

Ernest Hemingway

1899-1961

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Life and main works

Ernest Hemingway was born in Illinois in 1899. He was the son of a well-to-do Doctor (who later committed suicide) and spent his childhood in an active way hunting and fishing in the Great Lake region with his father, boxing or playing rugby. In 1917 he worked as a reporter for the "Kansas City Star"; this meant a remarkable step forward in his career as a writer since he started learning and gradually mastering the rigorous rules of "pure objective writing" characterised by declarative sentences without any unnecessary words and clichés. In the following year he volunteered as an ambulance driver on the Italian front, where he was severely wounded, and received a silver medal and decoration from the Italian government.

Back in the United States, he got a job as a foreign correspondent and in 1922 he settled in Paris where he joined a group of expatriate writers, called "the lost generation", who had in Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound their most influential writers. In 1924 he published his first collection of short stories, *In Our Time*, chiefly recalling the experiences of his childhood, and started writing the novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), published as *Fiesta in Britain*, which showed his love for exotic settings and extreme situations where violent actions reveal the most important manly virtues: courage, comradeship, endurance.

These themes were dealt with again in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), a novel about bull-fighting, and *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935), on big game hunting. In 1929 he published *Farewell to Arms* (1929), a love story set among the horrors and sufferings of the war, and perhaps the best American novel ever written on the First World War. During the Spanish Civil War he was a correspondent for an American news agency, and this experience was recorded in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940).

Hemingway's post-war fiction led to controversial appraisals: *The Old Man and The Sea* (1952) won him the 1953 Pulitzer Prize, while *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) and the posthumous *Islands in the Stream* (1970) were criticised. In 1954 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

Towards the end of his life, Hemingway suffered from hypertension, diabetes and acute depression; he feared physical decline and committed suicide in 1961.

The experiences of his life

Hemingway rarely wrote in an explicit autobiographical way, but it is as if he were trying to go back to the most important experiences of his life and give them a universal value that could become a model both for himself and his readers.

The key experience of his childhood were his encounters with nature, which came about because of his passion for hunting and fishing, seen as forms of struggle against nature in which man is rewarded for having fought skillfully and courageously. In this struggle, life and death are presented as the driving and mysterious forces of existence. The real prize for victory is the moral reward for having fought well and having been regenerated by an immersion in nature. Life is identified with a codified set of actions which gives man the measure of his control over events. Beyond these actions there is nothingness and death.

The meaninglessness of love

According to Hemingway, love appears to be meaningless, since the relationship between a man and a woman is a game with fixed rules and once the game is over, it has no sense at all. Moreover in Hemingway's vision, there is no true society: it is nothing but a combination of individual units, alienated men, who are unable to know themselves or each other.

The First World War

Another central experience of Hemingway's life was World War I; in fact, in 1918 he volunteered for ambulance service in Italy; here he was wounded and decorated twice. Out of his experiences came *Farewell to Arms* (1920). In the trenches Hemingway understood that the only chance of escaping the horror of death was in the pursuit of manly qualities such as: strength, sexual power, lack of sentimentalism and the ability to react. Consequently his heroes are men of simple character and primitive emotions.

Style

His style is equally tough, essential, primitive, characterised by simple syntax, colloquial, colourful dialogue and brief descriptions (often of landscapes). There is very little introspection, or analysis of personal feelings and sensations, yet Hemingway's prose creates great emotion in the reader.

Introduction to Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

Language

Hemingway exerted a remarkable influence in literature. Together with W. Faulkner and F. S. Fitzgerald he contributed to the renewal of English literary language. Hemingway stated that “All American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*”. He recognized his debt to Mark Twain in the introduction of “spoken language” in his writings. From Twain he learns to use simple words, to avoid complicated syntax, to convey meaning through dialogue and action.

According to Hemingway’s “**iceberg theory**” nothing crucial, or at least very little, is stated explicitly; rather, much of the meaning is communicated to the reader through omission and understatement; the substance lies below the surface of the plot:

“I have always tried to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. ... I have tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader. ... But the knowledge is what makes the underwater part of the iceberg”.

Through these words the writer affirms his reductionist approach to writing and its essential realism, his pursuit of “**pure objective writing**”. Spare language, abolition of unnecessary words, oblique depiction of emotion, restrained use of description are features of Hemingway’s style. Hemingway also owes a lot to Conrad who, in his preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* declares that

“All art appeals primarily to the senses”. A writer must “strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting and to the magic suggestiveness of music-which is the art of arts... so that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of the words, of the old old words, worn thin, defaced, by ages of careless usage”. The task of the writer is “to make you hear, to make you feel, above all to make you see”.

The comparison with music and painting operated as a stimulus on Hemingway’s writing. His ambition was always to create a story similar to a painting, with the same care for careful arrangement of details, for colours and shades. From music he derived the use of counterpoint, repetition, fragmented syntax, “staccato” rhythm. He wanted a form that could clarify all the levels of experience, from the minute description of details to its spiritual value.

Themes

By giving his experience a universal dimension, in his works Hemingway rewrites the American theme of the **isolated individual dealing with the hardships of existence** and trying to survive in a hostile nature.

Thematically he has dealt with the **initiation of the boy** into the complexities of adult life through the experience of the wilderness, hunting and facing life and death (In *Our Time* and other short stories, 1924). It is almost a primal encounter with nature that takes the form of a struggle. A struggle where victory depends on physical prowess and good mastery of the necessary skills. The

real prey is not the killed animal but the moral reward for having fought well and having been regenerated by an immersion in nature.

Then the writer moved on to the **initiation of the young man at war**, and the lesson of separation and endurance it taught (*The Sun also Rises*, 1926 and *A Farewell to Arms*, 1929). It is a world divided between those that have been wounded and those who have not. The real issue is how one deals with the wound, how one lives with the knowledge of the death he carries within himself.

The next step was an attempt to overcome separation in **a new initiation, the political and social responsibility** to one's fellow men in shaping history (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1940). The story is centered on an idealist hero who is prepared to die for the cause he believes in, being faithful to a code of behavior, even if he is aware of the contradictions involved.

The last step was to deal with **old age**. In *Across the River and into the Trees* the new initiation of the old man was to come from love, but love could not offset death.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, 1952, the old man is totally left to his own devices, as had been the case with the protagonists of *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. But this time he will win. The story entails the symbolic death of the old identity and the birth of the new one. The knowledge acquired through his entire life is the necessary component of Santiago's initiation and rebirth. The protagonist turns his defeat into victory because his action re-establishes his place in the society of fishermen and because he can become the father-teacher of Manolito. The novel is the emblematic tale of a man's capacity to withstand hardship and affirm his own identity and dignity. Santiago fights with the marlin on equal grounds, with honesty and respect for the antagonist, so that he feels the big, majestic fish as a sort of brother, a projection of himself. The sharks can deprive the old fisherman of the economic value of his prey, but not of its symbolic significance as a victory against bad luck and old age. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated": destruction belongs to the world of nature, defeat is a moral value and belongs to the world of civilization. The protagonist is a mediator between civilization and nature. He brings to nature the values of civilization (skill, endurance, experience) and brings back to civilization the essential confrontation of life with death, without rules, that nature implies ("eat and be eaten"). *The Old Man and the Sea* is a sort of synthesis of Hemingway's vision of life as a struggle and of all the moral values that shape man's dignity. In this sense, it is also the writer's spiritual testament. To Hemingway writing, as well as living, is a moral act; life is identified with a codified set of actions which gives man the measure of his control over events. Action is a measure of man's dignity and the only way to overcome **existential void (Nada)**. Fight (hunting, fishing, bullfighting, big game, war) is a sort of protest against death and a way to reach a kind of immortality. In the end, Hemingway is an existential nihilist. A story published in 1933, "A Clean, Well Lighted Place", contains a blasphemous version of the "Pater Noster" in the form of an invocation to nothingness.

Introduction to The Snows of Kilimanjaro

In 1933, Hemingway and his wife left for a safari in Kenya. He was after bigger and wilder game. The first literary result was *Green Hills of Africa* (published in 1935), a non-fictional personal narrative of the experience using the image of pursuit to hold together descriptions and personal reflections about Africa, hunting and writing.

A deeper truth of the personal experience of this period is more clearly inscribed in the African stories he wrote at the end of the thirties: *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. It is Hemingway again at his best in the unity between honesty of style and moral stance, in the use of fiction to give form to personal experience without pretence or consolatory escape. They are both stories of isolated men with wives who are either outright enemies or impotent bystanders, stories of men who have failed to use their lives.

Alienation, loss, grief and separation are the themes of the two stories.

First published in 1936 and later in the collection *The First Forty-Nine Stories* (1938), *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* reflects several of Hemingway's personal concerns during the 1930's regarding his existence as a writer and his life in general. Hemingway remarked in *Green Hills* that "politics, women, drink, money and ambition" damage the writers. His fear that his own acquaintances with rich people might harm his integrity as a writer becomes evident in this story. The flashbacks in the story also reveal Hemingway's fear of leaving his own work of life unfinished.

In broader terms, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* should be viewed as an example of an author of the "Lost Generation" questioning moral and philosophy.

As in most of Hemingway's novels and stories, in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* the central theme is death, how man reacts and behaves in the face of death. The mountains are a symbol of goodness, purity and cleanness, the plains by contrast stand for evil and confusion.

A tragic irony exists in that the protagonist dies in the plains, whereas the leopard, "the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard" that Harry, the protagonist, imagines on the summit of Kilimanjaro, has reached a sort of immortality by being frozen in the snow. However, in his final vision while dying, Harry identifies with the leopard, the leopard he had sometimes been in his past life when fulfilling noble actions. In this way, Harry finally reaches a sort of redemption which comes not through God but through nature.

Summary

Harry, a writer, and his wife, Helen, are stranded while on safari in Africa. A bearing burned out on their truck, and Harry is talking about the gangrene that has infected his leg when he did not apply iodine after he scratched it. As they wait for a rescue plane from Nairobi that he knows won't arrive on time, Harry spends his time drinking and insulting Helen. Harry reviews his life, realizing that he wasted his talent through procrastination and luxury from a marriage to a wealthy woman that he doesn't love.

As Harry lies on his cot, he is aware that vultures are walking around his makeshift camp, and a hyena lurks in the shadows. Knowing that he will die before he wakes, Harry goes to sleep and dreams that the rescue plane is taking him to a snow covered summit of Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa. Its Western summit is called the Masai "Ngàje Ngài," the House of God, where he sees the legendary leopard.

Helen wakes, and taking a flashlight, walks toward Harry's cot. Seeing that his leg is dangling alongside the cot and that the dressings are pulled down, she calls his name repeatedly. She listens for his breathing and can hear nothing. Outside the tent, the hyena whines — a cry that is strangely human.