

Ernest Hemingway

The recognition of Hemingway as a major and representative writer of the United States of America, was a slow but explosive process. His emergence in the western canon was an even more adventurous voyage. His works were burnt in the bonfire in Berlin on May 10, 1933 as being a monument of modern decadence. That was a major proof of the writer's significance and a step toward world fame.

To read Hemingway has always produced strong reactions. When his parents received the first copies of their son's book *In Our Time* (1924), they read it with horror. Furious, his father sent the volumes back to the publisher, as he could not tolerate such filth in the house. Hemingway's apparently coarse, crude, vulgar and unsentimental style and manners appeared equally shocking to many people outside his family. On the other hand, this style was precisely the reason why a great many other people liked his work. A myth, exaggerating those features, was to be born.

Hemingway in Our Time

After he had committed suicide at Ketchum, Idaho, in 1961, the literary position of the 1954 Nobel Laureate changed significantly and has, in a way, even become stronger. This is partly due to several posthumous works and collections that show the author's versatility – *A Moveable Feast* (1964), *By-Line* (1967), *88 Poems* (1979), and *Selected Letters* (1981). It is also the result of painstaking and successful Hemingway research, in which The Hemingway Society (USA) has played an important role since 1980.

Another result of this enduring interest is that many new aspects of Hemingway's life and works that were previously obscured by his public image have now emerged into the light. On the other hand, posthumously published novels, such as *Islands in the Stream* (1970) and *The Garden of Eden* (1986), have disappointed many of the old Hemingway readers. However, rather than bearing witness to declining literary power, (which, considering the author's declining health would, indeed, be a rather trivial observation even if it were true) the late works confront us with a reappraisal and reconsideration of basic values. They also display an unbiased seeking and experimentation, as if the author was losing both his direction and his footing, or was becoming unrestrained in a new way. Just as modern Hemingway scholarship has added immensely to the depth of our understanding of Hemingway – making him more and more difficult to define! – these works reveal and stress a complexity that may cause bewilderment or relief, depending on what perspective one adopts.

The “Hard-boiled” Style

The slang word “hard-boiled”, used to describe characters and works of art, was a product of twentieth century warfare. To be “hard-boiled” meant to be unfeeling, callous, coldhearted, cynical, rough, obdurate, unemotional, without sentiment. Later to become a literary term, the word originated in American Army World War I training camps, and has been in common, colloquial usage since about 1930.

Contemporary literary criticism regarded Ernest Hemingway’s works as marked by his use of this style, which was typical of the era. Indeed, in many respects they were regarded as the embodiment and symbol of hard-boiled literature.

However, neither Hemingway the man nor Hemingway the writer should be labeled “hard-boiled” – his style is the only aspect that deserves this epithet, and even that is ambiguous. Let us get down to basics, concentrate on one main feature in his literary style, and then turn to the alleged hard-boiled mind behind it, and his macho style of living and speaking.

An unmatched introduction to Hemingway’s particular skill as a writer is the beginning of *A Farewell to Arms*, certainly one of the most pregnant opening paragraphs in the history of the modern American novel. In that passage the power of concentration reaches a peak, forming a vivid and charged sequence, as if it were a 10-second video summary. It is packed with events and excitement, yet significantly frosty, as if unresponsive and numb, like a silent flashback dream sequence in which bygone images return, pass in review and fade away, leaving emptiness and quietude behind them. The lapidary writing approaches the highest style of poetry, vibrant with meaning and emotion, while the pace is maintained by the exclusion of any descriptive redundancy, of obtrusive punctuation, and of superfluous or narrowing emotive signs:

IN the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterwards the road bare and white except for the leaves.

At the end of the sixteenth chapter of *Death in the Afternoon* the author approaches a definition of the “hard-boiled” style:

“If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things.”

Ezra Pound taught him “to distrust adjectives” (*A Moveable Feast*). That meant creating a style in accordance with the esthetics and ethics of raising the emotional

temperature towards the level of universal truth by shutting the door on sentiment, on the subjective.

The Unwritten Code

Later biographic research revealed, behind the macho façade of boxing, bullfighting, big-game hunting and deep-sea fishing he built up, a sensitive and vulnerable mind that was full of contradictions.

In Hemingway, sentimentality, sympathy, and empathy are turned inwards, not restrained, but vibrant below and beyond the level of fact and fable. The reader feels their presence although they are not visible in the actual words. That is because of Hemingway's awareness of the relation between the truth of facts and events and his conviction that they produce corresponding emotions.

“Find what gave you the emotion; what the action was that gave you the excitement. Then write it down making it clear so the reader will see it too and have the same feeling as you had.”

That was the essence of his style, to focus on facts. Hemingway aimed at “the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be as valid in a year or in ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always” (*Death in the Afternoon*). In Hemingway, we see a reaction against Romantic turgidity and vagueness: back to basics, to the essentials. Thus his new realism in a new key resembles the old Puritan simplicity and discipline; both of them refrained from exhibiting the sentimental, the relative.

Hemingway's sincere and stern ambition was to approach Truth, clinging to an as yet unwritten code, a higher law which he referred to as “an absolute conscience as unchanging as the standard meter in Paris” (*Green Hills of Africa*, I: 1).

Hemingway's Near-Death Experience

Though Hemingway seems to have seen himself and life in general reflected in war, he himself never became reconciled to it. His mind was in a state of civil war, fighting demons inwardly as well as outwardly. In the long run defeat is as revealing and fundamental as victory: we are all losers, defeated by death. To live is the only way to face the ordeal, and the ultimate ordeal in our lives is the opposite of life. Hence Hemingway's obsession with death. Deep sea fishing, bull-fighting, boxing, big-game hunting, war, – all are means of ritualizing the death struggle in his mind – it is very explicit in books such as *A Farewell to Arms* and *Death in the Afternoon*, which were based on his own experience.

Modern investigations into so-called Near-Death Experiences (NDE) such as those by Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring and many others, have focused on a pattern of empirical knowledge gained on the threshold of death; a dream-like encounter with unknown border regions. There is a parallel in Hemingway's life, connected with the occasion when he was seriously wounded at midnight on July 8, 1918, at Fossalta di Piave in Italy and nearly died. He was the first American to be wounded in Italy during World War I. Here is a case of NDE in Hemingway, and I think that is of basic importance, pertinent to the understanding of all Hemingway's work. In *A Farewell to Arms*, an experience of this sort occurs to the ambulance driver Frederic Henry, Hemingway's alter ego, wounded in the leg by shellfire in Italy. (Concerning the highly autobiographical nature of *A Farewell to Arms*, see Michael S. Reynolds's documentary work *Hemingway's First War: The Making of A Farewell to Arms*, Princeton University Press 1976). As regards the NDE, we can note the incidental expression "to go out in a blaze of light" (letter to his family, Milan Oct. 18, 1918), and the long statement about what had occurred: Milan, July 21, 1918 (*Selected Letters*, ed. Carlos Baker, 1981).

Hemingway touched on that crucial experience in his life – what he had felt and thought – in the short story "Now I Lay Me" (1927):

"my soul would go out of my body ... I had been blown up at night and felt it go out of me and go off and then come back"

– and again, briefly, in *In Our Time* in the lines on the death of Maera. It reappears, in another setting and form, in the image of immortality in the African story *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, where the dying Harry knows he is going to the peak called "Ngàje Ngài", which means, as explained in Hemingway's introductory note, "the House of God".

The Coyote and the Leopard

Hemingway's seeming insensitive detachment is only superficial, a compulsive avoidance of the emotional, but not of the emotionally tinged or charged. The pattern of his rigid, dispassionate compressed style of writing and way of life gives a picture of a touching Jeremiad of human tragedy. Hemingway's probe touches nerves, and they hurt. But through the web of failure and disillusion there emerges a picture of human greatness, of confidence even.

Hemingway was not the Nihilist he has often been called. As he belonged to the Protestant nay-saying tradition of American dissent, the spirit of the American Revolution, he denied the denial and acceded to the basic truth which he found in the human soul: the will to live, the will to persevere, to endure, to defy. The all-pervading sense of loss is, indirectly, affirmative. Hemingway's style is a compulsive

suppression of unbearable and inexpressible feelings in the chaotic world of his times, where courage and independence offered a code of survival. Sentiments are suppressed to the boil.

The frontier mentality had become universal – the individual is on his own, like a Pilgrim walking into the unknown with neither shelter nor guidance, thrown upon his own resources, his strength and his judgment. Hemingway's style is the style of understatement since his hero is a hero of action, which is the human condition.

There is an illuminating text in William James (1842-1910) which is both significant and reminiscent, bridging the gap between Puritan moralism, its educational parables and exempla, and lost-generation turbulent heroism. In a letter written in Yosemite Valley to his son, Alexander, William James wrote:

“I saw a moving sight the other morning before breakfast in a little hotel where I slept in the dusty fields. The young man of the house had shot a little wolf called coyote in the early morning. The heroic little animal lay on the ground, with his big furry ears, and his clean white teeth, and his jolly cheerful little body, but his brave little life was gone. It made me think how brave all these living things are. Here little coyote was, without any clothes or house or books or anything, with nothing but his own naked self to pay his way with, and risking his life so cheerfully – and losing it – just to see if he could pick up a meal near the hotel. He was doing his coyote-business like a hero, and you must do your boy-business, and I my man-business bravely, too, or else we won't be worth as much as a little coyote.” (*The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James, Little, Brown and Co.: Boston 1926.)

The courageous coyote thus serves as a moral example, illustrating a philosophy of life which says that it is worth jeopardizing life itself to be true to one's own nature. That is precisely the point of the frozen leopard close to the western summit of Kilimanjaro in Hemingway's famous short story. That is the explanation of what the leopard was seeking at that altitude, and the answer was given time and again in the works of Ernest Hemingway.

But what about the ugliness, then? What about all the evil, the crude, the rude, the rough, the vulgar aspects of his work, even the horror, which dismayed people? How could all that be compatible with moral standards? He justified the inclusion of such aspects in a letter to his “Dear Dad” in 1925:

“The reason I have not sent you any of my work is because you or Mother sent back the *In Our Time* books. That looked as though you did not want to see any. You see I am trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across – not to just depict life – or criticize it – but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing. You can’t do this without putting in the bad and the ugly as well as what is beautiful. Because if it is all beautiful you can’t believe in it. Things aren’t that way. It is only by showing both sides – 3 dimensions and if possible 4 that you can write the way I want to.

So when you see anything of mine that you don’t like remember that I’m sincere in doing it and that I’m working toward something. If I write an ugly story that might be hateful to you or to Mother the next one might be one that you would like exceedingly.”

Merging Gender in Eden

Like many other of his works, *True at First Light* was a blend of autobiography and fiction in which the author identified with the first person narrator. The author, who never kept a journal or wrote an autobiography in his life, draws on experience for his realism, slightly transforming events in his life. In this sense, the posthumous novel *Islands in the Stream* is in some places neither fictional nor fictitious. *The Garden of Eden*, however, a book brimming with the author’s vulnerability just as *A Farewell to Arms* is, treats intimate and delicate matters. It is a story told in the third person, as are all his major works. Thus we get to know the writer David Bourne, assuredly an explorer like Daniel Boone, on his adventurous Mediterranean honeymoon.

The anti-hero’s wife in *The Garden of Eden*, Catherine Bourne, is one of the most persuasive and lively heroines in Hemingway’s works. She is depicted with fascination and fear, like Marcel Proust’s Albertine and, at least in name, she reminds us of the strong and attractive Catherine Barkley (alias the seven-year-old Agnes Von Kurowsky), the Red Cross heroine in *A Farewell to Arms*. The former character is much more complex and difficult to define, however, and her ardor and the fire of marital love prove consuming and transmogrifying.

Living at the Grau (“canal”) du Roi, on the shores of the stream that runs from Aigues-Mortes straight down to the sea, the newly wedded couple in *The Garden of Eden* live in a borderland where “water” and “death” are key words, and where connotations like L’eau du Léthe present themselves: Eros and Thanatos, love and death, paradise and trespass.

In this innocent borderland, moral limits are immediately extended, and conventional roles are reversed. Sipping his post-coital fine à l’eau in the afternoon, David Bourne feels relieved of all the problems he had before his marriage, and has no thought of “writing nor anything but being with this girl,” who absorbs him and assumes

command. Then the blond, sun-tanned Catherine appears with her hair “cropped as short as a boy’s,” declaring:

“now I am a boy ... You see why it’s dangerous, don’t you? ... Why do we have to go by everyone else’s rules? We’re us ... Please understand and love me ... I am Peter ... You’re my beautiful lovely Catherine.”

From that moment the tables are turned. David-Catherine accepts and submits, and Catherine-Peter takes over the man’s role. She mounts him in bed at night, and penetrates him in conjugal bliss:

“He had shut his eyes and he could feel the long light weight of her on him ... and then lay back in the dark and did not think at all and only felt the weight and the strangeness inside and she said: ‘Now you can’t tell who is who can you?’”

The Father in the Garden

Women with a gamin hairstyle, lovers who cut and dye their hair and change sexual roles, are themes that, with variations, occur in his novels from *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, to the posthumous *Islands in the Stream*. They culminate in *The Garden of Eden*. When writing *The Garden of Eden* he appeared as a redhead one day in May 1947. When asked about it, he said he had dyed his hair by mistake. In that novel, the search for complete unity between the lovers is carried to extremes. It may seem that the halves of the primordial Androgyne of the Platonic myth (once cut in two by Zeus and ever since longing to become a complete being again) are uniting here. Set in a fictional Paradise, a Biblical “Eden”, the novel is perhaps even more a story about expulsion, the loss of innocence, and the ensuing liberation, about knowledge acquired through the Fall, which is the basis of culture, about the ordeals and the high price an author must pay to become a writer worthy of his salt. Against a mythical background, the voice of Hemingway’s father is heard, challenging his son, as did the Father in the Biblical Garden. Slightly disguised, Hemingway’s dear father, who haunted his son’s life and work even after he had shot himself in 1928, remained an internalized critic until Ernest also took his life in 1961. Hemingway’s père pressed his ambivalent son to surpass himself and produce a distinct and lively multidimensional text, – “3 dimensions and if possible 4”:

“He found he knew much more about his father than when he had first written this story and he knew he could measure his progress by the small things which made his father more tactile and to have more dimensions than he had in the story before.”

After they had committed honeymoon adultery with the girl both spouses equally love passionately, David exclaims: “We’ve been burned out ... Crazy woman burned out the Bournes.” This consuming and transforming fire of love and its subsequent trials and transgressions, in the end has a purging effect on the writer, who finally, as if emerging from a chrysalis stage, rises like the Phoenix from his bed and sits down in a regenerated mood to write in a perfect style:

“He got out his pencils and a new cahier, sharpened five pencils and began to write the story of his father and the raid in the year of the Maji-Maji rebellion ... David wrote steadily and well and the sentences that he had made before came to him complete and entire and he put them down, corrected them, and cut them as if he were going over proof. Not a sentence was missing ... He wrote on a while longer now and there was no sign that any of it would ever cease returning to him intact.”

Maji-Maji and Mau Mau

But why is Maji-Maji so important to the author when he has attained perfection?

When Tanzania gained independence in 1961-62, President Julius Nyerere proclaimed that the new republic was the fulfillment of the Maji-Maji dream. The Maji-Maji Rebellion had been a farmers’ revolt against colonial rule in German East Africa in 1905-1907. It began in the hill country southwest of Dar es-Salaam and spread rapidly until the insurrection was finally crushed after some 70,000 Africans had been killed. The farmers challenged the German militia fearlessly, crying “Maji! Maji!” when they attacked, believing themselves to be protected from bullets and death by “magic water”. Maji is Swahili for “water” – one of the key words in Hemingway’s novel.

The conviction and purposefulness of the Maji-Maji in *The Garden of Eden*, corresponds to the Kenyan Mau-Mau context of the novel *True at First Light*, which Hemingway started writing after his East African safari in 1953. Mau Mau was an insurrection of Kikuyo farm laborers in 1952. It was led by Jomo Kenyatta, who was subsequently held in prison until he became the premier of Kenya in 1963 (and the first President of the Republic in 1964). For Kikuyo men or women (and there were several women in the movement), to join Mau Mau meant dedicating their lives to a cause and sacrificing everything else, it meant taking a sacred oath that definitely cut them off from decorum and ordinary life.

In Hemingway’s vision, Maji-Maji and Mau Mau blend with his notion of the ideal committed writer, a man who is prepared to die for his art, and for art’s sake.

In the private library of [Dag Hammarskjöld](#), who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize after his death in the Congo (Africa) in 1961, the year Hemingway died, a copy of the beautiful original edition of *A Farewell to Arms* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929) may still be seen (now in the Royal Library, Stockholm). In a way it is significant that the Secretary-General of the United Nations, who was dedicated to peacemaking, should have been a Hemingway reader.

Ernest Hemingway

Facts

Ernest

Miller

Hemingway

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1954

Born: 21 July 1899, Oak Park, IL, USA

Died: 2 July 1961, Ketchum, ID, USA

Residence at the time of the award: USA

Prize motivation: "for his mastery of the art of narrative, most recently demonstrated in *The Old Man and the Sea*, and for the influence that he has exerted on contemporary style."

Language: English

Ernest Hemingway

Biographical

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), born in Oak Park, Illinois, started his career as a writer in a newspaper office in Kansas City at the age of seventeen. After the United States entered the First World War, he joined a volunteer ambulance unit in the Italian army. Serving at the front, he was wounded, was decorated by the Italian Government, and spent considerable time in hospitals. After his return to the United States, he became a reporter for Canadian and American newspapers and was soon sent back to Europe to cover such events as the Greek Revolution.

During the twenties, Hemingway became a member of the group of expatriate Americans in Paris, which he described in his first important work, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Equally successful was *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), the study of an American ambulance officer's disillusionment in the war and his role as a deserter. Hemingway used his experiences as a reporter during the civil war in Spain as the background for his most ambitious novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). Among his later works, the most outstanding is the short novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), the story of an old fisherman's journey, his long and lonely struggle with a fish and the sea, and his victory in defeat.

Hemingway – himself a great sportsman – liked to portray soldiers, hunters, bullfighters – tough, at times primitive people whose courage and honesty are set against the brutal ways of modern society, and who in this confrontation lose hope and faith. His straightforward prose, his spare dialogue, and his predilection for understatement are particularly effective in his short stories, some of which are collected in *Men Without Women* (1927) and *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories* (1938). Hemingway died in Idaho in 1961.