

Ernest Hemingway's Achievements and Shortcomings in His Novels

R. Savitha and Dr. Laxmi Dhar Dwivedi



Ernest Hemingway

Courtesy: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1954/hemingway-bio.html

Abstract

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) is one of the major novelist in the history of American Literature. He is generally considered to be the spokesperson for the generation that faced the loss and devastation of two world wars in a lifetime. The present work is crucial as it marks Hemingway's Achievements and Shortcoming in his novels.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway, Characterisation, Action, War, Limitation, Achievements

His Limitation

No author exists who is completely satisfactory in every way. Every author has his faults and limitations. Different critics may point out different points of limitations. In our discussion of Hemingway, we cannot escape such a reading. Though he was a master and generally considered a genuine in the field of literary art, he has also faults and limitations. He was a writer who was pleased but was not free from elements that exasperated his readers. Some of the elements that aroused such feelings are his occasional snugness and sometimes over assertive masculinity and by his alternate shifting from sentimentality to toughness. His work is also marked by an obsessive concern with violence and cruelty and a fascination for war and death.

The irritating element was that he hardly used them to achieve catharsis of any kind but he seemed rather to be using these elements for some kind of sadistic satisfaction. Hemingway was however marked by a limitation of vision. This limited vision resulted in his drawing characters from a limited set--the expatriate American or else the Latin American. Hemingway hardly ever drew other characters. Though it is an artist choice to portray as an according to what he pleases, it nevertheless draws a negative connotation of an artist throughout his life, and in his entire oeuvre restricts himself. Another limitation is the same vein in that apart from these he has very occasionally touched upon the people, the manner and the interest and objective of his own contemporary society.

Achievements and Faults

At several points of time Hemingway has been strongly criticised for his faults, his deficiencies and his irritating qualities. On the other hand, because of his personality which attracted a great many people and because of his vast achievements and accomplishments which by way were a mean feat, he has been highly acclaimed also. Listed below are excerpts from statements made by critics over time.

Carlos Baker sums up Hemingway as, “Here is nature and here is man. Here is also something about the nature of manhood”. On the other hand, Alfred Kazin’s conclusion on Hemingway’s success ‘Triumph in and of a narrow, local and violent world, and never superior to it. The following have been extracted from Wyndham Lewis’s essay and points to several defects and achievements.

“When I had finished the book (*A Farewell to Arms*), I thought it was a very good book. By that I meant that the cumulative effect was impressive, as the events themselves would be. It is like reading a news, paper, day by day, about some matter of absorbing interest-say the reports of a divorce, murder, or libel action. If you say anyone could write it, you are mistaken because, to obtain that smooth effect, of commonplace reality, there must be no sentimental or other heightening, the number of words expended must be proportionate to the importance and the length of respective phases of the action, and any false move or overstatement would at once stand out and tell against it. If an inferior reporter to Hemingway took up the pen, that fact would at once be detected by a person sensitive to reality. It is an art, then, from this standpoint, like the cinema, or like those modernist still-life pictures in which, in place of painting a match box upon the canvas, a piece of actual match box is stuck on. Hemingway is a poster-art, or a cinema in words.”

“If you say that this is not the way that Dante wrote, that these are not artistically permanent creations, I agree. But it is what we have got: there is actually bad and good of this kind; and I for my part enjoy what I regard as the good, without worrying any more about it than that”.

“That a particular phase in the life of humanity is implicit in this art is certain. It is one of the first fruits of the *proletarianization* which, as a result of the amazing revolutions in the technique of industry, we are all undergoing whether we like it or not”.

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“But political significance! That is surely the last thing one would expect to find in such books as *In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *Men Without Women*, or *A Farewell to Arms*. And indeed, it is difficult to imagine a writer whose mind is more entirely closed to politics than Hemingway’s He is interested in the sports of death, in the sad things that happen to those engaged in the sports of love and war, or the people who profit by it, or in the ultimate human destinies involved in it. He lives, or affects to live, sub-merged. He is in the multitudinous ranks of those to whom things happen-terrible things of course, and of course stoically borne”.

“Another manner of looking at it would be to say that Ernest Hemingway is the Noble Savage of Rousseau, but a white version, the Simple Amen? man, that is, at all events the role that he has chosen, and} : Plays It with an imperturbable art and grace beyond praise”.

“Hemingway’s books scarcely contain a figure who is not in some way futile, clown-like, passive, and above all purposeless. His world of men and women (in violent action, certainly) is completely empty of will. His puppets are leaves, very violently blown hither and thither, drugged or at least deeply intoxicated phantoms of a sort of matter-of-fact shell-shock.”

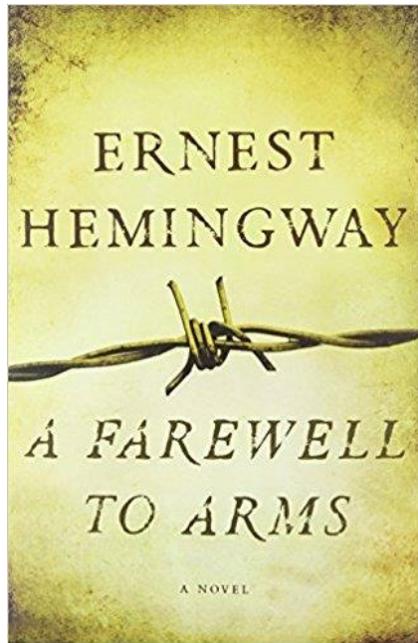
“It is not perhaps necessary to say that Hemingway’s art is an art of the surface, and none the worse for that. It is almost purely an art of action, and of very violent, which is another qualification. Faulkner’s that too: but violence with Hemingway is deadly matter-of-fact (as if there were only violent action and nothing else in the world).”

Characters Unforgettable

When we compare Hemingway to a novelist such as Dickens who created a vast array of memorable and unforgettable characters such as Oliver Twist, Uriah Heap, Mr. Micawber, etc. who suddenly spring to mind because of the unique characteristics that Dickens endows them With, entire span he has created no such memorable character. However, Hemingway’s art does not rest on his creating such memorable individual characters. His art rested on his ability to capture the atmosphere of and expressing a primitive attitude and thereby hooking his audience. There are therefore very less characters in his work who remain in memory for after finishing the novel neither as significant type of character or as particular human beings.

In *A Farewell to Arms* for example, we remember the war, the love affair, etc. but we do not recall any of the character vividly they remain mere shadows and do not come across as life and blood characters.

Similarly, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the reader instantly recognises the tension fraught atmosphere of the Spanish Civil War and certain stray incident such as the sexual encounter in the sleeping bag etc. However, one exception to the rule can be admitted. In creating Pilar, the guerrilla chieftain’s wife, Hemingway has created an unforgettable woman who shall long linger in memory.



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.ca/Farewell-Arms-Ernest-Hemingway/dp/1443439843>

Hemingway Dismissed for Not Being a True Novelist

According to Edward Wagenknecht, Hemingway is not essentially a novelist. This is what he says:

“Like Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway is, for many reasons, not essentially a novelist; he himself told Lillian Ross that all his novels had begun as short stories. There are six long fictions, but as novels only two of them count: *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Falls*. *The Torrents of Spring*, the brief burlesque with which he signaled his emancipation from Anderson’s influence, is merely an amusing hit of clowning, and both *To Have and Have Not* and *Across the River and into the Trees* are poor novels, though the latter has some interest as a portent. And though I know Hemingway’s special admirers will consider the statement outrageous, I must still record my judgment that, considered as a novel, *The Sun Also Rises* seems to me a slight thing, successful as it has been in teaching young people how to waste their life.”

This is one of the harsher negative comments on Hemingway. Edward Wagenknecht further comments on the theme of moral aimlessness saying that it never turns out to be any great achievement. This is what he says of Lady Brett Ashley the heroine of *The Sun Also Rises*, “Lady Brett Ashley is a true Hemingway character when she finds herself falling in love with Romero. She can’t help it. She has never in 3 her life, she declares, been able to help anything. Later, to be sure, she has her moment of revulsion, but moments of revulsion are not enough. So far as this world at least is concerned, she goes to hell. Obviously if ~ you lose the freedom of the will, there can be no morality, and without morality, the novel, which by its terms and conditions, is a study of human conduct, cannot possible have any meaning either. Even in the

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hands of as great an artist as Ernest Hemingway, moral aimlessness has not proved a promising theme”.

The Seamy Side of Life

Hemingway’s fictional character seem to be a collection of perverts, prostitutes and drunkards as filled as his novel are with soldiers, sports man, matador, fisherman, disillusioned expatriates etc. etc. He himself was greatly fascinated by war and its machinery and was therefore preoccupied with death and violence. He lived life on the edges-drinking hard and playing hard. And these are reflected in his fiction. In his novels and short stories his characters consume alcohol in extra large quantities, they smoke and drink unrestricted and they also indulge in casual sex thereby completely ignoring the conventional ethic of sexual relationships. Hemingway’s subject-matter can therefore be hardly considered pleasant. However, to criticize Hemingway too severely for these defects would be an injustice because the era that he lived in that of the post-world war era, ravaged by the war and then the economic depression, war full of such people. Therefore, to a certain extent these elements add to the realism of the text however unpleasant they may be and so cannot be done away with. Lastly it may be said that these elements are better dealt in works of fiction and less in his semi-auto biographical novels.

Too Much Action

Hemingway’s novel according to some critics place too much emphasis on action and therefore do not seem to provide an adequate philosophy of life neither does he supply a suitable form of reference for art. Hemingway had always wanted to avoid being ‘taken in’ by anything. But his work seems to supply evidence to the contrary. He has been ‘taken in’ by almost everything, right from hunting, bull-fighting etc to war. He has in a way romanticized the killing of men by men and therefore has been obliged to find a moral meaning to justify and explain it. Critics therefore charge Hemingway saying that if at all any thing was to be romanticized why couldn’t he has romanticized life, love and therefore the beautiful instead of romanticizing the ugly in the form of death and all the other ugly element associated with death.

Hemingway has also been ‘taken in’ by war, in a sense that though he expressed a feeling of being against war, he had somehow come to justify it. Hemingway was involved in a number of wars. The first and Second World Wars, the Spanish Civil War, then he also covered the Greek retreat and others as a war-correspondent. However, he never became a militarist. By 1942, when he began *Men at War* he was writing like all other professional patriots and in a sense justifying war by propounding the thesis that: ‘War is the sum of all evil, but this war is different! If we only destroy these scoundrels now, there we shall have ' peace upon earth for evermore!’” That this thesis is in vain has been adequately proved by the two world wars and yet his hero and heroine seem to be committed to this thesis. This is a severe fault in Hemingway who has to maintain the code, principle or cult. Such an emotion as pity is non-existent in the Hemingway world. Even if it does manifest itself, it appears in the rarest, minimal manner.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can call Hemingway’s world inadequate and minimal though his outlook may be large and encompassing. His world is a world limited to war and the violence

that is characteristic of war. The Hemingway world is at war, an armed and calculated conflict literally or else a metaphorical war which is marked by violence which may again be classified as literal, or metaphorical, actual or potential and there is always the corner. The world today is constricted by conditions imposed upon it by the war, and people and their behaviour are forced to behave according to these restricting conditions.

These conditions are a feeling of emergency and fear, apprehension and the notion of pleasure seized in haste. Pleasure in this world is therefore limited, has to be forced and is mostly of the sensual kind. Everything is restricted by the war and even morality has to go according to what is practical and pragmatic. It is a world where 'what you feel good after' is what is moral. According to this definition of morality also functions the ethics of a soldier and his virtues during war. Similarly, according to the rules of sport the rules and notions of escape which in turn makes up the code of armistice and the temporary modifications of the rules of war during peace time.

The world of Hemingway is a world where growth does not exist. Everything is stunted and does not bear fruit. Rather in this world things explode and break or else decay and are eaten away. However, complete and total misery is avoided through visions of strength and courage, stoic endurance and competence. Especially in *A Farewell to Arms* the visions that bring some sense of relief are visions of the pleasures and joy that the human body can bring if it is not in pain, by the thought and in diligence in love that cannot last long and by the pleasures to be found in sitting in cafes' going fishing and hunting and going to places and countries on holidays. Parole to the stunted development of the world, Hemingway's character also remain undeveloped. They do not grow in nature as it is. They do not in a sense even attain the status of an 'adult'. The world portrayed is therefore a narrow world and sharply marked by violence.

A close look at Hemingway's world reveals it to be inadequate and is hardly a world that one would wish to live in. But no matter how much man may think that this is not his world, he is wrong. It is in effect the actual world that we live in that Hemingway has portrayed in his works. The world that we live is ravaged as it is by war minor as well as two major ones and thus death and violence are part and parcel of one's life. We cannot forget that the destruction, the evil and the general chaos in the world of Hemingway is but a mere shadow of the actual world. Thus, no matter how narrow and repulsive the world created by Hemingway may be, is nevertheless the actual world that we live in, it is the real world.

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