

# Significance of the Title – A Farewell to Arms

## ✘ About Author

The author of the play, Ernest Hemingway was an American novelist, short story writer, and journalist. Hemingway produced most of his work between the mid-1920s and the mid-1950s, and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954. He published seven novels, six short-story collections, and two non-fiction works. Many of his works are considered classics of American literature.

## ✘ Introduction

A Farewell to Arms by Ernest Hemingway is a typical love – story. It is a love story of Frederick Henry and Catherine Barkley. Their love story survives through the obstacle of World War I.

For his novel, A Farewell to Arms, Hemingway consciously borrowed his title from the 16<sup>th</sup> century English poet, George Peele. He refers to the Peele’s poem intentionally to pay the ironic homage to the war. The title “A Farewell to Arms” puts Henry’s disillusionment with the war and Love. The title of the novel is a master – stroke of irony and one must think in terms of offering an ironic interpretation of the novel as well.

## ✘ Dual Meaning of Arms

It is the title of the novel “A Farewell to Arms” that first catches the attention. Critics are basically in agreement that there are two straight – forward meaning of the title of – A Farewell to Arms.

In this novel – A Farewell to Arms, The word “Arm” refers to Weapon of War, and it also refers to the Hand of Human Being. The hero in this novel commands farewell to war because he feels disgusted with it, and if he didn’t command to it, he would lose his wife. He also commanded farewell to his beloved which is enforced by a cruel fate. The farewell in the novel would be a voluntary according to us; but on the other hand, it is not at all an act of volition but it is the result of a disaster.

#### ✧ *Henry’s Sudden Participation in the War*

Frederic Henry an American is the hero of the novel who was serving in an Italian ambulance in World War I. What has brought him into the war is not specified in the novel. He hasn’t joined the war because of the democracy or any other causes. Perhaps, he volunteered for service in the ambulance because of some undercurrent of humanitarian sympathy. He is not a combatant in any case, and he has a feeling that he is in no real danger as he spoke –

**Well, I knew 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 than the war in movies.**

The next thought he thinks was that,

**I wish to God it was over though**

This shows that his participation in the war is the most casual affair. Despite that, he performs his duties conscientiously and efficiently – he does not shirk work or evade his responsibility. But he does not think himself indispensable either. In fact, when he returns from leave, he finds that everything is in good condition.

### ✘ *The Grimness of War*

All this does not mean that the grimness of war is not fully or vividly conveyed to us. Apart from the multiple injuries which Henry himself suffers when he is hit by a trench – mortar shell which necessitates his hospitalization. There is a terrible though brief account of the wounded man who dies in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. There is Passini who groans “*Mamma, Mia! Oh, Mamma Mia,*” and died. One of the patients who were in the hospital in Milan has seriously injured by the bursting of a combination of shrapnel and high explosive shell.

Some of the tragedy of the war is also conveyed to us through the way it has affected the spirits of Rinaldi and the priest. Rinaldi has been subjected to a severe strain because of the numerous surgical operations which he has to perform on wounded soldiers, while the stoical priest has begun to feel the havoc war is causing. In addition to all this, there are brief accounts of the war inserted here and there to remind us of the damage that is being done.

### ✘ *Caporetto's Retreat*

The climax of the horror of war is reached in the account of the Caporetto retreat which is orderly at first but becomes a confused affair afterwards. In the night, many peasants were joining the column of the retreating bunch. In the column, there were carts loaded with households' goods. In some carts the women sat huddled from the rain and others walked besides the carts keeping as close to them as they could.

### ✘ *Disillusionment of War even Before the Retreat*

We note Henry's complete disillusionment with the war even before the order of retreat. He is discussing the situation with Gino at Bainsizza and he tells us that he was always embarrassed by the words – sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression mixed with Vain.

Henry says that he could not endure such words. Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the number of roads, rivers and the dates. Gino is a Patriot, while Henry is opposite. And so, War has become meaningless to Henry.

✘ **A Farewell to Arms**

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 obligations. His anger is washed away. He wishes the Italian soldiers and the military police all the luck. He wished –

**This bloody train would get to Mestre and I would eat and stop thinking.**

He does not wish to read the account of the war in the newspaper. He wants to forget the war. It is worth nothing to him. However, he cannot completely dismiss the war from his thoughts.

✘ **The Love - Affair of Henry and Catherine**

Henry's love for Catherine is as casual in the beginning as his participation in the war; but at the hospital in Milan, he falls truly in love with her. He cannot help falling in love with her. She is a lovely – fine and simple girl. After parting with her in Milan, he finds her again in Stresa. He feels like a criminal having deserted from the army but she tries to set his fears at rest. Henry is now more than ever in love with Catherine. They are happy with each other in Stresa but they are also uneasy because there is the danger of the military police detecting Henry's presence at there and arresting him. Eventually, they escape into Switzerland and spend blissful time in a mountain villa. Henry is now perfectly secure against all danger, and the war is far – far away. They two don't need the company of any other person. As they said –

Henry	-	Do you want to see other people?
Catherine	-	No

**Henry - Neither do I.**

Their nights are grand because that is the time when they are one. Henry says –

**I won't go away. I'm not good when you're not there with me. I haven't any life at all anymore.**

In other words, Henry feels that without Catherine, his life would be empty and meaningless.

✘ **Another Farewell to Arms**

When the time of delivery comes, the doctor says that a Caesarean operation is required. The child that is taken out is already dead and now Catherine would die. Henry now knows that Catherine would die. He becomes desperate. He recalls an experience of the ants getting burnt on a log of wood. Death came to the ants inevitably and even he did nothing to save them. He prays to God not to let Catherine die. He says –

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

Catherine tells him that she is not afraid to die but she just hates it. She gets one hemorrhage after another. The doctors cannot stop the bleeding. Henry describes –

**I went into the room and stayed with Catherine until she died. She was unconscious all the time, and it did not take her very long to die.**

Henry tries to spend some time alone with the dead Catherine but it is not any good. It was like saying good – bye to a statue. After a while, Henry went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain. Here is another Farewell to Arms, but this time to the beloved's arms.

### ✘ Third Interpretation of the Title

There is one another way of interpreting the title. To interpret Arms as the war or as the embraces of Catherine is a limited way of looking at the title. A more valid interpretation would see the title as completely ironic. Henry has tried to escape from the obligation which life imposes. He did not wish to fall in Love, but he did. He tried to escape the war, but he felt like a school – boy who was playing truant. His life with Catherine in Switzerland and the life which they anticipated after the war were devoid of conflict. Catherine and Henry had Farewell to the life of action and struggle, but ironically their greatest test – the attempt to save the life of Catherine – came at the very moment when they seemed to have achieved a successful scape. And at the last, the novel saying to us is that –

**One cannot escape the obligations of action. One cannot say Farewell to Arms. He or she can only learn to live with life, to tolerate it.**

### ✘ Conclusion

A Farewell to Arms end with the image of Catherine reduced to a stature which reveals a total objectification of female. A Farewell to Arms was met with favorable criticism and is considered one of Hemingway's best literary works. The last line of the 1929 *New York Times* review notes –“It is a moving and beautiful book.”

