

# TIME

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## The Hero of the Code

*All stories, if continued for enough, end in death, and he is no true story-teller who would keep that from you.*

Ernest Hemingway, the storyteller who wrote those lines, was brushing his teeth. It had been, his wife later recalled, a "calm, good-natured" dinner, and she was sitting in her bedroom in their house in Ketchum, Idaho, when an Italian song she had not thought of for years came into her mind--*Tutti Mi Chiamano Bionda* (Everybody Tells Me I'm Blonde). Mary Hemingway walked across the hall to her husband's room to sing it for him. "I said, 'I have a present for you.' He listened to me, and he finished cleaning his teeth to join me in the last line."

Next morning, shortly after 7 a.m., a pajama-clad Hemingway went downstairs and from the gun rack took his favorite gun, which, like almost everything he owned, was not merely a thing but a ceremonial object. A twelve-gauge, double-barreled shotgun inlaid with silver, it had been specially made for Hemingway. He put the gun barrel in his mouth and pulled both triggers. The blast blew his whole head away except for his mouth, his chin, and part of his cheeks.

The small, quiet funeral took place four days later in the placid village cemetery of Ketchum. To the north, the peaks of the rugged Sawtooth Mountains were still capped with snow. To the east lay the lavish summer greenery of the Wood River Valley. Around the rose-covered coffin gathered only about 50 people, mostly Idaho neighbors and some of Hemingway's always-varied circle of friend--a doctor, a rancher, a hotel man, a onetime operator of a gymnasium. "O Lord," prayed Father Robert Waldmann, pastor of Our Lady of the Snows Catholic Church, "grant to thy servant Ernest the remission of his sins. Eternal rest grant unto him. O Lord."

## **Brooding Judgment**

Mary Hemingway kept insisting that somehow her husband's death had been an accident. Plainly it could not have been. Moreover, Hemingway had been ill and depressed for a long time. His blood pressure was high, and his doctor suspected incipient diabetes. His eating and drinking were restricted--to shrink more than 40 lbs. from the bearlike physique in which he had always taken a small boy's pride. Literary visitors last winter found Hemingway inarticulate and insecure, pathetically doubting not only his current creative powers but the value of all he had ever done. In two lengthy stays at the Mayo Clinic he got shock treatments for depression. Recently, the death of his friend Gary Cooper depressed him further.

Suicide as a way of ending the story of a life had been much on his mind. Hemingway's physician father, also ill with hypertension and diabetes, had died by his own hand in 1928. Indeed, Hemingway had brooded and passed judgment upon it in print. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan thinks about his suicide-father, "that other one that misused the gun," and calls him a coward. Elsewhere, Hemingway suggested that there was nothing cowardly in suicide--if used to hasten what otherwise might be a slow and messy death. Some years ago, his mother, as a present, sent him the Civil War pistol with which his father had shot himself.

## **Dr. Hemingstein**

There was a worldwide seismic shock at Hemingway's death, even though for some years younger writers had stopped imitating the master stylist, and despite the fact that in the last two decades, Hemingway had produced only a near parody of himself, *Across the River and Into the Trees*, and a small but immutable achievement, *The Old Man and the Sea*. For the rest, the legend engulfed the man, and he seemed bent on playing the part of a Hemingway character.

From his earliest expatriate days, when he knew James Joyce and Gertrude Stein at Sylvia Beach's Paris bookshop, Hemingway plainly enjoyed being a celebrity among celebrities. He went fishing with Charles Ritz, the Paris hotel man, and considered fighting a duel over Ava Gardner, whose honor somebody had insulted. In Paris he invariably cultivated Georges Carpentier, the prizefighter turned saloon owner; in New York he befriended Restaurateur Toots Shor, and despite an often-expressed desire for privacy, went on the town with Gossip Columnist Leonard Lyons. He not only allowed but encouraged the world to turn him into a character. He had well-publicized talks about child care with Grandmother Marlene Dietrich

("The Kraut"), jovially referred to himself as Doctor Hemingstein or Old Ernie Hemorrhoid ("The Poor Man's Pyle"), and talked of his literary prowess in prizefighting terms: "I trained hard and I beat Mr. De Maupassant. I've fought two draws with Mr. Stendhal, but nobody is going to get me in any ring with Mr. Tolstoy unless I'm crazy or keep getting better."

But all this could not damage the work he had already done or lessen his world impact, which was, and is, incalculable.

### **Stream of Sensuousness**

For years, critics skimmed the dazzling prose surface of Hemingway and harped on his tough-guy realism. In one of those flat-out statements that sometimes herald a major critical about-face, at least one U.S. critic, North Carolina State's E. M. Halliday, recently called Hemingway essentially a philosophical writer. His was, of course, never a formal but a sort of visceral philosophy. But though he was leary of metaphysical systems, Hemingway was really on a metaphysical quest. Without the customary marks of the intellectual, in fact often called anti-intellectual, he was nevertheless a tenacious observer of the crisis in belief and values which is the central crisis of Western civilization.

His philosophy--essentially a profound pessimism about the human situation and a stoic sense of tragedy--grew out of war. Like many a child of the times, he was born twice, once in Oak Park, Ill., on July 21, 1899, and a second time during World War I at Fossalta on the Italian Piave on July 8, 1918. At Fossalta, Hemingway, who had switched from ambulance driving to join the Italian infantry, was so badly wounded in a burst of shell-fire that he felt life slip from his body, "like you'd pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by one corner," and then return. He emerged with 237 bits of shrapnel (by his own count), an aluminum kneecap, and two Italian decorations. It was at Fossalta that he picked up his own fear and the lifelong need to test his courage.

This experience might not have shaped the philosophic attitudes of his works if the entire climate of intellectual history had not prepared all audience for him. The 20th century was primed for a philosophy of concrete things rather than abstract ideas, was ready for a psychology of sensations--for the brute fact, the tactile thrill, the stream of sensuousness that inundate the pages of Hemingway.

As a fledgling writer in Paris, Hemingway intuitively felt a double betrayal of language and ideals. The first thing the Lost Generation lost was its faith in words, big words. Says Lieut. Henry, the hero of *A Farewell to Arms*: "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred,

glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain . . . I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it." The big words were false, and life itself was "just a dirty trick," as the dying Catherine tells her lover in the same book. Hemingway's image for man's plight in the universe was that of an ant colony on a burning log. There was no hope of heaven or sustaining faith in God. In the short story *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, there is a parody of the Lord's Prayer built on the Spanish word *nada*, meaning nothingness ("Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name"). In *The Gambler, the New, and the Radio*, the hero narrator decides that "bread is the opium of the people."

### **Style for Its Own Sake**

The pattern of what Alberto Moravia aptly calls Hemingway's "ingenuous nihilism" was early set, but even Hemingway could not sustain himself on *nada*, or on bread alone. If life was a short day's journey from nothingness to nothingness, there still had to be some meaning to the "performance en route." In Hemingway's view, the universal moral standard was nonexistent, but there were the clique moralities of the sportsman or the soldier, or, in his own case, the writer. So he invented the Code Hero, the code being "what we have instead of God," as Lady Brett Ashley puts it in *The Sun Also Rises*.

The Code Hero is both a little snobbish and a little vague, but the test of the code is courage, and the essence of the code is conduct. Conduct, in Hemingway, is sometimes a question of how one behaves honorably toward another man or woman. More often, it is a question of how the good professional behaves within the rules of a game or the limits of a craft. All the how-to passages--how to land a fish, how to handle guns, how to work with a bull--have behind them the professional's pride of skill. But the code is never anchored to anything except itself; life becomes a game of doing things in a certain style for the sake of style, a narcissistic ritual which led Hemingway himself not only to some mechanical, self-conscious "Hemingway" writing but to a self-conscious "Hemingway" style of life.

To raise the Code Hero to something like tragic dignity, there had to be the risk of death. From Fossalta on, Hemingway had death as an obsession; the bullfight gave it to him esthetically, as a ritual, with order and discipline. In *Death in the Afternoon*, he states his tragic creed flatly: "There is no remedy for anything in life." His *Winner Takes Nothing*; his lovers lose all. His fictional stages are strewn with corpses. In *To Have and Have Not*, there are twelve, which compares favorably with the Elizabethans. Nemesis, in the Hemingway tragedy, is bad luck. "I was going good," says Manuel, the gored bullfighter in *The*

*Undeafated*, "I didn't have any luck. That was all." "Never fight under me," says Colonel Cantwell in *Across the River and into the Trees*. "I'm cagey. But I'm not lucky." Even Santiago, the old fisherman in *The Old Man and the Sea*, says, "I have no luck any more." Under the brilliant physical surface in Hemingway there was always the metaphysical brooding, the glancing reflections on a destiny his characters keep telling themselves not to think about.

What does not bear thinking about is what is going to happen. A Hemingway character does not make things happen; things happen to him. Hemingway's people often seem like masochistic spectators of their own doom. In *The Killers*, Nick Adams rushes to the boardinghouse room of the ex-prizefighter Ole Andreson to warn him that two gangsters are in town to kill him. "There isn't anything I can do about it," says Ole Andreson, lying on his bed and turning his face fatalistically to the wall. There isn't anything any Hemingway character can do about his fate except to take it.

### **Infantry of the Mind**

The trouble with the metaphysics of chance is that it is too shallow for a true tragic destiny. Unlike the Greek and Elizabethan heroes, the Hemingway hero does not understand his fate. It's simply a dirty trick. The reader, in turn, is saddened without being purged, resigned without being reconciled to man's destiny.

Whatever Hemingway's merits or demerits as a thinker, he had the greatest technical command of English of any modern writer except Joyce. He performed a major operation on the English sentence. He cut out the adjectives and prompting words that tell a reader how to feel and replaced them with spare, brisk monosyllables that he called the "ugly short infantry of the mind." Hemingway spliced his images together like a film editor so that the action was always advancing on the reader rather than the reader following the action.

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, El Sordo on the hilltop is waiting to squeeze the trigger on an enemy, but it is the reader who sights along the rifle: "Look. With a red face and blond hair and blue eyes. With no cap and his moustache is yellow. With blue eyes. With pale blue eyes. With pale blue eyes with something wrong with them. With pale blue eyes that don't focus. Close enough. Too close. Yes, Comrade Voyager. Take it, Comrade Voyager."

Though he relied on the common speech of the commonest men--race-track touts, prizefighters, soldiers--Hemingway wrote brilliant dialogue that was highly stylized, just as an X ray is a highly stylized picture of the body, It revealed more than it ever laconically

said. Though he never went to college, he picked his prose teachers well, starting with the King James Bible. His love of nature and the vernacular, together with a kind of battled male camaraderie, linked him fraternally with Mark Twain and Huckleberry Finn. Hemingway was the first of the '20s expatriates to knock on Gertrude Stein's door, and he learned the most. She taught him the impact of simple repetition and the rhythm of words.

From Flaubert, whose bust he used to salute while crossing the Luxembourg Gardens to his Montparnasse flat, Hemingway learned precision, the right word in the right place. But there is an emotional intensity in a random Hemingway sentence that the teachers do not account for and the imitators and parodists never capture. The effect of "In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels" depends on a special quality of vision. Everything in Hemingway is seen as it might be looked at by a man on the day he knew he would die.

### **Grace Under Pressure**

He never toyed with minor themes. He wrote of life and death, of time and towns (which he called cities), and of the courage he liked to call "grace under pressure." He never had much stomach, or much head, for politics, and his literary reputation may wear the better for it, since nothing dates like a paper barricade.

He once said: "Let those who want to save the world if you get to see it clear and as a whole." Seeing it clear and whole did not involve for him, as it did for Tolstoy, the high politics of a philosophy of history. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy speculates at length on whether heroes and leaders influence events or whether everything is impersonally determined like the rise and fall of tides. Hemingway had an underdeveloped social sense, and he put his characters in situations where society had already broken down. He pictured the social order as disorder, a kind of natural catastrophe like a river in flood. The individual could save himself only by relying on himself.

Of love, Hemingway wrote with peculiar implausibility. The love affair in *A Farewell to Arms* is a kind of modern *Romeo and Juliet*. Most of the other love stories read like adolescent male fantasies. In Hemingway there are only two kinds of women--the bitches like Margaret Macomber who shoots her husband the moment he displays courage, and the somnambules like Maria, who sleepwalks into Robert Jordan's sleeping bag. Lady Brett Ashley is a special breed, a likable bitch. Ibsen's Nora wanted to be her own woman.

Promiscuous, aggressive Brett, with her habit of calling everybody "chap," is both her own woman and her own man, with the fatal sterility of being able to give herself to no one.

Among major modern U.S. writers, Hemingway showed more internal discipline than Faulkner, who has ruined half his books with careless rhetorical obscurity, and more personal integrity than Fitzgerald, who potboiled and drank away the greatest natural gifts of the three as a novelist. Unlike Faulkner and Fitzgerald, Hemingway rarely dealt with the American scene after his early Nick Adams stories of hunting and fishing in the West. Internationally, Hemingway belonged with Eliot, Yeats and Joyce as one of the prime shapers of modern literature, but temperamentally he was more akin to that roving intellectual foreign legion of Malraux, Camus and Koestler, who sent back communiqués from all the battlefronts of the 20th century consciousness and conscience.

### **The Good Place**

Will Hemingway pass the test of timelessness? There are several good reasons for thinking so. Most of his short stories, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Old Man and the Sea* have the internal inevitability of masterworks; no one can imagine them happening in some other way. The underlying theme is universal: natural man pitted against the mystery of the universe.

T. S. Eliot once proposed a test for the lasting significance of a writer: "Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know." Through his books, Hemingway is "that which we know" of World War I, the Lost Generation, the mystique of the bullfight, the Spanish Civil War. One can learn all of this without knowing Hemingway, but once having read him, one can never see these subjects again without some angle or tint of his vision. His best books exist at that rare level at which literature becomes experience.

In Hemingway, experience is always form of fate. It tells of defeat and "the evil-smelling emptiness" of death. It stirs memories of pleasure and desire, "of sunshine and salt water, of food, wine, and making love." Wherever he went, whatever he did, the fate Hemingway yearned for was deceptively simple and impossibly serene--it was "the good place" Nick Adams found on *The Big Two-Hearted River*: "He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him. Now it was done. He

was very tired. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place."

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