

# **A Study of *A Farewell to Arms* as Ernest Hemingway's Autobiographical Novel: A Freudian Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

The objectives of this document-oriented study are to prove that the main character in *A Farewell to Arms* represents Ernest Hemingway's real life while serving his country during World War I and to demonstrate that Freudian psychological concepts of the organization of personality, instinct and anxiety can reasonably explain the similarity between the main character in *A Farewell to Arms* and Ernest Hemingway himself including the situation they have to go through and people they associate with. The results of this study confirm that the purpose of Hemingway's novel is to present the nature of himself as a human being and emphasize the importance of penetrating the unconsciousness, which is the best means of resolving self-conflicts. Moreover, the comparative study of the main character in *A Farewell to Arms* and its author, Ernest Hemingway, shows that his novel is an autobiographical novel because the main character is the personification of himself and the incidents in the novel depict his own experiences.

## Introduction

World War I was a military conflict which took place from August 1914 to November 1918, and involved many of the countries of Europe as well as the United States and other nations throughout the world. World War I was one of the most violent and destructive wars in European history. Of the 65 million men who mobilized, more than 10 million were killed and more than 20 million wounded. Once the war began, the countries involved mobilized their entire populations and economic resources to achieve the victory on the battlefield. However, when the war ended, onerous burdens lay over all countries. The financial losses combined with the battlefield deaths and physical destruction severely weakened European and American societies (Gilbert, 1994).

Literature, both poems and novels, in that period dealt with subjects related to war and destruction. Political events, the serious depression and chaos in society had a great influence on several poets and novelists. So, if anyone would like to study the impact of war on people during that time, one possible way is to study through poems and novels.

As one of the main functions of novels is to express feelings kept in its writer's mind, readers are expected to gain insight and sometimes even concrete knowledge about the effects of past and present social, economic and political conditions of a particular time on the writer. As a result, novels are seen as a source of history for many people.

In order to get deep understanding of novels, psychology is an excellent method to employ. Since the characters in the novel have human-like conditions, the use of psychoanalysis will be best suited to the quest for the truth hidden in the characters which will reveal the mind of their authors.

Sigmund Freud was the first psychoanalyst. Many of his insights into the human mind are now widely accepted by most schools of psychological thought. In the world of literature, many of his concepts are borrowed to explain the nature of characters which lead to conflicts or climax of the story. Freud's psychological concepts are employed to unlock the dark side kept in the character's mind.

In the case of *A Farewell to Arms*, although the book is not categorized as an autobiographical novel, in which its author pictures

himself in the story, the main character shares much similarity in ideas, points of view and experiences with the author. These are the reasons why the researcher will study the novel *A Farewell to Arms* and find the connection between Ernest Hemingway's life and the characters, plot and scenes in the novel by using Freud's theories in order to conclude that *A Farewell to Arms* is a reflection of Ernest Hemingway's life or, in a word, his autobiography.

## Scope of the Study

The researcher will study *A Farewell to Arms* by using Freudian psychological theories of organization of personality, instinct and anxiety in order to find connection between Frederic Henry and his surroundings and compare those with Hemingway's.

The impact of war on Hemingway will be focused only on the first World War during 1917-1918, the period in which Ernest Hemingway joined the army.

## Review of Literature

An attempt to use psychology for analyzing literature is actually the attempt to study and find out the truth hidden in the mind and behavior of human beings. The process mentioned can be completed by looking through the characters in the novel which represent human beings themselves. So, it means that the characters are regarded as human beings under different circumstances. The characters' reaction, behavior, attitude and feeling are similar to those that human beings have (ศรีเรือน แก้วกังวาล, 2529, น. 20).

At the end of the nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud had published his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He focused his study on the unconsciousness of mind or internal thinking. From his study, literary critics can see the link or the relationship between the authors and their works. The critics interpret symbols and the characters' actions along with studying the biography of the author in order to find out motivations and reasons behind the characters' behavior. By doing this

the critics hope that the hidden feeling or thinking of the authors will be revealed (สร้อยสน สกลรักษ์, 2537, น. 15). Many critics tried to prove that psychology can unlock the self of the author kept in his/her unconsciousness. According to Elizabeth Wright in *Psychoanalysis Criticism: Theory in Practice* (1985), the relationship between psychology and literature is described:

...Works of art or literature can reveal their creator's psychology. The novel acts as the channel to release the author's subconscious. The way the author reveals his/her subconscious through the story is just like the way s/he dreams. The same mechanisms which in dreams and nightmares, govern the manner in which our strongest, though most carefully concealed desires are elaborated. Desires which are the most repugnant to consciousness, also govern the elaboration of a work of art. (p. 45)

It means that, the author has invested his/her work of art with personal fantasies and, at times, unconsciously reveals himself/herself in it.

## **Freudian Psychoanalysis Theories**

As mentioned earlier, after Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* was published in 1900, literary scholars believed that his psychological theory could build a bridge between the authors and their works. Freudian psychoanalytical theories are used for interpreting the symbols or the actions of the characters which will lead to the real situations that its author is facing or used to experience.

In this study, three psychological concepts of Sigmund Freud will be employed. They are the organization of personality, instinct and anxiety.

### **The Organization of Personality**

The total personality as conceived by Freud consists of three major

systems. These are called the id, the ego, and the superego. In a mentally healthy person, the three systems form a unified and harmonious organization. By working together cooperatively, they enable the individual to carry on efficient and satisfying transactions with his/her environment. The purpose of these transactions is the fulfillment of man's basic needs and desires. Conversely, when the three systems of personality are at odds with one another, the person is said to be maladjusted. S/he is dissatisfied with herself/himself and with the world around.

### • The Id

The id is the drive in the human mind which each individual has since s/he was born. The sole function of the id is to provide for the immediate discharge of qualities of excitation that are released in the organism by internal or external stimulation. This function of the id fulfills the initial principle of life which Freud called the pleasure principle. Dream and recollection of thoughts are also considered as a kind of response to the fundamental needs. As a result, the novel that is written from the memory of the author or the fantasy story that requires considerable imagination, shows us the id in the author's mind, as Freud wrote in the article "*Creative Writers and Day Dreaming*" (1959):

The motive force of fantasies are unsatisfied wish, and every single fantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a corrective of unsatisfied reality...mental work is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes. From there harks back to a memory of an earlier experience in which this wish was fulfilled, and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfillment to the wish. (p. 38)

The above sentences mean that the drive to create a fantasy world in writing is the fulfillment of the need in the realistic world of the author to fulfill his/her dream. Furthermore, Freud explained that the system of the mind is related to the impression of a particular situation. The

imprinted memory will bring the author back to that time and s/he will write in order to fantasize his/her dream or memory or to correct his unsatisfied reality.

### • The Ego

The ego is the personality controlling or governing the id and the superego and maintaining commerce with the external world in the interest of the total personality and its far-flung need. Instead of the pleasure principle, the ego is governed by the reality principle. The aim of the reality principle is to postpone the discharge of energy until the actual object that will satisfy the need has been discovered or produced. The postponement of action means that the ego has to be able to tolerate tension until the tension can be discharged by an appropriate form of behavior.

Moreover, the ego can lead to dreams full of imagination created by the satisfaction of the dreamers. However, the dreamer is still able to differentiate the reality and the dream. He can tell himself that he is dreaming and all fantasies created are the way to lessen the tension caused by unfulfilled needs.

### • The Superego

The superego is the moral or judicial branch of personality. It represents the ideal rather than the real and it strives for perfection rather than for reality or pleasure. The superego is the person's moral code. It develops out of the ego as a consequence of the child's assimilation of his parents' standards regarding what is good and virtuous and what is bad and sinful.

### The Instincts

An instinct is a sum of psychic energy which imparts direction to psychological process and that it has a source, an aim, an object and an impetus. Actually, there are so many types of instincts because they are the representatives of bodily needs, but Freud recognized two great groups of them: those that are in the service of death and those that are in the service of life (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1985; Rycroft, 1968).

## • Death Instinct

The ultimate goal of the death instincts is to return to the constancy of inorganic matter. It is the drive that makes people want to return to their inorganic life, or, in other words, they want to die.

## • Life Instinct

The life instincts are better known because their effects are more public. They are the mental representatives of all of the bodily needs whose satisfaction is necessary for survival and for propagation. The form of energy which is used by life instincts is called *libido*.

Life and death instincts and their derivatives may be used with one another, neutralize each other or alternate with one another.

## **Anxiety**

Anxiety is one of the most important concepts in psychoanalysis theory. It plays an important role in the development of personality as well as in the dynamics of personality functions. Anxiety is a painful emotional experience. Anxiety is synonymous with the emotion of fear. Freud preferred the term anxiety to that of fear because it is usually thought of in the sense of being afraid of something in the external as well as in the internal worlds. Freud differentiated three types of anxiety: reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety and moral anxiety (Rycroft, 1968).

## • Reality Anxiety

Reality anxiety is a painful emotional experience resulting from a perception of danger in the external world. A danger is any condition in the environment which threatens to harm the person.

## • Neurotic Anxiety

Neurotic anxiety is aroused by a perception of danger from instincts. People who have neurotic anxiety are overpowered by the id. They are afraid that they will lose control over themselves and they will make some mistakes which later on will cause them to be condemned or punished.

## • Moral Anxiety

Moral anxiety, which is experienced as feelings of guilt or shame

in the ego, is aroused by a perception of danger from the conscious. The conflict is purely intra-psychic, which means that it is a structural one and does not involve a relationship between the person and the world.

## Summary of the Analysis

In order to understand the influence of war on the war-depicted novel like *A Farewell to Arms*, readers should be able to see how war has impacted on authors of war novels such as Ernest Hemingway. It is normally the authors' participation in battles and direct experiences received from them that determine the tone of the plot and the theme of the novels. Therefore, if readers want a deep understanding of the story, they have to explore the story of the author in the same way that they try to understand the characters. By doing this, the readers can relate the similarities and also some connections between the author and the characters because the author usually uses his/her own experience as a main source in creating the plot, setting, characters and, sometimes, theme of the story. Besides, at times, the author observes surrounding situations or people in society and uses those stories as inspiration in creating novels. Ernest Hemingway is a vivid example of an author who uses his own experiences in war together with his observations of events and people during the war period to write his novels including *A Farewell to Arms*.

The fact that Ernest Hemingway was an obsessed writer who wrote chiefly to relieve his psychic distress is a widely held belief. Many critics are interested in the parallels between psychoanalysis and the course of Hemingway's writing's career. His writing is a way to open the gate of tension kept in his mind and to relieve regressed aggressiveness. For this reason, the story that comes from its author's memory has a strong autobiographical basis and usually tells a story of the author himself caught up in a world of hostility or violence (Mandel, 1995).

Frederic J. Hoffman (1955), a contemporary literary critic, is another person who believed in Freud's theory of anxiety. He is quite certain that Hemingway was obsessed with the wounds and experience he got from World War I while he was only 18 years old. This idea is supported

by Philip Young in *Ernest Hemingway* (1964). Young referred to Freudian psychoanalysis theory and concluded in several of his books that after an extremely exciting situation, the mind of the person who is the victim of the event, for example, in this case, Ernest Hemingway's, will always bring back that imprinted memory. The memory is recollected over time to time because the situation destroyed his reasoning ability and emotional control system. This is why the person cannot forget what happen to him and the situation keeps lingering in his mind. If his id cannot release the tension and function in creating pleasure, he might lose control over himself and his ego may not be able to balance the id and superego.

In case of Ernest Hemingway, the violence and cruelty of war was particularly haunting. As an ambulance driver, he had to carry many injured soldiers to the hospital and sometimes the dead to the mortuary. He witnessed the moment when life was taken and he found out that war was not heroic. Later, when he was hit by the bomb, his own illness confirmed what was so frightening and destructive and it shocked him. According to Freud's theory, what happened to Hemingway is called anxiety which is explained as a painful emotional experience resulting from a perception of danger in the external world. Hemingway could not forget his war experience and, in order to hold his emotional balance, he relieved it in one of his novels *A Farewell to Arms*.

After the researcher studied the biography of Ernest Hemingway and related it to the story of Frederic Henry, the main character in *A Farewell to Arms* by using the Freudian psychoanalytical theories. Many similarities are found and the following are the results of the study.

## **The Author's Direct Experience in Plot**

The plot of *A Farewell to Arms* took place during World War I when the Italian Army was fighting against Austrian troops. It was at this time that Hemingway got involved in the fight as an ambulance driver. In 1918, Hemingway joined the ambulance unit destined for the Italian front. At Fossalte di Piave, he was hit by an Austrian trench-mortar bomb and had 237 pieces of iron in his leg. In Milan where

he was cured, he fell in love with a nurse named Agnes von Kurowsky, but, finally, they had to separate since Hemingway was sent back to the United States and was rejected because Agnes thought he was too young (Baker, 1988).

Ten years after the war, Hemingway wrote *A Farewell to Arms* and its plot resembles his own story in real life. Hemingway turned his experience into fiction. Both Hemingway and Frederic Henry underwent the almost identical experience in both love and war. Although Hemingway added his imagination in the story, it still cannot be denied that there are some true elements in the story especially in the plot which is about joining the war, getting hurt, falling in love and growing up.

## **The Author's Direct Experience in Characters**

From the fact that Ernest Hemingway joined the war and witnessed the cruelty of war in many situations, he released this tension in fiction and shared it with the readers. He wanted to take people living in different times and places back to the scene of the war. Hemingway used his main characters, Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley, as tools to bring his memory to life not just to remind him of the sadness, but to drain it from his mind.

### **Frederic Henry**

Frederic Henry is actually the copy of Ernest Hemingway. They both are alike in terms of what they had been through during World War I. Hemingway joined the Red Cross in France and was transferred to the Italian front. He was distributing cigarettes and food in the Piave district in the frontline trenches when a shell from a trench mortar burst over his head. After that, he was shot in the shoulder and in the right leg. One of his Italian friends was killed instantly, while another had both legs blown off. The third Italian was badly wounded and this one was picked up on Hemingway's back and carried to the first aid dugout. Because of this heroic action, he got two decorations from the government. Philip Young said in *Ernest Hemingway* (1964) that Hemingway threw the decorations away since he could not recall that he carried the injured soldier to a safe place.

The story of Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* is not much different from the story of Hemingway. Henry is an American ambulance driver and a lieutenant in the Italian army who was shot and then fell in love with a nurse who took care of him during hospitalization. He received two decorations from his bravery in war, but was not happy for them because he knew that he was eating cheese when the bomb hit and he could not move, not to mention that he could carry a man on his back. So, he was not proud of the decorations.

### **Catherine Barkley**

If Frederic Henry is proven to be Ernest Hemingway in reality, Catherine Barkley is no doubt Agnes von Kurowsky, a nurse who took care of Hemingway during World War I.

Agnes von Kurowsky was an older, very dependent American nurse. While she was taking care of Hemingway, they were clearly in love. After five months of hospitalization, surgery, recuperation, and physical therapy, Hemingway returned to the United States as a celebrity and a hero and finally was written to by Agnes to end their relationship (Meyers, 1985).

Ten years later Hemingway was still coming to terms with his love affair with Agnes. He wrote *A Farewell to Arms*, a story based on himself and Agnes. He was still trying to purge himself of his first real love. Agnes von Kurowsky was described in several books as a tall, dark-haired lady. In the 1929 novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, we see her become alive again in Catherine Barkley, a British nurse in Milan.

However, Hemingway took the characters further than his World War I experience –through a love affair, war scenes, a dramatic escape and the final scenes of childbirth. This can be explained by Freud's theory of the id. In reality, Hemingway was disappointed with the unfulfilled love he had for Agnes, so his id led to a dream full of imagination created by the satisfaction of the dreamer. Hemingway lessened the tension of losing Agnes by creating a wonderful love story between Henry and Catherine who represent himself and Agnes. However, since Hemingway was attracted by death, the final stage of life that he observed so many times during the wars, he was controlled by the death instinct. As a result, he decided to end Catherine's life during labor and the lovers had to be apart again like in reality. This can be explained

by Freud's concept of the ego. Hemingway's ego was governed by the reality principle and it brought him back from his fantastic love to the loss in reality.

## **The Author's Direct Experience in Theme**

The story *A Farewell to Arms* concerns itself primarily with the development of Hemingway's philosophy of life and all of the main characters in the novel serve largely as foils to Henry, a reflection of Hemingway.

Hemingway believed that the universe is an unordered one. There is no God to watch over man, to dictate codes of morality or to ensure justice. Instead, the universe is indifferent and, sometimes, even hostile to man's plight. In the book, the indifference is best exemplified by the war -- an ultimately futile struggle of man against man. There are no winners in a war, and there is no reason behind the lives which are taken.

The true Hemingway hero, including Frederic Henry, must first accept this fact of the universe. This calls for many things, the first of which being a disbelief in God. Because there is no God, there are no universal moral codes, no abstract values and no need for moral conventions. The code hero rejects these, but imposes order upon his life through personal values -- integrity, dignity, courage, etc. In essence, the hero learns that he, himself, is a crucial source of meaning. Finally, such a person must accept the finality of death, knowing himself to be caught in a meaningless existence.

## **The Author's Direct Experience in Setting**

The war scenes appearing in *A Farewell to Arms* are derived from the real incidents in world history. They are the real fighting scenes that Hemingway witnessed while carrying out his duty. According to Hemingway's biography reported in *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (1988), Carlos Baker said that Hemingway used to be a volunteer for the Red Cross working in Italy where the Italian troop

were fighting against the Austrian army. The setting that Hemingway used in his story, *A Farewell to Arms*, comes from these real places where he used to stay, for example, the scene at Caporetto and at the river Piave. This kind of the real setting reflects the impacts of war on Hemingway. The stories of the soldiers and innocent people who were in trouble during the war were recorded and used as the setting in the story.

## Conclusion

The result of the study of *A Farewell to Arms* as Ernest Hemingway's autobiographical novel found that there are some similarities between Hemingway's biography and the story of Frederic Henry, the main character in *A Farewell to Arms*. The finding of this study is proven by comparing the plot, setting and theme of *A Farewell to Arms* to Hemingway's biography and the use of Freudian psychoanalysis theory to reasonably explain the characteristics of the main character which is truly the representative of the author.

The comparative study of Frederic Henry in the Italian army in *A Farewell to Arms* and Hemingway's life during World War I demonstrates that *A Farewell to Arms* is an autobiographical novel because the main character is the personification of Hemingway and the incidents in the novel depict his experiences. Hemingway used his own experience in plotting the story, creating the characters, deciding on the theme and picturing the setting.

## Recommendations for Further Study

This study proves that many fictions can be analyzed by using Freudian psychoanalytical theory. By using psychology, the characters will be examined as if they were real life people. The researchers can find reasons behind the story that explain the real motives of the character's actions just like those we find in human beings.

Besides, this research confirms the theory of the connections between the authors and their novels. Apart from fantasy and imagination,

authors use their real life experiences as materials for creating plot, characters, theme, and so forth in their novels. So, it is recommended that Freudian psychoanalysis theory be used in order to analyze other novels and to find the relationship between authors and their characters in order to associate fiction with the world of reality and to learn messages in life that the author wants to convey to his/her readers.

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