

Reflections on Violence and the Crisis of Modernity:

Understanding A Farewell to Arms

Binleizi Xiang

College of Arts and Sciences, Hubei Normal University, Huangshi 435109, China.

Abstract: Based on *A Farewell to Arms*, this paper intends to figure out the connotation of the crisis of modernity embodied in this works through understanding the relationship between violence and war, violence and modernity. The novel reveals the cruel nature of war by the descriptions of the experience of the protagonist Henry in the war. It is not only an anti-war fiction, but also the author's discussion on the forms of violence, reflecting the author's philosophical thinking on the living conditions of modern westerners. Modernity is a process of rationalization of human society. With the intensification of human transformation and conquest of nature, scientific rationality paid too much attention to things while neglected man himself, thus providing space for violence to grow. War is a concentrated expression of violence. It not only pushes the relationship between man and nature into opposition with cold mechanical violence, but also leads to the alienation of interpersonal relations and the collapse of human spiritual home through omnipresent spiritual violence.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway; Violence; War; Crisis of Modernity

1. The Relationship between Violence and War

War is an act of violence carried out by violent organizations using violent tools, and its basic elements are characterized by distinct violent nature. In this novel, violence is the principal instrument of war.

Marxist's view of war holds that war is the highest form of struggle between nations, social classes, and political groups. The particular attribute that distinguishes war from other forms of social struggle is its violent nature. Without violence, war can not be called war. The violent nature of war is determined by the nature of war.

The fundamental function of war is achieved through the principal means of violence. War is an extreme form of resolving social conflicts. Its fundamental function lies in realizing one party's political goals and safeguarding its fundamental interests. In class society, this kind of contradiction is mainly manifested in the contradictions and conflicts of interests between different classes, states and political groups. When these social contradictions are irreconcilable and cannot be solved by non-violent means, it means that war must be used to solve them. Mao Zedong pointed out that war is an act of using violence to remove political obstacles, and it is the product of irreconcilable political contradictions. The fundamental function of war can only be achieved through violence. If political obstacles can be removed without violence, such social conflicts can only be called competitions or conflicts.

2. Violence and Modernity in A Farewell to Arms

2.1 Mechanical violence and mental violence

WHO defines violence as: "deliberately using the power of the body or authority to threaten or harm oneself, others, groups or society, or violence is likely to cause damage, death, mental injury, developmental disorders, or rights and deprivation of rights" (Krug, 2002:5). According to this definition, violence is manifested in two major aspects: physical violence and mental violence. Through the experience of the soldiers, Hemingway showed the mechanical and spiritual violence they suffered in the war.

By portraying the bloody scenes on the battlefield, Hemingway made readers feel the horror and fear of violence against life. For example, Henry was bombarded at the front line, witnessing his comrade Pasini lost a leg in the war and finally sacrifice. In addition, that Henry's ambulance team rushed to the battlefield and ambulance station frequently also reflected

the huge casualties caused by the war. This physical trauma brought by the war is a direct manifestation of mechanical violence.

In addition to direct depiction the brutal accident of war violence, Hemingway used many techniques in the dialogue to highlight the ubiquitous mechanical violence in the war. One soldier shouted: "Long live the peace" (Hemingway, 2002:239). And another soldier answered: "We could not go home because the war is not over yet" (Hemingway, 2002:239). From this we can feel the soldiers' hatred of the war as it deprived people of their lives. And their desire for peace also reflects the ruthless mechanical violence in the war.

Regarding the concept of mental violence, it refers to the behavior of harming others' mental health through non-physical contact. Serious mental violence may lead to others to suicide" (Wang, 2008).

The story takes place during World War I. The troops followed the strict military system and the dictatorial controls, creating an atmosphere of terror and tension. A kind of invisible spiritual violence is formed in this atmosphere, suppressing all soldiers. The novel places young people from different regions, races and classes in a limited space, which provokes multiple conflicts. Violence displays the ugly violence in interpersonal relationship in the form of repression and resistance. For example, the most obvious manifestation was the insult and verbal violence that was imposed on the priest by almost all military officers. The priest was a kind young man who provided spiritual guidance to soldiers. Due to their disdain for religion, the officers often made fun of the priest with crude jokes with rude words. Such blasphemy against religion and insinuation against the priest are all acts of violence under the mental violence of other members in the same community.

2.2 The exploration of the connotation of modernity

From the 16th century to the 20th century, modernity investigators have been constantly arguing about the connotation of modernity. This paper will make a brief introduction from the perspective of the modernity in the category of sociology. Specifically, modernity involves the following four aspects in the process of modernization, namely political, economic, social and cultural modernization. In the process of political modernization, the establishment and legalization of modern civil rights is an indicator of its modernity evaluation. The modernization of economy is marked by the victory of industrialization and the formation of market economy. The modernization of the society, on the one hand, means the collapse of the traditional hierarchical order and values, and the decline of religion. On the other hand, it means the new civil society and secular morality are established. The process of cultural modernization has always been accompanied by a modernity conflict of anti-modernization, which has led to the crisis of modernity.

After Baudelaire, the connotation of aesthetic modernity was expanded in various avant-garde movements (Vade, 2001). In this sense, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, there was a sense of heroism in the modern artists who pursued experimental innovation. The American youth, together with Hemingway, self-exiled to Paris to pursue art salvation, also has such a heroic demeanor.

2.3 The relationship between violence and modernity

Modernity is expressed by means of violence. It is an undeniable fact that violence is a natural form and an inherent phenomenon of human beings. As a kind of evil of human nature that cannot be eliminated, it always lurks in the deep heart of each of us. Modernity is a process of rationalization of human society. With the intensification of the process of human transformation and conquest of nature, the scientific rationality and humanistic rationality went their separate ways. At the moment, the crisis of modernity came into being. Scientific rationality paid too much attention to things while neglected people themselves, thus providing a space for the growth of violence. Through the writing of violence in the novel, Hemingway ruthlessly revealed the nature of the war and the festering wounds of metaphorical capitalist society, showing the crisis of modernity in this special situation.

3. The understanding of the crisis of modernity

The crisis of modernity is first reflected in the fact that the relationship between man and nature goes against each other. In the war, human beings conquered and transformed nature, so that the original harmonious living environment was

constantly destroyed, until completely destroyed in the endless cycle of war.

In addition, the crisis of modernity is also reflected in the destruction of the human spiritual home. Through the experience of Henry, the novel focuses on explaining the formation process of "the lost generation". From the beginning, Henry was in a state of away from home as he left the peaceful America and went to Europe. After joining the Italian army, he still could not get rid of his original identity. And the only American identity even gave him the hero medal which he should not have won. But it was also this American identity that made him almost be killed as a German spy, from which the absurdity of war can be seen clearly. In this process, Henry's hope of finding the meaning of life through military identity was also smashed. Then he renounced his military service and return to his personal world. The new identity as a husband and father once let him obtain temporary happiness, but the death of Catherine and the baby announced the failure of his last attempt. In the end, he has turned from a handsome young man to a ghostly homeless. His loss and confusion is not only the loss and confusion of Hemingway's generation after the war but also the entire human race in the war. War is only an extreme manifestation of this desperate state of existence. No one can really say farewell to weapons. From the "leavers" in the beginning to the "homeless" in the end, the continuous decline and denial of this identity vividly demonstrates the difficult situation of individual survival in the modern world. And the spiritual homeland is falling apart and being ruined eventually in this process.

4. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the the internal relationship between violence and war. Through the understanding of violence and the exploration of the connotation of modernity, it reveals the different forms of violence and the relationship between violence and modernity. In *A Farewell to Arms*, violence is a sign of the times: mental confusion and displacement. That is the state of modern people. It is the violence that makes us re-examine the chaotic spiritual dilemma of modern people. It is also the violence that allows us to see the demeanor of people under great pressure, which fully shows the binary of violence. From the protagonist's experience of modern people inspired by war violence, it reflects the war not only pushes the relationship between man and nature into opposition with cruel mechanical violence, but also leads to the alienation of interpersonal relations and the collapse of human spiritual home through omnipresent spiritual violence.

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About the author: Xiang Binleizi, was born in 1996 in Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Hubei Province, China. Miss Xiang received Master of Science degree from the University of Edinburgh and now is a teaching assistant at the College of Arts and Sciences of Hubei Normal University. Her major research interest is teaching English as a foreign language.