

A FAREWELL TO ARMS:
NOVEL INTO FILM

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Most of the reviewers of the film version of A Farewell to Arms focussed their attention on the acting of Jennifer Jones and Rock Hudson. While noting how these actors' portrayals of Catherine Barkley and Frederic Henry depart from the spirit of Hemingway's novel, they also gave some attention to the changes in plot and the effect of these changes on the characterization. When examined closely, however, many of the changes in plot reveal not only how but why the essence of Hemingway's vision of life and war was excluded from the film.

The changes in Hemingway's story might not appear quite so remarkable were it not for a fascinating document by David O. Selznick, the film's producer, which appeared in Life for March 17, 1958. This article, consisting of numerous memoranda which Selznick exchanged with members of his production staff during the planning and shooting of the film, reveals either unconscious hypocrisy or well-nigh total misunderstanding of Hemingway's novel.

Many changes in the story were made to satisfy the Italian government so that the film could be shot in Italy. These changes, Selznick revealed, consist mainly of emphasizing Italian military victories and stressing the civilian rather than the military disaster of the retreat from Caporetto. Selznick does not, of course, reveal how these changes are related to many other changes, among which are the virtual abandonment of the priest-baiting, the toning down of the soldiers' anti-war sentiments, the elimination of the shooting of the cowardly sergeant, and most important, the change which makes Rinaldi accompany Frederic on the retreat from Caporetto and be shot by a firing squad for raving against the war and his own cowardice. In the original of this scene Frederic only watches the execution of officers who are separated from their troops, and then runs for his life. This new incident is quite obviously planned to give an added motivation to Frederic's desertion so that it will be comprehensible and acceptable to everyone--the Italian government included. One of the first things Frederic says to Catherine when justifying his desertion is that he has seen his friend shot unjustly.

In the face of this distortion of the plot, and the melodramatic rant about Rinaldi's sickness and his greatness as a surgeon which Frederic

shouts out to the court martial, Selznick writes to Ben Hecht--the script writer--that he is most anxious that the script show Frederic deserting because he is fed up with the brutality and madness of war, and not because he saw his friend shot down. Selznick refers over and over again to his respect for Hemingway and his desire to be faithful to the spirit of the story --"the unique qualities of Hemingway"--yet the script introduces a major change apparently designed to create a motivation which the producer later says must be avoided.

Similar purposes are visible in other changes in Hemingway's plot. The shooting of the cowardly sergeant is eliminated probably because it reveals more brutality than is proper for a hero and does not reflect on the glory of the Italian sergeants who run or of the men who help Frederic to kill one of them. The script, however, makes a substitution for this incident, which shows an awareness of the original scene's purpose. In the movie, the ambulance man Aymo struggles with and chokes to death a civilian who tries to steal a seat on the ambulance reserved for a woman carrying a baby. Strangely gratuitous as this scene appears, it is very probably intended to show one effect of the retreat--the cowardice of the uninitiate--which Hemingway ruthlessly punishes in one of the sergeants. The new scene, however, makes the death of a coward the result of ungal-lant action and of a struggle to the death.

The new characterization of the priest culminates in the plot change which shows his approaching death while he remains behind as the bombardment of Caporetto begins. This scene connects with two other changes made by the film, all of which add a distinct kind of distortion to the story. The priest's final act is designed to remind us that salvation and meaning may accompany death. The same theme is introduced again when Rinaldi, the unbeliever, kisses a crucifix before he is shot by the firing squad.

Although the makers of The Sun Also Rises were able to distort its conclusion by making a pious Tyrone Power inform Lady Brett that many people still have God, Selznick and Ben Hecht have not had the nerve or the ingenuity to suggest a reunion in heaven for Frederic and Catherine. They have, however, managed the next best thing. Hemingway's conclusion shows Frederic leaving the body of Catherine and walking out into the rain, a man defeated by fate, robbed of the only thing he values, doomed to wander through a dreary and empty world. In the film, however, as Frederic walks out, the rain has stopped, for the forboding rain of the novel, which is suggestive of the woe of life, has been converted into a symbol of Catherine's private apprehension of death.

As Frederic walks along the damp streets, he remembers scenes in which Catherine swore that only his love gave meaning to her life. The implication is that she has found fulfillment before her death and that he can always treasure the memory of her and her fulfillment. Since the conclusion strains toward an emotion irrelevant to those elements of Hemingway's

plot and theme which remain in the film, it achieves little sense of conviction or finality. All of this tends to make the plot meaningless rather than expressive of the intense love of life and accompanying sense of meaninglessness which are central to Hemingway's theme.

It is curious how well the changes apparently forced on Selznick contribute to the shaping of a popular movie, and one wonders what the outcome would have been had he sacrificed authentic decor and filmed the movie in California. It is ironic that the film version of For Whom the Bell Tolls, which displayed considerable power and faithfulness to the novel, was made in California (one could hardly do it in Franco Spain), whereas the distortions of A Farewell to Arms were apparently increased by its production in Italy--where the producer sought authentic background. It seems unlikely, however, that a film true to the spirit of Hemingway's novel could be made now, since it would be virtually certain to lose money and would run counter to the self-satisfied religiosity with which our culture is now so strenuously trying to ease its anxieties.

My memory of the Gary Cooper-Helen Hayes film version is too dim to permit comparison. I do recall, however, that the earlier film had Frederic and Catherine married by the priest. The new version disports a daring treatment of sex outside marriage, but its insensibility to Hemingway's values suggests that this thin sugar-coating of realism is another example of the self-deceptions of our age. Possibly more conscious is the deception visible when one compares the film's written prologue about Italy's glorious participation in the war with the passage in the novel in which Frederic reflects on the emptiness and obscenity of all rhetoric which praises war.

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