

Oneness between Life and Death - Ernest Hemingway's Fictional World: An Analysis

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Abstract

This is an attempt to discuss how Ernest Hemingway is adept at establishing oneness between life and death as reflected in his fiction and also to examine how the post-war period has been labelled as “a Last generation” which is applied to the disillusioned intellectuals who rebelled against traditional values and ideals. Courage and strength in facing struggles and frustrations in life up to the doomsday make it a point that life and love cannot be separated from death. It shows how Hemingway's forest is full of unseen dangers and how he takes death as seriously as life thereby establishing their oneness.

Key Words: lost generation, oneness, life and death, cynical hedonism,
Hemingway hero, study of suffering, dissolution of death,
obsession, morbidity.

A Lost Generation

The post-war period is labelled as “a lost generation”. ‘The lost generation’ tag is applied to the disillusioned intellectuals of the 1920's who rebelled against traditional values and ideals, but could replace them only by despair or a cynical hedonism. These frustrated and disenchanted youths who were uprooted during the storm of war, now allowed themselves to be blown like chaff through the early years of peace; drowned their disillusion in alcohol, slept away the days and shared their beds with a different partner each night. These American youngsters, who had a firsthand experience of war and of violence, were physically and morally wounded and it left a deep psychic scar. It altered the entire pattern of their lives because they had a harrowing experience of suffering and degradation coupled with wounds and despair in all walks of life. All experienced the same needs in meeting the struggle and frustration of twentieth century man and even men of all times. Some became involved in war, suffered wounds and were forced to

reconcile the psychological disturbances created by these hurts, while others were forced to come to terms with the reality of the traumata created by the pressures of hostile environment. Hemingway belongs to the first category of men.

It is said that Hemingway suffered from a traumatic neurosis incurred by a severe wound of Philip young, “Hemingway’s fiction may be like Freud’s war patients, dreams in which the dreamers obeyed the repetition-compulsion contrary to Freud’s own notion of wish – fulfillment and the pleasure principle” (p343). Both war and bullfighting have always been recognized as the major metaphysical bases for much of Hemingway’s fiction. Since both emphasize the importance of adjustment to death, “this common denominator provides a view of interworking of Hemingway’s artistry when it concerns itself with either bullfighting or war” (Faleo 38).

Hemingway’s Knowledge and Experience of Death

From his earliest collection of short stories, *In our Time* to his post humorous novel *Islands in the stream*, Hemingway’s stories are studies in loss, the discovery of evil and the resultant death. In most of his stories, he presents a picture of life on the negative side, but not without a message. According to him, “Death must be accepted, faced unflinchingly and there by mastered.”

In the post-war period, the violent death caused a great imbalance in the life of man. Ernest Hemingway had received physical wound while distributing chocolates to the Italian soldiers in the trench. He suffered from a mortar-shell fire along with other Italian soldiers. Three of them died and two hundred and thirty seven-steel fragments were taken out of him leg alone through operation. Hemingway felt that he had died and his soul was going out of his body. This physical injury caused sleeplessness and hallucinations in him, and became symbolic, and has separated and alienated him from his past which became non-existent for him.

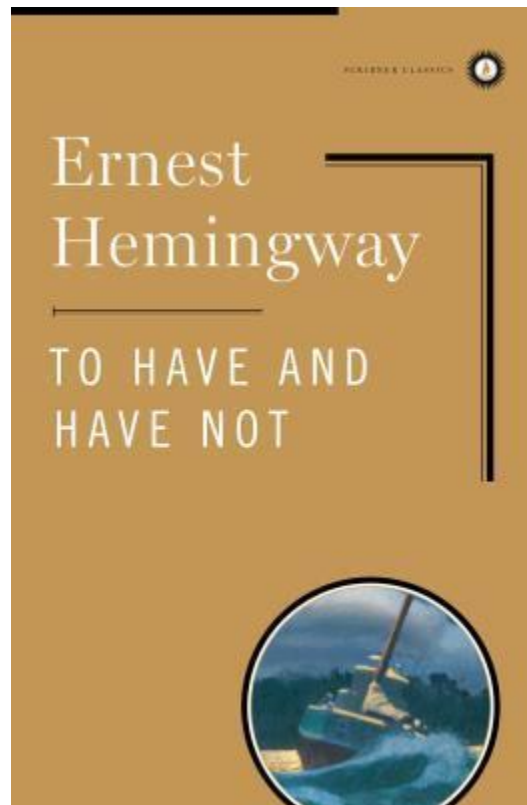
Hemingway had the knowledge of death as a boy in the Indian camp in the company of his father. He wanted to give pictures of death in his novels and short stories. As he had seen death in the world war and in the bullfights, a charge was leveled against him then that he had sought death throughout his life. He had actually shown a great awareness of violence, death and

brutality. *Death in the Afternoon* and *The Sun also Rises* have delineated wound and death in the bullfights.

Much in Life, Quite Hateful and Abominable

Similar to other writers of the lost generation, he has found much in life, quite hateful and abominable. Life cannot be separated from death. The Hemingway heroes have developed fearlessness and have a courage and strength in the face of struggle. *Death in the Afternoon* is a treatise on the bullfights, its morality, the danger and the death involved. Between 1924 and 1932, Hemingway was preoccupied with the problems of the wound and the death in his novels.

To Have and Have Not



To Have and Have Not is a portrait of the wound, the death, suffering and surrender. Truly speaking, the wound and the violent death are the themes of Hemingway's works. This death, the violent death, is the special feature of the twentieth century. Hoffman commented:

“Hemingway can claim that of having honestly attempted an explanation of a form of death to which the twentieth century is peculiarly heir-death that comes as a violet

disruption of life. It is unreasonable. It puts traditional securities to shame, since they cannot satisfactorily keep pace with its discriminate destructiveness. The sudden violent injury inflicted impersonally by efficient guns and planes, too remote from the victim-“to hold him any special grudge is the symbol of this type of death and of death in life which in its consequence.”(P 29)

Love of Violence and the Wound

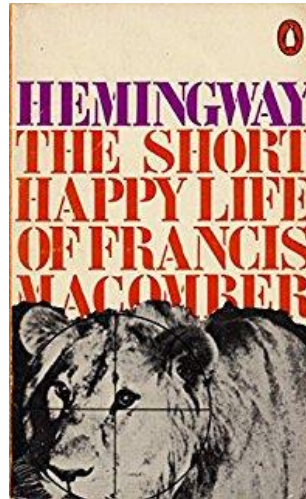
The love of violence and the wound and death in his special predilection manifested itself in various stages in his literary creations. Though love and death are important themes in Hemingway fiction, death occupies a more dominant position than love. Hemingway’s preoccupation with death has widely been commented upon. This preoccupation has been described variously as the cult of death, a death-wish, an obsession with death and so on. Hemingway himself said that death, violent death, was one of the subjects about which he most wanted to write. One critic goes so far as to say, “in reality, Hemingway has only one theme-death.” Hemingway ridiculed those famous lines: “Life is real, life is earnest and the grave is not its goal.” Death figures largely in the short stories and in the novels.

In Our Times

In Our Times may be considered a forward looking book in which “Indian Camp” is the story of initiation into violence and pain of the out raging to reveal a harsh and unpleasant reality” (Sanderson 29). It deals with Nick Adams’ initiation to the mystery of birth and death.

Nick accompanies his doctor father to a hut where an Indian squaw is passing through the ordeal of labor pains. “The baby wants to be born and she wants it to be born” (P. 87), unable to bear the screaming, Nick wants his father to “give her something to make her stop screaming” (P. 87). When the case becomes complicated, the doctor delivers the baby by performing successfully a caesarian operation on the screaming woman without anesthetic. The invalid Indian husband who was unable to stand his wife’s sufferings cut his throat from ear to ear with a razor. When the baby is born, the father of the baby is no more. Written a few minutes, Nick is given a chance to watch this grim birth-death drama - a birth, the fruit of a mother’s pain and a death, the result of a husband’s inability to bear the pain.

Stories of Wild Life



Hemingway's two African stories of wild life *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* are also studies of death. Both of them are "moral tragedies tipped with irony" (Benson 115) And both of them are rituals - "one a ceremonial triumph over fear" (Young 343). *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* is intensely tragic because in it, a death follows immediately after a resurrection, that is, "Macomber dies at the very moment he is commencing to live" (Baker 189). The only consolation is that he does not die biological before "He has gained crucial moment of spiritual elevation and insight"(Stephens 295). The great technical virtue of the story is "the development of an emotional intensity to a degree seldom approached in modern literature" (Baker191). Hemingway's obsession with the thought of death finds a complete expression in the short story *The snows of Kilimanjaro*. Death is the central theme around which the whole story reveals the working of the mind of a dying man who constantly feels the pain of the approaching death. In fact, according to Carlos Baker, it is "an experiment in the psychology of a dying man" (191).

Obsession with Two Types of Death

Harry's obsession with death makes him reminisce about only those incidents which are filled with violent and cruel death. The story begins with the hunting expedition of Harry and his wife Helen in Africa. Harry's lying very sick with a gangrenous leg. While trying to photograph a herd of water back, his knee scratched and he has neglected to put iodine on it; that explains the gangreneous leg. Because of the driver's negligence, they are struck there, waiting for the plane which will carry Harry to the Nairobi Hospital. Mrs. Harry who is very devoted to her husband, takes care of him whenever the pain of death becomes heavy for Harry. She tries to cheer him up

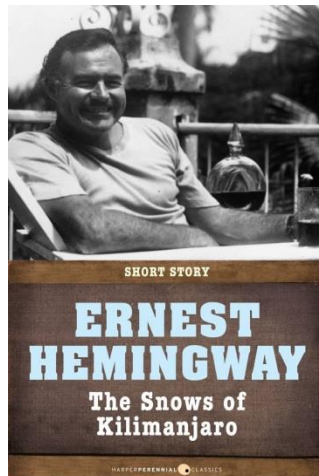
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and encourage him by saying that the plane will surely come to carry him out of the wilderness. But Harry's obsession with death becomes almost a firm conviction. Along with the obsession with the biological death, the obsession with his artistic death – that is his death as an artist also predominantly pains Harry. Having given up to a luxurious way of life by marrying wealth and then growing into complete dependence on it, Harry has died artistically long before his physical death. After having suffered from these two obsessions, Harry finally experiences the culmination of the pain as death begins to move up closer to him. The night falls; the Ryena, another foul devourer of the dead, makes a noise, Death comes and nests its head on the foot of the cot near his decayed leg and moves in on him; its whole weight is upon his chest; it crouches there; he is unable to move or speak; he dreams; in the dreams Compton, his friend carries him in his air plane; he sees the great high and unbelievably white peak of the Kilimanjaro. Donald Heiney says:

“when he dies his soul is full of the Kilimanjaro which symbolizes purity and escape; escape from the mean, bickering life, he has led with his wife, escape from the commercialism into which his writing has degenerated and on a physical level, escape from the hot damp plain upon which he lies dying”(P164).



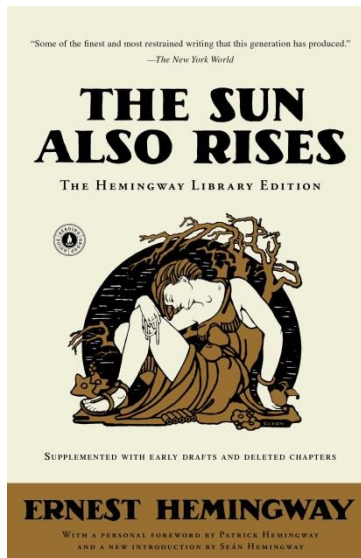
In the words of Belma Otus, “Harry’s soaring and achieving the summit of the Kilimanjaro is a mystic ascension leaving behind decay and senselessness. Harry is not victimised by death. His inner struggle ends in history, in his awareness of lack of meaning in life. He knows life ends in death and what leads to death is senseless and accidental - just a scratch and carelessness” (P. 50).

The Sun Also Rises

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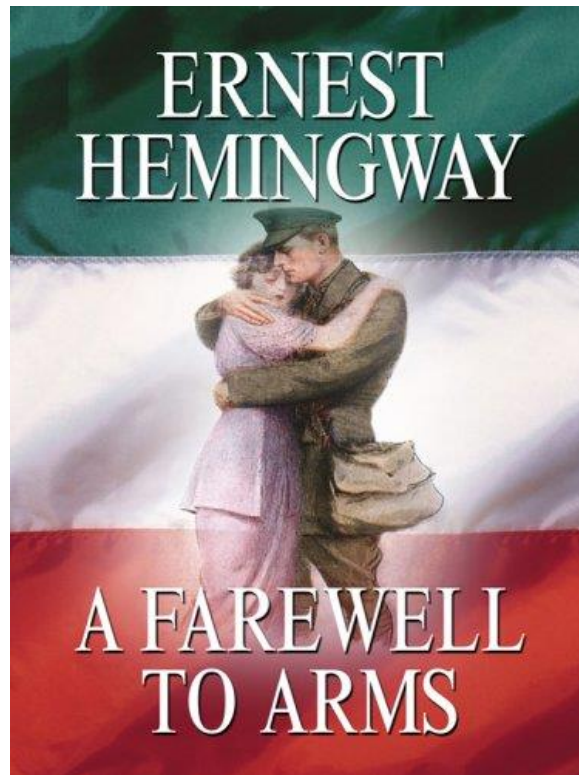
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In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway's very first major novel called as the Bible of the best Generation" (Lovine 26), tells us of the moral collapse of a group of expatriated Americans and Englishmen broken by the war. Here is Jake Barnes, rendered impotent by the war, a sexual cripple but he bears his sickness well. Jake Barnes loves Brett but he knows that he cannot lead a happy married life with her. He has the courage to face what life has given him, to live his life alone without Brett. He is unlike the unrestrained romantic Robert Cohn who follows Brett around all the time like a steer. Though Jake keeps his emotions under control, there are moments when his weakness overtakes him. But he derives strength for his moral values from the bull fighter Pedro Romero Seeing the undemonstrative courage with which Romero faces death during the bull fight, Jake also takes Courage. We are presented with a group of expatriates in the personalities of Robert Cohn, Mike Campbell, Brett, Ashley and the Count. For these people, life holds no meaning and they are lost in the mist of eating, drinking, dancing, playing cards and making love. Passing their youth in these pursuits is the only way for keeping off the gloom and dreariness of life.

The very title of the novel is taken from the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, the eloquent cry of the preacher as he contemplates the tragedy of men's brief life on earth. Through there is no biological death in the novel, there are other deaths - sexual death (Jake Barnes) and moral death (Brett, Cohn, Mike). *The Sun Also Rises* is intensely tragic because it is about the loss – "the loss of one's desires, one's love, one's life."



The most poignant death described by Hemingway is the death of Catherine pictured in *A Farewell to Arms*. Forebodings of Catherine's death occur in the course of the story. For instance, she tells Henry that all sorts of dreadful things will happen to them that he should not feel worried. Soon after she tells Henry that she is afraid of the rain because she sometimes sees herself dead in it and sometimes she sees Henry dead in it. Much later we are informed that the doctor had told Catherine that she had narrow hips and that it would be better if the child in the womb were not allowed to grow too big. When the time of delivery is near, Henry tells us:

“We knew the baby was very close now and it gave us both a feeling as through something were hurrying us and we could not lose any time together” (chap 40).

Then comes the actual account of unsuccessful child-birth and Catherine's death. Catherine has a harrowing time. She experiences severe pain, but she simply fails to give birth to the child. Henry's thoughts on this occasion add to the pathos of the situation. “Poor, poor cat. And this was the price you paid for sleeping together. This was “the end of the trap. This was what people got for loving each other” (chap 41). The doctor decides to perform caesarian operation but the child was found to be already dead. Catherine had a dangerous hemorrhage. Henry offered a fervent prayer: Oh, God, please don't let her die. I'll do anything for you if you

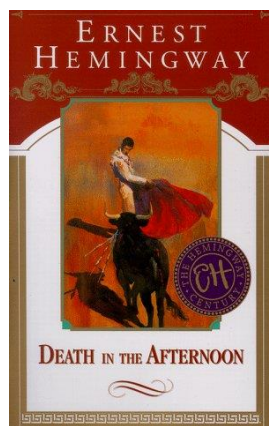
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don't let her die. Please, please, please, dear God, don't let her die..." Catherine said, "I'm going to die", adding, "I hate it". Catherine was not afraid of death; she just thought it "a dirty trick" and hated it". "Don't worry, darling", she said to Henry. "I'm not a bit afraid. It's just a dirty trick". Then she became unconscious and had one hemorrhage after another. The doctors couldn't stop the bleeding. Henry stayed with Catherine till her death. Henry would like to spend sometimes with the dead Catherine, but it was of no use. "It was like saying good-bye to a statue. After a while, I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain". This is one of the most moving accounts of death in the whole range of American fiction.

Death in the Afternoon

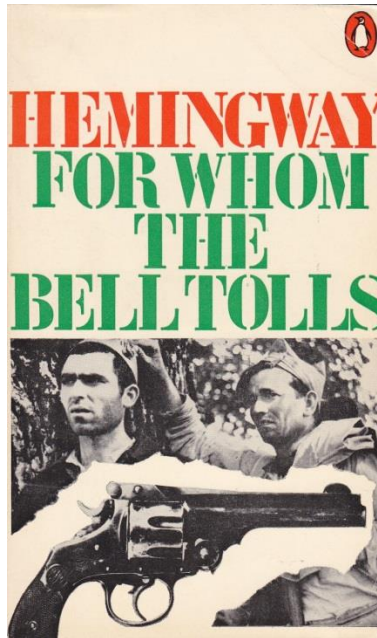


Death in the Afternoon is a treatise on the bull-fighting in Spain. It is about death - the death of bulls, bull-fighters and horses. "Death is for Hemingway somewhere near the center of life" says Carlos Spore Baker (P. 152). As Philip Young puts it, "Death has become Hemingway principal subject, for a while at least; his preoccupation with the idea is never more evident than here" (P. 67). This novel dramatically relates Hemingway's seven years as a spectator of bull fights. He suggests that the bullfights were made for the feeling of life and death which he thought might be gained there. To quote Hemingway, "The only place where you could see life and death, i.e., violent death now that the wars were over was, in the bull ring and I wanted very much to go to Spain where I could study it" (DIA 8). Hemingway here depicts bullfight as a microcosmic tragedy in which the death of the bull is inevitable. Hemingway seems to have the Castilian attitude towards death:

"They know death is the unescapable reality, the one thing any men can be sure of... They think a great deal about death. Hence by going to the bullring, they

have a chance of seeing death, given, avoided, refused and accepted” (*Death in the Afternoon* 266).

Such a healthy attitude towards death is one way of overcoming the usual sentimental taboos. To face the fact of death is as necessary to the writer of tragedy as a healthy facing of the other facts of life. *For Whom The Bell Tolls* is a “tragic epic” – a study in doom (Baker 96). It is an elegy on a dying man, a symphonic study of suffering and dissolution, a triumph of death; here is the true feeling which shapes the book” (Agostino 157).

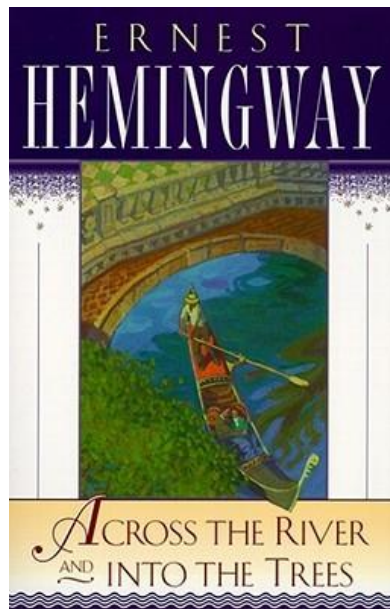


For Whom the Bell Tolls is principally a novel about the problem of killing people in a war and men’s response to war. This novel is about war, but it does not glorify war. Three major characters - Jordan, Anselmo, Pablo - reflect on the problem of killing in war. The problem of killing, the irony of killing, is the book’s pivot. Jordan turns the questions of killing- cold Russian, hot Spanish - around and around:

“Yes, Robert Jordan thought. We do it coldly but they do not, nor ever have. It is their extra-sacrament. Their old one that they had before the new religion came from the far end of the Mediterranean, the one they have never abandoned but only suppressed and hidden to bring it out people of the Auto de Fe; the act of faith. Killing in something one must do, but ours are different from theirs.”

Though Jordan apparently does not know Donne, and never understands that “any men’s death diminishes we”, he knows that killing is wrong. War is most sadly and viciously futile because each man kills part of himself - a position with which Hemingway would not have agreed. In the words of Levine, “It is the tragedy of Robert Jordan who is “one part defeated youth and one part undefeated loser” (P. 23). The second is the magnificent death of El Sardo whose real name is Santiago and whose courtly coverage will pass to Santiago of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Across the River and Into the Trees



Across the River and Into the Trees is also a study of death. It has the elegiac tone and moves like a love lyric. It is the story of an American colonel of the second world war who is in love with an Italian girl and dies of a heart attack after shooting ducks in the lagoons near Venice. As the other novels of Hemingway, it also deals with the theme of love and death. The greatness of this novel lies in the calmness and dignity with which the Colonel accepts his death.

To Have and Have Not shows how Hemingway’s passion for death embraces both the killer and the killed.

To Conclude

To conclude, it may be said that any study of Hemingway’s works shows that “death along with its ally, violence is the single reality that most comprehensively express

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Hemingway's sense of the world. His heroes live in a world that is like a hostile forest, full of unseen dangers, not to mention the nightmares that haunt their sleep. Death spies on them from behind every tree. According to Hemingway, by accepting death as the center of life one completes life. Mastery of life presupposes mastery of death and mastery of death indicates mastery of life. Hemingway then has two themes - life and death – and not only one. He takes death as seriously as life and thereby establishes their oneness. It thus follows that his interest in death is not really a matter of obsession or morbidity.

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