



# Military Humour in Hemingway's War Novels

## Author

**Mahavir Singh**

Assistant Professor of English  
Dyal Singh College, Karnal (Haryana), India  
Email ID: mahavir1964singh@gmail.com

## Co-Author

**Swati Punia**

Research Scholar (M.Phil Roll No-15)  
Kurukshetra University, Kutukshetra  
Email ID: itawspunia@gmail.com

## Abstract

*Hemingway's War Novels are basically tragic in structure but decorated with the streak linings of occasional military humours. The sprinklings of light-hearted fun tend to turn these tragedies into tragic-comedies. The manner in which the writer integrates a wide range of comic strain during stressful atmosphere of war reveals Hemingway's ingenuity as a humorist. He has employed the strategy of providing comic interludes through the naughty jokes of the soldiers on the hazardous situation. The casualty of men, the gloomy atmosphere of the war theatre, mental torture and occasional panic are factors responsible for the by-product of humour. Thus, humour in these war tragedies provides the readers a key to understand occasions of humour in the surroundings of war and psychology of the soldiers. A variety of comic strain is also found in love theme that runs parallel to the theme of war throughout the novels. Even the conversation of lovers evokes amusing laughter. The eccentricities and whimsicalities inherent in different lop-sided responses to love have been treated quite comically in these novels. Their fascination with obscenity is so strong that the soldiers term even the physical features of land in the bodily geography of a woman. The lewd jokes reduce the anxiety of the soldiers and their unsatiated gratification of carnal desires. One of the finest instances we find is in A Farewell To Arms when the bulging out bellies of cartridges carrying soldiers are compared with the pregnant women. The amalgamation of the tragic temper with the comic revelry is an old technique in literature, but the way it has been consummated by Hemingway is definitely unrivalled in the modern war novel.*

## Military Humour in Hemingway's War Novels

Hemingway's War Novels *A Farewell To Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* are basically tragic in structure but in both novels the theme of war and love is intertwined shining with streak linings of occasional military humours. Many critics have ignored the aspect of humour in such war novels but humour is an integral part of any tragedy and Hemingway himself has proved to be a writer of the trench humour. The critics have given different reasons for the joking at front where the soldiers stay away

from their families for too long and the pressure of hovering disaster deprive them of normal family life. The phantom of death and destruction always hovers over their minds and humour in the battle-field is a necessary tool to relieve their mental tension amidst the acute awareness of the horrors of war. That's why, Paul Jackson rightly observes that "the joking that dominates the novel is a response to fear and to the tension that war brings"(15). Thus, humour in these war tragedies provides the readers a key to understand occasions of humour in the environment of war and psychology of the soldiers. A variety of comic

strain is also found in love theme that runs parallel to the theme of war throughout the novels.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, the army officers at front mitigate their tension by cracking vulgar jokes at their fellow priest in the officers' mess teasing him that "Priest every night five against one"(10). This means that the priest pretends to be a pure man and goes every night to five beautiful whores of the nearby brothel meant for the officers at front. They also advise Lieutenant Henry, the protagonist of the novel, to visit during his leave the "centre of culture and civilization" where he could enjoy the company of "beautiful young girls – accompanied by their mothers"(11). Here, even the centres of culture and civilization are viewed as the seats of debauchery where the mothers themselves supply their daughters to the lecherous fellows. Thus, Hemingway humorously depicts the ailing effects of war resulting in the deterioration of moral values.

Hemingway creates the situation of hilarious suspicion for any foreign national in war. For instance, Henry sends a porter to bring a barber to get his hair-cut but during the process of hair-cutting the barber refrains from talking with him taking him to be an enemy that is evident from the conversation of Henry and barber:

"What's the matter? Don't you know any news?" I asked.

"What news?"

"Any news. What's happened in the town?"

"It is time of war," he said. "The enemy's ears are everywhere."

I looked up at him.

"Please hold your face still," he said and went on shaving. "I will tell nothing."

"What's the matter with you?" I asked.

"I am an Italian. I will not communicate with the enemy."

Once I tried to get a good look at him. "Beware," he said. "The razor is sharp."

I paid him when it was over and tipped him half a lira. He returned the coins.

"I will not. I am not at the front. But I am an Italian." (68-69)

The barber is of suspicious nature and the porter jokes with him by introducing Henry as an Austrian officer. He hates Austrians as shrewd enemies and refuses to discuss with him and does not even take a tip from him. For him "it was impossible to salute foreigners as an Italian, without embarrassment," because "the Italian salute never seemed made for export"(21). Hemingway commends the sense of patriotism within a common Italian citizen and expects from the Americans also the same patriotism.

After having got wounded in trenches by the mortar's shells, at the field hospital, Henry wants his men to be treated first and advises the nursing staff that, "I'd rather wait, there are much worse wounded than me. I'm all right"(47). Having seen the severity of his injury and his philanthropy for his subordinates, the English Doctor orders the nurses: "Lift him very carefully about the legs. His legs are very painful. He is the legitimate son of President Wilson"(47). It is a matter of ecstasy for Henry and joke for the readers that he was being associated with the president of the United States. Also, he is full of military haughtiness and never compromises with his soldierly decorum. He is very sensitive for his prestige as a soldier and in civilian clothes during war feels a 'masquerader.'

When Henry is transferred from the field hospital to an American hospital in Milan, his friend Rinaldi congratulates him to go among the beautiful nurses leaving behind "the nurses with beards of the field hospital"(60). Because at the field Hospital, the nurses are men only with beards and moustaches and the injured



soldiers dream to be treated by the passionate touches of the delicate female hands. That's why, having seen Henry's complacency in the hospital the major grumbles "why don't I get wounded?"(51) Their fascination with obscenity is so strong that the soldiers term even the physical features of land in the bodily geography of a woman. The lewd jokes reduce the anxiety of the soldiers and their unsatiated gratification of carnal desires. "The bawdiness of their humour is in direct proportion to the degree of tension under which the war participants live"(SPS 107).

We feel a gust of military humour in different other occasions also. In the hospital, Mrs Meyers addresses the wounded soldiers as "my dear boys" and the doctor congratulates Henry that "your blood coagulates beautifully"(88, 47). When Miss Gage calls him 'a sick boy,' he reprimands her that "I'm not sick. I'm wounded"(65). Sickness gives him the feeling of weakness and 'wounded' that of bravery. Henry and Rinaldi consider the prostitutes of the war-brothels as their "war comrades."

Before the induction of the retreat, Henry advises his ambulance drivers, Piani and Bonello, to take a three-hour sleep and hopes them to wake up after the termination of the stipulated time. But, Bonello cut a caustic joke that in case they sleep for a long period "the Austrians will wake us"(137). On listening about the retreat they are happy and jokingly imagine:

"I like a retreat better than an advance," Bonello said. "On a retreat we drink barbera."

"We drink it now. Tomorrow maybe we drink rainwater," Aymo said.

"We'll drink champagne tomorrow in Udine.

"Tomorrow we'll sleep in king's bed, Bonello said. "Tomorrow maybe we'll sleep in -----." Piani said.

"I'll sleep with the queen, Bonello said." (138-39)

They talk happily about the sleeping, dining, drinking and merry-making on the way to home. The very idea of soldiers to sleep in the king's and the queen's bed is laughter provoking. During the retreat, Piani chides Bonello for not using his brain and the latter's answer "if I had brains I wouldn't be here" amuses the readers that a common soldier is brainless. Sometimes it happens because the military system does never let them use their brains and they follow the orders of military top brass blindly.

Hemingway entertainingly presents the war-bred ill-obsession of some soldiers to kill a man by any hook and crook design to be decorated as a brave soldier. After Henry's shooting at the breaching sergeant, Bonello kills him because he "never killed anybody in this war and wanted to kill a sergeant." When Aymo asks about his response to God in confession, he callously replies, "I'll say, 'bless me, father, I killed a sergeant'"(149). He seems to forget that he has not killed an enemy but his own fellow-soldier of the Italian army.

The ludicrousness of the Caporetto retreat is presented through the illogical attitude of the Italian Military police who are summarily trying the retreating Italian officers and executing them in the pretext of being deserters. The carabinieri as the war machinery kill their own men falsely proving them to be traitors. Hemingway mocks at the foolery of the uncongenial military system in the following dialogue between the officers of the battle police and the lieutenant-colonel they are going to shoot:

"It is you and such as you that have let the barbarians onto the sacred soil of the fatherland."

"I beg your pardon," said the lieutenant-colonel. "It is because of treachery such as yours that we have lost the fruits of victory."

“Have you ever been in a retreat?” the lieutenant-colonel asked.

“Italy should never retreat.” (161)

The lieutenant-colonel’s question ‘have you ever been in a retreat?’ punctures the empty pompous slogans like ‘sacred soil of the fatherland,’ ‘fruits of victory,’ and ‘Italy should never retreat’ because it was a stupendous act of the persons who don’t participate in war and have no experience of the retreat. The conduct of the officers and the carabinieri of the battle police is a typical example of military administration in war because the interrogating people don’t take part in war and never face danger and blame others only.

In the treatment of love theme in the novel, Hemingway uses humour as an effective means to bring out the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to love. Satirical humour also arises from Ferguson’s conservative intolerance, exaggerated annoyance, and her incessant showering of curses upon Henry for making Catherine pregnant. She warns Henry, “But watch out you don’t get her in trouble and I’ll kill you”(110). Her suspicious nature, hysterical outburst and imbalanced behaviour certainly produce the desired effect. In the Hospital Catherine and Henry use literary allusions Henry consoles her by telling that she is a brave girl and “nothing ever happens to the brave”(111). He even quotes *Julius Caesar* about her valiant attitude that “the coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave but one”(111) and interprets Shakespeare’s quotation on bravery according to their circumstances:

“Nothing ever happens to the brave.”

“They die of course.”

“But only once.”

Hemingway, in tragic use of humour, describes how Henry and Catherine dream about the future of their expected-son in the grim realities of the never-ending war. While Catherine is

optimistic about the end of the war, Henry is sceptic; but both of them have capacity to cut jokes even in the midst of high danger:

“Where will we live after the war?”

“In an old people home probably.” She said. “For three years I looked forward very childishly to the war ending at Christmas. But now I look forward till when our son will be a lieutenant commander.”

“May be he’ll be general.”

“If it is an hundred years’ war he’ll have time to try both of the services.” (103-4)

Henry and Catherine express a mood of depressing amusement caused by the ever-lengthening war. Catherine looks forward for the war to finish after a long time when their son will be a lieutenant commander but Henry doubts about so early termination of it. She is obsessed with the birth of a son who might be a brave commander in future. Catherine cuts a joke that they “may have several babies before the war is over”(114).

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls* Pablo is chieftain of a guerrilla band fighting in hills in favour of the Republicans against the approaching Fascist forces. He is a distinguished soldier endowed with the qualities of determination, intelligence and quick decision but he is a horse-thief also who deceives his opponents silently and steals away their horses by killing the guards. In the beginning of the movement he “killed more people than the cholera” and “the typhoid fever”(28). Hemingway produces humour by comparing the sacrifice of the soldiers in war with the death by the diseases like cholera and typhoid.

Jordan, the Protagonist, joins the guerrilla band to blow up the strategic bridge during the Fascist attack. He is filled up to brim for duty but Pablo doubts his identity and does not welcome him as a new dynamiter in the mountains and rags him austerely. He does not



want to undertake any difficult enterprise dangerous for life and the presence of 'dynamite' was supposed to be really a great risk for the whole guerrilla band. Moreover, he senses the young leadership and military prowess in Jordan that could be dangerous for his own existence. So, Pablo baits Jordan to be "a false professor" and that "he has not got a beard" and speaks Spanish "with an accent"(202). He also provokes Jordan into anger by asking repeatedly what his countrymen wear under skirts.

We burst in laughter when we see Pablo's wife Pilar making her first appearance showering obsessions on Rafael: "What are doing now, you lazy drunken obscene unsayable son of an unnameable unmarried gypsy obscenity"(106). Equally humorous is the scene where the mild-mannered Anselmo rightly judges that Agustin is a "very serious man" though "he speaks very filthily." While Agustin and Jordan are watching the hovering over planes and listening to the firing of the tanks below, the former valorously jokes about the tank that "seems like a mouse coming out of his hole"(424). The battle of the war-hero El Sordo and his band is thrilling and constitutes one of the most beautiful descriptions of fighting. El Sordo, who takes "death as an aspirin" is supported by only four guerrillas and believing in quality assures himself that "better four good than much bad"(290, 142). He fights on a hilltop dexterously and is "wounded in the calf of his leg and in two places in his left arm" (290). His wounds get stiffened and has a severe headache but he has a capacity to "grin somewhere inside the pain." These untrained and patriotic gypsies thus live a vulgar life of fighting bravely and cracking obscenity upon one another.

Hemingway portrays a state of turmoil when Pablo and the innocent peasants brutally kill the fascist traitors. The peasants are eagerly waiting

outside the plaza to come out of traitors "still occupied with their sins" and don't let them finish their prayer. They consider this political upheaval the "Fair of Liberty" to make them owner of the town and the land occupied by the fascists declaring that "we thresh fascists today and out of the chaff comes the freedom"(105). People exult looking at their first victim Don Benito Garcia, the Mayor. Another victim, Don Federico Gonzalez, the fascist of first order, owns the mill and feed store. He cowardly turns up his eyes to heaven and "one of the drunkards poked him in the backside with a flail handle and Don Federico gave a quick jump as a balky horse"(107). The other hits him hard on his head with a club and someone swings him over the cliff taunting "with your permission"(108). Don Ricardo Montalvo, the next victim, arrogantly tries to be brave and warns Pablo not to touch him. Thus, all the arrogant fascists are hurled from the cliffs into the river. Hemingway seems to suggest that if the Fascists are brutish, the Loyalists too indulge in massacre and brutality which is ridiculed as a "civilized warfare" (Srivastava 52).

Finally, the strategic bridge is blown but at the cost of Robert Jordan's life. He is targeted by the fascist soldiers but fights heroically unto death. He forgets all other things including Maria and fully concentrates to win the war and thinks "if this war is lost, all of these things are lost"(Kaushal 100). Thus, the greatest pleasure for the hero comes from the performance of duty and even death for him is "only a thing to be avoided because it would interfere with the performance of your duty" (Srivastava 79). He takes death an unimportant thing, a hindrance for duty. When he is not in position to walk, he saves the other persons of the group as he alones checks the advancing enemy soldiers and lets his own men go away safely. In the end, anticipating his death, he jokes to have an extra-

leg for fighting, "I ought to carry the spare leg, too" which is certainly a brave response to death. Henry is compelled by stupid Carabiniere to leave the war, but Jordan dies in harness heroically. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the hero sacrifices his life but blows the bridge and "became at last relatively strong at the broken places"(Dahiya 114). Hemingway highly appreciates Jordan for his dogged-determination and expects from soldiers to have such a zeal for their duty.

Hemingway, in both novels, has employed the strategy of providing comic relief from the tension of war. There are numerous instances of such comic interludes. The vulgar jokes of the soldiers on the hazardous situation are natural response to the nerve-racking tensions of war. Even the conversation of lovers evokes pleasant laughter. The humour compels the readers' attention to the spectacle of chaos and brutality. The sprinklings of light-hearted fun tend to turn these tragedies into tragic-comedies. One of the finest instances we find is in *A Farewell To Arms* when the bulging out bellies of cartridges carrying soldiers are compared with the pregnant women. The eccentricities and whimsicalities inherent in different lop-sided responses to love have been treated quite comically in these novels. The death of men, the gloomy atmosphere of the war theatre, mental suffering, torture and panic are factors

responsible for the by-product of humour. The manner in which the writer integrates a wide range of comic strain reveals Hemingway's ingenuity as a humorist. The blending of the tragic moods with the comic revelry is not a new technique in literature, but the way it has been consummated by Hemingway is unquestionably unrivalled in the modern war novel.

### References

- [1] Dahiya, Bhim S. *The Hero in Hemingway: A Study in Development*. New Delhi: Bahri publications Private Limited, 1978. Print.
- [2] Dahiya, SPS. *The Comic Sense of Ernest Hemingway*. New Delhi: Khosla Publishing House, n.d. Print.
- [3] Hemingway, Ernest. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1958. Print.
- [4] ---. *A Farewell to Arms*. Delhi: A.I.T.B.S. Pub, 2004. Print.
- [5] Jackson, Paul. "For Whom the Bell Tolls: Patterns of Joking and Seriousness." *Hemingway Notes*, 6, No.1. 1980. Print.
- [6] Kaushal, Jogendra. *Ernest Hemingway: A Critical Study*. Patiala: Chandi Publishers, 1974. Print.
- [7] Srivastava, Ramesh. *Hemingway and his For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Amritsar: GNDU, n.d. Print.