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Hemingway's Iceberg Theory: A Secret to Powerful Storytelling

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Abstract

The prose style of Ernest Hemingway commands enduring respect in modern literature for its distinctive simplicity and depth. His writing is often characterized as colloquial, precise, crisp, and remarkably economical. Beneath this apparent simplicity lies a profound narrative strategy commonly known as the Iceberg Theory. According to this principle, only a small portion of meaning is explicitly stated in the text. At the same time, the larger and more significant part remains implicit, operating beneath the surface like the submerged mass of an iceberg. Hemingway suggested that an internal reservoir of experience, emotion, and memory shapes a writer's creative process. Dreams, desires, fears, and accumulated knowledge form a hidden emotional reserve that influences the writer's perception of reality and guides the selection of narrative details. While the visible narrative represents the writer's immediate observations, the deeper layers of meaning remain deliberately unstated. The effectiveness of this technique depends not only on the writer but also on the reader. Readers are invited to infer the submerged meanings through their own emotional and intellectual engagement with the text. Their personal experiences and interpretive abilities help them sense the unspoken dimensions of the narrative. For this reason, Hemingway believed that excessive authorial explanation weakens literary impact. Meaning should emerge through suggestion rather than explicit exposition, allowing the reader to participate actively in the construction of the narrative vision.

Keywords: Iceberg Theory; Observation; Stimuli; Reader Response; Fictional Vision.

1. Introduction

Hemingway practiced the art of personal statement. We find a great deal of personal element in his essays. The personal force of the narrator in The Sun Also Rises or A Farewell to Arms, is not greatly different in effect from the author's impact in the essays. Only the fictional mask complicates identities. He depicts himself and makes his personal views part of public life. He was an expert who knew both the basic principles and the ultimate refinements of the subject at hand. Hemingway's own personality and personal experience are the source of his fiction and his central characters. Hemingway had his insights into the world he lived in and found an adequate method to express his vision of that world.

Hemingway was always looking for a variety of forms, even though he would repeat important themes and suggestively echo earlier work. Seemingly simple, Hemingway's work is often complex. Although his own life experiences are repeatedly the basis of his stories, the experience itself is never the point of a story.

Hemingway emphasized four different roles while writing. Firstly, he presented himself as a model for living one's life "all the way up" as the man who could teach by example how to live the intense life. He had behind-the-scenes knowledge of the stories he was writing. Third, he was the master of 'how to' information, the preceptor of the way to do things, to extract the full measure of satisfaction in any act, and finally, he portrayed himself as the giver of expert advice, moral and technical, to those who had to act on knowledge. One of the roles Hemingway played in person before going behind the mask of novelist was that of the portrayer of the world's face.

Major Discussion

His emphasis on technique rested not only on his full experience but also on his geographical knowledge. His geographical knowledge worked as a source book for his fiction; it served equally well as a device to clarify the larger world for Hemingway and his readers. Hemingway's geographical knowledge can be divided into two sections: the physical and the psychological. He had the knowledge of countries like Spain, America, Africa, and France, the African Safari, the seas, and the mountains. He also had the knowledge of people, events like bullfighting, deep sea fishing, skiing, hunting, the technical knowledge of all these, the culture, and traditions. This geographical knowledge moulded his technique. Hemingway wrote as he travelled, but his role was not that of a travel writer but in early days that of a reporter, later that of an aficionado, and still later that of a sportsman, hunter, or fisherman. He reported the travel adventure as they provided insights for social analysis. His fishing trips of the early twenties in the Black Forest, for example, celebrated the pleasures of finding silvery trout and clear streams but were part of the larger picture of inflationary and bureaucratic bungling in postwar Germany.

1. **The Physical aspect of Hemingway's Geographical knowledge**

First, I shall give a brief account of the physical sense of geography in Hemingway's work. He had knowledge of places like America, Spain, and Africa that he mentioned in the novels. It had an impact on his style. His life and experiences of these places supplied him with the material for his novels. We find particular versions of Spain and Africa in Hemingway's writings. The versions of Spain and Africa that we find in Death in the Afternoon and Green Hills of Africa are stuffed versions of actual countries, artificial, static, and idealized products of that quest for originality.

The attraction of Spain, its geographical conditions, and cultural traditions had been a recurrent Hemingway theme. In his July 1925 letter to Scott Fitzgerald, he had written, "God, it had been a wonderful country… to me, heaven would be a big bull ring with me holding two seats and a trout stream outside. (L,165). Similarly, his comment in a letter to Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, "Spaniards are the only people" (L, 168), endorses the sense that place, people, and cultural value are all intimately connected in Hemingway's consciousness, and so we find in his novels. Moving about good cafes, hotels, breathtaking landscapes, famous paintings, eccentricities of people from diverse provinces, places to get the best puella, and the ritual to follow during the day of the bullfights to make the events of the arena the climax of a perfectly arranged day. His descriptions of Aranjuez, Ronda, and Valencia detailed more than the bull-fighting seasons there. Aranjuez was a good place to see one's first bull fight because of its picturesqueness. Ronda had romantic views from the plateau on which the town plaza was located, the comforts of fine hotels, good seafood, good wines, short walks, and a historic bullring. Valencia, besides being the home of several famous matadors, was in Hemingway's eyes more properly the home of

memorable paella, so memorable he had Pilar repeat in For Whom the Bell Tolls most of his lyric to Valencia. Like good travel literature, it spoke through the senses. In Death in the Afternoon, he wrote his total Spanish experience.

The sensual qualities of his immediate African experience transport him nostalgically back to his earlier boyhood world. In an article written about an African Safari in 1953-54, Hemingway writes of the homesickness he felt for Africa. The taste of cider and the smell of balsam needles carry him back in memory to the taste and smells of his Michigan past. With Hemingway's African trip of 1933-34, East Africa joined the short list of places associated with personal fulfilment, a sense of belonging with home. In The Green Hills of Africa, he reports that "smelling the good smell of Africa, I was altogether happy" (G.H.15). Hemingway's Africa was clearly as much territory of the mind and spirit and imagination as it was geographical reality. Africa for Hemingway had been constructed as a type of pure landscape where man and nature would interact without the pressures of history and politics. But it was mostly terrain and animals that concerned Hemingway. There were a few incidental observations on the popularity of Islam among East Africans, a brief sketch of the Masai, and the country. He described how the aristocratic Masai, avoiding tedious work wherever possible, hired the M'Bulus to dig their wells at a price of one cow per well. And he depicted Masai readying themselves for a lion hunt by drinking a potion brewed from tree bark. But African animals, more than Africans themselves, were his subject because the animals reminded him that they would vanish as the region ceased being a frontier. His role in Africa was more of a travel writer and safarist.

In the early Toronto Daily Star reports on the Greco-Turkish crisis, he took time from political articles to sketch Constantinople for Canadian readers. The city, its roads, nightlife, and Kemal Pasha's rule. In 1922, reporting on conditions in Alsace, Hemingway. Recorded details of life in Strasbourg. Hemingway also recorded scenes of French life. He described the night life in Paris, Berlin, and Madrid. Paris night life in the most highly civilized and amusing. Berlin is the most sordid desperate and vicious. Madrid is the fullest and Constantinople is, or was the most exciting. At Aranjuez one arrived by special bus from Madrid walked through the town to see the plaza de toros on the edge of the town, bought fresh strawberries and ate grilled steaks or roasted chicken and drank valdepenas at the feria booths for only five pesetas. Ronda had romantic views from the plateau on which town plaza was located, comforts of fine hotels, good sea food, good wines, short walks and historic bullring.

Hemingway was a connoisseur of approaches to cities and ports. On his first trip to Europe as a correspondent h described the Spanish port of vigo in chromo terms for Canadian readers "Vigo is a paste board looking village, cobble streets, white and orange plastered set up of one side of a big, almost land looked barbour that is large enough to hold the entire British navy. Sun baked brown mountains slump down to the sea like tired old dinosaurs, and the colour of the water is as blue as the chromo of the bay at Naples. Hemingway's scene painting however occurred as the back ground for strenuous action and his appreciation of architecture was limited mostly to the design of ski huts and cafes from terraces. The foreground of his sketches depicted Hemingway "sampling the sports experiences of an arca, rather than the views." For Canadian readers he described the luge as the Swiss version of bobsled, flivver canoe, horse and buggy and pram and the Alps as the place to luge.

Hemingway's travel experiences not only described cultural landscapes but his travel writing also abounded with observations on national character. Such observations were fundamental to his remarks on

politics, economics, military analysis and even bullfighting. But though he practiced making generalizations on European and Asian national character for his Canadian readers, he began by telling them about themselves and their "Yank" neighbours. In 1920 he contrasted the views of each other held by Canadians and U.S. Americans, lamented the lack of understanding between the two nations and concluded that U.S. citizens admired Canadians for the wrong reasons while Canadians, influenced by warmongering Hearst papers refused to credit Americans with having sacrificed sufficiently in the recent war "Americans needed to lower their voices", he said "and Canadians to lower their pride". In later sketches he characterized the French as exclusively France-oriented and highly sensitive about the war dead, called them geniuses in the arts of good living and hard fighting but fumblers in big business. He contradicted the myth of French cosmopolitanism when he explained how foreigners could pass themselves off in Paris as champions or experts when they were failures at home.

In Death in the Afternoon Hemingway had to explain Spanish national character to account for the complex feeling behind bullfighting. On several occasions he had to remind American readers of a psychology different from theirs. In sports Americans and British were dominated by ideas of fair play and victory. They could hardly look on a bull fight as anything more than an unequal match without fair play for both antagonists or hope of victory for one. But for Spaniards the bullfight was not sport or spectacle but a ritual offering and evidence of death. It predicted the cult of death that neither English, nor French, nor even some kind of Spaniards could understand. The Englishman lived for this world, and considered death a thing not to be talked about or to be risked except for patriotism advantage or reward. Although the French had a cult of respect for the dead, "they lived for such material things as family positions and good foods and wines. They could "kill for the pot," but not to celebrate death as a mystery. Part of his military analysis of the China-Burma theater of war in 1941, was also based on a reading of national character

These and many more places that Hemingway visited, his experiences there found a place in Hemingway's fiction. The knowledge of these places had an impact on his style of writing. He could write and omit few things because he had the knowledge of all. Because of such knowledge he could allude to facts implicit but real in the lives of the people in the novel and because he knew the facts were there, he could pass over them with the barest mention,

2. The Psychological aspect of Hemingway's Geographical knowledge

Hemingway moved about Spain, and the bull fighting was the vehicle to carry his observations. Hemingway understood bullfighting as one of the performing arts, his aesthetic impressions carried over into his observations. He moved about Spain as an aficionado following bullfights to mature his knowledge of that art. What he learned from the art of bullfighting was both technical and theoretical.

In the two Toronto Star Weekly articles "Bull Fighting Is Not a Sport It Is a Tragedy" and "World's Series of Bull Fighting a Mad, Whirling Carnival," and in his "Pamplona Letter" in the transatlantic review Hemingway sketched the key actions of a bullfight and suggested the color and Frenzy of a quasi-religious festival.

Bull fighting was a game in which death was certain either of the bull or of the matador. Hemingway frequently wrote of the matador's "creating" the bull, making him do things which his own raw instincts could not conceive but which with man's imagination became true. The bull became the instrument of

man's immortality. The picador horses are also killed in this game. The fear of death was particularly one to be confronted, he wrote in The Dangerous Summer'. Seeing his friends perform in the bull ring had for a time made the fear of death so strong for him that he could not witness or write of such scenes, but finally he had "practically eliminated that fear as a personal problem". Hemingway's personal experience with Pamplona and other bullfight towns provided him the background and foreground incident for the novels.

Hemingway also loved hunting in Africa. His work The Green Hills of Africa was much too concerned with his self-explanation and justification and too philosophically concerned with animals and hunting. In both "The Christmas Gift" and "Safari" he took a view of lions, leopards, wild beasts and some small deer that echoed qualities attributed to them in the bestiaries. In "Safari" for example he described the assault of a hawk on a flight of guinea fowl and the struggle of one guinea to escape while the hawk flew away with it already starting to feed on its prey. For Hemingway the allegory was cultural, "They were obviously of different tribes, watching this action I was not wholly sure of the white mans role in Africa."

In the Christmas gift he celebrated night as "the loveliest time in Africa" lovely because "the animals are quite transformed". The lion gives up his day time silence to cough and roar, the hyena's laugh takes on a pleasant note, the wile beast gives off terrifying noises to seem dangerous, the bat cared foxes come out, and the hunting leopard coughs messages to the baboons along the river.

He noted that the hunter's experience was incommunicable and incredible, that nobody ever believes shooting stories ever, and the pleasure has been in the run and trying to hold your heart in when you swing and hold your breath, sweet and clean, and swing ahead and squeeze off lightly with the swing. African animals more than Africans themselves were his subject. At a Masai watering hole he noted:

> There was a flock of more than six thousand guinea fowi and we shot only what we need for meat. The sand grouse come to drink at the water in the mornings in paris, singly and in scattered bunches. They also came in flocks that were dense as the passenger pigeons around Petoskey before Michigan ever was a state.

Later, He described the giant crocodiles along the Victorian Nile :

> Formerly in Southern Tanganyika along the great Ruaha River, the only sight we ever had of a crocodile was the tip of his nostrils in the water. These crocodiles along the Nile were on the banks and with their heads facing the shore rather than the water counted seventeen of the length of twelve feet and over…….

In the introduction to Francois Sommer's 'Man and Beast' in Africa, he saw the hunter's instinct as a complement to man's love for the animals worthy of being hunted. It is no hypocrisy to hunt animals and love them, he insisted. To hunt is an instinct of the same order as the instinct to worship and one that can easily become the instinct to worship.

He gave the technique of lion hunting in the "Notes on Dangerous Game." One approached the lion terrain by car and picked up his lion while the animal did not distinguish the hunter from the car but the hunter had to get out of the car and let the lion recognize him as a hunter before he shot. The lion's recognition of the hunter would immediately cause him to run for cover, and only the hunter's steadiness and marksmanship gave him his chance before the lion escaped, ran wounded into cover or dropped. If the wounded lion reached cover, the hunter had an even chance of being mauled while flushing the lion from

the thicket. His emphasis on technique rested on his experience and knowledge as an amateur naturalist. On several occasions he advanced technical instruction against a background of biological knowledge. His emphasis on technique had become a recognized and expected element of his writing. As he learned new techniques in big game hunting and deep sea fishing, he proved to himself that he had seen them and he had seen them imaginatively while writing them down.

His knowledge and experience in deep sea fishing helped him to write The Old Man and the Sea On the Blue Water, published in Esquire for April 1936. Contained in a paragraph the narrative essentials of the short novel. Hemingway argued that fishing was more exciting than hunting because one never knew what he would pull up from the depths of the sea. Hemingway had written many articles about deep sea fishing in 1930's and afterword's wrote introductions to books on fishing. He had very deep and detailed knowledge about fishing. In "Marlin off Cuba", for example, he told how hooked blue or striped marlin made a run to the northwest though they ordinarily travelled deep from east to west against the Gulf Stream. And the big ones, he noted, did not appear until September. In The Old Man and the Sea Santiago fishes deep. Finds his big Marlin in September and observes that the giant fish strikes in a north-westerly direction until, tiring he turns north east to follow the current. In "Marlin off the Morro," Hemingway reported the presence of Mako Sharks off Havana, even though they were allegedly found only in the waters off New Zealand and Tahiti. One of the first types of sharks to hit Santiago's marlin is the mako. There are many more incidents in the novel that Hemingway had experienced himself. Hemingway himself did his harpooning and clubbing of the sharks, preparing and tying the bait. The same expertness was shown by Santiago. Santiago is able to assume knowledge of the things Hemingway the essayist labored to establish. In the Esquire article "On the Blue Water" he provided both technical and moral insight for the Old man's later fight.

Hemingway had sound technical knowledge about fishing. In "Marlin off the Morro" he described four basic ways marlin hit a hait and told the proper ways to play them!" In "Marlin off Cuba", he added advice to new yachtsmen on where to find and what to pay guides and instructions on how to bait for deep running marlin and what weights and lengths of the line to use." In his introduction to S. Kip Farrington's Atlantic Game Fishing he explained the true sportsmanship obligated the fisherman to use tackle appropriate to the game. It should not be so light that the fish could escape wounded, to be destroyed later by sharks, because the angler had tried for a light tackle record. Nor should the equipment be so massive and foolproof that it took all the risk from the sportsman. All these techniques Hemingway used to form his novel.

Conclusion

A paradox in the non-fiction (and in the details of Hemingway's life) lies in the fact that if selfhood is expressed through acts of violence in nature such a proclaim of his own uniqueness also necessitated a destruction or diminishment of the natural world which Hemingway loved and revered. This does get explicit treatment in the non fiction, if only briefly. The later fiction though explore this particular issue more fully show, clear awareness of the paradox involved. This is more noticeable in The Old Man and the Sea where action and dream, are in tension with one another. The old man's struggle with the marlin and its destructions consequent on his act of prideful overreacting (I went out too far OMS, 104)is positioned in oppositional relation to the image of long golden beaches (of Africa) and the white beaches, so white they hurt your eyes 'with the lions…..playing like young cats in the dusk' there (OMS 18-19)

which comes to him as he sleeps. Two versions of nature and man's relation to it exist in unreconciled tension here placed in the separate realms of doing and dreaming

But many of Hemingway's favourite places were permanently spoiled for him (Philip Young writes in Bylme) only the sea was the last free place, a type of romantic non place, nature in untainted form.

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