

## THE CRUCIFIED MATADOR – A STUDY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S MAJOR THEMES

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Ernest Hemingway 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 Hemingwaystyle'. [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 universally 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 Walcott 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.

### Endnotes

1. Cleanth Brooks, 'Ernest Hemingway, Man On His Moral Uppers' *The Hidden God* (New Haven and London: Yale Press, 1969), p. 6.
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.
7. P.G. Rama Rao, *Ernest Hemingway, A Study in Narrative Technique* (New Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1980). p. 4. Hereafter cited as Rama Rao.
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* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; Cambridge University.
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.

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