Rainy Day Blues: The Role of Weather in *A Farewell to Arms*

The elements play a critical role in Hemingway's writings. They foreshadow future events, reflect the emotions of characters, and serve as a metaphor for overarching themes. In *A Farewell to Arms,* weather is heavily symbolic, especially the rain. Throughout the novel, the weather transitions gradually from warm and dry to wet, cold and muddy as the war becomes more real and immediate to Frederic. It is a symbol for mortality, steadily falling as a constant reminder of the violence of the war and the inevitability of death.

A Farewell to Arms begins in the summer, when Frederic is living peacefully in the countryside with the other officers. On the first page of the first chapter, the narrator describes the bed of the river, which is shallow and calm. Protruding rocks, "dry and white in the sun" (3), are unsullied by rain and mud, and maintain their white hue, symbolic of their purity--the river bed has yet to be flooded, and it flows along lazily in the summer sun. The rain, and the war, are far away; the artillery flashes in the distance seem benign, "like summer lightning" (3), rather than an actual threat. The narrator, Frederic, remarks that despite these flashes of the distant violence, "the nights were cool and there was not the feeling of a storm coming" (3). The violence is far-off; Frederic reacts to it just as a child who listens to a storm in bed, but snuggles further under the covers and feels safe. The threat seems not apply to him. As the fighting grows closer and autumn begins to arrive, the land becomes barren and damp: "The vineyards were thin and bare-branched too and all the country was wet and brown and dead with the autumn. There were mists over the river and clouds on the mountain…" (4). The ominous mist and oppressive clouds obscure the summer sun and suck up the heat, depriving the land of life and filling the reader with a sense of foreboding. Then, finally, winter arrives, and at the start of it "came the permanent rain and with the rain came the cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven

thousand dies of it in the army" (4). The rain is described here are *permanent:* it is all-encompassing, inescapable, and brings with it a disease which effortlessly wipes out vast amounts of soldiers, washing them away as easily as it erodes the dirt. This sentence impresses the reader with a sense of awe—the ease and swiftness with which the rain comes is intimidating. The rain is utterly beyond human control, and the soldiers can do little to protect themselves from its ravages—they are weak and helpless, weighed down by their equipment, totally vulnerable to the awesome power of the indifferent rain.

After Frederic returns to the front from his leave it is the end of springtime, and also the end of the innocent revelry he's been immersed in for some weeks. He walks through the countryside, where it is "warm and like spring," and finds the house "looked the same as when I had left it" (11). The threat of violence has not yet reached him. The spring fades and summer arrives, and though he sees some wounded while he is driving the ambulance, it is still far removed from the violence. Frederic has a sense of being invulnerable, and remarks, "Well, I knew I would not be killed. Not in this war. It did not have anything to do with me. It seemed no more dangerous to me myself than war in the movies" (37). The war doesn't apply to him; it may hurt other people far away, but he can't imagine himself a part of that violence. When he travels to the front, the wind foreshadows the bloodshed that is about to occur: "in the dark night the wind rustled the leaves dried by the sun" (51). The leaves, fragile and vulnerable, reflect the final moments of peace Frederic and the other drivers are afforded—although they are aware of the danger, they feel like it cannot harm them, and they banter casually about the types of bombs falling nearby. The mortar shell hits, though, and Frederic is jarred from his sense of safety and begins to realize the reality of the war. In the ambulance he feels the warm blood of the man above him dripping away and finally falling "very slowly, as they fall from an icicle after the sun

has gone" (61). The cold night has fallen, both literally and figuratively—the darkness has brought with it fear, confusion, and a definite sense of mortality.

The sunny hospital in Milan gives a temporary respite from the war. The weather is warm and hospitable and Frederic is able to forget the war as he falls deeper in love with Catherine, and "[does] not remember much about the days, except that they were hot and that there were many victories in the papers" (117). Violence is once again a distant threat, and he is able to casually read about bloody battles without any sense of fear. When the rain again begins to fall, though, Catherine confesses her fear of it: "I've always been afraid of the rain… I'm afraid of the rain because sometimes I see me dead in it…And sometimes I see you dead in it" (126). To Catherine, the rain represents her mortality—the rain is inevitable, a force beyond her control; despite her desperate fear of it, and Frederic's attempts to soothe her with promises of safety, it still comes. She tries to be brave, but can't: "'I'm not afraid of the rain. I'm not afraid of the rain. Oh, oh, God, I wish I wasn't.' She was crying. I comforted her and she stopped crying. But outside it kept on raining" (126). The inevitability of the rain, like death, is inescapable and terrifying.

When Frederic is finally sent back to the front, the atmosphere is very different than when he left: " There were wet dead leaves on the road from the rows of bare trees…We saw the town with a mist over it that cut off the mountains…It had been raining in the mountains" (163). The rain-soaked leaves carpet the road, symbolic of the many fallen soldiers. The land is barren and inhospitable, and draped with a gloomy mist seeping down from the mountains, where the rain and gore are quickly advancing. The war is now fully real for Frederic; he can no longer deny it: "Blow, blow, ye western wind. Well, it blew and it wasn't the small rain but the big rain down that rained. It rained all night. You knew it rained down that rained. Look at it…Everyone

was caught in it and the small rain would not quiet it" (197). On the way to Udine, the rain gives a short respite as they travel in a huge, unmoving line towards their destination. Mud is everywhere, and there is a sense of futility, of stagnation; there is no hope of progress and Frederic decides to pursue a side road, where they are led into a deep mire that they can't escape from. Frederic orders the two sergeants to gather brush but they refuse his desperate command, so he guns one of them down. The ubiquitous mud is a metaphor for the futility of the war itself—their planning and teamwork comes to nothing, they are forced to abandon their mission and let the trucks rot in the vast muddy fields. The shooting of the sergeant is pointless; even if they had helped they still would have been thwarted by the mud. Frederic's execution of the sergeant reflects his desperation—he is utterly helpless, fighting a war with no clear motive where no progress ever seems to be made. The death of the sergeant seems inconsequential to Frederic because the war itself is arbitrary. He blames himself for their predicament: "It was my fault. I had led them up here. The sun was almost out from behind the clouds and the body of the sergeant lay beside the hedge" (205). He wishes he hadn't led them there at all, but it's too late, and the body of the sergeant is a stark reminder that what has been done can't be reversed. The almost-present sun symbolizes their crushed hopes—they want to be optimistic, but they can't; the mud is everywhere, they are lost and no longer have any purpose because they must abandon their medical equipment. As they plod on the sky clouds over once again, and a sense of gloom returns.

After his escape to the shelter of the hotel Frederic is able to once again put the war out of mind temporarily, but this time it cannot be forgot. He wakes during the night "to hear the rain lashing the window panes. It was coming in the open window" (264). The rain is literally invading his living space, creating a physical presence that cannot be ignored. The risk of arrest

forces him to take immediate action. He fears the violence of the storm, but the barman reassures him: “The storm is over. It is rough but you will be all right” (265). With this comes a real sense of hope, and he and Catherine make their escape to Switzerland, whose ethereal snow-capped mountains and peaceful shores make it seem like a true haven from violence and persecution. As they come upon the Swiss shore, “The rain stopped and the wind drove the clouds so that the moon shone through…Then the clouds came over the moon again…but it was much lighter than it had been before and we could see the shore” (271). But their time of peace is short. As Catherine’s due date draws nearer, the weather becomes more severe: “In the night it started raining…turned the snow to slush and made the mountain-side dismal” (306). For a short while the weather turns mild and the two enjoy their time together, but realize that it is but a “false spring” (310), and won’t last. Catherine goes into labor in the middle of the night when the sky is clear, but as the birth progresses the sky darkens and foreshadows her impending death. As she is wheeled into the operating room, Fredric looks out the window and “could see it was raining” (324), and upon finding out the baby was never alive, remarks, “I could see nothing but the dark and the rain falling across the light from the window. So that was it. The baby was dead” (327). The rain is the background for both the child’s and Catherine’s deaths, steadily falling just as she had feared.