Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929)

Study Questions

Called the “Great War,” World War I dramatically transformed warfare. The real beginning of the 20th century, it also reshaped relations between close and distant countries, and altered the lives and expectations of millions of people on three continents. Particularly brutal and brutalizing, it wasted the youth of a dozen countries, massively augmented the powers of states, bred revolution in Russia, and transformed the United States, a late-comer that took relatively few losses, from a minor player on the world stage to the arbiter of a victory of sorts, and of peace. Like all wars, it was a unifying, but also a profoundly alienating experience. War correspondents and photography brought some aspects of the fighting and dying to people at home. For a better idea of the reality of war as it was experienced by those who lived it, we can turn to novels such as this one by Hemingway, who served as an ambulance driver, much the way his main character does on the Italian front. The war becomes background and context for a story of Henry and Catherine as they find, love, and lose each other; at another level, the war is the story, implacably, impersonally, brutally grinding up the young lovers along with all the rest.

**Characters:**

1. Tell the story of Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley. Who are these two young people? What do we learn about them in the first part of the story? How have they been shaped both by earlier experiences and by what they have seen and the parts they have played in the war on the Italian front? What view does each one take of the universe—what orders life and gives it meaning, what the rules are that people should live by? Why is Henry in Italy before the U. S. has entered the war? Why is Catherine there? How do they come together?

2. Consider Rinaldi, Henry’s roommate and a surgeon on the Italian front whose job is to fix up the wounded and get them back into battle again. Something of a foil for both Henry and the priest, how does he function? What portrayal does the novel give of Rinaldi, of doctors and medicine in the midst of carnage? What does Rinaldi find comfort and meaning in; how does he handle the futility of war? Describe the scene in which he, the priest, and Henry discuss the war and what will end it.

3. Consider the character of the priest, who represents religion as Rinaldi does science and rationality. What does he believe in? What is his relationship to Henry and the other men? Can he bring them comfort through religion?
Plot:

4. What do you notice particularly about the story of the love affair between Henry and Catherine? What obstacles—both in themselves and in the world at war around them—do they meet and overcome? What are the major turning points as they move from a sexual liaison to love to “marriage”? How is the course of their love shaped by the war? What meanings does Hemingway give to both their idyllic, peaceful times together, as in Milan, and to their frantic flight (can you compare this to Hurstwood’s abduction of Carrie on the flight to Canada and New York?) to escape the war, their Swiss interlude, and Catherine developing pregnancy? Is either of them a heroic figure? What makes them so?

5. Discuss the scenes in the novel when the main characters discuss the meaning of the war and what it will take to end it. How do Henry, Rinaldi, the priest, and Catherine understand the meaning of war and the possibility of achieving peace. What do they think of the government and military leaders in the countries at war. How does the crooked horse racing serve to illustrate the obstacles that simple, honest people face in their efforts to find a quiet, happy life?

6. The plot is often advanced, and turning points marked, by changes in the weather. Discuss the strategy of Hemingway’s? What does he achieve by contrasting the war of nations with events in the natural world? What role does the rain play as a symbol and a device in the plot? What does rain mean in this novel?

7. The other major plot element is scenes of battle. How does Hemingway use them to show us the character of war from the perspective of the common soldiers on the Austro-Italian front? What differences do you see in the descriptions of battle in the first and second parts of the book? What causes Henry, who has shot a deserter himself, finally to run away from the war and reunite with Catherine?

8. Hemingway’s novel closes with a tragic scene of birth and death. What is his message here? Where does he leave Henry at the end?

9. Assess this novel, one of the great classics of war fiction. Does it capture the complexity and ambiguity of war? In what ways can students of history use this novel as a kind of primary source? What kinds of evidence does it give us that we can not easily get somewhere else?