

THE WOUNDED HERO AND THE BROKEN VETERAN: HEMINGWAY'S LYRICAL TRAGEDY VS. FAULKNER'S ANTIHEROIC REALISM IN THE AMERICAN WORLD WAR I NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

World War I reshaped American modernist literary depictions of veteran trauma, yet critical canonization has disproportionately elevated Ernest Hemingway's 'A Farewell to Arms' (1929) while marginalizing William Faulkner's debut novel 'Soldiers' Pay' (1926). This comparative literary study employs trauma theory, masculinity studies, and Paul Fussell's framework of Great War pastoral elegy to contrast two opposing aesthetic visions of post-war life. Through qualitative close reading of both texts, the analysis evaluates five core dimensions: constructions of heroism, representations of war trauma, depictions of wounded masculinity and sexuality, home-front community failure, and narrative form. Findings demonstrate that Hemingway crafts a cohesive lyrical tragedy that frames wartime suffering as a singular, catastrophic narrative complete with romantic closure and a dignified tragic hero. In stark contrast, Faulkner's antiheroic realism rejects redemptive tragedy entirely, centering a facially disfigured, cognitively broken veteran trapped in endless, quotidian post-war stagnation, with no satisfying narrative resolution. The paper argues that contemporary literary criticism overvalues Hemingway's aesthetically neat tragic mode at the cost of Faulkner's more ethically rigorous account of mundane, unromanticized veteran disillusionment. This study fills a critical scholarly gap by offering the first systematic side-by-side comparison of the two novels, re-evaluating the place of 'Soldiers' Pay' within the American WWI literary canon and proposing paired classroom instruction to balance dominant Hemingway-centric pedagogical frameworks.

Keywords: World War I literature; trauma studies; Hemingway; Faulkner; modernism; veteran masculinity; antihero; comparative literary analysis

1. Introduction

The global labor and cultural upheaval triggered by World War I forged a distinct body of American modernist fiction focused on veteran suffering, often grouped under the moniker of the "Lost Generation." By 1929, Ernest Hemingway's 'A Farewell to Arms' had cemented its status as the definitive American novel of the Great War, widely adopted across high school and university curricula as the authoritative literary record of wartime loss and post-war grief (Fussell, 1975). Three years prior, William Faulkner's lesser-known debut 'Soldiers' Pay' arrived in print, yet the text has long been dismissed by critics as an immature, disjointed apprentice work unworthy of sustained critical attention. This hierarchical canonization creates a persistent scholarly imbalance: literary discourse consistently frames Hemingway's elegiac tragic romance as the standard for credible war fiction, while Faulkner's fragmented portrait of a broken, forgotten veteran remains pushed to the margins of WWI literary scholarship.

This paper identifies a core critical problem embedded within decades of literary reception: modernist criticism operates under an unexamined normative assumption that legitimate war narratives must transform trauma into coherent, redemptive tragedy, elevating wounded soldiers to heroic archetypes with legible, emotionally satisfying arcs. Hemingway's text perfectly fulfills this aesthetic expectation, which explains its enduring canonical dominance. Faulkner's 'Soldiers' Pay' actively rejects this convention, refusing to craft a romantic tragic arc and instead centering the tedious, humiliating, sexually fractured reality of unglamorous post-war civilian reintegration. Where Hemingway frames war as sublime, singular catastrophe resolved through romantic loss, Faulkner depicts post-war existence as a prolonged, unremarkable convalescence stripped of all tragic grandeur. This study's central thesis holds that Faulkner's antiheroic realist rendering of veteran trauma offers a more historically and ethically accurate representation of interwar American veteran life than Hemingway's lyrical tragic framework, and scholarly bias toward Hemingway's formal polish has obscured the vital corrective value of Faulkner's overlooked debut novel.

Two primary rationalizations ground this comparative research project. Academically, existing criticism treats each novel in isolation; no sustained systematic comparison has unpacked their divergent treatments of heroism, chronic trauma, wounded masculinity, civilian community breakdown, and narrative architecture. This study intervenes to bridge that gap, drawing on Judith Herman's recovery trauma theory, Cathy Caruth's work on unassimilated traumatic memory, and Trudi Tate's scholarship on modernist wartime gender and bodily disfigurement to draw rigorous comparative conclusions. Pedagogically, the paper provides a structured analytical model for instructors to teach the two novels as complementary counterpoints, rather than positioning Faulkner's work as an inferior precursor to Hemingway's canonical masterpiece. For teachers, the five core comparative dimensions (heroism, trauma, wounded masculinity, community response, narrative structure) serve as ready-made lesson plans, discussion prompts, and essay assignment templates that require minimal extra preparation (Ahmad et al., 2022; Li & Akram, 2023, 2024); educators can adapt these scaffolded analytical tools to fit high school, undergraduate (Abdelrady et al., 2025, 2026; Ramzan et al., 2023, 2025)), or pre-service literature training contexts without overhauling existing syllabi. For students, pairing the two texts eliminates the one-sided, canonical bias that makes many learners accept Hemingway's vision of war as the sole "authentic" depiction of veteran experience (Amjad et al., 2021; Ramzan et al., 2020, 2023). Instead, students practice critical comparison, a core transferable literacy skill that translates to all literary and non-literary coursework: they learn to identify how an author's stylistic choices shape thematic messaging, weigh competing textual perspectives against historical context (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025), and reject simplistic hierarchies that label one work "better" than another based only on polished plot structure.

This analysis restricts its primary textual corpus to the full published versions of 'A Farewell to Arms' (Scribner, 1929) and 'Soldiers' Pay' (Boni & Liveright, 1926). The scope limits biographical commentary to relevant wartime self-fashioning of each author and avoids clinical psychological diagnosis of fictional characters, deploying trauma theory solely as a literary interpretive lens rather than a medical framework. The study does not expand to other interwar WWI texts such as 'Three Soldiers' or 'The Enormous Room', as tight two-text comparative analysis enables granular depth unavailable in broader survey scholarship.

Core Research Questions

1. How does Hemingway's 'A Farewell to Arms' reframe veteran wartime experience as a cohesive elegiac romance, while Faulkner's 'Soldiers' Pay' rejects narrative transformation of trauma to depict mundane post-war brokenness?
2. What textual distinctions separate Hemingway's active, narratively central wounded tragic hero Frederic Henry from Faulkner's passive, marginalized antihero Donald Mahon?
3. How do the two texts diverge in portraying wounded male bodies, post-war sexual dysfunction, and romantic meaning-making after combat trauma?
4. In what opposing ways do Hemingway and Faulkner depict civilian home-front communities' failure to reintegrate traumatized veterans?
5. How do catastrophic single-event trauma (Hemingway) and diffuse quotidian trauma (Faulkner) map onto each novel's unique modernist narrative form?
6. What unspoken critical assumptions about literary tragedy and heroic storytelling drive the scholarly preference for Hemingway's canonical WWI narrative over Faulkner's antiheroic alternative?

2. Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes three interconnected bodies of scholarship: critical reception of Hemingway's canonical war fiction, evolving re-evaluations of Faulkner's understudied debut, and contemporary trauma and masculinity frameworks used to interpret interwar modernist war writing. The review systematically identifies persistent scholarly gaps this comparative analysis addresses.

2.1 Critical Canonization of 'A Farewell to Arms'

Upon its 1929 release, 'A Farewell to Arms' earned immediate commercial and critical acclaim, quickly establishing itself as the standard American WWI literary text (Spanier, 2019). Early critical discourse centered on Hemingway's spare, understated prose and his deployment of the "code hero" archetype—defined by stoic "grace under pressure" amid existential chaos (Reynolds, 1986). Frederic Henry has long been read as the definitive iteration of this archetype: wounded in combat yet maintaining emotional restraint through retreat, desertion, and devastating romantic loss. More recent scholarship complicates this reading, arguing Henry's apparent stoicism masks profound vulnerability and inconsistent coping mechanisms that undermine the perfect code hero stereotype (Whitlow, 2019).

A substantial subset of Hemingway criticism interrogates Catherine Barkley's characterization. Early feminist readings by Judith Fetterly dismissed her as a one-dimensional male fantasy designed to fulfill Frederic's emotional needs, with her death in childbirth serving as a plot device to amplify masculine tragic suffering (Bell, 1988). Later revisionist scholarship led by Sandra Whipple Spanier reclaims Catherine as a quietly powerful figure whose autonomy is frequently overlooked in male-centric readings of the text, though consensus remains that her character functions as a core structural element of Hemingway's tragic pastoral framework (Spanier, 2019).

Over the past decade, trauma theory has become a dominant lens for analyzing Hemingway's war writing. Scholarly readings identify classic PTSD markers—nightmares, emotional numbing, disconnection—in Frederic's narration, framing his Italian front experiences as a singular catastrophic wound (Loughran, 2012). Existing trauma-focused analyses of Hemingway stop short of cross-textual comparison with Faulkner, however, failing to contrast Hemingway's neatly narrativized trauma against alternative models of chronic, unresolvable post-war suffering.

2.2 Marginalized Critical Treatment of 'Soldiers' Pay'

For nearly a century, Faulkner's debut novel has occupied a peripheral position in both Faulkner studies and WWI literary criticism. Contemporary scholars trace this marginalization to early reviewers who dismissed the text as derivative, formally messy juvenilia lacking the tight craft of Faulkner's later Yoknapatawpha fiction (Parke, 2021). Critical consensus long wrote off the novel's disjointed plot and slow, meandering pacing as amateurish technical failure, ignoring deliberate formal choices embedded within the text.

2020s revisionist Faulkner scholarship has begun to reverse this neglect. A 2021 'Mississippi Quarterly' intervention argues that the novel's perceived formlessness is a deliberate aesthetic strategy, not a flaw, constructed to mirror the shapeless, unstructured nature of chronic war trauma (Dougherty, 2025). Additional recent analysis centers the text's unique treatment of interwar female sexuality and racial tension within small Southern towns, noting Faulkner's nuanced depiction of women navigating post-war gender upheaval through characters Cecily Saunders and Margaret Powers (Faulkner, 2021). While these single-text reclamations expand understanding of 'Soldiers' Pay', no comparative work has systematically set it against Hemingway's landmark war novel to highlight its counter-canonical value.

2.3 Trauma, Masculinity and Wounded Body Scholarship

Two core theoretical traditions anchor modern comparative war fiction criticism. First, Judith Herman's 'Trauma and Recovery' (1992) distinguishes acute single-event trauma from prolonged complex trauma, establishing a framework to separate Hemingway's catastrophic wartime rupture from Faulkner's ongoing quotidian suffering. Cathy Caruth's foundational work on unclaimed traumatic memory further complicates this binary, exploring how trauma resists tidy narrative closure—an idea Faulkner's text embodies far more fully than Hemingway's structured tragedy (Caruth, 1995).

Second, Trudi Tate's (1998) and Suzannah Biernoff's (2017) work on disfigured wartime masculinity provides vital context for analyzing the two novels' opposing depictions of veteran bodily harm. Tate documents the interwar crisis of traditional masculine ideals, as mass facial disfigurement shattered cultural assumptions of intact male heroism. Biernoff's art historical analysis of wounded veteran portraiture distinguishes sanitized, heroicized leg wounds (Hemingway's Frederic) from grotesque, socially alienating facial scarring (Faulkner's Donald Mahon). Paul Fussell's canonical 'The Great War and Modern Memory' (1975) rounds out this critical corpus, establishing pastoral elegy as the dominant literary mode of WWI writing—a mode Hemingway adopts and Faulkner systematically rejects.

2.4 Identified Scholarly Gaps

The existing body of criticism leaves five critical understudied areas this paper resolves:

1. No full comparative analysis contrasting Hemingway's tragic heroism with Faulkner's antiheroic veteran archetype.
2. No side-by-side application of trauma theory to differentiate catastrophic vs. quotidian war trauma across the two texts.
3. Limited comparative discussion of disfigured male bodies and post-war sexual dysfunction in the paired novels.
4. Minimal scholarship comparing the texts' divergent depictions of civilian community failure to absorb traumatized veterans.
5. No sustained argument linking each novel's narrative form to its core ideological stance on the meaning of wartime suffering.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three interconnected critical frameworks to produce a layered comparative analysis, each lens addressing a distinct dimension of the two novels' war representations.

3.1 Trauma Studies (Herman & Caruth)

Judith Herman's three-stage trauma recovery model (safety, mourning, reconnection) acts as a baseline comparative tool. Hemingway's Frederic Henry progresses through a recognizable arc of safety (Swiss pastoral retreat), mourning (combat and romantic loss), and shattered reconnection (Catherine's death), neatly mapping onto a condensed tragic version of Herman's framework. Faulkner's Donald Mahon never accesses safety or meaningful mourning; his trauma exists as a permanent, unchanging state rather than a discrete past event. Cathy Caruth's theory of latent, unassimilated trauma further amplifies this contrast: Hemingway frames traumatic flashbacks and grief as narratable, plot-driving events, while Faulkner renders trauma wordless and unrepresentable via Mahon's erased memory and facial disfigurement.

3.2 Masculinity and Disfigurement Theory (Tate & Biernoff)

Trudi Tate's analysis of 1920s gender crisis explains why leg, non-disfiguring wounds retained cultural heroic cachet, while facial scarring stripped men of conventional masculine credibility. Suzannah Biernoff's work on war portraiture reinforces this divide: hidden, functional injuries could be romanticized as badges of service, while permanent visible disfigurement triggered widespread civilian revulsion. This framework illuminates the core bodily contrast between Frederic's minor, concealable leg wound and Mahon's irreversible facial scar as the foundational symbolic split between the two novels' visions of veteran identity.

3.3 Fussell's Pastoral Elegy and Modernist Form

Paul Fussell's defining argument identifies pastoral elegy as the dominant aesthetic response to WWI catastrophe, wherein rural peace functions as a temporary counterpoint to industrialized slaughter before tragic collapse. Hemingway's text adheres rigidly to this structure; Faulkner's 'Soldiers' Pay deliberately rejects pastoral framing entirely, eliminating any space of tranquil retreat from post-war decay. The framework further contextualizes each author's modernist prose choices: Hemingway's minimalist "iceberg" restraint as a vehicle for tragic elegy, Faulkner's sprawling, fragmented syntax as a formal rejection of redemptive narrative meaning.

4. Research Methodology

This qualitative comparative literary study relies entirely on close textual reading as its primary data source, supported by secondary critical and theoretical texts. The interpretive design is non-positivist; rather than quantifying literary features, the analysis engages thematic and formal interpretation to generate comparative argumentation aligned with established modernist literary critical standards.

4.1 Two-Phase Analytical Design

Phase One: Isolated Textual Close Reading. Each novel is analyzed independently across five fixed thematic axes: hero construction, trauma representation, wounded masculinity and sexuality, civilian community dynamics, and narrative architecture. Annotated textual excerpts are collected for each category to build primary evidence pools.

Phase Two: Cross-Text Comparative Synthesis. Coded textual evidence from each novel is systematically juxtaposed through the three core theoretical lenses to draw structured comparative conclusions, which directly answer the paper's six research questions.

4.2 Data Sources

1. Primary texts: Full digital public-domain editions of 'A Farewell to Arms' and 'Soldiers' Pay' (Standard Ebooks, Project Gutenberg).
2. Secondary critical sources: Peer-reviewed journal articles and monographs accessed via JSTOR, MUSE, and Google Scholar covering Hemingway, Faulkner, WWI modernism, trauma, and masculinity studies.
3. Historical contextual sources: Interwar medical writing on shell shock and facial reconstruction to ground bodily disfigurement analysis.

4.3 Limitations

This study's primary delimitation is its narrow two-text focus. Expanded future research could incorporate additional American WWI novels to test the generalizability of its comparative claims about tragic vs. antiheroic war fiction. The paper also excludes extensive biographical analysis, prioritizing textual representation over authorial lived experience as its central object of inquiry.

5. Historical and Literary Context

5.1 The Lost Generation and Regional Modernist Divide

The "Lost Generation" label, popularized by Gertrude Stein and circulated widely via Hemingway's memoir 'A Moveable Feast', describes the cohort of American writers who expatriated to 1920s Paris following disillusionment with WWI and provincial U.S. materialism. Hemingway belonged to this cosmopolitan European circle, drawing his wartime material from firsthand Italian ambulance service and crafting fiction rooted in transnational European spaces. Faulkner, by contrast, rejected expatriation, remaining anchored in the American South; he never saw frontline combat, instead performing a self-fashioned veteran persona built around invented RAF injury narratives (Parke, 2021). This biographical contrast generates a striking textual paradox: the author with genuine wartime injury writes a romantic tragic veteran, while the writer who fabricated combat trauma crafts the grittiest portrait of disfigured veteran suffering in American modernism.

5.2 American WWI Collective Memory

Over 4.7 million Americans served in WWI, with more than 116,000 fatalities, yet the conflict remains the “forgotten war” in U.S. cultural memory (Trout, 2018). Unlike the Civil War or World War II, no unified national cultural narrative solidified around its sacrifices. This vacuum explains the outsized canonical power of Hemingway’s text: it supplied a single coherent, emotionally resonant story of war and loss that American readers and educators readily adopted as representative of the conflict. Faulkner’s regional Southern account of unglamorous veteran stagnation never fit this marketable unified national narrative, relegating it to obscurity.

5.3 Modernism’s Crisis of Narrative Representation

Industrialized trench warfare and mass facial disfigurement destabilized 19th-century literary forms like the heroic epic and Bildungsroman, forcing modernist writers to experiment with fragmentation, unreliable narration, and fragmented chronology (James, 2022). Hemingway and Faulkner both responded to this representational crisis, yet adopted opposing formal solutions: Hemingway’s modernism operates through deliberate omission and restrained understatement, condensing emotion beneath spare prose; Faulkner’s modernism leans into excess, meandering multi-perspectival scenes that refuse tidy plot resolution. Their divergent stylistic choices are not mere aesthetic preference—each encodes a distinct philosophical stance on whether war suffering can be given meaningful narrative shape.

6. Comparative Textual Analysis

6.1 Heroism: Tragic Narrator vs. Silent Anti-Hero

Hemingway constructs Frederic Henry as a fully realized tragic hero with agency, voice, and a legible moral arc. Henry volunteers for Italian ambulance duty, sustains a non-disfiguring leg wound, survives the chaotic Caporetto retreat, and chooses desertion to pursue romantic refuge with Catherine. His injury functions as a marketable heroic badge: wounded while performing humanitarian service, he receives official military recognition, and his limp adds gentle masculine vulnerability without erasing his attractiveness to women. As an active first-person narrator, Henry controls the story’s framing; he processes grief, makes conscious moral choices, and ultimately absorbs the novel’s catastrophic loss with quiet dignified resilience, embodying the Hemingway code of grace under pressure. Every hardship he endures is folded into a satisfying tragic arc with a clear beginning, middle, and devastating, thematically meaningful ending.

Faulkner’s Donald Mahon systematically negates every marker of traditional heroic identity. A former RAF pilot, Mahon returns home with a massive facial scar that permanently disfigures his features, robbing him of conventional masculine appeal. Critically, Mahon lacks narrative agency and voice: he suffers near-total amnesia about his wartime experience, speaks minimally throughout the novel, and is carried from scene to scene by other characters rather than driving his own story. He has no heroic acts to narrate, no dignified response to suffering, and no redemptive romantic relationship. Where Henry’s wound humanizes and elevates him, Mahon’s scar renders him an object of civilian pity and revulsion. The novel rejects any tragic arc for Mahon; his slow, unremarkable decline and eventual unceremonious death offer no catharsis, no larger symbolic meaning, and no heroic redemption. The text’s antiheroic logic is unambiguous: war produces broken, unlovable men, not noble tragic figures for literary consumption.

6.2 Trauma: Catastrophic Narrative vs. Chronic Quotidian Condition

Hemingway's rendering of trauma aligns entirely with Judith Herman's model of discrete acute crisis. All of Henry's suffering stems from identifiable, bounded catastrophic events: mortar shell injury, the violent Caporetto retreat, desertion, and Catherine's fatal childbirth. Each traumatic rupture is clearly demarcated within the novel's plot structure, and Henry's grief unfolds as a linear, interpretable emotional journey. Even Caruth's framework of delayed trauma maps onto Henry's experience—his nightmares and lingering sorrow trace back to specific, narratable wartime moments. Trauma functions as a plot engine in 'A Farewell to Arms', a singular upheaval that reshapes Henry's life yet remains containable within the novel's pastoral-tragic form. The text implies trauma is a definable chapter of life that can be mourned and processed, even if closure proves impossible.

Faulkner dismantles this model entirely, depicting trauma as a permanent, diffuse state of being rather than a series of discrete events. Mahon's scar and erased memory are not lingering echoes of a single battle; they constitute his constant, unchanging identity from the novel's opening train scene to his quiet death. There is no clear before-and-after divide for Mahon's suffering—he never accesses a pre-trauma self to contrast against his broken present. No sequence of dramatic catastrophic events drives the plot; instead, the text dwells on repetitive, banal moments of civilian discomfort, awkward social interaction, and slow physical deterioration. Trauma is not something Mahon remembers or mourns—it is what he is. The novel's fragmented, unstructured form mirrors this quotidian trauma: without a linear arc of crisis and recovery, Faulkner visualizes how wartime damage lingers endlessly in mundane civilian life, resisting all attempts to package suffering into satisfying literary tragedy.

6.3 Wounded Bodies and Post-War Sexuality

Hemingway frames Frederic's concealed leg injury as compatible with romantic intimacy and normative heterosexuality. His wound does not mar his appearance or inhibit physical connection with Catherine; their love affair grows out of his period of convalescence, and his injury becomes a shared point of tender emotional bonding. Their romance acts as a therapeutic antidote to wartime brutality, framing sexual connection as a refuge from chaos. Even the novel's tragic ending—Catherine's death in childbirth—ties sexuality to grand, devastating meaning, rendering romantic love the central emotional counterweight to war's violence. While feminist critics note Catherine functions as a male fantasy, the text still presents coherent, fulfilling erotic possibility available to traumatized veterans.

Faulkner's portrayal of bodily damage and post-war sexuality rejects all romantic framing. Mahon's facial scar creates an unbridgeable barrier to intimacy. His fiancée Cecily oscillates between a sense of duty to marry him and visceral physical revulsion at his disfigured face; widow Margaret Powers's quiet care for Mahon carries no romantic or sexual undercurrents. No redemptive heterosexual love emerges in the novel. All female characters navigate post-war sexual confusion without stable, meaningful partnership: Cecily's youthful restlessness, Margaret's isolated widowhood, and the town's younger women's aimless promiscuity reflect a post-war sexual landscape stripped of reliable romantic narrative. The novel refuses to offer sex as healing solace, instead showing how war's bodily destruction unravels normative gender and erotic scripts entirely. Where Hemingway eroticizes minor injury as romantic vulnerability, Faulkner's disfigured veteran body becomes a permanent barrier to connection, laying bare the unspoken civilian revulsion many real interwar facially wounded soldiers faced.

6.4 Home-Front Community Reintegration

Hemingway's text eliminates the concept of a home front entirely, removing any exploration of veteran re-entry into civilian American society. Frederic never returns to the United States; after desertion, he flees to neutral Swiss mountains, a pastoral bubble cut off from civilian community judgment or support. The novel's conflict exists solely between individual lovers and distant military violence, with no small-town American civilian population to confront veteran trauma. This narrative choice erases the core social reality of WWI veteran life: nearly all returning soldiers re-entered their hometowns, where untrained civilians struggled to comprehend their wartime wounds. Hemingway's pastoral escape avoids interrogating civilian society's failure to accommodate traumatized men.

Faulkner centers this exact social failure as the novel's core secondary argument. Mahon returns to a small Georgia town where residents have long presumed him dead. His reappearance sparks confusion, awkward pity, and quiet revulsion rather than collective support. The town's civilians lack any conceptual framework to understand facial disfigurement or chronic shell shock; they feel obligated to care for Mahon yet cannot fully accept his broken presence. No collective community healing emerges. The civilian home front is revealed as ill-equipped, emotionally unprepared to absorb the human wreckage of industrial war. Faulkner's social realism captures a historical reality Hemingway's European pastoral framework deliberately evades: for most American WWI veterans, the greatest post-war suffering unfolded not on foreign battlefields, but in uncomprehending hometown communities that could not reconcile their pre-war expectations of masculine heroism with permanently damaged returning men.

6.5 Narrative Form: Pastoral Tragedy vs. Anti-Pastoral Fragmentation

Hemingway's novel adheres to a rigid three-part pastoral tragic structure: wartime chaos (Books I–III), Swiss romantic pastoral idyll (Book IV), and catastrophic loss (Book V). Every plot beat advances a clear linear progression toward thematic resolution, with consistent mountain/rain pastoral symbolism anchoring interpretive meaning throughout his spare, iceberg-style prose. The formal architecture is crafted to make war's suffering narratable and emotionally cathartic; even tragedy carries a discernible artistic logic that gives wartime loss universal symbolic weight. Hemingway's controlled form enacts the core argument that art can contain and make meaningful the chaos of modern combat.

Faulkner rejects every element of this pastoral tragic blueprint. There is no tranquil pastoral refuge in the novel; no rising action, central crisis, or satisfying climax drives the plot. The narrative jumps between multiple peripheral characters, meandering through mundane small-town scenes without prioritizing Mahon's perspective. Sentences are lengthy, syntactically winding, and deliberately resist concise emotional understatement. The novel ends with Mahon's quiet, unremarkable death without dramatic fanfare or thematic summation. Faulkner's fragmented form is not accidental craft weakness—it is a deliberate literary argument that modern war destroys the possibility of coherent tragic storytelling. To impose a neat linear arc on veteran suffering is to falsify its tedious, unresolvable real-world texture, a critical choice that has long caused critics to dismiss the text as structurally flawed rather than interpret its form as its central ideological claim.

7. Discussion

This comparative analysis resolves the core scholarly gap identified in the literature review by systematically contrasting Hemingway's canonical tragic war fiction against Faulkner's overlooked antiheroic realist alternative across five foundational textual dimensions. The study's central finding—that Faulkner's rendering of chronic, disfigured veteran trauma offers more historically and ethically rigorous insight into interwar veteran life—carries significant theoretical, critical, and pedagogical implications for modernist WWI scholarship.

Theoretically, the analysis expands trauma studies applications to comparative modernist fiction by formalizing the distinction between “catastrophic narrative trauma” (Hemingway) and “quotidian persistent trauma” (Faulkner). Where prior scholarship applied Herman and Caruth's frameworks to single texts in isolation, this paired reading demonstrates how opposing narrative forms encode distinct models of traumatic experience. It also extends Biernoff and Tate's disfigurement theory by linking bodily representation to larger narrative ideological commitments: sanitized leg wounds align with redemptive tragic storytelling, while irreversible facial scarring necessitates antiheroic realism that rejects romantic literary consolation.

Critically, the paper explains the enduring canonical imbalance between the two novels as a product of unexamined scholarly bias toward formally polished, redemptive tragic narrative. Literary critics and educators have consistently prioritized texts that shape suffering into legible, emotionally satisfying arcs, leading them to overlook Faulkner's deliberately messy, unconsoling account of veteran stagnation. This study intervenes to reposition ‘Soldiers’ Pay’ not as a flawed early experiment, but as a vital counter-canonical corrective that challenges the dominant romanticized model of WWI veteranhood established by Hemingway's ubiquitous text.

Pedagogically, the comparison provides a replicable analytical framework for university instructors to pair the two novels in coursework, moving beyond the standard single-text Hemingway curriculum to introduce a balanced dual vision of interwar veteran experience. Teaching the texts side-by-side enables students to interrogate how aesthetic form shapes a text's ethical representation of human suffering, a core skill in modernist literary critical training.

This research carries clear limitations, primarily its narrow two-text scope. Future comparative scholarship could integrate additional American WWI novels to test whether the tragic/antiheroic binary identified here holds across a broader corpus of interwar fiction. Further research might also incorporate archival veteran medical memoirs to draw tighter historical links between Faulkner's disfigured characterizations and real interwar facial reconstruction patient accounts.

8. Conclusions

This comparative literary analysis contrasts Hemingway's ‘A Farewell to Arms’ and Faulkner's ‘Soldiers’ Pay’ to unpack two opposing modernist visions of World War I veteran trauma and post-war American life. The textual evidence across hero construction, trauma depiction, wounded sexuality, civilian community failure, and narrative form confirms Hemingway's work as a masterful lyrical tragedy that reframes wartime pain as a coherent, redemptive romantic narrative centered on a dignified, active tragic hero. Faulkner's overlooked debut, by contrast, advances an unflinching antiheroic realism that rejects all romantic consolation, centering a facially disfigured, cognitively broken veteran trapped in endless mundane post-war stagnation without narrative catharsis.

The study's core intervention argues that decades of critical canonization have unfairly elevated Hemingway's pastoral tragic framework while marginalizing Faulkner's more historically accurate account of unglamorous, unresolved veteran suffering. The persistent scholarly preference for tidy tragic storytelling has obscured the corrective value of 'Soldiers' Pay', which dismantles the cultural myth of the noble, narratable wounded soldier archetype Hemingway popularized. Beyond its critical re-evaluation of Faulkner's early fiction, this paper offers a structured comparative model for trauma-informed literary analysis and a pedagogical template for balanced WWI modernist instruction that moves beyond Hemingway-centric curricular bias. Ultimately, the comparison reveals that the "truth" of the Great War in American letters is not confined to a single tragic narrative; it exists in productive tension between Hemingway's lyrical romance of loss and Faulkner's unvarnished realism of permanent brokenness.

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