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Hemingway and people after combat

Looking at three short stories by Hemingway
about war

Bachelor's project in MLSPRÅK

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Hemingway and people after combat

Writing about people returning from war is not uncommon, from Homer's *The Odyssey*, to William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, and in multiple stories by Hemingway, stories like these have been told for as long as there have been a storyteller culture and conflicts to return from. Ernest Hemingway and many of his contemporaries wrote about the conflicts that defined a lot of the early twentieth century. I will, in this thesis, look at three short stories about war by Hemingway, and compare them to how other writers and historians portray war and conflicts.

Hemingway and the First World War

Firstly, I would like to look at Hemingway in the context of the First World War. Hemingway famously did not get to serve in the US army, marines, or navy because of bad eyesight. (Hemingway Sanford, n.a.) In 1918, at the age of 18, he enlisted in the Red Cross and became an ambulance driver in Italy. (Tucan, 2018, p.30) He was exposed, shortly after arriving, to the brutality of war. When arriving in Europe he experienced a bombardment of Paris. (Meyers, 1985, pp. 27–31) Then, on his first day in Milan he was witness to a factory explosion clean-up. (Mellow, 1992, pp. 57–60) He did not get to work as an ambulance driver for long either. Just after two months, on July 8th, he was wounded while bringing chocolate and cigarettes to the soldiers on the front line. He was hit with a mortar, got shrapnel wounds to both his legs, was immediately operated and spent five days in a field hospital. (Tucan, 2018, p.31) He spent the next six months in a Red Cross hospital in Milan, where he met Agnes von Kurowsky, a nurse at the hospital. They fell in love, and decided to get married in 1919 after Hemingway had returned to the US, but in March, of the same year, she sent Hemingway a letter stating that she had been engaged to an Italian officer. (Putnam, 2006) This was devastation to Hemingway, and you could argue that this rejection was one of the leading factors to his later divorces. You could say that he left them before they had a chance to leave him.

Traditional Military Fiction

Let us look at the traditional war narratives. Military fiction, or war novel, is a piece of fiction where the primary action of the story has to do with battles, the consequences of war, or about someone who is suffering the effects of war. Many of these novels are historical novels. The traditional war novels that came before the First World War concerned themselves with realism, in the sense that the goal was to describe the scenes of war as

accurately as possible. An example of this is the extremely detailed descriptions from *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane. Crane had not experienced war when he wrote the novel, but he managed to write accurately by interviewing survivors from the American Civil War, and reading letters from the conflict. (Øverland, 2017) His writing style leaves little to the imagination “A river, amber-tinted in the shadow of its banks, purred at the army's feet; and at night, when the stream had become of a sorrowful blackness, one could see across it the red, eyelike gleam of hostile camp-fires set in the low brows of distant hills.” (Crane 1917, p. 1) When writing *The Red Badge of Courage*, he also used a technique he called psychological portrayal of fear, something that Hemingway to some extent used in his own writing. (Davis, 1998, p. 65) Crane's style of writing is naturalistic. Naturalism wants to be scientifically objective, and wants to answer the same questions as an historian, how did this happen? However, this does not mean that the story is not fictional. (Bjerck Hagen, 2017) The main character of *The Red Badge of Courage* is fictional, but the story contains some universal truth. What the definition of truth differ from writer to writer, and what they are writing. Historians think the truth is the objective, what happened truth, and thus, they write factual non-fiction. Crane finds truth in the experiences of his fictional characters inner and outer life. *The Red Badge of Courage* is written in a third person limited view, which means that it is in third person, but we follow only the main character. Hemingway and Crane both write fiction that could be true. The biggest difference is the literary techniques they use. Hemingway often use simple, direct, and unadorned prose in his writing. It could be argued that he probably wrote like this because of his background as a journalist.

A look at the three short stories

The three short stories by Hemingway that I am using is from a collection. The short story collection that I am using for this, *In Our Time*, was first published in 1925, just 7 years after Hemingway's experiences in the war. The first story I am looking at was first published in 1930, as an introduction to the collection. (Hemingway, 2003, p 4) You could say that this story introduce the themes and literary techniques Hemingway use throughout the collection. All the stories in *In Our Time* is about war and/or how it affect people.

The story *On the Quai at Smyrna* is set after the First World War, in the Greco-Turkish war during the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire in Smyrna. Smyrna is an ancient Greek city located in what is now Turkey. Furthermore, we know that after the First World War, Greece occupied it and put in place a military administration. (Lim Ersland, 2018) Hemingway's

story do not explicitly state that the story is set during the Greco-Turkish war, but the short story talk about the Turkish officers and the Greek nice chaps. Therefore, we know that it is set during a conflict that involves Greece and Turkey, and we can assume that it has something to do with the first world war, because of when it was written and Hemingway's own experiences. The story is about an evacuation of the city Smyrna. The story is told from a first person perspective, but the story starts with third person perspective. (Hemingway, 2003, pp 11-12) The narrator says, "The strange thing was, he said, how they screamed every night at midnight." (Hemingway, 2003, p 11) First, Hemingway use the pronoun he, "he said", then he starts using me/I, which is used for the majority of the story, "I do not know why they screamed at that time" (Hemingway, 2003, p 11). I would seem like the narrator is not taking responsibility for his own actions, by distancing himself by using we "We used to turn...". (Hemingway, 2003, p 11) The first person perspective makes the story personal, because he invites the readers to put themselves in his perspective, but he also have a very dry non-passionate distant way to talk about the terrors of what is happening, and thus he distances the reader from connecting with the first person perspective. This and the fact that the reader not always know what the narrator is talking about, because of the jarring cuts in topic makes the reading experience disorienting.

An example; in the first sentence of the story we do not know who he is, and this happens again in the sentence "The worst, he said, were the woman with the dead babies." (Hemingway, 2003, p 11) At this point we have not been introduced to anything that would suggest that we were dealing with dead babies, and we do not know who he is. He could be the boy that the Turkish officer think was disrespectful, or the narrator himself as some sort of unreliable narrator who do not tell us that he is himself. Later when he is talking about a dead old woman we are not as startled, because we now know that death is a part of this story, but the way he phrases it makes it seem like the narrator does not look at the old woman as human, but some subject. "there was an old woman, most extraordinary case." (Hemingway, 2003, p 11) Chuck Palahniuk use a similar technique to make his characters seem desensitized to violence in Fight club. In the book there is a part after a bloody fight were the narrator sees half his face imprinted in blood on the floor, and Tyler looks at it and says "cool", instead of acting appropriately and thinking that what had just happened was not okay. (Palahniuk, 1997, p. 51)

The next story I will look at is A Very Short Story. It is the 7th story in the collection, and the story starts during the First World War. It is about a man who falls in love with a nurse. They

are in love, but they do not end up together, because the woman finds another man, an Italian officer. The man, back in USA, contracts gonorrhea at the end. The story is written in the third person, and follows the man from hospital ridden to gonorrhea infected. (Hemingway, 2003, pp 63-66) It is easy to see the parallels between the story and Hemmingway's own experiences during the First World War. The main character of the story starts off injured in a hospital in Italy, Padua, and meets a nurse with name Luz. The three first sentences of the story summarize the story as a whole. It starts off as a hot evening in Padua with birds in the sky, slowly it gets darker, then the searchlights comes on and we understand that this is set during wartime. (Hemingway, 2003, p 63) The hot evening is a parallel with the romance between Luz and our main character, and then it gets darker when they argue before he leaves for home, and then the loneliness, rejection, and gonorrhea is the epiphany that it is war. The main character may trigger some associations to the fisher king as well, whom often is portrayed with an injury in either the thigh or groin. A Very Short Story and On the Quai at Smyrna both have nameless main characters, and we do not get to see the events leading up to characters being where they are, it seems, in both, that there is something more than meets the eye, and that we only see the aftermath of something traumatic. In On the Quai at Smyrna it is the horrors that led to the death that is described, and in A Very Short Story it is the injury that led him to the hospital. We do not know what happened to the main characters.

The next story is substantially longer than the previous two. Soldier's Home is also the first of the stories I am looking at that have a main character with a name. His sister calls him Hare, his mother calls him Harold, and the narrator calls him Krebs. The story is told in the third person, and it is about a boy coming home from war and not being content with his situation. (Hemingway, 2003, pp 67-79) We do not see anything from the war except a picture of Krebs and a comrade with two girls that the narrator do not think is beautiful. They are according to the narrator on the Rhine, but that does not come across in the photo. It is very clear from the text that Krebs have some unresolved mental issues. The narrator repeats multiple times that things are not worth it, and that he do not want to go through the hassle of finding a girl, even though the narrator repeats that he do like to look at girls a lot. Repetition is a much-used technique in Hemingway's writing and in this story. The third person limited point of view give you a feeling that the narrator is Krebs talking about himself in the third person trying to convince himself, that finding a job and a girl is not worth it. Krebs seems to have problems with conforming to normal life, and you could argue that the picture of him and his comrade is a symbol of this. They have the same clothes, but they look too small. You could read it as

symbolism for how war can change you to such an extent that you do not fit in anymore. You could also argue that the picture represent fellowship. Something that many veterans talks about when coming home from war, is that they feel isolated in an uncaring world. (Stein, 2018, pp 1-2) In the book *Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere* by Jacob Siegel we see a similar experience where the main character's wife argue that he is closing himself off and fetishizing his time overseas. (Siegel, 2013) The story also talks about the difficulties of coming back to society when you have experienced great trauma.

In *A Soldier's Home*, in the first picture from before the war, all his fraternity brothers dressed in the same outfit, but here the outfits are not given any thought, so we can conclude that there is nothing wrong with the clothing, and thus, we can say that the changing sizes of clothing represent change. We are told that Krebs fought at Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Mihiel and in the Argonne. You could argue that fighting in all five of these is highly unlikely because they all happened in 1918. Belleau Wood happened the 1th to the 26th of June (Gilbert, na), the Champagne fits with the fourth battle of Champagne which happened on the 15th of July (Palardi, 2019) Soissons happened between the 18th and 22th of July (Edmonds, 1939, p. 249), St. Mihiel happened between the 12th and 15th of September (Gilbert, n.a), and lastly, Argonne was between the 26th of September and the 11th of November. (Augustyn, n.a) It could be possible that he was in all these battles, but when considering he lies a lot about the war, it seems unlikely. This may be just another of these lies. He states that he had to lie just to be heard. Here Hemingway may comment on fictionalized war narratives as a necessity to get people to listen. However, according to further reading, people are tired of hearing stories about atrocities according to the narrator. Therefore, he may say that it is the battle of getting people to listen does not work, or it could be read as people being desensitised to violence and stories about war.

Krebs is from a religious family, and there is a parallel between god and Krebs father. Krebs father is never seen in the story, but his mother talk about his father as if the father was talking through her. She tells Krebs what his father wants and Krebs do not believe that she is telling the truth. Furthermore, Krebs seem to resent both his father and god. He is angry with his father for not letting him borrow the car, and in one instance, he tells his mother that he does not live in god's kingdom. Krebs is angry with god, or have lost the belief in god, possibly because of what happened during his time serving overseas. Krebs are sheltering himself from things that could possibly be uncomfortable, from finding a girl, to a job, and he

states that he just wants his life to go smoothly. Krebs wants safety and comfort, and this is reflected even in his name which means crab in German. The story is about converting back to a normal life after war, and conforming to what is considered normal, but also the difficulties of doing so. The changes that Krebs experienced because of war was not positive for his life, and this is possibly a critique of the changes that happened to the US because of the First World War, from neutrality to conflict to later world police. (HISTORY, 2019) Furthermore, when Krebs reads about the war he tells us that he feel as if he is just learning about the war. This could be read two ways. Either he have lied about what he did in the war, and is just learning about it, or he did not experience the things he is reading about in the way it is written in the book. This could be read as a critique of how historians often do not think about how something felt, but rather how they objectively happened.

Krebs is apathetic, or is trying to be. Albert Camus wrote a book about a man that did not care about anything, and this is a reflection of Camus philosophy that life do not have any meaning if you do not give it meaning. The apathy that Camus main character feels when his mother dies in the beginning if *The Stranger*, he do not even know how long ago his mother passed away, is similar to the way Krebs feels. (Camus, 1942, p. 7) However, a big difference is that Krebs seems to care even though he do not want to admit it. He states that he do want a girl, and he seem to use apathy as a coping mechanism. Camus character have a philosophical struggle more than a psychological struggle, though you could argue that they are both psychologically ill men. *A Soldier's Home* ends with Krebs not going to his father to get a job, which may suggest that he is distancing himself from a conform life and possibly god. He goes to look at his sister playing basketball instead. (Hemingway, 2003, p 79)

Further Comparisons

The three short stories by Hemingway that I have looked at has in common that we never see any combat; we only see the consequences of war. The experiences of the characters from all the stories could be from any war, because they are so general. This makes Hemingway's stories about war timeless, because the chaos, and fear, isolation and post-traumatic stress can relate to any number of wars and to anyone that have experienced combat. You could draw a parallel between Hemingway's short stories and the slave narratives of Fredrick Douglass or something more fictional like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, because they wrote about something terrible that they generalized to such an extent that it captured the essence of how the situations were for many people who was affected by the situation.

(Andrews, n.a) They all wrote for the people who did not have a voice, or could not express it. This seems to be what Hemingway is doing. He does not care about writing the details of combat, he cares about writing what it did to people, how it affected people's lives, and possibly to some extent his own. From *A Soldier's Home*: "His lies were quite unimportant lies and consisted in attributing to himself things other men had seen, done or heard..."

The notion that people can be psychologically, and physically injured by going to war and experiencing violence is nothing new. PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, is something many writers have tried to convey in their work, from Hemingway himself, to Kurt Vonnegut in work such as *Slaughterhouse-Five*, to Bruce Joel Rubin in *Jacob's Ladder*. To express pain in any sense of the word is difficult, almost impossible, and understanding it for someone that is not the victim of it is just as hard. (Tucan, 2018, p.33) The frustration of not being able to express what you feel, and/or not being understood leads to isolation, and possibly depression. This comes across in *A Soldier's Home* in the way Krebs shelter himself from the world and pain that may happen. It is also interesting that because PTSD is such an abstract illness, that it best comes across in work that use unconventional storytelling, such as jumping perspectives, subjective narration, unreliable narrators, and jarring imagery. Hemingway's own writing style is often disorienting and makes the reader feel uncomfortable, which puts the reader in the headspace of a veteran being disoriented and scared. You feel more uncomfortable than scared when reading it, but you could not possibly get the full picture of such an experience through words. Hemingway wants you to understand.

Hemingway's writing is also a contrast with history books, which are all about the facts. When looking at a war you start with a date and end with a date, and everything in between is just statistics and data. This is a pragmatic way to look at periods in history, and it is a good way to get the logistics in place. History in general is a field that concerns itself with how things happened, and not whom, as individuals, it happened to if it was not someone with influence. When looking at battles in history we look at what it was for, who achieved what they were trying to do, and how many were injured and killed. The problem with this and the strength of Hemingway is that he wanted to convey what the individuals experienced on an emotional level. He also looked at what happened to the individuals after the date that historians would set as the end of the conflict, not saying that historians do not look at the consequences of war, but rather that it almost never is about normal individuals and the mind, the way Hemingway and many other authors look at it.

The First World War from a historian's perspective is cause and effect. The most common way to place the war is starting with the shots in Sarajevo in 28th of June 1914, and ending it the 11th of November in 1918. (Brazier, 2019) When looking at the war you often look at the state of the Balkans before the war, and alliances, and during the war you look at the battles, and after the war you look at the immediate aftereffects. In history books, no matter which war you look at, you will find the same information; the politics, the economy, resources, alliances, how many injured and dead, and dates. A common problem with a causal look at history is that you could theoretically argue that the first cause was the big bang. If you have a deterministic look at life you could easily argue that if you had all the factors that the creation of the universe were the original cause. (Tjønneland, 2018) However, that would be silly because you do not have all the factors, and you have to divide history in periods to make it accessible.

Closing statements and conclusion

Hemingway's writing in the three stories that I have looked at is distinctly his. He use simple, direct, and unadorned prose, and a lot of repetition. When reading Hemingway you can often feel that there is something brewing just under the surface, and his unconventional style makes the reader feel some of the confusion and fear of his main characters. He also does not concern himself with direct war and battles, and this makes him stand out from the traditional war narratives that came before him, and further pulls the reader into the confused headspace of a veteran. His writing style also makes the stories feel out of time, in the sense that you could place the stories in any modern setting and year, and it would not feel out of place. Hemingway is in control of the short story as a format. He cuts anything that does not belong. His writing is dense and therefor needs a lot of unpacking, and the stories start in the middle of action, in medias res. The biggest difference between Hemingway and the others I have compared him to, is that he have a single focus, and that focus is on the main characters. Hemingway removes the action of battles, which could have given him a lot of drive. Conflict makes drama, and drama is the most important thing in a story to give it drive, according to among others Robert McKee (McKee, 1998, p.138). To conclude, Hemingway's writing is authentically his own, and his focus and techniques are well put together to make stories about the damage that war can do to a person, both physically and mentally, that makes the reader empathize with the charter and to some extant feel the dread they experience. This is a contrast to the objective writings from history books, and prose of battle that many writers use in their own war narratives.

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