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Hemingway's Craft

Sheldon Norman Grebstein

Preface by Harry T. Moore

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WITH A PREFACE BY

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Preface

The title of Sheldon Norman Grebstein's *Hemingway's Craft* promises much. It is time we had a study devoted principally to Hemingway's art as such—his technique as well as his ideas. And this book amply fulfills its promise.

Literary criticism today is too often merely abstract. Too much of it deals entirely with the thematic aspects of written works, either giving scant attention to their organically artistic elements or paying them no heed whatsoever. The situation is extremely different in music and art criticism—yet the arrangement of sound in music and color and shape in art are no more important than the use of language, structure, and similar components of serious literature.

To say this is not to suggest that theme and idea are not an organic necessity in imaginative writing. Of course they are. As John Middleton Murry said in his usually impressive and sometimes annoying book *The Problem of Style*, attempts to separate ingredients in a written work are reminiscent of a statement in Swift's *The Tale of a Tub*: "Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse."

Unlike those literary critics who abstract the thematic element as the only topic of discussion and so remain fixed at one extreme, Professor Grebstein doesn't isolate one aspect of Hemingway: true, he concentrates on the technical side of that author, but does so with meaning always in view.

We have from the first wanted a book on Hemingway in the *Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques* series, and now, after more than a hundred volumes, we have it. About ten years ago I rejected a manuscript discussing this author, politely turning it down because it was entirely thematic. It presented some interesting comments, but they existed in a void. Such novels as *To Have and Have Not* and *Across the River and into the Trees* were discussed as seriously as *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and the early short stories, with not even the vaguest suggestion that there might be qualitative differences among these items. The present book makes no such mistakes, in any direction.

Professor Grebstein says, at the opening of his first chapter, "We begin, as Hemingway began, with the short stories." And the reader begins an exciting volume of criticism. Sheldon Grebstein has read Hemingway since he was a boy, he has used his books in lecture courses and seminars, and he has written about him. Now he presents a full study, so closely packed that not a line is wasted.

He deals with narrative perspectives, structure, dialogue, and similar matters, always perceptively. You begin to wonder what else he can do, and you find that one of his later chapters has the title, "Further Observations on Style and Method." But some of the previous critics have dealt with these subjects; is there anything fresh to say about them?

Plenty.

There is, among other matters, Hemingway's relation to painting. Professor Grebstein quotes the passage from *A Moveable Feast* in which Hemingway mentions the influence of Cézanne on his prose. Dr. Grebstein also refers to Lillian Ross's account of a visit to the Metropolitan Museum with Hemingway and his son, when he spoke of Cézanne as "his" painter and pointed out the trees and rocks in one of the landscapes: "I learned how to make a landscape from Mr. Paul Cézanne."

With a good ear for prose cadences, Professor Greb-

stein shows by notation and diagram just how expert Hemingway's prose is in the visual as well as in the pictorial sense. Then he concludes his critical study with an informing discussion of Hemingway's humor.

The book is further enriched by an appendix examining the manuscripts of *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, with the inclusion of some new material.

It seems to me that this book ranks, with Philip Young's, at the top of all Hemingway criticism. And it will be useful to all serious readers of modern literature, particularly because it deals with an important figure whose achievement is brilliantly analyzed in the following pages.

HARRY T. MOORE

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June 14, 1972

Introduction

That erratic pendulum, critical taste, so recently in the downswing against Hemingway, now moves in an upward arc. Several books, all appreciative, have recently appeared to augment the already substantial body of Hemingway criticism and to counteract the prevailing negative critical trend of the years just before and after the writer's death. With Carlos Baker's *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* we have the definitive biography, and every new year produces at least a score of essays and explications in the scholarly journals. Although Hemingway criticism falls far short of the bulk which has accumulated around such figures as Melville, Twain, and James, and even amounts to less than that dealing with Faulkner and Fitzgerald, there is certainly no scarcity of it. As is the case with many another American author, the writing about Hemingway considerably exceeds the writing by him.

Why, then, crowd another book into the ample shelf of Hemingway exegesis? There are reasons. The most urgent reason is personal: I *must*. Hemingway fascinates me. I have been reading him since I was a boy and I have been studying his work and teaching it for more than twenty years, beginning with my 1950 Columbia M.A. thesis. So, I am compelled to write by a congenial personal demon; and perhaps in writing I can exorcise it. Furthermore, although there are a number of keen, judicious, and comprehensive books, for example those by

Carlos Baker, Philip Young, Earl Rovit, and Jackson Benson, important and relatively neglected areas of Hemingway's fiction remain to be explored. As good as the best Hemingway criticism is, too much of it has been preoccupied with the writer's values, personality, worldview, the Hemingway Code, and so forth. Most critics praise Hemingway's artistry, yet surprisingly few of them have really investigated it intensively, that miracle of craft—or so I deem it—which creates so complex and durable an art from such seemingly scanty and simple materials. In fact, in my review of hundreds of pieces of Hemingway criticism, preparatory to writing this book, I found but a small minority which offered hard, detailed analyses of *technique*. In contrast, surely several thousand pages have been written about the Hemingway Hero and The Code.

Therefore, I will say relatively little about these familiar matters and presume that anyone who reads this book is also already acquainted with them. Instead, my special concern here will be with Hemingway's craftsmanship: those aspects of structure, language, and narrative technique which distinguish his writing from all other. To paraphrase Hemingway, I seek to bring to the surface some of the submerged part of the iceberg. Although my discussion may sometimes reiterate or echo what others have said, it is not usually because I have deliberately and consciously borrowed from them. In my first thoughts about this book I called it "The Neglected Hemingway," and although much Hemingway criticism has appeared during the time between my earliest conception of this study and the final execution of it, my original ambition still largely persists: to treat what others have minimized, slighted, ignored, or merely labeled. However, it could well be the case that I have so thoroughly absorbed the views of previous critics I can no longer separate what I discovered from what I inherited, the result of reading the critics on Hemingway almost as soon as I read Hemingway himself with any real seriousness. Too, in teaching Hemingway over the

years, including several graduate seminars, I have learned a great deal from my students and in the natural course of academic life have gratefully appropriated it as my own. Where I am aware of specific indebtednesses, these are clearly indicated in the notes.

This study depends upon a few fundamental assumptions about Hemingway. First, I believe that despite the shortcomings in even his best work, the relatively narrow range of his material, and the embarrassing badness of his worst books, he is a major and enduring artist rather than a minor writer possessed of a few peculiar aesthetic virtues and scattered glimmerings of genius. Second, as I have already implied, pertinent and memorable as are Hemingway's themes and worldview to the readers of this tormented age, he will last primarily because of his art not his ideas. I repeat a cultural fact that his detractors must also concede: after him the writing of prose fiction was different. Third, his depiction of a vivid and tangible surface reality, of physical action and sensation—in short, his verisimilitude—often merges inextricably with a deep symbolic understructure. The water is so clear it seems shallow to some, but when one dives in, one can go down and down and often never touch bottom.

My ambition is to persuade the reader to share these convictions by calling attention to them in the text itself, although I fear that many are too thoroughly confirmed in their view of Hemingway as a figure of declining importance to be won over by what I have to say. If I convince others whose minds are not yet made up, especially students, I will count my work more than fulfilled. To this end I employ no special method other than that of close reading, nor any critical terminology not current among serious readers. My most severe demand upon the reader is that he know Hemingway's work well.

Although I had hoped, when I first committed myself to writing this book (longer ago than I care to admit), that the Hemingway papers would be open to scholars

so that I might base my study on the "complete" Hemingway, we must still await the construction of the Kennedy Library, where Mrs. Hemingway will deposit her husband's *nachlass*, before such access is possible. However, we can infer from the comments of the two absolutely trustworthy men who have examined this material, Carlos Baker and Philip Young, that nothing will be forthcoming to substantially change or improve the Hemingway already in the public domain. *Islands in the Stream* makes a case in point. It is an interesting book and bears its author's mark, but it neither alters our understanding of Hemingway nor records new departures in technique. In quality it falls somewhere between his best and worst novels, well above *Across the River and into the Trees* but well below *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Consequently, I decided to delay my work no longer, although I surely would have found invaluable the opportunity to examine those documents which testify to the creative process itself. No doubt someone else will do it a few years hence.

I wish to acknowledge my debts for the various kinds of aid and courtesy I have received. To my colleague and chairman, Mario DiCesare, and to the Dean of Harpur College, Peter Vukasin, I owe thanks for the research semester during which this book was finished. Michael Albes, Joseph Lisowski, and Paul Butera gave assistance in collecting material. Miss Janet Brown of the SUNY Binghamton Library staff was again helpful to me in this project as she has been in others. I am grateful to Charles Scribner, Jr. for permission to quote from Hemingway's books, published by Charles Scribner's Sons. The Research Foundation of the State University of New York supported my work on Hemingway with two faculty summer fellowships and grants-in-aid.

Finally, I begin with the ambivalently happy and despairing knowledge that criticism can never wholly circumscribe the literary work and reduce its technique to a formula for precise explanation and objective analysis,

for the condition of the artist who makes the work is, in Emily Dickinson's remarkable phrase, "a soul at the white heat;" and in the same poem she goes on to remind us that the art, once made, "repudiates the forge." Nevertheless, we must at least try to apprehend the artist's design and to uncover some of the processes of his craftsmanship. The critic who succeeds does not despoil or exhaust the work, but replenishes it, himself, and its readers.

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The Structure of Hemingway's Short Stories

We begin, as Hemingway began, with the short stories. Hemingway's stories are microcosms in which his craft achieves maximum effectiveness within the least space. Few critics would dispute their artistry. Yet a surprising number of these stories have received almost no attention, and even the perennial favorites of commentators (for example, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place") are usually treated from the standpoint of character, theme, or what they illustrate of the Code, rather than from the perspective of technique. I propose to demonstrate that Hemingway's stories are organized upon certain fundamental structural principles. Once we perceive these principles and know how to apply them, the stories themselves take on larger and richer dimensions. Furthermore, these principles provide a useful approach to stories which at first glance seem slight and anecdotal, unworthy of close study and incapable of sustaining it. In my analysis of the stories I will also advance a number of considerations about technique, to be developed at greater length later in this study.

The first major characteristic which we must note about Hemingway's stories is their heavy reliance upon the dramatic method. In this respect to read Hemingway's stories in the company of those by such immediate predecessors and contemporaries as D. H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, and F. Scott Fitzgerald is to realize

how different Hemingway's are. Unlike the work of the others, which often reminds the reader of the presence of an editorializing and intrusive narrator, Hemingway almost always avoids direct exposition of theme, didactic description or discussion of character, and authorial commentary upon action and motive. Thus, Hemingway's stories show rather than tell. In its dramatic quality his short fiction most suggests comparison with that of Chekhov and Joyce, whose lessons he thoroughly absorbed and then turned his own way. Like them Hemingway appears not to have invented the life he presents but merely to act as the medium through which it passes. Indeed, Hemingway's method can perhaps best be inferred from Chekhov's dictum that in both scene and character the selection of significant details, grouped so as to convey an image, is the vital thing. Above all, Chekhov warned against the depiction of mental states except through action.¹

This is not only an apt summary of his own technique and Hemingway's, it is also virtually a synthesis of what makes the modern story modern. Moreover, both Joyce and Hemingway probably learned from Chekhov the effectiveness of using brief passages of nature description to set or to counterpoint tone, mood, or psychological action. Hemingway may also have been influenced by Chekhov's technique of the "zero ending," which is exactly the contrary to the traditional well-made endings of nineteenth-century fiction, or to the kind of ending O. Henry carried almost to parody: the surprise-resolution neatly knotting up separate strands of plot by an ingenious twist of plot or revelation of character. The whole point of the zero ending is *irresolution*—to leave the reader suspended among the apparently unconnected lines of character and action, consequently forcing him back upon his own resources of insight and imagination. Although Hemingway never explicitly accounted Joyce as one of his masters, despite his fondness for Joyce as a man and reverence for him as an artist, he doubtlessly profited from Joyce's examples in the writing of interior

monologue and the use of the limited-omniscient narrator. Perhaps, as Frank O'Connor argues persuasively, Hemingway's technique of repeating words and phrases in such a manner that they become incantatory was also imitative of Joyce.²

All these methods are now so familiar to us, have so thoroughly permeated our literary culture, and have been practiced by so many other writers, that we seem to have always known them. It takes an act of historical recollection to remind ourselves of how original they were in the unique forms Hemingway gave them in his stories. In fact, when those stories first appeared in the early 1920s they appeared quite radical, at least to American readers. Even if we concede Hemingway's stylistic debts to Twain, Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein, no real precedent for his stories can be found in American writing—at least insofar as their general method and structure are concerned.³

It was just this originality of technique that recommended Hemingway to the attention of established writers at the very start of his career, before he had completed any substantial quantity of work. How many other young writers, on the basis of a handful of poems and stories, have won the support of such figures as Stein, Anderson, Fitzgerald, Ford Madox Ford, and Ezra Pound? The editors of the American periodicals to which Hemingway submitted his stories were slower to catch on and more cautious in their response. Repelled by Hemingway's stark subject matter and puzzled by the apparent artlessness of method and bare simplicity of style, editors did not put his work before their general public until he had already established a reputation among the Parisian avant-garde with *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (1923) and *in our time* (1924), and then brought out *In Our Time* (1925) with a New York publisher.⁴

Fundamental to Hemingway's craft in the short story are the archetypal principles of antithesis and opposition, or, very simply, the conflict and contrast of antip-

odal forces and values. These principles shape the structure of the work by organizing its action and movement into certain basic patterns. In turn, the pattern of action determines the symbolism, so that around the opposing elements of the antithesis are gathered the appropriate images and associational clusters. As a result, once we perceive the underlying structural design and the particular antithesis or opposition it embodies, such seemingly random and spontaneous factors in the story as traits of behavior, details of setting, forms of speech, gestures—in short, all the necessary components of the work's credibility and verisimilitude—take their rightful place in the pattern and become deeply resonant with meaning.

What I am saying should be sufficiently obvious to serious students of literature as to require no documentation. It is what Kenneth Burke calls "symbolic action," and it is inherent to literary art. Although Hemingway's work happens to be unusually rich in kinaesthetic images, namely those associations evoked by bodily states and physical activity, it contains other levels of implication—the social and metaphysical. Furthermore, my approach borrows support from some of the basic perceptions of earlier Hemingway criticism, notably Carlos Baker's important insight into the contrast between mountain and plain, or "home" and "not-home," and Philip Young's provocative thesis that the compulsive return to the scene of the wound is Hemingway's *ur*-plot. Each of these expresses in its own way the principles of antithesis and opposition. Finally, we must remember that the pattern of action and its attendant symbolic associations develop additional complexity in that they are often ambivalent or ironic. As E. M. Halliday pointed out, in responding to Baker's mountain-plain theory, Hemingway's symbolism functions at its best as it engenders simultaneously different or even apparently contradictory meanings.⁵

I find two dominant and recurrent structural designs in Hemingway's stories, each sometimes operating sepa-

ately, the two sometimes integrated within a single tale. First, there is the design based upon the movement from outside to inside, or, conversely, from inside to outside. At its simplest level this movement records a change in the story's locale of action, or setting. Second, there is the pattern which uses a movement toward and away from a place or destination. These patterns usually provide a schematic symmetry in that they divide or distribute the action into two or three distinct parts or scenes, for example: inside/outside/inside, toward/"there"/away. Although the protagonist's bodily movement or shift in locale from out-of-doors to indoors (or the reverse) comprises the essential version of the first pattern, the structure can also be that of a psychological shift or a shift in narrative mode: from the protagonist's physical action to thought, or from dialogue to interior monologue. Likewise, the simplest form of the toward/away design is a trip or journey, the actual spatial movement or approach to a place, the arrival there, and the subsequent departure. However, once more the ground covered may be an imaginary terrain, an inner distance.

But enough abstraction. These structures must be observed in the stories themselves. We will look closely at several stories and merely scan others, as appropriate, to establish these patterns and trace some of their ramifications. For the outside/inside design I will discuss "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," "Che Ti Dice La Patria?" and "A Day's Wait." For the toward/away pattern "Indian Camp," "A Way You'll Never Be," and *The Old Man and the Sea* will serve as my examples. This selection both includes stories popular with critics and students, and others less often treated. Although my emphasis will be on structure, I will comment on such related matters as symbolism and significant detail, as the case requires.

The structural design of "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" is that of the outside/inside/outside pattern, and in this instance the literal physical movements divides the story into three scenes: out-of-doors, indoors, out-of-