IDEOLOGY AND NARRATIVE IN HEMINGWAY'S WAR FICTION

Edith-Hilde KAITER
"Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy of Constanța

Abstract : Starting from the assumption that war has never been beautiful and that "everyone dies", although memorable representations of it have tried to glorify it since time immemorial, one can underline the fact that, even from the very beginning, these war narratives have either served as mythical, supernatural interpretations of significant aspects of one particular culture or have attempted to tell, in more objective and more secular terms, the causes and effects of military confrontations.
The present paper is devoted to Hemingway's war fiction (both related to World War I and to the Spanish Civil War). It deals with the interplay between ideology (especially war discourse, both in literary traditions and in public speeches) and Hemingway's fictional narrative itself.

Keywords: Hemingway, war fiction, narrative, ideology, degeneration.

Hemingway's outlook on war, as it appears in his war fiction, largely depends on a rather special war experience he had in World War I, but also on a certain artistic environment, as well as some distinct ideological constraints. Trying to introduce what the typically American artistic response to World War I is, John Limon thinks that the Americans did not have the seemingly endless trench experience that defined the English, French, and German memory of World War I. But when Americans did get a measure of the experience, they still mainly saw in World War I a clash between the individual's imagination and authority. The enemy is always the army, the police, and friendly governments.[1] We can find illustrations to support Limon's belief by resorting to both modernist (Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*) and postmodernist (Heller's *Catch-22*) war fiction. However, in spite of all that, in Hemingway's war writing there seems to be an invitation to accept this as part of a game worth playing, even if the risks are high. War or anti-war discourse?

"Everyone dies" is the fatalist close of a war narrative, where even the narrator's death can be arranged, as in Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Hemingway includes in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* the story of the partisan Kashkin, "dead since April." "That is what happens to everybody,' Pablo said, gloomily. 'That is the way we will all finish.'"[2] The transition from a platitude about mortality to an informed prediction seems one of Hemingway's common gestures, and sometimes it is difficult to note whether there is Hemingway's irony hiding behind the scene: "They won't get us," Frederic Henry says, "Because you're too brave. Nothing ever happens to the brave." "They die of course," Catherine replies. "But only once," Frederic says.[3] Well, at this point, the reader is probably invited to appreciate Catherine's realism and Frederic's 'manly' attitude.

War is, in a sense, the adequate pattern of narrative, usually based on dramatic conflict, and both the protagonist and the reader are supposed to be aware of that. Even the distinction between brave and cowardly deaths that Frederic Henry alludes to cannot be

[1] John Limon, *Writing After War, American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 89.
[2] Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, New York: Scribner's, 1940, p. 14.
[3] Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993, p. 139.

BDD-A21845 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:56:53 UTC)

sustained. If a coward seen as the antihero dies a thousand deaths… "The coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave but one'.... [The man who first said that] was probably a coward.... He knew a great deal about cowards but nothing about the brave. The brave dies perhaps two thousand deaths if he's intelligent. He simply doesn't mention them."[4] There is also the situation when the brave are on the other side and die a stupid death: "We were in a garden at Mons. Young Buckley came in with his patrol from across the river. The first German I saw climbed up over the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him. He had so much equipment on and looked awfully surprised and fell down into the garden. Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that."[5]

From one point of view, war narrative has entirely degenerated. Narrative is all there is here: no characterization, no atmosphere and no individual style. From another point of view, war narrative has entirely degenerated. One German (to whom three sentences are devoted) becomes three Germans (two sentences) become all Germans (one sentence), all this amounting to the end to all of them. A rejected ending of *A Farewell to Arms* – "That is all there is to the story. Catherine died and you will die and I will die and that is all I can promise you"[6] – might as well read, "That is all there is to stories, and to their accompanying heroes."

The realization – with which Hemingway struggled during his entire career – that the tendency of narrative is towards its own exclusion can be linked to Peter Brooks's proposal of a Freudian narratology. As adapted by Brooks, the Freudian masterplot may be summarized as a delayed death-seeking, the delay assuring that all life will seek "the right death, the correct end."[7] This is nowhere more obvious than in a war narrative like Hemingway's.

In the shadow of Hemingway's work, the Freudian/Brooksian theory is surprisingly optimistic. A true answer to World War I would be a theory of why human beings might seek what we might call 'the wrong kind of death', not in keeping with their lives, not at the end of a satisfactory life story.

Writing a World War I narrative, following this model, is difficult. Allowing the plot simply to do what it wants to do without any obstacles – everyone dies – and one has obtained a perfect anti-novel. In Brooks's terms, this would amount to a rhetorically impossible plot of an extended metaphor. Everyone, according to Hemingway's war narrative, is alike; the world has reached a moment of stasis that is emblematic of death. Hemingway's style is the sign of his attitude toward this somber realization.

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, (1940) both Jordan and Maria are special in their own way; in *A Farewell to Arms*, the heroine, though initially neurotic, is a martyred saint at the end, but the hero, if courteous and experienced, is terribly ineffectual, while Jake Barnes, mainly because of his wound, is only a passive spectator.

The technical question of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is how to keep the narrative from failing too soon, as the main character is, in a different way from Jake Barnes, spiritually crippled by it.

What Hemingway in effect narrates in this civil war novel is the breakdown of narrative, as the intention that the collapse of the narrative is an analogy for dying. The artist surrogate of the book is not Jordan (only an apprentice writer) but Pilar, who appears to be his mentor, assuming a sort of mother figure, but also that of a teacher of writing, one might say. When she tells the terrible story of the execution of the fascists in Pablo's town, Jordan

[4] Ibid., p. 140.
[5] Ernest Hemingway, *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, New York: Scribner's, 1938, p. 105.
[6] Michael S. Reynolds, *Hemingway's First War: The Making of A Farewell to Arms*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976, p. 113.
[7] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, New York: Vintage/Random House, 1984, p.103.

BDD-A21845 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:56:53 UTC)

thinks, "If that woman could only write,"[8] and, surprisingly, takes her grim realism/naturalism as his model, while we attempt to read Hemingway within the Modernist war fiction framework. We take, as a consequence, her narrative as an emblem of this war book. Pablo had devised, as Pilar narrates it, a very cruel way of executing the fascists of his town. One by one they are to be led out of the Ayuntamiento, and forced between two lines of Republicans (armed with flails) until they arrive at a cliff over which they are all to be thrown. Once again, fate may be read in lines; but the lines do not seem to work properly, the narrative seems to break down.

To this point each death is personalized, the mob's fury against the fascists assuming various cruel forms. Don Ricardo's courage stirs the mob to an undifferentiated anger, and when the cowardly Don Faustino tries to imitate Don Ricardo, the crowd decides to humiliate him (by not beating him) before pushing him over the cliff. Now the crowd loses its ability to distinguish humans altogether; when Don Guillermo, a fascist but otherwise a respectable person, emerges, they harrass him as well. "They had had such success joking at Don Faustino that they could not see, now, that Don Guillermo was a different thing."[9] A fat grain buyer, insurance agent, and money lender appears next; the blood-drunk crowd rushes him, jumps on him, and beats his head on the "stone flags of the paving of the arcade and there were no more lines but only a mob."[10] Finally the executioners storm the Ayuntamiento; "I saw the hall full of men flailing away with clubs and striking with flails, and poking and striking and pushing and heaving."[11] All those who are murdered are put in a cart and thrown over the cliff.

The breakdown in the lines equals the breakdown in the capacity of the people to produce 'appropriate' deaths; the most vivid narrative in the book concerns the short-circuiting of narrative in Jordan's, as well as in the reader's consciousness. The artistic challenge of the book is to create a story out of the breakdown of story. In less formal terms, the challenge is to test whether a tragically abrupt death can be made to feel appropriate. But death eventually makes nonsense of any discriminating skills that may keep the reader's interest in reading – or in living. If the Russians are forced to abandon Madrid, the wounded Russians have to be killed; the presence of these corpses would not implicate the Soviet Union, because "nothing proved a naked dead man was a Russian. Your nationality and your politics did not show when you were dead."[12] *For Whom the Bell Tolls* stops just before Jordan's death. If it had continued, the book would have reached the absurd. It would have made nonsense of itself: it would have narrated the death of indiscriminate nobodies, irrespective of which side they may be, moving, through the terrible and the absurd, into the realm of the anti-hero and of the 'anti-war anti-book'. Jordan, like Hemingway himself at the end of his Spanish civil war experience, is confused, overwhelmed, unable to rise above the chaos.

There are almost no metaphors in *A Farewell to Arms*. Yet the book begins and ends with metaphors, as if to literalize the metaphoric connection of beginnings and endings in rounded narratives. On the second page of the book there is this odd simile: "the two leather cartridge-boxes on the front of the belts, gray leather boxes heavy with the packs of clips of

[8] Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993, p. 134.

[9] Ibid., p. 117.
[10] Ibid., p. 121.
[11] Ibid., p. 125.
[12] Ibid., p. 238.

BDD-A21845 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:56:53 UTC)

thin, long 6.5 mm. cartridges, bulged forward under the capes so that the men, passing on the road, marched as though they were six months gone with child."[13]

This may be seen as the foreshadowing of the death of Catherine in childbirth; it equates birth and death, men and women, war and peace. Death invades the womb: Catherine Barkley's child is dead in the third paragraph of the novel, his story as short-circuited a narrative as can be imagined. He is twice dead at birth.

The second-to-last sentence of the novel contains another of Hemingway's rare metaphors. Henry insists on seeing his dead wife, but it "wasn't any good. It was like saying good-by to a statue."[14] The metaphor is perfectly justified. In an early scene, Henry had visited Catherine at her hospital, formerly the villa of a rich German. Everywhere there are marble busts, in the office, along the hall. "They had the complete marble quality of all looking alike. Sculpture had always seemed a dull business – still, bronzes looked like something. But marble busts all looked like a cemetery."[15] Catherine is not merely statuesque at the end but also marmoreal. Hemingway has done something complex exceedingly simply: he suggests that Catherine is already absolutely non-Catherine because she seems or rather is inhuman, marmoreal, in her death from the moment of dying; she is like all other dead bodies in the way all busts are alike; she bears a resemblance to busts that are reminiscent of cemeteries; she has become metaphorizable no matter the vehicle; her final metaphor is reminiscent of early paradigms of likeness so that her death is an ending, artistically speaking.

The death becomes a meta-artistic matter: the corpse is a statue but statues are inferior art. They have no temporal dimension – even going along a series of marble busts gives no temporal interest to them, as the experience does not change. Hemingway does not merely use metaphor to suggest an appropriate ending to a metonymic narrative. He artistically simulates the short-circuiting of a young life by allowing metaphor to act as a rejection of metonymy. In one rejected ending of the story, Hemingway tries to tie up all loose strands:

You can stop a story anytime. The rest goes on and you go on with it. On the other hand you have to stop a story. You have to stop it at the end of whatever it was you were writing about.[16]

What if what an author was writing about does not have an end? One can close – one can affect closure – if the subject is early death. In opposition to the Freudian/Brooksian model, there is no rush for Catherine's death: "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry."[17]

When Henry writes that they "knew the baby was very close now and it gave us both a feeling as though something were hurrying us and we could not lose any time together," one realizes what is hurrying them. The fact that Catherine, despite her heroic spirit, dies quickly (once unconscious, "it did not take her very long to die"[18] turns out to indicate that the heart of modernist war narrative of the kind Hemingway writes is the inappropriateness of the form of death.

The book's metonymy quite frequently takes the form of a deliberate digressiveness. Hemingway explicitly makes the digression an emblem of a peacetime aesthetics. When he goes on leave, Henry does not visit the priest's beloved Abruzzi, which hurts the priest's

[13] Ibid., p. 4.
[14] Ibid., p. 332.
[15] Ibid., p. 28.
[16] Michael S. Reynolds, *Hemingway's First War: The Making of A Farewell to Arms*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976, p. 47.
[17] Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993, p. 249.
[18] Ibid., p. 311.

BDD-A21845 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:56:53 UTC)

feelings. He tells the priest that "it was what I had wanted to do and I tried to explain how one thing had led to another."[19] The sections of the book in which Catherine and Frederic seem to escape the war are simply metonymic: "Outside, in front of the chalet a road went up the mountain. The wheel ruts and ridges were iron hard with the frost, and the road climbed steadily through the forest and up and around the mountain to where there were meadows, and barns and cabins in the meadows at the edge of the woods looking across the valley. The valley was deep and there was a stream at the bottom that flowed down into the lake and when the wind blew across the valley you could hear the stream in the rocks."[20]

The opposition of hyper-metonymic style and super-metaphoric war means that there can hardly be a truce between them; there turns out to be no separate narratological peace. The relation of war activities to peace activities must, therefore, itself be the warfare of metaphor and metonymy. Once in Switzerland, Catherine and Henry walk and ski, and Henry boxes, as if strenuous physical activity and even violent male competition are conceptually proximate to war but not essentially like it. Much is risked in the proximity; when Catherine asks, early on, "Do we have to go on and talk this way?"[21] she registers the will-to-power of Hemingway's style. What Limon has called the metonymic method might be rephrased as the fetishistic method; sport or style substitutes for a missing term their resemblance to which is uncertain rather than certain and negligible. But the alternative to Catherine and Henry's peace is the original war of perfect inhuman metaphoricity.

John Limon asks himself and the reader if peace is a metaphor of war in Hemingway's novel. World War I is spatially invasive: Catherine dies in Switzerland simultaneously with a German breakthrough. It is temporally pervasive: "There is no finish to a war."[22] Every activity becomes war activity. Fergy tells Catherine and Frederic that they will never marry: "You'll fight before you'll marry." "We never fight," they protest. "You'll die then," she says. "Fight or die. That's what people do. They don't marry." Then she relents for a moment. "Maybe you'll be all right you two. But watch out you don't get her in trouble. You get her in trouble and I'll kill you."[23] The three alternatives are dying, fighting, and getting pregnant (followed by murder). All turn out to be one thing after all. This is metaphor run riot: every action leads to death, and style cannot, finally, escape it, says Limon.[24]

In *The Sun Also Rises*, which is not a war novel, Hemingway's bellicose attitude acquires an aesthetic dimension. Bullfighting may be "pure or false aesthetics": Romero's "purity of line" as opposed to the "false aesthetics of the bullfighters of the decadent period."[25] Whenever there is a duel, there is the temptation of a metaphorical connection of war with style itself: violence is performative for Romero, and personality emerges in his actions. Nevertheless, one end of the equation is missing: if there is a connection of the bullfight with the prose, will be find one of war with the bullfight? There is at least a metaphoric connection of the war-castrated Jake with the steers. If Romero's aesthetic ideal is expanded as follows – "holding the purity of line through the maximum of exposure" – and if sincerely working in the "terrain of the bull" gives the "sensation of coming tragedy,"[26] then what war, bullfighting, and writing have in common is an ideal of grace being at risk.

---

[19] Ibid., p. 13.
[20] Ibid., p. 289-290.
[21] Ibid., p. 18.
[22] Ibid., p. 50.
[23] Ibid., p. 108.
[24] John Limon, *Writing After War, American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 98.

[25] Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, New York: Scribner's, 1940, pp. 168, 215.
[26] Ibid., pp. 168, 213-214.

BDD-A21845 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:56:53 UTC)

Whether one likes this or not, Hemingway's lifelong view was that war and bullfighting are alike. And then, to go a step further on the macho road of what we might call Hemingwayan war discourse, bullfighting, war and boxing are alike. War and bullfighting require grace under castration-anxiety, but the killing of an animal is spiritually superior to the killing of a man. Anselmo, representing one of Hemingway's moods, thinks in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: "How could the Ingles say that the shooting of a man is like the shooting of an animal. In all hunting I have had an elation and no feeling of wrong."[27] Apparently, this would distinguish war from bullfighting, hunting, and fishing. Further, Romero's ideal of oneness with the bull is just what modern warfare, since the advent of machine guns, tanks, and bombing raids, prohibits. Or should the line be drawn between bullfighting and boxing? The black boxer in Vienna is a noble savage, but Cohn is contemptible. (The book seems to admire big boxers and despise small ones who fight smaller – Cohn is a middleweight trained as a featherweight.)

Carlos Baker's otherwise well-documented biography (Baker is also the editor of the author's massive correspondence) claims that Hemingway was willing to "teach his readers how to fish or shoot or watch a bullfight or a revolution."[28] It is worth mentioning here, just in passing, that, because of his wound while he was an ambulance driver in Italy during World War I, Hemingway had never tried to join the Spaniards in the famous chases with bulls in the streets, least of all to face a bull in the arena. In the manuscript of *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway pays as much attention to boxing as to bullfighting, but perhaps he omits the boxing exposition on the judgment, also recorded in Baker, that "boxing looked pale beside this great sport" of bullfighting.[29]

This passage about war writing seems to end ambivalently: "In the war in Italy when I was a boy I had much to fear. In Spain I had no fear after a couple of weeks and was very happy. Yet for me not to understand fear in others or deny its existence would be bad writing. It is just that now I understand the whole thing better. The only thing about a war, once it has started, is to win it – and that is what we did not do [in Spain]. The hell with war for a while, I want to write."[30]

One may read the above as 'to hell with war', which sounds even more anti-war than the title of *A Farewell to Arms*, but that would be a mistaken interpretation, I think, as it is based on an incomplete statement. What Hemingway says, actually, is 'The hell with war for a while, I want to write.' After a while, the author might come back to war, and then write another memorable novel. This interpretation is supported by other statements by Hemingway, such as the one in the introduction to *Men at War*, which, according to the subtitle, contains 'the best' war stories of all time: "Learning to suspend your imagination and live completely in the very second of the present minute with no before and no after is the greatest gift a soldier can acquire. It, naturally, is the opposite of all those gifts a writer should have."[31]

Not only is the war itself missing (after all, it is the war that disabled Jake) from *The Sun Also Rises*, but allusions to it are also deleted from the notebook version of the novel

[27] Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, New York: Scribner's, 1940, p. 442.
[28] Carlos Baker, *Hemingway, the Writer as Artist*, 4th edition, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 244.

[29] Ibid., p. 129.
[30] Larry W. Phillips, *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, Scribner, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, 1984, p. 23.
[31] Ernest Hemingway, *Men At War: The Best War Stories of All Time*, New York: Crown, 1942, xxvii.

BDD-A21845 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:56:53 UTC)

wherever possible. However, Hemingway's novels which deal with the First World War and the Spanish World War figure prominently, developing Hemingway's special war discourse and special war hero.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BAKER, Carlos, *Hemingway, the Writer as Artist*, 4th edition, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972.

BROOKS, Peter, *Reading For the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, New York: Vintage/Random House, 1984.

HEMINGWAY, Ernest, *A Farewell to Arms*, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993.

HEMINGWAY, Ernest, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, New York: Scribner's, 1940.

HEMINGWAY, Ernest, *Men At War: The Best War Stories of All Time*, New York: Crown, 1942.

HEMINGWAY, Ernest, *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, New York: Scribner's, 1938.

HEMINGWAY, Ernest, *The Sun Also Rises*, New York: Scribner's, 1940.

LIMON, John, *Writing After War, American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

PHILLIPS, Larry W., *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, Scribner, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, 1984.

REYNOLDS, Michael S., *Hemingway's First War: The Making of A Farewell to Arms*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976.

BDD-A21845 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:56:53 UTC)