



ERNEST HEMINGWAY: 20TH CENTURY MODERNIST AND EXPATRIATE

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“A short story succeeds, if it does, as a series or play of echoes. Its marvelously rigorous discipline does not allow for explanation, whether authorial or disguised through a protagonist.”

– Nadine Gordimer

Ernest Hemingway’s theory of the iceberg, a writing technique that called for minimalist prose and narration without narrative context, is reflected in his own contention: “If you leave out important things or events that you know about, the story is strengthened. If you leave out or skip something because you do not know it, the story will be worthless. The test of any story is how very good the stuff [that] you, not your editors, omit.” (Hemingway 1932, 192). To Hemingway, when one omitted exposition and contextualization, the heart of every story revealed itself faster and more forcefully. This was Hemingway’s most notable achievement as a novelist and short-story writer: his ability to convey social truths through prose built from what was “left after eliminating all the words that one could not stand to hear.” (Baym and Levine 2013, 1020). Indeed, Hemingway based his life’s work on the dignity to kill his writerly darlings – underscoring the belief that writing is deepened when rendered down to its purest and most immediate form. Skyrocketing to fame after the 1926 publication of his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway is regarded as one of the most famous and influential modernist writers of twentieth-century fiction.

Born today, July 21st, 1899, in Oak Park, Illinois to Clarence Edmonds Hemingway and Grace Hall Hemingway, Hemingway was one of six children. He and his siblings were raised in a middle-class Protestant suburb and spent summers at their cottage in Michigan, which would become the setting of many of Hemingway’s stories. Indeed, Hemingway’s upbringing played a significant part in inspiring its settings, for the vividness of both Michigan and nature appears in concrete detail. In his youth,



Hemingway would take advantage of the nature that surrounded him, partaking in hunting, fishing, and wading. His experiences in the natural world primed him to render such landscapes in stories. He later attended Oak Park High school, where he participated in sports and wrote for *Trapeze*, his high school paper. After graduating in 1917, Hemingway would join *Kansas City Star* as a sports reporter. Writing for newspapers would play a significant role for young Hemingway, as it forced him to write prose in an economic fashion, a skill he would transfer over to his fiction work.

As the First World War raged throughout Europe, Hemingway, freshly graduated from high school, found himself eager to join the American cause. After being deferred from combat duty for poor vision, he volunteered for the ambulance corps. Hemingway was injured by an Austrian mortar shrapnel, and after a six-month stay in the American Red Cross hospital, returned home to recuperate from the traumas of war. He would go on to marry Hadley Richardson in 1920 after a yearlong correspondence, the first of his four marriages. Hemingway and Richardson then moved to Paris, where the young writer became affiliated with expatriate artists and American writers, including Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot, famously known as “The Lost Generation.” This was a crucial period for Hemingway. It was through these connections that he was able to publish his collection of short stories, *In Our Time*, which draws upon his experiences in war. The stories feature protagonists like Nick Adams, a man who grows up in a northern Michigan landscape and narrates through tumultuous and psychologically deteriorating vignettes of war and crime. Indeed, Hemingway’s stint in Europe, where he was surrounded by a close network of thinkers, would open a space for him to cathartically grapple with the disillusionment of the postwar period.

War also adds to the emotional milieu of *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway’s 1926 novel, which is strongly influenced by his time in Paris. The novel’s protagonist is Jake Barnes, a World War I veteran whose wound has left him sexually impotent and unable to consummate his love for Lady Brett Ashley. Ashley, a divorced woman of the 1920s, is emboldened by promiscuity and newfound sexual freedom. The novel attempts to concretize the lostness of postwar Europe, which is signified through Jake’s wound as it both figuratively and literally prevents him from expressing his romantic love in a conventional way. Following his style of writing, the author published his second collection of stories, *Men Without Women*, followed by his second novel in 1927, *A Farewell to Arms*. *A Farewell to Arms* is about Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver serving in Italy, and Catherine Barkley, an English nurse. The novel portrays somewhat of an inverse of Barnes and Brett in *The Sun Also Rises*, in that Henry and Barkley do get to be together by the end, but their inability to escape the war lances their happily ever after. While *The Sun Also Rises* depicts a character whose stunted physiological state has direct ties to war, *A Farewell to Arms* reflects the



quiet, pervasive virality of war in socially structured spaces. Nonetheless, both novels center war as the malaise-like element that has incapacitated certain ways of living (e.g., consummating love, having a family, etc.). Again, Hemingway's efforts to invest an idyllic background with political resonance can be chalked up to the politics of his expatriate peers.

Hemingway's legacy continues through his anti-fascist politics, a theme that emerges in his work beginning in the 1930s. Hemingway was drawn to the conflicts of the Spanish Civil War and wrote stories such as *To Have or Have Not*, which illustrated working-class citizens as protagonists and contrasted them to their idly rich counterparts. Additionally, Hemingway's interest in the freedom of modernity and the consequential obscuring of gender roles after World War I underscored the rapid changes occurring for women during that time. These socio-political destabilizations invoked the trauma hidden in the cultural zeitgeist. Reading the work of Ernest Hemingway not only reminds us of this twentieth-century postwar milieu, but also foreshadows the deteriorating emotional and mental wellness of the author. Hemingway's death by suicide in 1961 and the national mourning that followed spoke to his continued legacy in American literature. His notion for succinctness and omission is memorialized in work that reasserts hard truths about our culture and modernity.

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SUGGESTED CITATION: Lorraine Reyes, Fe. 2021. "Ernest Hemingway: 20th Century Modernist and Expatriate." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published July 21.