

THE HEMINGWAY HERO'S OSCILLATION BETWEEN SELF AND SOCIETY IN MEN WITHOUT WOMEN

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Abstract:

In *Men Without Women* Hemingway focuses attention on the protagonist's rootlessness and bewilderment in the chaotic society. He also shows his protagonist in the post-war world where he finds himself alienated and purposeless. Ray B. West suggests that the Hemingway works deal with the condition of man in a society upset by the violence of war. Perhaps Hemingway could visualize no clear-cut solutions to the problem confronting society and he, consequently, became more concerned with the individual. He has consistently refused to become an instrument in the hands of a society that treats man no better than a mere thing. The Hemingway hero is trapped biologically: he signs a separate place, and as an aftermath he suffers from a feeling of truancy.

Key words: AESTHETICISM, DISILLUSIONMENT, FULFILMENT.

INTRODUCTION

The Hemingway protagonist, whose best specimen is Hemingway himself, has actively participated in war but as soon as it is over his inclination is to retreat into aestheticism, which is a sort of dam erected against disillusionment with war as a means of setting social and human problems:

If you serve time for society, democracy, and the other things quite young, and declining any further enlistment make yourself responsible only to yourself, you exchange the pleasant stench of comrades for something you can never feel in any other way than by yourself. That feeling I can not define completely but the feeling comes when you write well and truly of something....¹

The Hemingway hero has no desire to seek fulfilment in the societal frame. He seeks escape from the confused world of economic and political pressures into the secure world of art which he, as an individual, can make according to his own design.

Sometimes we find, in *Men Without Women*, the Hemingway hero's oscillation between self and society. It has often been said that he seeks escape from the chaotic conditions in society into toughness and individualism. Mere individualism obstructs the self from interacting with the oneness and here-ness of his existence – the precise moment in the history of society – and his potentialities for a corporate life will remain locked up within him. The life of a recluse is, evidently incomplete: therefore, he suffers from a feeling of existential guilt. The times may not be good – they were not good ever – but one has to act in a given situation. Rollo May asserts that

My sense of being is not my capacity to see the outside world, to size it up, to assess reality; it is rather my capacity to see myself as a being in the world, to know myself as the being who can do these things.²

And even an artist has certain obligations towards society, as Albert Camus reminds us:

Artist of the past could be at least keeping silent in the face of tyranny. The tyrannies of today are improved; they no longer admit of silence or neutrality. One has to take a stand, be either 'for' or 'against'.³

The Hemingway protagonist in *Men Without Women* asserts himself in the face of tremendous odds and it is his will to struggle that gives him heroic proportions. In all the stories in this volume, Hemingway puts his protagonists in situations when they have to rely completely on their own inner resources and in this way brings out their important inner character. Even death becomes important in his single-minded pursuit of courage and in his obstinate attempts to prove himself. In some stories, the Hemingway protagonists are ageing professionals – boxers, bullfighters or fishermen – who despite their age, show tremendous will-power by their unwillingness to give up; and it is their effort to prove themselves despite their limitations that all the more increases their heroic stature. Hemingway, in “Fifty Grand” has used the bullfight as a means for dramatizing the values he admired namely courage, endurance, dignity and skill. Like hunting, boxing and fishing, the bullfight has certain fixed rules and moreover, the individual has to rely completely on his inner resources. In this story, for instance, the Hemingway protagonist, Jack Brennan, displays extraordinary endurance and courage, the two qualities that Hemingway much admires.

Jack Brennan is an ageing boxer and knows that he cannot beat Walcott. He suffers from insomnia and feels tired all the time. He is training for the fight at Hogan’s health farm and Hogan also feels that Jack cannot win. The narrator, Jerry, who is Jack’s friend, also feels the same. So Jack bets fifty grand on his opponent Walcott: “I’m through with it. I got to take beating. Why not make money on it?”⁴ During the course of the fight Jack suddenly discovers that he has been double-crossed by Morgan and Steinfelt, who own a poolroom, and with whom he had bet his money, and who had asked him to bet on Walcott. Walcott fouls him deliberately hitting him five inches below the belt. Jack is in terrible pain, as the narrator describes him: “I thought the eyes would come out of Jack’s head. They stuck way out. His mouth came open”.⁵

The narrator knows that if he went down, he would lose his bet. He does not accept the foul, calls it an accident and tells the referee that he’s all right and invites Walcott to continue the fight. He displays extraordinary endurance: “Jack’s face was the worst thing I ever saw – the look on it! He was, holding himself and his body together and it all showed on his face. All the time he was thinking and holding his body in where it was busted”.⁶ He fouls Walcott in exactly the same way as Walcott had fouled him and loses the fight on the foul, thereby winning his bet. Earl Rovit calls his fast thinking and action after being fouled as his transformation “from a fully responsive mechanism of instincts into an instructive machine of avarice”.⁷

But this is not the case. Though Jack had bet on Walcott, it was because he knew that he would lose the fight and so, he had decided to make money on it. When Walcott fouled him intentionally, apart from his thinking about losing his money, the other thought that must have been in his mind is the double-cross or betrayal. Walcott must have bet money on him and also wants to lose the fight and here the situation is such that paradoxically the loser is the winner. Jack’s admirable qualities of extraordinary endurance and courage emerge, and as Joseph de Falco observes, “this ordeal finally transcends the immoral quality of his wager”.⁸ We see the extent of Jack’s tightlipped endurance when, after the fight, he says that “It was nothing”.⁹ It is this extreme self-control, this stoicism, that redeems him and elevates him to the status of a hero who makes a strategy for survival in this chaotic society.

In “The Undefeated” the protagonist Manuel Garcia is an ageing bullfighter who is also making a strategy for survival in this chaotic society. He is just out of the hospital after being wounded in a bullfight, but even at this stage he does not want to give up bullfighting. Retana, to whom he requests for an assignment in a bullfight, dissuades him but Manuel remains adamant. Retana puts him in a nocturnal for only three hundred pesetas. The regular picadors are not good and Zurito, a good picador, agrees to pick for Manuel on the condition that if Manuel is not successful that night, he would quit. Zurito also knows that Manuel has declined with age and before accepting to pick for him he had tried to persuade Manuel to give up bull-fighting but Manuel says that he had tried giving it up but had not succeeded. During the fight, he

performs with the cape till it's time for killing the bull with the sword: "It had all been easy up to now. The final stuff with the sword was all he worried over. He did not really worry. He did not even think about it. But standing there he had a heavy sense of apprehension".¹⁰ Manuel realizes that his reflexes have slowed down with age, yet he wants to go on, knowing that it may cost him his life. He performs the "faena" with the "muleta" and then launches himself on the bull with the sword but succeeds only in striking the shoulder-blades. He is thrown on the ground with the bull on him but he is not hurt because the bull is very excited.

In the second attempt, he again strikes bone and is again thrown on the ground with the bull bumping him till it is distracted by the capes. In the next two attempts, he charges on the bull with the sword, as the bull refuses to charge, and again in both attempts strike the shoulder bone, the sword jumping off into the crowd in the fourth attempt but he somehow manages to keep clear of the bull's horns. Manuel earns the scorn of the crowd by his repeated failure in killing the bull and people start throwing cushions and empty bottles at him. He feels extremely embarrassed at his inability to kill the bull properly but this does not lessen his determination. In his next attempt, he feels the bull's horn go into him as he tips on a cushion. After he is tossed clear, he gets up, "coughing and feeling broken and gone".¹¹ Hernandez, the other bullfighter, advises him to go to the infirmary, but he refuses to do so and runs towards the bull, charges, and this time he finally succeeds in driving the sword in: "He felt the sword go in all the way. Right up to the guard, four fingers and his thumb into the bull. The blood was hot on his knuckles and he was on top of the bull".¹²

Manuel, even after he has been badly wounded by the horn, refuses to accept defeat. He is, as Edmund Wilson observes, "defeated in everything except the spirit which will not accept defeat".¹³ He displays extraordinary courage and endurance by making another attempt to kill the bull, in spite of his being badly wounded and in much pain. His victory lies in the manner of his struggle. It is by his will to struggle with courage and endurance that he emerges as the undefeated and establishes his dignity in society.

Hemingway has used the bullfight as a means for dramatizing the values he admired namely courage, endurance, dignity and skill. As Lawrence R. Broer observes that "The bullfight could be viewed as a microcosm of man certainly putting himself against the destructive forces of nature and the overwhelming odds of death, but with one important difference. In the bullring, the forces of death are not nebulous and impersonal, but rather are reduced to something that can be grasped and reached against.... Even death itself becomes bearable, even meaningful, within the ritualized purposes of the bullfight. If the Matador dies, he has the chance to die nobly, fighting bravely and with integrity."¹⁴ The Hemingway protagonist asserts himself in the face of tremendous odds and it is his will to struggle that gives him heroic proportions.

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