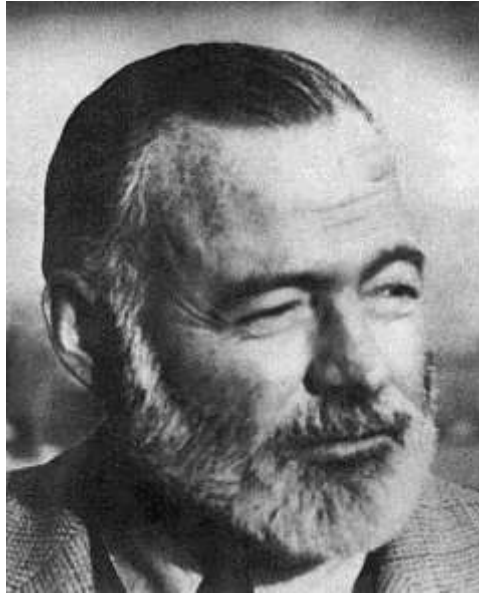


Art and the Artist in Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*

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Ernest Hemingway 1899-1961

Courtesy: www.americanlegends.com

The Legend of Hemingway and Its Impact on the Study of Hemingway Novels

The problem with Hemingway critics is their obsession with the legend of “Hemingway the blowhard, of Hemingway posturing with movie queens, bullfighters, and big fish, or of Hemingway the hard drinker who made pompous male pronouncements in men’s magazines” (Benson 47).

This larger-than-life image, which Hemingway so assiduously cultivated and which the critics so stubbornly pursued has led to serious distortions in the study of the novelist’s art and vision. This preoccupation with the writer’s life has led to the extreme narrowing of the critical focus on the writer’s work. He has been dubbed as an ‘unintellectual’ writer whose writing is marked by conspicuous absence of any idea, or any trace of commitment of any kind, or any objective concern with the historical, cultural and social issues.

If we can forget the man and more so the legend that surrounds him and just concentrate on his writings without the aid of extra-literary disciplines we shall discover the

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full canvas and complexity of Hemingway's values and vision as a writer. Once this task is accomplished we shall find that Hemingway was a liberal and committed humanist who over and over again projected in his fiction the humanist ideal of secular and liberal values. It is here that we find the golden streak of his fiction which is central to the understanding of his vision both as man and writer.

Honesty and Integrity

Honesty and integrity are the two cornerstones of Hemingway's code of artistic integrity, which emerges most clearly through his ironic, sometimes satirical portraits of the fake artists in a number of his works. He values the honest rendering of authentic life experiences and any one failing to observe this norm becomes an object of his ridicule. The way he rails at Andersons' pomposity and artificiality in language and life in the *Torrents of Spring* is a sure proof of his commitment to the values of truth, honesty and integrity both in life and art.

Hemingway's devastating and satirical portrayal of phoney artists such as Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises*, Roger in *Islands in the Stream*, Laughton and Gordon in *To Have and Have Not* provides us the key to the understanding of the versatility, maturity and wholesome aspect of his art. For Hemingway, the "only test was that everything he put down had to be honest" (Garnett 10) and this conviction precluded any sort of commitment to a particular political or social or economic ideology. For him, man was central and anything that caused suffering to him or stifled his conscience was anathema. It is here that we find Hemingway's strong aversion to politicians and disinclination to join any 'ism'. He was independent of any ideology or politics.

Non-Ideological and Apolitical Stance

Hemingway's non-ideological and apolitical stance was at variance with the stance taken by the majority of writers in the 30's when to be a leftist was a craze, rather, a mania. The literary atmosphere of the 30's was saturated with the outpourings of all kinds of literature of social commitment. It was Hemingway's disinclination of being uncommitted to the leftist political agenda in the 30's that invited strong denunciation from the writers as well as the critics. Stanley Cooper rightly observes:

His increasingly public persona and the subject matter of his books

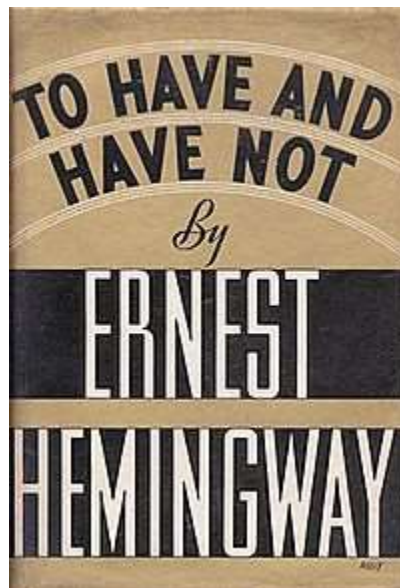
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convinced many that Hemingway was interested only in his own pleasure and amusements. With the American economy in shambles and the social fabric seemingly about to tear apart, many critics believed that Hemingway's interests – bullfighting, big game hunting and marlin fishing – were escapist and elitist. Millions were out of work in his country, and he was going on safari in Africa. Basic social and political questions were being debated and he was condemning the decadence of the Spanish bullfight. (49)

To Have and Have Not



Most of the criticism of Hemingway was based on political grounds and came mainly from so-called Leftist critics. Then appeared *To Have and Have Not* and praise started pouring in from these very quarters for Hemingway's treatment of the devastating impact of Depression and his sympathetic attitude towards the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. They saw in these works Hemingway's actual conversion to communism but they were surely mistaken, because these works are not the statement of his political views or ideas; but they show his concern with the suffering humanity at large in these harrowing times. For Hemingway, commitment to art was far more important than commitment to a particular ideology and the basis was his strong belief that politics, political ideologies, government and economic systems are all transitory; what is permanent is art. In *Green Hills of Africa* he wrote: "A thousand years makes economics silly and a work of art endures forever, but it is

very difficult and now it is not fashionable” (109). Hemingway believed that art was the only part of any civilization that could remain alive and vital for generations to come.

Thus, to judge art and the artist by contemporary, political and social standards is to be short-sighted and false. There are always good writers and bad writers. *To Have and Have Not* can profitably be read, apart from its social theme, as Hemingway’s statement of his strong aversion to everything that is fake and phoney in art.

Gordon the Author

It is through Gordon, the writer with so called leftist leanings that Hemingway brings out vividly and forcefully, the corrupting and corroding effect of commitment to a particular political ideology on the work of a writer. Gordon has written three books dealing with social issues and the latest book he is writing is about the strike in a textile factory. Hemingway tells us that art influenced by a particular cause or ideology tends to degenerate into a kind of formula writing. The following dialogue between Gordon and Spellman, a lousy young man, makes this point clear:

‘What are you doing now?’” Gordon asked.

‘Not much.’ said Spellman. ‘I get around a little. I’m taking it sort of easy now. Are you writing a new book?’

‘Yes. About half done.’

‘That’s great.’ said Spellman. ‘What’s it about?’

‘A strike in a textile plant’

‘That’s marvellous’, said Spellman. ‘You know I’m a sucker for anything on the social conflict’.

‘What?’

‘I love it’, said Spellman. ‘I go for it above anything else.

You’re absolutely the best of the lot. Listen, has it got a beautiful Jewish agitator in it?’”

‘Why?’, asked Richard Gordon, suspiciously.

‘It’s a part for Sylvia Sidney. I’m in love with her. Want to see her picture?’”

(*THHN* 141)

Deft Use of Irony

It is, indeed, Hemingway's deft use of irony in bringing Gordon and Spellman together in the bar. It is through this direct conversation between the writer and his self-proclaimed 'fan' that we come to know not only about the fake artistic standards of Gordon, the Leftist writer but also the kind of readers his works attract. Spellman is a rich spoilt brat for whom Gordon's books are just as good as drinks, or marijuana, or Sydney's picture which provide him a good form of entertainment. Gordon is in for big blow at the hands of a real communist who tells the writer that his books are just "shit". Both these judgments are a sad commentary on Gordon's integrity as a writer—the rich, the haves whom he denounces like his works and the have-nots whose cause he champions consider them to be 'shit.'

For Hemingway, dishonesty and falsity in rendering experiences in art are the cardinal sins that a writer can commit and this is exactly what Gordon does, and he does it because he is capable of doing only this. Gordon does not know the difference between reality and perception, thus leading him to his naive, rather insipid, presentation of social issues in his works. He writes on social themes because it is fashionable to do so and not because he understands the complex issues involved therein. This is nowhere more evident than his perceived impression about Marie Morgan.

Marie Morgan – Stereotyped Freudian Interpretation

Marie is in bad shape mentally and physically, as she is coming home from Sheriff's office where she was briefed about Harry's mortal wounding. But for Gordon, she epitomises what a lady of her age and background can do. He has never known her, never met her, never talked to her, but he claims to possess the whole inner life of that type of woman. He constructs a stereotyped Freudian interpretation of Marie as the slovenly, frigid, middle class house wife belonging to the working class, in whom her husband has lost interest since a long time ago.

Gordon's Relationship with Helen, His Wife

Hemingway, through ironic juxtaposition reveals Gordon's "lack of perception as artist and his selfish use of human beings." (Wylder 114). As against her perceived frigidity, Marie enjoys vigorous and mutually satisfying sex life with her husband, Harry. Gordon's preconceived and misconceived notions about Marie's type of women from the class he is

“supposedly” fighting for, become evident in Gordon’s real life relationship with his wife, Helen.

Hemingway is at pains to show Gordon’s false leanings towards Leftism through Marie and Helen, both of whom belong to working class. Gordon’s affair with Mrs. Bradley also shows his hypocrisy both as a writer and as a man. Helen’s father was an Irish boiler maker and a good union man. When Helen objects to her husband’s affair with Mrs. Bradley, he calls her a slut and disparages her father. As a writer, Gordon is supposed to sympathise with ordinary, working class people, but he is just a wastrel who has strayed into the realms of art.

In Hemingway’s artistic credo, a good writer is basically a good man, but Gordon is just the opposite. He is both a bad writer and a bad man. There can be no more insulting words than what Helen says of him as a man and as a writer: “No, not all right. All wrong and wrong again. If you were just a good writer, I could stand on the rest of it maybe. But I’ve seen you bitter, jealous, changing your politics to suit the fashion, sucking up to people’s faces and talking about them behind their backs.” (*THHN* 138).

Gordon’s Nemesis – Mrs. Bradley

Gordon’s nemesis is sure to come very soon and he receives it at the hands of the rich lady, Mrs. Bradley, who had interested him “both as a woman and as a social consciousness.” (*THHN* 105). Mrs. Bradley was a rich amoral lady whose hobby was to collect writers and their books as exhibition objects. So, Gordon was merely a collector’s item in her gallery of writers like him.

Gordon becomes cold and frigid on seeing Tommy, Mrs. Bradley’s husband during their sex act and gets his ‘reward’ in the form of stinging slaps across his face from none other than Mrs. Bradley. “In the darkness he had felt the slap across his face that lighted flashes of light in his eyeballs. Then there was another slap, across his mouth this time. ‘So that’s the kind of man you are’, she had said to him. ‘I thought you were a man of the world. Get out of here’. (*THHN* 140) The ‘leftist’ is wronged by the ‘rich’ and that provides him another subject matter for his next book.

Decent Writer, But Morally Dead Man

That Gordon is a decadent writer and a morally 'dead' man becomes crystal clear from the foregoing analysis. What also becomes more clear and evidenced is Hemingway's strong belief and faith in the honest rendering of authentic life experiences in the works of art. What passes under the garb of ideology at a particular period in the name of art is anathema to Hemingway for whom politics and ideologies are fleeting, temporary and inconsequential, whereas art is abiding and permanent. Hemingway's works are strong testimony to his strong aversion to thuggery in the name of art resorted to by writers like Gordon and Cohn and Roger and Harry.

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