

## **The Hemingway Hero: A Protagonist with a Difference!**

**Hannah M. Kirubaraj**

**Assistant Professor II of English**

**Kumaraguru College of Technology**

**Coimbatore**

### **Abstract:**

While most authors choose to portray their protagonists as individuals who finally emerge successful even in the face of the worst challenges, Hemingway's heroes are different men. They are beaten and torn and are characters who are injured physically, emotionally and spiritually. It's the resilience and grace with which they handle pressure that makes them heroes with a difference. In probing to find out why the author chooses to portray his protagonists this way, one finds that there are many similarities between the Hemingway Hero and the author himself. In short, the evolution of the Hemingway hero has very strong autobiographical traces to it. Therefore, this paper seeks to make a background study of the author's experiences to gain a clearer insight into the portrayal of the Hemingway Hero.

**Keywords:** Protagonist, Hemingway hero, physical, emotional, spiritual, existentialism, Nada.

A vibrant and energetic individual with a distinctive ability to transform his passion for outdoor life and adventure into remarkable fictional art, Ernest Hemingway, has left an indelible mark on the minds of his readers across the globe. Perhaps one of the most widely read American novelists of the twentieth century, Hemingway's passionate depiction of action-packed ventures like bull fighting and war have kept his expectant reading audience spell bound. Irrevocably committed to the task of creating fiction, he kept at it till his untimely death in 1961. One of the most striking features that have made Hemingway different from most other writers is the depiction of his protagonist – the “Hemingway Hero” as critics chose to call him – as a wounded man. While most people like to imagine the hero as a victorious and powerful person who can rise to his glory in the midst of any turmoil and strife, Hemingway chose to depict his central character as a person who was resilient and strong although he was beaten and badly injured. The purpose of this article is to make an analytical study on what made Hemingway choose a three dimensionally– physically, emotionally and spiritually – wounded man to be his hero.

Critics and commentators have studied Hemingway's protagonist deeply and have had much to say about him. Some consider him to be a man of prodigious dignity, who lived by a code of courage, honesty and fortitude that enabled him to pass through the pressures of life gracefully, with his head held high. Certain others thought him to be a tough, hard-boiled brute with an undying appetite for blood, sports, alcohol and women. Yet other critics felt that the hero is a deeply sensitive and hard bitten man, who was a loser in the race of life. But despite various critical notions, a close and careful analysis of the Hemingway Hero points out that whatever he was or was not, he was an injured man who was wounded physically, emotionally and spiritually. Stewart Sanderson in his book *Hemingway* lays emphasis on this when he states that Nick's wound was more than physical and that he had been wounded emotionally too. The Hemingway hero, by whatever name he appeared in books that the author had written, carried both physical and psychic scars. Therefore Hemingway's basic preoccupation while developing his heroes was on how to get them to live and survive with the scars. Nick Adams, who featured in the short stories, had been wounded in various ways, both as a boy and as a young man. The injury that Jake Barnes sustained proved to be far deeper than a physical damage and left the man crippled for life. In the book, *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederick Henry's physical wounds had

some stiff emotional consequences. It was not the physical injury but the emotional despair that drove him to make “a separate peace” and opt out of society. Colonel Cantwell, the battle scarred veteran suffered from a psychic injury caused by a broken marriage. When legends and myths and other great works of fictional art chose men of great strength and courage to be their heroes, why did Hemingway prefer wounded men to be his protagonists? This is indeed a question to reckon with!

### **The Iceberg**

It has been a long accepted fact that Hemingway’s approach to fiction was quite different from that of many others. Therefore, to get a better understanding of Hemingway’s heroes, it is important to delve deeper into the author’s life itself. He was not actually as simple a novelist as he was often made out to be, but was exceedingly complex and very hard to comprehend. For a clearer understanding, Hemingway’s life could be compared to an iceberg. The upper level or the ‘tip of the iceberg’ was the part of Hemingway that could be seen by the world. In this level of life, he was a man of great achievement and success – a remarkable hero and a great adventurer. He had all the popularity and esteem any man could dream of. But behind the façade of this exuberance and activity, Hemingway was a very different person. Away from the eyes of the entire world - perhaps even from the eyes of his wives – there was a highly turbulent sea and a furious gale blowing within him. He was bent on concealing this violent storm that kept ferociously raging at the depth of his being from everyone around. The tremendous love for danger that was perceived on the exterior – the whole hearted involvement in war, the great fascination for bull fighting, the long fishing expeditions in the midst of different kinds of dangers – were a mere reflection of the restlessness that was seething within him. Much of Hemingway lay concealed and murky. People around him saw only the mask of courage and strength that he wore. But it was behind that mask that Hemingway hid his fears and misgivings. In spite of all his courage in the face of the world, he was cringing with fear within himself. It is his biographer, Kenneth. S. Lynn who states that there was one point in his life when Hemingway could not sleep without the lights on.

### **Physical Debacles**

As a consequence of constant involvement in adventurous expeditions and dangerous sports, for a long time Hemingway retained a record of the number of blows a man could take

and still survive. Although he was not allowed to join the army for physical reasons, determined to enter the war, he managed to reach the scene of the battle as an ambulance driver, only to be hit by shrapnel. He was hospitalized and had to be in bed for a long time. Hemingway suffered a number of other injuries too. Philip Young lists them out clearly for us: "His skull was fractured at least once; he sustained at least a dozen brain concussions several of them serious ones; he was in two airplane accidents in the space of two days, during which time he suffered severe internal injuries, "jammed" his spine, received a blow so violent that his eyesight was impaired for some time.... In warfare alone he was shot through nine parts of the body and sustained six head wounds. When he was blown up in Italy at the age of eighteen, and was left, for a time for dead the doctors removed all of the 227 steel fragments which had penetrated him." (29, 30). On one of those occasions, when Hemingway was gravely wounded a few newspapers printed obituaries for him. Hemingway was said to have read those obituaries with immense pleasure after he recovered. Hemingway was also known to have suffered from high blood pressure and skin cancer. Someone once stated that he was so used to living with pain that he felt odd without it.

### **Emotional Cataclysms**

For Hemingway, emotional trauma started very early in life. He had to brace himself to face mental pressures, emotional upheavals, agony and conflicts from early childhood. Born to parents who were temperamentally very different, the boy Hemingway was torn between their whims and interests. His father was a medical doctor with an inherent fascination for adventure and hunting. His mother, on the other hand, was an individual who held strong religious convictions and had a profound interest in music. These two individuals with highly differing temperaments, sought to thrust their personal whims and interests on the young boy, offering him no opportunity to be an individual with interests of his own. The mother chose to dress him like a girl to satiate her own fancies and the father lost no opportunity to expose him to out-door life and adventure by taking him on fishing expeditions and hunting trips. This resulted in the child experiencing a suffocation that he was hardly able to understand or explain. As an adult, he thoroughly loathed childhood pictures of himself dressed as a girl and made sure that they were all well hidden away. These childhood experiences caused his self-confidence to dwindle and cracked up his sense of security. While he detested his mother's dominant and superior nature on

the one side, he equally loathed the subservient nature of his father. As a young boy, his days were so frequently plagued by the little conflicts and troubles that kept popping up in the Hemingway household that he preferred to stay away from home as much as possible.

The people of Oak Park, Illinois, among whom Hemingway was brought up, were known for their complacency and pride that caused them to shut out the sufferings of all those around. The author could not brook the fact that the people of Oak Park could be so insensitive and punitive. The various instances on which he accompanied his father to visit patients gave him an indelible exposure to intense pain and sometimes even to death. Later, he entered World War I as an ambulance driver and witnessed the romantic castle of war that he had built over the years come crumbling down. The horrors of war and the awful holocaust that ensued left Hemingway emotionally seared.

### **Spiritual Callousness**

As mentioned already, Hemingway's mother was deeply religious and was determined to bring up her children in tune with God. She therefore sought to teach them spiritual truths right from an early age. Although Hemingway used to kneel and say his prayers at his mother's lap when he was a boy, he chose to walk away from God when he turned eighteen. He was never spiritually inclined and no amount of persuasion from his mother could move him after that. The Name of Jesus Christ, became a swear word in Hemingway's mouth. For instance, while expressing his intense anguish to Fitzgerald in a letter, he brought in the name of Christ several times: "Christ's nose", "for Christ's sake", and "seem to be in mood of Christ like bitterness this A.M. (Lynn, 312). With no place for God in his life, Hemingway was overcome by the philosophy of existentialism, which led to the formulation of his Nada Principle. On serious consideration, Hemingway perhaps, would never have sought suicide as a means of escape, if he had only allowed himself to experience the comfort and support of Providence in his life.

Contrarily, the only source of comfort, Hemingway ever experienced in his life was his creative art. He chose his novels to be his mode of expression, wherein he gave vent to all his pent up anger and bitterness. Whenever things got out of hand, Hemingway resorted to writing as his cathartic cure. It therefore became established that art was Hemingway's opium in times of trouble. But when he found that this brace was also buckling and wasn't actually good enough to hold him up through all experiences in life, he was overcome by despair and hopelessness. The

restless fear and nervousness that had always lain hidden within him, finally surfaced. Depression took over and Hemingway saw nothing else but days and days of endless mental and spiritual gloom and helplessness. His psychiatrist did all he could to help, but failed. Unable to cope with things anymore, Hemingway committed suicide.

Hemingway's heroes were imitations of the author himself. Through his central characters he chose to reveal himself to the world. Thus, the battles of different kinds that he had faced in life and the three dimensional hurt that he had experienced were depicted in the lives of his heroes. Thus, they prove to be "Protagonists with a Difference."

## Works Cited

- Hamid, Syed Ali. *The Short Fiction of Ernest Hemingway: A Study in Major Themes*. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1985. Print.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Penguin Books, 1960. Print.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *Death in the Afternoon*. New York: Penguin Books, 1966. Print.
- Kazin, Alfred. *Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973. Print.
- Lynn, Kenneth S. *Hemingway*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987. Print.
- Oliver, Egberts, ed. *American Literature: 1890 – 1965. An Anthology*. New Delhi: Eurasia Publishing House, 1970. Print.
- Sanderson, Stewart. *Hemingway*. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1970. Print.
- Young, Philip. *Ernest Hemingway*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965. Print.