THE EMPORIA STATE RESEARCH STUDIES

THE GRADUATE PUBLICATION OF THE EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

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Vol. XXVIII Summer, 1979 Number 1

THE EMPORIA STATE RESEARCH STUDIES is published quarterly by The School of Graduate and Professional Studies of the Emporia State University, 1200 Commercial St., Emporia, Kansas, 66801. Entered as second-class matter September 16, 1952, at the post office at Emporia, Kansas, under the act of August 24, 1912. Postage paid at Emporia, Kansas.

"Statement required by the Act of October, 1962; Section 4369, Title 39, United States Code, showing Ownership, Management and Circulation." **The Emporia State Research Studies** is published quarterly. Editorial Office and Publication Office at 1200 Commercial Street, Emporia, Kansas. (66801). The **Research Studies** is edited and published by the Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas.

A complete list of all publications of the *The Emporia State Research Studies* is published in the fourth number of each volume.

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY
EMPORIA, KANSAS

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Papers published in this periodical are written by faculty members of the Emporia State University and by either undergraduate or graduate students whose studies are conducted in residence under the supervision of a faculty member of the University.

Death and Dying: Hemingway's Predominant Theme

by

Mark Scheel*

> I was trying to learn to write, commencing with the simplest things, and one of the simplest things of all and the most fundamental is violent death.[1]
>
> —Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*

In 1918 while convalescing from war wounds in Italy, Ernest Hemingway, barely nineteen years old, wrote to his parents: "Dying is a very simple thing. I've looked at death and really I know. If I should have died, it would have been . . . quite the easiest thing I ever did. . . ."[2] Death, a simple thing? Perhaps, yet it was seen as sufficiently complex by that same person to merit devoting most of his literary career to a careful analysis of its nature. Among the novels and short stories published and given major critical attention during Hemingway's lifetime, twenty-four works treat the theme of violent death.[3] In addition to these, the novel, *Islands in the Stream*, published posthumously, touches upon the same theme, and seven of the ten poems in *Three Stories and Ten Poems*, technically Hemingway's first book, allude to or depict death.

Most frequently, theories concerning the origin of Hemingway's preoccupation with death and dying take into consideration the psychology of the author. Philip Young, among others, discerns the operation of a kind of Freudian repetition compulsion in Hemingway's work. "Young's theory is that shock and violence act as both cause and effect as respects Hemingway's literary productivity . . . ."[4] That is, traumatic experiences associated with death in Hemingway's own experience dictate both the continuing necessity to write and the choice of the recurrent subject matter of death. Closely related to Young's theory are the views

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[1]Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner's, 1932), p. 2.

[2]Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. 72.

[3]Green D. Wyrick, "The World of Ernest Hemingway: A Critical Study," *The Emporia State Research Studies*, 2 (Sept. 1953), 7.

[4]Bern Oldsey, "The Snows of Ernest Hemingway," in *Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Arthur Waldhorn (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 73. Refers to Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Rinehart, 1952), pp. 136-43.

of such Soviet critics as Nemerovskaya and Miller-Budnitskaya, who see the fear of death as the key to an understanding of both Hemingway's work and personal life.[5] They believe that the war had implanted in Hemingway's mind a pervasive despair for the omnipotence of death, a fixation which compelled the author to seek out situations in both his life and art that entailed facing and struggling with the horror of death.

Still other theories point to causal factors residing outside the author. H. E. Bates believes that the particular spiritual and philosophic outlook of Catholicism provided Hemingway with his major theme. "Perhaps no Protestant can pretend to understand the Catholic mind, and it is from Catholicism, perhaps, that Hemingway's constant preoccupation with the theme of death arises . . . ."[6] Another factor may be the structure and conventions of the tragic genre within which Hemingway typically works. "After the tragi-comedy of *The Sun Also Rises*, all of Hemingway's novels have been tragedies. . . . A tragedian must employ his interest in death at the center of the art form he uses . . . [because] to face the fact of death is as necessary to the writer of tragedy as a healthy facing of the other facts of life."[7] Hemingway's choice of theme, then, may be the result of form shaping the nature of content. Whatever the cause, there can be no denying its continuing effects throughout Hemingway's career.

Although in the short story essay, "A Natural History of the Dead," initially appearing as part of the book, *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway treats exhaustively the physical properties of death, his major emphasis in his other works with this same general subject concerns the philosophic properties of death. At first glance, many of the stories and novels that describe these philosophic properties appear to imply views on death not altogether consistent with one another—reflections, it would seem, of the author's inconsistencies. A closer scrutiny, however, reveals that these differences are more apparent than real. For example, Martin Light identifies the common theme in Hemingway's stories of the Spanish Civil War (specifically, "The Denunciation," "The Butterfly and the Tank," "Night before Battle," and "Under the Ridge") as being the *futility*

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[5]Deming Brown, "Hemingway in Russia," in *Hemingway and His Critics*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 147.

[6]"Hemingway's Short Stories," in *Hemingway and His Critics*, p. 76.

[7]Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 152-53.

of death in war.[8] The lives lost are depicted as *wasted* in death. Yet, in the novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* also about the Spanish Civil War, death is granted a certain positive attribute. Here, death is seen, ultimately, as defining life's values.[9] It forces the hero, Robert Jordan, to adopt a faith and to act upon specific humanistic ideals. In the foregoing examples, the properties that seem to result from two separate, contradictory views of death, however, are simply the result of two aspects of a single larger view—that of the ubiquity and omnipotence of death. Commencing with this basic truth, Hemingway explores throughout his writing the many aspects of death that follow from this truth. When viewed as omnipresent and supreme, death must embody value as well as waste. As James Light points out concerning the message in *A Farewell to Arms,* Hemingway emphasizes repeatedly that it is the manner in which man adjusts and reacts to death that determines whether man is able to achieve some kind of limited domination over it.[10] Aspects, adjustments, and reactions pertaining to death, thus, make up the subjects of Hemingway's prose.

It is worth noting that certain side benefits accrue to Hemingway's work as a result of his preoccupation with death's omnipresence. According to Malcolm Cowley, one of the most lasting qualities of Hemingway's prose is related to the frequent sense of death which "seems to hover in the air while he is writing . . .; because of that wordless presence, he feels and transmits a special cleanness and freshness in the physical world that has been rendered by no other novelist of our time."[11] In some cases, as well, the extended treatment of death results in its elevation to the level of metaphor which may cast in relief other facets of the human condition. "Death is a fact, but it is also a metaphor for the hostile implacability of the universe toward living and loving. To die in Hemingway's world is certain; to live and love are at best provisional."[12] One of the clearest instances of this metaphorical quality is the manner in which death repeatedly enters into the lives and fates of the star-crossed lovers in *A Farewell to Arms.*

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[8]"Of Wasteful Deaths: Hemingway's Stories about the Spanish War," *Western Humanities Review,* 23 (1969), 29.

[9]Harvey Curtis Webster, "Ernest Hemingway: The Pursuit of Death," *Texas Quarterly,* 7, No. 2 (1964), 158.

[10]James F. Light, "The Religion of Death in *A Farewell to Arms,*" *Modern Fiction Studies,* 7 (1961), 172-73.

[11]"Papa and the Parricides," *Esquire,* June 1976, p. 103.

[12]Arthur Waldhorn, *A Reader's Guide to Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), p. 22.

In Hemingway, another aspect of death, one which is rooted in the tradition of the Elizabethan poets, is the parallelism between death and the sex act. "The making of love, as Hemingway has often remarked, becomes a kind of killing, the good killing. The famous love passage in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, when the earth seems to move, is so filled with death imagery that it might be taken for a description of dying. . . . It is this twining of sex and death, both fundamental crises of life, that is central to Hemingway's work."[13] Indeed, at times death itself takes on the character of a sex object, turning Hemingway's preoccupation with the subject into "a search for those areas where a man at least can maintain the illusion of making love to death rather than being violated by it."[14] The linking of sex with death (*sex* defined in the broader sense of *birth process*) appeared early in Hemingway's writing, the short story, "Indian Camp," being a notable example. Here, the young boy Nick accompanies his doctor-father to an Indian dwelling and witnesses both a Caesarian delivery and a suicide in the same night. The two endpoints of the life continuum, birth and death, are thus fused in Nick's experience. His boyish reaction is to deny his own mortality.

As mentioned previously, Hemingway was also interested in the adjustments which men come to in the shadow of all-powerful death. Possibly the most recurrent position depicted in Hemingway's fiction is that assumed by the courageous stoic, a position which critics eventually identified as "the code." "Hemingway's characters, in the presence of death, observe admirably the Nietzschean, 'Be hard.' "[15] Moreover, "anyone, the implication is, can live and die sloppily. . . . The trick is to die with as much dignity as the pressure of the world will allow."[16] Thus, grace under pressure becomes a moral law for the Hemingway hero. The hilltop fight of El Sordo in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is an example of this code in action. Dying well is seen by Hemingway as the essential corollary to living well.[17]

A special subcategory of death by "the code" is the soldier's death in nonviolent circumstances. The entire novel, *Across the*

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[13]Melvin Backman, "Hemingway: The Matador and the Crucified," in *Hemingway and His Critics*, p. 249.

[14]Stanley Cooperman, "Death and *Cojones*: Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 63 (1964), 91.

[15]Michael F. Moloney, "Ernest Hemingway: The Missing Third Dimension," in *Hemingway and His Critics*, p. 188. Although Moloney grants the Nietzschean lineage of the Hemingway hero, his overall appraisal of the hero's stoical attributes is negative; he lables these attributes as bestially indifferent.

[16]Oldsey, p. 76.

[17]E. M. Halliday, "Hemingway's Ambiguity: Symbolism and Irony," in *Ernest Hemingway*, p. 37.

River and into the Trees, is an attempt to deal with the problem of how one surrounded by violent death might face the approaching prospect of a quiet death.[18] Colonel Cantwell, an aging army officer with severe heart trouble, faces imminent death. He returns to Italy, the scene of his first wounding and, thus, first symbolic death. It is his effort to come full circle before the end.[19] He lives perpetually in death's shadow so that "all small sights and sounds, all old and renewed pleasures, all memories, take their colors from the stoical, reluctant acceptance of the termination of everything."[20] For Cantwell, the resolution comes through his relationship with the beautiful young Renata and with a peculiar process of castigation and purgation leading to the inner peace necessary for a happy death.[21]

As one might expect, Hemingway was too thorough as an artist to neglect the crucial counterpart to the phenomenon of dying—that of killing. Like dying, killing, for Hemingway, must always conform to the stoic moral code. "One must always 'kill cleanly' and with purpose. . . . Man should retain a dignity in his own death, and in bringing death to other forms of life."[22] It is the bullfighter, more than any other, who exemplifies the proper way to kill:

> He must perform the sacrifice cleanly, with one true stroke, preserving both his honor and the bull's dignity. . . . There must be a cognizance of death both from the standpoint of killing and from that of being killed; there must be more than a cognizance actually; there must be an acceptance. Knowledge of death's inevitability so that he does not react to its immediacy, coupled with unconcern for the possibilities of life after death, are necessary attributes of the ideal bullfighter. . . . It is not *that* one kills but *how* one kills.[23]

The act of killing, in a context comparable to the bull ring, might even be viewed as one means of attaining a temporary victory over death. Death, symbolized by the brave bull, is conquered valiantly by man.[24]

So much for the aspects, adjustments, and reactions pertaining to death. In reconsidering the philosophic properties of death as

[18]Horst Oppel, "Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees*," in *Hemingway and His Critics*, p. 222.

[19]Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), p. 120.

[20]Webster, 151.

[21]Oppel, p. 222.

[22]Wyrick, p. 23.

[23]Joseph Waldmeir, "*Confiteor Hominem*: Ernest Hemingway's Religion of Man," in *Hemingway*, ed. Robert P. Weeks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 166.

[24]Keneth Kinnamon, "Hemingway, the *Corrida*, and Spain," in *Ernest Hemingway: Five Decades of Criticism*, ed. Linda Welshimer Wagner (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974), p. 66.

delineated by Hemingway, one asks what, if any, pattern emerges that might allow these properties to be subsumed under a single scheme. Is there, for example, a principle implicit in Hemingway's treatment and emphasis that relates to some established philosophic doctrine? John Killinger, for one, would identify it as existentialism.[25]

Although some critics, such as Cooperman, would refuse to grant Hemingway an existential interpretation,[26] most would agree there are at least elements of existentialism throughout his work. The short story, "A Clean, Well-lighted Place," with its confrontation with *nada*, is a classic portrayal of the existentialist dilemma. Furthermore, Webster describes Nick Adams as symbolically always dying and passing into new life (for example, respect for parents wanes, love for Marjorie fades away) and labels him "an existentialist before the existentialists."[27] It is Killinger, however, who ultimately links the central role of death in Hemingway's fiction with the tenets of existentialism:

> Here then is the core of Hemingway's philosophy of violence . . . in that ill-defined twilight between life and imminent death where time and place are irrelevant questions, man faces his freedom. Nothing has any meaning at that instant except survival and existence. The superfluities of culture, race, tradition, even religion, all disappear in the face of one overpowering fact—the necessity to exist on an individual basis. This is the "separate peace." . . . This vision of death plays the same important part in the philosophies of all the leading existentialists.[28]

Killinger maintains that, in the final analysis, Hemingway saw death as serving a positive function, forcing man to face his freedom and to choose between an authentic individualism *versus* a "mass man" kind of existence. Hemingway's heroes are such because they choose a manner of living, in the face of death, that imparts individual *form* to their existence.[29] In other words, "Hemingway agreed with E. M. Forster that 'although death destroys a man, the idea of death can save him.' "[30]

One rather unfortunate corollary to the existential vision of death which may, however, provide still another reason for Hem-

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[25]*Hemingway and the Dead Gods* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1960), p. 16.

[26]Cooperman, 90-91. Dependence upon ritual, masculine horror of passivity, and the option to flee, Cooperman believes, are the elements in Hemingway's work which preclude giving it an existential interpretation. His analysis, however, is based primarily upon one novel—*A Farewell to Arms*—and fails to consider such relevant works as "The Undefeated" and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

[27]Webster, 154.

[28]Killinger, pp. 18-19.

[29]*Ibid.*, p. 70.

[30]Webster, 152.

ingway's repetition of the death theme is described, as follows, by Killinger:

> There is just one catch to the fact that life receives its real meaning when set over against death: for life to continue to have meaning, the death experience must be repeated again and again. The tension must be maintained, or the protagonist ceases to be an individual and becomes part of the mass.[31]

The individual may become trapped in a series of confrontations, like Manuel, the bullfighter, in "The Undefeated," a series necessary to preserve moral integrity, yet one which will eventually lead to *physical* defeat and death.

Such, then, is Hemingway's predominant theme of death and dying. Compelled, most probably, by psychological factors and those intrinsic to his subjects and form, he studied again and again through his fiction the many facets of death and the death experience which followed from its status of supreme universality:

> At one time or another [Hemingway] has described the death of ants, salamanders, grasshoppers, and fish; how hyenas die, how to kill *kudu*, the proper way to execute horses, how bulls are slain, how soldiers die, death in Italy, in Cuba, in Africa and in Spain, death in childbirth and death by suicide, death alone and death in a group; selfish death, sacrificing death, and graceful death.[32]

If any one philosophic system can act as a reference to the ordering and interpretation of these writings on death, it would undoubtedly be an aspect of positive existentialism.

Just as Hemingway began his career by writing about death, so also did he end most of his major works by allowing death its role. In final testimony to the supremacy of death in Hemingway's life and work, perhaps no words are more fitting than his own: "All stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true-story teller who would keep that from you."[33]

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[31]Killinger, p. 25.

[32]Thomas H. Cash, Jr., "Ernest Hemingway and Death" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, Dept. of English, University of Kentucky, 1951), p. 4. Quoted in Killinger, pp. 17-18.

[33]Hemingway, p. 122.

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