HEROIC AND EROTIC IN HEMINGWAY'S WAR NOVEL

Florica BODIŞTEAN[1]

Abstract

This study analyses the relationship between the heroic and the erotic dimension in Hemingway's literature of war. It deals with two of the writer's major novels, *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bells Toll*, novels that highlight, in their author's work, the path from solitude to solidarity and from demythization to remythization. Although the author wrote the former in his youth and the latter in his mature years, both novels change, according to a modernist spirit, the vision on heroism, proposing as heroes background characters whose relation with the world is decided upon strictly on a personal level. The second major change that Hemingway makes in the heroic epic pattern is the destructuring of stereotypes in connection with the masculine – feminine and public ego-private ego relationships.

Keywords: heroic, erotic, individual freedom, destructuring of stereotypes

Hemingway follows Tolstoy both in his war experience and his life – work relationship experience. "Both novelists carried their self-idolatry into the farthest regions of their art by investing their selves in the nature of things, so that they entered massively into the realm of what Freud called 'reality testing', though without the final Freudian wisdom of making friends with the necessity of dying." (Bloom, 1994: 346-347)

A "macho" writer who is said to promote "a primitive concept of masculinity" (Conn, 1996: 224), Hemingway is the perfect match between the stages of life and the stages of literary work: in life, he was a man of constant, extraordinary vitality, and his works approach violent, competitive, opposing themes such as victory and defeat, to have and not to have, to win and to lose, life and death. He is the image of an artist for whom the ivory tower is non-existent and only a very real world exists.

Two novels go beyond the above-mentioned oppositions, conferring them a subtler and more general meaning. Both are parable books in which the minimalist, detached, journalistic writing style which we were accustomed with from the writer's previous works becomes more literary in nature, aiming the metaphysical. The first novel is, chronologically speaking, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which was said to deal with a dialectical perspective of life and death that shifts from individualism to solidarity (Streinu, 1973: 399)[2]. The second, which is also the corollary of the writer's existential experience, is, of course, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Between these two works, the narratives focused on "agony" define individual formulas of the "either… or…" type that are related to the aggressive forms of existence. Supreme aggression is, even for this man and writer who obstinately seeks danger, war. If life lived under the spectre of death is, as has

[1] Assoc. Prof. PhD., „Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad

[2] „… life and death, no longer enemies, as they were in the individualistic problems, make a memorable alliance to ensure man's victory beyond the limits of the individual existence, under the form of a new type of society."

BDD-A2927 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:21 UTC)

often been said, the prevailing theme in Hemingway's literature, the commonplace of his artistic images is the idea that the meaning of life is revealed only in its confrontation with death. And what the writer rejects most fervently is violent, unexpected death that you have no time to become familiar with and you cannot "experience".

The desirable frivolity of existence…

A Farewell to Arms is not the book of human condition in war, as Malraux, a proud writer of the 20th century, suggested. It is the book of individual reaction to illogical events, so the only solution is to back away from any confusing occurrences. Frederic Henry notices the futility of making an effort to find a meaning either in fighting in the war or protesting against it. Thus the "healthy" alternative, that of avoiding any kind of involvement is self-evident. The novel of the First World War, as Roger Martin du Gard shows in the *Les Thibault*, is the novel of an absurd war that you cannot stand against. Nevertheless, man stands against it anyway, becoming a tragic victim. Hemingway's hero does not even stand against it, he makes "a separate peace". The impressive deployment of power focused on collective action in Tolstoy's novels has disappeared, being replaced with the strictly individual perspective of a man who reacts with indifference to a war that is indifferent to his destiny. The impression that the proportions of the world are decreasing is striking: "the world is no longer the 'great' field of the battle between good and evil, it is the smaller arena of the fight against the unacceptable" (Lupan, 1997: 91).

Under the circumstances, Hemingway's hero no longer preserves the classic "ingredients" of the Hero. Radu Lupan notices, as a novelty, the presence of an "elementary and primary hedonism" of the character (1969: VIII) that removes any trace of tragic vision[3]. On supporting this hedonism, the avatars of the male – female relationship become illustrative, since in the mythical scheme anti-heroism results from a change in woman's role: the woman is no longer an obstacle, she is a target, the happy alternative to war. *A Farewell to Arms* is the formula of a war novel without a tragic hero; on the contrary, the hero seeks personal satisfaction and eventually he will discover that war is not the only thing that can kill you. Love can also kill you, and in a much more treacherous manner. In order to be happy, you must run away from war, but – what a terrible destiny! – love can be an even greater tragedy.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, the plot of is highly unconventional: an American enlists as a volunteer on the Italian front and works for the ambulance service. He makes this decision on the spur of the moment and tries to justify it by saying that "things… cannot be explained", "I don't know. I was a fool", or simply by the fact that he was in Italy when the war broke out. In Gorizia, where he is quartered, he meets Catherine Barkley, a volunteer English nurse who suffers after her fiancé's death. The war had not allowed

[3] Later on, the critic will notice – in *Viziuni americane. Romanul american contemporan (American Visions. The Contemporary American Novel)*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1997, p. 92 – in the vitality of Hemingway's characters, the trace of a subtextual "overwhelming *mal de vivre*" which comes from being aware of ineluctable fate; according to the critic, the impression of *grace under pressure* that Hemingway's heroes leave is a great artistic achievement.

BDD-A2927 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:21 UTC)

them time enough to experience love. During an attack of the Italian troops, the American hero is hurt by a mortar shell while hiding in a shelter with his comrades and preparing dinner: "I was blown up while we were eating cheese". In Milan, in the military hospital, he and Catherine grow closer and closer, until their relationship becomes true love, He returns to the front and, during the retreat from Caporetto, when the Italian troops become very susceptible, he deserts lest he should be taken for a German in Italian uniform and be shot. The time has come for him to make a "separate peace", though this peace does not make him immune to the war going on around him: "I had the feeling of a boy who thinks of what is happening at a certain hour at the schoolhouse from which he has played truant". He runs away with Catherine in Switzerland and they live a happy life in their domestic paradise for several months, but she dies in childbirth.

Frederic Henry is a cynical, life-weary man who discovers his sensitivity and capacity of involvement gradually, while confronting not the horrors of war, but those of love. Estranged from his own family, he shares the general opinion that war is stupid. He is "very tired of this war", blames the obscene language of heroism, admits that he is scared "like hell" and carries out orders automatically.

In this physical and psychical context, women, from the prostitutes in the bawdy house for officers to the English nurses who are always the same, since no new nurses arrive, are a transitory source of entertainment. Eventually they become your friends and you no longer see them as women, but "old war comrades". We are speaking about a man who likes doing nothing, who never thinks too much about anything and Switzerland, where he escaped with Catherine, is a place that suits him best, since it is "a country where nothing makes any difference". The novel does not reveal where this weariness and lack of sentimentalism in front of universal disaster comes from. It only speaks of love as a counterweight to war and especially as a formula of individual fulfilment to the detriment of collective commitment. What is essential is the detachment, the Ego that must be protected from perverting circumstances. Loves stands for many things, including God, whom Frederic Henry perceives only during the night because, as Count Greffi, another character from the novel, explains, love "is a religious feeling".

Face to face with this upside down hero, the woman is a being who, when love is involved, lacks personality or initiative, does not have any personal beliefs to infuse others with and does not take part in the offensive, even in her "passive" way, because she lacks individuality. The whole love story is under the sign of "there isn't any me. I'm you. Don't make up a separate me". This perfect agreement between the woman and the hero that sounds so common and boring, the ordinary conversations and the excess of "darling" seem to be the symptoms of sheer mediocrity, while in truth they are the reactions of a woman who has undergone many severe trials and now takes pains, and manages, to be the perfect lover. This common Catherine Barkley has turned from a *desirable woman* in times of war into the unique woman at all times. The true Hero would have left her and gone to war, for the simple reason that the only territory on which one can really live is that of confrontation. All the more so because we are speaking about a woman whose

BDD-A2927 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:21 UTC)

qualities cannot be proved. Hemingway's behaviourist technique seems to make a woman out of plasticine: he creates a much too flexible woman who assures her lover that she has "a lovely temperature" or asks him to forgive her that she has become pregnant with him. It is a clear sign that in the anti-heroic novel the woman is herself "a person without qualities" who preserves nothing of her well-known role: she neither tells him to abandon the fight nor supports the fight, she only does what he, the man, says. And Frederic Henry, the anti-hero, deserts, preferring an island of neutrality and domestic comfort to the front. We are far from Tolstoy, who described the happy ordinary peace as a reply to the fervour of war, yet we are not that far from him; Hemingway's character is more than that, he is both one of those who enlisted and fought in the great federal wars and one of the representatives of the "lost generation", the generation of the 1920's, as Gertrude Stein called it.

Love and war, like life and death, are clearly separated. The Eros does not consume the time of war, it consumes only the time of convalescence or desertion. It is a relationship of the "either… or…" type that will become one of the "both… and" type in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. But it is precisely the lack of synchronicity of the heroic and the erotic event that leads to a much more disturbing conclusion: "The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry." In other words, you do not die in the war, but death will find you even in your happiest and most peaceful form of isolation. Switzerland is *no man's land* both in the proper and the figurative meaning. The laws that people have established allow you to live, but there are other laws that you cannot escape in any way.

In this novel, human suffering is not so impressive, but it is still very deep, as the characters escape into civil life. The only relation between the episode of war and that of love is that which reveals a universal unhappy existence, absolute solitude, lack of meaning.

… and the seriousness of a life lived in three days

The synchronicity of the heroic and the erotic is shocking due to time compression in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The American Robert Jordan, who teaches Spanish at a university in Montana, now a soldier in Civil War in Spain, has three days to prepare to blow up a bridge. This he has to do with the help of a partisan group and the bridge must be blown up as soon as the Republicans have started their attack, for fear that Franco's troops may receive backup. The symbolic structure of the novel is apparent: a whole existence in its archetypal scheme is crammed in only three days and each moment becomes an initiation. The characters are also archetypes, sometimes named by metonymy: the young man (Roberto), the old man (Pablo, Anselmo), the girl (Maria), the woman (Pilar), the gypsy (Rafael). The idea of destiny being written in the palm lines, a fulfilled, serene destiny, is suggested from the very first pages. All the themes present in

BDD-A2927 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:21 UTC)

other war stories are now re-written in a more serious manner and the individual sacrifice for humanitarian values is praised in Biblical style. Therefore the reunion of the main characters, Robert Jordan – Pablo – Pilar – Maria, can be seen as the sacrificial quartet of betrayal and love: Jesus, Judas, Mary and Mary Magdalene. The act of destroying the bridge is the separation of land and water, a way to isolate the chaos and create "an earth for men", as Saint-Exupéry, another humanitarian writer, would say: "if we want to win, first we must destroy the bridges". Robert Jordan is betrayed by Pablo at another "Last Supper" and in the following night, when the latter runs with the exploders and the detonator, the betrayal becomes real. But the new Judas converts himself like the disciples of Christ on the road to Emmaus and in the end we witness, with an invigorating feeling that puts tragedy on the second place, the triumph of human solidarity beyond the physical world, even beyond death. Solidarity is present in each of the characters, from the most coward to the bravest of them, from the most faithful to the least faithful of them, from Pablo, who returns to the group because he cannot deal with solitude – a very Spanish feeling –, to Maria, who parts with her fatally wounded lover and agrees to save herself, thinking that "as long as there is one of us there is both of us". The novel relies on spiritual values compared to which life and death are mere thresholds between the visible and the invisible world.

This synchronicity of the war novel with the love novel gives birth to the psychological profile of the Hero, its essence, its ultimate truth, what remains after the conflict between the capital experiences, which are love and war, has come to an end. The classical law of the unavoidable succession of Heroic and Erotic in the exemplary male evolution is also changed; the Heroic and the Erotic are now simultaneous, constantly intermingling, which makes their relationship one of mutual strengthening, not of exclusion.

Robert Jordan is a hero who paid attention to women only temporary and only from a physiological perspective. Nevertheless, his imagination is full of idea-women, of inaccessible women, of *la femme fatale*, movie stars like Greta Garbo or Jean Harlow. Starting from this level of a soldier's illusions, his meeting with Mary lacks credibility, although it is "the most important thing that can happen to a human being". But according to the law of the heroic novel, it disappears in a flash when duty calls and the hierarchy allows no comments: when Robert finds out about Pablo's betrayal, after the night he has spent with the girl, he confesses to her that "I would have struck thee there awhile back if thou had spoken". The appearance of a woman makes one aware of the value of one's personal life and a new feeling is born, that of being responsible for another life, and the utopian island of couple happiness – Madrid. Yet, when you have to carry something out you want to be free of any relationships, you don't want to be loved or to love. Otherwise, the direct and unequivocal relationship with death becomes too complicated. But love also gives life and death a new meaning, it transcends them by merging several existences into one. Therefore Robert Jordan's personal victory, at the end of the terrible trial of blowing up the bridge, is saving the girl, the chance to save

BDD-A2927 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:21 UTC)

himself. From nothingness? In the novel, "Memento mori!" becomes "la gloria": erotic ecstasy, existential beatitude, metaphysical vision, triumph over human destiny, the triumph of perspective over the moment through living the moment that encloses eternal praise: "Now and forever now". The major mutation that Hemingway manages to make in the structure of his Hero is the Hero's change into a background individual whose relations with the world become the object of strictly personal decisions. The feeling of eternity does not come from the chimerical dream of glory that would gain him posthumous fame; on the contrary, the absolute is revealed in the innermost experiences, near a girl, in a sleeping bag, somewhere in the Spanish mountains, a day before a guerrilla mission is to begin: "Then they were together so that as the hand on the watch moved, unseen now, they knew that nothing could ever happen to the one that did not happen to the other that no other thing could happen more than this; that this was all and always; this was what had been and now and whatever was to come."

In all the 20th century novels, the individual perspective dominates the community perspective, objective time finds a rival in subjective time and in the duration of the ego that eventually will become everything. The modernist adventure of the novel is under the sign of contesting the idea of man's taking root; the contest forms are dissolving relationships, the questionable community and the apotheosis of Narcissus, says Toma Pavel (2008: 371). On an exterior level, things are more complicated, more mystifying. Involvement must be total, and so must responsibility – we are now very far from *A Farewell to Arms!* – but everything is confused by the idea that carrying out the mission would destroy the lives of the close ones. In this book, Hemingway detaches himself from the ideas of the "lost generation" and writes a novel of tragic heroism, the heroism of the 20th century, the personalised heroism that places individual values and the freedom to build oneself on the first place. This is the only way to explain the intrusion of the private ego on the public ego even in moments of extreme tension: "He had never thought that you could know that there was a woman if there was battle; nor that any part of you could know it, or respond to it; nor that if there was a woman that she should have breasts small, round and tight against you through a shirt; nor that they, the breasts, could know about the two of them in battle. But it was true and he thought, good. That's good."

Maria is more individualised than Catherine, she is a solar being, having both the warmth and the power of the sun. She is delicate but strong, sensitive but determined. In the Biblical pattern of the novel, she is Mary Magdalene, purity beyond defilement, purity coming from the incredible power to love. She assumes love instantly, completely, without preparation and hesitation. For her, love is a *coup de foudre*, a sudden passion that knows no obstacles except for… time. Love brings this traumatised, lethargic being back to life. On the other hand, near her, Robert Jordan will eventually say: "I find life very interesting". Life is now lived to the full. The formula of tragedy (which resists thanks to the rule of the three unities, the conscious confrontation with destiny) without tragism comes from the natural acceptance of death, a benign death, since it comes in a moment when man feels fulfilled in his short, although intense life. Furthermore, as the writer's

BDD-A2927 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:21 UTC)

works demonstrate, tragism lies in isolation, and the solution of the individual projection in others stands out beyond death. As already noticed, "for Hemingway, defeat is more interesting than victory" (Cunliffe, 1969: 299), because the authenticity of his heroes comes to the fore in moments of great trials. The defeat on the exterior level, through apparent loss, is in fact a hidden victory, according to the famous sentence in *The Old Man and the Sea*: "A man can be destroyed but not defeated". He is a winner who "receives nothing". Despite the hero's assumed death, the end conveys an invigorating feeling, as the entire novel relies on the symbolism of the island and continent (announced in John Donne's poems), of solid and broken relationships, of the *passing* and the *mediation*. The bridge is a two-edged symbol: *die and become*, I die so that you can live or "I will be thee when thou are not there". The heroism of the 20th century goes beyond phallocracy and the frequent association with blood and death and shifts to humanitarian values, to the values of peace. And the reprehensible "frivolity" of the modern hero comes from eliminating the necessity of sacrificial death, as well as from excluding the idea of killing except out of need. The theme of killing is often formulated as a problem, especially in Anselmo's confessions: you kill because your duty tells you to kill, but you do it "not with pleasure and regarding it as a sin". The idea that even acts of bravery are hideous because they are bloody shows a huge distance from Homer's world. Moreover, humiliating the victim and gloating over him or her become acts that former heroes are ashamed to speak about. What Robert Jordan reproaches this civil war with is the absence of a code of chivalry and the lack of culture that could at least lead to dignified death. A "bloody crime" inherited from the Spanish Conquistadors replaces the ethics of war.

The prevailing intimacy in Hemingway's war novel breaks with the traditional misogynistic vision of the genre, re-creating male and female identities for which it suggests new forms of experience that differ completely from the classic forms such as activity vs. passivity. The wound is no longer the symbolical image of heroic assertion, it is a physical and psychological effect. Both men and women feel the effects of physical and psychical trauma: Jake Barnes, the protagonist in *The Sun Also Rises*, is incapable of physical love because war has mutilated his sexual capacity; Catherine Berkley wishes to forget she has lost her fiancé and Maria from *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is a victim of the fascist rapists in her town. All of them experience sterility, which is the stigma of war, both in its proper and symbolical meaning. Hemingway's theme is the effect of war, which, in male psychology, generates new conditions such as fear, vulnerability and the irrepressible need of protection and tenderness.

As far as the female characters are concerned, the specific prototypes of the heroic epic merge into the same being, thus producing "complete" feminine characters. It has been noticed (Lupan, 1966: 346) that, in Hemingway's works, the women who are loved represent non-individualised projections of men. Catherine, Maria or Renate from *Across the River and into the Trees*, are examples of ideal femininity and their ideal nature lies in the overlapping of their attributes and roles: for Robert Jordan, Maria is his wife, his sister and his daughter (as Anselmo is his friend and Pilar his mother); the other two women

BDD-A2927 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:21 UTC)

show, besides their Aphrodite-like attraction, maternal vocation (Catherine) or filial inclination (Renate, which Colonel Cantwell will eventually call "my daughter"). Given these overlapping roles, the particularities are fading. It is as if Penelope, Calypso and Nausicaa merged into one single being. A conspicuous, intriguing nature is Pilar, the true leader of the partisans, who, like Catherine, is a representation of the female combatant, but unlike her, she fights with the rifle in her hands. Pilar symbolizes the matrix of the nest (the partisan group) that needs to be protected from danger, the passionate woman who spent her youth with a matador and the Amazon who lives with Pablo at present. Pilar is the embodiment of personality. Women join the male heroes' club and sometimes even replace them. It is a symptom of modernist mentality: the outstanding figure, the personality, is not the hero's woman; she is his comrade, his equal with whom he develops a male-like relationship based not on love, but on trust. Pilar is everything and even more, she is a "pillar" both in Spanish and English. But this woman you can always count on is a gypsy, an ugly and coarse gypsy who knows what she looks like and is aware of her hidden charm, an Esmeralda of the 20th century seen not as an exotic attraction, but as an expression of strength, devotion and sacrifice for a humanitarian cause.

Yet in front of all these characters, be they clearly marked or just insipid creatures, passes War, the God-like character in Hemingway's historical universe, the only one who can influence decisions, facts, conscience, philosophy, psychical dualism. It is destiny itself.

Bibliography:

Bloom, Harold, *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages*, New York, San Diego, London, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.

Conn, Peter, *O istorie a literaturii americane*, (*History of American Literature*) translation and notes by Cosana Nicolae and Dalida Pavlovici, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1996.

Cunliffe, Marcus, *Literatura Statelor Unite* (*The Literature of the United States*), translated in Romanian by Rodica Timiş, Bucharest, World Literature Publishing House, 1969.

Lupan, Radu, *Despre dragoste şi moarte* (*Of Love and Death*), foreword to Ernest Hemingway, *Adio, arme* (*A Farewell to Arms*), translated by Radu Lupan, Bucharest, Publishing House for Literature, 1969.

Lupan, Radu, *Hemingway, scriitorul* (*Hemingway, the Writer*), Bucharest, World Literature Publishing House, 1966.

Lupan, Radu, *Viziuni americane. Romanul american contemporan* (*American Visions. The Contemporary American Novel*), Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1997.

Pavel, Toma, *Gândirea romanului* (*The Thinking Novel*), translated from French by Mihaela Mancaş, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2008.

Streinu, Vladimir, *Studii de literatură universală (Studies on World Literature)*, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1973.

BDD-A2927 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:21 UTC)

Source texts:

Hemingway, Ernest, *A Farewell to Arms*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1029, [Online]. Available: http://archive.org/stream/farewelltoarms01hemi#page/n5/mode/2up [2012 October 30].

Hemingway, Ernest, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, [Online]. Available: http://kkoworld.com/kitablar/ernest_heminquey_ecel_zengi-eng.pdf [2012 October 30].

BDD-A2927 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:21 UTC)