

The Soldier Defeats Enemy but System Defeats the Soldier in Ernest Hemingway's Works

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Life is a heterogeneous mixture of ecstasies and pathos, sun and shadows, and victories and vanquishes. An ordinary man desires to live peacefully and complacently but sometimes, the inevitable compulsions drag him into an unwanted altercation or in a prolonged war that is generally fought between two countries either to annex neighbours' territory or to quench the thirst of the power-hungry politicians. But in war, which is "the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery" (Hamid 25), both sides suffer and the cost paid in the form of men and material is beyond compensation. The fighting nations have to lose the numerous warriors and brave soldiers who can serve their motherland in other ways also.

Hemingway was a scholarly-soldier and inexhaustible man who vivaciously committed himself as a savior of mankind. He was so much obsessed with the military uniform that even after his return from the front he would wear his military uniform proudly around the town and professed on his war experiences to the students of his own school and displayed them the fabulous grids of scars on his knees and legs. Hadley Richardson, his first wife, dreamt of honeymoon in the distant fairy-lands somewhere in Europe but Hemingway stressed at the scenes of Fossalta at the Italian front where he fought like a genuine war-hero.

While distributing chocolates among the fellow combatants, Hemingway, with some other compeers, was badly wounded. But, he was a man of indomitable will and imperishable courage. That's why, after regaining consciousness, he picked up an

injured Italian on his sturdy shoulders to get a safe passage but, on the way, he was aimed at by the enemy-snipers. Consequently, the Italian was killed and Hemingway was again injured in the foot and the knee and more than two hundred steel splinters were operated out of his body. On convalescence, he was honoured with medals for bravery but the after-effects of war caused in him insomnia and hallucinations. Andre Maurois observes,

For a long time he could not forget that hell. He was in a state of shock. He found it hard to fall asleep; he could dream of that exploding trench mortar and awake with a start. (Lal 3)

Hemingway was a brave warrior but ultimately he became fed-up with the perpetuated war and the madness involved in it scarred his soul. He has expressed his experience of the wound and the decaying carcasses of the soldiers. As he says in his essay "*A Natural History of the Dead*" in an ironical way.

But surprisingly, even after a 'near-death' experience, Hemmingway's zeal for war could not be fully extinguished as in Spanish Civil War he again braced up in favour of the Republicans. He raised substantial funds to equip the Loyalists with ambulances and medical supplies. In 1942, like a true soldier, he exhorted that "once you are fighting a war-

---you have no choice but to try to win it. (Baker 229)

Hemingway's soldier-worship and war-borne traumatic shocks recur in his short stories and war-novels. *In Our Time* that deals with the war, violent death, murder and the sufferings of the soldiers and the civilians is 'a harrowing record of the barbarities of the period.' Chapter VI of the vignettes reveals a close bloody combat that litters the ground and roofs of the houses with dead bodies of Austrian soldiers. Nick and Rinaldi both are also badly injured in their legs and spines. In chapter III, the protagonist shoots the three German soldiers but in chapter VII, he is wounded at Fossalta and prays to Jesus Christ to get him out of the deadening bombardment. Because of the unbearable pain and terrible nature of war, he now wishes to escape the frenzy of it.

The other stories too, expose the murderous skirmishes among the soldiers at war. In "A Way You Will Never Be" Nick zealously strides towards the trenches with "Calf-skin-covered haversacks, stick bombs, helmets, rifles..... ammunition boxes, star-shell pistols..... gas masks" (SS 206) but the foolery of war makes him scared of the dark and he scornfully compares the million soldiers wandering aimlessly on people's expenses with locusts and grasshoppers. In "Now I Lay Me" also Nick has been fighting heroically but later becomes insomniac. He is very much frightened and "did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body" (SS 276).

Hemingway symbolizes this nocturnal fear of fighters as the serious repercussions of war that converts sportive valiants into

nonchalant renegades. In "*In another Country*" the major fights bravely but when wounded he is invalided out of the war. Moreover, war-borne procrastination causes his fiancée died of pneumonia. In anxiety, the major gets cynical and does not believe in bravery that kills one's kith and kin. "*A Natural History of the Dead*," depicts an artillery lieutenant and some soldiers doubting the death of their wounded compeer and arguing with captain-doctor to give him an overdose of morphine to let him die peacefully. On the denial of doctor, the officer gets infuriated and becomes ready to shoot him saying:

I am a humane man; I will not let him suffer" (SS 340). When the wounded-soldier dies the doctor remarks ironically, "See, my poor lieutenant? We dispute about nothing. (SS 341)

What a strange kind of callousness we find there in human psyche during war-time and that may ultimately be amalgamated in soldiers' behavior.

In "*Soldiers Home*" Krebs, an excellent mariner of America expects a hero's welcome on his return from the war but he is denied of that heroic greeting and this humiliation leads him to remorse of his participating in war. Because, once the war is over, the people become indifferent to their saviors and a lot of heroes die unknown and unsung. Moreover, stark realities of the battle field and hollowness of the traditional values compel Krebs to live a life of dissipation and licentiousness. When his mother counsels him that "God has some work for everyone to do" and consequently "there can be no idle hands in His

kingdom,” he anxiously replies, “I am not in His kingdom” (SS 115). He becomes agnostic and believes only in his own practical experiences at front which he thinks to be above every preaching.

Henry, the soldier protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms* valorously evacuates the wounded soldiers on the cost of his life. He takes risk of fetching food for his associates despite heavy shelling and gets wounded due to explosion of a trench mortar. He endures the pain stoically and goes back to the front again after his recovery. He also pacifies the agony of Passini, Manera and the Priest who desire to stop the war at any cost because they continuously live under dreadful condition and behave abnormally due to constant fear of death. Passini is ready to be labeled as a coward but not ready to die fighting in meaningless war. Hemingway reveals the hellish condition of soldiers who “have nothing but frostbites, chilblains, jaundices, gonorrhoea, self-inflicted wounds, pneumonia and hard and soft cancrs” (Srivastava 11) and their remarkable bravery in such uncongenial atmosphere. Henry convinces Passini that in case of surrender, enemy would take their land and humiliate their sisters which would be worse than war. Hemingway points to the ensuing barbarity of the enemy soldiers which should be checked by International laws.

At the Tagliamento Bridge, the killing of the Italian officers by the carabinieri causes Henry to desert the army. The hollow and stupid wartime slogans like “sacred soil of the fatherland,” “fruits of victory” and “Italy should never retreat” (AFTA 161) now aggrieve his soul. His genuine zeal to serve a suffering humanity is washed away with his diving into the Tagliamento River. When

a bar-man in Stressa asks him why he participated in war, he crisply replies “I don’t know. I was a fool” (AFTA 182). Hemingway advocates to avoid the frenzies of war that kills “the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially” (AFTA 178). That’s why Passini doesn’t want to fight and the committed soldier like Henry abandons army.

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Jordan proves himself an adamant soldier like his grandfather who had fought in the American Civil War as a republican. He accepts the communist discipline and promisingly fights for the loyalist cause in Spain. The Guadarrama Mountains have a strategic bridge and Jordan is expected to impair the supply line of the Fascists by blowing it up during the Republican attack. But, while Jordan was crossing the road, his horse is hit by a bullet and his thigh bone is crushed under the weight of the horse and he cannot resume the journey. In spite of Maria’s entreaties he refuses to go back with guerillas and covers the retreating companions at the cost of his life. For Jordan, failure would mean not only loss of self-esteem but also a heavy loss of life and property. In the end, while he is badly wounded and anticipating his death, he jokingly thinks, “I ought to carry the spare leg, too” (FWBT 467) to resume the fighting. Haunted by Maria’s love he wishes to fight and contemplates “If we win here we will win everywhere. The world is a fine place and worth the fighting for and I hate very much to leave it” (FWBT 438).

Henry was compelled by stupid Carabinieri to renounce the war, but Jordan fulfils his duty of blowing up the bridge, and dies in harness heroically. Ray B. West confirms,

While Frederic Henry deserts the Italian army, Robert Jordan continues a mission which he knows to be hopeless. He is self-sacrificing, undefeated, and affirmative. (Dahiya, Hero 121)

The paradox of the hero is that he fights war to save a republic and himself, is disillusioned to carry out the impossible orders hurled from the senile top brass and accepts discipline of the system only as a necessary evil. Hemmingway lashes at the frenzy military system that works unheedingly and kills many innocent soldiers. Citing Pilar's brutalities over the communists Hemmingway avers how people who are initially decent turn violent and even barbarous once they have tasted blood. Scott Donaldson writes that "modern warfare spread its violence indiscriminately, maiming innocent civilians as well as dedicated combatants (130).

The expatriates of *The Sun Also Rises* have once fought with enthusiasm but the war has shattered their lives like the defeated chessmen. In a military exploitation, Jake has been emasculated and becomes sexually disabled which embarrasses him off and on. In Milan hospital, a major pats him praising, "You, a foreigner, an Englishman (any foreigner was an Englishman) have given more than your life" (Fiesta 29). Although he does not surrender to despondency but when his nymphomaniac lover Brett openly flirts him, he curses the day he joined the army. His every attempt to consummate her terminates into an ignominy and he himself has to arrange her escapade with Romero, a sturdy bull fighter. In Hotel Montoya, when he hears the laughter of Brett and Mike in

bed, he feels crazy and laments that the war "was in reality a calamity for civilization, and perhaps would have been better avoided" (Fiesta 17). Hemingway recounts the humiliation of the soldiers who are invalidated out of the forces in such a way that they have to bear the stings of being impotent and resultant laughing stock in society.

Across the River and into the Trees reveals colonel Cantwell as a struggling officer and war veteran. His untarnished valour, unique courage and indefatigable tirelessness exhibit him an iron man of invincible prowess. Like Santiago, he roars, "a man can be destroyed but not defeated" (OMAS 250) but, the insane brutality of war and indiscrimination among the ranks has made him an existentialist. He has got injured his right hand, head and body, and his face has also been disfigured. His soul is badly bruised by the indifferent commanders and constant war. Moreover, the corruption, cruelty and hypocrisy of military world have got on his nerves and he openly criticizes the generals who fight only on the wall-maps away from the battle-field. During his visit to Venice Cantwell denounces war as "the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth" (Hemingway, *Men at War*, xiv-xv.) wherein the numerous soldiers fought with him and were ruthlessly butchered. To decorate the fellow soldiers who made supreme sacrifice, he erects a mock war-memorial. Hemingway bitterly attacks the corruption involved in the forces which corrodes the weaponry equipment and eats away the vital of a nation. He compares the soldiers with gold and leaders with iron and worries "if gold rusts, what shall iron do?" (Tilak 88)

In Hemingway's works, the soldier-heroes fight enthusiastically with unique courage. They endure pain without grumbling and adhere to a certain military code of conduct which leads them to spiritual triumph even in the face of defeat. But the noble zeal of young men to join the front finally imbibes in them a sense of depression. In trenches they kill the others for the reason they don't know and realise that "modern warfare is 'so utterly insensible' that taking part in it amounts to nothing more than suicide" (Hamid 36). Henry and Jake, Jordan and Cantwell all are committed soldiers but ultimately repent their enlistment in army.

Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* struggles in the Gulf Stream single-handed against the sharks but succeeds in bringing only a skeleton of a giant marlin which reduces his victory into mockery. When the old man comes back tired, people do not praise him but consider him unlucky. In the same way, the soldiers show their unbent

valour at front but finally grumble on their skeleton-like achievement in life because all the flesh has already been eaten away by the other hypocritical sharks. The soldiers are compelled to rethink- were they fighting to save these sharks? They do not win at the front of the society and are badly defeated. These men, who are selfless and 'without politics', (SS 58) find themselves "on the borderline of sanity and insanity, reality and unreality, and ultimately, life and death (Falco 115). Due to extreme stresses most of the soldiers are ready to hang their boots half-way without completing their terms of service and even without taking pensionary benefits. They never let their sons go to the front and this tendency weakens the defence mechanism of a nation. Some soldiers are lucky enough to make their best way in society but in most cases the "Death is a sovereign remedy for all misfortunes" (DIA 104)

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