

Ernest Hemingway



*For Whom
the Bell Tolls*



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Ernest Hemingway
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INTRODUCTION

I INTRODUCTION TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

By Prof. Ganesan Balakrishnan, Ph.D.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY (1899-1961) occupies a prominent place in the annals of American Literary history by virtue of his revolutionary role in the arena of twentieth century American fiction. By rendering a realistic portrayal of the inter-war period with its disillusionment and disintegration of old values, Hemingway has presented the predicament of the modern man in 'a world which increasingly seeks to reduce him to a mechanism, a mere thing'.¹ Written in a simple but unconventional style, with the problems of war, violence and death as their themes, his novels present a symbolic interpretation of life.

Ernest Miller Hemingway was born in 1899 in Oak Park, Illinois, in an orthodox higher middle class family as the second of six children. His mother, Mrs. Grace Hale Hemingway, an ex-opera singer, was an authoritarian woman who had reduced his father, Mr. Clarence Edmunds Hemingway, a physician, to the level of a hen-pecked husband. Hemingway had a rather unhappy childhood on account of his 'mother's, bullying relations with his father'.² He grew up under the influence of his father who encouraged him to develop outdoor interests such as swimming, fishing and hunting. His early boyhood was spent in the northern woods of Michigan among the native Indians, where he learned the primitive aspects of life such as fear, pain, danger and death.

At school, he had a brilliant academic career and graduated at the age of 17 from the Oak Park High School. In 1917 he joined the Kansas City Star as a war correspondent.



The following year he participated in the World War by volunteering to work as an ambulance driver on the Italian front, where he was badly wounded but twice decorated for his services. He returned to America in 1919 and married Hadley Richardson in 1921. This was the first of a series of unhappy marriages and divorces. The next year, he reported on the Greco-Turkish War and two years later, gave up journalism to devote himself to fiction. He settled in Paris, where he came into contact with fellow American expatriates such as Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. ‘From her (Gertrude Stein) as well as from Ezra Pound and others, he learned the discipline of his craft—the taut monosyllabic vocabulary, stark dialogue, and understated emotion that are the hallmarks of the Hemingway style’.³

Hemingway’s first two published works were *In Our Time* and *Three Stories and Ten Poems*. These early stories foreshadow his mature technique and his concern for values in a corrupt and indifferent world. But it was *The Torrents of Spring*, which appeared in 1926, that established him as a writer of repute. His international reputation was firmly secured by his next three books, *The Sun Also Rises*, *Men Without Women* and *A Farewell to Arms*. This was only the beginning of an illustrious career, with an impressive output of several novels and short stories, a collection of poems and *The Fifth Column*, a play.

Hemingway was passionately involved with bullfighting, big game hunting and deep sea fishing, and his writing reflects this. He visited Spain during the Civil War and his experiences on the war front form the theme of the best seller *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. When the Second World War broke out, he took an active part and offered to lead a suicide squadron against the Nazi U Boats. But in the course of the war, he fell ill and was nursed by Mary Walsh, who eventually became his fourth wife and continued to be with him until his death. In 1954, he survived two plane crashes in the African jungle. His adventures and tryst with destiny



made him a celebrity all over the English speaking world.

Hemingway began the final phase of his career as a resident of Cuba. There he continued his life of well advertised hunting and adventure, being often in the forefront of literary publicity and controversy. This phase is marked by a decline in his creative genius which, however, attained its original stature with the publication of *The Old Man and The Sea* in 1952. It was an immense success and won him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954.

His fortunes took a turn for the worse, when Fidel Castro came to power and ordered the Americans out of Cuba. It proved a great shock to Hemingway and added to his agony over the decline of his creative talents. He fell victim to acute fits of depression and attempted suicide twice. He was hospitalized and treated for his psychological problems. But after a few months of doubts, anxieties and depression, he shot himself on the 2nd of July 1961, bringing to an end one of the most eventful and colorful lives of our times.

Hemingway's literary genius was molded by cultural and literary influences. 'Mark Twain, the War and the Bible were the major influences that shaped Hemingway's thought and art'.⁴ During his sojourn in Paris, Hemingway also came into contact with eminent literary figures such as Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, D.H. Lawrence and even T.S. Eliot. 'All or some of them might have left their imprint on him'.⁵ Hemingway also acknowledged that he had learnt a great deal from the writings of Joseph Conrad. Besides these, his early experiences in Michigan colored his writing to some extent. The most important influence that left a deep impact on his genius was the nightmarish experiences which he himself had undergone in the two World Wars.

As a novelist, Hemingway is often assigned a place among the writers of 'the lost generation', along with Faulkner, Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos and Sinclair Lewis. 'These writers, including Ernest Hemingway, tried to show the loss the First World War had caused in the social, moral



and psychological spheres of human life'.⁶ They also reveal the horror, the fear and the futility of human existence. True, Hemingway has echoed the longings and frustrations that are typical of these writers, but his work is distinctly different from theirs in its philosophy of life. In his novels 'a metaphysical interest in man and his relation to nature'⁷ can be discerned.

Hemingway has been immortalized by the individuality of his style. Short and solid sentences, delightful dialogues, and a painstaking hunt for an apt word or phrase to express the exact truth, are the distinguishing features of his style. He 'evokes an emotional awareness in the reader by a highly selective use of suggestive pictorial detail, and has done for prose what Eliot has done for poetry'.⁸ In his accurate rendering of sensuous experience, Hemingway is a realist. As he himself has stated in *Death in the Afternoon*, his main concern was 'to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were that produced the emotion you experienced'.⁹ This surface realism of his works often tends to obscure the ultimate aim of his fiction. This has often resulted in the charge that there is a lack of moral vision in his novels. Leon Edel has attacked Hemingway for his 'Lack of substance' as he called it. According to him, Hemingway's fiction is deficient in serious subject matter. 'It is a world of superficial action and almost wholly without reflection—such reflection as there is tends to be on a rather crude and simplified level'.¹⁰

But such a casual dismissal as this, presenting Hemingway as a writer devoid of 'high seriousness', is not justified. Though Hemingway is apparently a realist who has a predilection for physical action, he is essentially a philosophical writer. His works should be read and interpreted in the light of his famous 'Iceberg theory': 'The dignity of the movement of an iceberg is due to only one eighth of it being above the water'.¹¹ This statement throws light on the symbolic implications of his art. He makes use of



physical action to provide a symbolical interpretation of the nature of man's existence. It can be convincingly proved that, 'While representing human life through fictional forms, he has consistently set man against the background of his world and universe to examine the human situation from various points of view'.¹²

In this aspect, he belongs to the tradition of Hawthorne, Poe and Melville, in whose fiction darkness has been used as a major theme to present the lot of man in this world. Hemingway's concern for the predicament of the individual resembles the outlook of these 'nocturnal writers'. 'As with them, a moral awareness springs from his awareness of the larger life of the universe. Compared with the larger life of the universe, the individual is a puny thing, a tragic thing. But in this larger life of the universe, the individual has his place of glory'.¹³ This awareness of the futility of human existence led Hemingway to deal with the themes of violence, darkness and death in his novels. By presenting the darker side of life, he tries to explore the nature of the individual's predicament in this world.

What attitude should a man take toward a world in which, for reasons of the world's own making and not of his own, he is fundamentally out of place? What personal happiness can he expect to find in a world seething with violence... what values could one respect when ethical values as a whole seemed university disrespected?¹⁴

This metaphysical concern about the nature of the individual's existence in relation to the world made Hemingway conceive his protagonists as alienated individuals fighting a losing battle against the odds of life with courage, endurance and will as their only weapons. The Hemingway hero is a lonely individual, wounded either physically or emotionally. He exemplifies a code of courageous behavior in a world of irrational destruction. 'He offers up and exemplifies certain principles of honor, courage and endurance in a life of tension and pain which make a



man a man'.¹⁵ Violence, struggle, suffering and hardships do not make him in any way pessimistic. Though the 'vague unknown' continues to lure him and frustrate his hopes and purposes, he does not admit defeat. Death rather than humiliation, stoical endurance rather than servile submission are the cardinal virtues of the Hemingway hero.

A close examination of Hemingway's fiction reveals that in his major novels he enacts 'the general drama of human pain', and that he has 'used the novel form in order to pose symbolic questions about life'.¹⁶ The trials and tribulations undergone by his protagonists are symbolic of man's predicament in this world. He views life as a perpetual struggle in which the individual has to assert the supremacy of his free will over forces other than himself. In order to assert the dignity of his existence, the individual has to wage a relentless battle against a world which refuses him any identity or fulfillment.

To sum up, Hemingway, in his novels and short stories, presents human life as a perpetual struggle which ends only in death. It is of no avail to fight this battle, where man is reduced to a pathetic figure by forces both within and without. However, what matters is the way man faces the crisis and endures the pain inflicted upon him by the hostile powers that be, be it his own physical limitation or the hostility of society or the indifference of unfeeling nature. The ultimate victory depends on the way one faces the struggle. In a world of pain and failure, the individual also has his own weapon to assert the dignity of his existence. He has the freedom of will to create his own values and ideals. In order to achieve this end, he has to carry on an incessant battle against three oppressive forces, namely, the biological, the social and the environmental barriers of this world. According to Hemingway, the struggle between the individual and the hostile deterministic forces takes place at these three different levels. Commenting on this aspect of the existential struggle found in Hemingway's fiction, Charles



Child Walcutt has observed that, ‘the conflict between the individual needs and social demands is matched by the contest between feeling man and unfeeling universe, and between the spirit of the individual and his biological limitations’.¹⁷ This observation is probably the right key to understand Hemingway, the man and the novelist.

NOTES:

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2. Mark Spilka, ‘Hemingway and Fauntleroy, An Androgynous Pursuit’, *American Novelists Revisited* ed. Fritz Flishmann (Boston, Massachusetts G.K. Hall and Co., 1982), p. 346.
3. Abraham H. Lass, *A Student’s Guide to 50 American Novelists* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), p. 175.
4. Mrs. Mary S. David and Dr. Varshney, *A History of American Literature* (Barilly: Student Store, 1983), p. 315. Hereinafter cited as Mary S. David.
5. Mary S. David. p.312
6. Mary S. David. p. 315.
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8. Rama Rao, p. 31.
9. Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (London: Grafton Books, 1986), p. 8. Hereafter cited as *Death in the Afternoon*.
10. Leon Edel, ‘The Art of Evasion’ in *Hemingway, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert P. Weeks (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 170.
11. *Death in the Afternoon*, p. 171.
12. B.R. Mullik, *Hemingway Studies in American Literature* (New Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1972), p. 8.
13. Chaman Nahal, *The Narrative Pattern in Ernest Hemingway’s Fiction* (New Delhi: Vikas Publication, 1971). p. 26.
14. W.M. Frohock, *The Novel of Violence in American Literature*



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15. Philip Young, 'Ernest Hemingway' *Seven Modern American Novelists, an Introduction* ed. William Van O' Connor (Minneapolis—The University of Minnesota Press, 1966), p. 158. Hereafter cited as Philip Young.
16. W.R. Goodman, *A Manual of American Literature* (Delhi: Doabe House, n.d), p. 357. Hereafter cited as Goodman.
17. Charles Child Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p. 275.



II READING FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

By Jennifer Luster

WHEN FIRST published, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was read with regard to then-current events surrounding the Spanish Civil War as well as in terms of its artistry (see reviews in Meyers). By contrast, recent literary criticism of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* emphasizes Hemingway's portrayal of gender roles, the love relationship between the novel's protagonists, and extra-artistic considerations such as biographical matters. Using the theoretical work of Roland Barthes, Michael Shapiro, and M.M. Bakhtin, this essay will attempt instead to revisit the work as a sociopolitical text on war. I will analyze how Hemingway frames the imagery and narrative of war, creates layers of discourse to tell the story of war, and codes social experiences of war within the text.

FRAMING WAR

For Whom the Bell Tolls includes many descriptions of a remote Spanish landscape, as Hemingway sets the imagery of war against a background of forests, rivers, mountains, and skies. The landscape works in part as a frame for viewing the war, establishing distance and creating images to counter its events. Hemingway writes:

Robert Jordan breathed deeply of the clear night air of the mountains that smelled of the pines and of the dew on the grass in the meadow by the stream. Dew had fallen heavily since the notes wind had dropped, but, as he stood there, he thought there would be frost by morning.

Throughout the text, Hemingway offers views of the landscape that work to draw the reader away from war; views of nature make up the artistic backdrop against which war is contrasted. Roland Barthes discusses how realistic



authors establish such views:

Every literary description is a view. It could be said that the speaker, before describing, stands at the window, not so much to see, but to establish what he sees by its very frame: the window frame creates the scene. To describe is thus to place the empty frame which the realistic author always carries with him (more than his easel) before a collection or continuum of objects which cannot be put into words without this obsessive operation... in order to speak about it, the writer, through this initial rite, first transforms the “real” into a depicted (framed) object.

By framing war with a natural aesthetic, Hemingway poses the question of neutrality. Throughout the text, he juxtaposes descriptions of the Spanish landscape with descriptions of war machines, a technique that implicitly questions the necessity of war. Contrasting natural frames allow the ideological, logistical, and mechanistic in war to be viewed clearly as such. For example:

Then the sun lessened and was gone and looking up through the trees at the brown, rounded height that it had gone behind, he saw, now, that he no longer looked into the glare, that the mountain slope was a delicate new green and that there were patches of old snow under the crest.

Then he was watching the bridge again in the sudden short trueness of the little light that would be left, and studying its construction. The problem of its demolition was not difficult. As he watched he took out a notebook from his breast pocket and made several quick line sketches.

They stood in the mouth of the cave and watched them. The bombers were high now in fast, ugly arrow-heads beating the sky apart with the noise of their motors. They are shaped like sharks, Robert Jordan thought, the wide-finned, sharp-nosed sharks of the Gulf Stream. But these, wide-finned in silver, roaring, the light mist of their propellers in the sun, these do not move like



sharks. They move like no thing there has ever been. They move like mechanized doom.

... “What do they look like to you, guapa?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Death, I think.”

Juxtaposing the features of the natural world with war machines throughout the novel, Hemingway creates a consistent tension, framing the loss of life in war in terms of a natural metaphysics. Because Hemingway offers views of the landscape that reach beyond the machinery of war, the reader is never given over to a military way of seeing. Michael Shapiro defines the “fog of war” as a dominant “phenomenology of military seeing,” emerging from the “institutionalized perspectives and practices within which enmity is generated and produced”. Hemingway’s natural framing of his discourse on war critiques that military way of seeing, lifting the fog of war throughout the text.

LAYERS OF DISCOURSE

A prose writer can distance himself from the language of his own work, while at the same time distancing himself in varying degrees, from the different layers and aspects of the work. He can make use of language without wholly giving himself up to it, he may treat it as semi-alien or completely alien to himself, while compelling language ultimately to serve all his own intentions.

Hemingway constructs at least three identifiable layers of discourse in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. First, he offers a natural view juxtaposed against the events of war and creating a common dialogical ground between author and reader. Second, he creates discursive space between characters to depict how wartime experiences are felt and understood among different individuals. Finally, Hemingway constructs Robert Jordan’s internal dialogue to depict a character grappling with the fundamental contradiction between the necessities of war and the value of human life.



When Hemingway writes in the third person, establishing the social context between himself and the reader, he creates a discursive space emphasizing a natural aesthetic, the background against which war is viewed. Bakhtin discusses how an author orients the nature of discourse between himself and the reader:

His orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his discourse; it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems of providing expressive accents, various social “languages” come to interact with one another. The speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver; he enters into dialogical relationships with certain aspects of this system. The speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener’s, imperceptive background.

For Whom the Bell Tolls is held together by Hemingway’s sequential descriptive telling of wartime events framed by his descriptions of a Spanish landscape. The reader always views war over and against the natural world, over and against life in all of its capacities. In the discursive space between the writer and the reader, Hemingway establishes common ground and a background against which he builds additional layers of discourse.

The second layer of discourse in the text is that among the characters. Hemingway establishes the context of the war with dialogue of varying types. In this layer, the overt voice of the author and the tacit discourse between the author and the reader gives way to discourse between characters.

The language used by characters in the novel, how they speak, is verbally and semantically autonomous; each



character's speech possesses its own belief system, because each is the speech of another in another's language; thus it may also refract authorial intentions and consequently may to a certain degree constitute a second language for the author.

The discursive space of storytelling among characters is especially significant in the novel; storytelling is the primary means for sharing news of the war. For example, Pilar informs and greatly affects Robert Jordan by recounting the story of a massacre that took place in her town, where her husband, Pablo, oversaw the torture and killing of local fascists.

"I saw Pablo speak to the priest again, leaning forward from the table and I could not hear what he said for the shouting. But the priest did not answer him but went on praying. Then a man stood up from among the half circle of those who were praying and I saw he wanted to go out. It was Don Jose Castro, whom everyone called Don Pepe, a confirmed fascist, and a dealer in horses, and he stood up now small, neat-looking even unshaven and wearing a pajama top tucked into a pair of gray-striped trousers. He kissed the crucifix and the priest blessed him and he stood up and looked at Pablo and jerked his head toward the door."

Don Jose Castro then steps outside to meet an angry mob and his death. Pilar tells the story of the murderous events in her town descriptively, leaving Robert Jordan with a sense of the war he will later regret having. In Pilar's storytelling—in the discursive space between her and Jordan—the war is viewed from within a social context and given human significance. A third layer of discourse in the novel is Jordan's own internal dialogue, through which he works to make sense of the war. Jordan reflects on the effect Pilar's story of the massacre in her town has had on him:



But you were always gone when it happened. The partizans did their damage and pulled out. The peasants stayed and took the punishment. I've always known about the other, he thought. What we did to them at the start. I've always known it and hated it and I have heard it mentioned shamelessly and shamefully, bragged of, boasted of, defended, explained and denied. But that damned woman made me see it as though I had been there.

Hemingway creates discursive space in Jordan's internal dialogue. Jordan is both subject and object; he acts and is acted upon in the context of war. Through Jordan's internal dialogue we view war from the perspective of an individual carrying out military orders that he questions, and we learn how acts of killing affect him. Hemingway's construction of Jordan's internal dialogue introduces the reader to a thinking and feeling individual intensely affected by war's requirements.

But how many do you suppose you have killed? I don't know because I won't keep track. But do you know? Yes. How many? You can't be sure how many. Blowing the trains you kill many. Very many. But you can't be sure. But of those you are sure of? More than twenty. And of those how many were real fascists? Two that I'm sure of. Because I had to shoot them when we took them prisoners at Usera. And you did not mind that? No. Nor did you like it? No. I decided never to do it again. I have avoided it. I have avoided killing those who are unarmed.

At the level of discourse of Jordan's inner speech, the value of human life, removed from ideological considerations, becomes central, while the politics and logistics of war fade almost completely from view. Bakhtin discusses how inner speech works in novels:

This form introduces order and stylistic symmetry into the disorderly and impetuous flow of a character's internal



speech (a disorder and impetuosity would otherwise have to be reprocessed into direct speech) and, moreover, through its syntactic (third-person) and basic stylistic markers (lexicological and other), such a form permits another's inner speech to merge, in an organic and structured way, with a context belonging to the author. But at the same time it is precisely this form that permits us to preserve the expressive structure of the character's inner speech, its inability to exhaust itself in words, its flexibility, which would be absolutely impossible within the dry and logical form of indirect discourse.

Shapiro explains how artistic and literary representation may work on a micropolitical level to “deform conventional modes of intelligibility,” to “articulate through writing, sounds or images, aspects of a life and thought-world that are officially unheeded”. By isolating the world of Jordan's inner thoughts, thoughts outside normative considerations of war, Hemingway “deforms” political discourse on war, bringing the individual's experience to the fore. For an appreciation of how *For Whom the Bell Tolls* engages the theme of war, I refer here to the theoretical work of Roland Barthes, looking at how the novel may be analyzed in terms of pluralities:

To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it....The networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signified; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach.... The interpretation demanded by a specific text, in its plurality...is a question, against all indifference, of asserting the very existence of plurality...