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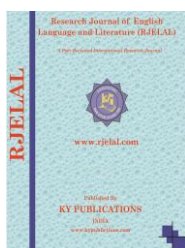


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WAR AND SEXUALITY IN HEMINGWAY'S 'A FAREWELL TO ARMS'

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ABSTRACT

War is the most dynamic feature of Hemingway's "*A Farewell to Arms*". It is not merely a passive backdrop to a story which hinges on love, sexuality and disillusionment, on the contrary, it is the primary protagonist of the novel: humanized and empowered. The dual strands of love and sexuality run in accordance with the physical and moral magnitude of the war. This powerful depiction of war serves to highlight the undeniable importance of the outdoors, the wild and the natural in Hemingway's fiction. Though never glorified, war is presented parallel to the protagonists and it runs through the greater emotions of love, loss and suffering adding to the fierce beauty of the novel. The study will focus on Hemingway's interpretation of sexuality, not only as a decisive force in channelizing the life of the lost generation but also as generating love which resembles the war in its absurdity, unorthodoxy and futility. In doing so, various aspects of love and sexuality in "*A Farewell to Arms*" will be explored through the lens of war, emphasizing the role played by war in curbing the psychology, sensibility and sexuality of the characters and in lending vitality and passion to Hemingway's most celebrated lovers: Henry and Catherine. The study also aims to show how Hemingway's protagonists in "*A Farewell to Arms*" discover love and experience self awakening through the aggression of war and how war casts a catalytic effect on their feelings and emotions producing a love which is as intense and destructive as the war.

Keywords: war, sexuality, love, lost generation

1. Introduction

It is difficult if not altogether impossible to disengage war and sexuality in *A Farewell to Arms*. It is equally challenging to study them as disparate strands operating independently and leaving their unique impact on the story. War and sexuality exist and operate as a collective force, giving way to new sensibilities and behavior. The main strength of the war struck people in FTA lies in their capacity to manipulate their sexuality for achieving peace and purpose in life. For Hemingway, sexuality was a tangible realization of life: a palpable condition of survival. The imperative sexual streak in

Hemingway's fiction prompted his critics to conclude that Hemingway exalts sexuality as salvation and 'once the curse of Puritanism is cast off, art will flourish and culture take a new lease on life. The human personality, happily sexualized, will become enriched and magnificently creative' (Glicksberg 130). Accordingly, sexuality in FTA becomes a lens for examining the human condition, for depicting the demeanor of a post war period and for re conceptualizing the world. As for the war, it is an all encompassing phenomenon. It controls and directs the movement of the entire novel. The war just like the bull ring, denoted for Hemingway, 'the quintessential microcosm of the larger human

tragedy' (Bluefarb 16). The characters of FTA move through the haze of smoke and ruin and reformulate their life according to the constructs of war. Apart from being a powerful reality, war also exists as an abstract force, a beguiling illusion that controls the people of the lost generation; similar to the fiesta in *The Sun Also Rises* which presented the people with a vision, however misdirected, to cope with their physical and psychological wounds. Each aspect of the fiesta is exteriorized to emphasize its physical and psychological impact upon the people. Brett represents the sensuous pleasures associated with the fiesta while Pedro symbolizes its grace and ethnicity and though Barnes may not symbolize any corporal aspect of the fiesta, he remains a source of peace and repose throughout the frenzy of alcohol, promiscuity and bull fighting. He symbolizes the 'calm' after the aggression of the fiesta. Just like the "comfortable white wicker chairs" outside the cafes, (on the morning after the fiesta) were a soothing sight after seven days of noise and violence, so is Barnes a comfort to all his troubled friends. The fiesta is for the people of Pamplona what war is for the characters of FTA: an ideology and a belief system. Under the stupor of war, the people attain courage to overstep many physical and emotional boundaries. They challenge the absurdities of the postmodern condition through their 'war influenced' sexual powers. Unpredictability regarding the war's intensity, direction and outcome is directly related to Hemingway's postmodern ideology: an outright rejection of accepted codes and a refusal to inflict boundaries on human versatility specifically on those human traits which influence identity construction and mold the social and sexual roles of human beings. Just as the war is capricious and ever changing in its import and effect upon the people, so are the responses of the war struck individuals towards their innate capacities of sexualizing and gendering. The social actors in FTA practice sexuality and gender with the same rage and pace as the war which engulfs them. The present research will explore the concept of sexuality within the framework of war. Sexuality exists on three levels in FTA:

- I. Same gender attraction
- II. Androgyny

III. Heterosexuality

Surprisingly, none of these sexual tendencies are clearly projected or individually attributed to any specific character. There is always an air of ambiguity and secrecy about the sexual aspirations of the characters. A stubborn refusal by Hemingway to assign clear sexual identities to the characters generates more sexual freedom and lends greater flexibility to the concept of sexuality, which is neither typified nor restricted through specifications of character or situation. It is as though 'the intense homosociality of his fiction demanded equally intense heterosexuality to deflect suspicions that either his male characters or he had homosexual tendencies (Moddelmog 81). Thus one sexual attitude is countered by yet another, hindering the development of any fixed sexual identity. Sexuality and its various levels are depicted (in the novel) through concrete and abstract realities such as the environment, the war and the body. The following is an examination of sexuality with war as the backdrop and as the moving principle behind all sexual outlook in FTA.

2. Same gender attraction as induced by war

While exploring the dimensions of human sexuality, Hemingway hardly if ever resorts to eroticism. His attention is almost always arrested by the magnanimity of nature and environment and the raw energy and freedom they offer man as opposed to the social and cultural inhibitions which restrict not only his sexual outlook but his entire perception of the world. It is as Linda- Wagner Martin says, "What happened in the early twentieth century to make sexuality a topic deserving of attention and study was the recognition that sex was pleasure, that sensuality was healthy and that human relationships benefitted from sexual exploration" (54). Thus, sexuality is never static in FTA. The characters do not have any fixed sexual identities mainly because their circumstances necessitate diverse sexual choices. In FTA, same gender attraction is one such impulse. It is not genetic. It is war induced. It symbolizes the communal aspect of war: the spirit of generosity and sacrifice initiated by war. Thus, in a Hemingway work, nature and environment if not the sole protagonists are almost always humanized. In FTA,

sexuality is reflected as much by the war as it is by the individuals. Hemingway, in showing same gender love as evolving from the extraordinary situation of war, questions the validity of the established norms of morality. For Hemingway, gender classification was unfathomable and the fact that 'sexual difference exists and that much of human happiness depends upon the acceptance and exploitation and even prizing of these differences was a predicament deeply arresting to his imagination' (Wyatt 89). In FTA, war provides a natural impetus to counter this predicament. Empathy for the same gender, in the context of war attains a different meaning as compared to normal circumstances where it would be audaciously labeled as homosexuality. Most of Hemingway's male protagonists enjoy a 'homosocial' life in which the 'line between affection and desire often seems about to implode' (Modelmog 364). However, in FTA, affection dominates desire and same gender attraction is an amalgamation of fraternal love, a desperate dependence for fellow humans and a jealous possessiveness for war comrades. Rinaldi on being refused sexual proximity with Henry is content to shift into the role of a blood brother and a war comrade, similarly Ferguson surrenders her love for Catherine more out of a spirit of sacrifice than anything else. Men and women of FTA, perform acts of charity towards each other thus preventing the war to overwhelm them with its ferocity. Most of these charitable acts involve bringing relief to the ailing body. New sexual dimensions are created through the 'affected' body. Thus the next important force, (after nature and environment) for assessing sexuality is the body. In depicting various levels of sexuality, Hemingway makes generous use of the body.

3. War, the body and role assigned sexuality:

In FTA the body is always described as unique or individual. Frequently categorized as attractive or ugly, clean or dirty and healthy or injured, the body, according to Wyatt 'stands at the centre of a complex set of recognitions' (172). As such, the body is never faceless; it either reveals or complicates sexual identities and is also a vital source for identifying and problematizing sexuality in FTA. Different configurations of the body expose

different levels of sexuality. The body presents challenges when it comes to determining the precise nature of people's sexuality. It is challenging even for Henry and Catherine, who in comparison to the others have a more defined sexuality. Yet, sometimes they find it difficult to meet the demands of their body and the sexual image which it holds out for others. Catherine realizes that she is attractive both to Ferguson and her male lover and is therefore constantly negotiating with her body to fit her roles: it is as though "she experiences frustration with restrictive gender codes and a sense of powerlessness" (Meshram 101). She postpones her wedding to Henry because she looked too matronly in her pregnancy. She also wishes to revert to her slim girlish form so as to remain exciting for him. Contradictorily, Catherine promises to be 'ashamed' for her pregnancy to console a distraught Ferguson, who is consumed by jealousy on learning of her love affair.

Similarly, Henry's body undergoes multiple changes and each change reveals a new sexual stance. As a part of the 'war machinery', his sexuality perches between a raw sexual need for prostitutes and an affectionate dependence on fellow soldiers. As an injured soldier, he becomes easily vulnerable to sympathy from his male friend Rinaldi and his female lover, Catherine. Rinaldi (whose own sexuality is the most dubious) is inevitably drawn closer to him; calling him 'baby' and even wanting Henry to kiss him. Henry too cannot help but admire Rinaldi's "fine surgeon's hands" and "his hair shiny and parted smoothly" when the latter bends to examine his knee. Ironically, Catherine acquiesces to Henry's sexual advances when he is no longer healthy but badly injured. She is described by Modelmog as 'sexually adventurous' because 'to have sex with the wounded Frederic Henry, she (Catherine) must assume the position on the top' (364). The adventurous sexual expression and the unconventional modes of sex are a prerequisite of the war spirit; which propagated freedom in every sense and a negation of all that was old, established and considered immutable. Henry describes his sexual urge for Catherine as "wildness". It was made

of the will to 'conquer' rather than 'win' in keeping with the war instinct.

As an absconder in civilian clothes, Henry feels like 'a masquerader' and even adopts the guise of a bearded lover and a 'make-believe' husband and this marks the beginning of the brief phase of unadulterated love in his life. The shedding of the war uniform also enables shedding of so many negative emotions associated with war. He loses the crudity of a soldier hungry for sex and transforms into a fictitious lover who traverses the misty mountains of Switzerland with his lady love. However, his vision of sexual love is inhibited by war: with Catherine's death, the brief allusion of true love is shattered and Henry reverts to his former hard cored self: "And this was the price you paid for sleeping together. This was the end of the trap" (227). He feels no affection for his son because he was born at a time when the bubble of their mythical happiness had finally burst and reality stood gaping: war stood mocking. The dead boy is objectified as "a byproduct of good nights in Milan" (227). In the final scenes before Catherine's death, the body once again becomes instrumental for exposing the disintegrating romantic allusions of the couple. Gasping for breath, Catherine realizes that the dream was finally over: "I am almost done, darling. I'm going all to pieces" (228).

Just as her body is over emphasized for its beauty throughout the story, it is made to suffer with the same intensity in the closing scenes. She is described as 'dead' and 'grey' while she is still alive: "I thought Catherine was dead. She looked dead". The skin that was once "as smooth as piano keys" is now scarred with a "high welted ridge and skilful-stitches like a cobbler's" (231).

Henry's body is affected too, physically as well as spiritually. He becomes more human; more sensitive to his physical needs. He feels hungry, oscillates between hope and despair and lives through each stage of Catherine's death. "Yes, but what if she should die? She can't die. Why should she die? (227). The fantasy had ended and so did the pretense of a healthy and fertile sexuality.

Since Catherine has more than one role to play in the novel, she is the most physically assertive

character of the novel. Much emphasis is laid on her body and its various configurations. In the nurse's uniform, she looks beautiful but she represents a system and an ideology which demands "very special behavior". She smacks Henry because he was violating the rules of that system in attempting to kiss her. Her sexuality as a nurse is of a philanthropic nature, as demanded by war to tend to her lover suffering from a "sabre cut" and "a wounded shoulder" or having been "shot through the head". Her association with Ferguson (though not without implications of homosexuality) is linked with her role assigned uniformed body. Ferguson draws comfort from Catherine's sexual propriety and the disciplined morality she exhibits as a nurse and therefore is shocked to see her uniform shed pregnant body.

Much later, her pregnant body refutes all official and social inhibitions. With her body transforming through pregnancy, the war also alters in significance. It recedes into the background and the beauty of the mountains and the serenity of winter take over the general climate of the novel. In the lap of nature, Catherine's pregnancy endorses a new sexual freedom. Her guiltless reference to herself as Henry's wife and the way she legitimizes her relationship with him saying she didn't feel like a "whore" the way she did amidst the hotel "furnishings" in Milan, stands in contrast to her discrete sexual behavior when she was a war nurse. In the Swiss mountains, Catherine's sexuality is in its most elemental form: aspiring for fertility and regeneration. By re visualizing war as capable of nurturing happiness, Catherine violates the 'war culture'. Her 'constructive' sexuality leads to her final annihilation. There is a gruesome contrast between her pregnant body swelling with life and hope and its relegation to a deflated 'statue' that gave birth to an ugly lifeless 'thing'. Catherine's lifeless body and her still born child are symbolic of countless war deaths, even the 'operating theatre in the novel's final scene bears a metaphoric relationship to earlier war scenes' (Strychacz 99).

4. Androgyny and the dual shades of war

War in FTA is not 'war' in the traditional sense: responsible merely for killings and

deprivations. It is much more. It is rich in symbolic significance since it juxtaposes many dichotomous strands: death and fertility, love and enmity, order and chaos to name but a few. Besides, influencing other sexual tendencies, war in being multifaceted reflects one of the strongest themes of the novel: androgyny. Androgynous behavior is undertaken in the novel, not purely as a sexual motivation but as a natural pre requisite to the instability of war. Gender is enacted and sexuality, over hauled, to keep pace with the oscillating pace of war. Hemingway's love for 'the outdoors' flows through the graphic descriptions of war. He is awed by its physical enormity and throughout the novel; war is equated with nature, emotions and life. War is omnipotent and perennial and can be related to all natural circumstances and each aspect of human demeanor, as pointed by Farrell: "the ongoing war comes to feel like a part of the natural environment itself, constant and enduring rather than man-made" (34). It can also invert sexuality as when "Hemingway uses the aggressive masculinist metaphor of pregnant soldiers protecting their cartridges under their capes" (Higonnet 215). The novel begins with descriptions of the landscape and the conditions of war:

"In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees" (8).

In a very tantalizing manner, Hemingway beautifies war presenting it parallel to nature and in the process also empowers it with human qualities. As observed by Rudy: "His (Hemingway's) magical humanity inhabits horrendous violence as majestic nature does torrential rain" (76). He goes on to say that in FTA "human and natural landscapes" combine in an "irrepressible vitality". The irrepressible vitality of war becomes a catalyst for a human love affair. Since it is the most resolute protagonist of the novel, war like the other characters possesses a gendered identity. The androgynous streak in FTA is best described through Catherine's character and Catherine herself is best

felt through the war. This is described by Putnam, as an example of "Hemingway's treatment of nature within a paradigm of the use of the feminine in the description of nature" (109). Catherine is introduced through the war apparatus: white uniform, a thin rattan stick and her feminine beauty seems spun out of war. It is as though she has emerged from the smoke of combat with her "tawny skin" and "gray eyes". The most remarkable aspect of Catherine's character is the meticulous gender balance that Hemingway sustains through her person. She is neither too feminine nor too manly and yet she is both, in perfect proportion. She longs to heal her trauma by "uniting wholly with an Other, often aspiring to an androgynous appearance to symbolize a merging of selves with a male partner" (Farrell 16). At one such moment, she says to Henry: "Oh, darling, I want you so much I want to be you too" (213). As observed by James, Hemmingway's "narrative re inscribes the male body's vulnerability in war time onto the otherwise powerful body of the nurse" (114). He goes onto say that Hemingway assigns the most 'feminizing aspects of male war experience' to Catherine Barkley. Likewise, she also represents the dual aspects of war: exercising power and influence to bring about a phenomenal change and on the other hand causing surrender and death through submission and sacrifice. Catherine is powerful and voluptuous like the raging war in her influence over Henry and in her ability to change the entire course of the novel from a dreary war document into a magnificent love story. She blends in perfectly with the war because she possesses all its hues. She is powerful and voluptuous: Henry surrenders to her just as he had unconsciously surrendered to the war. She takes him across the boundaries of sexual want and introduces him to sublime love. Before he met Catherine, war was the only controlling power in Henry's life; it had him psychologically and physically in its grip but later she became his sole navigator. She gave him a vision of hope amidst the darkest spells of war. In this sense, she stands for the redeeming qualities of war: the carnivalesque hope of betterment, fertility in the face of destruction and beauty in the face of ugliness. However, her struggles through childbirth and her gentle surrender to death symbolize her

indigenous female fragility and the evil outcome of war: loss and death.

5. War and heterosexual love

Heterosexual love is unheard of in FTA. It is eyed with suspicion, discouraged and even resisted. For most characters in the novel, romantic love is either a forgotten memory or something that has ceased to exist. Love was lost to the 'lost generation'. People experienced love in fragments, in distorted images and never desired for the 'whole': never sought the rudiments. Ironically, if war is responsible for obliterating healthy sexual love from the lives of the people, it offers for these very people a nostalgic reconstruction of that obliterated love. Henry and Catherine's romance is one such reconstruction: It is a war fable and according to Meshram a 'love affair, which blossoms glamorously from the mud of war' (110) or as described by Vernon 'In A Farewell to Arms, Hemingway hides homoeroticism in the least likely place - within the famous heterosexual romance of Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley' (71). It evolves through war, is nourished by war and is destroyed by war. It is true that war is the greatest provocateur in Catherine and Henry's life because it gave them the courage to defy all social barriers, to corrupt the ethics of war and to violate the general demeanor of that period by believing in the obsolete values of love and fidelity. The war paradoxically encouraged them to dream all that it physically and spiritually inhibited: it made them believe in love and happiness and distanced them from the community of the real war survivors like Renaldi and Ferguson who confronted it's (war's) hostility with perseverance and maintained its sanctity by not attributing any romantic traits to it.

When Henry first sees Catherine she is in uniform. She symbolizes the softer aspects of war: hope and healing. Immediately, Henry is able to see the distinction between her and the girls who "climbed all over you" yet he does not fall in love with her. She merely channelizes his sexuality bringing in the element of restraint and in doing so offers a contrast between coarse sex and refined love. Henry and Catherine are perpetually haunted by war and its 'magnitude and madness' (Meshram

110) and it is under the effect of war that they awaken to their sexual needs. Their first real love encounter is amidst countless reminders of war. Henry woke up in dirty bandages and with the feeling of 'being back at the front' and as usual Catherine 'looked, fresh, young and beautiful' and offered an escape from war. After their sexual interlude Henry's 'wildness was gone' but he sensed the first yearnings of love and felt finer than he had ever felt. Amidst the smell of blasted clay and freshly shattered flint was Catherine, the contrast was over whelming and too much for Henry to bear as he had said to her earlier, "And then you are so very beautiful" (23). The incident sparked two separate responses whereas for Henry it was a momentary escape from war, for Catherine it marked the beginning of a tumultuous relationship "Because we're going to have a strange life" (24). War was physically and mentally ingrained in the couple. They could never escape it. Catherine is aware of its omnipotence when she says "It's very hard. There's no place to drop it" (23). Henceforth, the lovers trudge through the war, exteriorizing it by personifying all its aspects. Their love affair is laborious, constantly making demands on their body and their peace of mind. They are displaced from their assigned stations and they suffer emotionally and physically. The rowing incident is an example of one of the most taxing physical experiences for Henry and even when they successfully crossed into Switzerland they had to fake identities to escape the law. Interestingly, they make war tangible. We see and feel the war through them because they humanize each composite of war: the woe, the suffering, the altruistic quality and most importantly the futility of it all.

Gradually, the lovers withdraw into a protective stupor, where they could denounce all manmade laws and live by their own terms. Heterosexual love in FTA reflects a new mode of sexuality which does not conform to any prior or prevailing standards and which is more magnanimous in nature. It allows the couple to follow their own religion. They believe themselves to be "married privately" not feeling any obligation towards the church or state. They tagged themselves as husband and wife without any qualms. They continued

hoping for a happy future, they named their unborn child; they planned a 'splendid marriage', never cared much about money or family and went on living in a trance like state. They are self willed, indifferent and independent as the war. "We live in a country where nothing makes any difference. Isn't it grand how we never see anyone?"(215). It gave them courage to say things like: "You are my religion" and "Thank god I am not your family" because they had long ago 'explicitly replace (d) traditional religion with the religion of each other' (Vernon 219). Catherine wished that they grow hair of the same length. She wanted to extract gonorrhea to feel the pain Henry had felt. She even wanted to turn American like Henry in order to remove all earthly distinctions and become his equal. Heterosexuality in FTA, more than ever symbolizes empathy and generosity for the loved one, to the extent of self negation. It is a deliberate obsession for self destruction. The priest predicted for Henry such a love: "When you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve" (57). Henry and Catherine go much ahead and ruin themselves for each other and once again serve to high light the futility and purposelessness of war.

War in FTA is not of a permanent disposition: it functions in spells which waver between periods of violence and peace; producing feelings either of despair or hope. War and its changing modes cast a deep impact on Henry and Catherine who steer their relationship according to its temperature because it is the only massive reality they have ever known and one which anchors their vision of life and according to which they maneuver their sexuality. Their first summer together was 'lovely'. It aligned with the conditions of war: "I do not remember much about the days, except that they were very hot and that there were many victories in the papers." Corresponding with the many victories was Henry's own health: "I was very healthy and my legs healed quickly" and his love affair with Catherine: "It was lovely in the nights and if we could only touch each other we were happy" (86).

Though they were placidly happy that summer, their love had not yet stood the test of

time. It had not been seasoned by pain and suffering. The brutality of war, in the true sense was still unknown to them. It was only after Henry's close encounter with death in the shooting incident with the battle police and his dangerous escape by plunging in the cold river water) did he realize that he was part of a meaningless war which was only spreading carnage. The unwavering precision with which the war operated was astonishing as well as motivating for Henry: It taught him to love unconditionally and with intensity, just as the war killed passionately and insensibly: "The questioners had that beautiful detachment and devotion to stern justice of men dealing in death without being in any danger of it" (162).

The war had left its imprints on Catherine as well; she had lost one lover to it and objectified his memory in the leather bound stick which she carried around. Their relationship had remained unfulfilled because the war had psychologically uprooted them. Catherine explains her romance with her first lover in short confused statements which alternate between: "If I would have known" and "I know all about it now" and "I didn't know" (18). Catherine had been unsure about her sexual rights because war was bafflingly unpredictable. However, her first loss "in the Somme" had taught her to capitalize on her sexuality, pushing her into a stoic love affair with Henry. For her second love prospect, she confronts the war with her sexual powers: her beauty, her womanhood and her ability to become a mother. It is difficult to imagine Catherine beyond the war and equally difficult to imagine that her romance with Henry could culminate into a successful reality. She dies because she was a hallucination that arose from the ruins of war and hallucinations are never real. Heterosexual love in FTA is a war borne fantasy. It is short lived because Hemingway never intended to romanticize war, on the contrary, he exposes its ugliness by showing how far it can deceive and destroy.

6. Conclusion

In making war so real and corporal, Hemingway once again reflects his passion for the raw energy found in nature: war in FTA is not contrived by man, it is depicted as an omnipotent

force of nature. Though, war is not glorified in FTA, it is the most moving expression of modern man's struggle to rediscover himself after being spiritually and psychologically uprooted. In the words of Spilka, 'For with Hemingway the great outdoors is chiefly a state of mind, a projection of moral and emotional attitudes on to a physical arena' (37). Ironically, though war is responsible for man's devastation, it develops into a vision which transcends the conventionalities of human laws by establishing the importance of the 'philanthropic' over the 'moral'. It becomes the gauge, against which the characters measure their happiness, predict their future and above all shape and direct their sexuality. All that the war upholds is articulated through the sexual endeavors of the lost generation: a stubborn and misconstrued intensity, an unwavering resilience and most importantly an unfounded hope. Sexuality and its various modes align with the different aspects of war to develop a rehabilitated ideal of life centering on sexual freedom with the hope of reviving the greater emotions of love and humanity. Through this novel, Hemingway scrutinizes war and all its adjoining realities and presents his people with fresh ideals for survival and happiness. It is as Meshram says, "the novel epitomizes the whole of the American response to the first world war. It thus becomes a representative of its time" (19).

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