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A Farewell to Arms

Ernest Hemingway · *1929 · original English text*

An American in the Italian ambulance service in the Great War falls in love with an English nurse. The front, a retreat, and a flight to Switzerland are told in Ernest Hemingway's spare sentences. The world, the book says, breaks every one; the ending does not relent.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does it mean to make 'a farewell to arms,' and what remains when the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice have gone bad and the world has broken the lovers anyway?

"The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places."

Book II, Frederic's meditation after a serious wound

Frederic Henry tries to leave the war, first in his heart and then in fact, after the caporetto chaos and a near execution. With Catherine Barkley he makes a private peace in the mountains. It is real love, and it is not enough to keep the world from breaking them at a last, civilian grief. Hemingway will not dress the loss in the old abstract words. The farewell is to a kind of war-talk as well as to the army, and the last watch in the hospital is almost without comment.

KEY CHARACTERS

Lieutenant Frederic Henry
An American with the Italian ambulance service, the narrator, who tries to leave the war for a private life.

Catherine Barkley
An English nurse, already bereaved, whose love is total and whose death closes the book.

Rinaldi
The surgeon, Henry's friend in the mess, witty and wearing down.

the priest
A gentle Abruzzi priest, a measure of faith the officers joke about and sometimes need.

Count Greffi
An old man at Stresa, courteous over billiards, a brief image of a passing world.

BROKEN PLACES

> *"The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places."*
> Book II

> *"I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain."*
> **Frederic Henry** · After the retreat

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Front, and a Nurse
BOOK I

Lieutenant Henry lives the routine of the ambulance mess, drinks with Rinaldi and the priest, and meets Catherine Barkley, who is already mourning a fiancé. Their first talk is half a game.

- The opening is a year of war in a few plain pages of roads and rain.
- Catherine's stick and her loss are not a flirtation only.
- Henry is not yet committed, to her or to the war's meaning.

02
The Broken Places
BOOK II

Henry is wounded. In the Milan hospital the game with Catherine becomes a love. He thinks of the world breaking every one, and of who is strong afterward.

- The surgery and the drinking are told without heroics.
- Catherine's nursing and her will make the ward a world of two.
- The sentence about broken places is hope and a warning at once.

> *"I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain."*
> **Frederic Henry** · Later, on abstract words after the retreat

03
Return, and the Retreat
BOOK III

He goes back to the line. The Italian retreat from Caporetto turns into a chaos of columns, suspicion, and shooting at the river. Henry, about to be executed as a deserter or a spy, dives and swims.

- The mess is thinner; the priest's gentleness still holds.
- The retreat is one of the great narrative passages of the war.
- His farewell to the army begins as survival, not as a speech.

04
Stresa, and a Row to Switzerland
BOOK IV

He finds Catherine again. They flee by boat up the lake in the weather, a long pull toward a border and a hoped-for peace.

- Count Greffi's old courtesy is a last civilized grace.
- The night on the water is work: rowing, rain, and nerve.
- Switzerland receives them as lovers, not as a cause.

05
The Mountains, and a Hospital Watch
BOOK V

They live quietly through a winter. In the spring Catherine goes into a long labor. The child is stillborn; she dies. Henry walks back to the hotel in the rain.

- The idyll is real and is not a truce the world has signed.
- The labor is written with a terrible patience.
- The last good-by is 'like saying good-by to a statue.' In this text the word is hyphenated: good-by.

> *"It was like saying good-by to a statue."*
> The last pages, after Catherine's death

War and Words · A Private Peace · Brokenness · Courage · Loss

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #75201 (1929). The site marks the work copyrighted: False; the U.S. term on this title ran out in 2025. The novel is in five books, with many chapters.
2. Exact wording in this text: "The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places." (every one is two words.)
3. Also exact: "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain."
4. The last farewell uses a hyphen: "It was like saying good-by to a statue." Do not modernize to "goodbye."
5. This is a war novel of wounds, a chaotic retreat, a desertion, and a death in childbirth. It is for older students. The book's suspicion of abstract war-talk is a moral point, not a license for cynicism about every sacred word.

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