

FILM

A Farewell to Arms (1929)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

adaptation by Ben Hecht (1957)

ANALYSIS

This is likely to remain the best film of *A Farewell to Arms*. Fortunately, the scriptwriter was Ben Hecht, the best screenwriter at that time. Unfortunately, the producer was David O. Selznick, the most overbearing egotist in Hollywood at that time, inflated by his huge commercial success *Gone with the Wind* (1939). His directors were sock puppets. If they disagreed with him about anything he fired them. Ben Hecht was perfectly faithful to the novel. He must have been intensely frustrated all the time by Selznick, who cared nothing for literature. Hecht undoubtedly wished he could have included more of Hemingway's dialogue and more scenes from the novel, but Selznick wanted to produce a spectacle. As a former reporter in Chicago, Hecht excelled at economy, dramatic plots and fast action. Selznick relaxed the dramatic tension in this story by interrupting it repeatedly with travelogue footage of alpine scenery and with unnecessary episodes in picturesque settings, making a very long movie at least a half hour longer than it needed to be. Documentaries could be excerpted from it, such as "The Very Long Retreat from Caporetto," "Perspectives on the Alps," and "Fun Things to Do in Switzerland."

Hecht knew Hemingway from when they were both journalists in Chicago. Hecht was a serious fiction writer who published a great many short stories in prestigious literary magazines, two of them selected for the *Best Short Stories* of 1915 and of 1922. Yet Hecht felt that Hemingway did not respect him. And he resented the fact that Hemingway had maintained his integrity while he himself sold out to Hollywood. No doubt he still craved the respect of Hemingway. Given the opportunity to adapt Hemingway's classic novel, Hecht must have felt pressure to be scrupulously faithful to the text. Hemingway was still alive in 1957 and he had scorned all the movies adapting his works so far. Hecht must have wanted to show Hemingway that he understood the novel and that he had done his best despite Selznick. Hecht wrote a commendable script but Selznick ruined it. Hemingway lamented, "You write a book like that that you're fond of over the years, then you see that happen to it, it's like pissing in your father's beer."

To David O. Selznick the most important thing about *A Farewell to Arms* was that it was being filmed by David O. Selznick. The opening shot is of his name David O. Selznick in oversized letters on a white sign in front of his headquarters, a pillared white mansion evoking the plantation in *Gone with the Wind*. Trumpets appropriate to the introduction of royalty accompany the proclamation that this is a David O. Selznick production. The movie begins like a biblical epic, scripture according to David O. Selznick. The recent technological advance widening the movie screen—Cinemascope—and improvements in color film and otherwise make it evident from the start that David O. Selznick has far surpassed Cecil B. DeMille as a producer of spectacles for the masses. Panoramic shots prolong the spectacle of troop caravans winding upward through the snow on narrow switchback roads up the Alps, refugees are another spectacle followed in their misery slogging for miles past dead bodies in grotesque postures, babies abandoned in the mud, old people falling and dying, one pathetic image after another, on and on, milking easy sympathy from the audience in distraction from the story of Frederick and Catherine. All the prolonged interruptions weaken themes and implications that connect scenes from the novel.

To his great credit, Ben Hecht not only preserves the Christian spirit of *A Farewell to Arms*, he enhances it. This was 1957 and Hollywood had not yet been able to censor religious faith. One of the first scenes in the movie is a chess match between the priest and the cynical battlefield surgeon Rinaldi that clearly defines the thematic conflict between Christianity and Atheism. Rinaldi challenges the priest by asking, "What if there is no God?" He refers to the future saying, "I will take pleasure in beating you." And when

Frederick mentions that he has seen a lot of churches, Rinaldi remarks, "From the outside I hope." Later the priest and Rinaldi are identified with "Heaven and earth." Throughout the movie, Hecht dramatizes the traditional conflict in American literature between the flesh and the spirit, an inner war more significant than the outer war, by personifying the flesh in Rinaldi and the spirit in the priest. Rinaldi repeatedly tries to persuade Frederick to go to the brothel with him, while the priest tries to persuade him to come up to the mountains of Abruzzi, a kind of earthly heaven where the air is pure. In Hemingway, mountains are recurrent symbols of spiritual rebirth as in *The Sun Also Rises* and even of immortality as in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." Here in *A Farewell to Arms* the fighting in the mountains is a profanation of spiritual values. Frederick consistently refuses to go with Rinaldi to the brothel, with increasing irritation. He tells the priest he wants to go up to the peaceful mountains with him, but instead he goes to the mountains of Switzerland with Catherine, who says "You are my religion."

Early in their romance, Catherine gives Frederick a St. Anthony's medal for protection. At the front, as Frederick is driving his ambulance up the mountains toward the battle, a priest is shown blessing a small group of troops. Asked by a paramedic what he thinks of the priest's blessing, Frederick answers, "It can't hurt." Outside the window of their love nest, a view of the city features the magnificent gothic cathedral of Milan in the near distance. The cathedral is central in a number of shots. Once after they make love they look out the window at the cathedral all golden in a golden light, like a sign of divine blessing. Catherine the nurse cannot agree to marry Frederick because then she would be sent away from him by hospital authorities, so they "marry" each other by making their own private vows. Their spiritual elevation through true love coincides with Italian troops reaching the summits of the Alps.

After the Italian army suffers a defeat Rinaldi breaks down, quotes St. Paul and confesses that he has been "true to the devil." Now he is dying of a "disease"—implicitly syphilis. This disease is both literal and a metaphor of Atheism when Rinaldi says "Everyone has it." He acknowledges that "priests always win." Rinaldi obeys orders, leaves his wounded patients in the hospital and retreats with the army, whereas the priest will not abandon the wounded. Rinaldi salutes him: "You have better orders. From God." Rinaldi is betrayed by his own side and executed—a tragic indictment of society. At the same time it coincides with the death of Atheism in the soul of Frederick.

Hecht is also faithful to the novel in depicting the deep insecurity of Catherine, her complexity, her fear of the rain, and her heroism. Cat's psychological growth is implied when she decides that after she has the baby she wants to cut her hair short, a sign in Hemingway that a woman is developing her masculine side, as in "Cat in the Rain." In one scene she wears a necktie and jacket that are pointedly masculine. That she is ahead of Frederick in her maturation is implied by her referring to him as a "good boy," while throughout the book and the movie Rinaldi refers to him as "baby." Frederick learns how to love from Catherine, who has already experienced the loss of a fiancé. After he is falsely accused of being a spy, Frederick deserts from the Italian army, accepts a blessing from a priest, declares that he is "joining" the priest, and dives off a bridge into a river, a baptismal cleansing.

Hecht retains Miss Van Campen as the nurse superior who dislikes Frederick and gets him sent back to the front, a proto-Feminist anticipating Big Nurse in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey. The hospital represents society and its technology, which cannot save Catherine, as dramatized when she keeps asking for "more" to relieve her pain: "It doesn't work!" Her fear of rain identifies her death with the natural order and she blames Nature for a "dirty trick"—as in getting dealt an unlucky hand in a card game. When Frederick laments that "They" kill you in the end, he is indicting not God but the forces of both Nature and society, which causes wars. Also to his credit, Hecht retains the moment when, as she is dying, Catherine momentarily loses her grace under pressure and snaps at Frederick, "Don't touch me!" Then she quickly says "Touch me all you want." She transcends her fear of death.

The charming Vittorio de Sica gives by far the outstanding performance. As Frederick, a young Rock Hudson is surprisingly good, almost as moving as Gary Cooper in the 1932 adaptation. As Catherine, Jennifer Jones is much superior to Helen Hayes. One of the few changes Hecht makes in Hemingway is that at the very end the rain, identified with fear of death, has stopped.

Michael Hollister (2015)