

Realism versus Romanticism through Symbolism

in

“A Farewell to Arms”

(Name)

Professor

Class

Date

Outline

- THESIS: Ernest Hemingway's experiences in the First World War provides a strong rebuttal to the romantic notions of war particularly in literature, and utilizes rain to symbolize death, destruction, and misery that he stresses as the realities of war.
- I. Introduction
 - A. The romanticist views war as a moral battle between good and evil.
 - B. Hemingway uses his first-hand experience in the First World War to portray how war is not as ideal as romanticists portray it to be.
 - II. Romanticism and Realism of War
 - A. War removes a person's control of his or her destiny.
 - B. The reality of the war is not about the purpose of waging it, but when it will stop terrorizing those involved.
 - III. Romantic Hero versus Frederic Henry
 - A. Frederic Henry, the main character in the novel, can never be a romantic hero.
 - B. Hemingway's portrayal of the novel's main character is in direct contrast to the usual romantic war heroes in literature.
 - IV. Realistic Hero's Breakdown
 - A. War destroys an individual's spirit.
 - B. Frederic breaks down and succumbs to the crippling effects of war in his attitude, love, and life.
 - V. Realism through Symbolism
 - A. Hemingway uses rain to symbolize the permanence of misery all throughout the novel and all throughout the war.
 - B. Hemingway uses rain to symbolize the hopelessness of the novel, and to provide readers with the hint that this realistic war story will not have a happy ending.
 - VI. Conclusion
 - A. Hemingway's total condemnation of war is a rebuttal to the romanticists' glorification of war.
 - B. The use of rain in the novel is ironic of the usual association of rain and water to life and fertility.
 - C. The novel's simple plot, language, and regular setting are characteristics of realism.

Realism versus Romanticism through Symbolism

in

“A Farewell to Arms”

Introduction

Romanticism in literature has always viewed the concept of war as something that is ideal. Writers such as Thoreau, Byron, and Emerson are among the writers who support the idea of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the majority or the nation (Ott 108). It is not surprising that during the years leading to the First World War, there was a lively hysteria for the prospect of doing something that is morally good and logical (Fletcher 16). Pride and honor are among the values usually linked to the advocated of war during that time (Keegan 11). People were not yet aware of the humongous and terrible realities that war would bring upon people, either in groups, by individuals, or by nations.

After the First World War, Ernest Hemingway wrote “A Farewell to Arms,” which can be seen as his realistic and somewhat acrimonious rebuttal to the romantic ideals associated with wars (Ott 108). Here, war is depicted as something destructive and inhuman, as opposed to the common standpoint that it is a moral and heroic struggle between good and evil. His realism comes from “his experiences as an ambulance driver in the Italian Army” (Hewson 52) and provides the novel not only allusions to the author's life story, but also to the more “severe and devastating realities of war” (Keegan 11). Italy, as history says, was largely destroyed in every possible aspect after the First World War --- morally, physically, and psychologically (Keegan 39). Hemingway's use of symbolism, particularly of nature, expresses his dry and cynical approach to war. The love story narrated in the novel is a sharp contradiction to its setting, which

is the author's way of depicting the illusions often associated with wars. For Hemingway, war cannot be justified by illusions of its moral or heroic purpose (Ott 109-10).

Romanticism and Realism of War

For the novel's lead characters Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley, they have no control over their lives during the war. Unlike the warring nations, they are not able to escape the realities that war inflicted on them. If the physical limits of the war's end at certain jurisdictions, the spiritual effect to people is limitless and exceeds territorial boundaries (Keegan 21). After the escape to Switzerland, Frederic states: "You never get away with anything" (Hemingway 320). Furthermore, through Frederic, Hemingway expresses his contempt for war by stating that it is something that "killed you gratuitously like Aymo. Or gave you syphilis like Rinaldi" (Hemingway 327).

The romantic and realistic purposes of war can never meet eye to eye (Bloom 33). Realistically, war is waged for the purpose of winning. Romantically, war is waged as a battle between good and evil. The novel stresses the author's contempt for the war. In a dialogue between Frederic and Italian named Pasini, Hemingway writes:

...but we must finish it...War is not won by victory...One side must stop fighting...But no, instead there is a war...even the peasants know better that to believe in a war. Everybody hates this war. (Hemingway 50-1)

In this dialogue, Hemingway presents the argument that the question is not whether why war is being waged, but when people will decide to end it. According to history, the war the Italian Army is fighting for means nothing but a mere parcel of land (Keegan 41). Most of the

population felt the real effects of the war and hated it (Keegan 39), yet the government decided to be romantic on the supposedly purpose of it. Hemingway states this reality in the novel through Frederic, Catherine, and the Italian soldiers who do not really care about the purpose of all this fighting, but are powerless to stop the turn of their fates.

While the whole romantic world paraded and feasted in their celebration of the coming of war, historians tell another story. The war soon becomes a dragging affair that went on and on to the point of meaninglessness (Keegan 53). Suddenly, reality hits people straight in the face that war is not really a romantic event of conflicting powers fighting for their own dignity and honor. The front lines of the war cannot have the same romantic idealism as the governments they obey. For them, war is about the endless dangers and risks of lives. (Hewson 55)

Romantic Hero versus Frederic Henry

In a romanticist's point of view, the romantic hero would be signing up for the battle because he knows the ideals he is fighting for --- justice and moral good. However, the realistic hero like Frederic Henry in the novel is fighting war for survival. It is not about dignity, or moral good, or justice (Bloom 21). He is fully aware that in war, no one can save anyone. Frederic is not able to save himself from being injured. He is not even able to save the Italian native from injury either. Frederic says: "I tried to get closer to Passini to try to put a tourniquet on the legs but I could not move" (Hemingway 55). In the novel, everyone that Frederic wants to save is not saved. He is not able to save even the love of his life, Catherine.

At the start, Frederic Henry is the ideal romantic hero --- confident, dignified, full of life, smart, and compassionate for his fellowmen. However, as the realities of war begin to hit him over and over, these characteristics begin to deteriorate. From the brave young soldier, Frederic

turns into a melancholic man wanting nothing more than to survive the horrors of his existence and live his life happily with Catherine. Instead of facing the enemies, he disguises himself in civilian attire. He wants to survive and he does not care for the “purpose” of the war. Unlike heroes in romantic war novels, Frederic tries to escape death (Bloom 49). He feels that death and dying is worthless in this war, or any war for that matter. No amount of dignity or honor could persuade him to think that human lives are worthy to be risked for the purpose of the war.

In a romanticist's point of view, Frederic would appear cowardly in avoiding death. However, this is exactly what the author wants to highlight --- that it is utterly unrealistic to view war as something that men look forward to in order to prove their strength, honor, or chivalry. Instead, he wants to point out that war is a disastrous event that destroys and brings deterioration to man's mental, spiritual, emotional, and physiological structure. Frederic says that wars breaks the human soul and “those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially” (Hemingway 249). It is easy to sense here that these lines do not portray the courageous and chivalrous thoughts of the usual romantic hero, but the fear and repugnance of a realist. Hemingway's reality is how a man would rather turn back to the peaceful state of his life rather than be caught dead in a war --- despite the grandeur associated to it by romantic literature.

Realistic Hero's Breakdown

As Frederic becomes more and more acquainted with the realities of war, he begins to break down. The bitter reality here is that no matter how much Frederic tries to survive and run away from the horrors of the war, the limitless boundaries of the spirit of war is something that is beyond any hero's control. This reality hits him fully when his baby dies:

The baby was dead...He had never been alive...You never had time to learn...But they killed you in the end. You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you.

(Hemingway 327)

Hemingway's dry tone expresses the hilarity of romantic ideals regarding war and death. Here, Frederic is not a man going through life bravely. Here, he is a man destroyed in spirit, crying out in a desperate attempt to appeal to deities: "Oh, God, please don't let her die...You took the baby but don't let her die...Please, please, dear God, don't let her die" (Hemingway 330). Frederic is overcome by the debilitating aftermath of war on a person's spirit, that even if the war ends, Frederic will have this lifelong trauma that he will carry with him as long as he lives.

Realism through Symbolism

Hemingway repeatedly highlights the destruction brought upon by the war. All throughout the novel, he uses symbolism to foreshadow events and lead readers into creating an accurate image of the desolate situation of those involved in the war (Bloom 19). Rain, or water for that matter, is usually seen as something that supports life, yet Hemingway effectively utilizes this as an ironic representation of gloom, pain, and destruction (Harrington 60-1) --- as if also to emphasize that the romanticist ideals on war are ironic and are merely illusions. On the first few pages of the novel, Hemingway writes: "At the start of the winter came the permanent rain...But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it in the army" (8). The tone is dry, almost casual. Hemingway chooses to eliminate reference to emotions and allows the "permanent rain" to speak for the real gloom associated with war.

Rain is also used to symbolize the fear of losing one's own life, of the life of a loved one to war. In the novel, Catherine is said to have lost a fiancé to war, and is equally afraid to lose

another loved one, Frederic, in the same manner (Seed, Benson, and Donaldson 452). In the story, Catherine says “I’m afraid of the rain because sometimes I see me dead in it” (Hemingway 113). This is either emotional or physical death. While romantics may view self-sacrifice as honorable, this line stresses the realistic viewpoint that war only threatens a person with the pain of possible death.

There is no doubt that rain here is used to symbolize or foreshadow death. Frederic, at one point, muses: “but outside it kept on raining” (Hemingway 93). This is right after Frederic comforts Catherine and tries to assure her that everything will be alright. But in this chaotic situation, no one is really in control of the circumstances. The helplessness of one's buckling under the persistence of the “rain” can easily be felt when one considers how no one can really control nature or fate, and this is what the author wants to say particularly in presenting how war affects a human spirit (Seed, Benson and Donaldson 452-3). By choosing nature to represent the gloom in the novel, Hemingway expresses the limited capacity of men to choose his destiny in the middle of a war. The only thing a person can do is try to survive as much as possible. This is very much contradictory to the romantic stance that glorifies war as something man can play with, command, or even justify.

Conclusion

Hemingway does not merely present the realities of war --- he condemns it. He states that it creates a situation that destroys mankind. With the use of rain to symbolize gloom and death, he lets the readers reflect on the war's ability to kill everybody --- heart, mind, and soul. It is a bitter rebuttal to the romanticists' glorification of war. This is not like the war between Hector

and Achilles that will decide the fate and glory of either army (Bloom 36-7). This is a war against individuals who are not given the chance to choose to live safely, peacefully, and happily.

From start to finish, references to rain are abundant along with other images of water. The rain foreshadows death in all aspects. It hinders any possible happiness that Frederic and Catherine could have (Harrington 60). It blocks any thought of hope from the readers that the novel will have a happy ending. From the muddy pools at the war front to the continuous pouring of the rain upon Frederic's return to his hotel room, all that rain symbolizes is misery and death. While rain could be a symbol of good harvest or fertility in most literary pieces, Hemingway uses it to symbolize death and sterility (Bloom 23).

In contrast to romanticism, aside from basing the story on real-life and first-hand war experiences, Hemingway uses an ordinary person to present the real situations that happen during war. The novel's plot is very ordinary and simple, and without the grand trimmings of mystery or adventure. Here, readers see two people whose happiness is obstructed by war. A romantic war story may lead to a happy ending, but Hemingway chooses to point out the reality that a bad event is almost impossible to end happily. The language and setting are very common --- as opposed to inflated speech --- portraying all the more the reality of the situation (Bloom 78-9). The symbolism used in this novel serves to emphasize the realities the author wants to portray. It may be ironic to view rain as a symbol of sterility, but the way Hemingway builds this particular imagery is not only brilliant, but also somewhat referring to the unspoken wisdom that "the usual connotation is not always the reality." During that era, it can be said that people are still so into the romantic stance on war, that Hemingway's novel can be taken as a rebuttal to that

consensus during that time (Ott 108). The way he utilizes rain to represent the gloom and misery all throughout the novel depicts the lingering realistic melancholy that wars bring to people.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. *Ernest Hemingway's a Farewell to Arms*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010. Print.
- Fletcher, George P. *Romantics at War: Glory and Guilt in the Age of Terrorism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. Print.
- Harrington, Gary. "Partial Articulation: Word Play in a Farewell to Arms." *The Hemingway Review*. 20.2 (2011): 59-75. Print.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975. Print.
- Hewson, Marc. "'the Real Story of Ernest Hemingway': Cixous, Gender, and a Farewell to Arms." *The Hemingway Review*. 22.2 (2011): 51-62. Print.
- Keegan, John. *The First World War: An Illustrated History*. London: Pimlico, 2002. Print.
- Ott, Mark. "Ernest Hemingway's a Farewell to Arms: a Reference Guide (review)." *Hemingway Review*. 23.2 (2004): 108-110. Print.
- Seed, David, Jackson J. Benson, and Scott Donaldson. "Review of New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway." *Review of English Studies*. 44.175 (1993): 452-453. Print.