

Reading Henry of *A Farewell to Arms*

Lihong Li

Foreign Language Dept. of Huaiyin Institute of Technology, Huai'an, Jiangsu Province, China

hylilihong@126.com

KeyWords: Hemingway hero; War; Henry

Abstract. Henry is a typical Hemingway hero, who bears the meaning of bravery, love, violence, beauty, coolness and death. Like many young people of his generation, he volunteered to serve in wars with dream to find adventure to prove his manhood, to “save the world democracy”, “la Belly France”, or “classical Italy.” But when he experienced the war, he was shocked by the chaotic butchery warfare. He saw with his own eyes an entire world of ethical, moral and political values shattered in the war, and he completely disappointed with the whole world and the warfare. Then he thought, he grew, he matured and his ways of thinking and doing is shaped by the war. He became a real Hemingway hero. He is created by the war.

1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway, the spokesman of “the lost generation”, is one of the greatest writers of this century. He is connected with war and bravery, love and violence, beauty and death. The name of Ernest Hemingway also means bullfighter, soldier, hunter, lover, the disillusioned realistic writer and doomed romantic writer. He himself is a legend, and the main characters he created are also characteristic, they are typical Hemingway heroes, such as Robert Jordan, Frederic Henry, Jake Barnes and Santiago. Indeed, Hemingway hero had much more reputation than his books, which it often seemed as though the books were incidental byproducts of the life of Hemingway himself.

Frederic Henry, of *A Farewell to Arms*, is also a real Hemingway hero. He is created by World War I. Like many young people of his generation, he volunteered to serve in the army with dream to find adventure to prove the manhood, to “save the world democracy” or “la Belly France” and “classical Italy” which were propagandized as bestial and subhuman. But when he experienced the war, he was shocked by the chaotic butchery warfare, he saw the cruelty of WWI.

2. Henry, Created by War

2.1 Henry, Grown up in the War

Henry is the main character of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. As one of Hemingway's heroes, his image is much influenced by Hemingway's personality, Hemingway's experience and Hemingway's attitude towards the society, etc. Hemingway's literature career is associated with the war, especially WWII. He experienced the war many times, he joined it, he tasted it, and then he cursed it. He was “blown up” in WWI under circumstances very much like Frederic wounded without any “stance of manhood”.

Hemingway's war adventure was a very brief taste, and far more bitter than glorious. In the adventure, he received a serious wound which left scars on his mind no less than on his body. According to his testimony, he never forgot the impact of that experience. It was not so much the pain that he remembered, as the matter in which the pain was inflicted--a helpless, passive receiving of a blow from an invisible first of machinery and death. Indeed, it was the passivity rather than the pain, which was to remain a nightmare for Hemingway throughout his career. The nightmare, which is the most important element in Hemingway's life, shaped many of his attitudes and indeed shaped characteristic Hemingway hero Henry. In the novel, it can be discovered both share the similar experience.

2.2 Henry, Created by the War

Lieutenant Fredric Henry is a young American attached to Italian ambulance unit on the Italian front.

He realized WWI is the first large scale imperial war, the first war in which mechanics were far important than heroes, and in which unprecedented massacres of men slaughtered each other with little or none of the “glory” and of “test of manhood”. In the war, brave soldiers and coward soldiers crawled about “from one bloody hole to another”. Henry was wounded in a very ridiculous way: a shell filled him full of metal while he was eating cheese and gossiping with others in a hole in the ground. For soldiers, it’s unbearable not wounding in battleground without true glory and sacrifice. He suddenly knew that in the mechanic warfare, the battlefields are corpse-factories; thousands of ambitious young man suddenly became dead. They cannot master their own life, their own will--even the will to get a taste of martial glory and noble sacrifice. The war has reduce man into an object, a passive creature, personal courage could have little meaning and less dignity in the warfare, in such case, no one can control his fate, no one can realize his glorious dream, the wars destroy them so easily, whether they are active or not.

Besides these, Henry also eyed the military leadership is absolute, the generals are incapable and selfish, the society is a mass and the government is deceitful. They start the war, but they cannot control the war. Then the plan was miscarried, the military administration “began to shoot troops by squads, so as to improve their morale”. The general treated the soldiers as cattle. If they succeed, the government benefits from it, however, the soldiers have nothing to do with the honor. Their result is only one: death, sooner or late, no matter who. “The world kill the kindest, the bravest--they kill you at the end”, man just as “ants on the fired log” “their bodies burnt and flattened, and went off not knowing where they are going.”

Facing the circus of days and the military chaos, Henry’s dream broken, his belief shaken “I was always embarrassed by the words scared, glorious, and sacrificial, and the expression in vain” remarks Frederic Henry, “I had seen nothing scared, and the things that were glorious had no glory and sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it.”

2.3 Henry, Farewell to the War

Henry seemed to have found the final proof of the bankruptcy of western civilization. He puzzled. Does my former belief is true? Why not throw it away and do things according to my right way?

It is no doubt that he would simply face up to reality with endurance, pride, and courage. Faced with futility, Henry accept it, even more, he opposes it by his strength as a man. He would not dribble sentimentalities or endow meaning to meaningless universe. He can endure it like a true man. Never to be a coward, even Henry doesn’t willing to take active measures. What he respects are the strength, power of individual creature, courage and control, especially the control of his thought, his mouth, even his actions. In fact, all Hemingway’s heroes have their own principles in spite of their cynicism.

Henry hated the war. He cursed it, but he did not escape the battlefield until the retreat happened. It is the retreat that made his mind to farewell to arms. “In fact, my obligation stops when the soldiers grasped my collar” “I am willing to take off my uniform--only for the sake of conscience, it has nothing to do with the honor--I am just wash my hands.”

He washed his hands. He said farewell to arms. But without the war, without the chance for manhood and assertion of will which he had believed that the war would provide, he is left in a world stripped of all meaning--a world which threatens not only his life, but the very essence of his manhood.

2.4 Henry, Farewell to His Love

What can he do next? To save the world peace? To sacrifice him for “the noble cause” and “glory”? No, Henry lost interest in finding “solution” that was not based on the facts of living--and the facts of doing. He wanted no more propaganda, no more expression in vain, no more horror of war but

real life--these determined Henry's attitudes towards love. When he meets with Catherine Barkley, he absorbs himself in love immediately. In fact, he has no choice if he wants to live bravely; Catherine's love is his only spiritual comfort and the unique way for him to escape the shadow of the war. In addition, Catherine is the very kind of good woman for him --her entire passivity and submission realized that his manhood failed on the battleground. Henry is searching not simply for a true love, but for a true cause--a means of achieving value in a situation of chaos and futility.

For the novel, there is a virtually important aspect of the relationship between Catherine and Henry, indeed, it is the fact that the young American is less a Byronic lover than he is a patient: he turns to his "lovely cool goddess", because in her complete passivity she becomes what the war itself should have been and was not "an instruments by means of which the Hemingway hero asserts his masculine role. Catherine herself hardly exits at all, she offers to become whatever you are", she returns to Henry his sadly damaged initiative, and in the process--becomes "Hemingway amoeba woman".

"We two are in one", "I'd rather be you", "If you are happy, I'm also" are her pet phrases. For the two, the other is his or her whole world, especially for Henry, he can't live without Catherine, because he isolated himself in their two-person world, and he cuts all his relations with the outside in which is full of war.

But the war still actually exists, Henry can't escape from its shadow. He is afraid of thinking of the war. For this, he does not willing to think--let the war be, let the world be. But he can't avoid thinking the war even at all costs "I'm just like pupil who is play truant, always think of the activities in school..."

The war is a monster, life is a game, the world is a big trap, and so the love seems a dream in Henry's eyes. He grasps it, he enjoys it, but he still regards it as an illusion because all are games, the end of the game is destruction. That's why he always feels he will finally lose Catherine, lose his love, and leave him alone again. That's why whenever he hears Catherine talking about her pregnancy, he feels nervous.

In Henry's heart, the love is doomed, and he prepares for Catherine's death silently till she really dies, he becomes calm quickly. In such a case, the Hemingway hero should abide by Hemingway code: a man should simply face up to reality with endurance, pride, courage and silence. He should accept disaster gracefully.

Henry's imaginative love ends. Perhaps, in his heart, just another play ends. There was nothing he could do, no one he could talk, no place he could go "Saying good-bye to a stature, after a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain." He farewells to love. He has to challenge the reality silently by himself according to his principles.

3. Summary

Henry, a lonely hero, after seeing an entire world of ethical, moral and political values shattered in the war, he farewells to arms; After saying good-bye to his love, he becomes a real Hemingway hero. In short, the war tempts Henry, breaks his dream, and then deserts him. In the war, he adjusts his attitudes towards life and love-- passive, fears of thinking, escape till finally accept the disaster bravely again which reflects Henry's spirits: lonely but brave, weak but strong. It is the war that creates Henry. Hemingway himself is an energetic legend; however, his hero Henry seems like a rose blooming quietly in dim night, set forth a delicate fragrance silently.

References

- [1] Li, Yixie, Chan, Yaoxin, *Selected Readings in American Literature*. TianJin: Nankai university press, 1991.
- [2] Stanly, Copperman, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1996.
- [3] Gui, Yangqing, Wu, Xianglin, *Selected Readings in English and American Literature*. Beijing:

China International Translation and Publishing Company, 1985.

- [4] King, Singer, *Hemingway, Life and Deaths of a Giant*. Zhejiang: Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House, 1984.
- [5] Hemingway, Ernest, *A Farewell to Arms*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1980.