

# Autobiographical Elements in Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls

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Hemingway's life was a rich reservoir from which he drew many characters and heroes for his works. His typical hero shares one of many of Hemingway's ideals. He leads a life of action, has courage and dignity, is wounded, and shows strong points in the hours of distress or tension. According to Philip Young, who propounded the theory of two heroes—"The Hemingway hero", and "the code-hero", the "code-hero", adds Young, alludes to the Hemingway hero who lives by the code of manhood, courage, fearlessness, stoicism and "grace under pressure". Philip Young defines the code-hero as "made of the controls of honor and courage which in a life of tension and pain make a man and distinguish him from the people who follow random impulses, let down their hair, and are generally messy, perhaps cowardly, and without inviolable rules for how to live holding tight".<sup>1</sup>

The code hero has mastery over his emotions and the Hemingway hero tries to acquire as he progresses. Thus, when the Hemingway hero grows through the various works of the author, he acquires this "code", and

the learning process is completed in *The Old Man and the Sea* where in the personality of Santiago both the heroes are merged.

Dr. Bhim Singh Dahiya, in a very exhaustive study of the nature of Hemingway's heroes, sums up the existing criticism on it and points out where he differs from it. For him, heroes not agree to the widely accepted theory of the code-hero, teaching the Hemingway hero, for the latter not only learns from his own experience but has also the ability to make serious commitments in the life which the former has not. Dr. Dahiya insists that the heroism "is not a matter of physical courage nor of personal success in the dangerous situations; it is characterized by his larger concern for the fate of human society, by his complex awareness of life, and by his mental courage that shows itself in withstanding stresses and strains of his complex awareness"<sup>2</sup>. Hemingway's hero is an embodiment of Hemingway's ideals of manhood and courage, fearlessness, honour and stoicism, popularly known as the Hemingway "code" which tests him in

the hours of tension and pressure. All these qualities are possessed by Hemingway's hero Robert Jordan, the central figure of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. He is the perfect representative of Hemingway's philosophy. Like Frederic Henry's commitment to Catherine and to humanity, and Hudson's to his art of painting, his is with the plight of the loyalists in the Spanish Civil War.

Just as Hemingway in his real life, as a volunteer, joined war, Robert Jordan as a volunteer, joined the International Brigade to fight against the Fascists, and was assigned the duty of blowing up a strategic bridge to facilitate the Loyalist offensives. His assignment in Spain is like that of Frederic Henry except that Jordan does not bid farewell to arms even when he is on the verge of losing the battle. Since, Hemingway is showing a progressive hero, Jordan comes somewhere between his early and later heroes: "the young man crushed and defeated by a world he did not make and cannot understand and the older battered survival whom many crushing cannot defeat".<sup>3</sup> Hemingway himself was a relentless fighter in his real life.

Besides, Jordan may be linked with earlier heroes, too. Like Nick Adams, he recalls his fathers' suicide, as also the lynching of a Negro in Ohio, and like Jake Barnes, he has some knowledge of bull-fighting. Being more mature than Frederic Henry in similar situations, he shows the greater and more complex awareness of life. He has become strong at places where others were broken. Like Hemingway

himself, Robert Jordan is also a man of action rather than a man of thought. His high Impractical ideas and a false sense of honour and dignity, like Hemingway, do not appeal to him. Like Hemingway, he does not deceive; he "is honest when he acts honestly."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, Hemingway's philosophy of action has best been presented in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which has been taken from the science of bull-fighting in which, "there is certainly much cruelty, there is always danger, either sought or unlooked for, and there is always death."<sup>5</sup>

Just as Hemingwayjr was a firm believer in action rather than in plans, same is the case with Robert Jordan who is an artist and having plans to write, but decides to become a bridge-blower and not a thinker. He goes on asking himself to stop thinking as he does not want it to interfere with his work. "Turn off thinking," he reminds himself, "you are a bridge-blower now"<sup>6</sup>. A strong believer in the performance of his duty, he is prepared to sacrifice his life for the cause. Like other Hemingway's heroes, he enjoys a good life, like wine and sex, eating and drinking, but he is not an epicurean, a coward or an escapist. His life of pleasure, including his love-affair with Maria is not allowed to interfere with his work of blowing the bridge. Not agreeing with this view, Alvah Bessive feels that the struggle of the Spanish people for "survival and decency was subordinated to an endless episode in a sleeping bag"<sup>7</sup>. It is an important

part of Hemingway's autobiographical mode.

The difference between Frederic and Jordan, who is the most perfect representative of Hemingway himself, is not, as the critics have argued, between the one, who is self centered and nihilistic, and the other, who is committed to certain abstract values. What the critics generally contrast for proving the supposed opposition between Henry and Jordan are the following utterances of the two protagonists: Frederic Henry's:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred

Glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in

Vain...I had seen nothing sacred, and the things

That were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices

Were like the stockyard at Chicago if nothing was

Done with the meat except to bury it.<sup>8</sup>

And Robert Jordan's

You are not a real Marxist and you know it

You believe in Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

....you have put many things in abeyance to

win a war. If this war is lost all of those things

are lost.

The two passages can be made to look antithetical to each other. Actually, both assertions are essentially the same.

In any case, his love for Maria does not come as an obstacle in the way of his work as it was also in case of Hemingway. Having her with him only in his idle time, Jordan carefully balances between his duties and his recreation which is also a popular notion of Hemingway's philosophy. And by doing so, he shows his maturity and responsibility. Frederic Henry shows his capacity for pleasure while acting under pressure and stress, but it does not mean as utter disregard to duty. His love for Catherine does not come in the way of his larger concerns for humanity.

The role of Renata in *Across the River and into the Trees* is also symbolic in the fact that she represents life in the midst of death. Holding her in his arms, Cantwell feels as if he were embracing the very life itself, while with her, he forgets all the bitter memories of war or other unpleasant emotions.

Thomas Hudson, though devoted to art, loved many women, welcomed them for a while, and "liked having them there, sometimes for quite a long time. But in the end, he was always glad. When they had gone, even when he was very fond of them"<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the greatest pleasure for the hero comes from the performance of his duty and his involvement in mankind. His enjoyment of life can only strengthen the faith in life and contribute to a larger cause of

humanity. There is an inexplicable sense of pleasure that Jordan feels in doing his duty. Here also, he shares some ground with Hemingway who was also of the same notion.

But, it does not mean, however, that Jordan is all happy with the war, (as it was also the case with Hemingway himself) particularly with the loyalists as well as his own participation in it. In the same way, the creator of Jordan, i.e. Hemingway, wanted to join army but he never glorified war in his novels. Like Henry, Jordan has the moments of depression of disillusionment and disenchantment, which deceives Pablo and other Spanish guerrillas. But to the Hemingway hero, his wounds or depressions do not make him abandon the cause. His heroism lies in rising above these for the betterment of humanity. Frederick's wound and Jordan's disillusionment do not hinder them from their noble pursuits.

According to Hemingway, each profession has some rites and rituals, which the "code-hero" respects and obeys. Most of these rituals have come from big games which Hemingway has taken as models. The ritual of hunting consists in that no life is to be sacrificed in vain, that animals be killed cleanly so as to give the least pain, and that they not be left behind wounded. Wilson teaches the "code" of hunting to Francis Macomber. In *Green Hills of Africa*, pop, the hunter, "hated to have anything killed except what we were after, no killing on the side, no ornamental killing, no killing to kill."<sup>10</sup>

Like Hemingway, Robert Jordan, too, respects the ritual of his action. He refuses to kill Pablo without provoking him to fight, for that would mean assassinating him in cold blood. It is against his morality to kill an unarmed man. Hemingway was also a strong believer of such kind of ideas in his real life. Like Hemingway, Jordan also thinks that he is not a professional soldier and his fighting with the loyalist forces is only for safeguarding humanity, democracy and the freedom of individual threatened seriously by fascism. By killing Pablo, he would be acting against that very individuality. Frederic Henry, too, warns the sergeant before killing him. Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, considers it a sin to kill fish only for pleasure; but he is a fisherman by profession, and he fishes to keep himself alive. He, however, observes, the code of fishing because he does not want to give the fish any unnecessary pain and treats it with dignity. This is the code of the hero that critics call "a new morality in action."<sup>11</sup>

To the Hemingway hero, the performance of duty has some religious sanctity. Every profession has its rules--a sort of private philosophy which Hemingway's hero does not want to violate. In *The Mahabharata*, and *The Bhagavad-Gita*, man's duty is considered the greatest religion."<sup>12</sup>The Hemingway hero does not believe in traditional values and superimposed morality. After rejecting "all values judgement of the past", he sets out "in the new world of action in serious

quest for a new value system”<sup>13</sup> These values are tested in Hemingway’s practical life. He fights against the society and institutions which try to impose their own values on him. Similarly, “Robert Jordan is unhappy because he has to suppress” his individuality by carrying out impossible orders which had come from Golz: “But should a man carry out impossible orders knowing what they lead to?” he asks himself Colonel Cantwell was also to worry later over the same problem. It is only for the larger interest of humanity that Jordan is prepared to tolerate such impossible orders, suspending his own individual judgement.

Hemingway himself had fought against traditional values and morality. He said, what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after. To many people with traditional ideas, this would appear a moral anarchy—“a strenuous kind of ethics in which everyman’s law is tailored to his private self”.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, the Hemingway hero is a moral revolutionary like Hemingway himself. He does not pray and does not go to church. If spoken at all, his prayers are only mechanical—a sort of empty ritual to satisfy others or even his own self. He has boundless confidence in his own powers and feels that a man shapes his own destiny. Jake Barnes is a Catholic only “technically”, and gets sleepy during his prayers. Frederic Henry does not love God, but fears him sometimes in the night. Santiago, though simple

and somewhat superstitious is not religious but says “Hail Mary’s”, and “Our Fathers”, and feels better after prayers. Thomas Hudson has no gods and looks at his life pessimistically after the death of his most beloved son, Tom. Robert Jordan, too, is not traditionally religious. Equipped with confidence in his capability, he does not resort to prayers. He believes in work and not “in ogres, soothsayers, or fortune tellers”.<sup>16</sup> He is against killing men or animals but justifies it “when it is for the cause”.

Like Hemingway himself, Hemingway hero is also a man of courage and honour. While defining honour, Hemingway says: “In Spain, hero is a very real thing called *pun donor*, it means honour, probity, courage, self respect and pride in one word. Pride is the strongest characteristic of the race and it is a matter of *pun donor* not to show cowardice”<sup>17</sup> He further says that in order to live in this world a man has “got to be tough” Like Nick Adams, the hero of his short stories, who has suffered both physical and psychic injuries in his fight but he bears his pains silently and uncomplainingly, Hemingway, too, had suffered many injuries during his lifetime. He also could not find something meaningful in his life, and he felt something missing in it. “With him, as with his heroes, to suffer uncomplainingly becomes an important part of the code”.<sup>18</sup>

Hemingway’s idea of stoicism and courage also appears to come from bullfighting: “The usual bullfighter is a

very brave man, the most common degree of bravery being the ability temporarily to ignore possible consequences. A more pronounced degree of bravery, which comes with exhilaration, is the ability not to give a damn for possible consequence, not only to ignore them but to despise them.”<sup>19</sup>

*In Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway had written: “There is honor among pickpockets and honor among whores. It is simply that the standards differ.”<sup>20</sup> The Mexican, Cayetano Ruiz, in *The Gambler, the Nyn and the Radio*, has been hit in his leg by a bullet. He conceals the name of his assailant, ignores his pain and proves worthy of the “honour-among-thieves-concept.” Wilson acquaints Francis Macomber with the code, quoting Shakespeare: “By my truth, I care not; a man can die but once....and let it go which way it will. He that dies this year is quit for the next.”<sup>21</sup>

Harry Morgan, loses an arm and yet he is a tough fellow Colonel Richard Cantwell receives a wound, in the First World War, and faces his death in a very heroic manner. Similarly, like Hemingway, Robert Jordan is a man of courage and the novel about him is “a study of man under the sentence of death.”

Like Hemingway Death has brought Jordan a sincere desire for some accomplishment. The height of stoicism is in one’s indifference to death. “To Jordan, his own death seemed of complete unimportance only a thing to be avoided because it would

interfere with the performance of your duty”. Like Hemingway, in the last Chapter, Jordan lies wounded, full of pain, and yet faithful to his duties, while death stares into his face. He does not want to be shot to avoid the pain. Instead of complaining against his pain, he thanks his stars: “you had much of luck. There are many worse things than this...It was lucky the nerve was crushed.”

As it was the case with Hemingway himself, Jordan is also of the view that to commit suicide as an escape from pain is unthinkable for him. It was his father’s shameful act from which the son suffered all his life. He would not like to associate his name with such a weirdly act. Instead, he looks backward and forward with a sense of calm and satisfaction with no desire “to complain when you have been so lucky”.

All the learning and experience of the Hemingway hero is usually crystallized in the concluding message to the world. It is as if he wishes the world to benefit from his trials. The lesson differs from one novel to another, partly due to variation in Hemingway’s own attitude.

Robert Jordan is the one in the novel who, like Hemingway himself, is aware of all the complexities in values both in individual freedom as well as patterned society. And the complex awareness of the hero is the result of his sensitive and open response to life around him. His vision of life is neither colored-as Anselmo’s-by any irrational faith in the Republican

cause, nor distorted-as is Pablo's-by any morbid concern for idealism. He had also felt, like Anselmo, a kind of religious feeling in doing his duty for the better cause of humanity.

Now, when Jordan has had the first hand experience of the system operating in the Republican military and politics, he is no longer a votary of that strict discipline he had so enthusiastically approved of in the beginning. It is despite his feeling of disenchantment, however, that Jordan accepts the duty of blowing up the bridge, and it is this disenchanted hero whom we see at the opening of the novel. In his real life, Hemingway was also not in favour of war activities. Jordan's situation, thus one recalls, is quite like that of Frederic Henry who carries a similar feeling of disenchantment with the Italian army and politics in the very opening of the novel. But the important thing about the Hemingway hero is that disenchanted or wounded, he betrays the better cause of humanity. It is in this commitment to the betterment of human society that his heroism lies. Frederick's stay on the Italian front despite his wound and disillusionment, and so is Jordan's fulfilling his duty of blowing up the bridge despite his disenchantment with the Republic management of war.

Thus, the paradox involved in the stance of the Hemingway hero is that while he must fight wars for the better interests of mankind, he can never accept the position of a professional soldier; that while he is firmly committed to the dignity and

liberty of individual human beings, he cannot accept killing as a vocation of his life; that while he must accept discipline of the system as a necessary evil for carrying out his commitments, he can never accept the system that reduces the individual's identity to general signs and symbols on the papers. In the same way, Hemingway also rejected such kind of systems in his real life.

Like him, Hemingway has portrayed his heroes optimistic rather than pessimistic in spite of many problems they face which seem to make them disappointed. We can quote the example of Harry Morgan in this context who loses his hand in his life but manages to tell the world before his death that a man alone, no matter how strong, has no chance in this world. Santiago half endorses Harry Morgan's lesson, but with an optimistic note: "A man can be destroyed but not defeated". Thomas Hudson had been successful in every respect except in his married life. He had learned not to quarrel with women and not to get married. But for him, "these things have been nearly as difficult to learn as how to settle down the paint in a steady and well ordered way at Gaylord's, "he had only started his education". He, then, learns about the smell of death from Pilar, the ecstatic experience with Maria, the negligence of the gypsy, the bravery of El Sorda and his band, the false glorification of La Pasionaria and the deception of Pablo. He learns all these things in a few hours' time--an amazing thing which tempts him "to

live a long time instead of going to die today because "I have learned much about life in these four days; more, I think than in all the other time".

The learning experience is so good that he would have preferred to become an old man so as to go on learning more and more. But a doubt assails him whether one goes on learning endlessly or comes to a point at which the learning stops. In any case, he wishes he had more time because he has to learn a lot about which he knows so little. To wish to learn without being able to transmit to others would amount to a selfishness which is not inherent in the hero's character.

This stand of Hemingway hero is also revealed by the circumstances in which he is placed in the war: he is always a kind of learner of a small group of people and never a commoner under the command of someone else. No doubt, both Frederic Henry and Jordan are under the command of their superiors, but his command is either at a distance as in the case of Jordan or almost non-interfering as in the case of Frederic. It is only in the position of unthreatened individual autonomy that the Hemingway hero most happily functions. His status as an officer or leader also ensures the necessary freedom he must have to feel as a free individual. When Frederic Henry deserts the Italian war, it is because of this certainty of stupid death, which would have been for no cause. Jordan does not have to desert the Spanish War because he does not have to face Frederic's kind of

situation. But, at the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Jordan is no less disillusioned with the military pattern than was Frederic. The only difference is that since he has not been compelled by any stupid Carabineer to leave the war and is able to complete his assignment, he is less frustrated than was the hero of *A Farewell to Arms*.

Any interpretation of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is bound to be incomplete without considering it as a great tragedy for not only has it two of the main elements of great action and great character, but also soliloquies of the hero, the observation of the unities of time and place which make it a "thoroughly Aristotelian" tragedy. It is a tragedy, too, in the sense of depicting an unfortunate period in the life of a nation when Robert Jordan, representing the loyalist forces in Spain, is wounded fatally in his symbolic fight against the villainous forces of the fascist Government.

Melville considered "a mighty theme" a necessary condition for a great work of art. It is difficult to gauge accurately what really constitutes a theme great or small. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* decidedly represent themes on two extreme poles in the middle of which lies the themes of other great works whether epic or tragedy. Some of Hemingway's themes of successful novels, if simplified by stripping off their symbolic meaning, are not very great--a lieutenant deserting his army to meet his beloved facing her inevitable death, a



fisherman bringing home a mere skeleton of a marlin after fighting the voracious sharks in the Gulf Stream, of an American blowing up an important bridge to arrest all the fascists' advance, but each one of them as touched by the master hand has been imbued with permanent value which raises the action of these works to a level elevated enough to meet, e.g. Matthew Arnold's concept of "high seriousness", and that of Aristotle of it being "serious, complete and of a certain magnitude".

In Shakespeare's plays, the tragic sense is usually, though not always, achieved in the hero's fall from nobility or higher stature. Hemingway's heroes are simple men, ennobled by their honour, courage and perseverance. The tragic sense in his works comes when the hero, who, in spite of his attained mobility, gets wounded, dies or falls to achieve his goals due to his tragic flaws or failures. Talking of the tragic hero, Aristotle suggests that he is "a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity by some error of frailty. Macneile Dixon in Tragedy fails to understand whether it mean 'a moral or intellectual error, of the heart or head'".

The building up of suspense brings an anticipated end to the novel with its hero waiting for his death. For the supreme misfortune to which the hero comes through his error or frailty in Jordan's case by overconfidence or trust misplaced is terminated with death and so with it the tragic as well

as aesthetic experience. The lifetime experiences of the hero crystallize at the time of his death into an essence by which the author affirms new values, by recalling his heroic deeds. In this way, Hemingway reveals his philosophy of life through Robert Jordan.

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