

## HEMINGWAY'S WAR FICTION KALEIDOSCOPE

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**Abstract:** Hemingway's life and work are obviously not of a single piece, lacking a consistent pattern which is made problematic by his remarkable poses, the paradoxes, the violent shifts in attitude. For Hemingway, fiercely competitive in everything he did, this complex kaleidoscope included what might be called alterity, the Other (animals, terrain, weather, other people, Nature, life itself) and the things associated with his own self and personality (his ambition, his talents, his tenderness and sensitivity). The present paper deals with the author's opportunities offered by the fictional world which he brought to life, partly as a result of his personal experience, to dramatize the conflicting, the dubious tendencies in his own contradictory nature.

**Key-words:** code hero, mask, war fiction, myth, Hemingway.

In his book about Ernest Hemingway, Philip Young stated that "when all the documents and reminiscences regarding Hemingway's biography are collected and collated, the enigma of the man will doubtless remain." (Young 104) That statement is both true and useless, since the enigma of any person, let alone an important author, will remain, no matter how many documents or reminiscences one might collect. However, the sense we can make of Young's view is that no written biography, Hemingway's or somebody else's, will reveal its human subject in all his or her complexity. In addition to an author's complexity, one should also take into account the complexity, sometimes contradictory aspects, of the interpretive communities which contribute to a literary work's interpretation. Although he was one of the most autobiographical of writers, obsessively concerned with himself and with his own experiences, Hemingway, believes Earl Rovit, is hidden in the middle of his own creation. He is so many men and so many personalities, each sharply sketched consistent, that the total dramatis personae of his own character-making suggests that the actual man Hemingway is not to be found in the sum of his images, but rather in the hidden centre. For each image was unquestionably a true one, thinks Rovit. (Rovit 18)

Although he does not formally codify the irreconcilable conflict until *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), this view is foundational in his writings from July 8, 1918 (the date of his first wound), and it is retrospective from that to the memories of his earliest childhood: (Rovit 18) In *A Farewell to Arms*, the odds against which the hero is tested (in other terms, the world vs. the self) are defined in terms of a grim alternative:

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you, too, but there will be no special hurry. (FA 267) In spite of all this, the hero is even more defiant than the ancient Greek heroes of the Homeric epics, who fought under the protection of a strong god or goddess. Hemingway was, as Sean O'Faolain said, "the only modern writer of real distinction for whom the Hero does in some form still live." (O'Faolain 164) Even though Hemingway's heroes are, in a sense, winners who take nothing, they are winners and the manner of their problematic achievement is individually self-generated, assessing their agency within situations largely of their own choosing, and under circumstances in which their native resources for physical action and courage are given opportunities to be expressed. The important significance of the individual has a lot to do with the American myth of self-sufficient individualism and largely explains Hemingway's considerable popularity at the time he was writing and publishing his war books. A second and related reason for his popularity may well be the excitement of physical and sensuous experience that Hemingway offered in abundance to an increasingly town-dwelling audience,

increasingly going away, even immunized from a physical life of comprehensive sensory response. Hemingway's talent for evoking physical sensations, for transmuting into prose how it is to taste, to see, to hear, to smell, to feel in a great variety of ways is a staple ingredient of his prose. And these sensations are typically presented within a framework of physical or psychological stress, in which the narrative perspective is left open-ended so that the attentive reader is forced to serve as the "ground" for the powerful prose-currents of the presented action. That is, the sensations are not merely described, but presented within a controlled frame of dramatic awareness, and the reader is invited to participate in, as well as to observe, the bombardment of sensory stimuli. (Rovit 20)

It was again Earl Rovit who stated that one could not believe the multiple masks which Hemingway exuberantly offered to the world, the bewildering combination of the images of Hemingway the man, the artist, the public personality, and the legend. He was the wounded twenty-one-year-old ex *Tenente* Ernesto Hemingway, recipient of the *Medaglia d'Argento al Valore* and the *Croce ad Merito di Guerra*, who had 237 pieces of shell fragment taken from his leg. He was also the shy young man who studied the craft of writing with Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound and the other Lost Generation Americans self-exiled to Paris in the inter-war period. Hemingway became the "spokesman" of The Lost Generation whose two volumes of short stories (*In Our Time* and *Men Without Women*) and two novels (*The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*) expressed artistic guidelines for two generations in a dialogue of understatement, and created a prose instrument which was later to be praised by the Nobel Prize Committee for its "forceful and style-making mastery of the art of modern narration." He was, according to Rovit, the bullfight *aficionado*, the skier, the big and the little game hunter, the fisherman, the prize-fighter and shadow-boxer:

He was the Santa Claus figure of *Field and Stream* who survived two airplane crashes in Uganda in 1954 to be able to sneer at his own obituaries which intimated that they had been expecting his death for a long time; and he was the sad-eyed isolate figure whose self-inflicted death on July 2, 1961, in Ketchum, Idaho, shocked a world that may have been expecting his death for a long time, but could not believe it when it actually happened. (Rovit 26) Hemingway, the public personality (who gradually turns into Hemingway the legend) gets to be an additional contributing element to stir the interest with which his stories and even his casual remarks were received. Hemingway became for a great number of readers not only the verbal painter of heroism and physical activity but also the actual hero himself. His exploits in all kinds of sport – and later his military experience – were conscientiously recorded, improved upon, and put into the publicity reports of the world press. It is actually irrelevant that the largest part of his alleged achievements have been exaggerated or even made up; the point is that the public life of the writer overwhelmed his writings and re-entered his prose as a supporting force for the aesthetic

validity of those works. Rovit considers that in the case of no serious American writer except Mark Twain and Walt Whitman had the writer's personality become such a

The interest in Hemingway's biography was also a final stimulus for his commercial popularity. The distinction between life and literature tended, in his case, to become blurred. Reading Hemingway was as informative as reading the newspapers, and much more exciting. The vision of bravery that the Hemingway myth promoted, the proof that the individual could still wage solitary battle against the elemental forces that oppress mankind, led to a revival, as far as the literary reception of his work is concerned, of the hero that Campbell would call the hero with a thousand faces a decade or so before things changed dramatically because of the rise of the counterculture and of the sobering signs of postmodernism.

Meanwhile, some critics like Rovit believe that there was an actual flesh-and-blood Hemingway behind all the masks. The poses, the shifts of personality, the sporadic outbursts of frightened aggressiveness were the means through which Hemingway the man might survive, might forestall the destruction which he felt awaited American writers. But merely to survive was not enough. The rules of the game called for total competition – unconditional surrender on one side or the other. And the weapon that Hemingway selected – the weapon that all his personality machinations were designed to protect – was his capacity to create art: “A country, finally, erodes and the dust blows away, the people all die and none of them were of any importance permanently, except those who practiced the arts...A thousand years makes economics silly and a work of art endures forever...” (GHA 109) To write a prose with “nothing that will go bad afterwards” would be to achieve importance; to secure a small piece of almost tangible immortality; to gain a handsome victory over life in which, even though the winner takes nothing for himself, the mere survival is made to convey a heroic message in an age that still needed heroes.

In order to achieve strong effects, Hemingway developed a selective use of pictorial details, which, by repetition, juxtaposition, and contrast with the violent situation they envelop, create a powerful tension and frequently succeed in shocking the reader into emotional awareness. The simplicity of the sentence structure and of the diction is reinforced by the limited use of adjectives and adverbs. There are hardly any metaphors, similes, or descriptive relative clauses. In other words, the traditional techniques of achieving pictorial description were constantly avoided. Also, the careful use of repetition – repeated constructions, words, and near rhymes – reinforces the echo of the narrator's presence.

Because of a strong need for a lyrical means of expression for his personal vision, the typical Hemingway fiction is of two closely related types. Either there will be an actual or an implied first person-narrator (*The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*), or there will be seemingly objective third-person narrated fictions in which the reader will be forced into the position of the reacting, unspeaking “voice”. As Carlos Baker suggests, because Hemingway is trying to convey emotional intensity *in time* and to make it safe from the attacks of distorting memory and the erosion of the temporal – we can expect his fictions to take place in a world which is “screened...at both ends.” (Baker 155) In varying degrees this is true for almost all Hemingway's fiction.

Mountains and meadows, villages and large cities – they are all individually believable within their own artistic-emotional contexts; but, taken out of them, they are indistinguishable, except by the place-names, the slight variations in folk-idiom, and the distinctive peculiarities of locale which even Hemingway could not disguise. Hemingway's exceptional strong point was not to describe what he saw, but to show himself seeing, to express the complex of feeling which was conjured up in him or in one

powerful factor in the judgment and reception of his works. (Rovit 26)

of his fictional characters when that character was placed in an appropriate situation of tension.

In the opinion of a young man who himself would become one of the giants of 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature, Saul Bellow, the direction of the central characteristic of Hemingway's aesthetic is to move his stories away from fiction toward fable – away from an interest in the concrete and the particular toward the universal and the symbolic. Hemingway's “lyric” need to express his personal vision of the world shows that the personal vision may become so overriding as to supplant the “objective” world when they come in conflict with one another. Saul Bellow commented on this aspect regarding Hemingway's fiction: “He tends to speak for Nature itself. Should Nature and Hemingway become identical one or the other will have won too total a victory.” (Bellow in *Partisan Review* 1953: 342) Since they fail to do so, the result is the tension and the complexity that one associates with Hemingway's creation, what can be referred to the author's kaleidoscope.

The reader expects that Hemingway's fictions will move from dramatic concerns to the enactment of myths promoting powerful heroes; that his focus will concern itself less and less with men, and more and more with an archetypal character; that this mythical creature will be cast in the image of his creator. One can also expect that Death, the universal antagonist of the cosmos, will have to be neutralized in some fashion by an artist who has chosen the course of antagonism against a hostile universe; and we realize that this neutralization may require a sort of agreement or even an alliance between the artist and Death. D.H. Lawrence was one of those who saw this mythic potential, which he considered typically American. He summed up what seemed to him the very essence of the American spirit and the true business of the American myth:

The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted. Of course the soul often breaks down into disintegration...What true myth concerns itself with is not the disintegration product. True myth concerns itself centrally with the onward adventure of the integral soul. And this, for America, is Deerslayer. A man who turns his back on white society. A man who keeps his moral integrity hard and intact. An isolate, almost selfless, stoic enduring man, who lives by death, by killing, but who is pure white. (Rovit 51)

An examination of Hemingway's aesthetic ends inevitably in a contemplation of the Lawrentian version of the true American myth. It remains to be seen whether we are dealing with “the disintegration product” or the work of “a simpler man” whose soul “has never yet melted.” (Rovit 52) Hemingway fiercely registered any potential loss of self, even a loss which might have given him the incalculable gain of transcendent mergence. Unlike T.S. Eliot – whose revulsion at the world was matched by his revulsion at his own sensory responses – Hemingway could not deny the fundamental joy of experiencing physical action, of delighting in the increased awareness of life and self which the operation of his five senses so abundantly offered him.

For most of his readers, Hemingway seems as if he had no other choice than to dramatize his lyric vision, and, like the Romantic Lord Byron, to create his own mythological persona, in his case, the Hemingway hero, largely desire, largely imagination, but basically a response to the needs of a special age that still required drama and heroism, even if other modernist authors like Joyce, were tempted to adopt a more parodic attitude to the legacy of myth. The uncompromising split that Hemingway seems to have felt between himself and the universe could be made to show an objective correlative of his emotions only through the tensions of a dialectic, contradictory form.

Action and reaction, force and shock, challenge and response – these are the strong antagonists which will be shown as engaging in a battle, especially in Hemingway's war fiction. One can imagine that the battlefield, the site of contact and engagement, is the dramatization of the human spirit, Hemingway's spirit, recording the attacks and

The code hero takes shape and grows up through Hemingway's novels, changing his name to Jake Barnes, Frederick Henry, or Robert Jordan. The code-hero also figures in Hemingway's earliest fiction, although the distinction is made between the youthful Nick Adams hero and the code hero of later years. According to Delmore Schwartz the hero dies and is resurrected in a considerable variety of shapes, forms and accents (usually non-American) through the bulk of Hemingway's creative output. (Schwartz in *Southern Review* 1938: 762-782)

Considering *A Farewell to Arms*, his adoption of a code of life does not preclude his vulnerability to the risks of the incalculable. Because he is human, he has loved. His commitment to love and his shock at Catherine's death have placed him “in another country” than the one he has prepared to defend. That other country was seen by readers to be nothing less than the human condition itself, for the human will is always vulnerable to ruthless destruction. And Hemingway's ultimate test of human performance is the degree of courage and dignity which people can discover in themselves in their moments of absolute despair. The challenge seems far greater than one's death (a challenge which Hemingway has typically considered a relatively easy one to face), although the hero can be considered neither victim, nor rebel. One can say that he seems to survive with dignity, creating the image of Hemingway's most eloquent portrait of ideal, profoundly humanistic heroism.

The characteristic of *dignity*, so important to Hemingway as to have supplied him with one of the major themes in his fiction, is relevant to this discussion of heroes involved in dramatic, war situations. The peculiar problems that science and technology have created in their strange narrative of progress and emancipation have made the depictions of human dignity almost anomalous in modernist and then in postmodernist literature. The one thousand faces of archetypal heroes have turned into anti-heroes or non-heroes, aggressive or passive, doomed men in revolt or essentially pathetic fools at the mercy of non-malicious and inescapable victimization. Dignity in either situation is difficult to attribute to such heroes who tend by choice to avoid the traditional values of rational intelligence and moral integrity on which dignity has traditionally relied. Heroes in modernist and postmodernist war literature are usually grotesque-picaresque saints, rebels, victims, and underground men of all shapes and colours. Their individual value as artistic achievements and embodiments of viable life attitudes is undeniable, but *dignity* is a quality that they have difficulty attaining.

Hemingway's attempt to retain the ideal of dignity without falsifying the meanness of the modern human condition is one of his signal triumphs as a modern writer. And it is generally through his characterizations of the code-hero figure that this quality of dignity is manifested, in the opinion of Philip Young. (Young 36)

Extending the interpretation that Hemingway's aesthetic concerns are not with the depiction of objective reality, but with the fantasy projections of his inner consciousness, the mirror of his art is held up to his own nature, and also to what he would like himself to be like, not Nature itself.

Earl Rovit explains his artistic success by the happy coincidence of the direction of his art and what might represent the condition of humanity for many. If Hemingway succeeded in casting a definition of the human condition which has been useful to twentieth-century readers it is because his own human condition, painfully and honestly transmuted into evocative prose in a lifetime of disciplined writing, was in some way deeply

counterattacks, the retreats, the acts of bravery and cowardice, the casualties and the irreparable damages. One can also imagine that all this is only a pose, encouraged by the values and standards promoted by a whole tradition of war fiction extending back to more heroic times.

representative of the condition of humanity. Critics have stated that one can never really know how aware he was of the direction that his art took and it was well known that it was compulsively intent on recording those emotional shocks that gave him a feeling of immortality. (Rovit 65)

It was through *A Farewell to Arms* that a larger public became acquainted with Hemingway's work. The pacifist beliefs of many individuals – so very widespread in such other countries as Germany after the First World War – were of course a fertile ground for the message of the novel. The moral of the story was readily accepted by the general reading public. Now, for the first time, Hemingway's narrative skill was emphasized and praised not only by the critics in France, where the Lost Generation was based, but also in such countries as the above-mentioned Germany, France's and America's enemy in both world wars.

In this context, to the varied kaleidoscope of Hemingway's artistic pattern can be added the reactions of international audiences, given that a literary work's “meaning” is a combination of important factors, beyond the author's craft. Several essays in some other European literatures regarding Hemingway's work appeared, which, although naturally associated with comparative literary history, are not in any way bound to a definite method but are held together by a common purpose, which appears only indirectly in the essays themselves. This purpose is the interpretation of what has been referred to as the European image of the United States of America, especially between the two World Wars. It has by now become common knowledge that the way in which the Europeans perceived America in its political, economic, social and cultural aspects was determined by a number of heterogeneous elements.

There was, after the catastrophe of the First World War and the high hopes set on American co-operation by victors and defeated alike, the shock of the American defection from the League of Nations, claims Roger Asselineau. The general collapse of what was left of Victorian values, together with a profound skepticism about anything that looked like the ideals of the pre-war world was also present. The theme of disillusionment appears in some form or other in every literature of Europe and the underlying attitude was bound to affect the critical reception of American writing. (Asselineau 4)

In this broad context the appearance and appreciation of Hemingway's work was bound to be of special significance. Unlike other writers, Hemingway was actively connected with events of vital influence on the future history of Europe. He had participated in the fighting on the Italian front. As a newspaper man he covered the Rapallo Conference and the Ruhr Conflict. He witnessed the horrors of the Greco-Turkish war in its final stages with the Greek retreat on Smyrna and the appalling misery of the refugees. He met Mussolini and watched the growth of the Fascist movement in Italy. He became intensely aware of the role of violence in human existence and of what the ever present consciousness of death can do to Man, stresses Roger Asselineau. (Asselineau 4)

Hemingway's work also helped towards a new interpretation of the image of America through the much more concealed method of setting an American character, often in the role of the narrator, against a foreign background. Unrecognized by the author himself, this important aspect was, in the inter-war period, one of the factors that increased the work's widespread appeal.

One could even say that Hemingway, by designing provocative characters of Italian, French, Austrian and Spanish origin, distracted readers from a

conscious view of his American characters. On the other hand, he probably relied on most of his American noncombatant readers trusting him for the depiction of something that was remote from the American shores, something that, in modernist fashion, should be contemplated aesthetically, rather than be dealt with in some form of social involvement. Whether this is true or

not, one cannot ignore the artistic dexterity of something that can be called Hemingway's kaleidoscope, which problematizes both the author's position and identity in relation to his fiction and the relationship between this fiction and the contemporary audiences of the inter-war modernist age.

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