A Farewell to Arms
Reader's Guide - Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's third novel, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), was crafted from his earliest experience with war. As a teenager just out of high school, Hemingway volunteered to fight in the First World War but was rejected because of poor eyesight. Instead, he drove a Red Cross ambulance on the Italian front, where he was wounded in 1918 by a mortar shell. While recovering in a hospital, Hemingway fell in love with Agnes von Kurowsky, a nurse seven years his senior. She did not reciprocate his passion, however, and rejected his marriage proposal five months after their first meeting.

These events were thinly fictionalized by Hemingway a decade later into *A Farewell to Arms*, with its tragic love story between an American ambulance driver and an English nurse. Lieutenant Frederic Henry meets Catherine Barkley in a small town near the Italian Alps. Though Catherine still mourns the death of her fiancé, killed in the war, she encourages Frederic to pursue her. Badly wounded at the front, Frederic finds himself bedridden in a Milan hospital, but Catherine arrives to look after him. It is here that their initial romance deepens into love. While Frederic recovers from surgery and prepares to return to action, Catherine discovers that she is pregnant—a surprise that delights and frightens them both. Though the couple has escaped the war, there are dangers that cannot be anticipated or avoided. The final chapter is one of the most famous, and heartbreaking, conclusions in modern literature.

This rather simple plot does not explain the appeal of *A Farewell to Arms*. It is Hemingway's writing style that transforms the story into a great tragedy. The critic Malcolm Cowley considered it "one of the few great war stories in American literature; only *The Red Badge of Courage* and a few short pieces by Ambrose Bierce can be compared with it." By omitting most adjectives and using short, rhythmic sentences, Hemingway tried to give the reader a sense of immediacy, of actually witnessing the events in his writing. He once described his method this way: "I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg." His spare prose and laconic dialogue made him the most widely imitated American writer of the twentieth century.
Ernest Hemingway, 1899-1961

Ernest Hemingway may have been the most famous novelist in the English language during his lifetime. Idolized by readers, envied by fellow writers, and adored by many for the romantic lifestyle that he created for himself, Hemingway the writer must always be distinguished from Hemingway the public figure. The first was a sensitive and exacting artist; the second was a larger-than-life image maintained for tabloid consumption. As early as 1929, Dorothy Parker was moved to remark: "Probably of no other living man has so much tripe been penned or spoken."

The adulation that Hemingway inspired is not difficult to explain. By turns tough and tender, he lived a life of exuberant masculinity—which included hunting for big game in Africa, for Nazi submarines in his fishing boat off Key West, or for the best bar in Paris. He celebrated bullfighting, boxing, hunting, and even warfare as manly pursuits worthy of respect. His years were rife with adventurous accident, including an anthrax infection while on honeymoon in France, and two successive plane crashes on safari. Second-degree burns resulting from a bushfire accident prevented him from traveling to Sweden to accept the Nobel Prize. He won the Silver Medal of Military Honor in the First World War and the Bronze Star Medal in the Second. A leader of the so-called "Lost Generation" and a Modernist, Hemingway's closest friendships included literary giants Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce. He was an intellectual and a celebrity, and one of the few Americans to find both roles congenial. He married four times and lived to see eighteen of his works published. He died a millionaire, a close friend of movie stars such as Gary Cooper, and a winner of both the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes. In many ways, his career was the stuff of legends.

Such success did not, however, alleviate his personal struggles. For a man so publicly celebrated and revered, he could be curiously reticent—he wanted no biography written about his life, and he left a will that blocked any publication of his letters. His later years were marked by severe depression, for which he underwent electro-convulsive therapy. Suffering from acute paranoia, he believed for a time that federal agents were after him. Years of alcoholism and organ damage wreaked havoc on his body; digestive complications, high blood pressure, and failing eyesight troubled him constantly. Ernest Hemingway eventually committed suicide in 1961, following the path of his father and two siblings.
**Hemingway and the Lost Generation**

Though he had served as an ambulance driver during the First World War, Ernest Hemingway's decisive years in Europe started in 1921, when he arrived in France with a letter of introduction from the writer Sherwood Anderson. In those postwar years, Paris had become the home of many expatriate writers, including Ezra Pound, James Joyce, E. E. Cummings, Ford Madox Ford, and Gertrude Stein. Hart Crane and F. Scott Fitzgerald were frequent visitors. It was this circle of mostly American writers that Hemingway joined when he arrived; and while "the Lost Generation" was Gertrude Stein's phrase, it was Hemingway who immortalized it in the epigraph for his 1926 novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. The book was so popular that, by 1934, Malcolm Cowley could note, "It was a good novel and became a craze-young men tried to get as imperturbably drunk as the hero, young women of good families took a succession of lovers in the same heartbroken fashion as the heroine, they all talked like Hemingway characters and the name was fixed."

Recently married and employed as a foreign correspondent for the *Toronto Star* newspaper, Hemingway spent his days interviewing leaders such as Mussolini and writing fiction. He soon became Ford's assistant editor at *The Transatlantic Review*, an important literary magazine. In 1923, the American author and publisher Robert McAlmon printed Hemingway's first book, *Three Stories and Ten Poems*, in Paris. Hemingway would later complain that all he earned from this book "was the enmity of McAlmon, because it sold out while his own volumes remained in stock."

Another American, Sylvia Beach, opened a bookshop called Shakespeare & Company in 1919, and it soon became a center of literary life in Paris. The store even loaned its poorer patrons rare books, such as D. H. Lawrence's banned *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It was shut down in 1941 supposedly because Beach would not allow a German officer to buy the last copy of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*; Beach had been the first to print Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922.

Why were so many American writers living abroad? Paris was a cheap place after the war, with none of the strictures to be found back home, such as Prohibition. Daring innovators in all the arts lived there-like Picasso, Stravinsky, and Modigliani-and many were neighbors in the cheap districts of Montparnasse. The artistic and intellectual ferment of those years moved Hemingway to write: "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast."
A Farewell to Arms  
Reader's Guide - Discussion Questions

1. What do we know of Frederic Henry's and Catherine Barkley's lives before the novel begins? As the novel's narrator, why would Frederic choose to tell us so little about their past?
2. At the beginning of their romance, Frederic treats his relationship with Catherine like a game. When does he fall in love? Why does it happen?
3. What role does religion play in the novel? How does Frederic's view of the priest compare to the other officers’?
4. Why is Catherine afraid of the rain? Why does Frederic fear the night? How do both the rain and the night foreshadow the novel's tragic conclusion?
5. Even before the retreat at Caporetto, Frederic considers that "abstract words such as glory, honor, and courage" are "obscene beside the concrete names of villages." What does he mean by this?
6. Identify a passage that vividly describes World War I. Does the novel make any assertions about war in general, or World War I in particular?
7. After his desertion, Frederic says that, "anger was washed away in the river along with any obligation." Are his actions justified?
8. The novel's action begins in the late summer of 1915; it ends in spring 1918. Has Frederic changed during this period of time? Is there any redemption at the end of this tragedy?
9. Toward the end of the novel, Count Greffi tells Frederic that love is a religious feeling. Does Frederic agree? Why or why not?
10. How would you describe Hemingway's style of writing and his characters' dialogue?
11. The words "bravery" and "courage" are echoed through the novel. Who is the novel's hero? Who is the most courageous character?

Taken from National Endowment for the Arts “The Big Read”