

# Themes of Violence, Horror, Death in Hemingway

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**ABSTRACT:** The brutality of the Hemingway world of fiction has given rise to the view that he is a sort of “caveman” of literature. But this is an incorrect view. Hemingway’s has the sensitive modern man’s interest in the problem of the meaning and values of human life. It has been said, for instance, that his heroes are “brutal and reckless by day but wistful as little boys when alone at night with the women they love.” There are curious spots of sensitiveness in and kindness. He gives us the impression of being a hypersensitive man who has been terribly hurt by life, and who dwells upon horrible things partly to experiences in World War I, and he has been no war, Hemingway would in all probability still have not taken a bright view of human existence. The collection of short stories, *In Our Time*, contains evidence that he encountered horror and terror even in his boyhood, at least on the hunting and fishing trips he made with his father in Michigan, and that he never afterwards quite got them off his mind. Perhaps he was also deeply moved by his father’s suicide. He was determined not to throw the veil over any dark aspect of life; he did not wish to resort to evasion. He never wanted to write about everyday life. Instead, he wanted to concern himself with the ultimate crises of human experience, to surprise the human soul naked, as it confronted an ultimate challenge. In this sense, namely in his pre-occupation with the problems of conduct, he is a profoundly “moral” writer. Unfortunately, he fails to formulate any moral values beyond his statement that anything that makes you “feel good afterward” is moral. And this does not get us very far.

## I. ABSENCE OF MORAL VALUES

The world of *The Sun Also Rises* is a world of drunkenness and indiscriminate sexuality, with streaks of pity running through it. It is not necessarily an immoral book because of its portrayal of the moral disorder inseparable from war: it may even be wholesome by virtue of that portrayal, but it is difficult to admire the nymphomaniac Lady Brett Ashley just because she gives up the bull-fighter in her anxiety not to poison his youth with her won corruptions. The act itself is unquestionably right, but with that kind of woman one cannot be too sure about motives. Jake Barnes is himself doubtful if he and she would have been each other’s salvation if circumstances had made it possible for them to be united. Indeed, this novel presents a group of people who have sold themselves to the devil cheaply without getting much satisfaction out of the bargain.

In *A Farewell to Arms* war again is the horror. The hero here makes “a separate peace” when his interests and those of his sweetheart, Catherine Barkley, demand it. The affair between Catherine Barkley and Lieutenant Frederic Henry begins casually and sensually enough, but it develops into an overwhelming romantic ardour which is however unblessed by conventional social sanctions because of war conditions and which ends in a situation of overwhelming pathos when Catherine dies in child-birth. Both here and in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway ponders the special character of the

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relationship in anything but a libertarian spirit; old Pilar warns Robert Jordan not to think lightly of Maria because she has come to him, in the midst of revolution, without the ceremony of marriage, and the young man himself ponders the cruel destiny of lovers for whom a whole life must be compressed within a few weeks of time. In Maria's case there is, moreover, one further complication. It is her urgent need, if she would survive as an emotional being, to be reconciled to life and the fundamental life-experiences after the outrages she has suffered at the hands of the fascists in the Spanish war.

## Unsatisfactory Treatment of Women and of Love

That both Catherine and Maria have their appeal cannot be denied. But in view of the submissive character of these females, many readers have accused the author of infantilism in his treatment of love. His women, they allege, represent a boy's erotic fantasies, like the film stars that came to Robert Jordan in his dreams. A great novel should deal with "something a little higher in the scale- say a love experience with some quality of awareness in it".

## Religious Significance

It has been asserted that Frederic Henry's encounters with the priest lend religious significance to *A Farewell to Arms* by pointing out the quest for meaning behind his careless life. "In the end, with the death of Catherine, Frederic discovers that the attempt to find a substitute for universal meaning in the limited meaning of the personal relationship is doomed to failure". There is something in this view, but one wonders whether the author had this purpose consciously in mind.

## Harry Morgan, a Criminal

A word about Hemingway's novel *To Have and Have Not*, whose central figure is Harry Morgan whose history is as unsatisfactory aesthetically as morally. It is true that the reader's sympathy for Morgan and his coarse wife is surely aroused; yet when all is said and done, the man is a criminal and a murderer, and Hemingway's attempt to glorify him into something more is simply an unconvincing device.

## Robert Jordan's Participation in the Spanish Civil War

Robert Jordan in *For Whom The Bell Tolls* has not, like Hemingway's earlier heroes, stumbled into war or embraced it in a spirit of adventure. He is in Spain because he believes that the battle for human freedom is going to be lost or won there, and he wishes to be counted among the supporters of the right cause. In this book the meaning does surely emerge from the fable.

## An Obsessive Interest in Death

In the beginning of the book called *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway tells us that he went to Spain to watch the bull-fights because that was the only place, after the War, where he could study violent death. Violent death was, he said, one of the subjects about which he most wanted to write. He had read many books in which, when treating this subject, the authors faltered and failed, conveying blurred impressions instead of clear and sharp emotions. In the bull-fights Hemingway found the "feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality" which he sought, and which he wanted to communicate to his readers.

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## Hemingway's Celebration of Bull-fighting

With *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway wished to demonstrate that bull-fighting, considered by most Americans to be a decadent, cruel amusement, was in fact a religious ritual. He wished also to assert his attainment of an outlook of life wholly different from that prevailing in his homeland. As he states in *Death in the Afternoon*, he was in rebellion against death. Like the metaphysical poets, he would defy death in his metaphors by proving death to be but a stage to a new order of being. Killing the bull was a ritual victory over death; it was also a rejection of the theory which denied the destructive forces in the human personality and which constituted as part of his anti-intellectual stance. His concern with bull-fighting and, in part of life, is related to Freud's idea that neuroses are frequently the result of a civilisation imposing upon the individual cultural ideals that frustrate primitive impulses of aggression and self destruction. Hemingway's view is even more akin to that of those modern social psychologists who feel that excessive repression has made culture itself neurotic.

## Death as a Means of Insisting upon Man's Individuality

In addition, the insistence upon the need to accept death was a way of insisting upon man's individuality. Through its many devices for obscuring the reality of death, American culture promotes the loss of individual identity, a sense of the cycle of the individual life is lost in the onward movement of the democratic mass. Values of life are given over to general opinion instead of being weighed anew in the light of individual experience. Hemingway's later fiction repeatedly offers the consciousness of an individual awaiting death and struggling for one final time to clarify the values by which he lives. The nearness of death is a reason the more for the Hemingway protagonist to cultivate his personal vision of how he has played, or mis-played, the game of life.

## Death at the Centre of Life in Hemingway's World

Much has been made of Hemingway's interest in death, and it has been labelled in various ways: the cult of death, a death-wish, an obsession with death, and so on. One critic goes so far as to assert that "in reality Hemingway has only one theme-death," and offers the following conjecture: "perhaps no Protestant can pretend to understand the Catholic mind, and it is from Catholicism, perhaps, that Hemingway's constant pre-occupation with the theme of death arises." In this there is much truth. In *Death in the Afternoon* Hemingway ridicules the Englishman who wrote: "Life is real; life is earnest, and the grave is not its goal." The Spanish, Hemingway points out, think a great deal about death and when they have a religion they have one which believes that life is much shorter than death. Their intelligent interest in death also accounts for their interest in bull-fighting; and there is nothing obsessive or morbid about their interest in death. As he declares in the same book, death is "the unescapable reality, the only thing any man may be sure of." Thus death needs to be accepted as an integral part of life. With Hemingway death occupies the centre of life, and it awaits a man from whichever point he may start. It is this presence of death that not only completes life but also makes life extremely precious.

## Romero's Encounter with Death

Thus considered, the image of Romero (in *The Sun Also Rises*) standing alone in the sunlit bull-ring facing the bull, the carrier of death, becomes poignantly symbolic. His encounter with death, which is the climax of the whole fiesta, is the very heart of the celebration of life.

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## The Coward and the Brave

The fear of death separates the coward from the brave. When Catherine amends Henry's quotation that "that coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave but one, by saying that "the brave dies perhaps two thousands deaths if he's intelligent. He simply doesn't mention them," Henry admits that he is not brave and says: "I don't know. It's hard to see inside the head of the brave." Whether or not Hemingway came to see inside the head of the brave, he held the fear of death as the ultimate test of manhood. The meaning of his African story, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" depends much on this fear of death.

## Jordan's Death, a Lonely Act

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, when once Jordan realises that death is inevitable, he urges his comrades to proceed while he is covering their escape, and when Maria insists on remaining with him, he declares: "Nay, view that dying is a lonely act. All along Jordan is aware of impending death. It is this awareness which makes him squeeze seventy years into three days, determined to live fully and to the hilt. He is determined also to experience every moment of his own death. Having completed his military mission, he enacts his own death with equal perfection. He dies his death, one of the most lonely and therefore beautiful deaths in modern American literature, showing that dying is also an art and a ritual.

## Hemingway's Interest in Life

The various deaths of Catherine, Macomber, Harry, Harry Morgan, Robert Jordan, Colonel Cantwell, and many unnamed characters may tempt us to agree with the critic who said that Hemingway really had only one theme- death. But this is not the whole truth. Hemingway takes such a great interest in death because he is greatly interested in life. By accepting death as the centre of life one completes life. Mastery of life pre-supposes mastery of death, and mastery of death indicates mastery of life. Hemingway then has two themes-life and death- and not only one. He takes death as seriously as life and thereby establishes their oneness. It thus follows that his interest in death is not really a matter of obsession or morbidity. His view of death is thoroughly sane.

## II. CONCLUSION

Viewed from inside, Hemingway's art emerges as a wholly integrated one. We can see the relationship of the four-fold base of his art: the Hemingway character, the Hemingway situation, the Hemingway style, and the Hemingway philosophy. Despite their complex texture, they are the outgrowth of one most elemental root that is his vision of life and death.

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