

**Frederick Henry as an Alienated Soul: A Critical
Study of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms***

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Hemingway, who is upheld as an existential novelist, is determined to leave no aspect of the dark side of human experience unexamined. In his novels, he has dealt with various themes like the theme of violence, war, death, loneliness, alienation and nihilism. But it is the theme of alienation which is the most recurrent theme in his novels. Every novel of Hemingway whether it is *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *To Have and Have Not*, seems to have been built around a particular theme, i.e., the theme of alienation and isolation. Hemingway himself was a victim of deep rooted alienation which he has expressed through his works.

As far as Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* is concerned, it is also built on the theme of alienation in the midst of war and love. Frederic Henry is the protagonist of the novel *A Farewell to Arms*, who is wounded in the war as was Nick and Adams. Like *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms* is also a tragedy of aimlessness which was succeeded by a tragedy of broken hopes. *A Farewell to Arms* takes us to the Italian front and includes a vivid account of the terrible retreat from Caporretto. An American Lieutenant in the Italian Red Cross falls in love with an English nurse, Catherine and she with him. Both have previously suffered more attrition than human nerves can stand, and in their passionate attachment they find a psychological refuge from the incessant horrors of war. They escape to brief happiness in Switzerland, but in giving birth to a child, Catherine the heroine of the novel dies. Henry who was feeling a sense of alienation in the beginning, finds some comfort in Catherine's company. But, after her death, his sense of alienation is more intense than earlier. The ending is far from inevitable. It is a comment on man's extreme sense of alienation which is unavoidable.

At the very outset of the novel, we find Frederic Henry, the hero-narrator of the novel, rootless and there is central emptiness in his life. His real father is dead, and he has a step-father somewhere in America, but he has quarreled so much with his family that he has hardly any communication with them. So, right from the beginning of the novel, the sense of alienation is there in Frederic Henry.

In order to overcome his sense of alienation, Henry has indulged himself with a number of girls to have physical gratification. But none of those girls could provide him

satisfaction and, more ever, he was not serious about them. This lack of seriousness is the direct result of his alienation he is suffering from. Due to his utter sense of alienation, he is not able to involve himself seriously in any work; for example, though he is a student of architecture, his interest in this field is not genuine or deep. His acute sense of alienation does not allow him to indulge in this subject deeply.

After getting frustrated with his student life, Henry has volunteered to serve in the Italian Ambulance Corps and now he tries to overcome his sense of alienation through war. He has neither patriotism nor hatred of the Austrians. In fact, the war and his involvement in it are as unreal experiences to him as anything else in his meaningless and alienated life. Speaking of the war he says: “ It did not have anything to do with me. It seems no more dangerous to me than war in movies”¹.

In short, the character or self-ness of the Henry whom we meet at the beginning of the novel is now almost non-existent. After joining army, Henry tries to overcome his sense of alienation with the excitement which the violence of war provides. He behaves energetically and enthusiastically towards war, but still he is not involved fully in the war as he indulges himself in some other activities such as drinking and sex. The sense of alienation in his character is symbolized by the image of masquerade. Some critics call him an alienated American disguised in Italian uniform. Ferguson calls him a “dirty sneaking American Italian”; he is “a snake with an Italian uniform: with a cape turned his neck”².

In war, Henry wants to get the full feel of life in the presence of death. That is why, his response is full of energy, and in the war he is wounded very badly on his knee. He is taken to a Milan hospital where he meets Catherine Barkley, the heroin of the novel, who is a V.A.D. nurse at the hospital, Henry tries to overcome his alienation through his love for Catherine. The haunting sense of loneliness teaches Henry the value of togetherness as if the woman Catherine were the missing half of the entity which he was meant to be.

Thus, like all other Hemingway's heroes, Henry suffers pangs of emotional isolation, and Hemingway's delineation of the heroic endeavors of his heroes to grapple single-handedly with a callous social order and a hostile universe, makes his novels as the epics of solitude. Henry's awareness of his alienation from the general mass of humanity and its set of values and morals, lends a unique superhumanly dimension to his quest for a philosophy of life, a code of ethics and a set of values that could give purpose and meaning to life in the surrounding chaos of alienation, meaninglessness and purposelessness.

Henry lies in a world of random and meaninglessness. Jay Gellens considers Henry "a modern man who feels the extreme sense of alienation"³. Henry is completely alienated, vacant and empty spiritually too. Robert W. Lewis Jr. points out "one should think that Henry is also alienated even when he falls in love with Catherine"⁴.

After his meeting with Catherine, Henry feels a distaste for war, but at the same time, in the beginning of his affair with Catherine, he is not able to indulge himself fully with her.

This is because Henry is thinking of his love for Catherine as a game. When he escapes to the battle during Caporetto retreat, he feels “alienated, hollow and sick”⁵.

In the company of Catherine, Henry is able to overcome his sense of alienation up to some extent, but not fully. He feels very happy in the company of Catherine with the passage of time, as he says, “and in a little time the room felt like our own home. My room at the hospital had been our home.” When he goes back to the fronts he admits that “it did not feel like home coming”. Before being injured he feels quite at home in barracks. When in love, Henry begins to see his situation in a new light which reflects that he is getting rid of his alienation for the time being. He goes through a process of de-massification. He is no longer an insignificant part of the whole or a well-oiled piece of machinery that obeys the button which some unknown operator works. At this point, Henry feels himself a unique, important individual who has got a point of view through being in love and which is fully his own. Now he sees war from this angle. For him, his private army which includes his beloved and himself has a more immediate reality than the army to which he belongs. Earlier he did not worry about death in war. But now it appears as a threatening force that will take away all that he values. It disrupts peace and chance of domestic happiness and makes more urgent the note of transiency, which is a threat to his love. Frederic Henry, through love, learns the meaning of life, the value of his existence. This shows that he considers himself a part of this whole universe and thinks that he really belongs to it. At this point, Henry’s sense of alienation is somewhat less than earlier.

Henry and Catherine know that this world breaks its strong ones and the weak ones alike while the courageous ones are killed by it. They both feel alone against the world and are apprehensive that the ‘they’, a generic term for the callous forces ruling the world, will smash their happiness, as ultimately they actually do. It is also useless to talk to or to explain things to or expect any appreciation or justice from the mean ant-heap of humanity, as Henry comes across with the battle-police when an encounter is there between them. The Hemingway hero brings the same attitude to bear upon his urge to talk to others. He is always reticent and tight-lipped, knowing fully well the futility of speech. Others are unfit to understand or appreciate him. The communication gap is simply too vast.

Hemingway further points out that one cannot honestly deny that this is the world we live in. The majority of people don’t have the insight or intelligence to detect the truth behind the existing facts of social conventions, morality and religion etc. The ones that do make the discovery are not willing to invite social wrath by defying them. Also, by taking leave from institutionalized religion and traditional conception of God, they would hang torturously in a vast void of nothingness with no hope of support or rescue from any source, howsoever unreal or imaginary. But Hemingway’s heroes are not only the knowing and the thinking ones; they also have the courage to defy or to reject society and have also the moral strength to face the nothingness they would find themselves in after stepping out of the human multitude.

From the point of view of intelligence, insight and understanding, they are so far advanced in evolution that

compared with them, the remaining mass of humanity is a mob of mere unnecessary duplicates. To them, morality is only the means of reducing everyone to their own level. They recognize the worthlessness of the society's values and have seen the hypocrisy and hollowness of its morality and religion and the cruelty of its customs and conventions. But in place of taking up a battle against this unthinking, ignorant and heartless mob to impose their own ethics and values on it by subduing it, they isolate themselves from its lines and launch on their lonely career.

Like all other Hemingway heroes, Frederic Henry, too, understands that the forces ruling over this world and its affair-Nature, Fate, and Society-have an infinite and inexhaustible resourcefulness and ingenuity in destroying man's best throughout plans and the mightiest of human endeavors. Ultimately, a man will lose everything. All things will end in pain and there is no remedy for anything.

Like Henry, Catherine, too, suffers from the pangs of acute alienation. Like Henry, she has also inherited alienation from his past. Hemingway's portrait of Catherine is a superb example of realistic and convincing portrayal, no matter what some of the critics might say. She also suffers from the sense of alienation because she has recently lost her fiancé in one of the actions of the war. She had a deep love for her fiancé, and still she is attached to his memories. It is obvious that there is an emotional void in Catherine's life due to this sense of alienation, and she wants to fill it. It seems to her that Henry would make a good lover for her. So, she also tries to overcome her sense of alienation through Henry's love, which is also the case with Henry.

In this way, both the lovers, who are typical victims of alienation in this world, try to overcome their respective alienation through their love for each other. Now Henry starts thinking the words “glorious, sacred and sacrifice” as embarrassing”⁶. Both of them feel lonely against the world and think that it is useless to talk to or to explain things to or expect any appreciation or justice from the mean ant-heap of humanity, as Henry discovers in his encounter with the battle police.

Henry thinks that there can be no help forthcoming in this world. Any action that outwardly appears as help, may have emerged from entirely different motives as in case of Henry’s emptying the water of his cup on the fire in which ants are collected on a smouldering log. Henry compares human predicaments to the struggle of ants. It is plainly a gratuitous death which comes to the ants. Henry pours water on the fire not to save the ants but he needs a cup of whisky.

When the fear of war hovers, Henry bids farewell to war and wants to enjoy the company of Catherine. They want to be alone, or in other words, they want to enjoy their alienation completely. As a result of that, they escape to Switzerland to enjoy their idyll love and they do enjoy themselves completely. Like William Faulkner’s couple Henry and Catherine feel the indifference of the world to be the need of the lovers. The ‘Idyll’ enjoyed by them is comparatively more tranquil than by Faulkner’s lovers. Hemingway as a humanist and philosopher attempts to comprehend this depression as one of the greatest or deals forced on man by history, as a challenge to his dignity and courage.

While enjoying their alienation in Switzerland, the main cause of Henry's alienation is that like Catherine, he, too, suffers from a paranoid fear of a threat of hostile forces that would destroy their happiness. But he is different from Catherine also, for Catherine, a vitalizing relationship like love has its own sanction. She asks, "what good would it do to marry now? We are really married. You are my religion, you are all I have got". These words by Catherine reflect as if she has overcome her alienation, and thinks as if the void is filled.

Like Henry, other Hemingway's heroes such as Thomas Hudson in *Island In the Stream* are also victims of utter loneliness and alienation Hudson, for instance, has to go on with his duty in his acute loneliness and alienation, caused by " the loss of his son, the loss of his love and the loss of honor too"⁷.And he has also to reconcile himself to the fact that in life there are no answers to one's problems because everyone has to survive alone in this world. Same is the case with the old fisherman in *The Old Man and the Sea*, who has no companion in human for, and has only the distant stars as his friends.

Similarly, the whole world is an alien place to Henry and life is so short that he is deeply impressed by the impropriety of getting attached to things, places and persons and of seeking any permanent settlement of fixed mooring in life in order to overcome his sense of alienation. Henry is so much obsessed with war that he is keenly aware of death which is always lurking about around the nooks and corners of life which is evanescent and ephemeral. Henry is a typical victim of war who is wounded physically as well as psychologically.

Hemingway heroes, thus, away from their homes, seek no permanent settlement in this world. They lead their lives in loneliness and alienation in hotels, clubs, cafes and camps or caves or they go about on war mission or on big game hunting or high sea fishing etc. Philip Young rightly observes in this regard: “Hemingway deals with his favourite subjects of loneliness, alienation, disguised as masculinity, in a world for honor and heroism...”⁸.

In spite of the perfect happiness that Henry feels in the company of Catherine, there is also a communication gap between them. Catherine and Henry have entered into the most complete and ideal harmony and fusion of minds possible between two persons. Catherine, at one place, goes off to sleep first and Henry is left waking and groping alone in the maze of his restless and alienated thoughts. That this happens at a time when both of them had decided to go to sleep at exactly the same moment makes the situation still more ironical.

Similar situation takes place in *Across the River and In to the Trees*, where driver Jackson sitting undisturbed at the steering wheel with Colonel Cantwell behind in the seat, symbolizes this very unconcern and unawareness of the outer world to one’s agonies and one’s expression of it. In other incident, Cantwell is narrating one of his war experiences to Renata, she starts feeling sleepy and finally goes to sleep in the midst of his narration. Seeing that she has gone to sleep, he says, “sleep well, my dearest lovely and I will just tell it for nothing”⁹. Some time later, Renata wakes up from her sleep to interject the remark, “I feel terribly about the regiment”. The Colonel tells her to drink to it once and then go to sleep

because “The war is over and forgotten”. But she is already asleep which intensifies Cantwell’s alienation.

After making a separate peace to the war, and enjoying the perfect idyllic happiness, Henry is still not able to get rid of his haunting sense of alienation which is further intensified by Catherine’s death in child birth. After Catherine’s death, Henry is all alone, and is left with nothing in this world. Now Henry accepts death as an inevitable reality. Death in *A Farewell to Arms* has been presented as a means of insisting upon man’s individuality. Through its many devices for obscuring the reality of death, American culture promotes the loss of individual’s identity just as Frederic Henry is always in quest for identity and meaning in an alien world.

The eminent critic Wylder argues that Frederic himself is responsible for the ruin of Catherine, and Robert Lewis remarks that “in the depths of his mind Henry is really glad that Catherine dies...”¹⁰. The fact is that Catherine’s death is the most shocking incident Henry experiences in the novel. Catherine’s death multiplies his sense of alienation. Frederic’s complaint against death, however, does not necessarily imply his belief in nihilism, or it does not reflect his sense of alienation, but his love for life. It is because he values life as the highest good that he resents on due to his strong sense of alienation, Henry made his farewell to arms, he becomes incapable of living in any sort of community which is due to his sense of alienation he is suffering from.

The only larger significance of Catherine’s death to the hero, Henry, is an educational one; it makes him deeply aware of the death as a supreme fact of life. It leaves him protesting

against the conditions of human existence in the situation when he is suffering from an acute sense of alienation.

The Hemingway hero, Henry, as he emerges at the end of *A Farewell to Arms*, is a person whose urge to serve humanity has, for the moment, subsided and who has, for the time being, abandoned his heroic role in society because the autonomy of his individual self has been threatened by a rigidly-patterned system. He has also experienced in the death of his beloved the unreasonableness of death that kills “the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially.” Henry’s attitude here is similar that of the hero of *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes, the most disturbing aspect of which is his consciousness of the impermanence of life. He too, suffers from a bitter sense of alienation.

In fact, if Hemingway’s novels are understood with their real symbolic meaning and all including implications, the conclusion at which one would inevitably arrive is that his novels are all time classic of the predicaments of human existence, with nothing important left out. His fictional genius has delineated the external saga of human desires and aspirations and the will to triumph and survive in the face of stupendous demands and oppression of society and menacing interference of the hostile forces of Fate and Nature. They are not like the isolated tales for his heroes only but are actually the stories of the real hero—that is man himself, struggling to assert himself against overwhelming odds and trying to find what can never be lost in a world where one will lose everything.

The last words of Harry Morgan in *To Have and Have Not* clearly point to his understanding that alone struggler has no chance against the onslaughts of social difficulties. Robert Jordan in *For whom the Bell Tolls*, lays down his life in the service of his cause and for the benefit of his group, Andres reflects that all he has is to give only as a sacrifice for others. Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* experiences an almost human with fish, birds stars and other objects of Nature.

On the apparent level, most of Hemingway's characters are undoubtedly isolated and alienated from their contemporary society. No doubt, Hemingway's depiction of their predicaments is truly representative of the predicaments of the existence of all the members of human society taken individually.

There is no doubt that Hemingway's novels can be hailed as the epics of human loneliness and emotional isolation, but he places his heroes in a crisis of loneliness only to highlight the possibilities of heroism, courage, endurance, super manhood and self-reliance that an individual- and, thus, the whole society which is conglomeration of individuals only-can reach. Hemingway has worked hard to point out the possibilities of the greatness of human society its glorious struggle to endure.

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