

HEMINGWAY: A RETURN

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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Like generations of American students, my first exposure to the outsized life and highly stylized writing of Ernest Hemingway came through assigned readings in a Junior High School “Language Arts” class. While I do not recall the specifics, we were likely provided with a biographical overview of this Nobel laureate's life and career, touching fleetingly upon his Illinois birth, and his adventures in the Michigan woods that would serve as backdrop for the famed Nick Adams stories. We would also have learned of his brief stint in a Kansas City Newsroom, with a note on the influence that period would have in the creation of his unique and groundbreaking prose style. We would have learned of his service in Italy, as a Red Cross ambulance driver in World War I, and of the severe wounding and trauma that would foster his need to see other wars, that would provide the backdrop for his most famous novels, The Sun Also Rises, A Farewell to Arms and For Whom the Bell Tolls. From these experiences he would derive and develop his lifelong interest in the ultimate cosmic struggle, the finality of death, and of man's ability to exhibit a stoic grace in the most harrowing of circumstances. In short, these experiences would create Hemingway the man, and the writer.

We would have learned of his days as an ex-pat in Paris, of Stein's Salon, of the “lost generation” and of his breakout success with The Sun Also Rises while still in his twenties. For sheer scale and context, we would have been told of his romantic, globetrotting life, of Spain, Key West, and Cuba, and of his hyper-masculinity expressed through four marriages, and countless affairs, his

passion for big game hunting and fishing, and of his fascination for the peculiar passion and tragedy of the bullring. Finally, we would have learned of his death, by his own hand, a brutal double barrel execution authored in the entryway of his Ketchum, Idaho home one early summer morning in 1961.

While unable to properly articulate it at the time, the reprise of this man's life and career seemed like a screenplay, were these the facts of a single life, or elements of fiction, or were they both? Jarred to motion by a startling bell, ending the class period, we likely bumped clumsily into each other as we clambered to snatch a dog eared Scribner's paperback edition from a putty colored book cart as we rolled on to our next class. I hope it was a Friday afternoon, that it was winter, bleak, and that special New Jersey grey, and that upon arriving home I would have flopped down in a quiet place opened the book and read:

“He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him.”¹

Like countless others before and since, I became that boy, and that old man, and through reading was unwittingly transformed, for even at thirteen I began to sense a special love of literature and through exposure to Hemingway would glimpse it's potential for masculine glamour and it's ability through symbol and allegory to reveal emotion, love and a transcendent spirituality. Now forty-seven years later through the discipline of an academic program I am given the opportunity to return to the work of Ernest Hemingway, to take a reflective, “grad studious” look at key selections of the work of this larger than life literary figure, who though dead more than fifty years continues to cast a huge shadow over American letters.

In this brief paper, I will look at the underlying reasons behind his continuing influence, at the ongoing relevance of his work, in a world of modern critics, driven by psychoanalytical and structural analysis, hyper critical, gender neutral, a world where CNN has stripped war of its false glamour allowing us to view in real time the type of human conflict that provided the geo-political framework of Hemingway's most famous novels. The world is a far smaller place than the world he knew, we all know and see what only a “fortunate” few like Hemingway witnessed

in an earlier time, and that modern awareness prompts one to consider his place in the canon of American and indeed of world literature. In short, does he still matter, do the books, at the least “main” ones still hold their own, still have a place.

This experience has been a rich one, the opportunity to question if the lifetime between my initial exposure to his work and my current reading has reduced my perception of his relevance as an author. I am at once pleased, and much more that a little surprised to acknowledge that it has not. At the outset, I suspected I would find him passé, a relic of another age. In fact, in pouring through his work again, I find him the epitome of the American literary artist. His is a famously flawed life – but so is our experience as a nation, one who's instinct for a preordained greatness has often been spoiled by pettiness or wrongheadedness. As a nation, we have been quick with our fists, as was Hemingway, we have and continue to love greatly, and to try mightily, we have enjoyed great bounty, experienced great sorrows, we are flawed but unbroken, we exhibit as a people exactly what Jake Barnes, Frederic Henry, Robert Jordan and other of Hemingway's characters exhibit. It is Hemingway's awareness of these fundamental elements of the American spiritual ethos, not the politically temporal, but the essential, the enduring, our true core values, and his ability to reveal these through a prose that is at once sparse and electric that is essential to his hold on us. Like other great writers, he holds a mirror up to our experiences and perhaps more importantly to our aspirations as a people, he makes us look, he makes us think, and he compels us to feel.

Influential critics, tilting at windmills, and at each other, in literary and academic journals persist in taking swipes at Hemingway and his work – but then we must ask, who are they, what have they done, more importantly, what have they written? While it is difficult to secure firm numbers it is important to note that Hemingway's books still sell in the millions each year and that virtually every word he wrote is still in print, his posthumous output, work that he did not publish while living is arguably larger than the body of work he did authorize for print. Ambling through your

local library, not only will you find the books still shelved, they will likely still be in the active “leasing” program as multiple copies of his works are often required to meet demand. No doubt this would have thrilled him; he was hyper-competitive in everything, including writing. He would have felt both proud and vindicated that in so many ways he has outdistanced so many of his contemporaries, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos and the rest. It seems that so many of the 20th Century powers have been reduced to an audience of graduate students in literary seminars - no one reads them. Perhaps Fitzgerald, or more accurately, Gatsby, still reaches us, with its beautiful lyricism, but he seems less relevant as a writer than as a tragic figure of excess, like the great athlete who squandered his gift. Similarly Faulkner, long a favorite of the critical academic set, seems a prisoner of University English Departments, when did you last see anyone reading him? He is a formidable writer and like Hemingway, classic American in his southern gothic personae, but it always seemed to me that his greatness had to be “explained” to the reader, we have to overcome his opaque, maximalist prose style and his psychotic creepiness.

This is not to say that Hemingway was a Saint, clearly he was not, like Faulkner and Fitzgerald he was self destructive in the extreme and his many biographers note his penchant for both personal warmth and humor as well as his selfishness and his mean spiritedness. Noting all of this, and returning to the books at sixty, those first read as a young student, has been both a pleasure, and personally enriching.

Some twenty years ago, the noted film critic, David Denby, returned to his alma mater, Columbia University in his late forties, to take the “Great Books” course, wisely required of all students at that University. He wrote a fine book entitled, Great Books focusing on the impact the books now had on a mature worldly man versus the impact they had on a nineteen year old. At the onset of this project, I found myself on similar terrain, how would I find my encounter with the books

now, with the experience of a well more than a partial lifetime behind me. In his introduction Denby confesses that:

“I needed to start work on this book in part because I know longer knew what I knew. I felt that what I read or understood was slipping away. I possessed information without knowledge, opinions without principles, instincts without belief. The foundations of the building were turning to sand while I sat in the upper balconies looking out at the sea.”²

This view is instructive to anyone considering a return to an academic environment and a clarion call for the values and importance of lifetime learning. With Hemingway I sought a return home in a way, an attempt to understand the continuing power of his work, which has almost been lost in the slipstream of his outsized life. In looking at Hemingway, we need to understand that while his life influences and informs the books, how can one's life not, the books are distinct from his life. Quite simply, when we take one of the books from the shelf, he does not come with them. But what we do take from the shelf, in his most important books, is a focus on crucial thematic elements, along with a revolutionary writing style, both of which provide the context of his enduring power as a major figure in American literary history as an analysis of the major war novels clearly shows.

One would be hard pressed to name a writer more subject to biographical scrutiny than Ernest Hemingway. From Carlos Baker's groundbreaking Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story published in the nineteen sixties to Michael Reynold's more recent multi volume biography, his life has been scrutinized like no other and it is clear that the amazing narrative of his life has brought a degree of focus to this work that may not have occurred if his life had been more pedestrian. Writing at the close of the 20th century Sven Birkert's noted that:

“It is safe to say that no other American writer --- perhaps no other writer this century --- achieved the combination of international celebrity that Ernest Hemingway did during his lifetime.”³

Hemingway’s literary star was firmly fixed with the 1926 publication of The Sun Also Rises and by the time he was awarded the 1954 Nobel Prize:

“Hemingway was a household name, and the celebrity persona had long since overshadowed the stylistic genius of his early work on which his reputation as a modernist master has continued to rest.”⁴

Certainly, Hemingway was a groundbreaking stylist, and a formidable personality but as we will hopefully show his lasting reputation, his lock on our literary consciousness is not the result of one or two flashes of greatness, it is broader based and his appeal more seminal, and fundamental than that. Hemingway’s place in American literature is secured by the greatness of his writing, the eternal truth of the major themes with which he dealt, and by his characters maddening ability to linger on the fringes of our consciousness. Harold Bloom gets at it directly in his critical collection on Hemingway noting:

“Nothing is got for nothing, and a great style generates defenses in us, particularly when it sets the style of an age, as the iconic Hemingway did. As with Byron, the color and variety of the artist’s life becomes something of a veil between the work and the aesthetic apprehension of it. Hemingway’s career included four marriages (and three divorces); service as an ambulance driver for the Italians in World War I (with an honorable wound); activity as a war correspondent in the Greek Turkish War (1922), the Spanish Civil War, the Chinese-Japanese War (1941) and the war against Hitler in Europe (1944-45). Add big-game hunting and fishing, safaris, expatriation in France and Cuba, bull fighting, the Nobel Prize, and ultimate suicide in Idaho, and you have an assuredly implausible life, apparently lived in imitation of Hemingway’s own fiction. The final effects of the work and a life together is not less than mythological, as it was with Byron, and with Whitman and with Oscar Wilde. Hemingway now is myth, and so is permanent as an image of Americanism, or perhaps more ruefully the American illusion of heroism. The best of

Hemingway's work, the stories, The Sun Also Rises, are also part a permanent part of American mythology, Faulkner, Stevens, Frost, perhaps Elliot and Hart Crane were stronger writers than Hemingway, but he alone in this American Century has achieved the enduring status of myth."⁵

Certainly, it is no small feat to be the American literary master of the American Century. This status was achieved by a ferocious discipline to writing as an art, a lifelong love of learning, he was a prodigious reader, and by a recognition that a man, at least one in a novel, could and needed to set his life to an honorable compass heading and stay focused on his core values though governments, religions, and other institutions, and even one's presumed friends often could and would let you down. We will see that Hemingway is perhaps the greatest proponent of the so called "code hero" the man who wears his honor as a suit of impenetrable armor. This too, while mythological, is a key to his enduring popularity, we want to believe that we are Robert Jordan, all the while suspecting, or at least wondering, if at the great moment we would answer the bell. Robert Penn Warren writing in 1958 brought a laser like focus to the Hemingway code noting that:

"The shadow of ruin is behind the typical Hemingway situation. The typical character faces defeat or death. But out of defeat or death the character usually manages to salvage something. And here we discover Hemingway's special interest in such situations and characters. His heroes are not squealers, welchers, compromisers, or cowards and when they confront defeat they realize that the stance they take, the stoic endurance, the stiff upper lip mean a kind of victory. If they are to be defeated, they are defeated upon their own terms; some of them have even courted their defeat, and certainly they have maintained, even in practical defeat, an idea of themselves – some definition of how a man should behave, formulated or unformulated – by which they have lived. They represent some notion of a code, some notion of honor, that makes a man a man, and that distinguishes him from people who merely follow their random impulses and who are by consequence, "messy"."⁶

While the narrative may be sparse, the dialogue unframed, the themes remain transcendent. Just as the prose was shockingly modern so were his major themes, for his heroes confront the nihilism, the void of the modern age and they neither bend nor break. In Hemingway's world:

“The code and the discipline are important because they can give meaning to life that otherwise seems to have no meaning or justification. In other words, in a world without supernatural sanctions, in the God abandoned world of modernity, man can realize an ideal meaning in so far as he can define and maintain the code.”⁷

It may well be that our shifting perceptions of honor, and codes, and of manhood itself, is one of the reasons that the books still have a hold on us. In 2014, some would deride an adherence to any “pre set” code of behavior; we have become situationalists, forever moving with and on the wind. By contrast, for some, Hemingway has:

“Come to represent an idea of manhood deeply at odds with how we view it today, a relic of a time when stoicism and strength were considered the only tools you needed to navigate life. The obvious conclusion is that Hemingway would despair of what men have become ... what with our emotional intelligence and our sensitivity (attempted at least) and our curious way of being more feminine than we have ever been before.”⁸

Few would argue that the needle of gender equity or parity has moved drastically since Hemingway was at the height of his power, but they may miss the point. Is Brett Ashley not a modern woman, surely she is sexually free and in the 1920's this would have been clear evidence of a modern world view. And what of Catherine Barkley willing to conceive a child out of wedlock a shocking reality for that time. Perhaps Hemingway's women also are adherents to a code of honor and honesty, just as the male characters are. Look at Maria whose love transforms Robert Jordan and is in fact resurrected by his return of it.

To be sure, Hemingway did not invent the code hero motif. Biographers tell us that he was influenced by a number the great western writers such as Owen Wister, author of The Virginian. In the great western novels we meet men who never whine, who accept their fate with Hemingway's classic stoicism, they exhibit a taciturn American world view, an attitude that Hemingway would raise to a literary art form. Robert Jordan for example speaks directly of the American Western hero, the one who pushes open the swinging door of the “Silver Dollar

Saloon” to meet his fate in a dusty street just as the Virginian squares off against Trampas so he can wed Molly without shadows.

It was not only Western American writing that influenced Hemingway thematically. Many critics, among them Edmund Wilson, saw parallels in their biographies, and in the work of Kipling and Hemingway. We are told that Hemingway read Kipling regularly throughout his life and the reading directly influenced his work. Jeffrey Meyers notes that:

“Hemingway’s code (which derives from Kipling) emphasizes taciturnly, asceticism, dignity, solidarity, self sacrifice and stoicism. In both writers there is a close correspondence between physical courage and moral strength...courage, honesty and skill are important rules of the code...one must speak in clipped tones, avoid pretentious phrases, condense emotion into a few expletives or deliberately suppress it.”⁹

The continuing appeal of his style and of his heroic themes were linked to a man of vast personal life experience, and a writing craftsman of the first rank. Clancy Sigal notes that:

“He took American prose to where it had never been. Single handedly he freed our language to express more feeling and emotion than previous writers...his glass clear “simple” sentences strike some readers as “hard boiled” and tight lipped. The opposite is true. His simplicity camouflages deep hard to control compassion. He wrote as if he had taken a screen writing class, and his short, sharp, adjectiveless phrases are like camera shots.”¹⁰

Hemingway’s characters, like the classic stoics, control their emotions, not because they do not care, but conversely because they care too much, so deeply, that realizing and releasing emotion and acting upon them would be tantamount to coming unhinged.

In Hemingway Lives: Why Reading Ernest Hemingway Matters Today, Sigal offers the following warning:

“Reading Ernest Hemingway for the first time can be a health risk. It’s like listening to a song that saturates your head even after it stops. There’s hardly a writer living or recent, whose style – not “technique” but a tool for finding your emotion – does not show him or her to be one of “Hemingway’s children”...he is like the God Zeus up there.”¹¹

Sigal recognizes what Hemingway readers know personally, the books change us deeply.

In approaching Hemingway’s key war novels, The Sun Also Rises, A Farewell to Arms, For Whom the Bell Tolls, we must pay heed not only to the overarching themes of courage in the face of a hostile world, we must also be cognizant of his quest for truth. Hemingway often spoke about the need to write a true sentence, and he spoke of this need for truthfulness in writing with the passion of a fanatic. Some of his critics point out the he wrote novels that were “no more” than thinly disguised biographical pieces, covert travelogues, and records of trips to Pamplona or to Spain during the Civil War. The distance by which such criticism misses the mark is shocking, the “big three” novels are not travelogues; they are indictments of modernity, of war, and of the governments, religions, and the other institutions that foment them.

In looking at Hemingway’s major works, it is important to appreciate the limitations of chronology. The Sun Also Rises was written in the mid 1920’s, a time when few people traveled even short distances from their homes. While World War I, and later World War II, would at great cost, open American eyes to the larger world, Hemingway’s novels brought critical social issues and exotic locales to the readers. He brought adventure, a point that modern critics in a shrunken world seem willing to ignore. Alfred Kazin writing on the posthumous publication of A Moveable Feast offers a telling observation on the use of the architecture of one’s real life experience to write fiction:

“The other day I heard a solemnly uninteresting young writer say that when he wrote fiction, he never thought of real people in situations; novelists who “used” real people lack the imagination of art. It always does me good to hear such strictures from people

who have no great instinct for narrative. They remind me of the many first-class writers who have consciously altered, combined, and restructured real facts to provide us with pleasures of the imagination. To recall the model is to see how life verges on imagination. Every person's life falls into fiction whenever he writes it as a story."¹²

Kazin recognized that Hemingway's remarkable vagabond existence was one critical key to the writing. He was not merely traveling the world, he was observing it, distilling it, storing it personally for later use. As Kazin notes:

"Ernest Hemingway constantly used real people and situations in his fiction...by the time he sat down to write anything he was so conscious of what he had experienced, what he had already written about it, and what others had written, that he had as much to triumph over, the critics, imitators and scholars as he did over his early self."¹³

It is surely Hemingway's ability to convert his experiences and his observations into "true" fiction that secures his position among the great American writers and that sustains his reputation.

Hemingway's thematic compass was unwavering throughout his career, his globetrotting allowed him to create novels and stories with a sense of adventure; they are great tales, well told.

Biographers have noted that he grew up in the age of Teddy Roosevelt and this sense of Americanism and of American adventure never left him. His famous "style" with its sparseness supported a very modern view of fiction, one in which he does not tell us everything but rather invites the reader to ignite his / her own imagination to bring much of themselves into the reading and in a sense ask them to write their own story. Speaking with George Plimpton in a famous Paris Review interview on his art, Hemingway discussed both the observational nature of his work and the demands he puts upon his readers:

"If a writer stops observing he is finished. But he does not have to observe consciously nor think about how it will be useful. Perhaps that would be true at the beginning but later everything he sees goes into the great reserve of things he knows or has seen. If it is any use to know it, I always try to write on the principal of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know, you can eliminate, and it

only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it, then there is a hole in the story."¹⁴

In essence Hemingway demands much of the reader, with so much below the surface we must ask, who are the characters really, what motivates them, what is the author trying to tell us.

Although there are huge stylistic variations between The Sun Also Rises, A Farewell to Arms, and most notably, For Whom the Bell Tolls, there is a mountain of ice below the surface of each the texts. As we begin to look at the novels themselves, we would do well to heed the famous mariner's warning, "Danger, icebergs ahead".

With its publication in 1926, The Sun Also Rises catapulted Ernest Hemingway into the very center of literary debate. Some eighty years later, he remains near that center, due to his adherence to a literary code that is amplified in each of the great novels and is supported by the dual brilliance of his story telling and his writing. That Sun, is a brilliant book, there is little debate, the fact that it is a first novel reveals it to be a stupendous feat. Earlier publications, his journalism for instance, Three Stories and Ten Poems, along with the stories In Our Time, gained him a reputation as a promising writer. With The Sun Also Rises that promise finds brilliant fulfillment. No longer just a handsome, macho, Midwestern boy maneuvering through ex patriot Paris, this book would confirm the promise, reveal his fatalistic stoicism and offer a prose style considered to be revolutionary, propelling him, front and center, on to the world literary stage, a mark he still holds almost one hundred years later.

The Sun Also Rises would reveal the central context of virtually all of the work, Men at War, for this novels focuses on the shattering impact of World War I upon the characters who on the surface appear as surviving revelers at a festival, but who are really adrift, the broken refuge of the slaughter of World War I. Both here, and in A Farewell to Arms, and For Whom the Bell Tolls and even in some of the lesser works such as Across the River and Into the Trees, and in To Have

and Have Not, takes us to war, literally and figuratively. As we shall see, war, desperate conflict, provides a greenhouse environment for the growth of both Hemingway's characters and his central themes, and as with a greenhouse plant, there is always more going on beneath the surface. Hemingway, as much as any writer before or since, prompts the reader upon conclusion to ask him / herself, what just happened here? In many ways, the surface, the pages, are nothing more than a map, they tell us a little something about the topography, general things about the novel, but the reader has to bring much to the table, in a sense, we must "write" ourselves into these books and in so doing the books become ours.

The Sun Also Rises has become popularly known as "the novel" of the "Lost Generation", a generation shattered by a war that generated over thirty-seven million casualties including an unbelievable sixteen million deaths, a war that still causes historians to ask, how and why did this happen. Gertrude Stein's famous epigraph rendered about an auto mechanic, of all things trying to repair her car, would label those who sought, in the frivolity and frenzy of the 20's, to bury those literally left behind "Flanders Fields," as well as the parts of themselves that the institution of modern war had destroyed. We need to understand the context of Hemingway's novels to really "get them." In some ways the offhand use of Stein's "Lost Generation" with respect to this novel is unfortunate as it can foreclose a broader reading of the novel, for this book, as much as anything he wrote evidences the iceberg theory of his work. In short, there is a great deal going on beneath the surface, and it is Hemingway's demand that we search head and heart that is one of his greatest appeals, and critical to his position in the firmament of American Literature. Hemingway at his best gives us the literary equivalent of the geological core sample, each layer, each reading, yields something more, something powerful, we must keep reading, keep working.

Ernest Lockridge in his Keys to Hemingway, comparing the opaqueness of Faulkner to Hemingway notes that:

“Hemingway is user friendly out of the box, no manual or instructions or tour guide required to read and enjoy The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms. His finely spun, deliberate masterpieces read as easily as an airport book. So what’s to “discern”? Well...just about everything. “There is much more behind Hemingway’s form than people know,” wrote James Joyce, author of the exasperating and largely unread masterpiece, Ulysses. Hemingway is elusive because 1) He disarms the reader by seeming so plain and simple, and 2) He deliberately omits “things” of genuine importance.”¹⁵

In The Sun Also Rises, we see the emergence of other common Hemingway traits that would shape and form all the other books, notably the power of his reportorial observational skills, and his melding of real life experiences into his art. This novel springs from actual trips to the Festival of San Fermin, barely fictionalizing some of his actual traveling companions, for example, Robert Cohn, is a thinly disguised version of the contemporary magazine publisher, Harold Loeb, who like Cohn was a Princeton graduate, a college wrestler to Cohn’s boxer. The Sun Also Rises may be a travelogue on the surface, but we know and feel in of our heart of hearts that it is a tragedy at its essential core.

Jeffrey Hart in a 1978 article titled “The Sun Also Rises: A Revaluation,” accurately notes that:

“Hemingway’s first novel, published fifty-two years ago, is a tricky affair, full of traps for the unwary, full indeed, of a specific kind of malice. The novel has made practically everyone who has written about it look foolish. This effect may not have been intended. Still is it implicit in the way that the novel actually works.”¹⁶

I am not sure that the novel is meant to make us look foolish, or even to make the characters look foolish, but it is meant to make us look, to challenge our fundamental emotional and spiritual values. Like all of his books, which are often books of action, he demands action or at least active engagement from his reader and in so doing the books and the characters engage us.

Readers of this novel are challenged from the outset, from the epigraph taken from Ecclesiastes, which gives the book its thought provoking title, and from Robert Cohn’s introduction in the first

two words of the book. We have to get to work immediately, is this to be an anti-Semitic screed, or will Cohn's Jewishness to be used to carry other themes and story lines. I think we see it is both as Hart notes:

“Surely this novel tell us that for postwar Europe, for what had once been called Christendom, its power and sense of identity have been painfully undermined, the Jew would be a problem. For Hemingway to put that particular notion at the very center of his novel ought to have alerted critical antenna, particular as subsequent history unfolded.”¹⁷

Hart is correct in pointing out that Cohn and his distasteful portrayal, he has manufactured himself, attempting to act the way he thinks he should, but in following this course of action he amplifies his distastefulness. He thinks he can fit in, have Brett's love, be Jake's friend, but he cannot. Perhaps what he can be is a harbinger of another great war, one that would be driven by the madness of anti-Semitic genocide. Thus, while the characters in Pamplona are the wreckage of the First World War, certainly Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley are, Cohn did not serve, and just as he is the source of friction in the novel the “Jewish question” will directly fuel genocidal madness a decade hence. Cohn cannot go back in time, and acquire a Veteran's status, his manhood, and while he can physically perform with Brett, she will never take him seriously as a lover, for though she is damaged goods and knows it, he is as well for he violates all of the principals of the Hemingway code hero, he did not stand up in the war and he whines.

Brett, the object of physical desire by many who can possess her physically, and of course do, and of emotional desire by Jake who cannot, is sexualized from her first appearance in the novel:

“She stood holding the glass and I saw Robert Cohn looking at her...Brett was damned good looking. She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boys. She started all that. She was built with curves like a hull of a racing yacht, and you missed none of it with that wool jersey.”¹⁸

In so many ways, Brett both physically and morally, is the new, modern woman. Her look implies it, her nearly insatiable sexual appetite and her role as the “guy’s best friend” represents a shift in female characterization. Brett is objectified sexually, and her near nymphomania will place her at the center of the novel, the light, around which the moths flutter. It is important to note that Hemingway’s characterization of her while not explicit in terms of depth, we never know her real motivations, is presented as a modern woman who controls her own destiny, limited though it may be. She is a woman who functions well in what was a man’s world.

It is in Chapter 4 that we begin to see clearly the foreshadowing of the tragic disaster that is at the center of the novel. In the taxi ride in Paris via a stolen, faulty kiss, we begin to learn that Jake Barnes is deeply drawn to Brett and also that he is unable to express his love physically. In the cab with its description of eye gazing, and kissing we begin to see that Jake’s masculinity has been crushed, killed, by the war – destroyed – as it has destroyed the lives of others. Jake’s impaired manhood is a metaphor for the destructiveness of war, it, and the institutions that war represents will destroy the individual and our reaction to this inevitable defeat is everything.

In his hotel room we find Jake:

“Undressing. I looked at myself in the mirror of the big armoire before the bed that was a typically French way to furnish a room. Practical, too, I suppose. Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny.”¹⁹

Clearly there is nothing funny about it, and his wounding which is never explicitly described is central to his personal tragedy and to a series of tragic events in the novel. If it was not enough to start with Cohn’s apparent masculinity, now the balance of the book will turn on the true nature of masculinity. While Jake Barnes burns with a love that Brett is not worthy of, committing a mortal

sin in his devotion, he is not a whiner, - he – unlike – Cohn who whines and pines, exhibits the stoic acceptance of a heroic Hemingway character.

This in many ways revolves around the circle of the bull ring and Hemingway was too intelligent a writer to be insensitive to the way in which his fascination with the bullfighting scenes in the novel would be received by the general public. While he saw the fights allegorically, man against nature, and his fate, a theater to display courage while wearing a “suit of lights” bull fighting provided a romantic as well as a symbolic backdrop. For better or for worse, Hemingway with this book invented Pamplona, a European adult July “spring break” that has become almost cliché. While critics in my view overplay the importance of the bullring, tying it to Jake’s lost masculinity, note, the steers used to control the bulls, there is no doubt that the Romero story line drives the central action in the novel, namely the final exposure of Cohn as unworthy, and of the moral collapse of Jake as evidenced by his playing the role of pimp for Brett initiating her relationship with the young bullfighter. This service for Brett will lead to Cohn mauling both Jake and Romero. In Hemingway’s world, the tantrum of a child, is not the manner in which a man conducts himself. In addition, much is made of Montoya’s rejection of Jake when he sees him introducing the young bullfighter to the dangerous older woman – Jake – has dishonored the perfect masculinity of the bullring, tarnished his role as the aficionado, and thus the bullfights will never be the same, for this is a moment of reduction, of failure.

In a moment of self revelation, Brett recognizes that she is wrong for Romero, and leaves the young bullfighter. Unlike the older war scarred travelers, he can expiate the sin of falling for Brett and then being thrashed by Cohn by returning to the ring, to the theater of masculinity.

Hemingway tells us at the close of Book II that the:

“Fight with Cohn had not touched his spirit but his face had been smashed and his body hurt. He was wiping all that out now. Each thing that he did with this bull wiped that out a little cleaner.”²⁰

Salvation, for him, consists of right living, returning to the dangers of the bullring, asking no quarter, choking down the bile of our natural fear, standing as a man in the center of the ring, exposing himself to fate.

Neither does his horrible wound truly destroy Jake, after leaving the festival he stops in San Sebastian, to visit the beach and to be taken by the beauty of a young couple he spots while sunning himself. Jake has suffered mightily – agonizingly, to be in love but not to be able to love, is cruelty of a high order. Though damaged, he is primarily constant, he is a code hero, for when Brett wires that she needs help – he departs for Madrid to collect her. Upon arriving she tells him she has sent the young bullfighter away, recognizing that she would have destroyed him.

As the novel ends, we find Brett and Jake heading out sightseeing in Madrid once again in the taxi where she tells him:

“Oh Jake...we could have had such a damn good time together” to which he famously replies “yes isn’t it pretty to think so”.²¹

The freshness of the novel and its’ theme remain, it is still a great read, perhaps because those themes and its fundamental human truths are constant. Jeffrey Hart notes that:

“The final impression left by the novel, one that for a long time rather puzzled me, is of the breathtaking beauty of the World, of the pleasures of the senses. And beyond that – strangely enough – of the possibility of romance, Jake and Brett do have an intense

romantic relationship where as Brett and Cohn, Brett and Romero plainly do not. That fact is only apparently paradoxical, for Jake's power of perception is connected with his wound."²²

Jake Barnes, Brett and Cohn cannot escape the past, and its damage is an active force in this and other Hemingway novels. One of the reasons the novel stays with us, haunts us, is the fact that for Hemingway, time present is imbued with time past like our actual lives which are allusive to all our past experiences. Jake's past, even with its horrible wounding, leaves him a better man than the other male characters who are not physically impaired.

While The Sun Also Rises is an allusive, reflective novel, concerning victims of an "earlier" war A Farewell to Arms (1929) is "in" time, a contemporary action driven anti-war novel. The reader will feel firsthand the desperation and carnage of war and will contemporaneously experience Lieutenant Henry's growing love for Catherine Barkley and his rejection of war which culminates in the flight to Switzerland where we witness the stillbirth of their infant son and the fateful death of Catherine. Returning again to a distillation of actual life experiences this novel is set in Italy, and involves the trials and tribulations of a young American, Frederick Henry, who volunteered to serve as an ambulance driver. Eighteen year old Ernest Hemingway had served as a Red Cross ambulance driver in Italy, suffered a serious wound to his right leg and knee for which he was decorated, and during his convalescence, fell in love with a slightly older nurse. While the facts of his life clearly flow through the novel, in A Farewell to Arms, we encounter a great story, told greatly. Unlike The Sun Also Rises, in this book we do not have to dive so deeply, the iceberg is less invisible. In this classic Hemingway novel, the story is more direct, and so to a great degree, are the characters.

This novel, like For Whom the Bell Tolls, is set in an actual theater of war, and delivers its strong political and moral messages via a masterfully told story and sympathetically crafted characters.

As James Atlas notes:

“Among their many virtues, Hemingway’s novels are exciting to read; they course with rapid action. What gives his novels such heightened urgency, is the succession of brisk images. Hemingway can sustain a breathless pace for chapters at a time, piling image upon scene upon scene, until the need to know what happens next submerges every other consideration. He isn’t a leisurely read.”²⁴

In A Farewell to Arms we again see the powerful story telling ability supported by razor sharp writing, short on adjectives, Hemingway pulls us into the book, and opens both our hearts and our mind to the book’s major message that encapsulates the story of love, sought, suspected, found, and lost. As Robert Merrill notes:

“There is no question that Hemingway conceived of A Farewell to Arms as a tragedy. He once referred to the novel as his Romeo and Juliet and later wrote: “The fact that the book was a tragic one did not make me unhappy since I believed that life was a tragedy, one knew it could only have one end.”²⁵

The colossal failure of governments and their institutions has resulted in war, a war that historians to this day struggle to explain – and this flawed conflagration serves as a perfect backdrop for his hero and heroine to seize their fate. Merrill drives to the heart of the novel when he notes that Hemingway rejects the classic elements of Aristotle’s view of tragedy, that of the flaw within the character which leads to his demise:

“Hemingway clearly departs from this traditional formula. Whereas the tragic catastrophe is supposed to result from the hero’s mistaken actions, tragedy in A Farewell to Arms depends on Frederick Henry doing the one thing we most desire him to do and most respect him for doing – committing himself in love to Catherine Barkley. There is nothing inherently tragic about this except in the world of A Farewell to Arms, where the tragic resolution depends on just this admirable decision. Hemingway has fashioned a new form of tragedy in which the hero acts not mistakenly but supremely well, and suffers a doom which is not directly caused by his actions at all but by the belief that life is a tragedy, life itself has become the backbone for a new literary structure.”²⁶

Both Frederick and Catherine will endure a series of tragic events throughout the novel, Catherine would lose her first love on the battlefield, she would lose her place in society by becoming pregnant out of wedlock, she would lose her son in childbirth and would ultimately lose her life as well. Similarly Frederick has seen the futility of war firsthand, he is horribly wounded, almost executed as a traitor, swims for his life, and struggles so that he can be reunited with Catherine and then reject the war via escape to neutral Switzerland.

Throughout Hemingway uses the cycles of life, the seasons and various meteorological omens such as rain to spiritually darken the novel. Rain accompanies all the desperate military events in A Farewell to Arms with its mud, and it is raining heavily once again when Catherine is hurried to the hospital for the climatic scenes where finally the “nurse” cannot be saved from the agony of her fate. In many key respects, Catherine adheres to the role of the “code” heroine, she is making conscious decisions throughout, aware of the power of fate but not shaken or destroyed by it, or even fearful of it. Both Catherine and certainly Frederick grow throughout the novel reaching a maturity that allows them to avoid the narrow fate that society might have drawn up for them, they seize life even though it ends in death, a death on their terms. In a world gone mad with war, Carlos Baker notes that:

“Catherine’s dying is directly associated with the whole tragic pattern of fatigue and suffering, loneliness, defeat and doom, of which the war is itself a broad social manifestation.”²⁸

World War I provided Hemingway the canvas on which to bring young Frederick Henry to manhood. His is a tale of the acolyte, the war his graduate education, and Catherine his mentor, for she truly knows the life lessons and it is through her love that Frederick comes to manhood.

Reflecting on Catherine and the depth of her courage he speaks what for the Hemingway faithful should forever be known simply as “the quote”, the very distillation of the author’s worldview:

“If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”²⁹

This sentiment leads us directly to the hospital room in a Swiss maternity ward, where in death we realize the level to which these characters have grown.

The brief intervals of joy that Catherine and Frederick found before the fateful delivery add to the tragic effect. In a world gone mad with war, two individuals chose love, and lost, but are better, even heroic for the choosing. After learning that their son, the product of their love is stillborn Frederick goes back into Catherine who also is slipping away and shares more Hemingway wisdom:

“This is what you did, you died. You did not know what it was all about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you.”³⁰

Catherine’s example is the light of the novel, her and Frederick’s maturing love for her. Often feminist’s critics scoff at the character, as a flat prop for Frederick’s lust. I think they are dual heroes, the couple as hero, for when faced with the absurdity of war:

“Catherine refuses to be helpless. She pulls herself together with dignity and grace defines the limit of her own existence and scrupulously acts her part, preferring romance to the theater of the absurd. By imposing order on experience, she gains a limited autonomy, as much control over her own destiny as a human being in Hemingway’s

world can hope to have. From her example, Frederick Henry learns how to live in it too.”³¹

As much as any of his books you take A Farewell to Arms with you for the rest of your journey. Perhaps the key to Hemingway’s ongoing popularity is this fact, that Frederick Henry, and Catherine Barkley, like Jake Barnes, and Robert Jordan, and Santiago, become a part of our collective cultural memory, and they become part of us. When we think of all the literary characters we have known, it seems Hemingway’s live on with us.

The appearance of For Whom the Bell Tolls in 1940, Hemingway’s structurally complex novel of the Spanish Civil War thrusts him once again into the center of literary consciousness. While he produced short stories, journalism and the hybrid Green Hills of Africa and the uneven novel To Have and Have Not, the 1930’s did not see the production of work of the critical quality of either The Sun Also Rises or A Farewell to Arms. “Bell”, would change all of that, it would put the author back in the spotlight solidly re-launching his career and solidifying his position as the greatest American writer of the period. For Whom the Bell Tolls was worth the wait, it is a great book, both as a tale of adventure, as a love story, and as the ultimate expression of Hemingway’s fascination with fate and the manner in which a man must deal with his fate, stoically and heroically, right to the end.

This novel is infinitely more complex stylistically than either Sun or Farewell both of which use a first person narrator to move us into and through the novels. Bell, is a large novel (some 500 pages), particularly stout when we consider that its action takes place over only a handful of days. The story, or elements of it are told and retold from the perspectives of various key characters whose narration or observation provides us with a kaleidoscopic view of the action, the characters, and their motivations. For Whom the Bell Tolls, is a book rich with allegory, symbol and metaphor. It tackles the opening act of what would be the greatest battle of the twentieth

century, that of good versus evil, of fascism, the forces of darkness, versus democracy, the forces of light. While it is all of these things, it is that rare work, a novel of serious thematic nuance and depth, clothed in the now classic love story of twentieth century American Literature. Like so much of Hemingway at his best, and this may be his greatest gift, it is simply a great story, told through the eyes of now iconic characters. Like all his other great books, it too goes into our cultural backpack and travels onward with us.

While the novel brings us back to Spain, this is a far different country and era than the wastrel twenties of The Sun Also Rises. The Spanish Civil War which pitted Republicans who sought to protect the extant government of the Spanish Republic, a Republic that promised reform of the oligarchy, as represented by traditional land owners and dominate institutions such as the Catholic Church, who interestingly, were represented by Rebel fascists under the command of Francisco Franco. The war would exact a disastrous toll with some 500,000 fatalities, and an exodus of approximately the same number of Spaniards who were forced to leave their country. It was a war characterized by atrocities on both sides, with violent executions and torture; a proxy prologue to World War II, as Germany and Italy supplied and armed the fascists while the Russians, Mexico and various international brigades of liberals, often populated by artists and writers, supported the loyalist Republicans. Unfortunately for Spain, Franco's forces prevailed, allowing him dictatorial power over Spain for the next thirty-six years only ending with his death in 1975.

One of the challenges presented by this novel is overcoming the receding awareness of the fundamentals of the Spanish Civil War of 1936 to 1939. One wonders if the novel would enjoy an even more exalted position had it been set in World War II, the Big One, which forced the war in Spain to the sidelines of our memory and is responsible in a great sense for it often being overlooked. Michael Reynolds notes:

“Today the Spanish Civil War which was once the heart’s blood of this novel, has become a footnote to the violent century that bore it. Old soldiers may still argue across card tables, rehashing their salad days at the siege of Madrid or on the rocky slopes of Teruele, but their memories have become history, and they have become artifacts trapped in time. So much blood has since soaked the earth, dulling our capacity for horror, that Hemingway’s once great novel has reached the sticking point; it must either transcend time or become one of its footnotes, of interest to historians and graduate students but no longer part of the mainstream. Even the best written fiction goes astray in time’s good time. How could Hemingway have predicted the contemporary American reader: detached, deconstructive, post modernist, and political on only narrow issues.”³²

Reynolds points are well taken but every novel is date stamped at its binding, it is always out of time, it is only in dealing with the universal truths that writers realize artistic immortality.

However, if Reynolds point was to truly hold, how do we explain Shakespeare; the great writers, and I think Hemingway is one, focus or at least shed light on what Faulkner, in his Nobel address, defined as the eternal verities of love, honor, and truth.

In *Bell*, Hemingway’s characters tap into those virtues and values that are in fact transcendent. In one sense the book is quite simple, an American college professor with a general fondness for Spain based on past travels has joined the loyalists to fight fascism’s attempt to overthrow the legitimate government. The fascists represent the forces of military modernism, in Spain they were proxies for Hitler, they were better equipped, note Hemingway’s focus on their planes and aerial bombardments and commentary on their tanks and armor. Jordan and his partisan group are forever close to the earth. The novel begins with Jordan lying on pine needles observing the bridge which he is assigned to destroy and ends with him on the ground alone confronting his fate calmly again on a bed of pine needles. Robert and Maria consecrate their relationships on those same pine needles, the evergreens symbolic of the natural order, and in contrast to the mechanized terror of fascism. Jordan and his support group literally live in a cave. They are of the Spanish Earth.

In reading a novel published in 1940 it is critical to pause and reflect on how much more we now know than the contemporary reader did. Writers like Hemingway through the novels and his contract journalism were at one time the sole windows on important aspects of world events. While there were reporters in Spain, and some news reel reporting, there was no CNN, no immediacy of insight and impact. Hemingway himself noted the challenge in a letter to the critic Ivan Kashkin:

“In stories about the (Spanish Civil) war I try to show all the different sides of it, taking it slowly and honestly and explaining it from many sides, it is very complicated and difficult to write understandingly about both deserters and heroes, cowards and brave men, traitors and men who are not capable of being traitors. We learned a lot about all such people.”³³

Readers would see these hero types clearly reflected in Jordan, Pilar, Marie and Anselmo and the lesser type in Pablo who breaks and compromises the mission, but ultimately returns.

The fact that Jordan knows his cause is doomed that the fascists hold the logistical advantage in the larger issue of the war, and even that the bridge as a target is no longer crucial, confusion in the command prevents his fateful abort message from properly getting through the command structure, this does not negate, and may symbolically even elevate Jordan's character.

For Whom the Bell Tolls is a novel about honor and perhaps most importantly, like A Farewell to Arms, the transformative power of love. Through the combined characters of Pilar and Maria it continues Hemingway's focus on a new brand of feminism. For like Brett and Catherine the two women in Bell are survivors, women of courage and action. In the case of Pilar, she may be the toughest “man” in the outfit and through the reflected love of Maria, Jordan gains his initial glimpse of the full possibilities of a life which will ultimately be denied to him.

Critics have commented on the stark difference between the world view presented in A Farewell to Arms in which Frederick and Catherine flee the insanity of war torn Italy and Jordan's allegiance to a failed mission.³⁴ It is important to note that A Farewell to Arms is a post war novel while For Whom the Bell Tolls we now view as a prequel to World War II. Thus it is not surprising that Hemingway, even though he was always suspicious of institutional authority, no doubt sensed that the world hovered on the brink of a great war, one in which fascism had already turned its cards. In short a reflective novel written in the safety of peace would naturally vary from one where a rising enemy of humanity, and of art, and freedom was forming ranks. Michael K. Solow focuses on the author's philosophical shift in the face of a Europe on the brink:

"I believe that For Whom the Bell Tolls is an incitement to wage a particular war while hating war in general, a response that mirrors the author's wrestling frame of mind. Hemingway's own journey from anti-political isolationist into a political advocate, from pro-loyalist subsequently disillusioned with elements of "the cause," yet always steadfast in his anti-fascism sheds light not only on Jordan's fate but on his creator's narrative project and maturation as an artist."³⁵

No reader in 1940 America could fully appreciate the book, because even though Europe was already falling apart; we could not foresee the scale, nor the depths of the horrors, that lay just ahead. Hemingway sensed this, and wrote a tale where duty, honor and perhaps most importantly love would carry the book.

For Whom the Bell Tolls is arguably one of a handful of truly Great War novels, but perhaps more importantly, is it one of the great love stories of all time – in fact it is the combination of love and war that provides the tragic fuel for the book. Robert Jordan, first appears as a limited figure, a munitions expert who views his life as a series of missions, defined and accomplished. Mission is all until he sees Maria and everything begins to change, for both of them. Due to the brief duration of the novel, barely four days, it may be the greatest example of accelerated love at first sight ever written.

The victim of nationalist terror and torture which saw her village decimated and resulted in her rape and the symbolic shearing of her hair, Maria is one of the walking dead until encountering Jordan. The experienced Pilar, the earth mother of the book, “gives” her as a gift to Jordan sensing that in doing so she will save them both. In their lovemaking, which we are told, moves the earth, Jordan is born to life and Maria, who did not speak is reborn. In their developing romance the futility of war and the rigidity of General Golz’s orders concerning the bridge are laden with tragedy for as the mission fast approaches his new found love causes him to reflect:

“How little we know of what there is to know, I wish that I were going to live a long time instead of going to die today because I have learned much about life in these four days; more, I think, than in all other time. I’d like to be an old man and to really know. I wonder if you keep on learning or if there is only a certain amount each man can understand. I thought I knew about so many things that I know nothing of, I wish there was more time.”³⁶

Like Jake Barnes, Frederick Henry and later Colonel Cantwell in Across the River and Into the Trees, and Harry Morgan in To Have and to Have Not, Hemingway’s men need women to be whole, to make sense of an absurd world. Jordan tells us that:

“Maria is my true love and my wife. I never had a true love. I never had a wife. She is also my sister, and I never had a sister, and my daughter, and I never will have a daughter.”³⁷

Maria, (Mary), in the Marian Christian tradition, with her ability to heal through love is the reflection of the divine feminine – just as Robert Jordan will go to his bridge, his personal Calvary where he will in Hemingway fashion embrace his fate without rancor.

The Robert Jordan of the final scenes is an infinitely more complex man than the man in the opening scene, his sense of honor is strengthened by the metamorphosis brought about by Maria's love. Jordan personifies the Hemingway worldview:

“For in such things the bad ending, failure could not be ignored. It was not simply a possibility of harm to one's self, which could be ignored. He knew he himself was nothing, and he knew death was nothing. He knew that truly, as truly as he knows anything. In the last few days he had learned that he himself, with another person, could be everything...But that is over and done with now on this morning and what there is to do now is our work.”³⁸

It is this stoicism, this peculiar form of courage that allows man to understand the gravity of his predicament, but still remain steadfast. With his shattered leg, lying on those pine needles once again, Robert Jordan covers the retreat of the woman he loves fighting to the very end. He is not benighted, ignorant, he understands his situation clearly, but it is his leg that is shattered not his spirit.

Ernest Hemingway poured his hard won knowledge gained through reporting on the war into this major novel which arrived to great critical acclaim. For the male reader, the adventure and courage will always linger as we wonder, and hope, that we too would stay on mission while we pray that somewhere our Maria is waiting. The novel exerts its power for reasons that Michael Reynolds clearly notes:

“Each of us is his own Emersonian artist, none of us has a choice, and all of our stories are embedded within larger stories. If we make that connection then the novel transcends the historical context that bore it, becoming a parable rather than a paradigm, and thus, softly, across time, the Bell continues to toll for us.”³⁹

Ernest Hemingway's continuing position in the highest echelons of American literature is linked to the fact that both he and his characters straddle the space between that of American dreamer and American archetype. Hemingway knew and understood us better, and his major characters

have become unforgettable as a result of this sensitivity and knowledge. His life and his work reflect key components of both the American dream and the American reality. He understood and celebrated the greatness of individual Americans while at the same time remaining suspicious of institutions that twice in as many decades sent its sons and daughters off to fight in World Wars that would change them, maim them, and kill them. He knew in his artistic heart that no one gets out of the game unscathed, that life will break us all, but he shows us how to meet its challenges steely eyed and on our feet. Jake Barnes, floats among the wreckage of the post war 20's, seeking fun on the surface of life, in an effort to hide the unspeakable agony of being unable to experience the beguiling beauty of sexually engaging the woman he loves, ironically, perhaps one not worthy of his devotion. Similarly, Frederick Henry, loses Catherine and their baby, after risking a firing squad to be with her. In a similar mode, Robert Jordan forsakes possible bliss with Maria to stay true to his mission, for we as Americans, as our history shows, yield to no one in our fealty to the great, and even to the lost causes.

Hemingway knew us in ways that other writers simply did not, and when at his best, his art, like a mist, clings and haunts us still. He knew, as did his characters, how life's box scores would read well before the final out was made. Critics often attack him as thematically limited, they miss the point, his themes were the only ones that really matter, notably love, life and death and how we comport ourselves as we experience them. He stuck to a thematic north star, but he did so while in possession of the skills of a master story teller, and one who was nothing less than a technical virtuoso as a writer. While it is true, he lived an outside life, one that informed and influenced the books and for which he is still famous today, he was always a disciplined writer, monastic in his dedication to the craft of writing.

As American readers we come to the books, or come back to them, because they speak to us as unique artistic products, art that becomes a part of us, mirroring facets of ourselves, our nation,

and our collective desires, and they remain relevant, because the themes and the threats about which he wrote remain extant today.

This project marked a “return” to Hemingway after a forty plus year detour, I imagined at the outset that I would find the books stilted, the world view dated, but human experience has never truly been the victim of rapid change, the great themes abide. In the Coda, of his monumental biography, Michael Reynolds distills Hemingway, his art, his greatness, his continuing hold on the imagination of readers, and why he still matters:

“Ernest Hemingway was the embodiment of America’s promise: the young boy from Oak Park who set out to become the best writer of his time. With pluck and luck, talent and wit, hard work and hard living, he did just that. In the process he told us that pursuit was happiness, that man alone was no fucking good, and that any story followed far enough would end badly. Before he burned out, he lived constantly out on the edge of the American experience. In the process, he fathered sons, wrote books, influenced friends and won ever prize available to a writer. He remodeled American short fiction, changed the way characters speak, confronted the moral strictures confining the writer, and left behind a shelf of books telling us how we were in the first half of the 20th century. His is a classic American story; the young man who transforms himself following his ambition, succeeds beyond his dreams, and finally burns out trying to be true to the person he has become...his ambition, intensity, creative drive, sense of duty, belief in hard work, and faith in the strenuous life carried him to the pinnacle of his profession, provided him wide recognition and considerable wealth, before destroying him when he could no longer meet their demands. It is an old story, older than written words, a story the ancient Greeks would have recognized.”⁴⁰

It is this classic nature of Hemingway’s work that continues to keep him fresh in our consciousness. The great books are just that – they are great, thematically, character wise, and prose wise and thus they remain worthy of continuing interest. And while no great surprise, they are far richer in meaning to me on my return to them at this stage than they could have ever been in my youth.

I chose to focus on the three major novels, but, To Have and Have Not, his only novel set, at least partially on America soil, Across the River and Into the Trees and of course The Old Man and the

Sea are certainly worthy of attention as well. For many Hemingway readers, the latter book defines their exposure to him – which while understandable is unfortunate – not because it is not a great book, a great tale, but simply because there is so much more. Also many people are sadly more familiar with his frenzied life than his measured art. Lance Marrow writing in 1986 observed that:

“He was a violently cross grained man. His life belonged as much to the history of publicity as to the history of literature. He was a splendid writer who became his own worse creation, a hoax and a bore.”⁴¹

With Hemingway, we need to guard against the argument ad hominem, for as noted earlier, he is not the books and his seriously failing mental and physical health in the 1950's were not the whole of his life, anymore than much of the posthumously published work by those who sought to profit off him in death constitutes His work. The great novels will and should remain central elements of the American and world literary cannon, not the least because the work is more sophisticated and enduring than it appears in casual reading. Time Magazine covering his 1954 Nobel Prize Award noted:

“At his best Hemingway has a sense of fate recalling Melville, and American hardiness recalling Mark Twain (who never used big dictionary words either). Hemingway can carve ice blocks of prose; only a few words on paper convey much more beneath the surface. The tacit economical style contains more than meets the casual eye. The dignity of man and also his imperfection, the recognition that there is a right way and a wrong way, the knowledge that the redeeming things of life are measured in the profound satisfactions that comes from struggle. Said Dr. Anders Österling, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, in Stockholm this week: “Courage is Hemingway's central theme – the bearing of one who is put to the test and who steels himself to meet the cold cruelty of existence without, repudiating the great and generous moments.”⁴²

We should continue to read Hemingway and I suspect generations will, because when he is at his best he sets a standard to which man can inspire to emulate in the face of the many cross currents and emerging dangers of modernity.

How satisfied he would be to see himself still in the center of the Kiplingesque arena, casting a huge shadow over a bull ring full of writers and critics who smugly thought themselves his better – and were wrong.

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