

Transcending Nothingness - The Existential Heroes of Ernest Hemmingway

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Abstract

An Existential hero is portrayed in literature as the one who has transcended above the meaninglessness of life and has accepted it with its original harshness and reality. The characters presented in the works of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Hemmingway show stark similarities with the existential characters of Kafka, Camus and Sartre. The European writers regard this concern "with the meaning of identity in the modern world, the nature of good and evil, the possibility of fulfilment in the contemporary society". Hemmingway strongly believed in living a life fully and heroically and he felt that even in the dystopian world after World War man was powerful enough to realize his moral purpose. His true heroes are the ones who have accepted their responsibility towards the world where notions of ultimate truth and reality do not exist anymore.

The moral context of Hemmingway signifies the idea that life must be lead fully and heroically. Existing in a post war context and being a part of the World war Hemmingway had his personal experiences of the war trauma of which he certainly felt that even if the conditions are adverse and unfavourable things always centre around a man to make a place heaven or hell as it was in his power to make decisions that laid on the foundation of his moral grounds.

The world was left confused and disorganized after first World war and in those topsy turvy situations Hemmingway felt that it was in a man's power to realize his moral purpose but the purpose must be forged within the strong citadel of soul. According to him a true hero accepted responsibility for himself in the world even when the notions of truth and certainty vanish. It was felt that with the vigour of his heart and being persistent he must derive a meaning out of the meaningless world, a world that was devoid of values outside him.

Hemmingway adopted Stoicism and Existentialism in his writings but he did not adhere to any one philosophy nor did he kept his writings confined to their limits. He personally felt that any single philosophy was incapable of encompassing the human actions in totality and therefore no life could exist and flourish in a constrained atmosphere. He believed in the idea that life can shape philosophies rather than philosophy shaping life. The thought has been brilliantly signified in The Snows of Kilimanjaro where the restriction of life is seen on the endless human possibilities when death puts an end to the

heroic stance of the protagonist : *"He had loved too much, demanded too much, and he wore it all out."*

Hemmingway's response to the theory of Sartre has been contrary as Sartre stated that all paths lead to death, but Hemmingway is determined on the idea to choose at least one path and follow it wholeheartedly in order to see the way or manner death is reached. In *The Snow of Kilimanjaro* the protagonist wishes to choose such a path so that in the short span of life that is still left for him he wishes to live it fullest by doing all those that he wanted to do and this is the reason why he writes, to bring about his long fascination come true. For Hemmingway truth is values and not just ideas, he tries his best to make his readers realize and feel the truth rather than accepting it as an idea or driving through an argument.

The philosophy of Ernest Hemmingway is deeply interconnected with Stoicism and Existentialism. Stoicism is a Greek school of thought that lays emphasis on self control, resilience and endurance even in the situations of adversity, it is in fact stating to accept and embrace the truth and reality with patience as it is a fact and not an imagination so he must accept it. The Stoic philosophy is much justified through the character of Santiago in *The Old Man and The Sea* by Hemmingway who is demonstrating his unwavering determination and strength of character when he is constantly in battle against nature to catch the giant Marlin. Though the challenges are insurmountable still Santiago maintains his dignity and composure reflecting the true spirit of Hemmingway hero who reflects the Stoic ideals of facing difficulties of life with strength and courage:

Santiago: "Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready."

Manolin: "I see, Old Man. You are ready."

Santiago: "Yes, I am ready. I have been ready before."

The above extract reflects the determination of Santiago who is emphasizing his preparation by solely depending upon luck and despite facing constant challenges in his life he is still calm and peaceful thereby accepting the uncertainties of life with resilience and patience. Hemmingway's philosophy of life aligns with the idea of living in present and this is justified through the character of Santiago who is least bothered about future and further planning, he has no plans but believes in winning the present moment. This concept of him is echoing both the Buddhist philosophy and existential thoughts. His characters strive to gain the full experience of life and are capable of embracing the intensity of emotions in the passing moments.

A Clean, Well Lighted Place by Hemmingway reflects his existential experiences in the portrayal of war, adventure and loss. In the novel he has used the term Lost Generation for the survivors after the war who are facing the identity crises due to unrestricted migrations. They are lost people who are suffering the loss of their native land, home culture, community and family members and have been uprooted from their original place. In the novel the term basically refers to the writers and artists living in Paris after World war I. The novel displays the theme of paranoia as a consequence of the war that mad individuals feel emotionally and psychologically insecure who searched for the meaning of their life aimlessly in a changed world.

The emptiness and spiritual void broadened after the war and this is characterized in the novel through the characters of the old and the young waiter. Like the old man the older waiter prefers to stay late at night cafes and he tries to investigate the reason why they both go home late or are reluctant. He explains his point to the younger waiter by saying that the old man likes it that's why he stays late, but the younger waiter dismisses his idea and gives the reason that the old man is lonely. However the reality is that both the old man and the older waiter are lonely.

The old man lived with his niece to take care of him and so he drank till late night. The older waiter is also lonely and makes a habit of going home late, he suffers from insomnia but calls it loneliness. The waiter faces and unknown fear or dread, but it is actually his overwhelming fear of nothingness which is an existential angst about his position in the universe and an uncertainty about the meaning of life. He does not find meaning in other aspects of life like culture, religion and community but finds solace only in the well clean lighted cafes where he feels life makes some sense to him.

Old Man: "What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too."

It is the intellect of the older waiter to see his own future in the old man that he is also going to have same fate in future. The theme of Nothingness dominates the work and Hemmingway suggests that life itself has no meaning and it is the human being who provides it a meaning through his choices and actions. He says that man is a significant speck in the sea of nothingness. The character of the older waiter justifies the above idea when he states that it was all nothing and man was a nothing too. He uses the term 'nada' for religion which means 'nothing' and through this term he signifies that religion in which people show firm belief and even fight with each other on its extreme level is also nothingness. He does not say "Our Father who art in heaven" but he says "our nada who art in nada".

The older waiter's statements wipe out every belief and fixation of the human society that creates discrimination and conflict and he justifies himself as the true hero of Hemmingway who firmly believed in the concept of Nothingness. He justifies at the same time that not everyone is aware of the Nothingness because the young waiter hurtles through his life happily unaware to find any reason why he should be sorrowful, but for the old man and the older waiter the idea of Nothingness is overwhelming leading them to despair.

For Whom The Death Bell Tolls is yet another brilliant work of Hemmingway in which his hero is a pure existentialist. Robert Jordan, the protagonist reaches the military age and becomes a part of the mandatory military service in US, but he enters the Spanish Civil war just not that he is obliged to do so. Robert is also a Spanish teacher and he has a choice to stay in America and teach Spanish out of his love for Spain. According to Sartre:

According to Sartre (Barnes, 1965: 32 and Struhl, 1972: 107-108), at such state, Robert is nothingness. He is not a Spanish teacher because if he is, he will commit his commitment as a Spanish teacher, teaching Spanish as well as possible. However, he annihilates his Being, his "in itself", as a teacher of Spanish. He loves Spain and believes in the Republic. Yet, he is still nothing for the doctrine of existentialism says that man is nothing else but what he chooses. He exists only as he realizes himself. Therefore, he is nothing else but the sum of his action (Struhl, 1972: 36).

Robert experiences the situation of Nothingness and decides to go to Spain and fight the war. At this moment he reflects some real actions to show that how much he loves Spain, and by doing so he emerges as a lover of Spain and the one who believes in Republic. This is the value of subjectivity in the character of Robert and he feels that if Spain is destroyed it will be unbearable for all those people who believed in him and trusted him so he shows the sense of solidarity here which is a result of his awareness of his subjectivity.

According to Barnes (1965, 217) there are two types of people, the first is the one who decides to live for himself against the Universe and the second is the one who chooses to die so that his fellow men can lead a better life. In this respect Robert Jordan seems to choose the second option as he feels that the meaning of life must be ahead of it. The meaning must not be the expression of being but it must lead to being and this idea is beautifully justified through the character of Robert as enters war because of his strong will for meaning.

Robert's strong will is the spirit that compels him to find the meaning of life in a meaningless world because he does not enter the war for glory and award but to find the meaning of his own life. After the war ends he chooses to teach Spanish in America, this is his commitment and he tries his best to meet it. However after killing a cavalry man he wonders that was it really right to kill people, but anyhow he had to kill, and how many people whom he killed were Fascists? Robert realizes that killing is wrong but that was the way to show his support towards the Loyalists. He wonders whether he will kill again or not.

Robert's conflict at the bridge is the turning point of this fine work of Hemmingway where his choice makes him find the meaning of his life. The El Sordo's band is beaten by the Fascists and it is the moment of leaving for the bridge which brings Robert in conflict. The exploder of

dynamite is brought away by Pablo and he must carry the order. Robert is fully aware that he will kill his companions if he blows off the bridge. The time has come and there is no reply by General Golz and there is no exploder.

Robert is in conflict and he must choose one option and in either of them he must suffer loss. If he blows the bridge he will kill his companions along with himself and if he does not he will make the loyalists advance in a much worse manner. He understands that his choice is based on his personal understanding but ultimately it will effect everyone bound to him so he is free to make a choice. Robert's anguish makes him take the decision of blowing off the bridge as he does not care about himself and gives importance to his accomplishment of duties. At this instant Robert justifies the second type of people as stated by Barnes and emerges as the true existential hero of Hemmingway.

Jordan's character has been that of an obedient and self sacrificing man to a fault whether it is the act of blowing off the bridge and trains for Republican cause or the question of legitimacy on his relationship with Maria, his dedication has been beyond reproach. His decisions are based completely upon the purpose of his life and this is the reason he disregards the thoughts of happy future with Maria and ends his relationship with her. Every time after his decision he convinces himself by focusing upon the purpose which he feels was sound. He feels that the idea of blowing the bridge would have been carried out in a way less detrimental to others rather than what Golz had planned, but he never made any changes and just carried out the orders of his seniors:

"You are instruments to do your duty. There are necessary orders that are no fault of yours and there is a bridge and that bridge can be the point on which the future of the human race can turn. As it can on everything that happens in this war. You have only one thing to do and you must do it." (Hemmingway 43)

He is resentful of Golz but the ultimately realizes how important his role was in winning the war. Jordan is a highly idealistic character who does not care for hunting but would never hesitate to kill a man if it benefits the Republican cause or justifies the end. But Jordan is also misguided and through his character Hemmingway points out that how people can be blindfolded by what they think as worthy of cause and how war can cause great harm to humanity by well meaning, prominent ignorant

individuals. *For Whom The Death Bell Tolls* opens with an epigraph which introduce the novel. It is an extract from an essay by seventeenth century British poet John Donne :

—No man is an Island, entire of it selfe; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a Clod be washed away by the Sea, _Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee” (Hemingway 4).

Donne explains that no man on this planet is alone because man being a social animal is always a part of the community and as a result if death occurs to any human it effects and diminishes other human also because he is a part of the mankind. Donne justifies that it is not important to ask that who has dies but it is important to realize that the death bell tolls for everyone who is a part of the human race. The same idea has been utilized by Hemmingway to introduce the novel and its purpose. Highlighting the damages of war caused to humanity Hemmingway focuses again and again on the purpose of human life to justify the idea that decision and choices ultimately effect the human life and that is effecting other human also as they are connected through society , therefore any decision that is taken or choices that are made must be based on human considerations and its well being. The purpose may be justified through various arguments but how the purpose of causing harm to oneself and others can be justified by any reason.

The epigraph is central to the book and the idea that human beings are free and bound at the same time is strengthened, therefore if one life is lost we lose something too, when somebody dies, a part of us also dies. The book has been written with death as the central theme and it is about people who die in war but at the same time it expresses deep meditative thoughts on death. The position of Robert Jordan in the initial half of the book is a stage which reflects his ongoing process of education, later he compares his early experience in war with the Communists to religion.

Hemmingway has reflected Robert Jordan's inner conflict through his interior monologues an actions that plague him. He very well knows that his job is of killing people but at the same time he does not believe in killing in the abstract. As far as his love Maria is concerned he has a realization that there is no place for her in his life as he is

all the time engrossed in military work putting his life on stake. He knows that he is not a family man or a lover so he refuses to continue on his relationship with her. He has lot of disillusionment and confused ideas regarding the motto of the Republican but he still continues to fight for them. Though publicly he announces that that he is an anti Fascist rather than a Communist but as a person he thinks that he has no politics at all.

The writings of Hemmingway were deeply influenced by Existentialism and Nihilism, the twin philosophical systems which became in vogue as for the writings after first World War. *The Sun Also Rises* is one of the best examples of the existentialist philosophy which was published in the year 1926. *A Clean Well Lighted Place* describes the depressed thoughts of a middle aged waiter who faces loneliness in his life and as a representative of existentialist nihilism the story captures death as a mandate of human life even of one tries to find comfort and security sitting in clean well lighted space. The waiter's belief that life is meaningless reflects that all endeavours of the life are futile and meaningless as death is inevitable and takes away all. In his work *The Capital of The World* Hemmingway describes the tragic death of a young Spanish waiter who was aspiring to be a matador. The hero Paco died full of illusions and had no time to lose or gain anything in his life. Paco as compared to many of the other second rate bullfighters who were inhibiting the hotel where he worked is different from them as he believes in romance and the honour of being a bull fighter. Showing his firm belief in the idea of living the present Hemmingway reflects that he died struggling to accomplish his dream of becoming a matador rather than rotting and wasting away his life in sloth and laziness.

Thus the battered and traumatized protagonists of Hemmingway be it Francis Macomber, Robert Jordan or Santiago they resemble the wounded lions and advancing armies gnawing the feelings of 'nada' in their quest for happiness, meaning of life and peace. It is true that some of them find existential authenticity and some of them do not, but still even those who slip in nihilism are always heroic characters in the literary universe of Hemmingway.

“What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada.” – *The middle-aged waiter, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.”*

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