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# HEMINGWAY'S HONESTY AND THE TRAGEDY OF *A FAREWELL TO ARMS*

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**Title:** Hemingway's Honesty and the Tragedy of *A Farewell to Arms*

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**Abstract:** In his writing, Ernest Hemingway made frequent use of the word 'honesty'. 'Honesty' is, however, an ambiguous term, and it is not an entirely simple task to figure out exactly what Hemingway meant when he used it. In this essay one of the objectives will be to seek to understand and establish a definition of the 'honesty' which Hemingway employed in his writing. During his lifetime, Hemingway indicated more than once that his novel *A Farewell to Arms* was meant as a tragedy. This notion has, over the years, been largely ignored by critics due to the fact that the novel does not fit into the category of tragedy as defined by Aristotle. Another objective of this essay, therefore, will be to examine *A Farewell to Arms* closely in order to see whether the novel can be said to create a tragic effect. The final and main objective of the essay will be to connect Hemingway's 'honesty' with the tragedy of *A Farewell to Arms* to understand in what way, as I believe it does, the former contributes toward the latter.

**Keywords:** *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway, Honesty, Tragedy, Aristotle, Tragic Effect

# Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Tragedy?.....	3
3. Hemingway's Honesty.....	8
4. The Role of Honesty in Tragedy.....	15
5. Conclusion.....	22
References.....	24

# 1. INTRODUCTION

In his writing – especially in his writing about writing – Ernest Hemingway often used the words ‘truth’ and ‘honesty’. The following excerpt is from his memoir *A Moveable Feast*:

But sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get going [...] I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, ‘Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.’ (Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 22)

Another example is where, in his 1932 non-fiction book *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway addresses the matter of his own ‘Iceberg Theory’ of writing:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. (Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, 169)

And in a 1935 article for *Esquire*, Hemingway, during a conversation with a young and aspiring writer from Minnesota, says that ‘Good writing is true writing’ and that ‘[i]t [imagination] is the one thing beside honesty that a good writer must have’ (215). Even when Hemingway is, for instance, depicted by an actor as a character in a film, this theme of ‘truth’ and ‘honesty’ is a dominating aspect of the character. In Woody Allen’s 2011 film *Midnight in Paris* the character of Hemingway, portrayed by Corey Stoll, claims about *The Sun Also Rises*, that ‘it was a good book because it was an honest book, and that’s what war does to men.’

‘Truth’ and ‘honesty’, however, are both ambiguous terms, and it is not an entirely simple task to figure out what Hemingway actually meant when he used them. A considerable portion of this essay will therefore be dedicated to doing just that.

Robert Merrill notes that ‘[...] few critics have taken seriously his [Hemingway’s] suggestion that the book is a tragedy. I think this is unfortunate, for it obscures Hemingway’s contribution to the history of tragic form’ (Merrill 571). Hemingway’s critics, Merrill claims, ‘have obviously read their Aristotle.’ But despite the fact that *A Farewell to Arms* does not fit into Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, where the hero must possess some sort of character flaw which causes him to bring upon himself his ultimate demise, Merrill argues that the novel does indeed create a tragic effect. Merrill offers several explanations of different aspects of the book which contribute toward this tragic effect; he

does not, however, suggest that the 'truth' or 'honesty' of *A Farewell to Arms* could be one of these aspects. I would agree with Merrill that the novel is tragic even though it does not fit Aristotle's definition of tragedy. This essay, though, will argue that the previously mentioned 'truth' or 'honesty' of Hemingway's writing contributes toward the tragic effect which the novel creates. The objectives of this paper, therefore, are to argue that the novel *A Farewell to Arms* is a tragedy; to attempt to understand and establish a definition of the 'truth' or 'honesty' which Hemingway employed in his writing; and then to demonstrate how Hemingway's 'truth' or 'honesty' contributes toward creating a tragic effect.

In terms of secondary literature, the amount of reading I have done for this essay has been extensive. Although only two articles, by Robert Merrill and Robert C. Hart respectively, are cited in the essay, works such as Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (2000) and William E. Cain's 'The Death of Love in *A Farewell to Arms*' (2013) play an important part in, for instance, my understanding of the First World War and of its role in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Helpful, also, especially when dealing with issues of 'truth' or 'honesty', is Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1974) and Margot Norris' 'The Novel as War: Lies and Truth in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*' (1994).

## 2. TRAGEDY?

### 2.1. How to decide whether *A Farewell to Arms* is a tragedy?

In the introduction I mentioned Robert Merrill's rather unique view that *A Farewell to Arms* should be considered a tragic novel. In 'Tragic Form in *A Farewell to Arms*', he claims that critics over the years have dismissed the notion that *A Farewell to Arms* is a tragedy for one simple reason: the novel does not entirely fit into Aristotle's definition of the term. Merrill, though, argues that the test for tragedy is not whether it follows Aristotle's model to the smallest detail, but whether the work produces a tragic effect. He claims that Hemingway, with *A Farewell to Arms*, has managed to do this without relying on the classic tragic structure devised by Aristotle, and thus has 'contributed to the history of tragic form' (571).

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle summarizes his idea of what a tragedy should be in the following manner:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (*Poetics*, part VI)

Certainly, a tragic drama of Aristotle's time would be different from a modern novel in many ways. The lead characters, for instance, would be different; the dialogue, often rhymed, would be infinitely different – the language in a modern novel, especially in one by Hemingway, would not be 'embellished with each kind of artistic ornament.' Ultimately, however, judging from this excerpt, it seems that the purpose of tragedy – the effect which a tragedy should have on its audience – is, through the induction of pity and fear, a 'purgation' of these feelings. Aristotle called this a *catharsis*. This is also the effect which Merrill believes is the test for tragedy; as long as the work in question arouses pity and fear and effects a 'proper purgation of these emotions', it is a work within the genre of tragedy. In other words, Merrill and Aristotle agree in the question of what a tragedy *should* accomplish, but they disagree in the question of *how* that is accomplished. Or, rather, Merrill believes that it can be accomplished in ways other than those described by Aristotle.

If the requirement for tragedy is, as Merrill and Aristotle agree, that it must produce a tragic effect – that it must inspire pity and fear in its readers or viewers and thus

effect a catharsis – then what I must do to be able to claim that *A Farewell to Arms* is a tragedy, is to argue that it produces a tragic effect.

## 2.2. The Tragic Effect of *A Farewell to Arms*

In the *Poetics*, part XIII, Aristotle claims that ‘pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.’ ‘Unmerited misfortune’ is straightforward; it means that the catastrophe which the protagonist of the tragedy is subjected to cannot be deserved in any way, or, at least, the catastrophe must be *beyond* what the protagonist might deserve. In other words, a ‘catastrophe’ where the protagonist is rightfully sentenced to a lifetime in prison for the murder of a child cannot be tragic, because that misfortune would not be unmerited and thus would not inspire pity. ‘The misfortune of a man like ourselves’ is somewhat more complicated to explain. In short, it means that for the misfortune of the protagonist to inspire fear in a reader or viewer, this reader or viewer must be able to identify with the protagonist. This does not mean that the reader or viewer must have been through similar experiences to those of the protagonist, or that they must have been subjected to the same sort of catastrophe or suffering. Rather, it means that the protagonist must resemble a human being, a person of the real world. He cannot be a one-dimensional hero or villain, or a completely innocent victim, because such characters do not exist in life and thus are impossible for a human audience to truly understand and identify with. It must be a character with both strengths and weaknesses, who is capable of both good and bad, and who is susceptible to influences and impulses both good and bad. It must be a character that the audience can understand, acquaint themselves with, and care about. This is what inspires fear.

The question is, then, whether the catastrophe suffered by the main characters of *A Farewell to Arms* is an ‘unmerited misfortune’, and whether the main characters of *A Farewell to Arms* are ‘like ourselves’.

The ultimate catastrophe of *A Farewell to Arms* consists of (1) Catherine Barkley’s death and loss of her child, and (2) Frederic Henry’s loss of Catherine Barkley and their child. As I view it, both of these misfortunes are unmerited. There are two things Catherine has done which could *possibly* be argued by someone to merit her misfortunes. Firstly, she conceived and gave birth to a child out of wedlock, and secondly, she accompanied Frederic in his desertion from the army. Both of these notions, however, would be considered ludicrous by the general audience of a work like *A Farewell to Arms*, and



would certainly only be argued by extremists if by anyone at all. The sins of Frederic are much the same as those of Catherine: sex out of wedlock and desertion from the army, and just as in the case of Catherine, hardly anyone would argue that these sins make the misfortunes which befall him deserved. As regards Frederic, though, there is another interesting incident: During the military retreat, he executes a soldier for disobedience and attempted desertion (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, 182). Certainly, this action is not a violation of the law of the time, but morally it seems very dubious, especially since Frederic himself later chooses to desert the army. However, it would hardly be reasonable to suggest that because of this incident, completely unrelated to his later misfortunes, Frederic deserves to be robbed of the love of his life and his newborn child. Since there are no reasonable arguments to the contrary, it can thus be concluded that the misfortunes of the characters of *A Farewell to Arms* definitely are unmerited, and that the work succeeds to arouse pity.

But, as Merrill suggests, there is another, equally important component in a tragic effect: ‘To move us with the force of tragedy, Hemingway had to present his hero and heroine as something more than “victims”, poor, worm-like figures whose fate might inspire pity but not fear’ (Merrill 576). Aristotle wrote that fear is aroused ‘by the misfortune of a man like ourselves’, and I attempted a definition of this as ‘a character with both strengths and weaknesses, who is capable of both good and bad, and who is susceptible to influences and impulses both good and bad’. Basically, then, a ‘man like ourselves’ must be a complex, multidimensional character. There are several reasons why I believe Catherine and Frederic fit into that definition. As humans, they are changeable; they do not act with absolute consequence. The novel is full of actions which contradict earlier actions, illogical impulses of emotion, moods which pass as suddenly as they come. For instance, as indicated above, Frederic executes a soldier for attempted desertion, only to later follow that very soldier’s example. Catherine slaps Frederic for attempting to kiss her, only to apologize and let him kiss her nonetheless (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, 24, 25). When Frederic sees his newborn child for the first time, the nurse asks him, ‘Aren’t you proud of your son?’, whereupon Frederic replies, ‘No,’ ‘He nearly killed his mother’ (287). When Catherine is certain that she will die and Henry takes her hand, she says, ‘Don’t touch me,’ then smiles and says, ‘Poor darling. You touch me all you want’ (292). These examples all contribute toward the unmistakable *humanity* of Catherine and Frederic, toward the feeling that they are ‘living people; people not characters’ (Hart 317). And, while these changes of heart, mood-swings,

and impulses may not always be logical or justifiable, there is always a *reason* behind them, a reason which may not be explained in the text, but which, solely because it is so very human, can be understood by a reader nonetheless. This is what inspires fear; to see humans, humans whose actions and behavior and feelings we understand, care about, and can recognize ourselves in, approach such a monumental catastrophe (the key word here is *approach*. Further explanation in the next paragraph). We fear *for* them. Theoretically speaking, then, it would be fair to say that *A Farewell to Arms* is a tragedy. The work inspires pity and fear and, as Aristotle claims, pity and fear are the two emotions which must be produced by a tragedy in order for a catharsis of these emotions to take place.

The argument most frequently produced by critics who dispute that *A Farewell to Arms* is a tragedy, though, is that the work cannot inspire fear because there exist no ‘tragic flaw’ in the main characters of the story – their downfall is not a cause of their own, ill-advised actions. They do not fit into Aristotle’s own definition of the ‘man like ourselves’: ‘a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty’ (*Poetics*, part XIII). Frederic and Catherine are not, as for instance Othello, led toward their demise by misplaced jealousy and by ignorance of the true facts. Rather, the catastrophe of the novel is purely accidental, and the critics wonder how something so arbitrary can inspire fear. There is a clear purpose to the tragic flaw, and it is not difficult to understand why it has for so long been considered an irreplaceable aspect of any tragedy. For instance, the flaw makes the protagonist more human and brings him closer to the audience; it increases the likelihood that the audience will care about him. But mainly; in most tragedies, the audience is privy to more information than the protagonist; again, using *Othello* as an example, the audience is aware from the very beginning of the play that Iago is a liar. Othello himself, however, has no reason to distrust him. The tragic flaw of Othello is his inability to judge whom to trust, as well as his tendency toward jealousy. As the play progresses, the audience begins to have a premonition of how the play will end, they start to see the approaching disaster. Othello’s tragic flaw causes him to make wrong decision after wrong decision; the audience, meanwhile, grows ever more fearful. They *fear* for him and for Desdemona, more and more, until the end, finally, becomes inevitable. In *A Farewell to Arms*, critics argue, there exists no such flaw. There is nothing in either Frederic’s or Catherine’s character which is the obvious cause of all their wrong decisions; their decisions, in fact, are not even necessarily wrong – and they are certainly not directly linked to the ultimate

catastrophe. And yet, I believe that *A Farewell to Arms* succeeds to inspire fear. As I attempted to explain in the last paragraph, the main characters of the novel are depicted so as to seem as *human* as possible, so that the audience can embrace them and care about them. This alone, however, does not inspire fear. Aristotle wrote that

[...] the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. (*Poetics*, part XIII)

This is true. Regardless of how much we care about a character, his downfall – his move from ‘prosperity to adversity’ – will only shock us. However, if, as it is in *A Farewell to Arms*, this character’s downfall is foreshadowed from the very beginning, the reader will, similar to the audience of a tragedy like *Othello*, have a premonition of the end of the book; they will sense that the story might end in disaster. Throughout *A Farewell to Arms*, this sensation is very strong, and Hemingway employs many different devices, omens being one of them, in order to create and maintain it. As Merrill points out, the ‘most famous omen is of course the rain, which accompanies every disaster in the book, from the marching of the soldiers in the first chapter to the night of Catherine’s death’ (575). At one point in the novel, Catherine even says ‘I’m afraid of the rain because sometimes I see me dead in it’ (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, 114). After two or three gloomy moments or disastrous events accompanied by rain, the reader starts to associate rain with such incidents. It is simple classical conditioning; whenever it starts to rain in *A Farewell to Arms*, the reader will, provided that he cares enough about the characters he is reading about, fear for them. Of course, the rain is not the only omen Hemingway uses to foreshadow the impending disaster; there are many other features of the novel which serve this same purpose. Miss Ferguson’s constant blaming of Frederic for ‘the mess’ he’s ‘gotten this girl [Catherine] into’ (220) is another example. My point here is that Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* succeeds to produce the fear that is so vital in any tragic effect without following the model which Aristotle devised. All tragedies do not need a tragic flaw; to produce fear, it is enough to create characters which the reader cares about, subtly promise their demise, and then fulfill that promise.

Let us now leave the subject of tragedy for a moment and instead focus on the concept of ‘truth’ or ‘honesty’.

### 3. HEMINGWAY'S HONESTY

According to the *Oxford Paperback Dictionary*, to be 'honest' is to be 'truthful' or 'trustworthy' ("Honest"). It could hence be argued that to write 'truly' is the same as to write 'honestly'. Furthermore, it stands to reason that something, for instance a novel, which is 'honest', could also be called 'true', because if a writer writes honestly, the writing which ends up on the page must be true. For the sake of efficiency, what has hitherto been called 'truth' or 'honesty' will in the remainder of this essay be referred to simply as 'honesty'.

It is my view that Hemingway's honesty consists of three components or qualities. In the introduction I mentioned Woody Allen's 2011 film *Midnight in Paris* and the quote by the character of Hemingway, 'It was a good book because it was an honest book, and that's what war does to men'. He says this about *The Sun Also Rises* – however, we do know for a fact that *The Sun Also Rises* is a fictional story featuring fictional characters, and therefore cannot be true as in 'in accordance with fact' ("True"). What does the character of Hemingway mean, then, when he says that it was an honest book? In his 1957 essay 'Hemingway on Writing', Robert C. Hart offers an answer to this question:

Hemingway's view of the writer's craft is centered in 'truth' – artistic truth. Truth in fiction is not factual truth, not, as we may infer from his distinction between creative writer and reporter, a report of what *has* happened, but, in something like Aristotle's sense, an account of what *could* happen within the limits of the possibilities of life as we know it here and now. (315)

Thus, the first quality of Hemingway's honesty is that it is 'artistic', as opposed to 'factual', that is, the events and the characters he depicts are invented, however only within the boundaries of what is possible.

The second quality of Hemingway's honesty has to do with language and Hemingway's depiction of events. In *A Farewell to Arms* it is remarkable how little emotional language Hemingway uses. By emotional language I do not mean words such as 'angry' or 'scared'. These are not emotional words because they are indifferent labels attached to emotions; they merely state facts – 'I was angry' (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, 24). Such labels are not at all uncommon in the novel. Rather, emotional language is anything within a language which a writer might use to sway a reader toward a particular perception of something which occurs in the novel. The word 'creep', is a simple example of emotional language. It literally means '1. to move with the body close to the ground' or '2. to move

timidly, slowly, or stealthily; to come on gradually' ("Creep"), however, most people would associate it with some sort of uncomfortable or even ominous feeling. Through the employment of the word 'creep', then, a writer or speaker might indicate his own opinion or feelings about something without explicitly stating it; they might say 'Winter is creeping up on us' instead of 'Winter is coming', and thus make winter sound like an uncomfortable and ominous thing even to a reader or listener who would normally be glad at the prospect of it. Here follows an example of the typically *unemotional* language of *A Farewell to Arms*:

We expected a bombardment but it did not come. It was getting dark. Guns were firing from the field behind the village and the shells, going away, had a comfortable sound. (167)

If, on the other hand, Hemingway chose to write this passage using emotional language, it might have looked more like this:

We expected a bombardment but luckily it did not come. The night was creeping in. Guns were firing from the field behind the village and I sighed with relief at the sound of the shells going away.

If we look at these two passages sentence by sentence; the first written by Hemingway without emotional language, the second rephrased by me with emotional language; we can see that in the first sentence, the only difference is the addition of the word 'luckily', which is an emotional word because it clearly indicates the narrator's feelings about the events which are taking place around him. The second sentence has been changed completely, from 'It was getting dark' – an indifferent statement devoid of emotion where the speaker evidently does not mind whether it is light or dark – to 'The night was creeping in' – a statement which makes the narrator's feelings about the approaching darkness clear as well as transfers these feelings onto the reader. In the third sentence, the comfort which the narrator feels as a result of the fading sound of the shells has been expressed in a slightly different way. A 'sigh' is always caused by some sort of emotion; whether it be boredom, frustration, or something else; and the word redirects the reader's attention to the face of the narrator. The word 'relief' simply states what sort of sigh it was that the narrator emitted, and since a 'sigh of relief' is a very relatable thing, it is easy for the reader to imagine the narrator's face, as well as the emotions on that face.

We can see, then, the difference between the two passages above. The first remains emotionally detached, simply describing events as they happen, as viewed by an indifferent observer, while the second is more concerned with how the events cause the narrator to feel. The example I have given here illustrates, in my opinion, quite effectively this

second quality of the honesty of Hemingway, and at the same time allows it to be viewed in contrast to something else.

I have not yet addressed, however, the question of why a text which contains an abundance of emotional language is less honest than a text which does not. The key lies in the word 'indifference', defined as 'feeling or showing no interest or sympathy' or 'unconcerned' ("Indifferent"). Of the passages quoted above, the first could be called 'indifferent', while the second could be called 'emotional'. In the first passage, the narrator does not concern himself with anything apart from relating events which have taken place. He does not concern himself with the reader's opinion of the events he is relating, and he does not attempt to make them appear in a certain way – for instance, he does not attempt to make them seem exciting. His sole concern is to tell of events exactly as they happened, unaltered and unadorned. (The 'he' in this scenario, mind, is the narrator as opposed to the author; Henry as opposed to Hemingway. The first quality of Hemingway's honesty, that it be artistic rather than factual, still stands. The events have not happened in real life, but they have in the life of Henry, and it is the *narrator's* sole concern to tell of them exactly as they happened, unaltered and unadorned.) In the second passage, the narrator's purpose is something else entirely. He tells of the night 'creeping in' so as to create excitement and suspense and cause the reader to experience a sense of discomfort. He tells of the protagonist's 'sigh of relief' in order to stir that same emotion in the reader. In the first passage, the events taking place are in plain sight for the reader to behold; in the second passage, the emotional language covers them in a veil which the reader is forced to look through. In other words: the first passage requires interpretation, just as events in real life do, and the second passage does not, since the narrator has placed his own interpretations in the text. It stands to reason that for a depiction of an event to be honest, it must, as reality does, require interpretation – and it must therefore be written indifferently as opposed to emotionally. To be clear, this indifference or lack of emotional language is a feature throughout all of *A Farewell to Arms*; however, I do not mean to say that no single emotional language feature exists in the novel – as to any rule, there are exceptions. Mainly, the second quality of Hemingway's honesty is discernible in the depiction of events, while, for instance, the narrator's own thoughts definitely may contain emotional language.

The third quality of Hemingway's honesty is connected to the second as well as to Hemingway's theory of writing, the 'Iceberg Theory'. In *Death in the Afternoon*,

Hemingway writes, as quoted earlier in the introduction, the following about the Iceberg Theory:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. (169)

In this omitting of ‘things’ of which Hemingway writes, emotional language could, in my opinion, be included – therein lies a connection to the second quality. The text cannot have the intended effect if it is covered in a veil of emotional language. The Iceberg Theory, though, is not primarily about the omission of emotional language, but about the omission of explanations. The language, i.e., the actual words on the pages of *A Farewell to Arms*, seldom answers anything but the following questions: What do the characters do? What do they say? What is happening around them and what do the surroundings look like? And very rarely: What emotion do they feel? In cases such as the latter, the emotion is simply labeled and never elaborated. In other words, the causes or reasons behind what characters do or say or what occurs around them is never explained by the narrator. It is in the actions and behavior of the characters and in the dialogue between characters that the characters can be truly discerned. For instance, in the passage quoted here, Henry and three Italian ambulance drivers are settling in to rest for three hours before continuing their retreat back from the mountains:

I went out then through the dining-room and the hall and up the marble stairs to the room where I had lived with Rinaldi. It was raining outside. I went to the window and looked out. It was getting dark and I saw the three cars standing in line under the trees. The trees were dripping in the rain. It was cold and the drops hung to the branches. I went back to Rinaldi’s bed and lay down and let sleep take me. (171)

The narrator states here that the room in which he stands is the room he shared with Rinaldi before the retreat, which means that his own bed should be in that room as well as Rinaldi’s. Henry, however, makes the conscious choice to sleep in Rinaldi’s bed instead of his own. Certainly, there is a reason behind this choice, and even though this reason is never explained by the narrator, it can nonetheless be understood by the reader. As I view it, the passage reveals, through action, an aspect of Henry’s personality which is never addressed directly throughout the entire novel: He goes to sleep in Rinaldi’s bed because he is afraid of what awaits him, and the bed of his friend offers him comfort.

Here follows one more example:

‘What a lovely country,’ she said.  
‘Isn’t it grand?’

‘Let’s go and have breakfast!’  
‘Isn’t it a grand country? I love the way it feels under my shoes.’  
‘I’m so stiff I can’t feel it very well. But it feels like a splendid country. Darling, do you realize we’re here and out of that bloody place?’  
‘I do. I really do. I’ve never realized anything before.’  
‘Look at the houses. Isn’t this a fine square? There’s a place we can get breakfast.’  
‘Isn’t the rain fine? They never had rain like this in Italy. It’s cheerful rain.’  
‘And we’re here, darling! Do you realize we’re here?’ (247, 248)

This dialogue takes place as Henry and Catherine land in Switzerland after a full night of rowing. In the previous example, Hemingway depicts emotion through action; here, he depicts emotion through dialogue. In connection to this dialogue, the only thing the actual narration says as regards emotion is ‘We were cockeyed excited’ (248) – which is another unelaborated label. The actual emotion, the relief following the escape from potential desertion charges, the relief following the, if only temporary, loss of the burden of the war, for instance, is visible only in the dialogue. Once again, there is no explanation in the actual words on the page – the readers must interpret the text and understand by themselves why the rain is different in Switzerland compared to Italy, and how it is possible to love the way a certain country feels under one’s shoes.

Perhaps this quote from Angela Carter’s *Wise Children*, which, as regards narration, could be said to be the polar opposite to *A Farewell to Arms*, could provide an illustrative contrast:

I *did* piss myself when I saw him, in fact, but only a little bit, hardly enough to stain the sofa.  
Such eyes! Melchior’s eyes, warm and dark and sexy as the inside of a London cab in wartime. His eyes.  
But those very eyes, those knicker-shifting, unfasten-your-brassiere-from-the-back-of-the-gallery-eyes, were the bitterest disappointment of my life till then. No. Of all my life, before and since. No disappointment ever after measured up to it. Because those eyes of his looked at us but did not *see* us, even as we sat there, glowing because we couldn’t help it; our helpless mouths started to smile. (Carter 72)

Comparing this excerpt from *Wise Children* with the two from *A Farewell to Arms*, we can see that the essential difference between the two narrative techniques is that Carter’s narrator *explains* to the reader the cause behind everything that happens and the effect it has on her, while Hemingway’s narrator simply *shows* the reader what happens and does not bother to explain *why* a character utters a particular line or behaves in a particular way. The excerpt from Carter, you could say, resembles a diary, while the excerpts from Hemingway resemble a screenplay. But how is this connected to honesty? For a writer to produce something like *A Farewell to Arms*, to produce a passage of text where emotions and thoughts can be perceived by a reader even though they are not stated in the words on the paper, he must know in his



head what is transpiring in the minds and hearts of his characters. He must think to himself, through the entire writing process: How, *honestly*, would a human who had this in his mind and this in his heart, act in this particular situation? If the writer has succeeded to depict actions, behavior, and dialogue honestly, the inner workings of his characters will be there to be understood and felt by any reader who has the patience to look beneath the words, beneath the surface of the water, for the bulk of the iceberg. In this way, Hemingway relies heavily on the honesty, the trueness to life, in the behavior of his characters; they must behave as real people would behave, because if they do not, they will not seem human, and readers will not be able to understand them, identify with them, care about them, and fear for them.

In summary: Hemingway's honesty, as I view it, could be divided into three different components or qualities. Firstly, to claim that Hemingway wrote honestly is not the same as to claim that Hemingway wrote only of events which are factually true, events which have come to pass in real life. The events which transpire in *A Farewell to Arms*, as well as the characters that feature in them, are fictional; however, they are imagined, as Hart writes, 'within the limits of the possibilities of life as we know it'. Secondly, Hemingway uses an indifferent style of narration, ridding himself of emotional language for the purpose of presenting to the reader an honest depiction of events which, as real-life events, require interpretation and where the language itself does not inform the reader what his opinion should be of the events taking place. Thirdly, in his writing, Hemingway makes use of the Iceberg Theory. I admit that the second quality of Hemingway's honesty, the omission of emotional language, could be counted as a part of the Iceberg Theory. However, the Iceberg Theory is more about the omission of explanations. For the Iceberg Theory to have the intended effect, the writer must write with absolute honesty and must at all times, against the backdrop of his knowledge about his own characters, consider how, honestly, those characters, or *people*, rather, would act in any given situation. If a writer has employed the Iceberg Theory correctly, the words which he has written will be what is physically visible to the eye, i.e. the tip of the iceberg, while everything else; emotions, desires, the cause of actions or behavior; will be the bulk of the iceberg, looming under the surface. If I were to establish a working definition of Hemingway's honesty to use for the remainder of this essay, it would be as follows: Hemingway's honesty is artistic as opposed to factual and does not allow for depictions of events or characters which pass beyond the 'limits of the possibilities of life as we know it here and now'; it does not allow for an abundance of emotional language

and depicts events with a natural indifference; and it does not allow for explanations, that is, the reason behind the behavior or actions of a character cannot be explicitly stated in the text, but can be understood or felt, rather, from the context – assuming that the behavior of that character has been depicted honestly.

# 4. THE ROLE OF HONESTY IN TRAGEDY

Since I have divided Hemingway's honesty into three qualities, it would be suitable in this section to go through each of these qualities in turn and examine how they contribute toward *A Farewell to Arms*' tragic effect.

## 4.1. First quality

In section two of this essay I indicated that Aristotle's definition of tragedy should be viewed more as guidelines on how to efficiently create a tragic effect than an absolute, unchangeable set of criteria which any work must fulfill in order to be called a tragedy. In other words, my opinion is that a tragic effect could be accomplished outside of Aristotle's 'template'. There are, however, some characteristics of Aristotle's ideal tragedy without which it is doubtful that a tragic effect could be achieved.

It is, moreover, evident from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen – what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. (*Poetics*, part IX)

With this quote in mind, I would also remind the reader of Robert C. Hart's article 'Hemingway on Writing', which was quoted in the section three of this essay –

Truth in fiction is not factual truth, not, as we may infer from his [Hemingway's] distinction between creative writer and reporter, a report of what has happened, but, in something like Aristotle's sense, an account of what could happen within the limits of the possibilities of life as we know it here and now. (315)

Comparing these two quotes, it is not difficult to see that Hemingway's idea of what truth in fiction should be must have originated with Aristotle. The first quality of Hemingway's honesty, then, is in fact one of the foundation pillars in Aristotle's idea of tragedy. This essay has argued, though, that only because something is a feature in Aristotle's idea of tragedy, it does not mean that it, in itself, is essential in the creation of a tragic effect. It will therefore be necessary for me to demonstrate why *this* particular feature of Aristotle's tragedy is essential in the creation of a tragic effect. For instance, if a writer of fiction allows himself to pass beyond the 'limits of the possibilities of life as we know it here and now', that is, if he rids himself of the first quality of Hemingway's honesty, what are the consequences? In my

opinion, a work cannot achieve a tragic effect if it lacks the first quality of Hemingway's honesty.

A story is 'true' when it seems to the reader as though it were 'as it would truly be,' and becomes in the reader's mind as much a part of his past as his own personal experience. (Hart 315)

In other words, if for instance an occurrence or a piece of dialogue in a novel seems artificial, or seems as though it would not happen that way in real life, it is because the writer has not written honestly (as in the first quality of Hemingway's honesty). Certainly, not all writers even attempt to write honestly, or to stay within the 'limits of the possibilities of life as we know it here and now'. The fact is, however, that if a writer is attempting to create a tragic effect, he will not be successful without the first quality of Hemingway's honesty. Consider the following paragraph from *A Farewell to Arms*:

But after I had got them [the nurses] out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn't any good. It was like saying good-bye to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain. (293)

This passage, the very last of the novel, is permeated by an unrelenting hopelessness. It is so dense, so impenetrable, that it does not leave any room for comfort; the feeling of hopelessness is completely unmitigated. The ultimate tragedy of *A Farewell to Arms* is dependent on the fact that the reader is allowed no refuge from this hopelessness. Consider, as a contrast to Catherine's death, the death of Boromir in the 2001 film *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*.

BOROMIR: Frodo, where is Frodo?

ARAGORN: I let Frodo go.

BOROMIR: Then you did what I could not. I tried to take the ring from him.

ARAGORN: The ring is beyond our reach now.

BOROMIR: Forgive me. I did not see. I have failed you all.

ARAGORN: No, Boromir. You fought bravely. You have kept your honor.

*He reaches to pull the arrows from Boromir.*

BOROMIR: Leave it! It is over. The world of men will fall, and all will come to darkness, and my city to ruin.

ARAGORN: I do not know what strength is in my blood, but I swear to you I will not let the White City fall. Nor our people fail.

BOROMIR: Our people? Our people.

*He reaches for his sword. Aragorn places the hilt in his hand and helps him put it to his chest.*

BOROMIR: I would have followed you, my brother. My captain. My king.

*Boromir dies. Aragorn touches his hand to his forehead, then to his lips.*

ARAGORN: Be at peace, son of Gondor.

*He bends down and kisses Boromir's brow.*

The death of Boromir, as opposed to that of Catherine, is what could be called a 'crowd-pleasing' death. Boromir, despite the fact that his torso is penetrated by three thick arrows,

manages to keep himself alive for the exact amount of time required to have a ‘meaningful’ farewell, to make sure that all is said, done, and forgiven before he passes. His death is as perfect and satisfying as any death could ever be – presumably more perfect and satisfying than any real-life death has ever been (which means that *The Lord of the Rings* passes beyond the ‘limits of the possibilities of life as we know it here and now’ and thus does not follow the first quality of Hemingway’s honesty). Certainly, *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Farewell to Arms* are two very different works, in two different genres, aimed at two different audiences – told through two different mediums, even – and written by two different people with different intentions and objectives. And certainly, *The Lord of the Rings* was never meant to be tragic. However, it is in the interest of this study to consider the question of how two events, both of them within the category of premature death in fiction, can have such different emotional impacts on an audience. As regards the first quality of Hemingway’s honesty, I would argue that the passage from *A Farewell to Arms* follows it while the passage from *The Lord of the Rings* does not. The passage from Hemingway seems to depict humanity; the affairs of humans and the emotions of humans. Frederic attempts to have a meaningful farewell with his deceased beloved, but it is impossible because she has already passed on and is now nothing more than a ‘statue’, and the woman he loved is gone. He lingers in the room and in the moment for a few minutes, waiting for some sense of ‘closure’; but there exists (i.e. it does not exist in real life) no such closure, and he ultimately gives up and walks back to the hotel. Emotionally, it is a thoroughly unsatisfying situation for the reader; which is only fitting, because how could premature death ever be emotionally satisfying? And yet, in the passage from *The Lord of the Rings*, the premature death of Boromir somehow manages to emotionally satisfy the audience. As stated in section two of this essay, a tragedy must inspire pity in its audience. A viewer of *The Lord of the Rings* will not feel any pity during Boromir’s death scene precisely because it is so unrealistically satisfying. It is full of redemption, forgiveness, honorable pledges, and closure, moving the audience not toward pity but toward a sense of satisfaction. However, these are not the emotions which premature death causes in real life; in other words, the death of Boromir is not an honest depiction of premature death. Catherine’s death, however, is an honest depiction of premature death. It does not leave the reader in a state of satisfaction. It does not attempt to cover up the brutal indifference of nature, or the consuming sorrow following the death of a loved one, and it does not attempt to inject some sort of meaning or significance into Frederic’s last moments in the room with the

body. The reader is, as I have stated, allowed no refuge from the hopelessness which Frederic is feeling; there exists nothing in the text to mitigate it – no redemption, no forgiveness, no honorable pledges, and no closure – and the reader has no choice but to pity Frederic deeply. This situation, which Hemingway forces his readers to witness and participate in emotionally, is, by every definition of the word, harrowing – but it is the truth.

Again, I am very much aware that *The Lord of the Rings* was never intended to depict ‘life as it is’. The purpose of the last few paragraphs was to illustrate the difference, as regards emotional impact, between a text which follows the first quality of Hemingway’s honesty, and one which does not. As is discernible in the examples I have provided, Peter Jackson, in writing the screenplay for *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, has sacrificed the first quality of Hemingway’s honesty in order to create a death scene which is pleasing and satisfactory to an audience, thereby also sacrificing the ability to achieve a tragic effect. Meanwhile, in writing *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway has opted to stay within the ‘limits of the possibilities of life as we know it here and now’ in order to create an imitation of an actual death, a death which will inspire in his readers the pity that is so vital in a tragic effect.

## 4.2. Second quality

As regards the second quality of Hemingway’s honesty, it definitely contributes toward the tragedy of *A Farewell to Arms* – however, I do not think it is, as the first quality, absolutely necessary. In terms of helping the tragic effect, the second quality has one main function. In the second section of this essay I argued that Hemingway’s use of omens in *A Farewell to Arms* is an important factor in the ‘fear-half’ of the work’s tragic effect; that it works, in a way, as a replacement or substitute to the tragic flaw. The second quality of Hemingway’s honesty, that it ‘does not allow for an abundance of emotional language and depicts events with a natural indifference’, could be viewed as one of these omens. Consider, for instance, the following two excerpts from *A Farewell to Arms*,

I felt something dripping. At first it dropped slowly and regularly, then it pattered into a stream. I shouted to the driver. He stopped the car and looked in through the hole behind his seat.

‘What is it?’

‘The man on the stretcher over me has a hemorrhage.’

‘We’re not far from the top. I wouldn’t be able to get the stretcher out alone.’ He started the car. The stream kept on. In the dark I could not see where it came from the canvas overhead. I tried to move sideways so that it did not fall on me. Where it had run down under my shirt it was warm and sticky. After a while the stream from the stretcher above lessened and started to drip again and

I heard and felt the canvas above move as the man on the stretcher settled more comfortably.  
'How is he?' the Englishman called back. 'We're almost up.'  
'He's dead I think,' I said. (57)

And:

We would make for the side-road and work to the south of the town. We all started down the embankment. A shot was fired at us from the side-road. The bullet went into the mud of the embankment.

'Go on back,' I shouted. I started up the embankment, slipping in the mud. The drivers were ahead of me. I went up the embankment as fast as I could go. Two more shots came from the thick brush and Aymo, as he was crossing the tracks, lurched, tripped and fell face down. We pulled him down on the other side and turned him over. [...] He lay in the mud on the side of the embankment, his feet pointing downhill, breathing blood irregularly. The three of us squatted over him in the rain. He was hit low in the back of the neck and the bullet had ranged upward and come out under the right eye. He died while I was stopping up the two holes. (189, 190)

In the first excerpt, Frederic lies in incredible pain on an uncomfortable stretcher in a dark ambulance ascending a mountain; a man bleeds to death on the stretcher above him, and the blood of the dying man drips onto Frederic's chest. In the second excerpt, a man is shot through the head by friendly fire and dies in the wet mud of a railroad embankment while his friends struggle to stop the bleeding. Both excerpts relate immensely traumatic events, and yet, in doing so, remain completely devoid of emotional language. I have already explained, in the third section of this essay, the purpose of this omitting of emotional language – the excerpts above do not contain emotional language because that would interfere with the honesty in the depiction of those events. However, it is interesting to consider how such an emotionally indifferent depiction of such horrifying events affects the reader's perception of the narrator. This indifference or honesty in the language of *A Farewell to Arms* is present from the very beginning of the novel and it immediately causes the reader to sense that something is amiss with Frederic. Who could it possibly be, telling of such events, apparently completely unfeeling? In this way, Frederic's apparent detachment from the events which he relates serves, similar to the repeated mentions of rain in relation to gloomy moments or disastrous events, as an omen to foreshadow the approaching catastrophe – thus contributing to the fear which the novel must induce in the reader in order to produce a tragic effect.

### 4.3. Third quality

The sheer strength or potency of the tragic effect of *A Farewell to Arms* relies heavily on the third quality of Hemingway's honesty. In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway writes the following about his decision to omit the real ending to his short story 'Out of Season': 'This was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the

omitted part would strengthen the story' (70, 71). Here, Hemingway refers to his omission of the old man Peduzzi's suicide, a sequence which, ultimately, Hemingway judged would provide too much of an explanation of Peduzzi's behavior throughout the short story. The reason why the omission of that part of 'Out of Season' served to strengthen the story is not complicated – when a reader is allowed to realize something on his own, the emotional effect which that something causes is considerably greater than if the reader had simply been told by the narrator. Returning once again to *A Farewell to Arms*, here is a very simple example of this:

'It's nearly time to go.'  
[...]  
'I hate to leave our fine house.'  
'So do I.'  
'But we have to go.'  
[...]  
'I'll have a fine home for you when you come back.'  
'Maybe I'll be back right away.'  
'Perhaps you'll be hurt just a little in the foot.'  
'Or the lobe of the ear.'  
'No I want you ears the way they are.'  
'And not my feet?'  
'Your feet have been hit already.'  
'We have to go, darling. Really.'  
'All right. You go first.'  
[...]  
We walked down the stairs instead of taking the elevator. (140, 141)

In this passage, Catherine and Frederic sit in a hotel room attempting to distract one another from the fact that Frederic has to leave in order to catch the train back to the front. On three unique occasions throughout this passage, either Catherine or Frederic utters something to the effect of 'We have to go', whereupon the other person instantly attempts to veer the conversation in another direction. At length, they manage to pull themselves together and step out of the hotel room. However, even then, in a futile effort to hold on to the moment, they take the stairs instead of the elevator. The reason why this passage is so effective is because nothing in it is explained. There are no comments accompanying the dialogue, for instance, as there would be in a lot of other literary works. There exists nothing to tell the reader how to react to the events taking place; to read it is as similar to observing a real-life conversation as it could possibly be. And then, the statement, 'We walked down the stairs instead of taking the elevator', which, in its simplicity, very efficiently causes the reader to feel the desperate reluctance of the two characters. Perhaps the most illustrative way of explaining this – that is, the fact that a story carries more weight if it remains unexplained by the narrator – is to



compare it to a joke. The most universally known fact about jokes is that to explain them is to ruin them. The same could be said for stories. A joke will not have the desired emotional impact if it is explained, i.e. it will not cause the listener to laugh, or at least not as much as it could have. A story – a tragic story, for instance – will also not have the desired emotional impact if it is explained; in other words, it will not cause the reader to feel pity and fear, or at least not as much as it could have. Consequently, the third quality of Hemingway's honesty, where almost all sorts of explanations are omitted, serves to increase the strength of the tragic emotional impact of *A Farewell to Arms*.

There is also another way in which the third quality of Hemingway's honesty contributes toward the tragedy of *A Farewell to Arms*. In section three of this essay I claimed that because of the absence of almost all sorts of explanations, *A Farewell to Arms* is heavily dependent on the honesty, or trueness to life, in the behavior of its characters. If the characters behave not as they would behave but as the writer would *have* them behave, for instance, the reader will not truly believe that the characters are people. If the reader does not believe that the characters are people, he will not be able to fear for them, for as Aristotle claimed, 'fear is aroused by the misfortune of a man like ourselves'. This, of course, is closely connected to the first quality of Hemingway's honesty, where events must be depicted within the 'limits of the possibilities of life as we know it here and now'. In the same way, the characters in a tragic work must behave as people would in 'life as we know it here and now', because if they do not, it will be impossible to inspire fear, and thereby to achieve a tragic effect.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study conducted in this essay has shown that Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* fulfills the requirements of a tragedy; it has arrived at an efficient definition of Hemingway's honesty; and it has demonstrated how Hemingway's honesty contributes in the tragedy of *A Farewell to Arms*. Consider one final example:

Bonello came up.

'Let me go finish him,' he said. I handed him the pistol and he walked down to where the sergeant of engineers lay face down across the road. Bonello leaned over, put the pistol against the man's head and pulled the trigger. The pistol did not fire.

'You have to cock it,' I said. He cocked it and fired twice. He took hold of the sergeant's legs and pulled him to the side of the road so he lay beside the hedge. He came back and handed me the pistol.

'The son of a bitch,' he said. He looked toward the sergeant. 'You see me shoot him, Tenente?' (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, 182)

In this passage, the first quality of Hemingway's honesty, the 'artistic truth', causes the reader to feel pity for the young men who have been forced into the army to witness such events, perform such actions, and endure the tribulations of war. The second quality of Hemingway's honesty, by means of depicting horrible events without using emotional language, operates as an omen to inspire in the readers fear of the catastrophe to come. The third quality of Hemingway's honesty, by neglecting to explain the actions and utterances of the characters, allowing, instead, the reader to see the events unfold before his eyes without interference, serves to strengthen the feelings which the passage produces.

There exists much more to be said as regards all the areas I have touched upon in this essay. There are many more arguments to be produced, both for and against the tragedy of *A Farewell to Arms*. There is more to be said about all the qualities of Hemingway's honesty, and, certainly, Hemingway's honesty contributes toward the tragic effect of *A Farewell to Arms* in many ways beyond those I have described here. However, since the essay is of a limited length, I have chosen to develop only on the parts which I find are of the most interest and importance.

In the introduction to an edition of *A Farewell to Arms* from 1948, Hemingway wrote that 'The fact that the book was a tragic one did not make me unhappy since I believed that life was a tragedy and knew it could only have one end' (Merrill 571). It was this belief, the belief that life is a tragedy, which Hemingway attempted to convey through his novel *A*

*Farewell to Arms.* But even though life may be a tragedy, it is only when it is depicted plainly, clearly, and honestly, that this becomes evident.

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