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PREVIEW

A Reconsideration of the Hero in Hemingway's Short Stories

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A RECONSIDERATION OF THE HERO IN
HEMINGWAY'S SHORT STORIES

by

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PREVIEW

A Reconsideration of the Hero in
Hemingway's Short Stories

The Hemingway hero of the short stories, as described by Philip Young, is a character very similar to Nick Adams or Harry of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." His story typically involves initiation into life through repeated violent or evil events which bring him, as a youth, into contact with the more unpleasant or perplexing aspects of reality.¹ As a youth, Young writes, he is a "sensitive, masculine, impressionable, honest, out-of-doors" type; thus his contact with the aforementioned aspects of reality wound his sensibilities. In addition, this repeated contact produces a sickness of spirit, an extreme bitterness, a disillusionment that results in the rejection of all ideas, all abstracts, all relationships except those based on human sympathy.² He breaks with society and thereafter tries to fill the void which results by learning complex ritualized activities such as fishing, writing, or bullfighting. Performing these activities provides him with a sense of order and gives him relief from his nightmares as well as those realities which have become nightmares, by occupying his mind. His wound never disappears, but these rituals help him ignore it as long as he adheres to them strictly, through force of will. And this self-fortifying action of "holding tight against pain" replaces what he has rejected and becomes his code.³ Thus,

as Young puts it, the manhood attained after such experiences is "complicated and insecure," but the character has begun "learning a code with which he might maneuver, though crippled, and he [is] practising the rites which might exorcise the terrors born of the events that crippled him."⁴ Young says "might" rather than will "exorcise the terrors" because although a successful confrontation with what he feared replaces the fear with something strong that makes him mature, he is nonetheless still too tortured by his earlier wounds not to violate his code and show signs of his torment.⁵ Therefore, according to Young, the hero of the short stories never successfully learns to live by the code.⁶ However, in these same stories there is another, whom Young calls the "code hero" to distinguish him from the "true 'Hemingway hero,'" who is faithful to the code.⁷ This figure demonstrates the code's successful functioning through his complete and unquestioning adherence to it and thereby introduces the "Hemingway hero" to its heroic possibilities.⁸

For Young, it is only in the novels that the Hemingway hero finally adjusts to his code, and then finds in it the sort of solution to his problem that the hero of the short stories had hoped for so desperately.⁹ In For Whom the Bell Tolls, for example, the protagonist Robert Jordan finally wins out "over his incapacitating nightmares" by firmly grasping onto his code and performing his duty, which is to blow up a bridge. Here the hero becomes strong by mentally reviewing the "horrors" of his past, and by avoiding speaking of them in ways that would only reopen

the wounds they caused.¹⁰ In addition, in To Have and Have Not and The Fifth Column, the hero comes to realize that he alone has no hope for survival.¹¹ Finally, in The Old Man and the Sea, Young claims that "an extraordinary thing had happened, for somehow or other a reverence for life's struggle . . . and for mankind . . . had descended on Hemingway like the gift of grace on the religious."¹² For Young, it is in this story alone that the "Hemingway hero" and the "code hero" successfully merge in the character Santiago. Alone he holds tight against all that life asks him to bear, and because he emerges from his ordeal still "capable of such decency, dignity, and even heroism, . . . his struggle can be seen in heroic terms."¹³

This notion is true enough. But when dealing with the short stories Young became so concerned with the heroes' efforts to deal with their wounds that he missed their efforts to deal with life itself after the wounding occurred. "Capital of the World," for instance, provides much insight into the qualities necessary for a hero to become what Young referred to as successful. In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" one finds a hero, Harry, who becomes strong by reviewing his past horrors and by reaffirming certain ties to society. Further, in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" occurs an exact prototype of Santiago in the older waiter.

More recent critics do not distinguish between the heroes of the novels and the short stories as Young did. Like Young, they note that some characters, after being "wounded" by the shattering of their illusions, have created a shrunken but ordered world by

their ritualistic adherence to a code. The characters seek this shrunken world to fill the void left after the end of their illusions. In addition, they note that each character faces the task of adjusting his vision to fit new conditions: in the absence of illusionary absolutes, he must learn to depend on the only thing he has any chance of controlling, himself.¹⁴

Critics are divided, however, about the real aim of the Hemingway hero. One group sees him as a fraud. John Griffith, for instance, believes that he uses ritualized physical activities to help occupy his mind and thereby free him from ever having to think about the void around him.¹⁵ Others, like Frank O'Connor and Leo Schneiderman, go on to claim that these methods of occupying his mind are simply comfortable ways of avoiding life and its difficulties, of avoiding concern for others, and of saving himself from his felt weaknesses by spending his entire energies upon solitary and defiant poses.¹⁶

Yet other critics think the Hemingway hero is truly heroic. Leonard Kriegel regards his use of codified rituals as helping him endure painful tests, not by providing him with chances for defiant or masochistic stances, but rather by helping to give him the ability to endure pain without losing the capacity for pulling through.¹⁷ Earl Rovit considers such efforts necessary for the Hemingway hero, who, instead of using them to help him ignore reality, finds them a support when he tries to maintain dignity in moments of fear or despair.¹⁸ For, as Ray B. West, Jr., and William Barrett point out, like the bullfighter's code which turns