

WAR SYMBOLISM IN HEMINGWAY'S WORKS

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Abstract: *Symbols dominate the existence of Hemingway's characters, a subtle observer of all activities full of sensitivity. The use of constitutive symbols, image verbalization and reality are characteristics of the main themes in Hemingway's works: alienation, nada or nothingness, gender.*

Key words: *spiritual death, gender, characters, alienation, despair, belief, historical changes*

As a writer, Hemingway is assigned an important place among the representatives of "The Lost Generation," along with Faulkner, Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos and Sinclair Lewis. The concern of these writers, including Ernest Hemingway, was to show the loss caused by the First World War in the social, moral and psychological spheres of human life.

The generation deserved for a long time the adjective that Gertrude Stein applied to it. The reasons, as Malcolm Cowley argues, are not difficult to find: *"it was lost, first of all, because it was uprooted, schooled away and almost wrenched away from its attachment to any region or tradition, [...] because its training had prepared it for another world than existed after the war, [...]. It was lost because it tried to live in exile. [...] because it accepted no older guides to conduct and because it had formed a false picture of society and the writer's place in it"*¹.

The new writers formed a "literary generation" that *"belonged to a period of transition from values already fixed to values that had to be created"*².

The history of the 1920s is a convincing demonstration of the value of an *avant garde* with members engaged in major and most serious occupations, reformulations of principles and forms, demonstrating "the advantages of an aesthetic and a moral release from nineteenth-century constraints"³.

Hemingway, has agreed to the longings and frustrations that are typical of these writers, but his work is distinctly different from theirs in its philosophy of life.

His works should be read and interpreted in the light of his famous "iceberg theory."

In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway outlines his "theory of omission" or "iceberg principle." He states: *"If a writer of a prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth being above water. The writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing"*⁴.

This statement throws light on the symbolic implications of art. Hemingway makes use of physical action to provide an interpretation of the nature of man's existence in a world with its disillusionment, where his heroes are in a perpetual struggle which ends

¹ Cowley, M., (1969), *Exile's Return*. New York. The Viking Press, p. 9.

² *Ibidem.*, p. 10.

³ Hemingway, E., (2004), *The Essential Hemingway*. London. Arrow Books.

⁴ Hemingway, E., (2004), *The Essential Hemingway*. London. Arrow Books.

only in death. In a world of pain and failure, the individual tries to assert himself with dignity for his existence. In his commentary on the existential struggle found in Hemingway's fiction Charles Child Walcutt has observed that: "the conflict between the individual needs and social demands is matched by the contest between feeling man and unfeeling universe, and between the spirit of the individual and his biological limitations"⁵.

Written in a simple but unconventional style, with the problems of war, violence, and death as its main themes, evidencing a metaphysical interest in man and his relation to nature, Hemingway's works present a symbolic interpretation of life.

This metaphysical concern about the nature of the individual's existence in relation to the world made Hemingway imagine his heroes as alienated individuals struggling with life, facing hardships with courage, endurance and will as their only weapons. The Hemingway hero is a lonely individual, wounded either physically or emotionally. His behavior is an example of courage and as Philip Young argues, "he offers up and exemplifies certain principles of, courage and endurance in a life of tension and pain which make a man a man"⁶. In spite of all hardships, violence, struggle and suffering he is not pessimistic. Although he is sometimes frustrated, he does not admit defeat. He prefers death to humiliation, stoical endurance to submission: these are the virtues of the Hemingway hero.

Hemingway's fiction reveals as Goodman shows "the general drama of human pain" in which the author has "used the novel form in order to pose symbolic questions about life"⁷. The trials and sufferings undergone by his protagonists are symbolic of man's difficult situations in which he does not know what to do in this world. The war, as a major symbol of the destructive change in cultural attitudes, is responsible for the tragedies of the human spirit. The war was disillusioning and disastrous in its consequences. It was worse for those who did not die. They were confused over their future.

Introducing Hemingway's Short Stories: Symbols and Symbolism

Many of the modernists refer to *modern* which as Robert W. Lewis argues, suggests "a strong and conscious break with traditional forms and techniques of expression,⁸" including the belief, which according to C. Hugh Holman, "we create the world in the act of perceiving it".

Modern is associated with themes of alienation, loss and despair, with a world seen through the emptiness of old ways of thinking, as experienced by the writers who wrote about it.

In a meaningless world, as Robert W. Lewis argues, a "lonely impulse" is "sufficient reason to act fatalistically, even when one knows that an impulse, an instinctive, [...] is outside the world of reason entirely"⁹.

As the modern highlights the unconscious over the self-conscious, and is concerned with the new psychology and mythology of Freud and C.G. Young, the reasons, the rational and ordered thought are illusory.

Works of literature can lead us to see deeply into and beyond things through the use of symbols which are usually objects, characters or even actions. The characteristics of a

⁵ Walcutt, C.C., (1974), *American Literary Naturalism- A Divided Stream*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁶ Young, P., (1966), 'Ernest Hemingway,' *Seven Modern American Novelists,-An Introduction*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.

⁷ Goodman, W.R., (1968), *A Manual of American Literature*. New Delhi: Doaba House.

⁸ Holman C. H., (1980), *A Handbook to Literature*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

⁹ Lewis W. R., (1992), *A Farewell to Arms. The War of the Worlds*. New York.

symbol are usually related to the abstractions it represents. An idea related to an area of major concern in the work, can also be a symbol.

A literary symbol as an object, character or action that is both part of the story in a literary work, can be seen, touched, smelled, heard, tasted, encountered, or experienced by people in the story, poem or play, suggesting abstract meaning beyond itself. The image and meaning of a symbol conveys far more than mere words.

Ernest Hemingway proves this by his effective use of symbolism in his works to explore the disillusionment and the determination of individuals against the background of a merciless environment.

The *Nick Adams Stories* as Bryant Mangum argues, “chronicle the movement of the code hero from a condition of innocence, a kind of pre-Adamic state during which he is unaware of his mortality, into a condition of experience or knowledge”¹⁰. The stories which best suggest this movement are *Indian Camp* and *Big Two-Hearted River*. Both of these stories follow the process of bringing Nick to the lowest level of initiation into life in the presence of death, in this way demonstrating the earliest stage in the formation of the Hemingway code and clearly illustrating the iceberg theory, despite the apparent simplicity of their story lines.

Following the Hemingway hero throughout the short stories and starting from the earliest example of Nick Adams, to the later portrayals, such as that of Francis Macomber, one can see and realize, as Bryant Mangum explains, “the step-by-step development of Hemingway’s code for living in the modern wasteland, as well as the refinement of his aesthetic theories”.

With Francis Macomber the code hero finally reaches the point of full initiation to which he has been moving since the early Nick Adams stories. In his first form, as in *Indian Camp*, the hero becomes aware of the central dilemma of life: to face his own mortality. Once he accepts, as Bryant Mangum argues, “this call to adventure,” the pursuit of experiences begins, revealing, at least symbolically, “the truth that in life, death is always present”¹¹. The hero’s task is to accept it with patience and courage when suffering. Death is seen and called by various names like *nada* or nothingness, as imagined by those who are close to it like the old man who comes every night in the cafe in *A Clean, Well –Lighted Place*. The code hero is the one to grasp the thing itself. This is the case of Francis Macomber for whom the cycle is complete, the initiation is accomplished as he embraces death without fear.

Indian Camp appears to be a straightforward narrative about a boy who goes with his doctor-father on a trip into an Indian village to deliver a baby. The delivery is a difficult one which finally must be accomplished by Caesarian section and which causes so much pain to the mother that her screams cause her husband, who is on the bunk above her, to slit his own throat as the new baby is brought into the world. For Hemingway, the events offer an opportunity to present a miniature study of the relationship of the seasonal cycle to the human life cycle. The scene begins in early morning before sunrise, when Nick and his father cross the water to go to the Indian camp, symbolically, the early morning of Nick’s life. His father takes him to witness the delivery of a baby, to show him more of life and the living.

On the way back, “Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning”¹², a typical representation of the symbol of death and life. Nick denies the lesson he has learned: “In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die” (301). The surface of the story, the events of that morning whose focal point has been life on the bottom bunk and death above, has

¹⁰ Mangum, B., (1982), *Critical Survey of Short Fiction*. Salem Press, 1621-28.

¹¹ Mangum, B., (1982), *Critical Survey of Short Fiction*. Salem Press, 1621-28.

¹² Hemingway, E., (2004), *The Essential Hemingway*. London. Arrow Books.

suggested the iceberg, which is the human condition as it is closely inserted into the birth-death phases of the seasonal cycle.

Light and dark in *Indian Camp* symbolizes racial prejudice as well as the personal growth of the protagonist. The narrative highlights a world of Indian oppression and religious opinions that causes the Indians losing of self-respect, reducing them to the role of dark ignorant stereotypes. On the other hand, the white men seem to live in a sort of utopia full of light and understanding. The concept of the lighter skinned white man holding supremacy over the darker skinned Indian is present throughout the entire narrative. Dark symbolizes Nick's lack of awareness as he begins his journey on an unknowing night, while the light symbolizes the new understanding gained by Nick.

As Nick and his father arrive at the shore, "Uncle George was smoking a cigar" which burns like a faint beacon in a sea of darkness, the light in the darkness symbolizing understanding with the decadent world of the white men.

Another example of Hemingway's symbolism refers to an Indian carrying a lantern who leads the way to the Indian camp and as they reach the logging road the Indian blows out the lantern. The logging road metaphorically represents the progress of white men. As the Indian reaches the road, he no longer needs a light. He is not in the dark now. The Indian has reached the world of his oppressor where a greater gleaming is available to him. The lantern is no longer necessary.

The light of lanterns guides the group to the birthing shanty. As Nick and his father arrive, the Indian "men had moved off up the road to sit in the dark" and hide from the light of the lanterns and the white man's knowledge to save lives. The Indians wait in the shadow while Nick's father prepares to perform the operation.

The metaphoric usage of light and dark heightens the clash of two opposing cultures. This symbolism also strengthens Nick's own personal growth as a person.

Hills Like White Elephants is a story that takes place less than ten years after the end of World War I. The war caused immense loss of life, physical suffering, and psychological and emotional damage. The Great War, as it was called with good reason, shattered the optimistic outlook held by much of the population in Western Europe and in the United States. After the war ended, many people as a result of the social changes that took place during and after the war reacted by deciding to enjoy life fully in the present since the war showed that life can end so quickly, and by rejecting older values and traditional roles. The war led to changes in gender roles, as while young men were away in the military, young women had to work in factories instead of in homes, schools or offices. Having seen large cities and other countries, young people found it difficult to return to the places where they grew up. Many people wanted to travel and to live in modern locations. The American man in *Hills Like White Elephants* seems to be one of them, and to reflect the sense of restlessness and desire to see new places and have new experiences: "That's all we do, isn't it," Jig says, "look at things and try new drinks?"

The story begins with a description of the setting. There were long hills, a train station, a bar and a beaded curtain. From the beginning to the end, Hemingway uses the various aspects of the setting as symbols to reveal things about the American, Jig, and them as a couple.

The broad setting of "*Hills Like White Elephants*," as Judith Ortiz Cofer explains, "is eastern Spain, about a third of the way from Barcelona to Madrid and the specific setting, a hot day at a rural train station, a junction where two lines meet in the middle of nowhere"¹³.

¹³ Cofer, O.J., (2005), *Approaching Literature in the 21st Century. Fiction, Poetry, Drama*. New-York, 119-133.

Hemingway uses the actual train station, an important part of the setting, as a symbol. The author tells us “the station was between two lines of rails in the sun”¹⁴. This train station, between Barcelona and Madrid, symbolizes the decision that must be made and which can change the direction of their lives. The railway brings another significance: the wanderings across Europe undertaken by Jig and the American and their luggage which is covered with labels “from all the hotels where they had spent nights”, which is a proof of the directionless journey or wandering that is shaping their lives.

By creating a sense of isolation, the story focuses us on the two people and their problem. There are other people in the bar, but we see no one else except the waitress, the other people are just there, like the chairs and the tables. The location includes only a railway junction: no town or city is indicated, which increases the sense of isolation. Using a train station as location also creates a sense of transience, no roots, no home no ties. Placing the story at a junction suggest that the characters are facing a decision about the direction in which they should go. The distant hills in “Hills Like White Elephants” are actual objects in the story, visible to the characters and are prominent, as they are included in the title and discussed several times in the story. They seem to convey a sense of longing for that which is distant and unattainable, “all the things you’ve waited so long for,” as Jig puts it¹⁵. *Meanings* in the first sentence of the previous paragraph is in the plural. “Symbols, as Judith points out, usually convey a cluster of possible meanings; they are rich, suggestive and evocative”¹⁶. The readers do not reduce them to a single, definite meaning. The verb *suggests* compared to *symbolizes* “conveys better the sense of a symbol’s openness, inclusivity and plurality”.

Conventional and traditional symbols, according to Judith Ortiz Cofer, “bring into a literary work the clusters of meaning they already possess outside the work”. In the setting of Hemingway’s story there is no reference made to white elephants, “They are the imaginative half of a simile”. In the story, Jig is looking at the line of hills, white in the sun and says “They look like white elephants”¹⁷. She is talking about physical appearance: “the hills are rounded and lumpy (not with sharp peaks and points),” as Judith argues, so they could be compared to the bodies of elephants. Jig says later, “They don’t really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees”(404), but for most of the readers the visual image of their shape is clear. The phrase is repeated three times in the story, as well as being the title of the story. White elephants have taken on, as Judith Ortiz Cofer argues, “traditional symbolic significance in Eastern cultures and, to some extent, Western societies”¹⁸. Through repeated references and as a result the prominence of the title phrase, a certain traditional symbolic significance is carried into “Hills Like White Elephants.” As the story implies, Jig unlike the man, has seen white elephants:

“*They look like white elephants*” she said.

“*I’ve never seen one, “the man drank his beer.*

“*No, you wouldn’t have.*”¹⁹.

If she has seen them, she probably knows that they are both rare and venerated and figuratively, a burdensome or useless possession.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definition for *white elephant*, all current when Hemingway was writing:

¹⁴ Hemingway, E., (2004), *The Essential Hemingway*. London. Arrow Books.

¹⁵ Hemingway, E., (2004), *The Essential Hemingway*. London. Arrow Books.

¹⁶ Cofer, O.J., (2005), *Approaching Literature in the 21st Century*. Fiction, Poetry, Drama. New-York,

¹⁷ Hemingway, E., (2004), *The Essential Hemingway*. London. Arrow Books.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

a. A rare albino variety of elephant which is highly venerated in some Asian countries.

b. fig. A burdensome or costly possession (from the story that the kings of Siam were accustomed to make a present of one of these animals to countries who had rendered themselves obnoxious, in order to ruin the recipient by the cost of the maintenance). Also, an object, scheme, etc., considered to be without use or value.

As Jig and the American have a very short conversation which goes from “all the things you’ve waited so long for” to “white elephants” to the operation: the “simple operation” that is “not really an operation at all” the reader is left to decide what the operation is. In this light, as Judith Ortiz Cofer argues, her use of *white elephant* suggests “a contrast [...] between pregnancy and new life as, on the one hand, a highly valued treasure and, on the other hand, a burden or an object without value”²⁰. As the story implies, if Jig stays pregnant, she may be similar to a burden and unwanted possession for the man.

As compared to Jig’s dilemma in “*Hills Like White Elephants*,” the symbols in “*The Snows of Kilimanjaro*” are stronger and more meaningful. Hemingway uses two different animals to symbolize the type of person Harry wishes he were and the type of person he has actually become. The leopard is seen only in the epigraph at the opening of the story, but its presence is extremely important to the rest of the story. Hemingway uses the leopard to represent what Harry would like to be, someone with strength, courage and passion. The reader is told the legend of the leopard carcass found at the top of Kilimanjaro and it is a mystery why he went there. The leopard, as Jerianne Wright argues, was seeking the summit, known as “The House of God”²¹. In this story the leopard symbolizes qualities such as grace, speed, strength, courage and dignity. The leopard pounces with purpose, with lightning speed, and with accuracy. Hemingway uses the hyena to symbolize Harry because like the hyena he is a lazy scavenger that takes the easy road in life. He lives by rich women and has been too lazy to follow his dream of being a writer:

“He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in by drinking so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions, by laziness, by sloth, and by snobbery, by pride and by prejudice, by hook and by crook”²².

This symbol also demonstrates a theme in the story of living without passion. The mountain represents the afterlife, a place of inspiration that Harry can go, to achieve the characteristics of the leopard. Through his delirious visions, the reader finds out that Harry could never be associated with the qualities of the leopard. Harry has never been able to exercise his talent because he was too afraid to try. He realizes that, if he died, he “would not have to fail at trying to write them either”²³, and therefore does not fight against death. “He merely awaits death,” as Jerianne Wright argues, “expecting to gain from it the spiritual enlightenment that others must work hard for.”

This quality of laziness can be seen in his vision of his trip to Kilimanjaro, to the “House of God.” Unlike the leopard, who made the hard and tiring climb in search of the mountain’s summit, Harry takes a helicopter ride to the top. The hyena that circles his campsite is waiting for him to die. He has lived off the riches of his wife, calling his love for her “the lie he made his bread and butter by”²⁴. Harry lies crippled on a cot while his

²⁰ Cofer, O.J., (2005), *Approaching Literature in the 21st Century*. Fiction, Poetry, Drama. New-York, 119-133.

²¹ Wright, J., (2001), *Hemingway’s Use of Animals as Psychological Symbols*. Los Angeles. Amazon. Com. Monday November 12.

²² Hemingway, E., (2004), *The Essential Hemingway*. London. Arrow Books.

²³ Hemingway, E., (2004), *The Essential Hemingway*. London. Arrow Books.

²⁴ Wright, J., (2001), *Hemingway’s Use of Animals as Psychological Symbols*. Los Angeles. Amazon. Com. Monday November 12.

wife goes “to kill a piece of meat”²⁵. The microcosm of the camp is an extension of the real world in which Harry picks up the leftovers of others, just as the hyenas live off the leftovers of the better hunters. The hyena in the story is always associated with Harry’s death. When Harry faces the realization of his death, it comes “with a rush; not as a rush of water nor of wind; but of a sudden evil-smelling emptiness and the odd thing was that the hyena slipped lightly along the edge of it”²⁶, and the death actually occurs, it is the hyena that announces it with “a strange, human, almost crying sound”²⁷. The hyena is associated with Harry’s psychological state, as Jerianne Wright argues, “it is a symbol of his psychological death that has occurred because of his inability to act decisively for himself”²⁸. The physical death is simply the last step in this process. The two animals represent conflicting personality traits. Harry, in the end, dies as he lives, as a hyena scavenging the leopard’s leftovers on his path to Kilimanjaro.

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place, which comes four years after *A Farewell to Arms*, shows Hemingway’s attitudes towards the central dilemma of initiation shifting, which is more in line with the “wise-man” characters such as Count Mippipopolous in *The Sun Also Rises* and Count Greffi in *A Farewell to Arms*.

The dilemma focuses on the necessity of living life fully and stoically with the permanent acceptance of death. What is new in this story is Hemingway’s perspective which is in the process of changing.

It is closing time in a café. “Everyone had left[...] except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light”²⁹. The old man comes there every night and the week before he had tried to commit suicide. The young waiter denies the old man’s last drink, as he wanted to close the bar and go home. Actually, the young waiter has no sympathy for the old man, while the old waiter sympathizes with the old man, understanding how important it is for him to be accepted in a clean, well-lit café, which is open as late as possible, for those who might need it.

The shift in Hemingway’s perspective, as Bryant Mangum argues, is subtly suggested in the story’s dramatic structure, in which Hemingway often, and quite consciously, omits the dialogue guides, forcing the reader to decide whether the speaker is the young waiter or the old waiter. When the readers become aware of what Hemingway is doing in showing the two waiters’ very different attitudes, the dialogue guides are unnecessary. Their omission becomes part of the iceberg, as Bryant Mangum points out, “the part you can omit and it only strengthens your iceberg”³⁰.

The young waiter cannot understand the old man’s despair: “He has plenty of money,”³¹ the young waiter says. When asked by the old waiter the reason that the old man tried to commit suicide, the young waiter replies that it was “Nothing”³². This answer is full of irony. The young waiter does not understand the “nothingness” concept that is affirmed in the old waiter’s “Our nada who art in nada” monologue, which indicates his degree of sympathy for the old man who is “a good client” but “he’s lonely” and he is one of “all those who need a light for the night”. Although he was drunk, when he left the café very late, he was “walking unsteadily but with dignity”. Through the old waiter who leads an honest life, Hemingway suggests that a life lived with an awareness of death, in other words with a recognition of *nada*, will have moments of despair. For Jake in *The Sun Also Rises*, Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms*, or the old man in the café,

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Mangum, B., (1982), *Critical Survey of Short Fiction*. Salem Press, 1621-28.

³¹ Hemingway, E., (2004), *op.cit*.

³² *Ibidem. op.cit*.

who experienced moments of loneliness, a light bulb at night, a dry place out of the rain, or a clean well-lighted café is the only possibility through which they can survive, they feel safe and protected in a troubled world.

According to Bryant Mangum, in all the stories and novels published around 1933, the year of publication of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," there is a distance between the code heroes and the thing itself, death. Death is very near to the heroes in such stories as "The Killers," where Ole Anderson is waiting to be killed. This situation and other situations like this are viewed from the perspective of a Nick –like character, by one whose days are not numbered. The situation of Frederick Henry is different, he is watching death which happens to other people. In *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*, the code hero moves a step closer to death, as Bryant Mangum argues, when the code hero embraces death, that is for him "the end of the story"(6). As the title of the story suggests every moment lived in fear was not actually life at all. Only in overcoming the fear of death did he escape the insistent presence of Margot and actually have a life of his own, although its duration was only a few seconds.

The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber, as Bryant Mangum argues, "can be viewed thematically as the last phase of the initiation of the code hero," a phase which is also experienced in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* and to a certain extent, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Big Two-Hearted River is symbolically a story of the construction of a value system after all the traditional values which someone was taught as a child have been burned away. This lonely process must be undertaken in solitude, a good explanation for the fact that in this long, two-part story, there is only one character.

Having set up his camp by the river, Nick crawls inside his tent to place some things at the head of the bed. The light which came through the brown canvas and the smell of the canvas created a mysterious and homelike atmosphere in the tent.

"Now", as Frank Scafella argues, "things were done. There had been this to do [...]. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him.[...] Now he was hungry"³³. Nick is still touched by "the light" and "the canvas smell." The mystery, the feeling of happiness that he is at home settled, his "growing hunger," all these touch Nick. The idea, "Nothing could touch him,"³⁴comes to Nick when he feels "settled," at "home," "in the good place," and beyond "the need for thinking," "the need to write"³⁵. As Frank Scafella argues, "these needs cannot touch him in his tent at the river".

However, in the good place at the river the idea, "Nothing could touch him," as Frank Scaffella points out, "touches Nick in thought beyond need. So the double significance of 'nothing ,'at once an absence and a presence") in Nick's thinking means that "nothing" is "something" that Nick is free to enter.

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