

Discuss the title of the novel, "A Farewell to Arms".

Two-fold Meaning of "arms"

The word "arms" in the title has a double meaning. It refers to "weapons of war" and it refers also to the arms of a human being, in this case a woman. The hero in this novel bids farewell to war, but he also bids farewell to the woman he loves. He bids farewell to war because he feels disgusted with it. But he is enforced to bid farewell to his beloved by a cruel fate. In one case the farewell is a voluntary step; in the other case the farewell is not an act of violation but the result of disaster.

Henry's Casual Participation in War

The hero, Frederic Henry, is an American serving with an Italian ambulance unit in World War I. What has brought him into the war is not made clear at any stage in the course of the story. He is not fired by any passion for freedom or democracy. In fact, he has no "ideals" of any kind. Perhaps he volunteered for service because of some undercurrent of humanitarian sympathy. In any case he is a non-combatant. He has a feeling that he is in no real danger. He says,

"Well, I know I would not be killed. Not in this war. It did not have anything to do with me. It seemed no more dangerous to me myself than war in the movies."

There is, indeed, a surprising lack of fervour or ardour or enthusiasm in his involvement in the war. His participation in the war is a most casual affair.

The Grimness of War

The grimness of the war is fully and vividly conveyed to us. Henry himself suffers when he is hit by a trench-mortar shell. Passini expires. There are many patients in the hospital in Milan who are seriously hurt by high explosive shell. The tragedy of the war has affected the spirits of Rinaldi and the Priest. Even the stoical priest has begun to feel the havoc war is causing. The climax of the horror of war is reached in the account of the Caporetto retreat. Many peasants join the column of the retreating multitude with their carts loaded with household goods.

Complete Disillusionment with War

We note Henry's complete disillusionment with the war eve before the order for the retreat is given. He tells us that he was always embarrassed by the words "sacred", "glorious" and "sacrifice". He says that he could not endure such words. Thus, Henry's approach to these things is not that of a patriot. War has become meaningless to him.

A Farewell to War

The plunge into the river marks Henry's farewell to "arms" in the sense of war. He is out of the war. He has no more 'obligation'. He wishes "arms", the Italian soldiers and the military police, all the good luck. He does not

wish to read the account of the war in the newspaper. He wants to forget the war. He has made "a separate peace". Henry refuses to discuss the war with the barman at the Grand Hotel in Stresa and with Count Greffi. However, it is worth noting that he can not completely dismiss the war from his thoughts. Anyhow his break with the war is complete when he escapes to Switzerland in Catherine's company.

The Love-affair of Henry and Catherine

Henry's love for Catherine is as casual in the beginning as his participation in war. But at the hospital in Milan, he falls truly in love with her. She is "a lovely girl", "a grand girl", and "a fine simple girl". She comes to bed with him every time he wants her. Henry feels like a criminal in having deserted from the army but Catherine tries to set his fears at rest. They are happy with each other in Stresa. But they are uneasy too because there is the danger of the military police detecting Henry's presence there and arresting him. Eventually they escape into Switzerland and spend blissful, ecstatic time in a mountain villa. Henry is now perfectly secure against all dangers. The war is far, far away. Henry feels that, without Catherine, his life would be empty and meaningless.

Another Farewell to Arms

When the time of delivery comes the doctors say that a caesarean operation is necessary. The child that is taken out is already dead, and now Catherine would die. Henry knows that Catherine is going to die. He becomes desperate. He prays to God not to let Catherine die. He laments.

"Oh, God, please don't let her die. I'll do anything for you if you won't let her die. Please, please, please, dear God, don't let her die..."

Henry stays with Catherine until she dies. He tries to spend some time with the dead Catherine but it is not any good. He says goodbye to a statue and leaves the hospital. Here is the another farewell to arms, to the beloved's arms.

A Third Interpretation of the Title

To interpret "arms" as the war or as the embraces of Catherine is a limited way of looking at the title. The title is also ironic. Henry has tried to escape from the obligations which life imposes. He did not wish to fall in love, but he did. He tried to escape the war like a truant. Catherine and Henry had said farewell to the life of action and struggle. What the novel says, finally, is that one cannot escape the obligations of action. One can not say "farewell to arms". One can not sign a separate peace. One can only learn to live with life and to tolerate it.