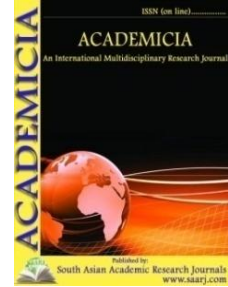




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## SYMBOLISM AND IRONY IN HEMINGWAY'S NOVELS

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### ABSTRACT

*Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea was the sense of awe that it created in its author and its readers. There has always been a certain mystery about Hemingway's effects in his best writing. Hemingway has used the symbolism of association to convey by implication his essential form the time of his earliest American publication. Hemingway has used techniques of symbolism and techniques of irony and used them well. Hemingway, in fact, stirs thought as to the interrelationship of these two kinds of ambiguity. It is remarkable how often they operate together in his stories: an ironic fact, perception, or even on the primary level may epitomize an irony in a broader context, and thus doubly deserve selection and accurate report by the narrator. Taken at face value the denomination "symbolist" has meanings in the common language of criticism that are quite inapplicable to him. But beyond this, Hemingway uses symbolism.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Inapplicable, interrelationship, intermittently, poignantly, inaccurate, sophisticated, transmitted, connotative, symbolism, paradoxical, inconsequential.*

### INTRODUCTION

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* created a sense of awe and curiosity among the readers and its author as well. Hemingway himself wrote to one of *Life's* editors about this novel as "Don't you think it is a strange damn story that it should affect all of us (me especially) the way it does?".<sup>1</sup> It is evident that there has always been a certain mystery about Hemingway's effects in his best writing. From *In Our Time* (1925), with its puzzling "chapters" connecting the stories, through *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), with its oddly equivocal interpretation of the Spanish civil war, his nevertheless were at pains to recommend. The brilliance of his reflected surface

together with the roughness of the things he preferred to write about- fishing, hunting, skiing, bull-fighting, boxing, horse-racing, and war- perhaps made it difficult to see one of the cardinal facts about Hemingway: that essentially he is a philosophical writer. His main interest, in representing human life through fictional forms, has consistently been to set man against situation from various points of view.

Undoubtedly Hemingway's preoccupation with the human predicament and a moral code that might satisfactorily control it, in itself partly accounts for the sense of hidden significance which many have experienced in reading him. Obscured as this preoccupation has been by his choice of particular fictional materials and by his manner, which has always eschewed explication, it could nevertheless almost always be felt: it was impossible to avoid the impression that this writer was dealing with something of final importance to us all. Like the Elizabethan whom he evidently loves, he never lets us quite forget that death awaits every man at some turn perhaps not far along the way. And like nobody but Hemingway-that is, in his peculiar and distinguished manner as an artist he continually reminds us that it is our "performance en route" that counts for good or bad.

But what is the essence of this peculiar manner? It is a manner of implication, clearly, as he himself has said in various notes of self-criticism of which the figure in death in the Afternoon is perhaps the most striking: "The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water".<sup>2</sup> The question is what mode of narrative technique he exploits in order to make the ice-berg principle operative in his work. I do not remember seeing the word "symbolism" in critical writing about-Hemingway before 1940, nor have I seen more than one review of *The Old Man and the Sea* that did not lean heavily on the word. The number of exegeses that explain Hemingway as a symbolist has increased geometrically since Malcolm Cowley suggested in 1944 that he should be grouped not among the realists, but "with Poe, Hawthorne and Melville: the haunted and nocturnal writers, the men who dealt in images that were symbols of an inner world".<sup>3</sup> It was a startling and pleasing suggestion. Mr. Cowley advanced it rather tentatively and did not press his discovery very far: but it was taken up with something like a hue and cry by other critics who, it seemed, had been testily waiting for the scent and were eager to get on with the hunt. Literary conversation soon began to reflect the new trend: I recall hearing it asserted on two proximate occasions that the sleeping bag in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is an "obvious" symbol of the womb: and that a ketchup bottle in "The Killers" patently symbolized blood. By 1949 it was no great surprise to open an issue of the *Sewanee Review* to an essay by Caroline Gordon called "Notes on Hemingway and Kafka".<sup>4</sup> It would have been surprising only if the analysis had not hinged on a comparison between the two writers as symbolists.

Hemingway has not attempted Kafka's kind of symbolism and fallen short: it is something foreign to Hemingway's art. the Kafka story used by Miss Gordon as the basis for her comparison is "The Hunter Gracchus", a carefully elaborated allegory revolving around the life of Christ-that is to say, there are two distinct and parallel narrative lines, the primary, which operates within the confines of a more or less realistic world, and the secondary, which operates within the realm of religious myth and in this case is assumed by the author to be a prior possession on the part of the reader. Incidentally, Miss Gordon forces her comparison from both sides claiming for Kafka, as something he shares with Hemingway, "a surface which is strictly

Naturalistic in detail”.<sup>5</sup> But this claim must rest on a curious understanding of the phrase “in detail” since the story on the “Naturalistic” level offers, among other attractions, a corpse that is mysteriously still alive, and a German-speaking dove the size of a rooster.

Hemingway has used the symbolism of association to convey by implication his essential meaning from the time of his earliest American publication. It may well be that this was inevitable for a writer starting out with Hemingway’s determination to communicate, as he put it (in death in the Afternoon). Everything is to depend on judicious discrimination of objective details: what really happened is not by any means everything that happened: it is only “the actual things... which produced the emotion that you experienced”. As a matter of fact “produced” is a little too strict, as Hemingway demonstrates again and again in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, where he depends heavily on the technique of objective epitome- a symbolist technique, if you like- to convey the subjective conditions of his characters. The details selected are not so much those which produce the emotion. Thus at the crisis of *The Sun Also Rises*, when Jake Barnes presents Brett to Pedro Romero- a Pandarism for which he is obliged to hate himself- his agonized feelings are not discussed, but are nevertheless most poignantly suggested by the perceptions.

There is, of course, a larger sense, germane to all good fiction, in which Hemingway may be said to be symbolic in his narrative method: the sense which indicates his typical creation of key characters who are representative on several levels. We thus find Jake Barne’s war-wound impotence a kind of metaphor of the whole atmosphere of sterility and frustration which is the ambiance of *The Sun Also Rises*: we find Catherine Barkeley’s naïve simplicity and warmth the right epitome for the idea and ideal of normal civilian home life to which Frederic Henry deserts: we find the old Cuban fisherman in some way representative of the whole human race in its natural struggle for survival. But the recent criticism of Hemingway as symbolist goes far beyond such palpable observations as these, and in considering the fundamental character of his narrative technique I wish to turn attention to more ingenious of not esoteric explications.

In Hemingway: The Writer as Artist, Carlos Baker has established himself as the leading oracle of Hemingway’s symbolism. His book is the most valuable piece of extended its contribution is one of new insights into the symbolist aspect of his subject’s narrative method. Mr Baker’s chapter on *A Farewell to Arms* is an original piece of criticism, and it solidly illustrates his approach. He finds that the essential meaning of this novel is conveyed by two master symbols, the Mountain and the Plain, which organize the “Dichtung” around “two poles”: “By a process of accrual and coagulation, the images tend to build round the opposed concepts of Home and Not-Home...The home concept, for example, is associated with the mountains: with dry cold weather; with peace quiet; with love, dignity, health, happiness and the good life: and with worship or at least the consciousness of God. The Not-Home concept is associated with low-lying plains; with rain and fog: with obscenity, indignity, disease, suffering, nervousness, war and death: and with irreligion”.<sup>6</sup> It is in terms of antipodal concepts symbols, the Mountain and the Plain. He argues that from the first page of the story these are set up in their significant antithesis, that they are the key to the relationships among several of the leading characters, and that the central action- Frederic Henry’s desertion from the Italian army to join Catherine Barkely, the British nurse- can be fully appreciated only on this symbolic basis. *A Farewell to Arms*” he concludes, “is entirely and even exclusively acceptable as a naturalistic narrative of

what happened. To read it only as such, however, is to miss the controlling symbolism: the deep central antithesis between the image of life and home (the mountain) and the image of war and death (the plain)".<sup>7</sup>

All the works of Hemingway that can be possibly be constructed to operate symbolically does no violence whatsoever to the naturalism of the story on the primary level. Nothing could be a more natural-or more traditional-symbol of purity, of escape from the commonplace, in short of elevation, than mountains. If thousands of people have read the passages in a Farewell to arms which associate the mountains "with dry-cold weather; with peace and quiet; with love, dignity, health, happiness and the good life" without taking them to be "symbolic" it is presumably because these associations are almost second nature for all of us. Certainly this seems to be true of Frederic Henry: it is most doubtful that in the course of the novel he is ever to be imagined as consciously regarding the mountains as a symbol. This of course does not prove that Hemingway did not regard them as such, or that the full understanding of this novel as an art structure does not perhaps require the symbolic equation, mountain equals life and home. It does, however, point differentially to another type of symbolism, where the character in question is shown to be clearly aware of the trope, as when Catherine Barkely says she hates rain because 'sometimes I see me dead in it',<sup>8</sup> or when Frederic Henry says of his plunge into the Tagliamento, "Anger was washed away in the river along with any obligation".<sup>9</sup>

But Mr. Baker has claimed a most exact and detailed use by Hemingway of the Mountain-Plain symbolism, and his ingenious interpretation deserves closer attention. Like many other critics he is an intense admirer of the novel's opening paragraph, which he says, "does much more than start the book. It helps to establish the dominant mood, plants a series of important images for future symbolic cultivation, and subtly compels the reader into the position of detached observer". He proceeds to a close analysis of this paragraph:

The second sentence, which draws attention from the mountains background to the bed of the river in the middle distance, produces a sense of clearness, dryness, whiteness, and sunniness which is to grow very subtly under the artist's hands until it merges with one of the novel's symbol is the plain. Throughout the sub-structure of the book it is opposed to the mountain image. Down this plain the river flows. Across it, on the dusty road among the trees, pass the men-at-war, faceless and voiceless and unidentified against the background of the spreading plain.

This is highly specific, and we are entitled to examine it minutely. Mr. Baker says the river is "in the middle distance" in the direction of the mountains with the image of which, as he sees it the symbolic images of the river are too merge into one great symbol. But is the river really in the middle distance? The narrator tells us he can see not only its boulders but its pebbles, "dry and white in the sun". the river must, of course, flow from the mountains, but in the perceptive seen from the house occupied by Frederic Henry, it would appear to be very close at hand- closer than the plain, and quite in contrast to the distant mountains. And this raises the question of whether the clearness, dryness, whiteness, and sunniness offered by the river are in fact artfully intended to be associated with the mountains-image and what it is held to symbolize: or disregarding the question of intent, whether they do in fact so operate in the artistic structure. Why must the river images be disassociated from the images of the plain across which the river, naturally, flows?.

Because the river images are of a kind which, if they work as symbols, are incongruent with what Mr. Baker has decided the Plain stands for; they must instead be allocated to the Mountain. This is so important to his thesis that the river shifts gracefully, but without textual support, into “the middle distance”, closer to the mountains.

As a matter of fact, the plain presented in the opening pages of a Farewell to Arms is as troublesome as the river when it comes to supporting Mr. Baker’s interpretation. There are plains in many countries that could well serve as symbols of emptiness, desolation, disaster, and death—we have some in the American West. But this does not appear to be that sort of plain: quite the contrary. “The plain”, Frederic Henry narrates “was rich with crops; there were many orchards of fruits trees...” Mr. Baker tells us neither how these images of fertility, disease, suffering, nervousness, war and death”, nor how we should symbolically interpret the conclusion of the sentence”... and beyond the plain the mountains were brown and bare”. One can easily grant that as the novel unfolds the impression of war itself grows steadily more saturated with a sense of doomsday qualities: that was an essential part of Hemingway’s theme. But to what degree is this impression heightened by the use of the Plain as symbol? The simple exigencies of history prevent exclusive association of the war with the plain as opposed to the mountains, as the narrator indicates on the first page: “There was fighting in the mountains and at night we would expect to find, despite this difficulty, a silent artistic emphasis of the plain in symbolic association with all those images which his interpretation sets against those coalescing around the Mountain symbol.

What all this illustrates, it seems that Mr. Baker has allowed an excellent insight into Hemingway’s imagery and acute sense of natural metonymy to turn into an interesting but greatly over elaborated critical gimmick. It is undeniable that in the midst of the darkling plain of struggle and flight which was the war in Italy. Frederic Henry thinks of the Swiss Alps as a neutral refuge of peace and happiness—surely millions must have lifted their eyes to those mountains with like thoughts during both World Wars. But in so far as this is symbolism it belongs to our race and culture; and if it is to be sophisticated into a precise scheme of artistic implication revolving around two distinct polar symbols, the signals transmitted from artist to reader must be more clearly semaphored than anything Mr. Baker has been able to point to accurately. I do not believe this is derogatory to Hemingway. Sensitive as always to those parts of experience that are suggestive and connotative, he used the mountain metaphor which is part of our figurative heritage to deepen the thematic contrast in A Farewell to Arms, between war and not-war. But nowhere did he violate realism for the sake of this metaphor; nor did he, as I read the novel, set up the artificially rigid and unrealistic contrast between the Mountain and the Plain which Mr. Baker’s analysis requires.

A reader must understand the symbolic pattern Mr. Baker claims for A Farewell to Arms in order to get the main point of the story: but unless he understands the irony of Catherine Barkley’s death he surely has missed it completely. Long before this denouement, however, irony has drawn a chiaroscuro highlighting the meaning of the book. There is from the beginning the curious disproportion between Frederic Henry’s lot in the army and his frame of mind. A non-combatant, he lives in comfortable houses, eats and drinks well, makes frequent visits to a brothel maintained exclusively for officers, and has extensive leaves urged on him by a sympathetic commanding officer. Despite such pleasures he is malcontent; and the more this fact

emerges the more it becomes evident that his mood is a reflection not of his personal fortune, but of the whole dismal panorama of civilization disjointed by war. His manner of narration is already ironical: "T the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came the cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it in the army".<sup>10</sup> Healthy in body, the hero is afflicted by a paralysis of the will, a torpor brought on by too many months of living close to the war; and this is the reason for his paradoxical failure to visit the home of his friend the chaplain while he is on leave: " I myself felt as badly as he did and could not understand why I had not gone. It was what I had wanted to do..."<sup>11</sup> Even the one constructive effort he has been regularly capable of, the performance of his duty as an ambulance officer, has begun to seem absurdly inconsequential to him: when he returns from leave he finds that his absence apparently has made no difference whatever.

The episode in Milan, so recalcitrant to Mr. Baker's symbolist scheme, has an integral function in the ironic structure of the narrative. Recuperating far behind the lines, the hero becomes part of the incongruously pleasant civilian scene which always-to the incredulous and bitter astonishment of most combat soldiers- goes on while men die at the front. Yet to add a further ironic twist to this, there is Hemingway's satirical portrait of Ettore, the American-Italian who is a "legitimate hero" in the Italian Army, Not only does he see the social life of wartime Milan as perfectly normal, but it is clear that his view of the war as a whole is the reverse of Henry's: "Believe me, they're fine to have", he says, exhibiting his wound stripes. "I'd rather have them than medals. Believe me, boy, when you get three you've got something".<sup>12</sup>

It is meaningless to argue that the work of any good writer owes its success exclusively or even predominantly to any one narrative artifice. Hemingway has used techniques of symbolism and techniques of irony and used them well; what we want in criticism is an even view of his use of these and other artistic resources that does not exaggerate one at the expense of others. A point deserving great attention and emphasis about the writer is his devotion to the implicit rather than the explicit mode: and both symbolism and irony truly serve this artistic purpose. Hemingway, in fact, stirs thought as to the interrelationship of these two kinds of ambiguity. It is remarkable how often they operate together in his stories: an ironic fact, perception, or even on the primary level may epitomize an irony in a broader context, and thus doubly deserve selection and accurate report by the narrator. As an illustration of his early effort to communicate "what really happened in action".

This is to apply the generalization to symbolism does depend essentially on likeness, and irony on difference; and as artistic tools both are means of interpreting imaginatively, and with the flexibility of implication, a complex reality. Symbolism signifies through a harmony, irony through a discord; symbolism consolidates, irony complicates; symbolism synthesizes, irony analyzes. Taken at face value the denomination "symbolist" has meanings in the common language of criticism that are quite inapplicable to him. But beyond this, Hemingway used symbolism with a severe restraint that in his good work always staunchly protects his realism. So likewise does he use irony. It is the ambiguity of life itself that Hemingway has sought to render, and if irony has served him peculiarly well it is because he sees life as inescapably ironic. But we must classify him let us do him justice: with all his skillful use of artistic ambiguity, he remains the great realist of twentieth century American fiction.

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