



LUND UNIVERSITY
Humanities and Theology

**A Subtle Slide towards Commitment: Frederick
Henry's Identity in *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest
Hemingway**

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K01 Literary Seminar

Autumn 2008

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Introduction

In the book *Hemingway and His Critics*, in an interview with George Plimpton, Hemingway himself describes his style as follows: “I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg” (34). Consequently, to define the protagonists of Hemingway’s novels can occasionally present a challenge to the reader; the thoughts behind their actions are sometimes hard to motivate unless you read between the lines. For example, Jake Barnes, the main character of *The Sun Also Rises* (1927) gets rejected by Brett Ashley because of his sexual impotence, a dilemma that in fiction more commonly would be connected with profound anxiety and strong emotional reactions. Instead, Jake displays a kind of detachment towards the matter that can be hard to comprehend for anyone with a more traditionally romantic vision of life and an equally romantic expectation of literature. This detachment – the seeming lack of beliefs, hope and caring, and the distance from feelings that can be seen in Jake Barnes and his expatriate friends – is even more prominent in Frederick Henry, the protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929).

The opinions of what genre *A Farewell to Arms* belongs to, Rovit says, range from it being perceived of as a love story, to a portrayal of the cruelties and the illogical nature of war as such; some critics have even chosen to go as far as to call it a tragedy (98). This diversity of outlooks, I believe, has to do with the combination of two factors. Firstly, there is a story of love between a man and a woman. Secondly, the same story is set in Europe during World War One, an environment that involves death, betrayal and broken dreams on a daily basis. The unpredictability of war, of what is going to happen next, the fact that your best friend or your true love might die tomorrow, make people hesitant about the value and use of being too attached to someone; love and war are simply two contradictive forces that do not work very well together, which consequently contribute to the difficulty of deciding on a genre for the book, but also, more importantly, constitutes the framework for the complexity Frederick Henry’s identity.

The issue of Frederick Henry’s identity has been discussed from different angles. Wilson brings significance to the fact that Frederick is an American in the Italian army. He argues that Frederick’s foreign roots, even though he does not become an object

mockery for the Italians because of his background, make him feel “alienation”, as he puts it, to an extent that it affects his personality. Moreover, Wilson continues that Frederick’s occupation as an ambulance driver, as opposed to being a regular soldier, strengthens the feeling of not belonging (pars. 4, 5). One might then suppose that Frederick misses his native country, but no such clue is given in the book; the only thing we know, as Rovit puts it, is that, “[h]e is rootless; he has a stepfather somewhere in America, but he has quarreled so much with his family that the only communication between them is in their honoring of his sight drafts” (99). To what extent Frederick’s identity depends on the feelings of rootlessness and the perceived alienation can only be left to speculation, but the assumption – whatever be the reason – that he does not quite know who he is, must not be denied.

Critics have discussed the other characters’ influence on Frederick’s identity. Light argues that Frederick encounters four different ideals of service which are exposed to him through different characters he gets to know in his experience: the Priest, who represents a religious ideal of service; Rinaldi, who is very devoted to his work as a surgeon and hence embodies an ideal of “serving mankind”; Gino, who with his patriotism stands for an ideal of serving your country; and Catherine, who displays an ideal of serving the one you love (par. 1). Light arrives at the conclusion that, as Fredric ultimately cannot identify himself with any of the ideals of service he has wavered between, he rebuffs all of them, and that he – after his loss of Catherine – is left with believing in the only thing one can be certain of: death (par. 2). Rovit’s argument is reminiscent of the latter’s in that he believes that Frederick meets several “tutors” in the book – none of which he ultimately accepts (98). In contrast, he does not claim that Frederick ends up believing in death only, but rather that he has gone from the safety of being emotionally detached – and hence the safety of not committing himself to anything that he risks to lose – to a position where he is a bit more attached (105).

I believe that Frederick’s detached personality – his escape into excessive drinking, his visits at the brothel before he meets Catherine and his incredibly casual attitude toward very serious matters – to a great extent depends on the war. However, what is so special about Frederick is the character of his detachment. His indifference towards pride, nationalism and glory are incompatible with his rank as a Lieutenant.

Moreover, the fact that it is very seldom that Frederick exposes his disbelief in those concepts, that he rather says what people want to hear, often coming across as being ironic just to avoid conflict and, simply, because he does not care, shows the essence of Frederick's persona. It appears that Frederick has a somewhat negative and cynical world view; at heart he believes that there is really no use in believing in anything because, in the end, the cruelty and the mercilessness of the world will take those beliefs, laugh at them and throw them straight in your face.

Nevertheless, a subtle change can be seen in Frederick after his injury from the grenade that nearly kills him; he seems to become a bit more involved. With the scene before the grenade incident at Plava as a sort of take off point – a point at which Frederick's detachment is at its peak and is shown from all aspects, ranging from his descriptions of the environment to his dialogues with the other ambulance drivers and the way in which he acts, and which is also the moment just before he gets injured – I will proceed trying to see how Frederick's identity gets shaped and affected by his experience. My thesis is that Frederick becomes increasingly caring after his wound. I do agree with Light that he faces different kinds of service, but I do not believe that he rejects them all in the end; the ideal of love and caring leaves a mark in him.

Frederick Henry's Detachment Prior to His Getting Injured, and His Wound as a Turning Point

That Frederick Henry feels he is not really a part of the war is indicated at several points through the course of the novel. When he says that “[he knows he] will not be killed [...] in this war” (37), he not only comes across as irrational and naïve – considering that he, after all, is at the front of one of the most horrible wars history has ever seen – but he also shows his utter detachment from the war and the risks of it. In line with that, just before Frederick leaves for Plava he says to Catherine that he is off for a “show” (43). It could be suggested that the word choice has some significance with regards to Frederick's role as an ambulance driver and the way in which he looks at his role in the war: he is always further away from danger than the regular soldier, but still he sees all the death and destruction from the front row, so to speak, which makes him perceive it as being a show. In using a word like that, he positions himself in the role of a spectator rather than as a participant of the war; his detachment gets revealed figuratively through

his narration. Before continuing to make a closer analysis of Frederick's detachment it makes sense to have a brief look at his role as a Lieutenant.

To begin with, Frederick Henry is frequently called upon as "Tenente", which is the Italian word for Lieutenant. For the record, it is made clear in *Selected Letters 1917 – 1961* that Hemingway himself, when he served in World War One, had the rank "soto Tenente" (second Lieutenant), which was one rank below that of Frederick Henry (11). As to what it means to be a Lieutenant, Kelley L. Ross states that a Lieutenant "holds the place [...] for [and] represents, the superior officer" (par. 2). More concretely, he continues by saying that "[a] Lieutenant as such holds the place for a Captain, who is the 'head' [...] of the basic military unit" (par. 2). It can thus be concluded that Frederick is in charge of a unit when the Captain is absent. And among the officers he is outranked by Captains and he himself outranks officers who hold the rank of Second Lieutenant. All of those three ranks belong to the category "officers" (Ross, chart 3).

In chapter nine, Frederick's rank as a Lieutenant is being tested. He and four other ambulance drivers, (Passini, Gordini, Gavuzzi and Manera) none of who holds the rank of officer, are installed in a dugout at Plava in connection with an attack that is to take place that night. From the very moment that Frederick arrives at the dugout and meets the people he is to be in charge of, they begin to demand things from him. It is as if they are testing his patience in a defiant manner that is reminiscent of lower school pupils testing the nerves of a new teacher: "What about eating, Lieutenant? [...] 'I'll go and see now,' [Frederick] said. 'You want us to stay here or can we look around?' 'Better stay here'" (47). The questions might at first sight appear innocent. However, if one considers the serious situation they are in and, then again, the fact that they are not just talking to anyone – Frederick Henry is after all their Lieutenant – the questions come across as rather naïve, mundane and inappropriate; many would probably agree that food and "walking around" would be among the last things to care and think about in a scenario when death is lurking just around the corner. Even though the last sentence ("[b]etter stay here") could be argued to have the tiniest bit of authoritative air about it, the character of Frederick's reply is but very modest; to call it an order would be to exaggerate, it rather feels like a piece of advice, lest they risk their lives. His modesty also suggests that he rather adapts to and yields to the other drivers' will than to get in

conflict with them, because then he would risk getting into a discussion, which is something that Frederick with his detached manner tries to avoid as much as he can.

That the other drivers' casual manner towards Frederick might have something to do with his American origin is hard to tell from the information given in the scene at Plava, but it would be subjective to rule out the possibility of it. A few hints are given in the book to support such a thesis. For instance, the Priest implies that, since Frederick is not an Italian, he is a bit less of an officer, but nevertheless "nearer to the officers than to the men" (70). This suggests that non-native Italian officers are looked upon a bit more casually and perceived of as less authoritarian than are the Italian officers. Even if that might be the case in general, the men at Plava with their skepticism against the war show no nationalistic traits what so ever. Consequently, it may be suggested that they do not make too big of a deal out of the fact that Frederick is of American origin, but rather treat him just the same way as they would treat an Italian officer.

Frederick's portrayal of the scene when they are sitting in the dugout conveys a sense of almost uncanny composure: "We sat on the ground with our backs against the wall and smoked. Outside it was nearly dark. The earth of the dugout was warm and dry and I let my shoulders back against the wall, sitting on the small of my back, and relaxed" (48). The words he uses to describe the situation give a warm feeling, a feeling of comfort, as if they were sitting on a beach on a tropical island somewhere far away from danger. However, knowing that that is not the case – but rather something far more unpleasant – sends out contradictory signals which might set the reader in a situation where he/she does not know whether to feel happy or sad when reading the scene; that is what makes it a bit uncanny. Furthermore, the idyllic picture and sensation Frederick conceives of the dugout is yet another pointer of the detached way in which he perceives the war: something that will not hurt him and something that he is not really a part of.

In the casual atmosphere in the dugout the subject of the conversation turns to the Bersaglieri, which are the ones that are going to be at the attack that night. Passini's comment that he thinks "Bersaglieri are fools" (48) has several qualities to it which come across as controversial in the presence of Frederick: firstly, it predicts a bad prospect of the outcome of the attack, which is like admitting defeat; secondly, it slanders the reputation of the Italian army and the Italian nation; finally, to call your

own countrymen “fools” sounds shockingly brutal to be a comment in the presence of an officer. Moreover, Frederick’s reply, “[t]hey are brave and have good discipline” (48), appears to be a mechanical answer that comes from Frederick the Lieutenant rather than Frederick the person, because he does not display any emotional reaction, nor does he defend his argument any further as they keep talking negatively about the Bersaglieri.

Frederick’s modest and non-authoritarian behavior is shown further as they have a discussion about war. The other drivers agree that, in order for a war to stop, one side has to take the initiative to stop fighting. Even though Frederick disagrees with them and maintains that he believes they “should get the war over” (49), he does not get upset or irritated over the other drivers’ anti-war comments, which normally would be a compatible reaction from what is the common notion of a Lieutenant. Instead, in the same air as his concise reply about the Bersaglieri, he only says what is expected from a Lieutenant, and does so with a rather indifferent, unprotesting tone, implying that he really does not care. To take this behavior to its extremes, one could say that Frederick – in speaking the way he does – passively disfavors the success of the Italian army. This is, of course, even more the case with the other drivers who are outright against the war. However, the fact that they hold no officer ranks still stands, which perhaps not justifies but, at the very least, gives them a bit more legitimacy to think as they like. Ironically, the moment Frederick gets the most upset during the attack at Plava, is when one of the drivers says that they have no forks for their pasta. “What the hell”, (53) he says. The fact that he gets upset over such a triviality is tragic and it shows the illogical nature of war; it seems that matters which are normally unimportant and trivial – forks, for instance – become much more valuable in the hopeless and uncertain atmosphere of a world where you have no control.

As has already been mentioned, before he leaves for Plava, Frederick states his certainty of not being killed in the war (37). This fearlessness is not only shown through his words but it is also demonstrated in practice at some points. For example, he risks his life when he against the regulations chooses not to wear his helmet in Gorizia (the town in which his company is stationed). He bases his decision on the fact that he thinks they are “uncomfortable” and “too bloody theatrical in a town where the civilian inhabitants ha[ve] not been evacuated” (28). Both of his reasons for not wearing a

helmet are very pathetic and display a marker of what he is prepared to risk his life for – he jeopardizes his life for the sake of feeling physically comfortable, not causing panic among the civilians, and perhaps even for the sake of not looking silly.

Another occasion where Frederick demonstrates his reckless side even more notably is when he and Gordini go to fetch pasta and cheese for the other ambulance drivers. Their timing could not really be worse as the attack is about to begin just as Frederick and Gordini reach the Major's shelter where the food is. In the dark of the night Frederick sees "the Austrian search-lights [...] moving on the mountains behind [them]" (52). They hear grenades exploding nearby, so near that even the sound of dirt hitting the ground can be discerned. Still, Frederick is resolute in his aim, which is to bring food back to the dugout. In spite of the Major's advice that they "better wait until the shelling is over", Frederick insists on going back because, as he replies, "they want to eat" (53). To call it stupidity would be to deprive Frederick of his unselfishness and to call it bravery would be to ignore the banality of the situation. Instead, it makes more sense to say that Frederick's reckless behavior is just yet another sign of his detachment; he does not fear death, he ignores the mere possibility of it happening to him. Since he feels death cannot get him and that he has very little to lose there is simply nothing to fear.

At the end of the scene at Plava a trench mortar shell lands by the dugout, explodes, kills Passini and causes severe injuries to the rest of the group. Frederick's knee gets badly hurt by the explosion, which is an incident that, considering his description of it, definitely is a near-death experience for him. The following thoughts run through his head just as the grenade has exploded:

I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and *I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind.* I went out swiftly, all of myself, and I knew I was dead and that it had all been a mistake to think you just died. *Then I floated, and instead of going on I felt myself slide back.* I breathed and I was back. (54, italics added)

One way of looking at this excerpt is to see it as a remarkably vivid depiction of what it actually might feel like to be that close to death. The inability to breathe, the trancelike and illusory conception of "floating" and leaving your own body conveys a feeling of being in a state somewhere between existence and non-existence. Of course it is impossible to know what it is like to be close to death without personally having

experienced it. Hence, it is a bit audacious to claim that this is what it must be like and that the portrayal of what goes through the mind of Frederick is absolutely realistic. However, Burgess' account of Hemingway's own participation in World War One – how he got injured in his knee while carrying a man who was screaming in agony after having been hit by shell fragment, “[f]ell, recovered, and made the final hundred yards with his still living burden, [and subsequently] lost consciousness” (22) – gives quite some credibility and legitimacy to Hemingway's (and Frederick Henry's) way of describing a near-death experience.

Another approach to this scene is to see it as a turning point in Frederick, a point at which he is about to undergo a change. About the matter, Rovit claims that “the wound is the first lesson to [Frederick] of what he stands to lose” (101). Rovit's statement has a lot of relevance to it. Up to the point of the injury, as has already been made clear, Frederick does not even consider the risk of getting killed in the war. The explosion makes him realize that there actually is something to lose and that he is just as much in danger of the war as anybody else. It should be made clear, however, that the impact of the near-death experience is but very subtle. Frederick does not become an entirely different person with a completely different and reevaluated view on things; it is not as if he suddenly has found the meaning of life or gone through some kind of spiritual revelation. As a matter of fact, he is almost the same after the wound, except that his ignorance of the risks of war has been tested and proven unreasonable, and by consequence he becomes more *aware*, and thus a bit less *detached*.

As Rovit gives extra attention to the part that goes, “I knew I was dead and that it had all been a mistake to think you just died”, interpreting it like Frederick's realization of his having been “dead” (detached and uncaring) for a long time (101), I would like to stress the significance of some other parts of the quote, namely the parts I have chosen to italicize. The *wind* in the first part can be interpreted as a kind of refresher, a wind that blows some awareness into Frederick. Frederick leaves his body for a while and his “soul” (in lack of a better word) gets swirled around in the wind and awakens from its “sleeping” state of ignorance and indifference. Finally, the notion of *floating* can be read as a symbolic way of describing the way in which a person who is detached unprotestingly floats, so to speak, with the stream all the time. The fact that Frederick “slides back” could be seen as a tiny slide towards commitment.

Frederick Henry's Interaction with Rinaldi and the Priest

Out of the different male characters Frederick encounters in the novel, Rinaldi and the Priest are the ones he comes closest to. Both of them are there as a constant moral support; and Frederick appears to voice his thoughts to them to a much higher degree than he does to any other male character in the novel. Since Frederick does not expose much of his feelings otherwise, his conversations with Rinaldi and the Priest constitute a good tool for defining Frederick's personality as to where he stands at different stages of the story.

Frederick's relation to the Priest is a bit special. We first come across the latter in the mess in Gorizia, where Frederick sits with a number of other officers, one of which holds the rank of Captain and another who holds the rank of Major, to have supper. Although the Priest is there with nothing but good intent – to give guidance and comfort to the soldiers in the tough times of war – he does not get a whole lot of appreciation. The officers seem to grab every possible opportunity to make fun of him. It seems that they take advantage of the Priest's shyness and the fact that they know that they can bully him as much as they like without him protesting about it; he becomes the scapegoat on whom some of the officers canalize of their feelings of anxiety. It could be suggested that he is an easy object of mockery partly due to his different position in the war; he is not out in the battlefield and he does not kill people, nor does he indulge in sinful activities such as going to the brothels. Those factors unite the other officers in a masculine kind of way and hence make the Priest different and the easiest target around, so to speak. Frederick does not defend the Priest, but nor does he actively participate in the bullying of him. The following extract shows Frederick's passivity when the Captain makes fun of the Priest's celibacy in the mess:

'Priest not with girls,' went on the captain. 'Priest never with girls,' he explained to [Frederick]. He took [Frederick's] glass and filled it, looking at his eyes all the time, but not losing sight of the Priest. 'Every night five against one [said the Captain].' Everyone at the table laughed. [...] The Priest accepted it as a joke. (7)

It is easy to understand that the Captain's joke, if a joke at all, actually is not very funny. It has no real point or humorous substance to it; the only thing it does is making fun of the Priest's sexual innocence and the fact that he has the other officers against

him (at least according to the Captain). Still, everybody laughs at it. The fact that the Priest “[accepts] it as a joke” shows his meekness and innocence. As to why the officers laugh, part of the answer probably lies in the concept of peer pressure – the fact that they feel obliged to laugh in order not to get bullied themselves. The Captain’s stare at Frederick after the joke probably looks for confirmation, as if he wants to determine from Frederick’s reaction whether he has him on his side or if Frederick feels sympathy for the Priest. The latter is confirmed as the officers go on by mocking the Priest for his religion. The Major says that the Pope is on the Austrians’ side and declares that he is an atheist. When another officer continues by recommending the “Black Pig” to Frederick, a book that the Priest considers “vile and filthy”, Frederick “smile[s] at the Priest and he smile[s] back across the candle light” (8).

On the one hand this shows that Frederick feels sympathy for the Priest, but it also shows that he is not prepared to go as far as to defend him verbally; such a maneuver would demand far too much commitment from Frederick’s side as he would risk getting into an argument. His solution to the moral dilemma of the scene is to take the easiest and most diplomatic way out, not making enemies with either party.

Although Frederick’s handling of the peer pressure situation above tells a lot about his detachment through the way in which he acts, the moments of eye-to-eye dialogue with the Priest are even more interesting. The first occurrence of this is before he gets wounded, just after he has come back to Gorizia from his leave. The Priest had wanted him to go fishing and visit his parents in the Abruzzi. Instead, Frederick’s trip had been more inspired by the advice from the bullying officers in the mess: to go to the large cities and indulge in harlotry and alcohol (9). However, as he comes back he has a bad conscience for not having gone to the Abruzzi. He tries to explain to the Priest, who is disappointed, why he did not go and how he really had wanted to go (13), which is an act through which Frederick’s desire not to make any enemies is further shown. Even if such a desire most likely is a part of Frederick’s detached persona, the thoughts that run through his head when he thinks of how nice it would actually be to see the Abruzzi seem very genuine and sincere. It could thus be suggested that the Priest has had some influence on Frederick already at this stage in the sense that he has made him feel bad about himself for his sinful activities on his permission. Rovit thinks that Frederick’s apologetic attempt to justify his sinful choice to the Priest and to himself is a “key to the

motif of self-discovery” (98). In other words, Frederick is insecure of who he really is; his thoughts about why he did not go to the Abruzzi, even though he, at heart, wanted to do so – the fact that he is questioning himself – show that he endeavors to come to terms with his identity; he tries to discover who he is.

The dialogue between the Priest and Frederick at the hospital in Milan is probably the most profound and thought-revealing discussion of the novel. The atmosphere is friendly and genuine as both of them declare they have missed each other and have a drink from the bottle of Vermoth the Priest has brought with him. What happens next is highly surprising: Frederick notices that the Priest looks upset and actually asks him, “[w]hat’s the matter, father? You seem very tired” (70). By asking a question like that Frederick shows a capability of caring he has not really shown before. Although it is the Priest who takes the initiative to visit Frederick, their discussion held in the hospital could be seen as a continuation of Frederick’s process of trying to come to terms with his identity and a point at which he is measured against the Priest’s ideals. Moreover, the fact that the conversation is held after the injury is important to have in mind if one considers Rovit’s claim about the significance of the incident with the wound as an example to Frederick of what he stands to lose (101).

Their discussion covers basically the entire spectrum of the novel as they talk about love, religion and war, the former two being the most interesting issues with regards to the Priest’s influence on the shaping of Frederick’s identity. When the Priest asks Frederick if he loves God, he responds that “[he is] afraid of Him in the night sometimes”, and that “[he does not] love much” (72). The ironic character of the replies does indeed show Frederick’s general detachment and his indifference towards religion. But more importantly, he does not question the Priest’s faith but rather seems to let the values be presented to him. Those values towards God that are idealized by the Priest are extended to a suggestion of what it means to, and how you are supposed to, love another person, “[w]hen you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve” (72). The last quote, Wilson points out, is Frederick’s gradual move towards an ability to love a person more genuinely as defined by the Priest (par. 26).

Rinaldi, who is a surgeon, is, at least in the beginning of the novel, Frederick’s closest friend. Their relationship initially comes across as a typical buddies-in-war-relationship as it seems they are on the same detached kind of wavelength. Moreover,

their interaction, being far less profound than the communication between Frederick and the Priest, mostly revolves around women and alcohol, which are escapist activities that seem to unite the soldiers. The shallowness of their conversation is revealed early, as the first thing Rinaldi asks Frederick when he has returned to the front from his trip in Europe, is if he has had any “beautiful adventures” (11), (meaning whether he has slept with any prostitutes). Light brings up two things they have in common that strengthen their bond when he points out that “both are not only living a life of non-thinking sensation, but more important both are involved in the service of healing man’s body” (par. 5). Although Light’s point is completely relevant, it must not be forgotten that Frederick and Rinaldi are in fact roommates, which probably contributes a whole lot to the closeness between them.

Even if their conversational topics are a bit shallow, their friendship still feels very genuine; there is a teasing air between them that can only be found between real friends. Just as Rinaldi knows he can tease Frederick in a friendly kind of way – for instance, when he, in an ironic manner, calls Frederick his “great and good friend and financial protector” when he is about to borrow money to appear wealthy in front of “the English girls” (12) – Frederick equally knows he can tell Rinaldi to “[g]o to hell” (13) without causing an emotional stir. They simply know where they have each other, which is actually expressed by Frederick rather explicitly when he has returned from the hospital in Milan to the front: “[h]e had spent two years teasing me and I had always liked it. We understood each other very well” (169).

Cohen brings forth an interesting argument when he claims that there are in fact signs of Rinaldi having a sexual desire towards Frederick, and feelings of wanting to be more than just friends with him. For instance, he directs attention to Rinaldi’s repeated attempts to kiss Frederick (par. 4). Nevertheless, Cohen is not ignorant to the argument that Rinaldi’s kissing might be a part of Italian customs. His main counter argument, however, and the reason he believes there is a sexual desire, is that he believes “Rinaldi “trafficks” Catherine between himself and Frederick as a means of eroticizing his relationship with his roommate” (par. 10). Although I find this theory fascinating, I will not try and support it since I think it is a bit too farfetched. Instead, in a more traditional line of reading, I believe Rinaldi is a close friend and a close friend only. Moreover, Rinaldi plays an alternative path to the Priest as to what he prioritizes and idealizes in

life. As was mentioned in the introduction, Light argues that Rinaldi represents a quality of being devoted to his work as a surgeon and thereby embodies an ideal of “serving mankind” (par. 1). On top of that, it could be suggested that Rinaldi, through his shallow attitude towards women, represents a view on love that is the exact opposite of what the Priest idealizes.

Catherine, the Retreat and Frederick’s Identity by the End

When Frederick initially meets Catherine it is pretty evident that he has no intention of committing himself to her the way he eventually will. The following excerpt is Frederick’s thoughts on Catherine at their second meeting, as he has come to meet her at the hospital she is working at:

I did not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her. This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards. Like bridge you had to pretend you were playing for money or playing for some stakes. (30)

The parallel he draws between seduction and bridge shows the superficial mindset he has at this point; he believes that, if he plays his cards right – if he chooses the right words and follows the rules of seduction – he might get to sleep with Catherine. He also reckons that he has to pretend he wants more than just physical pleasure in order to increase his chances of achieving what he wants. Catherine sees right through Frederick’s façade, however, as she says that “[t]his is a rotten game we play, isn’t it? [...] [y]ou don’t have to pretend you love me” (31). At this point of the novel Frederick has Rinaldi’s superficial attitude towards women, and Catherine appears to be aware of, and all right with, Frederick’s intentions.

As to who Frederick is when he first meets Catherine, Rovit claims that Frederick has no significant *me* or “character” at this point, “[h]e is his manners and his intermittent drive to satisfy his creature instincts in drinking, sex, and the sporadic excitement of the sensations which the violence of war provides” (100). Furthermore, even if he has slept with a whole lot of women, none of them has played any major part in the shaping of his character (100). Rovit’s statements are highly relevant and important to have in mind when considering Catherine’s role in relationship to the development of Frederick’s identity. Firstly, the fact that he, as far as we know, has not had any experience of profound love, or any emotional scars from rejected love, makes

him more capable of taking it in, even though he is somewhat reluctant to show emotions in the first place. Secondly, Frederick's "creature-like" attitude towards sex, his detached persona and his lack of a noteworthy *me* are traits Catherine is to have an impact on.

What starts out as a game of seduction between Catherine and Frederick, pretty soon turns into something more profound. As it is easy for Frederick at Plava – when he has not developed any feelings for Catherine – not to think about anything outside of the moment, not to let himself become occupied by thought, to stay detached and emotionally absent – it soon shows he is less able to “remain detached as he [...] gradually fills [*sic*] in love with Catherine” (Wilson, par. 19). She occupies increasingly more of his mind, especially when he knows he will not see Catherine for a while after he has left Milan to return to the front. Moreover, Catherine has turned into a controversial topic when Rinaldi tries to joke about her at Frederick's return to Gorizia. Rinaldi asks if she is good in bed. Frederick becomes very upset and tells him to “shut up” (169).

Normally, Frederick's telling Rinaldi to shut up is merely a friendly response to his teasing. This time, however, it gets evident that he really means it, as Rinaldi keeps pushing the subject when he responds to Frederick's telling him to shut up, “I will. You will see I am a man of extreme delicacy. Does she——?” To this Frederick reacts, “[Rinaldi], [...] please shut up. If you want to be my friend, shut up” (169). The last sentence reveals the seriousness of the situation; Frederick is more or less telling Rinaldi that he is actually prepared to give up their friendship unless he stops joking about Catherine. The fact that he puts such an ultimatum on his good old friend shows on the one hand that he is, as opposed to before, prepared to get into an argument (for the sake of defending a woman he loves, even). On top of that, it suggests that Frederick has left Rinaldi's superficial view on women and love, and partly gotten to embrace the Priest's view on those concepts. The fact that Catherine becomes an increasing part of Frederick's thoughts is, apart from her having become a sensitive topic, shown more concretely when he is back out in the field. In the midst of the retreat Frederick starts daydreaming: “Catherine was in bed now between two sheets, over her and under her. Which side did she sleep on? Maybe she wasn't asleep. Maybe she was lying thinking about me” (197).

The retreat is, on the whole, a passage where Frederick shows an inability to remain detached. As the Germans and Austrians begin to break through the northern Italian lines the Allied forces initiate a massive retreat towards the town of Udine. Frederick and his group of three other ambulance drivers, Piani, Aymo and Bonello, two girls and two engineers they have picked up on the way, begin by following the great mass of withdrawing troops, but rather soon they decide to break off from the unit to take what they believe is a shortcut. As one of their cars gets stuck in the mud, Frederick shows the culmination of his growing inability to stay detached when he shoots one of the two engineers who refuses to help getting the car out of the mud. His dramatic behavior stands in stark contrast to his earlier demonstrated detached non-authoritative manner, and the fact that Frederick is not even the engineers' officer strengthens the utter unexpectedness of the act. It could be suggested that Frederick's increased feelings for Catherine have given him a reason to care more about not dying. Moreover, the situation Frederick and his group are in, with the enemy troops not far behind, is highly dangerous and most likely an extremely panicking scenario. Hence, it is probably a combination between Frederick's will to be able to reunite with Catherine and pure panic that makes him shoot the fleeing engineer.

In connection with the execution of Italian officers by the Italian battle police at the river Tagliamento, Frederick takes the reckless decision to jump into the river to save his own skin – from what he has seen he feels he is most likely to be executed otherwise. On the train he boards, after his river escape, which is heading for Milan, Frederick reflects upon what has just happened. He puts the war behind him and takes leave of all of his former obligations. It is not with utter contempt or war-disgust, however, that Frederick leaves the military life:

Anger was washed away with any obligation. [...] I had taken off the stars, but that was for convenience. It was no point of honor. I was not against them. I was through. I wished them all the luck. There were the good ones, and the brave ones, and the calm ones and the sensible ones, and they deserved it. But it was not my show anymore [...] (232)

The neutral attitude Frederick shows here after nearly having been shot to death by Italians reveals that he is still able to be just as detached as he was before he met Catherine. Indeed, Frederick does express a longing for Catherine on the train, "I was made to [...] eat and drink and sleep with Catherine" (233). However, Rovit makes a

very relevant point when he claims that Frederick leaves the war, not because he wants a reason to come back to Catherine, nor because of a “disillusionment” with war ideals – he never had any war ideals anyway – but rather because he has been “pushed to the wall”, and would be killed otherwise (104). I do agree with the former, but not completely with the latter. Indeed, it might be true that Frederick would not flee the war at that very point if it had not been for the hard circumstances. Nevertheless, I believe the prospect of meeting Catherine, along with the slightly more emotional capacity she has brought forth in him, play a palpable part of Frederick’s decision.

The death of Catherine is not only very tragic, considering the happy times the couple has had right before and during the pregnancy, the prospect of a future in peace and the abrupt turn all of that takes; it is also a crucial moment when it comes to defining who Frederick has become by the end of the novel. The emotional ordeal Frederick is thrown into at the realization that Catherine might die in childbirth makes him apply the Priest’s view on what it means to love someone, maximally. Light notes Frederick’s eagerness to serve when Catherine is dying, as he “gives her gas to ease her pain” and keeps offering her his assistance (par. 4). Frederick even turns directly to God when the situation is at its most critical point: “[d]on’t let her die. Oh, God, please don’t let her die. I’ll do anything for you if you don’t let her die. Please, please, please, dear God, don’t let her die” (330). His intensive pleading and begging lends support to his own theory he told the Priest earlier that “it is in defeat that we become Christian” (178). Catherine’s death does not leave Frederick completely empty and hollow, but rather she has set him in, as Rovit puts it, “[t]he precarious and highly vulnerable position of [a] man who has made an investment in life and must learn to back his play” (105). Frederick’s experience and his love affair with Catherine have simply made him aware of what it feels like to really love somebody. The death of Catherine does question the value of being attached to someone, but it does not deprive Frederick of his experience, which suggests that, just like Rovit argues, Frederick has become a bit more “humanly alive” by the end (105).

Conclusion

In sum, up to the point of Frederick's injury, he is fully able to remain detached, as can be seen in his reckless, fearless and non-authoritative behavior at Plava. By then, he is a man who tries to avoid conflict, tries not to think outside of the moment, and he is also a man who does not fear death, since he does not feel he is a part of the war. Moreover, just like his friend Rinaldi, he takes solace from the war in women and alcohol; Catherine starts out as a mere means of solace. After he is injured, however, and as his feelings for Catherine become more palpable, he has a harder time to stay emotionally detached, the shooting of the escaping engineer demonstrating a poignant example of that.

Though the question of who Frederick has become by the end of the novel to a large extent is a matter of speculation, there are at least two ways of looking at it. It could, on the one hand, be argued that the death of Catherine makes Frederick reject all kind of belief in anything, return to the detached position he started out from, and, as Light argues, leaves him standing "with the knowledge of the one thing man can believe in: death" (par. 5). Such a claim, however, equals saying that Catherine has not had any long-lasting influence on Frederick whatsoever, which deserves to be questioned. She is, after all, as far as what is revealed by the story, the only woman whom Frederick has cared about genuinely and more than just for the sake of sex. However, the fact that she does die suggests that Frederick becomes skeptic towards the value of getting attached to someone. But, proposedly, he is not as skeptic as he was in the beginning of his journey.

In agreement with Rovit, I believe Frederick does neither return to the "Rinaldi position", nor to a position where he completely embodies the Priest's ideals, but rather he lands somewhere in between the two (106). Though Frederick will remain detached to some extent, his experience and his affair with Catherine have given him an insight into what it might be like to be attached to someone; and that insight, I believe, has left a significant mark in him.

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