

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## A Farewell to Arms

by

### Ernest Hemingway

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### Book Information

Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms

Quiz Number: 8656

Macmillan, 1957

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332 Pages

Book Level: 6.0

Interest Level: UG

Set in World War I Italy, this is one of the most poignant love stories ever written.

**Topics:** Classics, Classics (All); Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Romance, Romance (All); Wars, World War I

### Main Characters

Catherine Barkley a British nurse

Count Greffi an elderly man who plays billiards with Henry

Dr. Valentini an Italian doctor

Frederic Henry an American ambulance driver for the Italian army

Helen Ferguson Catherine's friend, also a nurse

Meyers an American

Moretti an Italian from San Francisco

Mrs. Walker, Miss Gage, Miss Van Campen nurses

Passini, Manera, Gavuzzi, Gordini, Bonello, Piani, Aymo ambulance drivers

Rinaldi Henry's friend, an army surgeon

Simmons an American studying singing in Italy

the priest the chaplain in Henry's detachment

### Vocabulary

**anarchist** a person who promotes an absence of government, in which there is no law or order

**carabinieri** the Italian police force

**picturesque** like a picture; quaint and charming

**socialist** a person who believes in the theory of government in which there is public ownership of the means of production and distribution of goods

### Synopsis

Frederic Henry is an American ambulance driver volunteering for the Italian army during World War I. The war is not glamorous, and many of the soldiers believe the war is futile.

Henry's roommate, Lieutenant Rinaldi, introduces Henry to an English nurse, Catherine Barkley. Catherine's fiancé has been killed in the war, and Catherine is very troubled. Henry does not immediately fall in love with Catherine, although he wants to have an affair with her. As time passes, however, he realizes he feels lonely without her.

Shells hit a dugout where Henry and the other ambulance drivers are eating pasta and cheese and drinking wine. One driver dies, and Henry is seriously wounded. He is taken to a hospital in Milan. Catherine Barkley has been stationed there.

At the hospital, Henry and Catherine fall deeply in love. They begin a sexual affair in Henry's hospital room, and Catherine becomes pregnant.

Henry is sent back to the front, and the lovers part. Not long after, the Italian army retreats from the Austrian and German forces. During the retreat, Henry shoots and kills a sergeant who disobeys. One of the ambulance drivers is killed by the Italians, and another deserts the group. Henry and other officers are pulled from the retreating forces and questioned as to why they are not with their men. Henry sees the officers being killed after they are questioned, and he deserts the army by diving into the river.

Henry hops a passing train and returns to Milan, where he learns that Catherine has gone to Stresa. He finds her there. They enjoy a short respite; then, the bartender tells them Henry is about to be arrested. Henry and Catherine row a small boat to Switzerland. They take rooms in the mountains near Montreaux, and are happy. When spring and the

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rains arrive, they move to town. Catherine's long labor begins. She is in terrible pain, and eventually bears a dead child. Catherine hemorrhages and dies. When Henry attempts to say goodbye to her, he thinks "it was like saying goodbye to a statue." He walks back to the hotel in the rain.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

Catherine and Catherine's baby both die in the story. Why did Hemingway end the story with these deaths?

*Hemingway expresses a very pessimistic view of life in this novel. One of his themes is that a person is alone in the world and cannot rely on anyone else to give their life meaning. Henry must go on alone. The world breaks people of courage, like Catherine, by killing them. All life inevitably ends in death, and after death there is nothing.*

#### Literary Analysis

What role did the priest play in the story? What might the way in which Henry and the other men in the detachment treated him reveal about the theme of the book?

*The priest had a traditional religious value system. Many of the men, with the exception of Henry, taunted the priest. This shows that the old, traditional values were no longer accepted. Henry was friendly with the priest, but he did not accept the priest's religion. This showed that Henry respected the fact that the priest had a value system, and having discarded traditional values, was searching for a value system he could call his own.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Henry was searching for a value system. Catherine already had a value system. Identify her value system. What do you think of it?

*Catherine's value system was simply loving Henry. She had abandoned all traditional values; she felt no need to go through the formality of marriage, for example. She believed that everything ends with death. She believed in living and dying with courage; hence, when dying, she said only, "I'm not a bit afraid. It's just a dirty trick."*

#### Constructing Meaning

Why did Henry desert the army? Was he justified in doing so?

*He deserted the army because, during the retreat, officers were being removed from the troops and killed on trumped-up charges. Had Henry not deserted, he probably would have been killed. Most readers probably think Henry was justified in deserting for this reason alone since all but one of the men he was responsible for had either been killed or deserted. A volunteer in a foreign army to begin with, Henry then felt that his obligation was over.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Most of Hemingway's novels include a hero with certain characteristics, called a "Hemingway hero." During the war, Hemingway, along with some other writers, concluded that traditional religion and other western values had not saved humankind from the ravages of war. His heroes search for a new set of values based in the here and now. They are hard-living, hard-drinking men who put great stock in sensual pleasures. They are men of action who do not talk much, especially about their values. One of their greatest values is self-discipline and the ability to act courageously in the face of death. Critics have said that Henry is searching for a value system throughout the book and only becomes a

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true Hemingway hero only at the end, when upon Catherine's death he realizes that a man must be totally independent. Ask the students to write a theme about what Henry believes and how his beliefs are reflected in his behavior, attitudes, and relationships. Ask them to compare Henry's beliefs with their own.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** *A Farewell to Arms* takes place on the Italian front during World War I. Assign the students topics to research about World War I: causes, participants, weaponry, medical techniques, battles, retreats, living conditions of the soldiers, war resistance, the U.S. role in the war, and other subjects selected by the students. Ask each student to make a short presentation to the class on what he or she has learned.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Hemingway is known for his distinctive style, which was the product of his years as a newspaper reporter. His writing is straightforward. Never verbose, he tends to understate rather than overstate, and he uses few adjectives. Instruct the students to locate other Hemingway novels or short stories. Ask the students to read various passages aloud, and discuss the common stylistic elements of the passages. Then have them write a paragraph of their own in "Hemingway style."

**Responding to Literature** War has been a theme of many authors, poets, songwriters, and artists. Ask the students to look at the library and at home for examples of artistic works related to war. Choose one. Show it to the class, and explain what the artist is trying to say about war in his/her work. Compare it to what Hemingway was trying to convey. If the student chooses, he or she could write or draw an art piece about war.