

Education and Growth in Five Hemingway Works

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One of the often repeated themes of Ernest Hemingway's work is the transition from ignorance and naiveté to knowledge and understanding. Hemingway places each of the main characters and many of the subordinate characters of his stories in challenging situations. They are brought face to face with some problem or weakness in their lives and forced to deal with it. This often results in some kind of growth or change. In the short stories contained in the collection *In Our Time* and in the novels *The Sun Also Rises*, *Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *The Old Man and the Sea* we witness the main characters as they confront their own particular demons and experience their own epiphanies.

Hemingway places each of his characters somewhere on a continuum that begins with innocence, ignorance, dissatisfaction, incompleteness, or lack of awareness and finishes with a challenge to make use of new revelations, insight, wisdom, or truth. Between the beginning and end of this cycle are the different stages that make up a rite of passage particular to the needs of each character. Sometimes we are allowed to witness the complete process, as with Frederick Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, but sometimes only a portion of it, as in the Nick Adams short stories of *In Our Time*. Occasionally—as with Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—it is completed successfully and a new trial begins. Occasionally—as with Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*—it is not and the same lesson has to be repeated.

For all of the differences, each characterization follows a similar pattern. There is an introduction first to the character and then to the problem. This is followed by a catalyst that launches the character into action. This, in turn, is followed by testing, revelation, and finally, application. After it is all over there is the beginning of a new—or sometimes the repetition of an old—lesson.

As each protagonist is introduced we are given some sense of their situation and their

state of mind. Sometimes there are no overt indications of any problems while at other times it is obvious—though not always to the character—that something is wrong. For some, like Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, the problem is a vague sense of dissatisfaction. For others, like Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the problem is literally a matter of life or death.

The young Nick Adams of the short story “Indian Camp” —from *In Our Time*—is green, innocent, naive, and lacking life experience at the beginning of the narrative. When Nick goes to the camp he assists his father, a doctor, with a difficult delivery. As his father tries to explain that the woman is having a baby, Nick thinks he understands and says, “I know”. His father’s response, “You don’t know”, and Nick’s reaction to the woman’s screams indicates that he really didn’t understand as much as he thought (16). Later, in “The Battler”, we see how his naive gullibility allows him to fall for an old, childish trick that gets him tossed off of a train (53).

The characters of *The Sun Also Rises*, on the other hand, are world weary, unfocused, without strong conviction, and aimless as the story begins. Jake Barnes is frustrated, dissatisfied, and in pain. A war injury to his groin causes him to feel incomplete. The only passion in his life is Brett, but that relationship only brings frustration (25). Hemingway describes Robert Cohn, another of the main characters, as he was before the narrative gets started. He was “an Innocent” with a poor self image and so little experience in life that he settled for the first woman that was nice to him (3, 4). At the point where the story begins, though, he is dissatisfied with his life. He is bored and anxious to be somewhere else, with someone else (8).

Frederick Henry is an idealistic, yet unfocused young American who, as *A Farewell to Arms* begins, is serving with the Italian army during World War I. His lack of focus is illustrated by what he chooses to do and what he chooses not to do while on leave. He fails to visit the priest’s small hometown and family, even though that was his intention, and instead hits the “sin centers” of some bigger cities. His early inexperience is revealed in rather cryptic comments comparing himself, in retrospect, with the priest at his first posting. “He had always known what I did not know and that when I learned it, I was always able to forget. But I did not know that then, although I learned it later” (14).

The protagonist of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan, is also an American fighting in a foreign war, this time with Spanish guerrillas during their civil war. We quickly see him as a businesslike, careful, committed man of action with a strong sense

of duty. While he has not perfectly experienced life at this point in his journey, we understand him to be an astute judge of character. His love interest, the young Spanish woman named Maria, has suffered traumatically at the hands of the fascist enemy and has been living in a shell for self-protection.

Santiago, the old man of *The Old Man and the Sea*, is experiencing a run of the “worst form of unlucky”, *salao*, and has not caught any fish for eighty five days when we first encounter him. His situation is desperate. He is old, poor, hungry and alone. The way he faces his difficulties, however, shows that he has a strong character and a lot of determination.

After introducing the characters a catalyst is brought into play, catapulting them into action and beginning the process. Sometimes the action is sparked by an internal decision and initiated by the protagonist. At other times it is started by external forces or circumstances which then propel the character—sometimes in spite of him/herself—into action.

Though Hemingway uses the same Nick Adams character more than once, each of the short stories of *In Our Time* is independent of the others. Each story shows him at different points in his life and in different circumstances so each story utilizes a different catalyst to initiate the learning process. In “Indian Camp” it is the witnessing of both birth and death. At the beginning of “The Three Day Blow”—having recently broken up with his girlfriend, Marge—he is already past this point of the cycle. We don’t clearly understand what motivates him to break up with her, but something causes him to do so. “The Battler” also begins past the point of initial action. Nick is already on the road for some, unstated reason. His ejection from the train is—as is his encounter with Ad Francis and Bugs—merely part of a series of encounters and experiences guiding him to a greater truth that he will grasp at some point after this story ends.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake’s war injury isn’t what instigates his active introspection. Instead, frustration over his inability to satisfy both his desire for Brett and her desire for him is the real impetus. He is constantly in turmoil about how to deal with this frustration, sometimes to the point of tears (31, 34).

Though dissatisfaction and frustration also play a part in Robert Cohn’s decision to make changes in his life, his trip to New York is the event initiating the action. People in New York were nice to him. He realizes that they see him differently than the people he had been with before (7). This causes him to reevaluate the image he has of himself.

He senses that something is wrong in his life and wants to change it. He seems to be an eager student, yet he can't seem to realize that the problem is not where he is nor who he is with, but that it is something inside of himself. He wants to break up with his fiancée, Frances, and go to South America. Jake tries to tell him that he will still be the same person, but Robert will not listen to him (11).

Frederick Henry is injured during an attack by the Austrian army and sent away to recover at a hospital far from the fighting. Unlike Nick Adams in "The Three Day Blow" and Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises* who end relationships, Frederick Henry begins one when he falls in love with nurse Catherine Barkley during his recovery. These events in *A Farewell to Arms* are what trigger the transformation process for him. Initially he is removed and detached from both events and people, but—even though he doesn't want to or plan to—he falls in love with Catherine Barkley. Their relationship colors the way he perceives things after that.

Like Frederick Henry, Robert Jordan (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*) has not been in love before. As a young man who is very "religious" about his politics (66), he has not been open to anything or to anyone touching him deeply. Perhaps this is because of the shame he feels about his father's suicide (66, 340) or a resulting fear of trusting anyone else enough to let them get close. His commitment to anti-fascism has been a way to avoid intimacy and dealing with his feelings. Maria, a young woman at the guerilla camp, has also shut down emotionally due to her torture, rape, and imprisonment by the fascists. Something comes alive inside of them, however, when they first encounter each other (67). There is a chemistry between them that causes them both to open up to love and to life in the present.

Santiago, of *The Old Man and the Sea*, is alone and hungry. This is what sends him out to sea at his advanced age. Though he has faith in his abilities, his morale is low and it is a struggle to maintain his confidence. The thing that launches the old man into a battle—not only for his physical life, but for his spiritual life as well—is external. By hooking the giant fish when he is out alone, he is forced to come face to face with himself and take stock of his abilities and limitations.

After the catalyst is introduced each of the characters begins a rite of passage that—after a significant personal test or series of tests—leads them to the revelation of a truth that they need in order to live a full life. The protagonist in each of these five books share a common denominator: whatever struggle they must face—be it an enemy army,

inner-conflict, pain, death, or loss of love—in the end they must stand alone. All of them must take their chances and endure their rite of passage. Each must learn how to face life's problems and learn how to live their life fully and independently.

The Nick Adams character goes through different trials at different points of his life. As the young Nick of "Indian Camp" he must endure the woman's screams as she goes through her delivery. This is a hard thing for him to do as evidenced by his not looking at the contents of the basin he holds for his father, by not watching as his father sutures up the new mother after the surgery, and by his asking, "Oh, Daddy, can't you give her something to make her stop screaming?" (16, 17). After the delivery, he also witnesses the slit throat of the new baby's father even though his own father tries to shield him from it. Later, in "The Three Day Blow" he goes through the struggles and doubts that can come with the breaking up of a relationship. He seems to be in the middle of a three part transition. He begins with the intense emotional involvement of an inexperienced young lover. Even though he has no clear understanding of why, he then develops a sense of dissatisfaction with the relationship and so he breaks it off. The story then seems to point him in the direction where healing is about to take place, however it is only implied and the story concludes before this takes place.

Like Nick Adams and his relationship with Marge ("Three Day Blow"), Jake Barnes also experiences frustration in his relationship with the beautiful Brett Ashley. His frustration, however, is more concrete. He knows why he is dissatisfied. It is tangible and physical as well as emotional, yet throughout *The Sun Also Rises* he deals with the situation poorly. He tries to avoid facing up to his demons, symbolized by his inability to function sexually, by treating life in a cavalier fashion and by drinking too much. His demons come to him in the dark, however, and his thoughts torment him (31, 34, 148, 149). He watches as the love of his life flirts with, goes out with, and has affairs with other men, even as she is engaged to marry someone else. Though it tears him up inside, he continues to follow the same pattern and spends time with Brett. This fans the fires of a love that they both have decided is not a possibility for them.

Robert Cohn, on the other hand, seems at first to be taking control of his life and preparing to live it on his own terms. He leaves Frances, whom he doesn't really love, and appears ready to stop the recurring pattern of measuring his self worth based on others' acceptance of him (46-48). But then he has an affair with Brett, becoming infatuated and obsessed with her. He follows her across Europe and makes a pest of himself (142). He

acts like a thirteen year old boy unable to see the truth of things as they really are and unable to let her go when she rejects his attentions. He shamelessly vies for her affections and alienates everyone around him (178). Instead of breaking the pattern and becoming a whole person on his own, he wraps himself up in Brett's acceptance or rejection of him.

In *A Farewell To Arms* Frederick Henry goes through a series of difficult times that each bring him to a new level of understanding about the world, life, or himself. He is forced to confront the possibility of waiting too long for incompetent doctors to perform a needed operation to mend his leg. In order to receive proper treatment, he must take control of the situation himself and find another doctor willing to and capable of performing the necessary procedure (95-100). Later, when he is back on active duty he finds himself in charge of men and material during a military retreat hopelessly mis-managed and poorly planned by the officers in charge. He successfully makes it to the safety of the Italian army lines, though not without difficulty or casualties. As an officer, he is immediately pulled from the line of refugees and soldiers to be tried on the spot as a deserter and summarily executed. Thinking quickly, he dives into the rain-swollen river to escape (222-225). This begins another ordeal as he tries to stay alive, escape capture, and reach Katherine who is carrying his child (225-133). When he finally finds Katherine in Stresa where she has gone with a friend, they must almost immediately embark on another dangerous and difficult journey to escape his arrest as a deserter. They escape Italy by rowing a small boat thirty-five kilometers—at night, in a storm, and past Italian boarder guards—to Switzerland (269-277). Once there, they spend the winter at a chalet in Montreux where they have a temporary respite from their troubles and where Katherine's pregnancy progresses. As the time nears for the baby's delivery, they move to Lausanne to be nearer a good hospital, but it does no good in the end (308). Because of complications, Frederick is forced to endure another trial, unable to do anything, while Katherine wages an unsuccessful battle both to deliver her baby and to stay alive (312-332).

Robert Jordan, the under-cover operative in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, also goes through a series of war-related difficulties as he learns about himself and life. He is confronted with a number of strategic and moral decisions that will effect many lives and possibly the outcome of the war. He is uncertain of the guerrilla leader, Pablo's, dependability. They have several confrontations where Robert must decide whether it would be better to kill Pablo for the good of the operation or to leave him alone (55-56, 211-214).

They have several close encounters with enemy troops, including one that forces Jordan to make the difficult decision not to go to the aid of another, friendly band of guerrillas under attack by that enemy (294). However, the biggest challenge to his equilibrium comes when he meets and falls in love with Maria, the girl the guerrillas have rescued from the fascists (67, 91).

Almost the entire book of *The Old Man and the Sea* is an account of the emotional, spiritual, and physical trial of Santiago, the old fisherman. Even before he hooks the big fish the question of his physical strength is voiced by his young friend, Manalo, "But are you strong enough now for a truly big fish?" (14). Santiago seems to have some premonition about his upcoming ordeal with the great fish because he says—again, before he hooks it—that even though he may not be as strong as he thinks, "I have many tricks and I have resolution" (23). After hooking the marlin and struggling with it for a while, we catch a glimpse of the old man's emotional struggle as he wonders to himself if the fish is as desperate as he is (49). The spiritual aspect of the old man's test is not as obvious, nor as fully developed as the mental and physical aspects. Though Hemingway skirts over the issue lightly when Santiago, not ordinarily a religious man, is driven to prayer (64, 65), there seems to be a spiritual undertone to the story. The physical side of the ordeal is much more clearly illustrated by his hunger, his fatigue, his cramping hands, and the minor injuries he receives during the struggle (55-60). Although he finally comes out the victor in his battle with the marlin, his ordeal doesn't end there. During the long trip back to port he must fight off numerous shark attacks, not giving up until the last shark leaves (118, 119). He is not—on the surface anyway—successful and arrives home with nothing but the skeleton of the great fish tied to the side of his tiny boat (121).

In the end, each of Hemingway's characters must make a choice. If they embrace the truth—often a difficult one—they become an active participant in their own fate and live fully. If they don't, they become passive participants and—rather than experiencing a rich life—end up merely existing.

In each of the short stories of *In Our Time* Nick Adams is shown at different places on "Hemingway's continuum" and each story's lesson is never quite clear. Even so, the stories—except for "Big Two-Hearted River"—leave us with the impression that Nick, in time, will understand. In that story we are introduced to Nick at a point where he seems to have already come to an understanding of some implied, but not specified, truth. He seems to have already put whatever ordeal he went through behind him (139) and is trying

to assimilate and put into practice what he learned in an almost ritualist fashion⁺.

In contrast, Hemingway states one of the lessons in *The Sun Also Rises* quite clearly through Count Mippipopolous. By “knowing the values” and “living very much” you will be able to enjoy everything (60). Jake and Robert have little success learning their respective lessons, repeating the same patterns over and over. When Jake and Brett meet early on it is clearly not the first time they have confronted their frustrations (26). Though they agree not to be together, they repeatedly find themselves together. They meet for dinner (33), when she returns from San Sebastián the first time (69), and again several times in Spain (Books, II, III). Jake won’t let go of Brett and learn to “live very much” without her. Robert also fails to learn the value of becoming his own person. Though no longer willing to settle for a relationship with just any woman who is nice to him, he still doesn’t see his self worth as being independent from the acceptance of others, in this case Brett Ashley. Not willing to let her go when she clearly is not interested, he follows her around Spain, makes a nuisance of himself, alienates everyone he is with, and goes so far as to come to blows with Jake and the bullfighter, Pedro Romero (142, 206). In the end he runs back to Paris, embarrassed, possibly to try and patch things up with Frances and fall back into his same old lifestyle (222).

The main lesson that Frederick Henry learns through his experiences is that he must primarily depend on himself. While in the hospital he is poorly treated by the attending physicians and will suffer at their hands if he doesn’t insist upon a second opinion (95-100). His superiors bungle the evacuation, and he must rely on his own resources if he and his men are to survive (188-221). When he is pulled from the line of retreating soldiers and refugees to be tried as a deserter he must depend on his own instincts and quick action or be shot (225). Though he has the assistance of the bartender in Stresa, it is Frederick who must do the work and take the risks to reach Switzerland in the row boat (269-277). As these events transpire he begins to understand that he must stand alone. In fact, he doesn’t wait for the governments to end the war, but acts independently to make his own, separate peace that allows him to quit with a clear conscience (241). All of these events prepare him for his most difficult trial, Katherine’s death, which he must face alone (313-332).

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls* Robert Jordan’s encounter with Maria knocks him out

⁺Malcom Cowley (ed), *The Viking Portable Hemingway* (New York: Viking Press, 1994), pp. xviii-xix.

of his bigoted and hidebound political thinking. He comes to realize that there is no guarantee of tomorrow, there is only now. He must live as fully as possible in the present and be thankful for it (164-166). He realizes that he not only can, but must try to have as full a life in seventy hours as in seventy years. Deciding that if now is all there is, he must live hard and love hard to make up in intensity what he will lack in longevity (168, 169). That is exactly what he does over the next four days with both Maria and his “true family” (246, 379). He acts on this truth, living as intensely as possible even as he dies. Though he suffers great pain from a broken leg, sees that all is lost, and is tempted to end it all like his father did, he continues to hang on and live as fully as possible under the circumstances. He doesn’t give up while he knows there is still something he can do (470).

Santiago has learned two things at some point in his life. One is that he must accept things as they are, take them as they come, and do what he can. The other is that even though he can be destroyed, man is not made for defeat (103). He applies these philosophies throughout *The Old Man and the Sea*. He believes that luck is good, but he “would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready” (32). Though he wishes Manalo were with him to help and provide company as he battles the marlin, he accepts that he is alone and does what he must. He works the lines (52), eats (56), challenges his hand to “go ahead and cramp, turn to claw, it will do out no good” (58), and keeps on fighting the fish through to the end (97). He accepts that the sharks will attack during the return voyage and advises himself to just “take it as it comes” (103) while preparing to do battle as best he can. When sharks damage the fish, he accepts it, continues his journey home, and adjusts his thinking by addressing it as “half fish” (114). In the end, after the sharks have devoured the marlin, he refuses to acknowledge that he was beaten, only that he went out too far (120).

Hemingway wants his characters to grow, learn, and mature, so he has them struggle with a set of challenges. These challenges provide the framework which allows the growth process to take place. He begins with the introduction of the character(s) and the problem/challenge facing them. Then he provides a catalyst that sends them on a journey entailing a rite of passage or test. Finally there is a revelation of some truth and an opportunity for its application. The five books cited here illustrate how he uses this pattern to bring his characters, in the majority of cases, from naivety and innocence to knowledge and wisdom.

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