



Frederic Henry as a Modernist Hero in *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway

Iqra Khan

Government Postgraduate College for Women, Haripur

Mrs. Shabina Bibi

Lecturer in English at Government Postgraduate College for Women, Haripur

ABSTRACT

Heroism in literature has traditionally been linked with courage, sacrifice, and moral certainty. The modernist period, however, redefined this concept by emphasizing alienation, dislocation, and survival over triumph. Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms reflects this transformation, particularly in the portrayal of Frederic Henry in Book I. The paper investigates Frederic Henry's characterization through Malcolm Bradbury's (1976) Modernist Hero Archetype, which identifies six defining features of the modernist protagonist: alienation, existential disillusionment, fragmented consciousness, cosmopolitan existence, anti-heroic endurance, and aesthetic individualism. A qualitative textual analysis of selected passages demonstrates that Frederic Henry, though detached from traditional ideals, embodies these traits. The study concludes that Frederic Henry represents a distinctly modernist hero whose significance lies in endurance and authenticity rather than conquest. This reading highlights Hemingway's contribution to reshaping the literary idea of the protagonist in the twentieth century.

Keywords: Modernism, *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic Henry, Bradbury, Modernist Hero.

1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) stands as one of the most significant works of literary modernism, capturing the disillusionment of a generation scarred by the First World War. Through its spare style and bleak portrayal of war, the novel reflects the breakdown of traditional ideals such as glory, sacrifice, and honor. Unlike earlier narratives that glorified warfare or celebrated heroic triumph, Hemingway presents war as chaotic, meaningless, and profoundly alienating.

At the center of this narrative is Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver in the Italian army. Unlike the traditional hero of classical or romantic literature, Frederic Henry does not embody courage, loyalty, or noble sacrifice in a conventional sense. His desertion from the army, rejection of abstract ideals, and pursuit of personal love make him appear unheroic when measured against traditional standards. Yet his character captures the very uncertainty and dislocation that define the modernist experience.

The study takes the stance that Frederic Henry, despite his seemingly unheroic actions, should be understood as a true protagonist within the framework of modernist literature. His alienation, existential disillusionment, and quiet endurance align closely with Malcolm Bradbury's (1976) model of the *Modernist Hero Archetype*, a figure marked not by triumph but by survival in the face of fragmentation and loss.

The study is significant as it re-examines Frederic Henry's role in *A Farewell to Arms* by focusing solely on Book I, where his alienation and rejection of traditional ideals are first established. By applying Malcolm Bradbury's (1976) model of the *Modernist Hero Archetype*, it highlights how Frederic Henry, despite his seemingly unheroic actions, embodies the essence of the modern

protagonist. The research contributes to modernist criticism by showing how Hemingway redefines heroism through endurance, disillusionment, and personal authenticity rather than triumph or moral certainty.

1.1. Problem Statement

Frederic Henry's characterization in Book I of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* presents a paradox: his detachment, rejection of abstract ideals, and apparent lack of conventional valor seem to disqualify him as a heroic protagonist. Traditional literary expectations associate the protagonist with moral clarity, courage, and duty, yet Frederic Henry distances himself from such values. This raises the problem of how he can be understood as the central figure of the novel when his actions appear unheroic. By applying Malcolm Bradbury's (1976) concept of the *Modernist Hero Archetype*, the study addresses the issue of whether Frederic Henry, despite his alienation and disillusionment, should still be recognized as a true modern protagonist within the framework of twentieth-century literature.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What makes Frederic Henry a protagonist despite his unheroic actions?
2. How does Bradbury's Modernist Hero Archetype explain Frederic Henry's role as a modern hero?

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To prove Frederic Henry is still a protagonist in modernist terms.
2. To apply Bradbury's theory to show how Frederic Henry redefines heroism.

2. Literature Review

Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* has long been a subject of critical inquiry, especially regarding the characterization of Frederic Henry and has evoked critical debate concerning the nature of heroism, masculinity, and existential crisis in war literature.

Yixing Wang (2022) challenges traditional readings of Frederic Henry as a Hemingwayan hero, arguing that he is not a hero but a deserter who fails to confront the trauma of war. According to Wang, Frederic Henry's avoidance of reality, lack of moral courage, and inability to take responsibility negate his potential as either a traditional or philosophical hero. His detachment, far from stoicism, reveals a deeper existential withdrawal that undermines heroic ideals.

Kuldeep Thakur (2022) in his work upon, *Fredric Henry: A Lost Hero in Hemingway's in A Farewell to Arms*, explores themes of alienation and emotional emptiness in Hemingway's male protagonists, positioning Frederic Henry as a figure caught between emotional detachment and a search for meaning. According to Thakur, though initially disengaged, Frederic Henry's gradual immersion in love and war marks a quiet resistance to the meaninglessness that surrounds him. Thakur's interpretation frames Frederic Henry's internal struggle as heroic: not through grandiose action, but through existential endurance. Thakur said that Frederic Henry's perseverance amidst trauma and emotional devastation reflects the quiet valor of facing an absurd reality without yielding to despair.

In *A Comparative Study of the Escape Motif in The Red Badge of Courage and A Farewell to Arms*, Meng-Ning Wang (2022) frames Frederic Henry's retreat from war not as cowardice but as a philosophical stance rooted in disillusionment. Wang argues that Frederic Henry's escape is part of the Hemingwayan narrative of survival and ethical resistance. By choosing love over militarism, Frederic Henry adheres to a personal code, asserting control in a chaotic world. Wang's reading affirms Frederic Henry as a "Code Hero," one who suffers but endures with quiet dignity.

In *'Unsoldiered' Soldier or Alternative War Narrative?: Modernist Epistemes in Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms*, Ngwa Yvonne Iden (2019) highlights how Frederic Henry

embodies a “desexualised and feminised soldier.” Through a modernist lens, Iden emphasizes the disempowerment and vulnerability inherent in Frederic Henry’s character, arguing that his experience reflects the shifting identities of post-World War I masculinity. According to Ngwa, the novel subverts the traditional image of the empowered male soldier, offering instead a portrait of psychological and emotional fragility.

Lihong Li (2019) also supports this notion in, *Reading Henry of A Farewell to Arms*, by aligning Frederic Henry with the archetype of the Hemingway Code Hero. According to Li, Frederic Henry embodies the values of courage, stoicism, and emotional resilience. His capacity to love sincerely and act selflessly, even in the face of personal loss, situates him within Hemingway’s tradition of flawed yet noble masculinity. His choices are not mere acts of escape but signs of personal conviction and honor, qualities Li interprets as central to Hemingway’s heroic ideal.

Finally, Niclas Martinsson (2008) in his work *A Subtle Slide towards Commitment: A Character Analysis of Frederic Henry in Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms*, offers a nuanced interpretation of Frederic Henry’s identity. Initially detached and cynical, Frederic Henry undergoes a subtle slide towards commitment following his injury. Martinsson emphasizes how the priest’s idealism and his evolving relationship with Catherine expose his vulnerability and capacity for emotional growth. This development complicates the notion of Frederic Henry as a mere symbol of detachment, instead portraying him as a character in the process of negotiating meaning and emotional commitment amid chaos.

Together, these critical voices provide a layered understanding of Frederic Henry’s character. They reveal the inadequacy of simplistic hero-villain binaries and instead frame Frederic Henry as a product of complex existential, moral, and cultural forces. His trajectory resists categorization, echoing the broader themes of disillusionment and identity crisis that define much of modernist literature.

3. Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative textual analysis, a method commonly used in literary studies to interpret meaning within texts (Given, 2008). The primary focus is Book I of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, with attention restricted to the character of Frederic Henry.

The theoretical lens guiding the study is Malcolm Bradbury’s (1976) *Modernist Hero Archetype* (Modernism: 1890–1930), which defines the modernist protagonist as an “unhoused” figure marked by fragmentation, exile, and resilience. Selected passages from Book I are subjected to close reading in order to trace how Frederic Henry departs from traditional heroic ideals.

Secondary sources are incorporated to position the study within existing scholarship. However, the primary method remains qualitative interpretation of the text itself, as literary analysis emphasizes depth of understanding rather than quantifiable measurement (Creswell, 2014).

3.1 Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Malcolm Bradbury’s Modernist Hero Archetype

Malcolm Bradbury (1976), in *Modernism: 1890–1930*, argues that the modernist hero emerges as a literary response to the collapse of traditional values in the early twentieth century. He observes that modernism reflects a “crisis of culture” in which “belief in moral values, history, and personal identity faltered” (Bradbury, 1976, p. 225). This disintegration of inherited certainties, especially after World War I, produced protagonists who embody ambiguity, alienation, and endurance rather than clarity, stability, or conquest. As Bradbury notes, this was an age when, echoing Yeats, “‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’” (p. 228).

3.2 Key Tenets of the Modernist Hero Archetype

3.2.1 Alienation and Exile

Bradbury highlights how modernist figures/heroes are often “unhoused” both socially and spiritually, existing as outsiders in their own societies (p. 235). Writers such as Joyce, Pound, and Hemingway themselves became expatriates, embodying this sense of displacement in their characters.

3.2.2 Existential Disillusionment

The modernist hero arises in response to a “glare and existential exposure” of the modern city, where individuals are forced to “redefine themselves” amidst collapse and disorientation (p. 234). This reflects the broader post-war disillusionment where moral and cultural frameworks could no longer be relied upon (p. 228).

3.2.3 Introspective and Fragmented Consciousness

Bradbury stresses that modernist fiction “emphasizes introspection over action” and often suspends traditional plots in favor of fragmented and inner-focused narratives (p. 231).

3.2.4 Urban and Cosmopolitan Contexts

According to Bradbury, the modernist city became the “scene of becoming” where protagonists sought new identities while rejecting inherited cultural values (p. 234).

3.2.5 Anti-Heroic Valor

In place of triumph, Bradbury asserts, the modernist hero embodies “endurance rather than conquest,” facing life’s absurdity with psychological resilience instead of outward heroics (p. 238).

3.2.6 Aesthetic Individualism

Bradbury further notes that when traditional beliefs collapsed, many protagonists turned to art as a form of “aesthetic emancipation,” seeking new truths through artistic or personal codes of meaning (p. 238).

Thus, Bradbury situates the modernist hero as a figure of epistemological uncertainty alienated, introspective, and morally ambiguous, whose heroism lies not in victory, but in survival and self-definition.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Frederic Henry’s role in *A Farewell to Arms* raises the question of how heroism can be defined when traditional ideals collapse. Rather than measuring his worth through valor or triumph, this study examines his character through Malcolm Bradbury’s (1976) framework of the modernist hero. Bradbury outlines six defining features; alienation, disillusionment, fragmented consciousness, cosmopolitan existence, anti-heroic endurance, and aesthetic individualism; which provide the basis for interpreting Frederic Henry not as unheroic, but as a redefined modernist hero.

4.1 Alienation and the ‘Unhoused’ Modernist Hero

Bradbury (1976) observes that modernist protagonists are frequently “unhoused both socially and spiritually, existing as outsiders in their own societies” (p. 235). Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* exemplifies this paradigm, as his detachment from traditional values renders him socially estranged and spiritually displaced.

“I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it.” (Book I, Ch. 11, p. 41)

Frederic Henry’s admission illustrates a fundamental disconnection from the collective rationale for war. Rather than engaging with national or moral justifications, his concern is limited to personal survival. Through Bradbury’s framework, this disengagement demonstrates the condition of being spiritually “unhoused,” where the individual navigates existence without reliance on inherited cultural or ideological structures.

"I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice... I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory." (Book I, Ch. 27, p. 184)

Frederic Henry explicitly rejects the language of honor and sacrifice, which traditionally legitimizes warfare. Frederic Henry resists the dominant discourse of his society, thereby positioning himself outside the moral and cultural frameworks that sustain conventional heroism. His alienation is not incidental but central to his identity as a modernist protagonist.

"Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers..." (Book I, Ch. 27, p. 184)

This statement underscores Frederic Henry's preference for the tangible over the abstract. In Bradbury's terms, the modernist hero rejects inherited symbolic vocabularies in favor of direct, lived experience. Frederic Henry's dismissal of abstract ideals signifies his estrangement from collective meaning systems, reinforcing his "unhoused" condition.

"There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity." (Book I, Ch. 27, p. 185)

By locating dignity solely in geography and not in ideological abstractions, Frederic Henry exemplifies Bradbury's modernist outsider who has been severed from communal values. His alienation from the linguistic and cultural frameworks of his time situates him firmly within the category of the modernist hero; an individual "unhoused" in both the social and spiritual sense.

4.2 Existential Disillusionment

Bradbury (1976) emphasizes that the modernist hero emerges in an age when "belief in moral values, history, and personal identity faltered" (p. 225). Existential disillusionment thus defines the modernist protagonist, who recognizes the futility of traditional ideals and confronts a disordered world stripped of coherence. Frederic Henry, in Book I of *A Farewell to Arms*, reflects this condition through his detached observations about the war and his own role within it.

"I had gone to no such place but to the war; and when I came back the next year the country was not the same as before." (Book I, Ch. 2, p. 6)

This observation signals Frederic Henry's recognition of rupture and disorder. The war alters the very landscape of his experience, displacing stability with change and loss. In Bradbury's terms, Frederic Henry's awareness of a world in flux mirrors the modernist sense of dislocation, where certainty in history and continuity collapses.

"There were many victories but no one ever talked about them." (Book I, Ch. 3, p. 9)

This remark underscores Frederic Henry's perception of hollowness behind official narratives of triumph. Unlike the traditional hero who draws meaning from victory, Frederic Henry views such events as insignificant. Bradbury's concept of existential exposure is reflected here: the protagonist sees through collective illusions and recognizes the emptiness behind rhetoric of success.

"The next year there were many victories. The mountain that was beyond the river was captured and then lost and captured again. But the war did not end." (Book I, Ch. 3, p. 9)

Frederic Henry's detached description of repetitive battles illustrates disillusionment with the cyclical futility of war. For Bradbury, this aligns with the modernist protagonist's confrontation with absurdity; a recognition that action lacks progress, and meaning is no longer grounded in teleological certainty.

4.3 Introspective and Fragmented Consciousness

Bradbury (1976) argues that the modernist hero is not characterized by action but by fragmented consciousness and introspection (p. 231). Frederic Henry exemplifies this in Book I,

where his narration dwells on impressions, memories, and detached observations. His role as a hero lies not in conquest, but in the inward struggle to make sense of a fractured world.

"In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains." (Book I, Ch. 1, p. 3)

This opening line situates the narrative not in action but in reflection. Frederic Henry recalls the war through memory, emphasizing perception and setting over events. Bradbury's modernist hero privileges inner awareness and descriptive consciousness rather than traditional heroic deeds, signaling the shift from external valor to internalized observation.

"I was very tired and when I came home I lay down on the bed and read the papers about the hospital." (Book I, Ch. 9, p. 33)

Here Frederic Henry turns inward, his narration fragmenting the war into mundane detail. Instead of dramatizing heroic action, he reports private fatigue and domestic routine. Bradbury's model clarifies this as the modernist suspension of traditional narrative in favor of interior states.

"I watched the firelight in the room and waited for the girls to come in." (Book I, Ch. 7, p. 25)

This brief observation captures Frederic Henry's reflective consciousness. Rather than focusing on military or external activity, he dwells on a sensory moment. Bradbury notes that modernist protagonists live within fragmented impressions rather than unified plots, and Frederic Henry's introspection here aligns with that mode.

"I had gone to the war every summer, but the fall I was to be at the front regularly." (Book I, Ch. 5, p. 15)

Frederic Henry's fragmented timeline reflects his consciousness moving between past and present, memory and anticipation. This disjointed temporality is a modernist stylistic hallmark that Bradbury associates with psychological fragmentation rather than linear heroic progression.

4.4 Urban and Cosmopolitan Contexts

Urban and Cosmopolitan Contexts in Book One of *A Farewell to Arms*

Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* opens within a distinctly urban and cosmopolitan setting, capturing the disillusionment and fragmentation characteristic of modernist fiction as outlined by Malcolm Bradbury. The world Frederic Henry inhabits is one of instability; cities caught between civilization and chaos, reflecting the psychological dislocation of the modern hero.

In the early chapters, Hemingway writes, "At the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came the cholera... only seven thousand died of it" (Book One, Ch. 2, p. 4). The sterile tone and matter-of-fact mention of mass death expose the dehumanization of urban modernity, where human suffering becomes part of the landscape. Bradbury identifies this emotional detachment as central to the modernist condition, in which war and city life reduce individual agency and moral clarity.

Later, the narrator remarks, "There were many victories but no one ever mentioned them" (Ch. 3, p. 7), signaling the collapse of meaning and communication in the cosmopolitan war environment. This aligns with Bradbury's idea of the modern world as one marked by moral relativism and loss of narrative coherence. The absence of shared truth underscores the modernist belief that reality has become fragmented and subjective.

Finally, when Henry observes, "The town was very nice and wet and cheerful and clean after the rain" (Ch. 5, p. 14), Hemingway juxtaposes the illusion of urban beauty with the underlying decay of war. The city becomes a deceptive refuge, symbolizing the paradox of modern civilization order on the surface, despair beneath.

Through these depictions, Hemingway's Italy represents the modern metropolis Bradbury describes: a space of alienation, irony, and internal exile. Henry's experience in this cosmopolitan setting embodies the modernist hero's struggle to find meaning amid fragmentation and loss.

4.5 Anti-Heroic Valor

Modernist heroes, Bradbury (1976) notes, frequently inhabit urban or cosmopolitan landscapes where identities are unsettled and traditions disrupted (p. 234). Frederic Henry, an expatriate soldier in foreign towns and transitional spaces, emerges as a hero precisely through this cosmopolitan displacement. His detachment from a stable homeland underscores the modernist redefinition of heroism as survival in transient contexts.

"I ate the end of the cheese and took a drink of the wine. 'What's the matter with your leg?' one of them asked. 'Nothing, just a little stiff.'" (Book I, Ch. 7, p. 24)

Frederic Henry downplays his own condition, displaying endurance rather than dramatizing pain. In Bradbury's framework, this understated response reflects the anti-heroic hero who survives through stoicism rather than martial triumph.

"The officers were not very enthusiastic. They carried canes and kept their uniforms clean." (Book I, Ch. 2, p. 7)

Frederic Henry's description of fellow officers emphasizes appearance over valor. This detachment suggests that heroism, in this context, is performative rather than substantive. For Bradbury, such anti-heroic imagery reflects the collapse of older heroic ideals, replaced by endurance through irony and detachment.

"We talked about beer, and one of the drivers wanted to go to Torino." (Book I, Ch. 4, p. 13)

Rather than glorifying war, Frederic Henry and his companions distract themselves with trivialities. This anti-heroic scene underscores Bradbury's observation that modernist characters resist epic heroism, finding survival and ordinary pleasures more authentic than conquest.

"The others went down to the river to bathe. I sat in the garden until it was dark." (Book I, Ch. 6, p. 20)

Frederic Henry withdraws from camaraderie and action, choosing quiet endurance over participation. Bradbury's notion of the modernist hero as one who persists through introspection rather than conquest is embodied in such moments of retreat.

"I went to the mess hall for supper. It was crowded and the food was not good." (Book I, Ch. 9, p. 34)

This description highlights the banality of military life. Rather than dramatizing heroic battles, Frederic Henry's focus on poor food illustrates the anti-heroic nature of his experience. Bradbury identifies this emphasis on ordinary endurance as a key marker of modernist heroism.

4.5 Aesthetic Individualism

Bradbury (1976) notes that when traditional belief systems collapse, the modernist hero often turns inward toward art, private judgment, or self-fashioned truths for meaning (p. 238). In *Book I of A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic Henry exhibits this tendency by prioritizing personal perception, private desires, and individual choices over collective ideals.

"I ordered the wine; the waiter brought a half carafe of red wine." (Book I, Ch. 7, p. 25)

Frederic Henry's deliberate attention to the simple act of ordering wine illustrates his focus on small, private rituals rather than shared ideals of glory or honor. Bradbury's concept of aesthetic individualism explains this shift: meaning is relocated from grand abstractions to personal and aesthetic experience.

"I watched the firelight in the room and waited for the girls to come in." (Book I, Ch. 7, p. 25)

Frederic Henry privileges private perception and atmosphere over external events. Bradbury argues that modernist protagonists fashion meaning through aesthetic sensitivity and subjective awareness. Frederic Henry's quiet observation reflects this turn to individual experience as a form of grounding.

"I was tired and lay down on the bed in the room. I had been reading the papers about the hospital." (Book I, Ch. 9, p. 33)

Instead of pursuing heroic action, Frederic Henry seeks solace in private reading and rest. This reflects Bradbury's point that modernist figures, estranged from collective ideals, pursue individual ways of constructing meaning even in mundane or aestheticized acts like reading.

"The next afternoon we drove to Milan to see the horse races." (Book I, Ch. 8, p. 30)

Frederic Henry's diversion into leisure and aesthetic enjoyment, such as horse racing, underscores his withdrawal from communal ideals of duty. For Bradbury, this demonstrates the modernist protagonist's search for authenticity in personal pleasures rather than national or martial obligations.

"The girls came in. There were two of them and they were nice girls." (Book I, Ch. 7, p. 26)

Frederic Henry's appreciation of companionship and beauty, framed in simple terms, highlights how he grounds meaning in immediate aesthetic impressions. Bradbury's model clarifies that in the absence of higher ideals, modernist heroes pursue individuality through small acts of personal valuation.

Through the structured approach, the researcher has shown that Frederic Henry's character in Book I is not an example of a failed traditional hero but a successful portrait of a modernist one. His alienation, disillusionment, and introspective nature are the defining features of a protagonist confronting the absurdities of the twentieth century. Within Bradbury's framework, his lack of conventional valor is reinterpreted as a form of heroism based on psychological endurance, clear-eyed honesty, and the struggle to maintain a self in a world where old heroic codes have become obscene.

Conclusion

The study set out to examine Frederic Henry in Book I of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* through Malcolm Bradbury's (1976) *Modernist Hero Archetype*. At first glance, Frederic Henry appears to fall short of traditional expectations of a hero: he is detached, skeptical of ideals, and reluctant to embody valor or duty. Yet, when viewed through Bradbury's framework, these very qualities; alienation, disillusionment, introspection, cosmopolitan displacement, endurance, and aesthetic individualism, emerge as the defining features of the modernist hero.

By analyzing Frederic Henry's characterization in this light, the study has demonstrated that his apparent unheroic actions do not disqualify him as a protagonist; rather, they establish him as a distinctly modernist figure whose heroism lies in survival, authenticity, and personal meaning. In doing so, the study addressed its central questions: what makes Frederic Henry a protagonist despite his detachment, and how Bradbury's model enables his reinterpretation as a hero.

Ultimately, the study underscores Hemingway's role in reshaping the concept of literary heroism in the twentieth century. Instead of celebrating conquest or moral certainty, *A Farewell to Arms* presents a hero defined by endurance amid fragmentation, thereby aligning with the broader modernist redefinition of identity, purpose, and survival.

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