

FILM

For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

adaptation by Dudley Nichols (1943)

ANALYSIS

For Whom the Bell Tolls was written to inspire the western democracies to win the fight against fascism. The novel dramatizes the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) as a prelude to World War II and celebrates the heroic resistance of republicans to the fascists armed by Adolph Hitler. The film adaptation was likewise intended to be inspirational. To that end, the film is set mostly in the picturesque high rocky mountains north of Avila, a pine forest with deep rugged canyons and towering peaks in the background patched with snow, an elevating spectacle that evokes both idealism and mighty obstacles. The leading roles are played by Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman, both very popular actors and both friends of Hemingway. The film transcends the genre of war adventure especially through the acting, the characterizations and the tone. It is compelling throughout, but it is very long—with an intermission.

The opening shot of a bell tolling is one of the most famous in movie history. The quotation on the screen is from John Donne, the metaphysical poet and Christian minister, affirming our common humanity and responsibilities in the sight of God—“No man is an island.” This theme is dramatized throughout the film in the solidarity and self-sacrifice of the characters: “We’re all brothers.” In the first scene (1937) Robert Jordan, played by Cooper, blows up a train. His companion gets shot, does not want to be captured and tortured, and asks Jordan to shoot him. Jordan does it but calls it “murder.” Several times killing people in this war is depicted as necessary sin that must be atoned for later.

Robert Jordan is an American professor of Spanish. His grandfather fought in the American Civil War, his father was a Republican and Robert felt moved to join the resistance against fascism in Spain because this is a “proving ground” for the Nazis in Germany and for the fascists in Italy. This is confirmed by an occasional Nazi helmet among the fascist troops. During the 1930s hundreds of idealistic Americans went to Spain like Robert Jordan to join the fight for democracy, especially professors and writers. Some were Communists. Organized Communists were sent into Spain by Stalin, who tried to exploit the war for his International Communist Party. This confused alliances because the Communists were just as fascist as the Nazis and Stalin signed a pact with Hitler in 1939.

The plot is simple. Jordan is ordered by his Spanish commander to blow up a bridge in the mountains as part of a coordinated attack that will start in three days. His guide is Anselmo, a sweet old man who weeps when he must kill a young man from his village. He and others wear the black berets common to men in Spain and a strumming Spanish guitar is a motif on the sound track. Anselmo leads Jordan to a cave in the mountains where a republican guerilla band is hiding. A few skeletal trees outside the cave suggest that this landscape has gotten bombed. The band includes the colorful gypsy Rafael, who gets excited every time he anticipates blowing up a fascist tank and makes a vigorous kiss-off gesture with his thumb from his lips. He eventually gets one of course, then gets riddled by a tank machine gun.

At first the band appears to be led by Pablo, a menacing killer in a black beret played with compelling force and subtlety by Akim Tamiroff. But the actual leader is the dark gypsy Pilar, an even more powerful figure who used to be Pablo’s woman before he lost his courage and became an unreliable drunk. Pilar is perhaps the strongest woman ever to appear on screen—with “the head of a bull and the heart of a hawk.” Played by Katina Paxinou, who won an academy award for her performance, Pilar first appears standing like a conqueror on a high rock above the head of Jordan: “Here I command. No one but me.” Jordan says, “Without the woman, there’s no control here.”

Critics of women in Hemingway, especially Feminists who have never read him, do not mention Pilar because she contradicts their falsehoods. Instead they pick on Maria, calling her a “male fantasy.” Maria is only 19 years old and she witnessed her parents shot by the fascists, who then raped her repeatedly and cut off her hair. Hemingway is reporting abuses of women common during the war and celebrating their resilience and spirit through Maria. Critics of her brief love affair with Robert would have preferred her to be ugly rather than be Ingrid Bergman, who looks as luscious as a ripe peach. She is offset in her beauty by Pilar, who outspokenly admits that she is ugly. Nevertheless, Pilar has had a succession of men fall in love with her for her inner beauty, including a matador. Contrary to what Feminists claim about men, physical beauty is not their only criterion for love. Nor are all men afraid of strong women, as domineering Feminists claim. Pilar also has a spiritual capacity Feminists lack, an ability to accurately foretell the future. All the men in the band including Pablo accept Pilar as a leader. She is so tough she pulls the pin on a hand grenade with her teeth, just as John Wayne does in war movies, a feat not really possible. Hemingway liked Pilar so much he named his boat after her and while patrolling the coast of Cuba during WWII he planned to ram her into a Nazi submarine if one surfaced.

Robert Jordan has never fallen in love before: “I have no time for women.” Pilar asks him what he believes in and he answers, “Myself.” Jordan is a self-reliant, resourceful American. Clearly, though, he believes in more than himself or he would not be risking his life for others in a country not even his own—he believes in Democracy. In the beginning he does not say he believes in God, but in the end both he and Maria pray to God. When he falls in love with Maria, he transcends himself and attains not only a romantic love but *agape*—spiritual or divine love. “No man is an island” is elevated to transcendence of self, as Robert says to Maria, “You’re me now.” Robert and Maria attain the religious union that Frederick and Catherine attain in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). In the earlier novel the woman dies, in the later novel the man dies, both with grace under pressure. There is conventional romantic studio orchestra music on the sound track and it is unlikely that any couple could attain the transcendent love that Robert and Maria do in only *three* days, but the novel transcends Realism with poetic compression, as Hawthorne does in his allegorical Romances and John Donne in his poems.

Michael Hollister (2015)