

## Peace through Literature: A thematic study of Ernest Hemingway's a farewell to arms

<sup>1</sup> Babatunde D Adetunji, <sup>2</sup> Oluchi C Ikwuagwu, <sup>3</sup> Kingsley O Eze

<sup>1</sup> Department of English, African Thinkers Community of Inquiry College of Education, Enugu, Enugu, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup> Department of English and Literary Studies, Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, Nigeria

### Abstract

The degree of cycles of bloodletting and violence in the world is alarming and worrisome. This has threatened the world peace and undermined progress of democratic consolidation. However, the researchers observe that violence and conflicts are inimical to and threaten the continuous co-existence of the people of the world. Therefore, frantic efforts must be made that peace is not negotiable in the world. This feat can be achieved by preaching peace through all forms of literature (literature of peace). It is the position of this paper that literature as a tool for assessment of human issues by mirroring the society is a veritable means or instrument for conflict resolution. The significance of literature cannot be overstated in this regards; the past is seen by the people of the present. This medium can be a panacea to the various causes of bloodletting and violence seen all over the world. Also, literature is an effective way for socio-political reformation in the society, therefore, if a leave is taken from HEMINGWAY's novel, Farewell to Arms where the hero is disillusioned by war and its causes, various conflicts and bloodletting can be drastically reduced, both in the socio- economic and political life of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** literature, peace, novel, 21<sup>st</sup> century

### Introduction: The Roles of Literature

Surely one of the most important and ambiguous questions in the field of human sciences is what does literature do for us? Obviously, talking about human sciences, in fact, it is clear that literature has strong, direct and indirect relation with nearly all human sciences. Society and its problems as well as politics are reflected by literary works. Psychology and mythology like history can show themselves in the surface of literature. Ultimately, it deserves saying that no science like literature can interplay with other sciences so that investigating literary works helps to know other sciences too. The importance of question like, "what does literature do for us?" can be attributed to the fact that such question raises doubt about the concept of literature as a global and universal concept in humanities. Before answering the question, "what does literature do for us?" It is necessary for all readers to fully understand the nature of literature. In fact discussing the ability and disability of literature is possible after understanding the nature of literature. We shall not be carried away and focus our attention towards the discussion of the essence of the literature because it is not the topic of this paper. It is possible to say in short way that literature is Tolstoy's "War and Peace", Shakespeare's Hamlet, Macbeth and Othello, Dickens's Great Expectation, Milton's "Paradise Lost", Homer's "Iliad" and hundreds of other masterpieces. All these works written in prose or poetry are literature. Authors want to enlighten this secular world through their eyes and minds for readers, and this revealing function is at the same time, its ability. Literary masterpieces have this ability to show obviously the human being's nature so that readers can select themselves the right way of life. Doctor

Faustus is a famous play written by Christopher Marlow which shows the conclusion of ambition even for complete intellectual power. Tragic flaw of this tragedy is ambition. Inner tension and other ethical news are the most important lessons of this play (Greg, 1946: 97 - 99) [6]. Shakespeare wrote plays such as Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello and King Lear in order to show the mental and emotional pressures over their characters. Shakespeare wants to penetrate deep into the hidden side of the characters and show their struggles and tensions of psych. The main idea of this play is to inform readers so that they get information about their intricate interior (Nuttall, 1983: 57 - 62) [7]. The destructive ability of ambition is shown in the play of Macbeth (Spencer, 1994:193) [9]. Hamlet has been created in order to criticize the conclusion of revenge phenomena, so that readers get familiar with its destructives traces (Spencer, 1994: 195) [9]. The play Othello draws to the story of Iago's jealousy and how nobility and credulity of Othello's characters are responsible for his crime and death. King Lear deals with the error of judgment, moral blindness, and gaining insight through suffering (Spencer, 1994: 203) [9]. Ultimately, it must be said that talking about external and internal world is one of literature's main functions. From here, another important question comes out. That is, by increasing penetration of common's communicative instrument such as radio, television, newspaper and comprehensive literature in the field of sociology, psychology, anthropology, comparative history and also other various documents, would it be possible that readers show more interest to literatures masterpieces? If readers have no interest to literature, which one of both literature and readers blame? Does literature have fault, or in the middle of

modernism storm is there no respect for literature? To what extent can literature ensure peace? Can we really learn from literature? These questions are unfolded in the face of “what can literature do for us?” Which has been the content of this paper?

### **World peace and literature: the role of literature towards peace**

Literature with its special vocabulary confronts with passing of time. It has this ability that makes battle with death. Literature has this facility that takes challenge and overcomes the parting and separation, because this is literature which can grant oversimplification and generalization to trivial matter of our life, to passing of time, to taste of life, to death, to solitude, to disappointment, to dissatisfaction, to doubt and hesitation. If literature wants to fill the gap between itself and readers, particularly in the case of separation, which is inevitable and irremediable, it must have a discussion with uneasiness and anxiety, lonesomeness, death, disappointment and hesitation, for the reason that these issues cause readers to be captive in their personality. In this serious situation, readers need to help know that this experience is common and it belongs to all people, not to a special one. This is the duty of literature.

Language brings people into cluster of society and makes them members of the general public. Every emotion like unfortunate and disappointment, when illustrated itself by helping of word, will hence not be separated and discarded by society. Ailments which want to seek sympathy will be more tolerable. Literature must take discussion of defeat, disgrace, death and transgression, not only for unmaking reader frustration, but also for delivering them from disappointment. Mankind consists of another human being; that is, mankind only through others be comprehended entirely, and getting the understanding of other people is not possible, except through exposing their interior condition to others. This is the ability and capacity of literature that enlightens and clears the interior condition of mankind for each other.

Effective peace literature critics, as in any field, are able not only to provide new readings of textual contents, but also to provide new contexts in which even old readings can become new. For example, when Jesus-contextually not yet Christ-gives the Sermon on the Mount and proclaims “blessed are the peacemakers,” he is speaking directly to the reader in that crowd, although that awareness may only come later. Reading the passage to one’s self, reading it out loud in congregation, disassembling and reassembling it in a seminar, heatedly debating it in a bar or café, or explaining it to someone of a different religious tradition—each engagement provides, in Gadamer’s terms, new insights. This can apply to key passages from all belief systems, including secular ones like sciences. There is, insists Gadamer, an often unacknowledged hallmark of the cathartic dimension of peace literature that its criticism seeks to draw out: new insights are not only about texts in different contexts, but about the persons and the texts in different contexts, then about the persons without the texts in different contexts in which the texts manifest themselves through the persons. These ripple effects are perhaps most obvious in religious, legal, and other prescriptive texts, but are also present to varying extents in declarations, manifestos,

constitutions, laws, poems, novels, and theatre. A prime example of this, drawn from American literature, is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Individual, social, and collective critical categories are used in an attempt to understand and inform as much experience as possible without sacrificing precision.

### **Peace in Literature: Extricating Disillusionment in A Farewell to Arms**

*A Farewell to Arms* can be described as the parable of man’s disgust and disillusionment of the idea of war and its causes. This is because the novel attempts to contrast the chaos of war and the serenity of peace. The novel does this by trying to divulge truths about First World War and about the generation who had fought the war and whose lives have been wrenched from the expected pattern and old values. This account is best explained through Frederic Henry, the hero who comes close to the harsh realities and brutalities of war. The hero journeys into the war and he comes out in search of peace and love, hence the title: *A Farewell to Arms*.

The hero, Frederic Henry is portrayed earlier in the novel as a man of duty, who attaches to himself no sense of honour, nor does he expect any praise for his service, even after he has been severely wounded. This is in contrast with Frederic Henry’s personality we know earlier: the rejection of his personal responsibility for the war and his preference to illusion of love for Catherine leaves so much to be desired of war.

Although Frederic is not alone in his abandonment and disillusionment of war, majority of the characters express their ambivalent about the war. For instance, Henry’s Comrade Friend whom he calls Signor Maggoire says “I am tired of this war. If I was away I do not believe I would come back” (P.171). Later Rinaldi says “the war is killing him and he is very depressed by it”. They are resentful of the glory it supposedly brings”.

The character of Frederic portrays him as coolly detached and a naïve character but the reality of the war turned his innocent idea of the war into bitter disillusionment. During the war in Milan hospital, he tells the priest that victory is worse than defeat because it prolongs the war. In fact, the shooting by Frederic of the engineer for refusing to help free the car from the mud shocks everyone. This incident confirms the psychological and physical transformation as an inevitable by-product of spiraling violence and disorder of the war, because it is a contrast for personality of Frederic who volunteers himself as an ambulance driver for the war.

The vivid description of the brutality and futility of the war attests to the fact that wars are senseless, it is destructive and it is a ruin for the entire human race. *A Farewell to Arms*, an anti-war novel is a good example to illustrate the fact. The novel portrays inglorious aspect of war as the hero, Frederic recounts his experiences. For instance, Frederic a volunteered driver drives an ambulance South along a cluttered road with evacuees. The road is muddy because it has just rained. The two Italian Sergeants decide to retreat and hope to reach Udine, at the Austrian border. When the ambulance becomes stuck in the mud, Frederic tells them to help extricate the stuck van but they want to flee. He shoots one of them, wounding him in the process, but an Italian Corpsman finishes

the Sergeants by putting a bullet into his head.

Also, when they are stuck in the mud, Frederic and his friends set on foot for Udine. They encounter German motorcycles ahead of them. Chaos reigns as the officers pull off their insignia and Frederic and his friends flee in different directions. Those whom the German capture are given Kangaroo trails and are later executed. Although Frederic is detained, he escapes under the cover of night; he jumps into a river where he holds onto a log. He later crosses the plain on foot until he can hop into a train bound for Milan.

These catastrophic events of war serve as basis for Frederic's disillusionment and disorientation and his eventual abandonment. Frederic expresses his bitterness and feelings of disenchantment thus:

I had seen nothing secret and the things that were glorious, had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it.

This conversation he had with Gino shows his ambivalent about war. He equates military heroism and sacrifices of human lives in the war with the slaughter of livestock. The experience has enlightened him about the nature and purpose of war, concluding that no one has profited from war; war only brings destruction and mass loss of lives.

On realizing that war in reality is a calamity for civilization, Frederic begins to seek for peace and his desire for Catherine grows leaps and bounds. The comfort and support that Catherine offers becomes more than a distraction from the world's unpleasantness (war). Their love begins to sustain and blossoms into something undeniably real.

Frederic's understanding of how meaningful his love for Catherine is outweighs any consideration for the emptiness of war which enables him to abandon the war and he seeks for her. Although the authority plans to arrest him for desertion, he borrows a rowboat with which he rows all night with Catherine to neutral Switzerland.

Having being reunited, Catherine and Frederic plan a peaceful life together where emptiness and damage the war has inflicted will be healed and forgotten. They travel to the remote Swiss mountain where each intends to be the other's refuge. Frederic Henry removes himself from the complexity, complication and destruction of the war; he leaves it behind. The couple enjoys the serenity of domestic life. The ravaging war is distance to them now and they are harbouring a world of seclusion by engaging in all kinds of merry-making activities and entertainment.

### **Autobiographical Elements in the Novel: Similarities between Hemingway and Frederic Henry**

The novel seems inseparable from the writer or novelist. It is written against the historical and geographical background of the World War I. This is because the events mentioned in the novel contain numerous references to people and place, governments and fronts that the readers can easily recognize. This is to establish substantial facts and put the discussion into a proper perspective that will remove doubt associated with fiction.

There are however, similarities between the hero cum narrator

and the novelist. For instance, Frederic Henry and Hemingway himself are Americans who are ambulance drivers during a particular war.

Also, both are wounded in the war. Frederic Henry was wounded in the knee and he is therefore sent to the American hospital in Milan, coincidentally, Catherine, a nurse is also sent to the hospital. Hemingway who enlisted in a Red Cross Ambulance Corps stationed on the Austrian front in Italy was wounded and he was sent to an American hospital in Milan where he met an American nurse named Agnes von Kurowsky. Another similarity between Hemingway and Frederic is alcoholism. Hemingway was fascinated by food and drink. This explains why many of Hemingway's stories are filled with overflowing references to wines and Liqueurs. A Farewell to Arms' character, Frederic is accused several times of hiding alcohol under his bed. In fact, after his knee has healed, he is diagnosed with jaundice but he is later kicked out of the hospital and sent back to the front. The nurses attributed the illness to alcoholism.

Furthermore, the lady in Hemingway's life, Agnes Von Kurowsky, a nurse in the American hospital in Milan is similar to that of Frederic Henry's Catherine. They both met the nurse while in the hospital convalesces and the eventual death of Catherine during childbirth can be likened to the departure of Agnes Von Kurowsky. Agnes wrote Hemingway that she had fallen in love with another man. This shattered his dream of marrying Agnes just like Catherine's death shatters the dream of the two being together.

These events inspire A Farewell to Arms after the war, and it is pertinent to draw similarities between the two personalities for the purpose of discussion.

### **Towards Peace: Lessons from a farewell to arms**

It is important to state here that the entire account is a narration of Frederic, the hero and it is narrated in the first person point of view. This technique helps to understand the emotion and the physical state of the hero. There is a need to identify, dissect, discuss and make inference from the account of futility of war as narrated by the hero. These lessons will make man sue for peace that seems elusive irrespective of the socio-cultural and political bias in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These lessons are enumerated as follows:

1. Frederic Henry's war experiences show that wars depress and kill human beings. As hinted earlier, the account creates a deeper understanding of war and its causes. The hero suffers a terrible and painful mortal wound that makes him sue for peace. He later abandons his duty post as an ambulance driver and he is longing for Catherine and where they can be secluded from the war. He becomes depressed and he sees many people being killed and maimed therefore, he wants peace.
2. Another inference made from the Frederic Henry's account is that war can turn an innocent and a naïve man into a dangerous creature. For instance, Frederic who has hinted earlier in the novel that he has not killed anyone seen shooting an uncooperative engineer. Henry cannot be excused from the savagery of war, although what led to the act is circumstantial.
3. The actual reflection of war portrays that it is terrifying, disordered and disjunctive. It is depicted as

indiscriminateness, senseless and technologically deadliness. This, the protagonist does by exploring the destructive power of war. War exacted casualties hideous in nature and in number. It proves that a million people could die in a single battle without changing so much in the front line. These experiences made Frederic to conclude that "wars weren't won anymore. Maybe they went on forever. Maybe it was another hundred years' war" (123).

4. Lessons are also learnt that wars are ignited by a special group of people. This class of people controls and makes money out of wars. They are oppressive agents of the state whose aim is domineering. Frederic understands this distrustfulness associated with war, he therefore deserts the army

Lessons from the novel show that freedom, peace and happiness among and within all nations and people are pertinent. Nations and states of the world must make conscious efforts to expedite actions to ensuring willingness or voluntary cooperation either by virtue of the system of government or international cooperation that can prevent war. Therefore, bilateral conflicts must be resolved without resulting to war in the 21st century. This will ensure peace and peaceful coexistence in the world is guaranteed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Conclusion

How does literature promote peace? Literature has become a veritable means through which people understand the tragedy of wars, most especially the ones that have ravaging the world in the past. An account of the First World War is given in literary form by Frederic Henry. Literature also plays a tremendous roles by bringing to the fore the challenges facing human beings. Through its universal appeal, literature is expected to establish a lasting stability, peace, development and progress. To achieve this, lessons must be learnt from literary works especially autobiographical account such as A Farewell to Arms where accurate accounts of issues such as war that overwhelms the characters' physiological and psychological beings are given. To achieve this tangible opportunity and the possibility of global peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, literature must be harnessed to meet the challenges because it has the capacity for the advancement of global peace in this generation and the next. Idea controls the world. Literature is the single powerful force that can precipitate global peace and alleviate many of the world's most complex challenges inimical to brew war. The paper discusses how the hero abandons his duty post in search for peace. Lessons must be learnt from the events of the war and the hero because sustainably resolving conflicts is relevant to peace building.

### References

1. Brooks C, Robert H. Understanding Drama: Twelve Plays. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1948.
2. Daiches, Davide Critical approach to literature. N.J. Prentice-Hall Inc, Englewood cliff. 1956.
3. Buckley, Vincent. Poetry and Morality. London: Chatto and Windus. pp. 197. 1965
4. Dutton, Richard. An introduction to literary criticism. York Press, 1984.
5. Grant, Michael. Eliot TS.A critical heritage. London: Routledge, 210:1982.
6. Greg WW. The Damnation of Faustus in Doctor Faustus In Modern language Rev, 1946, 12.
7. Nuttall AD. A new mimesis: Shakespeare and Representation of Reality; London. Methuen. 180, 1983.
8. Seldon, RA reader's guide to Contemporary Literary theory; London: Harvester Wheats heaf. 1989, 218. Hemingway, Ernest. A Farewell to Arms. USA: Beta NU Publishing. 1929
9. Spencer, Theodore Shakespeare and Nature of man. New York: Macmillan. 1994, 173.