



# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Ernest Hemingway's

## **A Farewell to Arms**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

by

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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Historical Fiction

**A** *FAREWELL TO ARMS* IS historical fiction, a story set in “the past,” that often involves historical events either directly in the plot or as a background to the main plot’s events. Historical novels may or may not involve actual people who lived during the time period the story is set. Critics have not yet reached an exact definition of historical fiction. The most popular opinions are that historical fiction is set in a time period either (1) before the author’s lifetime or (2) ten or more years before the time it was written.

As Ernest Hemingway was born in 1899 and did, in fact, drive an ambulance for the Italian army during World War I. According to the first view of historical fiction, *A Farewell to Arms* is not a historical novel. According to the second view, it is. Clearly, however, the setting of World War I is more than mere decoration, and the characters’ attitudes and actions are shaped in large part by their context. Were the story set in another time and against another background, the lives of the characters would inevitably play out differently. Thus, the novel can be considered “historical.”

Set in Italy during the First World War, Hemingway’s novel revolves around Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver for the Italian Army. Seeking diversion from the war, Frederic enters into a romance with a British nurse also serving in Italy. The nurse, Catherine Barkley, has recently lost her long-time fiancé in one of the horrific battles of the Somme in France. Frederic and Catherine authentically represent many of the men and women who served with the Allied Forces in what contemporaries called The Great War; they not only faced difficult decisions about the importance of serving in the army and winning the war, but they also experienced a growing love and began to worry about each other’s safety and security.

### Modernism

Over the twenty years before the Great War, confidence in traditional beliefs and expectations gradually eroded under questions about the sanctity of religion, the efficacy of science, and the cultural isolationism of the U.S. Increasingly, change seemed necessary; the old needed to give way to the new. As famed critic and Hemingway biographer Michael S. Reynolds argues, “[t]he war merely put a period on the end of a sentence that had been twenty years in the writing.” The artistic response to the feeling that modern life was more “disorganized” than had been expected is called *modernism*, which literary scholars usually see as emerging between the two World Wars. Modernist writers and artists privileged dedication to craft over traditional beliefs. Twentieth-century critic and social commentator Edmund Wilson recalled that modernist writers wanted to create “something in which every word, every cadence, every detail,

## Formalist Approach Applied to *A Farewell to Arms*



### Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

## Activity One

### Examining key relationships and their relation to the structure of the novel

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *A Farewell to Arms*: Formalism Activity One Worksheets One, Two, and Three.
2. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
3. Assign each group one of the following relationships:
  - Frederic and Rinaldi
  - Frederic and the priest
  - Catherine and Ferguson

*NOTE: If you have more than three groups, you may assign more than one group to a relationship.*

4. Have each group peruse the novel for the places in which their assigned relationship makes a significant appearance and complete the handout.
5. As the groups examine their assigned relationships, have them discuss whether Hemingway portrays each character and his or her interactions in his or her own right or merely as a literary device and note their findings on their handouts.
  - Is each character in the relationship
    - round or flat?
    - complex or stereotypical?
  - Does either character serve as a literary device (e.g., foil, antagonist, etc.)?
  - Is either character used as a narrative device or vehicle (e.g., means of communicating exposition to the reader)?
  - Is the relationship complex or simple?
  - Does it change?

## Feminist Theory Applied to *A Farewell to Arms*



### Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

## Activity One

### Examining the key women in the novel

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Farewell to Arms*: Feminism Activity One. You may want to give each student more than one copy of the sheet; then, she or he will be able to take notes during the group presentation as well.
2. Divide the class into five groups or a number of groups divisible by five. Try to have male and female representation in every group.
3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the following:
  - Catherine in Books 1 – 2
  - Catherine in Book 3 – 4
  - Ferguson in Chapters V, XVII, XXXIV
  - Miss Gage; Miss Van Campen in Chapters XIII, XVII, XXII
  - Prostitutes in Chapters III, XVI
4. Have each group complete “*A Farewell to Arms* Feminism Activity One Worksheet,” using a separate line for each character and each chapter.
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings and decisions to the class.
6. As a whole class, discuss whether the women in *A Farewell to Arms* tend to be full-fledged characters, stereotypes, or literary conventions (such as foils).

## Marxist Approach Applied to *A Farewell to Arms*



### Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

#### Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



## Activity One

### Examining the novel for evidence of class conflict and struggle

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *A Farewell to Arms: Marxism Activity One Worksheet* and *A Farewell to Arms: Marxism Activity One Worksheet Two*.
2. Divide the class into five groups or a number of groups divisible by five.
3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the following incidents:
  - The mechanics' interactions with Frederic before their trench is hit in Chapter IX
  - Frederic's discussion with the priest in Chapter XI
  - Frederic's discussion with the British major in the first paragraph of Chapter XXI
  - Rinaldi's behavior when Frederic returns in Chapter XXV
  - The retreat from Caporetto in Chapter XXIX and the escape at the Tagliamento River in Chapters XXXI and XXXII.
4. Have each group re-read its assigned section(s) of the novel and complete *Worksheet Two*, following the example provided in *Worksheet One*.
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings.
6. As a whole class, discuss whether Hemingway appears to take one side or another in the class conflicts in his novel, or does he seem to remain neutral in his presentation of class differences?