

## Breaking Away from Stereotypical War Romance in *A Farewell to Arms*: Mutually Interdependent Hero and Heroine

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Chung, Ewha. "Breaking Away from Stereotypical War Romance in *A Farewell to Arms*: Mutually Interdependent Hero and Heroine." *Studies in English Language & Literature* 47.2 (2021): 151-165. This paper examines how Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley, in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1927), mature in a relationship that enables them to not only break away from being passive victims of the war but also pursue their lives as active protagonists struggling with the biological trap of death. My reading focuses on the couple's combined effort of mutual interdependence to understand and defiantly confront the threat of death without crumbling under its effect. The novel's tragic ending is not seen as love story but rather as a narration of how the hero and heroine, through the progress of their mutually developing relationship, have become independent enough to face challenges without regressing back into their previous passive roles. This paper concludes with a new reading of Catherine's death that touches upon but necessarily excels beyond questions of gender and social identity to include an analysis of her soldier-like acceptance that applies to the silent forgotten unknown men and women who died alone with the same courage and integrity that Catherine exemplifies for Frederic and Hemingway's readership. (Sungshin Women's University)

**Key Words:** romance, mutual interdependence, maturation, naturalized social functions, biological trap

## I. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1927) outlines the transformation and maturation of the hero and heroine, Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley, whose story evolves through the threat of war and death. Both the hero and heroine experience the trauma of war, respectively, but come to rely upon each other as a means of overcoming and breaking away from the controlling forces of the war and being "trapped biologically" (139) in inevitable death. The scholarship concerning Frederic and Catherine, however, continues to largely focus on defining the relationship as a romantic one in which conflict is seen in terms of gender identity and how each character develops by attempting to redefine, reverse, and invert masculine and feminine roles to acquire control. Joel Armstrong summarizes the critical debate "over what sort of love story *A Farewell to Arms* really is: romantic, nihilistic, pastoral, or tragic?" (78) with an emphasis on Henry being left disillusioned about love. Charles Nolan Jr. analyzes Catherine as a complex victim who suffers from "diagnosable psychological ailments," but he also acknowledges how until the 1980s Catherine was seen as "either destroyer of men or fantasy figure" (105). Daniel Traber explains how his focus on Catherine is "to critique gender roles and their naturalized social functions" (28), while Sandra Whipple Spanier reexamines how "layers of critical opinion over the past sixty years have colored and clouded our view of *A Farewell to Arms*" and how she hopes to restore the "complex and underestimated heroine, Catherine Barkley" (75). In response, my reading does not aim to refute nor question such critical approaches but rather seeks to analyze the Frederic-and-Catherine relationship as one that is based on maturation. In this relationship, Frederic and Catherine cannot develop or change without a growing mutual interdependence that enables them to transform from passive war victims into independent characters capable of serving as active protagonists. The need for mutual interdependence arises when both characters are pushed to the brink as victims and must turn to each other for support, which ironically entails the hero and heroine

breaking free of the war and its functional routine. Frederic's desertion from the army and Catherine's illicit out-of-wedlock pregnancy force the characters to develop individualized yet mature understandings of how to perceive the biological trap of inevitable death and pursue a happiness that is not controlled by the war nor governed by socially naturalized gender roles.

Frederic begins his relationship with Catherine as a game of sexual conquest in which, as Linda Wagner-Martin explains, the "macho" (54) soldier seeks to get the most popular nurse, who is passive and uninterested in the dating game because she is still numb from the recent death of her fiancé. It is only after Frederic suffers serious physical injuries and later experiences the threat of execution for killing a soldier that he psychologically reaches out to Catherine with the ultimate plan of action: desertion from the army and complete abandonment of his passively routine life as a soldier. As Catherine's pregnancy progresses, she awakens from her stoic passivity over the loss of her former lover and the couple finally embark upon a plan to illegally cross the Swiss border by boat. In Switzerland, Frederic and Catherine undergo a transformation that enables the hero and heroine to experience life together without the interference and controlling forces of the war. What is unique is that it is the couple's combined effort to actively understand and defiantly confront the biological trap of death that enables them in different ways to experience, understand, and face death without crumbling under its effect.

Frederic's conversion from secular war hero to a self-revelation of how much he relies on Catherine and his newly developing relationship with god matches Catherine's transformation from passive submissiveness and fear of being "trapped biologically" (139) to her defiant and brave acceptance of death without fear. The tragic ending, then, is not a love story but rather a culmination of how Frederic and Catherine, through the progress of their mutually developing relationship, have matured and become independent enough to face challenges without retreating back into their previous roles as passive victims. The typical 'girl-dies-in-childbirth' plot ending is unsettling because of the ironic relationship embedded within the transformation of the

hero and heroine. Frederic ironically learns about the meaning of life from the deaths of Catherine and their newborn, while Catherine must rely upon a war criminal lover to overcome her fear of the biological trap that kills her in the ending. During Catherine's final stage of pregnancy, in the snowy mountains of Switzerland, ironically again, the relationship of the hero and heroine transforms into a bonding that can brush off secular desire and help the protagonists confront the biological threat of death.

## II. Breaking Away from Stereotypical War Romance

Although William Cain briefly touches upon how "the magnitude of their mutual need" is "what attracts" (383) Frederic and Catherine to each other, the ongoing scholarship of *A Farewell to Arms* largely neglects the fact that Catherine and Frederic, in differing ways, both use and need each other to break away from the restrictions that thwart their maturing transformation into independent protagonists. Numbed by the shock of her fiancé's death, Catherine's neurotic passivity resembles how she, like Frederic, are controlled by what Spanier describes as "the environment of a brutal and irrational war" (76). Blinded by what Charles Hatten describes as "the propagandistic glorification of the war," Henry is seen entering the army "simply to establish his manhood through the quintessential masculine activity of war" (83). Catherine, another passive victim of the war, retreats into a guilt-burdened loneliness, by trying to reenact an unfulfilled romance with her dead fiancé which results in stoic submissiveness in her substituted relationship with Frederic. Ironically, although Frederic conducts himself as the stereotypical playboy soldier at war, Scott Donaldson argues that Frederic "consistently depicts himself as a passive victim inundated by the flow of events [of the war]" which includes his "drinking and whoring routine at Gorizia," a near-fatal leg injury, witnessing the "moral chaos of the retreat from Caporetto" (98), his harrowing escape from being executed, and ultimate desertion

from the army. What serves as motivation then for Frederic and Catherine to break away from their initial state of being controlled by the environment of the war is the fact that they provide each other with the strength to overcome the fear of death. Both hero and heroine help one another understand how their lives have been controlled by the meaningless violence of the war and the biological trap, which as Traber explains “can be extended to include social definitions and limitations as other traps built upon biology” (37).

Catherine is first introduced as the Red-Cross hospital’s most attractive, newly-arrived British nurse who becomes the object of a game between Frederic and his Italian doctor comrade, Rinaldi. The reader is provided with both Frederic’s and Rinaldi’s desire for and male perspective of Catherine’s physique and stoic passive response to their advances. Frederic has little or no interest in why Catherine is so passive about sex and is even less interested in why she seems “a little crazy” (30) during their first meeting. The controversy concerning Catherine continues amongst critics who reduce her to that of a passive sex symbol and “divine lollipop” (Hackett 32); those critics who perceive her to be deviously “destructive” (Lewis Jr. 54); and, critics who are sympathetic and idealize her as a “passionate priestess” (Waldhorn 123). Catherine, however, defies being categorized as a stereotype because she undergoes a transformation from stoic passivity to emotional dependency to dying, in Spanier’s terms, as the “apotheosis of bravery in a woman” (99), which is a sign of her maturing relationship that necessarily involves Frederic.

Spanier explains that “ironically, while Frederic thinks he has been in control playing a game with Catherine,” in reality, Catherine has been “using him for purposes of her own” (86). Spanier, however, does not recognize how both Frederic and Catherine are passively caught within the conditions of the war that propel them to enact routine roles within the soldier-and-nurse dating game. Frederic, the macho soldier, literally experiences a break from his routine life in the war when he is forced to be, as Donaldson puts it, “on his own” and “must act to escape [execution/death]” – thereby evolving from passive victim into an independent protagonist. On the other

hand, Catherine, as Spanier explains, is portrayed as “already knowing what Frederic will eventually learn” (84), and, that is, regardless of how hard you try “they just keep it up till they break you” (232). Because Catherine has experienced personal loss from the war and fears the biological trap of death, she needs and uses Frederic to awaken from a stupor of emotionless submissiveness. While Frederic takes advantage of Catherine’s vulnerable state and pursues her as a sex object, Spanier describes how Catherine is also using Frederic as a “substitute” (86) for her dead fiancé and has him perform the conversational dialogue of her former lover. What is uncanny about this scene with Frederic is that Catherine breaks out of her mourning passivity and takes on the active roles of what Spanier defines as “producer and director,” thereby directing the love-making scenes, producing the dialogue, and terminating the scene once she is satiated. Catherine takes control of the situation; she comforts the bewildered Frederic by assuring him that she is “all right now” (31); and, she compliments him for his sexual performance and informs him that he does not “have to pretend” (31) to love her. Catherine’s sudden switch from submissive partner to director of and participating actress in a love scene with Frederic requires not only a “critique of gender roles and their naturalized social functions” (28), as Traber concludes, but also an analysis of why Catherine changes and what her transformation means in terms of her relationship with Frederic. Catherine acknowledges what Frederic seeks from her with his game strategy, while she also realizes how he can serve as a substitute for her dead fiancé, with whom she regretfully resisted having sex. Catherine sees Frederic as a sexual partner, whom she uses deliberately as a means of digging herself out of her guilt-ridden mourning and stoic passivity. When she goes to meet Frederic for the first time, she symbolically carries her shroud of mourning with her in the form of a memento—her dead lover’s swagger stick. Frederic, unintentionally, functions as a means for Catherine to switch from traumatized neurotic passivity to the active stance of protagonist, who equals and questionably excels beyond Frederic’s understanding of how the war and threat of death control them.

Although Spanier recognizes that Catherine is an “initiated” active character, whose part is “to teach Frederic by example how to live” (76), Spanier nevertheless glosses over the fact that Catherine’s ability to function as the initiating character necessarily stems from her mutual need of and dependence on Frederic. The relationship, then, is not a one-way process in which Catherine teaches and guides a passive victim how to live in the secular world. Rather it is an interaction in which both Frederic and Catherine must bond together to be able to not only overcome their fear of death but also relinquish all ties with the mundane world in search of internal peace and a means of maturely accepting death—not as a “coward” but as “brave” soldiers (139). Catherine conveys her fear of the future as she latches onto Frederic for assurance with a pledge-like warning, “If anything comes between us we’re gone and then they have us” (139). Frederic understands what Catherine fears and reassures her that together they are safe from what Traber defines as “they,” the “dominant culture” (34), because the mutually interdependent bond between Frederic and Catherine won’t allow them to “get us” (139). Mutual interdependence between Frederic and Catherine then begins far before they are forced to flee to the Swiss mountains, where the two mature by bonding in coalition against the threat of Frederic’s execution, the threat of Catherine’s encroaching due date, and the threat of their re-entrance into culture and civilization when the couple come down from the mountains to go to the hospital in town. Frederic not only acknowledges and explains to Catherine that they are safe because she is “too brave” but also relies upon her because he knows that “nothing ever happens to the brave” (139), who know what he has yet to learn about death. Living proof of her bravery, Catherine withstands the pain of childbirth, loses her newborn baby, and dies from hemorrhage after hemorrhage. Catherine physically and literally takes on every challenge that the unidentified forces of “they” throw at her and finally acknowledges defeat by accepting her oncoming death. Frederic witnesses how Catherine fearlessly struggles as a “dear, brave sweet” soldier (331), who defiantly paves the way for Frederic to indirectly experience death through her example.

### III. Mutually Interdependent Hero and Heroine

Robert Merrill records how Hemingway not only “once referred to the novel [*A Farewell to Arms*] as his *Romeo and Juliet*” but also explained how readers “respect” Frederic for “committing himself in love to Catherine Barkley” (571-72). Merrill designates the novel as a romance in which “love illuminates all of life, attracting the characters with its beacon-like power to make meaning visible in the people, experiences, and possible futures surrounding them” (577). David Wyatt reinforces a romantic interpretation of the protagonists in which “Romance expresses the longing for union and return and represents these longings as given to both genders” (68). In response, however, John Beversluis questions the protagonists’ love based upon the premise that Frederic provides so little of his “inner life” involving Catherine, while the reader is barred from direct access to Catherine’s inner life (23). Cain encourages the reader to ask whether Frederic and Catherine are really “in love” and further argues that “what attracts these two [characters] to each other is the magnitude of their mutual need” rather than an all-encompassing beacon-like power of love (383). As Cain explains, “Hemingway prompts us to notice and reflect upon the larger issues, for there is more to life than fusion in love” (387). Hemingway’s tragic novel, then, can be seen as the maturing attempts of the hero and heroine to confront wartime trauma and the inevitable threat of death based upon a mutually interdependent relationship.

When Frederic is injured and hospitalized in Milan for a serious leg injury, Catherine changes from stoic passivity to taking on the role of attentive nurse, thereby becoming dependently clingy and emotionally attached to Frederic, who in contrast seems only interested in having sex with his pretty girlfriend. The two characters function on separate levels of reality in which Catherine develops an attachment to Frederic that enables her to switch from guilt-stricken mourning of the dead to her professional job of nursing and bringing Frederic back to life after a difficult and lengthy leg surgery. According to Wagner-Martin, Frederic’s extensive “hospital scene” is used to emphasize “death and the frustration of medical knowledge that cannot save



lives” and “to create the mood of inexorable death” (62), which serves as the foundation for the developing relationship between Frederic and Catherine. At first, Frederic refuses to embrace a deepening spiritual relationship with Catherine and continues to carry on with his routine habits related to alcohol and women. However, he gradually becomes medically and emotionally more dependent upon Catherine who then takes on an active role as both nurse and lover.

Leo Gurko argues Catherine becomes Frederic’s “leechlike shadow” (87) in that her isolating love steers the way to Frederic’s destruction, while Richard Hovey emphasizes how the “love impulses in [the novel] are fettered by sadism and death wishes” (85). Whether Catherine’s love is a sadistic, leechlike death-wish or not is beside the point because after Frederic begins the process of his first transformation with plans of escape and desertion, the one and only person he confides in is a pregnant Catherine. In an effort to detach himself from the daily routine of war, Frederic, ironically, shoots a soldier for disobeying orders, escapes execution from the military police, and takes Catherine with him to begin a new life in Switzerland. Frederic follows the early advice of a young priest who urges him to leave the mundane life in civilization for spiritual peace with nature. Frederic realizes that a break from civilization and the war means being with Catherine surrounded by nature, waiting for the birth of their baby. Cain argues that “Frederic’s rejection of war in all of its horror and his embrace of love,” his life in the Swiss mountains with Catherine, “contrasts powerfully with war’s disarray, chaos, suffering, and death” (386). When the two successfully make it across the lake into Switzerland, Stacey Guill explains how Frederic is emotionally moved not by the fact that “they have reached safety but that they have reached safety together” (104). Frederic and Catherine begin their separate maturation processes into independent characters because they mutually provide each other with the motivation to be free of social restraints. The process of interaction allows them to receive comfort and support, but it also serves as a means for the characters to shift gears to an active stance of having to provide comfort and support for their partner.

In Milan, during the developing stages of the relationship, Catherine anxiously waits

to be reunited with Frederic and, later in Switzerland, she desires to be merged into one entity with Frederic, which can be seen as a desire to perform her subservient gender role but also as an ironic means of transcending the binary contrast between masculine and feminine identities. Once in Switzerland, Frederic develops a deepening appreciation for the spiritual beauty of nature and a maturing bond with Catherine whose pregnancy restricts sexual interaction. Frederic, who once ridiculed the Italian priest for suggesting that he seek the peaceful mountains of Abruzzi to nurture his soul, begins to understand and value nature and its peaceful beauty, which is set in contrast to the futile war victories and defeats reported in the daily newspapers being read by customers in the Swiss town restaurant. Frederic no longer desires Catherine to satiate his sexual needs. Rather he values her company and realizes how much he needs her for stability and to find meaning in everyday life. Frederic's transformation becomes evident when he experiences increasing anxiety about his limited time with Catherine, which both he and Catherine feel is being hurried along. Although Frederic and Catherine do not require communicative conversations, they foresee with growing fear the imminent biological trap waiting at the end of their efforts to live as equal individuals free from the war and, what Traber terms as, "naturalized social functions" of "gender" (28).

As Catherine nears her due date, Frederic begins to obsess about Catherine's health and the possibility of even losing her during the process of childbirth, which then serves as evidence of why Frederic values Catherine, and what Catherine's death means to him. Upon his desertion from the army and fear of execution, Frederic switches from being, as Spanier explains, "skeptical" and "detached" (84) about life to experiencing a "crucial realization that human destiny is in the hands of an invisible and arbitrary [god]" (91). At the hospital, after Catherine's caesarean operation, Frederic is told to have supper and return to see Catherine later. Walking to the town café in the rain, which Catherine once feared, Frederic finishes his meal but suddenly senses and intuitively realizes that Catherine needs him and that he must get back to the hospital immediately. Having broken free from his past soldier routine and interests, Frederic can now sense and even foresee future threats that endanger his

relationship with Catherine. Recalling how Catherine had once explained to Frederic, "I'm afraid of the rain because sometimes I see me dead in it" (126), Frederic walks with urgency "through the rain up to the hospital" (329) in fear of losing Catherine.

How and why Frederic transforms from his skeptical role as passive victim to a fervently compassionate partner is often analyzed as Catherine's manipulation of Frederic, a "reversal of power" between the hero and heroine (Fiedler 318). Hatten, however, offers a very different analysis in which Henry waits anxiously in the hallway of the hospital while Catherine's fate is being determined in surgery; the heroine is undergoing a painful childbirth experience, "similar to battle" (96), while the hero waits and prays "like women traditionally [did] in wartime" (96). In bravely confronting death, according to Hatten, Catherine not only overcomes her fear and dies in a "feminine version of a battlefield" (96) but also achieves "the heroic stature" of a brave soldier. Defining the Frederic-Catherine relationship in terms of power conflict then oversimplifies and glosses over the fact that Frederic has also matured into an active, independent protagonist who seeks to comfort and support a soldier-like Catherine battling the biological trap of death alone.

#### IV. Conclusion

As soon as Henry hears that Catherine has had a hemorrhage and is in great danger, he passionately and desperately begins to pray to an unknown god, "Please, please, dear God, don't let her die" (330). Frederic actively reaches out to what he felt was an indifferent god in an attempt to bargain for the one person he has come "suddenly to care very much" (51). Just as the young priest from Abruzzi once suggested that Frederic use his military leave to visit the cold, clear, and dry snowy Italian mountainside rather than regress back into "culture and civilization," Frederic comes full circle and realizes that the young priest "had always known what [he] did not know [about life]" (52). Frederic's maturation provides a striking example of

transformation which begins with skeptical cynicism maturing into a desperate belief in god. The transformation from feeling detached and unconcerned to the act of performing a self-sacrificing oath for Catherine's life, "I'll do anything you say if you don't let her die" (330), serves to prove that Frederic "learned" later what he "did not know then" (52). Not only does Frederic personally plead with god for Catherine's sake by trying to strike a bargain with god but also he beckons Catherine to seek the blessing of "a priest or any one [another religious authority figure]" (330) as an attempt to save her soul.

Catherine's response may seem inconsistent or even inappropriate to the reader, but because she can read Frederic's desperation she is also capable of comforting him. In her last dying moments, Catherine defiantly reassures Frederic that she is "all right" and concludes that Frederic will also be "all right" (330) when his time comes. Catherine frankly and decisively tells Frederic that he is all she needs because she explains, "I'm not afraid. I just hate it" (330). As if Catherine, like the young priest from Abruzzi, has known all along that Frederic fears the night just as she once feared the rain, she comforts Frederic by assuring him just before she falls unconscious that, "I'll come and stay with you nights" (331). Catherine promises to come and stay with Frederic to comfort his fears and support him spiritually during his loneliness in the Abruzzi-like cold, clear, and dry snowy mountains away from culture and civilization.

In comparison to Henry, Catherine's maturation is symbolized in the transformation of her no longer fearing rain but appreciating the snow that surrounds the couple in their peaceful world of mutual interdependence. Catherine's advanced state of pregnancy does not limit her to passive feminine subservience but rather enables her to function as an equal, who is undistinguishable from Frederic. Hence, when Catherine tells Frederic "I want us to be all mixed up" (300), she does not attempt to erase herself nor does she attempt to reverse or invert existing gender identities. Rather, as Traber points out, Catherine attempts to "rewrite her identity by integrating a subjectivity that would locate her beyond 'normal' gender patterns" (35). Both Catherine and Frederic desire to be united as one entity not only physically but also

in terms of identity as they bond with each other. Cut off from “culture and civilization” (8), Frederic and Catherine immerse themselves in the snowy mountains of nature, which as Marc Hewson explains is a place “outside the masculine laws of war and, by extension, outside the laws governing gender identity” (57). Frederic and Catherine seek the Abruzzi-like mountains to heal from the trauma of war, wean themselves away from the controlling forces of the dominant culture, and mature together by actively identifying with and supporting each other. The hero and heroine share various conversations concerning identity, both physical and spiritual, that differ from their initial conversations in Italy in which they passively took on roles as unstable individuals living in either denial of reality or fear of death.

The heroine, Catherine Barkley, goes from being afraid of the rain and its superstitious association with death to becoming, as Spanier claims, an “unknown soldier” (75), who faces death with the courage and integrity few characters in literature have ever been able to express in their dying moment. Catherine is neither masculine nor feminine in her transformation, which is nurtured through her relationship with Frederic, and she later develops beyond any help that Frederic offers because she unflinchingly faces death alone, grudgingly yet defiant and calm. As Hatten explains, in dying bravely, Catherine “confronts the ultimate fear-inducing situation of death and masters it” in a way that teaches and guides Frederic how to confront his inevitable death (96). In her dying moment, Catherine exhibits a stability that is strong enough to show her partner, Frederic, how to accept the truth about the biological trap without sentimental emotions and continue life with a matter-of-fact attitude that prevents Frederic from regressing into his skeptical, emotionally detached routine of sex and alcohol that he once relied upon in the beginning of the novel. Catherine ventures to promise to return as a spirit after death to comfort Frederic, who would have to continue to deal with the threat of death on lonely nights without her. The novel then, as Hewson explains, is not simply a “masculine war story” but rather a narrative of a “love affair” that matures and grows out of the “destruction at the Italian war front” (53). Hewson concludes that Frederic and Catherine’s “growing commitment to each

other” suggests an attempt “to move beyond the cultural models” of masculinity and femininity that “were governed by early 20<sup>th</sup> century social values” (54).

Upon Catherine’s and the baby’s death, Frederic is somber yet stable and he no longer perceives of death as punishment by an angry god nor does he avoid the truth that he is biologically trapped to die, regardless of any effort on his account. The reader then confronts a mature Henry who can now acknowledge both Catherine’s and his own physical limitations yet refuse to become paralyzed by fears he once harbored in the past. In contrast to the stereotyped portrayal of Frederic and Catherine in the beginning of the novel, though described as dark and lonely in the end, we have a new understanding and means of accepting the inevitable biological trap that first haunted Catherine and later threatens Frederic. The trap still remains but it is no longer a threat to run away from nor does it serve to unhinge the lives of those who are left to face the ultimate trap. Frederic will continue to pursue his life as a mature and active protagonist, who learns from and continues to depend upon Catherine’s dear, brave, and sweet example, if not her comforting spirit that will come and stay with him at night. Spanier defines Catherine as the “unknown soldier” (75), thereby defining her death scene as a symbol of the silent forgotten soldiers who died alone with the same courage and integrity that Catherine exemplifies: majestically without sentimental tears and maturely without destructive vengeance. The ending of *A Farewell to Arms* rings cold, clear, and dry like the snowy Abruzzi mountains with the two protagonists who touch upon but necessarily excel beyond questions of gender identity and naturalized social functions to include the unaccounted suffering souls of war.

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