

FILM

A Farewell to Arms (1929)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

adaptation by Benjamin Glazer & Oliver H. P. Garrett (1932)

ANALYSIS

This old movie is worth seeing just for the last scene. Some of the dialogue is inaudible because sound had just been introduced into movies three years before and techniques were primitive. Many scenes are so dark it is difficult to discern what is going on and easy to lose track of the plot. The novel has been reduced to the romantic love story. Lost are the thoughts of Frederick Henry, his existential religious conflict, the criticism of the profiteers who started the war, the many ironies, the symbolism of plains and mountains, the clear definitions of levels of love—erotic (brothels), romantic (lovers), and divine (the priest). Despite all that is lost, it remains a powerful love story. Feminist critics are disgusted by love between heterosexuals, but people capable of love themselves will be moved by the last scene. Early in the movie, when Frederick goes flirting among the nurses, one of them remarks “Typical male conceit.” Hemingway depicts Fred outgrowing his male chauvinism and learning true love from Catherine.

The plot of the novel remains mostly intact. The most significant omission is the priest’s invitation to Frederick to stop going to brothels and come up with him from the plain to the mountains, symbolism that affirms religious faith and counters Fred’s loss of faith at the end when his prayer is not answered and Catherine dies. In the novel the priest is mocked in the soldier’s mess hall, but he transcends “the mess” of human conflict. In this movie Christianity is under attack, as imaged when a cemetery full of crosses gets bombed. The most significant addition to the plot is that the priest “marries” Fred and Catherine in a prayer to absolve them of living in sin. This avoided censorship of the movie under the industry Production Code. In the novel Catherine refuses to marry Fred, as Hemingway affirms her independence. The motif of rain is retained, the nasty nurse superior Miss Van Campen—a Feminist who dislikes and punishes Fred—is conflated with Fergy, who in the novel is protective of Catherine but likeable. Fred’s rising from erotic to romantic and finally to divine love of Catherine is dramatized through his increasing resentment of the hedonism of his friend Rinaldi, who in the novel is a sympathetic dying man.

In this version of the story Catherine goes ahead of Fred to Switzerland and he does not know she is pregnant. He rows alone across the big lake rather than with her as in the novel. Their idyllic weeks together in the mountains of Switzerland during her pregnancy are omitted, which intensifies the drama, as Fred comes into the hospital still dripping from his long row across the lake in the rain. Catherine is played credibly by the famous Helen Hayes, though she is slightly affected, her pasty 1920s style makeup looks unreal and her lips are too thin. The movie is carried by the acting of Gary Cooper, a friend of Hemingway and a leading man with such appealing sensitivity that all the secretaries at Paramount and at Warner Brothers swooned over him whenever he came into the studio.

Frederick bids a farewell to arms when he deserts from the Italian army and goes to join Catherine. This script omits the dialogue when Catherine, dying in great pain, momentarily loses her grace under pressure and snaps at Fred, “Don’t touch me!” then apologizes. In the novel this lapse dramatizes the intensity of her pain and her heroism in transcending it. Catherine is the most ideal character in all of Hemingway. As she dies in Fred’s arms, the orchestral music on the sound track swells into the love song from *Tristan and Isolde*, which is deeply moving in itself. Cooper is poignant. He lifts her body from the bed and turns to the window, holding her in his arms like she died on a battlefield. Like he is offering her up to God. In the novel she is like a “statue,” like the goddess of love without arms. In this adaptation, her death coincides with the Arm-istice. Outside the window, crowds are celebrating the end of WWI as Frederick, with Catherine draped from his arms, murmurs “peace, peace!”

Michael Hollister (2015)

