

On Hemingway's Literary Characters

Sur les personnages littéraires de Hemingway

Despre personajele literare ale lui Hemingway

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Abstract

The present paper is a brief outline of Hemingway's characters and the way in which they correspond to the author himself. It is known for a fact that Hemingway evinced a tendency to imitate his characters when they were coming to grips with diverse situations. Thus I have tried to briefly pinpoint the fading boundaries between reality and imagination in his work. By doing so, I have focused on both male and female characters, underlining the major dissimilarities between these two categories, as well as their main features.

Resume

Le présent document est un bref aperçu des personnages de Hemingway et de la façon dont elles correspondent à l'auteur lui-même. On sait pertinemment que Hemingway a manifesté une tendance à imiter ses personnages quand il venait aux prises avec des situations similaires à celles présentées dans ses romans. Donc, j'ai essayé de préciser brièvement les limites, quelquesfois très fines, entre réalité et imagination dans le travail de Hemingway. Ce faisant, je me suis concentrée tant sur les personnages féminines que sur les personnages masculins, soulignant les différences principales entre ces deux catégories, ainsi que leurs caractéristiques principales.

Rezumat

Această lucrare este o scurtă privire asupra personajelor literare ale lui Hemingway și asupra felului în care acestea corespund autorului însuși. Este cunoscut faptul că Hemingway a avut tendința de a-și imita personajele atunci când acesta se confruntau cu diverse situații similare celor prezentate în romanele sale. Astfel am încercat să subliniez succint granițele, uneori foarte fine, între real și imaginar în opera lui Hemingway. Totodată m-am concentrat atât asupra personajelor feminine, cât și asupra celor masculine, subliniind calitățile lor majore dar și diferențele dintre acestea.

Key words: *characters, reality, imagination, shifting boundaries*

Cuvinte cheie: *personaje, real, imaginar, granițe interschimbabile*

Des mots clés: *des personnages, le réel, l'imaginaire, déplacement des frontières*

Introduction

The present paper is in more ways than one a “sentimental journey” into the wide world of Hemingway's literary characters. This journey was prompted by a quest for values involving both male and female characters of outstanding emotional makeup, uncommon perceptivity, and

undaunted power to live testifying to Hemingway's accomplishment as an "enduring" writer. It stands to reason that Hemingway the writer (i.e. the creator) spoke frequently through his characters (in the normal run of literary creativity). It is also true that many of Hemingway's characters epitomize a good deal of their creators' life- and world-awareness. What adds complexity to the "Hemingway case" however is the particular interaction existing between Hemingway's whereabouts and his characters' fictional world. Arguably (but quite often, obviously) readers of literature seem to be always eager to find out "the whole truth" ("the way it was") that triggered the writing of a work of fiction. Indeed they seem to evince a rock-firm belief that the real world can be fully identified with the literary one. To make things even more intricate, Hemingway himself evinced, all through his adult life, a strange tendency to "imitate" his characters when they were grappling with challenges similar to his own.

Such being the case in order to single out the defining features of Hemingway's characters I focused my attention on the shifting boundaries separating reality and imagination. Time passes away entailing endless evaluations and re-evaluations of everything under the sun. Hemingway's work (like art in general) is no exception to that, although definitely nowadays Hemingway is looked upon from angles that differ enormously from the approaches to his life and work when the writer was still alive. Much has been said about Hemingway that will or will not stand the test of time and this is so, perhaps because the basic qualities of his literary work are still there and still inviting the reader to the complex process of research (i.e. re-search), search again with the purpose of finding new meanings and a new sense or perhaps a new significance. Needless to say such topics as "the importance of dialog in Hemingway's literary work", "the language idiosyncrasies that characterize the author", the "suppressed" plot accounts that we witness in most of his works and many other features have been preserved almost intact in spite of the fact that the literary standards have changed and many of Hemingway's contemporary fellows have been cut down to size, fitting under the compendious umbrella of the disparaged reference term: "ALSO RAN".

Be it as it may, those familiar with Hemingway's work will not fail to realize that his characters still represent not only an inviting critical journey but also an element that can spark off further analyses followed by additional discoveries. Time has winnowed many critical views of Hemingway's life and work. Some evaluations still hang in there, ready to be considered the proper "food for thought". Many exegetes and critics tried to debunk Hemingway of his merits by showing that his male characters were nothing but machos, tough men, which could be easily described by referring to the famous statement of old fisherman Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*: "a man can be destroyed but not defeated". Thus the male characters are to a very large extent Hemingway himself, the skeptical writer living in a skepticism-inspiring world who often vanish in violent clashes with adversities.

If male characters seem to have a code of honor which testifies to the writer's credo, the female characters made some exegetes believe that they are sometimes hard to look upon with sympathy, understanding or admiration. If such male characters as Jake Barnes (*The Sun also Rises*), Frederic Henry (*A Farewell to Arms*), Henry Morgan (*To Have or Have Not*), Brother Jordan (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*) will make us react by showing unbounded respect, the women-characters (Brett Ashley, *The Sun Also Rises*; Catherine Barkley, *A Farewell to Arms*, etc) are looked upon by some exegetes as being considerably inferior to men. Indeed, apart from the physical attraction that they spark off in men, they lack emotional or mental complexity or anyway, they are looked upon as being less fit to grapple with the inconsistencies of a world dominated by males.

But these opinions and the host of others one comes across when reading Hemingway, seem to be rather shallow representing an obvious rush for judgment. And maybe right here we sensed the existence of far-reaching and broad ranging potential, requiring new investigations meant to shed new light on old matters that seemingly have lost any dimension for re-evaluating old literary values.

But what is it that makes it so hard for us to pin down convincingly and realistically the main features of Hemingway's characters? Is it the reality (staggeringly rich) of his life which

Hemingway made ample use of in his literary work? Is it mere fictionalization of what he had seen and experienced or is it something which we often overlook when prodded by a hard to control impulse to describe everything as it really was? What can this be? The more we read or re-read Hemingway, the better we realize that imagination as a creative force coupled to his incessant endeavor to look, act, react or judge like the characters that he gave life to, unleashed considerable creativity and originality. We hope that this paper will fully testify to this assumption.

Beyond the shadow of any doubt Hemingway himself purported the assumption that he wrote mostly about true happenings, real people and actual events. But was it really so? A close analysis of Hemingway's major novels will entail the realization that quite often his fiction reflects reality far better than the so called "accurate accounts of facts", while "true presentations" have a weaker impact on readers. Why is that so?

When in 1580 Philip Sidney defended the poets (and all the nonconformist thinkers) against the Puritans' labeling them "liars", he strongly advocated the idea that a creator must imagine things that do not exist. Quite a number of years later the pre-romantic William Blake voiced his belief that all through history what became undeniable truth had once existed only in the imagination. And in 1794 S.T. Coleridge pinpointed to the difference between "passive fancy" and "active imagination". Nowadays very few will dismiss the evidence that imagination is the top-ranking human gift. This digression is also valid when tackling Hemingway's life and work. For, in my opinion, some of Hemingway's characters that come closest to being the author's alter egos turn out to be an undeniable proof of the writer's imaginativeness. Let us refer for example to the following fragment from a "Farewell to Arms":

I wished she were here now. I wished I were in Milan with her. I would like to eat at Cova and then walk down the Via Manzoni in the hot evening and cross over and turn off along the canal and go to the hotel with Catherine Barkley. Maybe she would. Maybe she would pretend that I was her boy that was killed and we would go in the front door and the porter would take off his cap and I would stop at the concierge's desk and ask for the key and she would stand by the elevator and then she would get in the elevator and it would go up very slowly clicking at all the floors and then our floor and the boy would open the door and stand there and she would step out and I would step out and we would walk down the hall and I would put the key in the door and open it and go in and then take down the telephone and ask them to send a bottle of Capri Bianca in a silver bucket full of ice and you would hear the ice against the pail coming down the corridor and the boy would knock and I would say leave it outside the door please. Because we would not wear any clothes because it was so hot and the window open and the swallows flying over the roofs of the houses and when it was dark afterward and you went to the window very small bats hunting over the houses and close down over the trees and we would drink the Capri and the door locked and it was hot and only a sheet and the whole night and we would both love each other all night in the hot night in Milan." [1]

Still, real life experience plays a huge role in Hemingway's literary output, *A Farewell to Arms*, the story of a hopeless romance during World War I, being probably "one of American literature's most enduring classics". [2] It is known for a fact that the novel is, at least partly, based on the author's relationship to Agnes von Kurowsky, a nurse whom he had met after being wounded on the Italian front, as he was working as a volunteer for the Red Cross. Von Kurowsky being seven years his senior, rejected Hemingway's marriage proposal through a letter in which she called him a "kid", explaining that her feelings towards him were rather those of a mother for a child than of a sweetheart. He was devastated after her denial and this relationship had a deep impact upon his emotional life, fact which has fascinated scholars for a great deal of time. The elements of this love story remain vague, although the movie "In Love and War", directed by Richard Attenborough, inspired from von Kurowsky's World War I diary and letters, uncovers astonishing manuscripts. It seems that Dimitri Villard's father became friends with Hemingway and von Kurowsky while he was serving for the Red Cross, nonetheless he was unaware of their attachment. Hemingway's biographer contacted Villard soon after the author's suicide and gave him von Kurowsky's address. In next to no time he was to find out about her extremely passionate

letters to Hemingway, which made it “hard to believe there wasn’t a relationship between the two”, said Villard. Hemingway’s relation to von Kurowsky is all the more so interesting as her letters to him are surprisingly contradictory to the entries in her diary; while in the former she wrote loving words expressing her being fond of him, in the latter she expressed pity towards him, as he was in love with her and she was not.

Whatever it is that happened between the two, it had a deep impact upon Hemingway’s future relationships with women, as well as the portrayal of females in his fictional world, as Diliberto underlines in her essay entitled *A Hemingway Story, and Just as Fictional*, published in the New York Times. Another important question is whether Hemingway would have been the same writer if it weren’t for the frustration, anger, humiliation that he had to deal with after his being rejected. It is more than clear that the author transformed his personal experience into a source of inspiration. “*A Farewell to Arms*”, the love story of Catherine Barkley, a beautiful nurse, and Frederic Henry, a lieutenant in the Italian Army, stands testimony to this. But then again, Hemingway also uses his literary creativity to alter reality, to beautify it; if von Kurowsky’s diary exposes her as a harsh, insensitive woman, Catherine Barkley is portrayed as a loving, romantic and sensitive person, trying to escape an unhappy past through love. Be that as it may, the gloomy experience of being rejected seems to have triggered Hemingway’s interest in writing about lost loves, impossible or torn apart relationships in many of his novels. When it comes to his characters, the boundaries between reality and fiction are fairly thin, the author himself admitting in an interview edited by George Plimpton in *Modern Critical Views: Ernest Hemingway*, that some characters are the product of his imagination, others drawn from real life and most of them a mere invention from general knowledge of people:

Interviewer: We've not discussed character. Are the characters of your work taken without exception from real life?

Hemingway: Of course they are not. Some come from real life. Mostly you invent people from a knowledge and understanding and experience of people.

Interviewer: Could you say something about the process of turning a real-life character into a fictional one?

Hemingway: If I explained how that is sometimes done, it would be a handbook for libel lawyers. [3]

Coming back to the subject of male and female characters in Hemingway’s novels, the writer is the epitome of expanding masculinity in his work of fiction, rather than focusing on the female dimension. Some critics, like Leslie Fielder, state that women basically do not exist in his books; due to the fact that they are almost always undermined by the male figures, shaped by them, defined by their relationship to men. It seems that the women in Hemingway’s books are but mere reflections of male fantasies or dreads. An exception to this rule appears to be Catherine Barkley, who ever since the publication of *A Farewell to Arms* has been regarded as a most intricate female figure, who managed to alter Frederic Henry’s views upon the war and upon life, through her nurturing, even though he fails to understand this in the beginning and simply defines her as a “beautiful and willing lover, who makes few demands of him”, as Suzanne del Gizzo states in her essay entitled *Catherine Barkley: Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms*. Roger Whitlow identifies one of the main challenges when it comes to the critical approach of Hemingway’s female characters, namely that women are more often than once presented through the spectrum of men. Thus, critics suggest using a words-on-the-page-only analysis, that is, focusing solely on the female characters’ actions, deeds and perspectives presented in the book.

If by the mid 19th century many women were considered hysterical and hysteria in its turn, a female sexual dysfunction, as Freud put it, in Hemingway’s novels women are depicted as being a response to some sexual fantasies of men; for example, Frederic sees Catherine Barkley as a sexual capture only, at least in the beginning. But further reading will prove quite the opposite, namely that Catherine herself is exploiting Frederic by using him as a replacement for her dead fiancé, thus trying to overcome her inner crumbling. The following line from *A Farewell to Arms* indicates her

most intricate behavior towards Frederic: “Say, ‘I’ve come back to Catherine in the night’ “ (30). It seems as though Catherine is a ground breaking character of Hemingway’s, one who inter-changes the relationship between male and female and thus helps to redefine the situation and (self)assessment of Hemingway’s male characters. Yet another aspect that sets Catherine apart from the usual one-sided, blank female characters in Hemingway’s novel is the symbols surrounding and defining her. Catherine Barkley is a nurse of Scottish background who serves in the Italian army, which suggests her caring nature, her sensitivity, as well as her strength and willingness. In her essay on Catherine Barkley, Suzanne del Gizzo observes that the female protagonist’s hair is the most powerful symbol defining her: it does not only stand for her sexuality and femininity, del Gizzo sais, but the desire to cut it off represents a longing to break with conventions, with the indicators of traditional femininity; and this is a most powerful feature, which sets her apart from all other female characters created by Hemingway. The most powerful image of Catherine going against conventions is when she refuses to marry Frederic because of her pregnancy. She refuses to be categorized as yet another woman submitting to preset order. It is probably her experience as a nurse during war that made her re-define the terms “romance”, “conventions”, “life” and that transformed her into a much more mature person than Frederic. Her role in their relationship seems to be more powerful, as she is the one who helps him achieve his “separate peace” (243).

Conclusion

All these interpretations depend on the diverse readings of the novel, whether one perceives the characters from the male or from the female point of view, from a traditional or a less conventional angle. Be that as it may, there is ample evidence that Hemingway’s characters as well as the literary world they inhabit are highly reflective not only of the writer’s knack for telling “a good-real story”[4], but also of his broad ranging skill and far-reaching experience. Other than that we are left with Hemingway’s lifelong creed that there is always endless imagination which can give sense to our apparently senseless existence.

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