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## *Hemingway's Vision of Life and Death Struggles\**

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### **Abstract:**

*In Hemingway's fiction, death becomes a significant issue which contrastively pairs off with life. His works attest to the fact that life receives its real meaning when pitted against death. Therefore, the most recurrent motif in all of Hemingway's works has been the subject of death and violence, only to intensify human life and consciousness. In Hemingway's works, for life to continue to have meaning, the death experience must be repeated again and again. The tension must be maintained or the protagonist ceases to be an individual, and becomes part of the mass. One may conclude that the consciousness of death shatters the banality of everyday existence, and liberates man from the petty mentality of the ordinary life. Moreover, by interiorizing and humanizing death, man can apparently deprive it of its character as restriction upon his freedom.*

**Key words:** *Life; Death; Violence; Modern Consciousness; Individuality; Freedom.*

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Hemingway's artistic achievements with the novelistic experimentation gained him the world's most prestigious literary award, namely the Noble Prize, in 1954 His citation praised him for overcoming the "brutal, callous and cynical" tendencies of his early career to produce a work of heroic pathos, distinguished by its "natural admiration for every individual who fights the good fight in a world of reality overshadowed by violence and death"

Modern Literature exploits death as a recurrent theme occupying the writer's consciousness. The twentieth century is also considered as an age of materialism and conformity. It was at this time that Hemingway strove to neutralize the potential evil lurking within the literature of the time. The province of his art is the extensive yet subtle network of human relations that in investigates the larger questions of illusion and truth.

According to Jeffery Meyers, "Hemingway's fame rests on his fiction, the ultimate test love and death (214). Death became, in his fiction, the ultimate test of reality and the territory of experience. According to Thomas Cash:

It would be difficult to find an author who has written of death as often and as consistently as Hemingway. At one time or another he has described the death of ants, Salamanders, grasshoppers and fish; how hyenas die, how to kill kudu, the proper way to excute horses, how bulls are slain, how soldiers die, death in Italy, in Cuba, in Africa and in Spain, death in childbirth and death in suicide, death alone and death in a group, selfish death, sacrificing death, and graceful death. (qtd in Brooks 2259)

Hemingway's obsession with death works in two diametrically different directions: as an agent of liberation and of restriction. Both ways death can enhance man's awareness of living consciousness and endow life with vitality and vigor (Weeks 3).

Hemingway's search for the meanings of death often results in very gloomy portrayures of human suffering born of *nada*. Cleath Brooks makes the following comment about the significance of violence in Hemingway's world:

It [violence] embodies, of course, the great threat of *nada*, of physical death. But in another dimension, it also involves the threat of *nada* as spiritual death, for if the hero cannot summon up courage and discipline to face the threat of physical death, he will die the death of the spirit. If the characters of the Hemingway world appear tough and insensitive, the hero recognizes his obligation to the code, to the demands of the spirit; his sensitivity is to honor and not only his own, for he recognizes the code of honor in others and responds to it. (2257)

Hemingway argues that man neither can nor should shut out the consciousness of death entails. Hemingway's fundamental conviction is that the affirmation of life is impossible unless man realizes the consciousness of death. As Hemingway's concept of relativity extends to the realm of language and life, each adjective or noun finds its meaning in relation to its opposite. Hemingway asserts that if life is not put against death, life would of death and resolutely faces the fact that each of us is condemned to die.

All human experiences which arouse – ranging from danger and conflict to moral decisions and acts of faith – the individual to action and engages his energies are heightened by an awareness and consciousness of death as a personal possibility. The consciousness of death releases life intensity. In Hemingway's view the consciousness of death releases human energies by revealing the insignificance of ordinary pursuit, thus breaking through the thin crust of meaning, convention, routine and habit, of which we are normally victims.

Whereas an ordinary man thinks of death as a scary phenomenon and reacts to it with numbing fright because he resists the consciousness of death, flees from it, in order to protect the mundane values which he has not the courage to abandon, the courageous man will embrace the consciousness of death as an agent of liberation. The brave man will not flee from the anguish which accompanies death because he is aware of the values which the consciousness of death carries with it.

In Hemingway's fiction, numerous situations occur to point to the fact that death has a central role in man's existence and it serves to reduce the problem of existence to its lowest common denominator, where it can best be handled by man. In "Two – Hearted – River" Nick is mentally and physically hurt. Nick's wound is not an isolated instance of a Hemingway character facing death or violence. Nick was long before exposed to death, an acquaintance that began with the jack-knife- caesarian in the short story "Indian Camp". After Nick's father was through with the operation on the Indian woman, he said, "I am going to sew up the incision I made." Here, Hemingway comments, "he [Nick] did not watch. His curiosity had gone for a long time." This confrontation with violence and death becomes Hemingway's long-time obsession.

In fact, of the forty nine stories published in the collected edition of 1938, ranging from very long stories to some very short ones, the majority deals with the issues of death and violence. Nick Adams is the central character in most of these pieces in different age levels, and the process of his growing follows a chronological and psychological sequence. Meyers believes that " *In our time* Hemingway found a way to combine objective and imaginative writing, to express the range of powerful feelings he'd experienced in war" (218). The first story of *In our time* begins with death and the last one ends with death. Hereafter, death becomes Hemingway's serious concern. He does not indulge a taste for its own sake; he is deeply concerned with its meaning and its consequences.

Hemingway's involvement with death promotes idea that the courageous man will not flee from death, or the anguish that it brings along because he is aware of the values that the consciousness of death carries with it. So death emerges both as a humanizer to lose its restrictive character and also an enhancer of self-awareness, conferring upon man a status of individuality. Hemingway argues that it is not death but its consciousness that individualizes.

In Hemingway's view, once man has recognized the truth of his condition and accepted it, he can live in it with meaning, order and beauty, finding or creating them in the processes of life itself. For Hemingway learning to live in this world means turning to the sensuous beauty of nature, and to meaningful personal and social relationships. Nick finds pleasure and solace in his perception of nature, meaning and purpose in the step-by-step activities of camping and fishing along the "Big Two-Hearted River". Moreover, learning to live in this world also requires for the Hemingway characters to establish a meaningful involvement with other people. In "The Killers" Nick Adams tries to help Ole Anderson by warning him that the gunmen have come to kill him; and the older waiter in "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" wants to keep the café open for the old man because he understands how much men need light and order in a dark and empty universal. Hemingway's conviction that man can find meaning and value in his experience of life evokes an essentially tragic vision of man. His characters can and do transcend the conditions which hurt and destroy them: in an empty and indifferently maleficent universe, they confront the human condition directly and by living fully within it. Santiago in *The Old Man and The Sea*, "a man is not made for defeat . . . . A man can be destroyed but not defeated." Yet, they do, at times, get defeated, but they insist that they should be defeated on their own terms.

"A Clean Well-Lighted Place" is the product of Hemingway's sustained effort to confront the consciousness of death intrepidly, rather than to suppress it. The importance which Hemingway

attributes to this particular consciousness of the inauthentic man, in this case the young waiter, to allay the fear of death. This technique consists in depersonalizing death by reducing it to an abstract and universal category for a purely biological and social phenomenon, refusing to recognize that it is a concrete experience of a spiritual order, which all human beings and especially one must individually undergo. In the shorter but more specialized vocabulary of Hemingway, it consists in saying to oneself, not "I shall die. But rather "one, dies".

In the short story "The Battler," Nick in his teens, is cuffed off a dazedly into the camp of the old battler, a cauliflower-earned ex-fighter who becomes so violent and unmanageable that the big negro, bugs, has to quiet him with a blow on the head. This story completes the first series of Nick Adams stories, repeating the themes of death and macho violence, and reconfigures the key elements of the previous stories. "You've got to be tough" (53) has turned into the moral of the tale.

In "The killers ", Nick goes to the big city, where he becomes involved with two professional assassins stalking a Swede who sits and waits stoically for his death, convinced that any effort to escape would be futile. In his adulthood, Nick attends the war and encounters violence in massive proportions – the officer who will not die but is put in the cave of the dead in "A Natural History of the Dead", the dead mules lying in the water with their legs thrust at the sky in "On the Quai at smyma," and the two dead Austrians lying under a crumpled pink wall that had once hidden the now-twisted iron bedstead, in the story in which Nick receives the wound.

Nick's gain of the war is a deformed leg for which he has to go to a rehabilitation hospital to train it to bend again. There, in Spain, he meets a tall, pale faced lieutenant of whom Nick later says, "he had lived a very long time with death and was a little detached, and there was nothing that holds us together expect that we met every afternoon

in the hospital ("In Another Country" 41). Death had repeated its isolating function on each of them. While in Spain, Nick sees the bullfights, which furnishes material for several of the subsequent stories in *In our Time*. The final stories deal with bullfighting scenes including the story of the torero who kills five bulls until his face is completely blanched. Another story describes a wounded horse, canting around the arena while his entrails oscillate comically from wound beneath him and the last chapter displays the great bull itself roaring blood, terminating the collection of Hemingway's short stories with the dire images of blood, violence, and death.

Death becomes a central issue in the long fiction of Hemingway as well. As Robert Jungman asserts, it "provides a way of universalizing what may otherwise be taken for an isolated instance of human suffering or at least for an experience unique to the twentieth century" (110). In the Sun *Also Rises*, Jake Barnes gets very close to death and is emasculated by the war. In *A Farewell to Arms*, The protagonist, Frederick Henry, is wounded by an exploding mortar. Similarly, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* Jordan repeatedly confronts death, often reflecting on the Negro he has seen lynched when he was a child and still thinking about being handed the gun which his father had committed suicide. In *Across the River and into the Trees*, Richard cant well bears his share of wounds, still regretting losing a regiment because of stupid orders from higher up, and has seen plenty of war and death.

*In The Old Man and The Sea*, Santiago holds tight against pain. "I must hold this pain where it is," he thinks as grips the line on his. "Mine does not matter. I can control mine. But his pain should drive him mad."

Philip Young thus comments on the continuity of the suffering:

The effect of the wound the code hero has been suffering is just beginning to be hinted at. This shell that has hit Nick in the spine is of a piece with the blows that he took when he saw the

jack-knife caesarian, that nearly decapitated Indian, the Battler, and the black jacking Negro when he felt himself forced to repudiate his mother and his girl-friend, when he hit the cinders after a blow in the face on a freight train . . . The same wound which emasculates Jake, hospitalizes Lt. Henry and whose scar Cantwell bears more than thirty years is significant beyond these facts. (Young 90)

It is endurance in the face of pain and suffering which sets the code hero apart from the ordinary men, denoting him his distinct individualism. Jake achieves it at the expense of sexual deprivation, and it makes Lt. Henry desert the battle field. The same process drives Harry Morgan to murder his shipmates to protect himself from the police and promotes Jordan to cover the retreat of others. And there are many other Hemingway code heroes who excel in the art of bearing the pain and continuing to bear it all. It is, indeed, the capacity of preserving the code, the discipline, which gives the Hemingway hero his full humanity. It enables the code-hero to give order and meaning to the confusion and chaos of the world. With this discipline comes a the process of learning that the hero must undergo to live in this world as Jack Barnes confirms, "I did not care what it [the world] was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it, you learned from that what it was all about" (*The sun Also rises*).

The point is that life seems to receive its meaning from its opposite, death. Thus, to denote life meaning, the death experience should be repeated every single moment, to sustain tension and intensity. That is why the old man Santiago persist in repeating the same painful experience:

The thousand times he had proved it meant nothing. Now he was proving it again. Each time



was a new time and he never thought about the past when he was doing it.

*The Old Man and The Sea* 4

Robert Jordan contemplates on similar notion when he reflects upon the quality time:

To live as full a life in seventy hours as in seventy years. And if there is not any such thing as a long time, nor the rest of your lives, nor from now on, but there is only now, why then now is the thing to praise and I very am happy with in. Now, ahora, maintenant, heate, now, it has a funny sound to be a whole world.

*(For Whom the Bell Tolls* 183)

Thus, what distinguishes the code-hero, the great individual from the ordinary man, is this abiding need to reconstitute the self by a repetition of the critical experiences. Tony Tanner emphasizes that the continuity of pain leads to a fascination with it:

They [certain images] express a fascination with death that recurs throughout Hemingway's work. Such recurrence suggests that every encounter with death aggravates rather than allays the fear of it. It is a repression, which continually fails and so must repeat itself. (83)

Hemingway's readers might quite justifiably wonder what Hemingway heroes are trying to prove? Why don't they go back to the current of their life and settle down? A meticulous look at all they have achieved indicates that after having seen the real life, vital, authentic life through the trauma of death, they feel an urge to continually recreate it. In *A Farewell To Arms*, Catherine alters the old

quotation to suit the code hero's philosophy of life and death. In contrast to the old saying, "The coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave but one," she asserts, "The coward dies perhaps a thousand deaths if he is intelligent enough."

For Hemingway, war, struggles and animosity are not the only situations to seek violence and death. Staged violence would do as well as he states in the beginning of *Death In the Afternoon*:

The only place where you could see life and violent death now that the wars were over was in the bull-ring and I wanted very much to go to Spain to study it. I was trying to write, commencing with the simplest things and one of the simplest and the most fundamental is violent death. It has none of the complications of death by disease or so called natural death or the death of a friend or someone you have loved or have hated. (8)

No only the bull-fighter closely experiences death in each encounter with the bull, the viewers, if they give their soul the game, may experience similar intense tensions.

Hemingway explains this shared experience of bullfighting in the following manner:

Now the essence of the greatest emotional appeal of bullfighting is the feeling of immortality the bullfighter feels in the middle of a great faena and that he gives to the spectators. He is performing a work of art and he is palying with death, bringing it closer, closer to himself ... . He gives to feeling of immortality, and as you watch, it becomes yours. (213)

The barrera seat is nearest to the ring, where one can overlook the movements and emotions of the torero. It is from the barrera that you can see danger and learn to appreciate it. All of Hemingway heroes are barrera sitters, and he is contemptuous of those who view the scene distantly.

In Hemingway's view, a truly brave torero faces death frequently, not by merely faking the appearance of danger with body contortions. He, then, becomes Hemingway symbolic individual who really knows life. In addition, there is an emphasis on the clean killing of animals, a code hero's distinct characteristic. In Hemingway's view, "the truly great killer must have a sense of honor words must be a simpler man . . . Killing cleanly . . ." (*Death in the Afternoon* 37). Therefore, when Romero in *The Sun Also Rises* claims that he kills the bulls so they do not kill him, he is in fact implying that he asserts himself as an individual by taking life at the moment when he can most easily lose it. Speaking of the grand old bullfights of the past, Hemingway says:

The whole end of the bullfight was the final sword thrust, the actual encounter between the man and the animal, what the Spanish call the moment for truth, and every move in the fight was to prepare the bull for that killing.

(*Death in the Afternoon* 46)

In a sense the moment of truth is symbolic, and applies the facing-death situations of all of Hemingway's heroes. According to Michael Thurston, "from the beginning, then, the violent death at the literal and figurative center of the bullring is linked metonymically, syntactically, and spatially, to the truth at the center of writing. Throughout the book, death and writing are figured in the various aspects of bullfighting Hemingway examines in such detail (46). For Nick, the moment of truth, or the epiphany is the moment when he receives the spine wound. For Jake, it is when he received his crucial

wound, for Henry when the mortar landed in his trench, and for Jordan, when the wall fell on him. Hemingway's, however, kept vital as an individual by being cast continually into the teeth of death.

As Carols Baker emphasizes, Hemingway's preoccupation with the theme of death is evident in all of his fiction. Baker explains that: "His stories appear to deal with a variety of themes: boxing, bullfighting, war, hunting, fishing . . . all of them physical subjects, but in reality Hemingway has one theme: death" (79). Hemingway attempts to establish the point that the courageous man will not flee from death, or the anguish that it brings along, because he is aware of the values that the consciousness of death carries with it. So, death emerges both as a humanizer to lose its restrictive character and also an enhancer of self-awareness, conferring upon man a status of individuality. Hemingway argues that it is not death but its consciousness that leads to man's achievement of a distinct identity.

For Hemingway death fulfills two significant functions. One is that the consciousness of death confers on the code-hero the status of individuality and heightens self-awareness.

As Thurston indicates, "Hemingway consociates adherence to conventional masculinity with the proper orientation toward death; in many scenes ... man's stance toward death or his recognition of death as the ultimate truth to that man's masculinity or the search for false security in the face of death, to man's unmanliness" (50).

The second function is that by interiorizing and humanizing death, the code-hero can dispense with it as a freeing agent. Hemingway's contemporary life has reduced to despair will appreciate their sublimity and will receive them as monuments to the heroism of the human spirit.

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