

## NEW APPROACH OF HEMINGWAY'S IRONY-FOCUSING ON

### *A FAREWELL TO ARMS-*

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#### ABSTRACT

The irony in *A Farewell to Arms* has been analyzed through the prism of ambiguity or paradox emphasizing a nihilistic interpretation. Unlike the existing approach, this study is to elucidate irony as a role to pursue a new vision of life, noting that the hero in this novel recognizes an absurd world and purifies his soul beyond unbearable limits. Søren Kierkegaard (1992) says that human beings can be spiritually matured by recognizing irony. [1, p504] This quote helps readers understand how the protagonist, Frederic Henry, is able to maintain an existential life without losing stoicism under the absurd circumstances that he should not be able to endure.

This study will also observe how the emotion of fear when people are faced with death, is sublimated into irony, which transcends the suffering, and how Hemingway makes readers, who can never be free from unfair situations, aware of what true life is by realizing irony. By suggesting the direction of the existential life with irony, *A Farewell to Arms* is worth discussing through a new perspective for its educational value by those who are in countries in which the possibility of war still exists, such as Korea.

**KEYWORDS:** Hemingway, Kierkegaard, Irony, Absurd Circumstances, Spiritual Maturity

#### INTRODUCTION

*A Farewell to Arms* shows human finitude within the theme of war and love. Hemingway reveals the limits of the world interspersed with pain and despair that human beings are inevitably faced with. Especially in the ending of this novel where deals with the heroin's death has made many critics remark that this novel is very desperate. As mentioned in the Abstract, Kashkeen's assertion on early Hemingway's early works has become the basis of general criticism.[2] This tendency is proved by E. M. Halliday's comment below. [3]

There are many other ironic strokes in *A Farewell to Arms*, but it is this series, identifying the activities of war with all that is brutal and meaningless in human life, that gives the novel its predominantly ironic texture. [3, p66]

Robert Gajdusek(1996) explains the oxymoronic and ambiguous patterns in this novel to show that Hemingway's acknowledgment is the greater wisdom of the paradoxical nature of art in which truth in fiction becomes truth indeed [4, p48]. In fact, Hemingway himself experienced the divergence and the hypocrisy that happened in the war. The war that he took part in to pursue justice was like cattle slaughterhouses. This ridiculous state led him to feel irony.

There is a lot of research about Hemingway's irony based on the contradiction or paradox to explain the absurdity of this world, as William Dow [5] says irony in Hemingway is a banal subject. Even though many critics show interest in

irony, so far, the approach of how irony influences people who are in terrible situations, has not been seen. So this study elucidates how important the irony in this novel is, as a tool to make people not lose their moral strength.

## **CORRELATION OF HEMINGWAY'S WRITING TO KIERKEGAARD'S IRONY**

Søren Kierkegaard's insistence, "...no genuinely human life is possible without irony..." [6, p326], is a ground to explain Hemingway's philosophy of existential life, through irony. Irony defines the limit of fallacy human beings can make, leading people to recognize the human finitude, and becomes an important element to discern what truth is in life. Going beyond realizing an absurd life people can't avoid irony helps people reach the level of purity in their spirits and seek a new viewpoint for life. Hemingway is an artist who is interested in irony, making irony he encountered in war into visible letters. As Linda Wagner(2002) says that Hemingway plans the reader's response by elaborate writing[7, p10], the irony generated from his hard-boiled style and suppression of narration creating a bridge to connect human thought with reality, making people judge what is right and decide how they act, and finally these become factors to create interest in this novel. It is not an exaggeration to say that the behaviors the characters show by perceiving irony are a touchstone to cope with the harsh world.

Even though a dark atmosphere flows throughout this novel, the existential spirit with which the hero denies unreasonable death is a main basis. Along with Henry's mental power to take a mortal risk, the true courage Catherine Barkley shows when she knows she can't avoid death is a precondition that human beings should have.

It is important to study how they overcome their extreme anxiety and fear when they face death. Seizing the symbolic meaning of death that Hemingway really wants to say becomes a key to understand the ending of this novel that is apt to show a desperate message. In Hemingway's works, death produces the invisible abstractions beyond the meaning that the letters have. These concepts are clearly based on a phenomenon of death people commonly perceive, but are expressed more with the abstruse characters. As Robert Lewis [8] remarks that he has sought an aesthetic life through the process of death (1989), Hemingway reaches self-awareness, feeling the utmost pain from death. [9, p334-7] Fear in the face of death arises momentarily and then is sublimated into irony, which can produce strength to transcend the suffering from fear. The fact that Hemingway has gone to the fields of hunting, bullfighting and battle shows how strong Hemingway's will is to build inner awareness by witnessing scenes of death.

However, Malcolm Cowley (1962) says that Hemingway listens to his personal demon, puts Hemingway on the same line with Hawthorne and Melville. [10, p51] Ray B West (1962) concludes that this novel does not have any hope. [11, p151]

It is true that Hemingway has seldom been an affirmative writer; it is true that most of his work is narrow and violent and generally preoccupied with death. [10, p51]

What the novel says, finally, is that you cannot escape the obligations of action—you cannot say "farewell to arms"; you cannot sign a separate peace. You can only learn to live with life, to tolerate it as "the initiated" learn to tolerate it. [10, p151]

In fact, in the early short story, "Indian Camp", the Indian husband's suicide has lead to interpret Hemingway as a weak person who has a fear and an obsession of death. But this comment can be different if we focus on Nick. His behavior is very noticeable. Even though he is young, he assists his father who delivers an Indian baby by Caesarean

section without losing his dauntless attitude. Nick observes a miraculous birth followed by the woman's intense pain and without hesitation, accepts his father's suggestion that he be an intern to help in the operation. While Nick is watching the process of delivery, the woman's husband succumbs to his dread and finally commits suicide. By deciding not to die (... he felt quite sure that he would never die.)[12], Nick who is young but brave may underestimate the Indian man as a coward indirectly. Henry who became an adult from a young boy, Nick, says that "The coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave but one?"[15, p139] This expression is a clue that Nick's final declaration is the pledge not to be afraid of death.

Despite this resolution, death is the most extreme situation for human beings. People who are faced with situations of imminent death cannot be given time to make excuses. They have to only focus on a watertight action and survival. [13, p19] But Hemingway's heroes will not take a subservient position to beg for their life. The codes they have in common are practical disciplines, perseverance and courage that are not unreasonable or frivolous. Therefore, Hemingway's heroes face reality and attempt a desperate escape after feeling irony in death and catching the situation calmly.

Henry is not afraid of the suffering imposed on the body in the crisis of death. But he feels the psychological impact on the contradictory situation different from those beliefs that he has had as a faith. Since the world was created, almost everyone has thought that the sense of value, "a good man is blessed", is an immutable law. But the value is useless in a hellish battlefield sacrificing the good to new weapons and leaving only the irony.

Kierkegaard (1992) says that people who realize the essential irony are not bound in a specific form. [1, p 503-4] This argument explains what the source of courage with which Henry can express his existential will. Through his insight of the world, Henry separates truth from lies and he acts to move into action with faith, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated." [14, p103], rather than being helplessly a victim in the irrational system.

Henry is an ambulance lieutenant stationed in Gorizia in the south of Italy, who volunteered once the U.S.A joined World War I. Hemingway, who experienced the war, objectifies the real state of the battlefield in which blind slaughter is carried out, not distinguishing between friends and foes. The development of new weapons takes the lives of millions of people and obscures the boundary between good and evil. The real battleground is a field with indiscriminate devastation and in which the sacred and glorious cannot be found. [15, p184-5]

As if Pieter Bruegel's "Landscape with the fall of Icarus" represents the battlefield where human beings' life is ignored, the landscape Henry reflects that human beings' life itself is irony wholly. The fall plains in which Henry's troops are stationed are rich with crops, but the other side of the mountains has become naked with the burned trees by the bombing. [15, p3] The landscape that contrasts fear with peace reveals human being's stupidity, being enumerated with the contrary scenes of the wounded soldiers' groan and the hospital smell followed by a peaceful depiction. [15, p10]

Henry expresses the groans of the wounded serenely because he already experienced that "... only seven thousand died of it (the cholera) in the army." [15, p4] This expression is felt as though Henry is accustomed to war and his awareness for life seems to be paralyzed. But this means that Henry tries to keep his distance from the trauma he got as much as possible, and avoids a direct reaction to the ironic situation of the destructive war so that readers can judge it for themselves. The word of 'only' means that war can destroy more people than seven thousand soldiers who died due to the cholera. As Wirt William(1982) points out that 'rain' in Hemingway's works means 'a disaster'[16, p80], constantly falling rain puts the retreating troops into chaos and eventually makes the officer, as well as Henry in trouble. While Lieutenant

Henry is wandering after he lost his men during the retreat from Caporetto, he becomes misunderstood as a traitor. This ridiculous situation shows the extreme irony of human destinies. [15, p 224]

Right after several officers are accused of being traitors, Italian military police execute them without a chance to explain, like slaughterers. Henry in the group of deserters feels that the order for his execution will not be long. But while watching the officers being shot, Henry remains calm.

“It is you and such as you that have let the barbarians onto the sacred soil of the fatherland.”

“I beg your pardon,” said the lieutenant-colonel.

“It is because of treachery such as yours that we have lost the fruits of victory.”

“Have you ever been in a retreat?” the lieutenant-colonel asked.....

“Abandoned his troops, ordered to be shot,” he said. [15, p 223-4]

The words of ‘the sacred land of the motherland’ and ‘fruits of victory’ for the military police to accuse the officers of being traitors are inconsistent with the officers’ unfair situation, which produces irony.

The logic, in which someone has just been granted authority to kill another without listening to why he or she should die in doubtful situations, is made possible in war, but it is the brutal acts of war that end human lives in an instant with absurd criteria.

Hemingway enumerates cruel events without clearly describing his own judgments about the war through the mouth of Henry, which reveals a contradictory war. Kierkegaard(1989) says that irony is not to be understood as a form of words and bound to the restrictive form because it exists in the infinite form in the man who feels irony [ 6, p 326], which can help us understand the validity of Hemingway’s method of writing. For Hemingway, irony is not something that can be discussed with limited representations and all the mundane affairs.

Hemingway protests potentially the terrible cases by describing them without emotion. Along with this narrative discourse that is in harmony with speech while suppressing emotion, the hero’s situation is filled with affliction and the misery is felt. The internal conflicts of the characters are in inverse proportion to the monotony of expression in narrative thus creating irony. This is the exquisite point of this novel.

## IRONY FROM OVERTURNED STORIES

It is especially interesting to study irony from the contrariness of the stories with the hard-boiled narrative patterns and analyze the process of Henry’s mental change. As mentioned earlier, soldiers who are retreating fall into chaos due to ‘rain’. When the car an immediate subordinate, two master sergeants and Henry are riding in gets stuck in the mud, the master sergeants quickly leave without carrying out Henry’s order to bring the branches of a tree. They seem to be escaping so Henry shouts at them to stop but they do not stop. Finally Henry shoots them three times, one of them is killed.

“I order you to halt,” I called. They went a little faster. I opened up my holster, took the pistol, aimed at the one who had talked the most, and fired. I missed and they both started to run. I shot three times and dropped one.” [15, p204]

The meaning of firing ‘three times’ is closely connected with “Three Shots”, in which Nick fires the gun three

times to get rid of fear. In the army, feeling fear signifies death. Soldiers should kill the enemy in the war and must be able to welcome death bravely. Henry, who cannot be free from this social law, has the soldier executed in his duty as an officer.

However, this situation is reversed after Henry has been caught by military police and charged with the crime of desertion. He is going to be executed regardless of the fact that Henry has never intended to desert. Henry cannot accept and tries to escape from this ridiculous situation. The hair breadth scene in which he rejects the unjust death and jumps into the Tagliamento river reminds readers of Henry's previous behavior of shooting a soldier, showing how unreasonable this situation is.

I looked at the carabinieri. They were looking at the newcomers. The others were looking at the colonel. I ducked down, pushed between two men, and ran for the river, my head down. I tripped at the edge and went in with a splash. The water was very cold and I stayed under as long as I could. [15, p225]

This scene in which the reverse happens in an instant shows the culmination of irony. Henry shoots the man for desertion as his role as an officer, and soon he becomes a deserter with the same reason as a victim of war. War degrades lives of the young to expendable supplies under the abstract values of honor and sacrifice. [15, p185] After Henry feels irony from the absurd reality, he decides to escape. As if Arthur Waldhorn(1975) interprets the meaning of 'falling into the river' as a ritual act, perceiving irony is also a rite of passage to choose an action. [17, p126-127]

Henry, who is different from Hemingway's previous wandering hero in *The Sun Also Rises*, acts boldly. He is a 'hero' to reject the contradictory rules that prevail on the battlefield venture. Henry's dimension is different from that of the officers who are executed wrongfully without resistance. [15, p 224] Henry does not comply with the unreasonable system and succeeds in escaping after realizing the irony of his situation.

His unwavering attitude is also consistent with Henry's narrative pattern. Even though he is in imminent danger in which he can die, Henry does not lament the absurd situation or mention at all about the fear of death, and just calmly describes the progress of the case. But readers are poignantly empathetic to the conflict Henry does not reveal with a fretful mind. The narrative pattern can be found in Hemingway's early short stories "In Our Time" [12]

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.

Readers feel the brutal nature of war, but cannot read the narrator's bitter feelings and a tinge of agitation of the German who is being killed except for the expression, 'awfully surprised' in this description. This senseless expression of the speaker means that he does not feel the seriousness of killing people but shows a desperate attempt not to feel guilty about his action. The reader receives this as a silent cry of irony.

Nevertheless, Henry's mental suffering is sometimes revealed at night. Hemingway expressed the fear of the 'night' in "Three Shots" and "War", and the fear is more powerfully found in "Now I Lay Me". In the novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake cannot sleep well when the lamp is off. Although this trauma does not stem from his intentions, the mental pain he feels at night comes from guilt made after killing a man. Henry's affiliation also is equal to pains of the above-mentioned protagonists.

He looked at me and smiled.

“You understand but you do not love God.”

“No.”

“You do not love Him at all?” he asked.

“I am afraid of Him in the night sometimes.” [15, p 72]

In Henry's consciousness, the 'night' becomes a cause of bringing guilt. He is afraid of God at night. He does not utter his guilt to Him because he cannot trust God. The reason why Henry shows this ironic stance is that he distrusts God's existence. How could the young die in the ridiculous battlefield if there is God judging right and wrong? Henry's thought of God reflects the contemporary tendency about God. For Henry, unfair death can come upon human beings, regardless of whether or not God exists. Henry who had been absolutely dependent on religion and traditional values of society does not accept an abstract and ideal way of life. Henry who is feeling estranged from the existing value can't believe God's existence, nor have sincere feelings for a woman who loved him. Henry is just bantering with Catherine without affection even though he is kissing her.

I knew I did not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her. This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards. [15, p30]

In the opening part of this novel, love was abstract and meaningless to Henry like religion and traditional values. But Henry's superficial thought about love and the uncertain entity of the value he has depended on are clearly purified after perceiving irony and falling into the river. Henry, who comes to believe that love between human beings is the only force capable of surviving the absurd world, realizes who his precious person is and what he should pursue. He now knows that the only truth is to live with the true lover. Henry will not be afraid of the 'night' if he is with Catherine. [15, p249] His decision seems to be easy to explain Wagner's comment about love.

Love was, in many respects, still the answer to the increasingly technologized society of the twentieth century. People feared the impersonality of the binary, of the numbers-based lives shared by even the most stalwart humanists by mid-century. [18. p8]

Like Wagner's comment about the importance of love, Catherine's true love mitigates Henry's trauma. But this happiness does not last very long, and Catherine is suffering from the pain of childbirth. Finally she must receive a Caesarean section because the birth is not going smoothly. [15, p324] But a nurse near Catherine greets another nurse with a smile without caring what happens now to the patient who is suffering severely. [15, p324] Henry who is watching his beloved wife's suffering discovers others' indifference from the nurses' laughing. The inconsiderate nurse does not participate in the parturient woman's pain that can take her life away.

It is interesting to look over how indifference is revealed when others are suffering. In Hemingway's works, the painful event happens in one scene, but in others, the peaceful routine takes place as it goes like the message from "Landscape with the fall of Icarus". For example, "The Capital of the World" Paco, who got injured during the bullfight practice, is dying in the cold restaurant, while his sisters are watching a movie in the theater.

This dramatic contrast shows that pain and defeat of the hero are lonely and private. Irony from this contraposition

increases the severity of the pain of the hero and makes readers feel a sense of unity with the hero. [19, p12]

This kind of indifference seems to exist even between man and God. Man cannot escape from the natural disaster because they are part of nature and tied to a law of nature that sometimes brings violence and death. Humans also cause self-destructive war itself.

But God is not involved in man's brutal nature and has no concern with natural disasters that can kill so many people at one time. As if humans who do not care about the existence of trivial ants can be seen as the Almighty, God is just a huge presence higher than in the human sequence. He casts doubt of faith in God which may be an abstract idea human beings have made. [15, p327-8]

But it is necessary to examine Henry's behavior in which he prays earnestly to God to ask for his beloved's life when Catherine becomes endangered after she had a stillbirth.

I knew she was going to die and I prayed that she would not. Don't let her die. Oh, God, please don't let her die. I'll do anything for you if you won't let her die. Please, please, please, dear God, don't let her die. [15, p330]

The scene is the opposite of the previous scene in which Henry was cynical about God. In fact, He did not show the urgent and heartfelt emotion for himself when he was in the life-threatening situations in which he got hit by a mortar shell [15, p56] and was chased by the MP. Henry, who did not lose his cool in front of an imminent death, lays down all his pride and really wants to borrow the power of miracle to save the life of his beloved.

His poignant prayer reflects how deep Hemingway's altruism is. Even while Hemingway was suffering serious injuries on his leg during the First World War, He took an injured colleague out to a safe place.[20, pxxi] Almost all of Hemingway's works shows altruism dissolved in him. Sacrifice of Jordan to choose death for the safety of Maria and his team members in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is an extension of Henry's humanism.

Despite Henry's fervent prayer, the shadow of death to be cast on Catherine is getting closer. But she does not lose courage even to the end and shows a temperate attitude Hemingway has sought when Catherine struggles against death.

This normative act of the heroine could be comparable to the courage Henry has shown. Catherine is different from Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*, who does not care about the men around her in order to meet her desire. She has shown the generosity and love for Henry since early in the novel. Catherine's sincere love makes Henry, who has thought love is just a game, realize the value of true love.

I have been alone while I was with many girls and that is the way that you can be most lonely. But we were never lonely and never afraid when we were together. [15, p249]

Catherine who is pregnant is devoted enough to volunteer to row while they are going to Switzerland across the lake because Henry looks tired. [15, p274] She feels sympathy for Henry who would be left alone after she already knew her death. [15, p330] Henry who is watching the lover's death is very anxious. She gives up her breath saying that she is not afraid of being dead to Henry who is watching sadly. [15, p331]



“Don't worry, darling,” Catherine said. “I'm not a bit afraid. It's just a dirty trick.” [15, p331]

In reality, death in the human world is an inescapable reality and a relentless and remorseless metaphor of the universe that is opposed to life and love. Although Henry has dreamed a beautiful future with Catherine, the inevitable fate of human beings prevents their love.

In the last part of this novel, it is necessary to contemplate the meaning of ‘death’ the main characters accept. Hemingway's consistent issue dealing with death is that human beings should have the courage to take inevitable death courageously. For example, in “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber”, Macomber who was too weak to be acknowledged from his wife as a real husband becomes a real man by looking death in the face. In this respect, Catherine's attitude of death belongs to the normative category Hemingway has pursued.

Like the coexistence of light and darkness, Hemingway's heroes already apprehend that death is hermaphroditic with life. In “Indian Camp”, as Nick declares himself not to be afraid of death, Henry, who became an adult from Nick, reaches the mental state in which he can accept the lover's death and transcend the fear of death.

After Catherine's death, the doctor, who is worried about the mental pain of Henry, offers to take him to the hotel, but Henry rejects his offer and faces the corpse of Catherine. [15, p332] Henry is now able to send Catherine off courageously, so that he can accept reality once again as he has done until now.

By perceiving juxtaposed changes from an accomplice of war to a deserter, from the game of love to true love, from a cynical perspective of God to a dependent manner, readers will pay tribute to Henry's desperate efforts to pursue true humanity and the existential will through irony Henry realizes in the face of incomprehensible things and humans' inevitable fate.

## CONCLUSIONS

Hemingway's irony makes the images felt from the experience of human affairs. In this novel, which reveals the human finitude in an absurd world, the artist aesthetically expresses the inner consciousness of the contradictions and inconsistencies resulting from the gaps between falsity and truth, expectation and achievement, intention and execution.

Hemingway describes the facts with which his feelings are ruled out to show the harsh realities of the battlefield as they are. The indiscreet destruction in the war is in contrast to the artist's desire to be an effort for democracy. New weapons disintegrate traditional values at the expense of many people. Henry's cynical view about the harsh war was expressed with the narration that brings about irony, which emits the author's real feelings opposed to the emotion that can be felt in the narrative in reverse.

The juxtaposed structure of changes about the situation and the emotion evokes readers' sympathy with Henry's suffering and delivers a message that as life and death coexist, despair is engaged with hope. Henry is aware of the woman's death as an inevitable irony which man cannot avoid. We can see this realization as a bridge that can make the hero transcend the pain once again so he can continue to express his existential will.



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