

Trauma and Recovery: Interaction of Love and War in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*

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Abstract

As one of the most important literary works written by an American writer, *A Farewell to Arms* has been studied from the perspective of a variety of critical approaches. The present study examines this novel from the point of view of trauma studies, especially as discussed by Judith Herman. Hermann divides trauma into several types and proposes three basic steps for the healing process: immunization, recalling and mourning, and reconnecting with life. Using her ideas, this paper concludes that the protagonist of the novel goes through traumatic experiences, whose effect deeply transform his very elemental characteristics. Furthermore, it illustrates how the main character makes an attempt to reconnect with the pre-traumatic society in a doomed way. The reason is attributed to the simple fact that he has not been able to confront and accept trauma and provide a reliable narrative. The main reason for his failure is that he does not go through all the stages Herman believes a trauma survivor should go through to relieve the pain and suffering.

Keywords: trauma, *A Farewell to Arms*, recalling and mourning, and reconnecting.

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How to cite this article:

Behzad Pourgharib; Abdolbaghi Rezaei Talarposhti; Ahmad Reza Rahimi. "Trauma and Recovery: Interaction of Love and War in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*". *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature, Arts and Humanities*, 1, 5, 2025, 253-264. doi: 10.22077/islsh.2025.8419.1547



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1. Introduction

The American novelist, short story writer and reporter, Ernest Hemingway was born in the last year of the nineteenth century. He left the country in 1917 as he wanted to join the US army for the World War I. However, his request to join the army was rejected due to his poor eyesight and hence he applied for a job as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross and found himself serving in Italy. His active period in the Red Cross was two months when he was wounded in leg and was taken to the hospital and then to another hospital in Milan. He had to return to his hometown in two years. (Nuraliev & Tsugaeva, 2023)

The experiences he had during the war took its toll on him such that his illusion of fighting with honor would be soon replaced with the simple concept of death in the battlefields. However, his life in Italy and his job as a wartime driver provided him with ample materials to write about. He was able to create wonderful images of the war and depict the feeling ranging from hope to despair and loss, to the extent that Fariha Gul (2024) asserts “as a war veteran himself, Hemmingway illustrates a realistic portrait of how war changes people through its menace and dangers” (11). *A Farewell to Arms*, which follows the life of an American ambulance driver serving in the same regions Hemingway did, reflects his experiences during these years.

The story happens during the First World War when a young American called Lieutenant Fredric Henry, an ambulance driver in the Italian army, falls in love with an English nurse, Catherine Barkley who cares about him after his injuries. Upon learning Catherine’s transfer to Milan, he moves there where he learns that Catherine is pregnant. They escape from the horrors of war to Switzerland. Later Catherine gives birth to a stillborn child and dies at childbirth as well. Henry is left alone and is desperate. Thus, the story is about Henry and Catherine’s life and death which microcosmically reflect the brutality and atrocities of the battlefields and their traumatic effects on the minds and souls of those therewith related. It is also a reminder that as Al-Fahdawi (2017) believes, veterans often grapple with silence, working to reconstruct their narratives for healing but ultimately feeling unsuccessful in this endeavor (140). Similarly, Khalil and Jahan (2022) emphasize this struggle, illustrating the profound impact of trauma on veterans (113). The importance of the novel in the scene of American literature in particular, and twentieth century literature in general, has made it a center of attention to many and from a variety of viewpoints.

2. Literature Review

Since its publication in 1929, *A Farewell to Arms*, has been received as a popular war novel and analyzed through a variety of critical approaches, each of which has pointed out special aspects of the novel. Such critical works have taken its themes into consideration, in addition to the specific style of Heminway, his heroic code in particular. The psychological status of the protagonist, Frederick Henry, was of significant importance for the analysis as well. This study, however, claims to glance

it from the trauma studies point of view, as it has not been much applied to this work of the early twentieth century. To understand the worth and value of this study, it deems proper to have a quick review of the previous studies which have endeavored to look at Hemingway's masterpiece from different points of view.

Regarding the depiction of men and the concept of masculinity, Ilyas (2018) believes that Hemingway's depiction of masculinity encompasses both traditional ideas, such as bravery, and the fragility that comes with enduring trauma. He highlights the characters' struggles with their experiences and society's expectations of masculinity (83) which might include some features such as being stoic and strong in case of shocking events. The setting of the novel, a battlefield, would play an important role as well, since it is a traditional arena in which the men would be challenged as to prove who the real man.

Thomspon (2019) in his paper entitled "In Hemingway's Madness and Descent into Chaos: A Farewell to Arms", examines the theme of madness in the novel and underlines the significance of the contribution of the characters' traumatic experiences to their psychological unraveling (45). In other words, the important thing is that the traumatic experiences of the characters are in fact the very elements which shaped the men of the novel as they are. Accordingly, had he not been exposed to such experiences; Henry's personality would have been totally different.

Vibishnan G and Dr. Sp. Shanthi (2024) in *War Life and Trauma in Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms* analyze the dual portrayal of war in Hemingway's novel, emphasizing the protagonist Frederic Henry's transformation from idealism to disillusionment. They argue that Henry's traumatic war experiences lead him to seek solace in love, yet his inability to fully process trauma results in a doomed attempt at recovery. Their work aligns with broader discussions on war's psychological impact but lacks a detailed exploration of trauma theory, such as Judith Herman's framework. This gap is addressed in the current study, which examines Henry's trauma and recovery through Herman's stages, offering a deeper understanding of his failed reintegration into society.

Azim Uddin and Karmakar (2020) concentrate on the love relationships in the novel. Their interpretation of the word "arm" in the title of the book as having two meaning – the first meaning would be "weapons" while the second meaning is "arm as a part of human body" – would basically be a pun which Heminway has chosen in order to make the title of the story, or rather the story itself, more centralized around the concept of love as we see that Catherine and her love affect Henry so much so that "he starts to have a lasting change from within" (51). The essay concludes that the soldier who came to find glory in the war, was ready to leave it for yet better one – the love.

Mengni Wang (2022) in "A Comparative Study of the Escape Motif in *A Red Badge of Courage* and *A Farewell to Arms*" declares that escapism in literature has an old history with "its roots in Roman and Greek myths and legends" in addition to

the Books of Genesis and Exodus and relates this motif with the American literature (90). He concludes that while Fleming, the hero in *A Red Badge of Courage* escapes due to “his instinct and the influence of society, Frederic’s escape is caused by his total disillusionment and desire for survival” (92). More than the desire to attain glory in war, it is the hope to survive which Hemingway’s hero endorses.

Having paid attention to some of pivotal works which have considered *A Farewell to Arms* from different viewpoints, the paper will pursue its goal of delving more into the novel providing an introduction to the concept of trauma and how Judith Herman, the key theorist of the paper’s argument, views it. The study will cover her concept of remedy and healing from trauma as well.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to fill a gap in scholarship in regard to trauma and the novel *A Farewell to Arms* through the theoretical framework of Judith Herman, whose psychoanalytic theories on trauma’s impact on individuals and the challenges of recovery and reintegration are applicable to the novel. Definitely, Herman’s going through the “three stages” (Herman 2015: 63) of recovery helps categorize Lieutenant Frederic Henry’s traumatic experiences and analyze their impact on the character.

4. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In 1992, Herman introduced her pioneering work, *Trauma and Recovery*, addressing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Herman’s theory stemmed from extensive experience with individuals who had endured trauma, including those who survived sexual violence, domestic abuse, natural calamities, and “military trauma” (Herman 2015: 43). Herman is a distinguished psychotherapist (and psychohistorian) who has made distinctive contributions to the discipline beyond the trailblazing clinician on certain issues. Despite being published over twenty years ago, her book remains a foundational text in the study of trauma (Suleiman 2008: 285, as cited in Zaleski, Johnson, & Klein 2016: 377). The present work addresses Herman’s recovery stages and how they assist in the examination of Frederic Henry’s traumas and their impact on his character. Although moments of trauma have been recorded since the time of ancient epics and with the emphasis on the traumatic experiences of soldiers in battlefield and its impacts on their personalities and lives afterwards, academic studies of trauma originally began in late nineteenth century, with the research of Jean-Martin Charcot whose studies on hysteria was more about the psychological conditions of women. More than the significance of traumatic events, the method to relieve people of the pain they suffered from was another important issue as well. Thus, and in order to relieve the patients of such pains, he introduced hypnosis as a “method to recall traumatic events, leading to the abrogation of symptoms (Ringel and Brandell 2012: 1).

In this way, the patient would more or less re-experience the same traumatic

events which would be used in relieving him/her of the pain of going through it. As Herman recounts in *Trauma and Recovery* (2015), “Janet discovered that when the memories were recounted under hypnosis, the traumatic symptoms were alleviated” (Ringel and Brandell 2012: 12). This is almost the same thing which is emphasized by other trauma studies scholars as well – the fact that the person will go through the similar or almost similar experience with the sole purpose of recovering from the terrible conditions in which he/she was caught.

Freud’s involvement with the trauma studies occurred during the period in which he was responsible for studying the mental and psychological status of the soldiers who had left the army, claiming that the dreams they had about the war would not let them have sound sleep. Unable to integrate these dreams into his interpretation of dreams as wish fulfillment process, he would relate such feelings with the hysteria. According to him, a person can be said to have a traumatic experience when he or she “experiences fright without preceding anxiety or fear, and without simultaneously experiencing a physical wound or injury” (Freud 1961:11). Moreover, Freud’s concept of trauma involves ego conflicts and repression, leading to repetitive somatic phenomena and dreams (Pourgharib et al. 2024: 45; Freud 2015: 14; Caruth 1995: 11). In case of remedy or recovery from such events, Freud believes that the dreams which a traumatized person has will bring him back to that moment, which in turn provides an opportunity to explore and process the traumatic experience with the possible hope for relief (Freud 1961: 11).

Much later and a still significant psychologist in this area is Judith Herman, who contributed one of the classical works of trauma studies, entitled *Trauma and Recovery* which, besides offering a full understanding of the trauma and traumatic symptoms, hints at the possible solutions which might help patients relieve of the pain of trauma and help them rediscover the life which was disrupted as a result of a traumatic event and occurrence. In fact, as a pioneering clinician and a major player in the theoretical debate, her *Trauma and Recovery* has been one of the most important and insightful books in the field of traumatology.

Regarding trauma symptoms, Herman (2015) categorizes them into three groups: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction (18). Hyperarousal refers to “a state of permanent alertness” which makes the person be prepared for any similar events which might befall him or her. For her, “hyperarousal is characterized by a shattered fight or flight response and an inability to filter out stimuli that non-traumatized individuals might consider background noise” (36). A typical example for this, as provided by Freud, is a train incident survivor who would be so much influenced by what he had gone through that he would experience traumatic feeling towards the train and as the result, he would fear traveling on trains ever after. A related example to this study might be a traumatized soldier who awaits violence and killing even after he has returned from the battlefield (Herman 2015: 36).

Intrusion is “the *idée fixe* or the repeated event that has not been assimilated

as normal memory” and as such it lacks verbal narrative and context, making it “necessary to narrativize them in order to process and integrate them into past memory” (Herman 2015: 38). As it is clear then the concept of narrativity is of much importance to the trauma studies. In better words, in order to understand trauma, the person should be able to put it in a sort of a narrative. Thus, trauma encodes abnormal memories, causing flashbacks and nightmares, making safe environments feel dangerous (Herman, 1997; Nobarly & Dasht Peyma, 2016). Similarly, Rezaeian et al. (2023) describe when “the terrible incident is over, victims believe they have been frozen in time” (89), emphasizing that trauma victims need to create narratives to process their experiences and move beyond feeling stuck in time.

The third group, constriction, is the state of detached mood and emotional shutdown. For Herman (2015), “detachment becomes a survival mechanism in the face of overwhelming loss and terror (44). It might be better explained as a sort of numbing which Herman defines as “a state of detached calm in which terror, rage, and pain dissolve” (42). In other words, emotions are so overwhelming that the psyche shuts itself and stops reacting to the surroundings with the sole purpose of keeping itself safe. “The traumatized people may constantly constrict and limit themselves to avoid the traumatic experience” (214). Moreover, Traumatized individuals may limit themselves to avoid re-experiencing trauma. Emotional constriction is a significant characteristic of PTSD (Valdez & Lilly 2012: 87). While this strategy can help manage trauma, it may also reduce social activities and lead to a sense of disconnection. Those who have experienced rape and violence often withdraw from close relationships due to feelings of shame and guilt (Lansky, 2000). Critics such as Robert J. Lifton also paid attention to the concept of numbing in traumatic cases. As endorsed by Cathy Caruth as well, Lifton believes that numbing is the moment when “the mind is severed from its own psychic forms, there’s an impairment in the symbolization process itself” (Caruth 1995: 134), which can also point to the lack of narrativization.

Most critics agree on almost all the above-mentioned points in regard to the characteristics of a traumatic event or the traumatized people. A more important issue which is more controversial is related to finding solutions to heal the patients from the traumatic experiences or their nightmares and flashbacks to the moment of trauma. In fact, it is the issue on which Herman focuses more than many other critics. Unlike critics like Caruth who puts emphasis on the incomprehensibility of trauma and as the result, the impossibility of releasing from it, Herman provides a three-stage solution for such cases. The three stages can be called recognition, integration and reconnection.

The first stage involves establishing safety and stability. As Herman states, “the first task of recovery is to establish the survivor’s safety” (Herman 2015: 159). This process can only begin after the recognition of the traumatic experience by the person who underwent it. This person comes to understand that trauma is similar to other

daily events which might happen in life and as such, he or she should accept it in this way so that the trauma will not happen again in their dreams or flashbacks. This stage will render trauma as a normal event and when a person accepts it, he or she will deal with it as such and then there would be no use to fight against it or attempt to return to that moment. When the traumatized person accepts it as a normal event, one of the consequences is that the same thing will not be experienced again, and therefore, the person is safely guarded against it.

The second stage is the period in which the survivor remembers the trauma through constructing a narrative which will facilitate memory processing and integration (Moser et al. 2007: 1081). The difficult part is that the survivor does not have a full memory of what has happened to him or her, as Herman maintains, “their narratives often have gaps” (176) and these gaps must be filled for the person to be able to recognize what has gone before. In better words, the traumatic experience can be like a puzzle to the person who must put the pieces together in order to comprehend the final image. A way to fill the gaps is to form a narrative which will change “the unspeakable into the speakable” (Herman 2015: 181) which emphasizes that this narrative should be similar to the narratives about non-traumatic events. The survivor will be able to go through the final stage as it is impossible to continue without this phase of making a narrative for the event.

Finally, her third stage is related with the reconnection with the community. For Herman, “their [survivors] recovery depends upon the discovery of restorative love, trust, and empowerment” (Herman 2015: 218). As before this stage the survivor has accepted the traumatic event as an inseparable part of his life and has been able to understand it fully, he/she has been put in the right path to redemption. Having gone through these phases makes it possible for him/her to reconnect with the society from which the trauma and its danger and possibility of reoccurrence have separated him/her. In fact, after the integration of the person into the society, there will be no separation and the individual will be able to lead his/her normal life as millions of other people.

Thus, having reviewed ideas on trauma and those of Judith Herman, in particular, this paper will apply the aforesaid ideas to the novel *A Farewell to Arms*, written by Ernest Hemingway. It will discuss how a novel about the war has also paid enough attention to the traumas the characters have gone through and have experienced, in addition to the possible solution which the author points out in his masterpiece. This concept of healing is specifically dealt using the ideas of Herman.

5. Discussion

As its setting indicates, there is no doubt that *A Farewell to Arms* will include trauma and traumatic experiences. The setting of the story is the First World War which was the greatest war in the history of mankind until its occurrence in the early twentieth century. Realist representations of the images of war in the novel are, to a great extent,

the outcome of the author's first hand experiences in the war.

The protagonist is an ambulance driver, who though might not be taken formally as a soldier, is responsible for taking the wounded soldiers either to the hospital to be treated or the churchyards to be buried. He is a witness to the atrocities of the war from the very beginning of the story. The traumatic events start from the earliest moments of his war experience when, due to his being exposed to the bombings and other war-related accidents, he develops a sense of everlasting fear and anxiety, common to the soldiers fighting in the battle grounds. He is represented as a person who carries the weight of the trauma throughout the war and despite the propaganda about the glory of war and battlefields.

I did not say anything. I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory (Hemingway 2012: 185)

These words point to another aspect of all wars – the truth of trauma in them. This truth is ignored in the ideology of wars representing them as some glorious act. By denying this very notion, Henry has to accept the fact that the war has terrible effect on the people who witness it and live through it. The protagonist had gone through traumatic experiences during his service in the war; therefore, it will not be surprising if he reacts to some events in a hysterical way such as the moment when bombs explode near him. As Caruth (1995) asserts “catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them” (1). Psychologically speaking, it can be said that Henry exhibits constriction, disconnecting from his emotions through drinking and muted grief. In better words, he has decided to repress his feeling and thus he has found drinking as a way out of his conditions. His stoicism, the very thing expected from the men in wartime, looks more unreal and fake, since he is affected by the events. Influenced by the trauma of war, Henry cannot show his resoluteness and stoic behavior which points out to the severity of the traumatic experience he has gone through. In his case, it is the severity of trauma and traumatic event which are too strong to be healthily responded to.

Speaking from another point of view, it can be said that Frederic Henry reminds readers of the Hemingway's “code hero” acting stoically enduring the traumas of war. However, beneath his repressed emotions, he exhibits hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction that reveal profound wounds to his masculinity. As any other military man, he would like to display his bravery, courage and heroic features, yet, he cannot fully show his manliness due to the effects of war. Hemingway provides a good example when he describes the bomb explosion near his protagonist;

I ate the end of my piece of cheese and took a swallow of wine. Through the other noise I heard a cough, then came the chuh-chuhchuh-chuh—then there was a flash, as

when a blast-furnace door is swung open, and a roar that started white and went red and on and on in a rushing wind. I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind. I went out swiftly, all of myself, and I knew I was dead and that it had all been a mistake to think you just died (Hemingway 2012: 47).

This is one of the highly traumatic moments in which Henry is caught. The author describes it in a way which looks very similar to the moment when a soldier dies. Henry does not die here, although he feels he is dead. From the traumatic point of view, it can be argued that the writer wanted to show how such events have profound impacts on the people who would survive the war. This moment of his being injured can be related to the moment when Henry speaks about his fear of bombing if repeated again. The reason he expected such terrible event lies in the fact that he has gone through the same things.

His sense of self is gradually damaged over the course of the novel and through his traumatic experiences. After his injury and the death of his dear friend Passini, Frederic exhibits an emotional numbness and desire to retreat from the war. Frederic states, "I was through. I wished them all the luck. There were the good ones, and the brave ones, and the calm ones and the sensible ones, and they deserved it. But it was not my show any more" (Hemingway 2012: 232). This state of separation running thorough his personality displays well how Frederic's purpose and identity are lost altogether. This very state of mind is the reason behind his desire to get connected with Catherine in the first place, which brings a hope of reunion with his pre-war status. It can be said that on his way to save himself from the grips of trauma, he decides to reconnect with the past, in which he fails, since he does not properly go through the three-stage process which Herman speaks of. Without recognizing and coming face to face with the trauma it is futile to attempt to return to the pre-traumatic life.

In the first stage of healing, one way of accepting traumas may occur through different phenomena such as flashbacks, gestures, or actions. Frederic's behavior demonstrates repetition when he tries to prove that "nightmares aren't real" (Hemingway 2012: 180), although these nightmares are conduits for the trauma to express itself. Traditionally, nightmare is always considered as one of the many ways in which trauma demonstrates itself. These nightmares act as the stand-ins for the real traumas and aim at making the traumatic experience happen to the survivor at least while he is sleeping so that he could grasp a little of what he has been exposed to. The nightmares are in fact venues for the survivors to understand the trauma more fully. Thus, it can be concluded that Henry is going through replication through which all trauma survivors pass.

A very important notion in trauma studies is the significance of narrativization of the event, which is a prerequisite for the final redemption. Henry fails in this process as well because what the author presents is his protagonist's inability to speak

about his experience, to the extent that it can be argued that he cannot articulate his emotions, destroyed by the brutality of war. As Herman (2015) notes, “the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections” (133). The survivor must regain authority over their story. Herman argues that recovery cannot occur in isolation: “Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world” (70) and Hemingway provides this other person in Catherine.

It is noteworthy that the character of Catherine is as important as Henry since she is the one who is a hope beyond traumatic experiences. She is related with the concept of recovery, as Herman mentions it. The truth is that from the beginning of the novel, Catherine aids Frederic’s recovery from a near-fatal injury. Her tender care at the hospital gives him solace amidst the pain: “I was very stiff and sore...but her fingers pressing the muscles of my shoulder made it feel much better” (Hemingway 2012: 29). As Frederic remarks, Catherine offers him an escape from the war’s brutality.

Furthermore, Catherine represents the promise of a new life, the very life which Henry desires to replace with the brutal war. Pokharel (2012) points out, “Hemingway has presented man as a trapped creature seeking love, communion and fulfillment in an alien and meaningless world.” (61) It seems that the author stages their love as a substitution for the war to act as a place of hope among the destruction both are living through. Frederic declares, “I did not care what came after the war. It could not be worse...I would go to America or anywhere. Anywhere I did not have to see the front or be involved in the war” (Hemingway 2012: 112). And in his world, it is Catherine who is the only possibility beyond the tragedy of war. It is Catherine who serves as the possibility of reconnecting with the world, and whose death means a sort of end in Henry’s healing process.

This love does not die with Catherine’s sudden death at her childbirth. Henry’s real trauma might be the one he lives after losing Catherine. It was this love which acted as a solution, taking him out of the war trauma, and it seems that he loses that chance of full recovery with her death. Catherine has not only taken care of his physical health, but also had mended his wounded soul. If Catherine and his love for her are taken as representatives of remedy from trauma, it can be concluded that her death would seal the end of this process and as the story continues, it is well clear that Hemingway’s protagonist has not recovered from all he has gone through. It can be said that her death would be a new trauma in Henry’s life, just to complicate his weary mind and tired psyche.

6. Conclusion

Having reviewed the views of trauma studies critics, with the focus on Judith Herman, this paper examined Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* in the light of Herman’s ideas on different kinds of traumas and its injurious impact on one’s body

and psyche. The study demonstrated how the protagonist of the story suffers a case of traumatic experience, although he tries to maintain a stoic façade in case of war events. Later, he attempts to reconcile with the situation hoping for redemption from his conditions. However, as it has been proven, the main character does not pursue the three-stage process Herman explains in her idea of trauma recovery and as such he fails in reconnecting with the society to resume the normal way of living. His beloved's death brings in more trauma in his life, diminishing the last hopes for the possible future redemption.

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