly believes in the possibility of marriage, both Catherine and Fredric seemingly have no religion, and the priest speaks about the love of God: "I would be too happy. If I could live there [Abruzzi] and love God and serve Him" (76). Fredric and Catherine on one side, and the priest, on the other, are expressing the opposite aspects of Hemingway's mind because of which he consequently tries to marginalize the priest in the novel. However, *A Farewell to Arms* is considered a work of separation. But if we move beyond the apparent consequences of the novel we may call it a novel of association. Fredric at the closing part of the novel, after his futile praying for God, realizes the true nature of the world. Reproaching the absurdity of life, Fredric ponders over the state of human beings. The baby is dead and his love, Catherine, is going to die shortly. To Fredric, Catherine and the baby are not separate from each other. Nothing has remained of their fiery love for him and the dead baby as the consequence of their passionate love ought not to be baptized because both Fredric and Catherine were non-believers. In this regard, Hemingway affirms that even the act of selecting a religion is compulsory like the life itself. In a way, Hemingway justifies the confrontation between Fredric and the priest in the novel. Hemingway suggests that even the dead baby was forced into the religion through Baptism. As the novel closes, the durable relationship between Fredric and Catherine outweighs the transient presence of religion. Hemingway thus assures us that religion along with its herald, the priest, are unwelcome and unwanted for his hero and heroine.

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