

E. HEMINGWAY, THE SHORT-STORY TELLER – THE GENEROUS SIMPLICITY

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Abstract: The paper intends to present the concision of Hemingway's story telling style, pointing out his multiple symbols hidden within his minimalist plot and synthetic dialogues, thus proving the author's both authenticity and modernity; the article is going to apply these generic features specific to Hemingway's writing on two of his notorious short stories: Cat in the Rain and Hills Like White Elephants, delivering a text interpretation.

Keywords: minimalist plot, simplicity, inner quest, modernity, authenticity

A Conceptual X-Ray

Nowadays it's a largely acknowledged fact that the classical boundaries of the literary genres are not so rigid any more as they allow diverse species to naturally interfere, to naturally compensate their particular areas of significance, completing the aesthetic attributes and also harmoniously compensating each other. Generally posing as a modern writer, E. Hemingway may also be read and analyzed in a post-modern key of interpretation, especially whenever we refer to his short-stories. Apparently a clearly-cut literary form, the short-story proves to be an extremely generous one as far as Hemingway's writings are concerned.

Influenced by Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein if we are to take an interest mainly in his early writings, Hemingway became the leading spokesman of the so called "lost generation"¹, voicing, in fact, the bitter feelings belonging to all disappointed people who could not find hope in a world of collapsed illusions any more. Awarded with the Pulitzer Prize for his *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), Hemingway states his confidence in man, in his power to eventually triumph, being convinced that "a man can be destroyed but not defeated"². E. Hemingway is today highly appreciated as a master of psychological penetration and sharp dialogue; for him, the *short-story* formula became a congenial form which he amply cultivated. His style and art accomplishment would represent an important development stage in modern fiction, as he strove for a detached presentation of facts, for a bare record of happenings whose meanings are revealed through understatement and spare dialogue. He turned the emotional honesty into a more important element than the mere realistic accuracy³.

His writings are both *literature of escape* and, mostly, *literature of interpretation*. Hemingway's fiction reveals itself frequently as interpretative since it illuminates some aspect of human behavior, it offers an insight into the nature and conditions of our existence, it consequently gives us a keener awareness of how a human being is supposed to act and react in a sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile universe. Thus, as an interpretive writer, Hemingway is in every respect a discoverer: he takes us – the readers – into the midst of life and he shows us the world as it really is or as it is hidden from our inexperienced eyes.

¹ See Meyers, Jeffrey – editor & Routledge, Publisher, *Ernest Hemingway: The Critical Heritage*, London, 1997.

² Hemingway, Ernest, *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, Arrow Books, London, 2004.

³ According to Waldhorn, Arthur. *A Reader's Guide to Ernest Hemingway*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972.

“Fiction, like food, is of different nutritive values. Some is rich in protein and vitamins; it builds bone and sinew. Some is highly agreeable to the taste but not permanently sustaining. Some may be adulterated and actually harmful to our health. Escape fiction is of the latter two sorts. (...)”⁴.

Hemingway is by far both a discoverer and an interpreter of his own text; as a serious writer, he acts as an intermediary between a segment of experience and an audience. He remarkably constructs his own text, paying attention to coherence and substance. Given the fact that truth in fiction is not the perfect synonym to fidelity to reality, Hemingway gives credibility and consistence to his short-stories, playing the game of make-believe, conceiving plausible characters and situations, thus charming and respectively conquering his readers’ minds.

Hemingway’s stories are remarkable for achieving a symbolist resonance without the use of classic rhetorical figures. The authorial voice in his stories renounces the privilege of authorial omniscience in two ways: by abstaining from any comment or explanation or judgment on the motif regarding his characters’ behaviors and by restricting itself to the perspective of only two of his characters⁵.

Hemingway’s stories are vital organisms, speaking a language of their own, patterned by hidden symbols and various connotations, all of them inquisitive and provocative to the readers’ intellects.

Applying on *Cat in the Rain* & *Hills like White Elephants*

The most discussed story appropriated to Hemingway is by all means *Cat in the Rain*. It was written at Rapallo in May, 1923. It reveals a corner of the female world in which the male is only tangentially involved. From the window of a hotel room where her husband is reading and she is fidgeting, a young wife sees a cat outside in the rain. When she goes to get the animal, it has already disappeared. The cat stands somehow in her mind for a comfortable bourgeois domesticity. The sudden disappearance of the cat becomes tragic given all its inner associations with many other things that she longs for: long hair she can do in knot at the back of her neck; a candle-lighting dining table where her own silver gleams; the season of spring and nice weather and, of course, some new clothes. But the moment when she articulates her wishes into words, her husband mildly advises her to shut up and find something to read. Her constant and obsessive object of her desire, *the cat*, transforms not only into a repetitive motif, but also into a central symbol of her identity and substance, the nucleus of her inner un-fulfillments and deep disappointments:

“Anyway, says the young wife, I want a cat. I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can’t have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat.”⁶

The cat becomes a substitute of all her frustrations, the subject of her immediate desires; the girl is the referee facing *the actual*, represented by rain, boredom, a preoccupied husband, irrational yearnings and *the possible*, made up of silver, spring, fun, a new hair look, new dresses. Balancing between these two extremes, *the actual* and *the possible*, *the cat*

⁴ *Story and Structure*, fourth edition, Laurence Perrine Southern Methodist University, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Atlanta, p. 7.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 12.

⁶ See *Theories. A Reader*, edited by Sean Matthews, Aura Tars Sibisan, editura Paralela 45, Pitesti, 2003, p. 359!

is finally sent up to her room by the kindly old innkeeper whose sympathetic deference is greater than that of the husband.

The short-story is invaded with symbols, both relatively obvious and hidden; in this particular respect: the cat could be interpreted as a symbol of a wanted child; the man in the rubber cape – a symbol of contraception; the maid with the umbrella, particularly the umbrella – opening with almost comical effortlessness behind the young wife – a symbol of how her way of life abruptly intervenes between her and a vital, fertile relationship with reality; her later demands are expressions of a desire that never reaches full consciousness, the desires for *motherhood*, a home with a family, an end to a strictly companionate marriage with George; the public garden – the symbol of fertility; the war monument – symbol of death, violence, ending.

The short-story, although a quite concise one, it is well-formed, with a clearly defined beginning, middle and end, but – as a specific of Hemingway's short fiction – the primary action is not equivalent to the primary vehicle of meaning. The plot is concentrated in his short-stories and it has merely apparent significance; the elements which are indeed making the difference are those beyond the plot, the hidden meanings of the characters' actions and desires. The maid and the manager are in this particular logic both *helpers*, as far as the young wife is concerned. The maid contributes to the symmetry of the story both numerically and sexually; her main function as a construction artifact is to emphasize the status of the wife as a client and expatriate and thus to act as a warning or corrective against the wife's tendency to attribute to the padrone a deeply personal interest in herself, a sign of her sexual and emotional frustration⁷.

The story is disguised as a modern plot of resolution: the quest for the cat has no particular relevance as far as the ending is in question; it is not the point of the story whether the wife gets the cat eventually or not.

Although restrictive in form, Hemingway's short-stories are harmoniously constructed, giving the readers the strong feeling of closure, of substance. *Cat in the Rain*, for instance, is built by exploiting a series of oppositions; the temporal and special contiguities are, in fact, expressing a series of social and cultural differences, as they follow:

“There were only two Americans stopping at the hotel”. – stating the clear opposition of nationalities, an index of their cultural isolation;

“They did not know any of the people they passed on the stairs on their way to and from their room”. – stating the vulnerability to breakdown in their relationship, being an index of social and mutual dependence;

“Their room was on the second floor facing the sea”. – stating the opposition of culture versus nature;

“Water stood in pools on the gravel paths”⁸. – expressing the very image of unhealthy stagnation as far as their relationship is in question.

While the wife is displaying a “natural” use of the eyes, her looking through the windows revealing actually her *need for communication*, the husband's reading a book acts as a substitute for communion. Everything is gradually expanded and exploited within

⁷ Idem, p. 360.

⁸ See Idem, p. 352.

Hemingway's texts. The crisis in the marriage focuses and insists on feelings such as the loss and the failure of love.

A similar thematic and plot we are dealing with in *Hills like White Elephants*. In it, there is another young couple, presented in opposition, constructed with the use of pairs of oppositions: while the man appears to be superficial, the woman is thoughtful. His boredom and lack of patience are doubled by her curiosity in experiencing something new. While she is un-experienced, he tends to generalize and to show, in fact, ignorance:

"The beer's nice and cool", the man said.

"It's lovely", the girl said⁹.

This is only a sample of the two characters' opposition, pointing out male strength versus female delicacy. Set in a European train station in the early 20th century, the story revolves around an American man and the girl he has with him, discreetly carrying on a conversation regarding the possibility of aborting their unexpected child. Throughout the entire story the protagonists spend their time talking and drinking alcohol.

Their crisis is related to an unspoken issue, she has to be persuaded to get rid of the "problem" in order to return and to enjoy the initial status of the couple's happiness. He offers her, in fact, a false choice: the only alternative for her is to solve the problem so he can be satisfied. Their dialogue betrays her intuition, her inner quest, on one hand and his vanity and egoism, on the other hand. He is only uttering empty words, while she is in need of substance, of stability:

"I'll do anything for you".

"Would you please please please (...) stop talking?"¹⁰

The ending of the short-story is definitely a modern one: the open ending, not clearly articulating the solution of their problem, but uttering the female's despair, her abandonment, her sacrifice and her implied growing-up. The title of the story is metaphorical, stating the possibility, but never the reality, rendering an item of her imagination, of her never-ending inner search of her own salvation, of her own accomplishment.

Concluding...

In all these respects, Hemingway's short-stories are all concentrating psychological dilemmas and inner quests.

E. Hemingway, in his pose as a short-story writer, proves that in an extremely limited form one can express unlimited issues as far as the human psychology is concerned. The gifted authorial pen and his attentively studied proportion in revealing the tension and the essence of humanity in and within the concise moments of their crises are outstanding. The writer speaks about human un-fulfillments, frustrations and losses of identity, in a restricted form, but displaying generous subtext connotations, scrutinizing both facts and characters with an eye of a keen observer of human nature, writing in quite a believable tonality and in a symbolical structure.

Influenced by his journalistic career, Hemingway contended that by omitting superfluous and inessential matters, writing becomes more interesting. When he became a

⁹ E. Hemingway, *Hills like White Elephants*, volume *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, Arrow Books, London, 2004., p. 260.

¹⁰ Idem, p.261.

writer of short stories, he retained this minimalistic style, focusing on surface elements without explicitly discussing the basic themes. Hemingway strongly believed the true meaning of a piece of writing should not be evident from the outward story and instead the nub of the story should lie below the surface and should be allowed to periodically shine through. Critics such as Jackson Benson claim that his *iceberg theory*, also known as the *theory of omission*, in combination with his distinctive clarity of writing, functioned as a means to impose the necessary distance of himself to the characters he prototyped¹¹.

Hemingway himself summarizes his theory in these words:

“If a writer of prose knows enough of 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 iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.”¹²

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¹¹ See Benson, Jackson J, *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, Duke University Press, 1990.

¹² Hemingway, Ernest in *Death in the Afternoon*, in *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, Arrow Books, London, 2004