



(Dis)loyalty and Tragic Hero: Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*

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Abstract – Frederic, the hero of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, shows disapproval of war by refusing to be loyal to his army during the World War I. However, still on duty, this protagonist turns out to show loyalty to a nurse who severely rejects him in many regards in the beginning. This paper analyzes the dualistic aspect of this hero and argues that he displaces loyalty to where he is not meant to and misplaces disloyalty where it is not expected to.

Keywords: disloyalty, loyalty, protagonist, tragic hero

Résumé – Frederic, le héros du livre à succès d'Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, a montré sa désapprobation de la guerre en refusant d'être loyal envers son armée pendant la Première Guerre mondiale. Étonnamment pourtant, encore en service, ce protagoniste, habillé de déloyauté, se révèle être loyal à une infirmière qui le rejette sévèrement à bien des égards au début. Cet article analyse l'aspect dualiste de ce héros et soutient qu'il déplace la loyauté vers là où il ne doit pas et place la déloyauté où l'on s'y attend le moins.

Mots-clés: déloyauté, loyauté, protagoniste, héros tragique

1. Introduction

Many readers of Albert Camus' classic, *The Stranger* (1946), or Jack Webb's mystery book *One for My Dame* (1961), or even Richard Wright's "How Bigger Was Born" quickly come to grips with very special protagonists who are rigorous with their own principles to the point of posing threat and unease to people they live with, sometimes to themselves. Such protagonists refuse social conformism regardless of the consequences, from the beginning of the plot to the end. A light reading of Hemingway's classic might induce one to cast its protagonist in the same mould, the like of Camus' Meursault, Webb's Jack Rickson or Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas. This mistaken assumption might drive one to approach *A Farewell to Arms* with the goal of discovering another staunch hero in mind. However, *A Farewell to Arms* is not any book like the first three, when it comes to comparing their main characters' inclination to social conformism. Although Michael Reynolds (2000, p.31) rightly calls *A Farewell to Arms* "the premier American war novel from that debacle World War I," the book's protagonist failed to get me focused on both war and its cataclysm as well as the promise of the title to read about a hero who uses disloyalty to army to ostensibly promote peace.

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Most Hemingway's critics have acclaimed *A Farewell to Arms* as his bestseller. Many others, like Michael Reynolds (1976), Masaya Takeuchi (2001), Alex Vernon (2002), and Sandra Gilbert (1983) have delved into the protagonist's gender, either with the argument that his masculinity has been threatened by a woman, or that he suffered from homosocial environment. As a result, he chose heterosexuality. Still, other critics contend that Frederic merits heroism for having deserted the army. While all these speculations are ostensibly great, no critic has honed in on the inner psyche of Frederic, to the best of my knowledge. Therefore, this article posits that disloyalty to army should not be construed as the famous strategy deployed by the protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms* to express his farewells to arms. Rather, this essay argues that because Frederic is a fragmented protagonist, he unsuccessfully struggled with loyalty, using it where he should not have, and refusing to use it where he should have.

2. Loyalty Misplaced

Frederic is loyal when and where he should not. Actually, being loyal is something very good and everyone is required by the ethics to express loyalty whenever there is the need. But the type of loyalty Frederic showcases in this novel is very sarcastic and contradictory. The first expression of Frederic's loyalty materializes when he attempted to kiss Catherine, one of the nurses who took care of wounded soldiers. Strikingly, the woman slapped him: "I leaned forward in the dark to kiss her and there was a sharp stinging flash. She had slapped my face hard. Her hand had hit my nose and eyes, and tears came in my eyes from the reflex."¹ Although people may argue that every dating starts with either the lady rejecting the man or trying to insult him, this particular dating and Catherine's response at this critical moment fully shows Frederic's disloyalty to the troop, is full of controversies and seems out of place.

There are glaring signs that she did not love him Yet, Frederic was blinded by his love. What kind of love is this? A love whereby a high-ranking soldier, a lieutenant, a much-respected person in the army will, for the sake of love, have himself ridiculed by a nurse? Frederic's attitude might be similar to one adopted by many people who do not know what love really is.

¹ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (London: Vintage, 1999), 24. Subsequent quotations are to this edition with page number parenthetically referenced in the text.



To love does not entail one's diminishment. Although it is often assumed that love is blind, squaring love with blindness is quite questionable. Actually, one should not disagree with Frederic to love, and he even does well to love a woman, because the army is full of homosociality and even homosexuals. Frederic should receive compliments for choosing to remain heterosexual in this milieu. What is more, his choice of a woman can suit the fight many people might be fighting during the day of Ernest Hemingway. Admittedly, Frederic's choice is an act of bravery and temerity. It is appropriate to recall here that often when soldiers are sent to the front, either in a neighboring country or in a far-away country to assist their allies to save lives and establish peace, they face sexual and gender identity problems. They are no longer with their wives and might spend an extended period of time in that place. Because of the scarcity of women among the troops, they are tempted to express romance to their male comrades. Frederic is trying to eschew such a trap. Since he wants to enjoy his full masculinity and macho, Catherine remains the ideal candidate to serve that purpose. As Masaya Takeuchi (2011, p.27-28) opines, "Frederic's movement from the extremely homosocial army to the privatized heterosexual space with Catherine Barkley triggers the fluidity" of his gender and sexuality. Takeuchi (2011: 30) further argues that he made this decision because "the homosocial pressure of the military coerced him to follow the code of the heterosexual masculine conduct."

However, Frederic's choice of a woman who does not love him back and who goes to great lengths to remind him that they are going to have a strange life remain puzzling. That is, Mr. Henry, you had better look for a woman who will destroy your profession, reputation, and your entire life. Still, the protagonist paid no heed to this warning.

Many critics, including Sheridan Baker (1967), Michael Moloney (1961), and Ravit Earl (1963), argue that Frederic's loyalty to Catherine fits well because as Robert Merrill (1974, p.572) claims, "Henry [does] the one thing we most desire him to do and most respect him for doing—committing himself in love to Catherine Barkley." If one gets this host of critics well, the most important thing Frederic should do is to love a woman, and nothing else. It seems imprudent to draw such a conclusion, knowing the period in which the action was taking place and the duty Frederic was to play: we are in a war time and he is a soldier. Rather than saying that we most desire Frederic to commit himself to loving Catherine, we should say he has misplaced that very eagerness. Frederic should have expressed this loyalty to the army.



Does it make any sense when Frederic commits himself to Catherine under these circumstances? Obviously not, because when we crosscheck his itinerary, we hasten to say that his loyalty to her is misplaced: Frederic, the initiate who goes to Milan and its “exciting nights” (11), whom we first meet in a brothel (18), who tells Catherine he has never loved anyone, and who finally commits his whole life to this one woman. And although both are fully aware of the dangers they are running, they decide to engage in love anyway.

Moreover, though Frederic is infantilized by Catherine, he nonetheless expresses a blind love to her. To infantilize is to treat and consider someone as a child, an infant. In the novel, Catherine has infantilized Frederic on many occasions. She often called him “boy,” though Frederic is not a child. Instances like “you are such a silly boy,” are legion in the text (93; 111; 112; 113). Arguably, one could say that she is domineering and exercising female power over him. The puzzling side is that Frederic did not feel diminished or disrespected by this. Instead, he is proud and carelessly continues his womanizing game.

In times of war, as argued earlier, it is not expected from a male, and a soldier in the front, to be romantically driven. To love is natural and people have to be loyal to their love. This is socially and morally wished and required. But the trouble with Hemingway's protagonist is that he has displaced this loyalty. Rather than being loyal to the army, driving his ambulance and carrying casualties to the hospital and becoming a hero in the end, he chose to be loyal to a woman. This displaced loyalty blinded his eyes so much so that he is ready to sacrifice his own life in the name of love.

Frederic's love to Catherine is so intense that our limited space is not enough to discuss about it. However, the tight space available should be devoted to examining his love and making any sense of this senseless love. Every now and then, Frederic is keen on loving Catherine and would recall that they had a lovely time a summer (101), or his description of her flabbergasts the reader: “she had wonderfully beautiful hair and I would lie sometimes and watch her twisting it up in the light. She had a lovely face and body and lovely smooth skin.... And I would touch her cheeks...her chin and throat with the tips of my fingers and say ‘Smooth as piano keys’” (102-3). It is normal to love, but all this zeal at war time should be given to the army, to the people who sent you to defend them. How can a man – not even an ordinary person, but a lieutenant – be easily controlled and manipulated by a woman? Some critics would call this love. Though one has nothing against the word itself, it abhors to condone this type of love in such a critical period. Much further, Frederic's love leads him to confess the following to



Catherine: "I'll love you in the rain and in the snow and in the hail and—what else?" (113). Why he does not say that he will do the same to the front whether it rains, snows or hails?

What if Frederic gathers all that energy and uses it in the front? Why, instead of loving Catherine and telling her that he really loves her, that he is crazy about her and is mad about her, does he not deploy such a force to save people's lives? (84) Frederic's love is actually beyond the flesh. According to Charles R. Anderson (1951, p.439), "when the love of man for woman reaches the point of demanding expression in poetry, this in itself is a token of aspiration above the flesh." He was even taken away in his love so much so that he quoted passages from an anonymous lyric, "The Lover in Winter Plainetth for the Spring," to substantiate it. Frederic's displacement of loyalty seems to jeopardize his very existence.

3. Misplaced Disloyalty

Frederic is a soldier, a lieutenant, to start with. Formally, he must be loyal to his duty. Before joining the army, one has to think over and over again and see whether this is a calling, a passion, or else. One should weigh the pros and the cons, the effects of such a decision before venturing into it. Presumably, Frederic too might have done all these calculations before he enlisted in the army. As is required, anyone who joins the army has to swear and take an oath. That is to say, he or she accepts the terms and conditions of the job; i.e., firm commitment to it.

One should concur with Frederic that going to war is something unpleasant. War itself connotes evil, destruction, and killing of innocent people. As a result, shooting human beings is something we should not connive or condone. Hemingway's protagonist himself makes it clear in the very beginning that war "is goddam...rotten" (32), i.e. there is no peace during war. Further, a character named Passini reiterates Frederic's view about the war in these terms: "Listen there is nothing as bad as war...When people realize how bad it is they cannot do anything to stop it because they go crazy" (46). In clear, war is a tragedy. However, once an individual accepts to go to the front, that person must perform the duty correctly and in a loyal manner.

It is often believed that a soldier should be loyal to his army and country. He or she, having sworn in, is publicly promising to the whole world that they will remain faithful and sacrifice their life to serve their nation. The foregoing prohibits soldiers' desertion from duty.

A close analysis of this character, even from the outset, however, reveals his misplaced disloyalty to the army from the very beginning of the war. After



returning from his leave of absence, for instance, he realizes that he is not as indispensable as he had believed:

It evidently made no difference whether I was there to look after things or not. I had imagined that the condition of cars, whether or not things were obtainable, the smooth functioning of the business of removing wounded and sick from the dressing stations, hauling them back from the mountains to the clearing station and then distributing them to the hospitals named on their papers, depended to a considerable extent on myself. Evidently it did not matter whether I was there or not. (16)

As this passage might suggest to any learned reader, Frederic is trying to demarcate himself from the army. In so doing, he seems to be bidding farewell to the arms as if he was into it. More importantly, he even, as Marc Hewson (2003, p.53) pontificates, “imagines himself as a hindrance to the efficient running of the operation.”

Unlike Hemingway's Nick—a recently returned veteran of the Great War—whose language even betrays his soldierly self and betrays his attempt to escape that self, Frederic's language denigrates his self. Nick—the protagonist of “Big Two-Hearted River”²—was this soldier who got down to business anytime the need arises. The following passage speaks volumes to his bravery (in Vernon, 2002, p.34): “Nick went over to the pack and found, with his fingers, a long nail in a paper sack of nails, in the bottom of the pack. He drove it into the pine tree, holding it close and hitting it gently with the flat of the axe. He hung the pack up on the nail. All his supplies were in the pack. They were off the ground and sheltered now.”

While Nick is busily working and pays not heed to joke and desertion knowing that he is entrusted a mission in which no little error should be made, Frederic's focus is deviated from his duty to laziness and unreasonable love. A glaring instance of Frederic's carelessness and disloyalty is his plans to put off his uniforms and quit the troop:

I would like to have had the uniforms 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 wish them all the luck. There were the good 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 (208).

² “The Big Two-Hearted” is available, in Ernest Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: The Finca Vigia Edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 177-199



Frederic's resolve to remove his uniforms is very odd. One would have thought that he was out of his senses or that he was enchanted. How can a whole lieutenant, for no reason, behave like that? What could be the real rationale behind his taking off the stars? Has he forgotten that those stars represent his dearest and revered country? Indeed, what Hemingway's protagonist has done is strange. By removing the stars, Frederic denies his citizenship and cultural identity. Therefore, this behavior of his is criminal and deserves punishment via martial court.

A troop who vows loyalty to their country should cling unto their promise. They have to know that by accepting to join the army they are professing fidelity to their homeland and to the people they protect. Those who fail to stick to this principle must be detained to deter others. It is embarrassing that today many of our respected armed forces no longer exhibit devotion and commitment to their job. The fashion for some soldiers is to put on the uniforms and never commit themselves to their duty. All they wait for is their monthly salary or rob some ignorant road users who do not know their civilian rights.

Frederic was sent from America to assist the Italian corps. His duty is to drive the ambulance at the front and carry the wounded to the hospital. Admittedly, this task seems less dangerous, compared with those who are firing in the front-war zone. Yet, he wants to run away to Switzerland. The question one can put to him is whether he is going there on duty or to save lives. Frederic, as any normal human being, is free to be (dis)loyal to people. It is one's own choice. Nonetheless, the attitude of this man betrays his very sense of a person. To express his contempt to the army or his refusal to go to the front, Frederic, with his noble and respected position, should have officially written a resignation letter and found his way to his superior. That is the way a responsible man of his caliber acts. But he acted dishonorably and in a horrifying way by ordering a wine shopkeeper to buy him a civilian cloth so that he can trade the uniforms with it: "(...) you're about my size. Would you go out and buy me an outfit of civilian clothes?" (215).

A lieutenant of Frederic's rank ought to be that person who encourages his corps and never sees defeat unless otherwise indicated. A soldier is promoted in the wake of a heroic exploit. However, this is not the case of Frederic. His very language sounds defeat and weakness: "I hoped for a long time for victory...I don't believe in the victory any more, [and what he surprisingly believes in is] sleep" (161).

Furthermore, Frederic's escape from war to romance underscores his disloyalty. Frederic has to express his love to a female since he wants to preserve the heterosexual ethics. However, his timing is unacceptable. Alex Vernon (2002,



p.49) is right when he argues that “for an American male to escape war, [...] he must...desire to relinquish love.” As a soldier, he has no right to devote his soul and energy to a woman in war time. If he does, then a bad omen should necessary fall on him. Catherine and her child die, because his lover has committed a sin and should be rewarded accordingly. The death of Catherine and the baby’s passing is even better, because he that sins, it is he that should die. Hemingway has deadened the consequence of Frederic’s attitude, otherwise he himself should have passed away for him to be regretting in the hereafter, should there be any possibility. But her death has inflicted suffering on him, an indirect poetic justice.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, one can argue that Frederic’s wounds are done intentionally. He was wounded, of course, but his using of this as an excuse to abandon the front for so many days can lead the reader to suspect him of a malingerer. Skeptics must examine Frederic’s attitude upon arrival at the hospital and his discussion with Miss Van Campen, the nurse, to be convinced. Were Frederic a loyal soldier, he would not give himself to drinking in his condition. Worse, his disloyalty is so displaced that he does things when and where he is less expected. While Miss Van Campen was checking on Frederic, she saw eleven bottles of alcoholic drinks with him, drawing her following comment: “I suppose you can’t be blamed for not wanting to go back to the front. But I think you should try something more intelligent than producing jaundice with alcoholism” (129). Much further, she reveals that self-inflicted jaundice does not entitle him to a convalescent leave (129). Clearly, this nurse is accusing Frederic of “using alcoholism to avoid going back to the front” (Herndl, 2001, p.38).

Although some critics attribute Frederic’s ultimate failure to an unforgiving world that seeks to kill people who bring courage and revolution to it, I see this otherwise. Their arguments are based on the narrator’s following statement:

if people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry (222).

These words appear truthful but are contradictory. Do they imply that people the like of Frederic have been bringing courage to this world? If yes, what sort of courage? It is my considered opinion that the world pours venom on people who are not honest with themselves.

It would be possible, though, to state that Frederic has betrayed the very sense of patriotism. Even if in his adaptation of another scholar’s view, Diane Hendl (2002, p.42) holds that the World War I is the apocalypse of masculinism, that



“paradoxically...the war to which so many men had gone in hope of becoming heroes ended up emasculating them...confining them as closely as any Victorian woman had been confined,” it is far-fetched that Frederic can also fall into this category – i.e. hero. He is a man, we do agree. He further goes to the front, fine but why does he not expect the war to come to an end before he is denied heroism?

In his own world, Frederic thinks he is escaping the army, thus bidding farewell to arms as the title suggests. Conversely, his own behaviors betray his decision. On many occasions where one was expecting him to behave as a hero who has really escaped the war, in order to listen to love, Frederic gave himself to drinking. Observe, for example, the time when Catherine was at labor in the hospital. Frederic went to the café and drank a glass of wine as if nothing was happening (279). Further, after the caesarian of the woman and the baby’s death, he drinks a considerable amount of alcohol again: “I ate the ham and eggs and drank the beer...I drank several glasses of beer. I was not thinking at all...I ordered another beer...I was not ready to leave yet...I drank another beer” (291). The point here is not that he is drunk but the fact he should be drinking while he was passing through this hardship.

Frederic’s disloyalty is truly misplaced and he is even unaware of this. For example, his desertion from the army disturbs his consciousness. He actually “feels guilty” (217) for his escape from the Italian officers’ execution, despite his shooting at the deserted sergeant during the retreat. This guilt provokes his feeling and in civilian clothes, he felt like a masquerader. He was scornful and sad (217).

4. Inconsistencies in the Character of Frederic

Understandably, one would have expected Hemingway to create a character who stands firm to his principles throughout the novel. One was expecting Frederic to be a heroic and revolutionary character *par excellence*. As the story unfolds, the reader is proud and hurray Frederic for performing his mission as any proud American soldier would do.

Interestingly, one was even tempted to conclude by then that Frederic deserves a more prestigious decoration than the token he received for going to the front, knowing beforehand that he could have been killed. He risks his life as a valor and get wounded. Pains and scars did not decide him to resign and the reader was expecting him to keep it up to the end.

However, Frederic shamelessly deserted the army in the dead of the war: an act of cowardice. Why should a revolutionary character, the like of Merlo, have to make this choice? Any informed person knows that war destroys more than it



builds. It deeply affects and destabilizes gender relations. Frederic has done well to bid goodbye to arms for fear to fall into homosociality, his dislike. According to Alex Vernon (2002, p.35), "military and war experiences affect the soldier's sense of gender identity, which for the male veteran means his masculinity, his conception of himself as a man, and by extension his general conception and experience of gender relations." This finding might have played a decisive role in Frederic's choice to desert the troop. Clearly, he deemed right not to be affected so much so that he loses the meaning of life after the war. Surprisingly, the war did not come to an end before he is affected. Frederic does not complete his mission before experiencing the post-war trauma.

Frederic's perception of the imminence and disaster of the war forced him, one can argue, to desert. At his place, any soldier might be tempted to take the same decision when they see their fellows killed and wounded like Passini (55). The death of this friend of him and his own wounds force Frederic "to realize the brutality of the war and the powerlessness of soldiers in face of technological power of the war" (Takeuchi, 2011, p.31). Therefore, by resolving to leave the front, one was thinking he would stick to that decision and remain so throughout the book. However, his next action seems contradictory and even draws questions about Hemingway's titling of the book.

A problem lies with either the construction of the character of the main character or the title of the book. In Book Four, the reader realizes that Frederic's plan is to flee the army. But the achievement of that plan is only inferred through his eloping with Catherine. Consider, for example, the way one should view Frederic's state of mind in the following: "I was not made to think. I was made to eat. My God, yes. Eat and drink and sleep with Catherine. To-night maybe. No that was impossible. But to-morrow night and a good meal and sheets and never going away again accept together. Probably have to go damned quickly. She would go. I knew she would go. When would we go?" (208). To what extent can a soldier, even if a deserter, would say such a thing? Who in this world would say that they are not made to think? Frederic avers that the world is chaotic and nothing works: why does he not create a world of his own? He later disdains and is embarrassed by adjectives like sacred, glorious, and sacrifice; he further whines that all these are abstractions or that this world is tragic and beyond his taming, completely forsaking his responsibility altogether. Creath Thorne (1980, p.535) rebuts such a position: "in a world inherently tragic where no rightful order is ever restored, the only possible response to that world is to bear one's essential and inevitable defeat



with courage and dignity.” However, our Frederic refuses to acknowledge that bitter truth.

Critics like Edmund Wilson (1950) and Sheldon Sacks (1964) suggest that *A Farewell to Arms* should be read as a tragedy. Others like Caruth Cathy (1985) and Duncan Bell (2006), argue that Hemingway’s tragedy is not Aristotelian, that is to say, the character has not done anything leading him to a tragic end. In the Aristotelian worldview, there is tragedy only when the doom of the hero derives from his own acts. With reference to this context, Merrill (1974, p.571) affirms that *A Farewell to Arms* is not a tragedy, because “its lovers make no fatal error in judgment or deed” and therefore “not responsible for what happens to them.”

However, other critics, including E. M. Halliday (1956) and Carlos Baker (1963), argue that Frederic and Catherine are hero and heroine who can be compared to William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. I strongly disagree with the above: Hemingway’s characters do not deserve to be heroes. Skeptics should examine Frederic and Catherine’s attitude throughout the novel. They went against the social conventions. Frederic forsook what he was sent to do and gave to love. He failed in his duty and did nothing brave in the front.

There is tragedy in the novel. The stillborn baby’s death is followed by Catherine’s passing. Frederic must be sour aggrieved. These events force him to question the very essence of life and the world. Although one can moan with Frederic and console him because this unjust world had taken away these innocent and dearest people from him, one has to revisit the tragedy inherent in this novel. Both Catherine and Frederic are very much aware of the unjust world we all are living in. They know that the world victimizes people who try to bring hope and peace. However, their “decision to love is a conscious choice, made without illusions” (Merrill, 1974, p.576). Thus, they should be prepared to accept any foreboding consequences.

5. Conclusion

Though war is the prime theme in Hemingway’s *A Farewell To Arms*, it is gradually replaced by a so-called love. Frederic, the main character, begins with in the front yet ends with a tragic love. He expresses love when and where he should not have and retreats himself from the army when he is less expected. One expects him to remain loyal to his creed throughout the novel. Actually, he has forgotten that one must confront sometimes a world of chaos and war in order to understand the value of order and peace. One has to endure suffering to value happiness and wealth. Definitely, Frederic is loyal but this loyalty is displaced. He should have



either been loyal to his own principles or to the army. Moreover, that he is disloyal seems acceptable, but his disloyalty is misplaced. Has he stuck to rebelling and resisting against the war till the end, he would have been called a genuine hero and a revolutionary character who, like Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, Albert Camus' Meursault or Jack Webb's Jack Rickson, have remained faithful to what they believe in. Has he refused to go to the front from the outset of the novel and devoted himself to loving a woman would have been understandable. Understanding him in this light would have shifted the title of the novel from *A Farewell to Arms* to *A Welcome to Love* or so.

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