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## Introduction

The First World War lasted from 1914 to 1918. It left parts of Europe completely devastated, especially along what was known as the Western Front between Germany and France. The soldiers came from all over the world to fight for their countries and allies, and thus it became a world war. The generation who fought received the name “the lost generation” postbellum due to the number of soldiers who lost their lives.

Information about the events of the war was mainly given to the civilians through newspapers and propaganda.<sup>1</sup> Another way of spreading information regarding the war was by using literature. Both during and after the First World War, literature with topics related to the war was published. For the United States of America,<sup>2</sup> far away from the battlefields of Europe, the literature became one of the main sources of information regarding the war and how it affected the participants.<sup>3</sup> One author who wrote several short stories and a novel regarding the war was Ernest Hemingway. His collection of short stories *In Our Time* contains stories both related to the war and life after it. What may Hemingway’s short story collection *In Our Time* offer of insight regarding soldiers’ life during the First World War and their return to society after it?

The focal point of this bachelor thesis is two of the short stories found in the collection *In Our Time*, with references to a third. These are ‘A Very Short Story’, ‘Soldier’s Home’, and ‘Big Two-Hearted River: Part 1&2’. These short stories tell of soldiers returning home after the war and their experiences during the war. Therefore, they might provide valuable insight regarding the thesis question. To further analyse how they may provide valuable insight, it is useful to give information regarding the war and the involvement of the US, as well as Hemingway’s own experiences and knowledge of the war.

The bachelor thesis contains four parts. The first one is the approaches used to research the thesis question: Historicism and the socio-historical approach. Both focus on the connection between the historical context and the literature. The second part is the background information, containing both a presentation of the First World War and of Ernest Hemingway. The third part of the paper focus on the short stories and the analysis of what kind of insight they may offer into a soldier’s life during the war and their return to society after it. The fourth and final part of the paper is the conclusion where the findings are presented, as well as possible further research on the topic.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthews 2005: 217.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter written as “the US”.

<sup>3</sup> Matthews 2005: 217.

## Historicism and Socio-historical approach

Historicism focuses on how a text, an artefact or an idea have a meaning related to the historical context where they were created. It claims that everything “is therefore historically determined”.<sup>4</sup> The content of a text needs to be understood based on its historical origin. Through the use of a quote from Paul Hamilton, Simon Malpas explains that a text or an idea cannot be taken out its context of creation to say it “always has and always will mean ‘this’ in and of itself”.<sup>5</sup> According to historicism, the meaning a text might contain will always be connected to political, social, cultural and economic environments of the era in which it was created.<sup>6</sup>

While historicism regards the context and the historical origins of a text, it does not necessarily regard the author, which is what the socio-historical approach does. Both focus on the use of context and history to understand the text, but the socio-historical approach also considers the author’s society and “his or hers position within it”.<sup>7</sup> The author’s individual belonging to a certain group is one of the meanings of the position in society.<sup>8</sup> In the case of literature connected to the First World War, it is necessary to know the context if the focal point of the analysis is the text’s relation to the war. This makes the theories of historicism and the socio-historical approach to useful tools for researching the thesis question.

## The United States and Ernest Hemingway in The First World War

Before the First World War broke out in 1914, Europe experienced a change in its geopolitical system. Throughout the beginning of the century, different alliances were made in case of war on the European continent. The Triple Alliance between Germany, Italy, and Austria from 1882 still existed in 1914. The alliance between France and Russia from 1892/94 gained a new member in 1904/1907 when Britain joined them. This polarization of the political powers in Europe created a tense situation while it still kept the continent safe from war until 1914.<sup>9</sup> While the alliances did not cause the war, they were one of the reasons why it escalated and “broke out the way it did”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Malpas 2007: 55.

<sup>5</sup> Malpas 2007: 57.

<sup>6</sup> Malpas 2007: 57.

<sup>7</sup> Hawthorn 2013: 208.

<sup>8</sup> Hawthorn 2013: 208.

<sup>9</sup> Clark 2013: 122-123.

<sup>10</sup> Clark 2013: 123.

The US did not get involved until 1917, three years after the outbreak of the war. It tried to keep its neutrality throughout the war and use its new role as a leading economic power to negotiate for peace and create a new world organisation. The efforts failed and it was not capable of mediating a peace between the warring countries of Europe. Instead, the US was pulled into the war, which it was well prepared for both economically and intellectually, though the preparations were not specifically made towards the European conflict.<sup>11</sup>

War always has at least two sides fighting against one another. In the case of the First World War, it was Britain, France, and Russia against the Triple Alliance. When the US joined the war, it did so as an opponent to Germany. The German government had, according to President Wilson, “proved to be a menace to world peace and civilization”.<sup>12</sup> World peace would never be secure as long as Germany’s militarism remained in the world, and a peaceful foreign policy could only be pursued by democratic governments, which Germany was not at that time. The goal of the American intervention in the First World War was to assist with the outcome of the European conflict and to make the world safe for the policy of democracy.<sup>13</sup> In June 1918, two million American troops reached the beaches and shores of France in an attempt to stop the German advances.<sup>14</sup> Though the US joined the fight against Germany, the American armed forces were kept separated from those of the European countries with their own command structure,<sup>15</sup> which was the norm at that time.

The war ended with an armistice on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1918. The peace treaties were signed during the Peace Conference in Paris 1919, and among them the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>16</sup> Before the armistice and postbellum, Europe had experienced four years of war. The Western Front was covered with trenches and the lines of the battle had barely moved throughout the war, whereas the Eastern Front was less static.<sup>17</sup> According to Nils Arne Sørensen, 66 251 000 soldiers were mobilised during the war, whereas 9 876 000 of the soldiers died. The US mobilised 2 100 000 soldiers and lost 117 000.<sup>18</sup> Around 50 000 American soldiers died in battle, while most of the rest died of diseases or battle wounds.<sup>19</sup>

Not only did the war claim the lives of many young men, it also caused problems for the survivors due to the mental trauma inflicted caused by the war years. Throughout the entire

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<sup>11</sup> Iriye 2013: 27, 29-30, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Iriye 2013: 41.

<sup>13</sup> Iriye 2013: 41.

<sup>14</sup> Iriye 2013: 43.

<sup>15</sup> Iriye 2013: 42.

<sup>16</sup> Tooze 2015: 228, 255, 306.

<sup>17</sup> Tooze 2015: 33.

<sup>18</sup> Sørensen 2010: 141.

<sup>19</sup> Palmer, Colton & Kramer 2007: 700.

war, soldiers suffered from what the doctors at that time called shell shock. The cause for the trauma could be “fright and anxiety brought about by the explosion of enemy shells and mines, and seeing maimed or dead comrades”<sup>20</sup> as well as emotional shock. The symptoms of a shell-shocked soldier could be convulsions, inability to walk or stand, muteness or loss of memory, taste or other senses.<sup>21</sup> The term shell shock went out of use in the aftermath of the First World War. Since 1980, the term posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD for short) has been used on cases similar to shell shock. The symptoms of PTSD are re-experiencing or re-living the traumatic events in dreams, flashbacks or thoughts, and “emotional numbing and avoidance of stimuli reminiscent of the trauma”.<sup>22</sup> It would be wrong to use the term PTSD on soldiers from the First World War and their mental trauma as that would be a case of anachronism. However, it is useful to point out the symptoms of what is today called PTSD, as it appears to be similar to what the distressed soldiers expressed as symptoms of shell shock during the war.

One of the American soldiers who fought in the First World War was Ernest Hemingway. Born and raised in Oak Park, he left home to work as a reporter for *Kansas City Star* in 1917 shortly after the US had declared war on Germany. Through his job as a journalist, he learned to write short and concrete sentences.<sup>23</sup> This style is recognizable in the short story collection *In Our Time*.

Hemingway resigned from *Kansas City Star* in 1918. He had applied to the American Red Cross and was called to war shortly after he quit his job. Like many other youths around the time of the First World War, Hemingway left for the war with enthusiasm and anticipation for the adventures to come. Upon arrival, he was sent to Schio, Italy where he worked as an ambulance driver. Later, he volunteered for the front against Austria and was sent to the Piave River front. There, in Fossalta, he was wounded in both legs and had to leave the battlefield to heal and recover. He tried returning to his work for the American Red Cross, before travelling back to the US.<sup>24</sup>

## *In Our Time*

*In Our Time* was published for the first time in 1925. The story of the collection began in 1923 with the publication of Hemingway’s first volume of writings, *Three Stories and Ten Poems*. It was published in Paris right before Hemingway and his wife Hadley left France for Canada and

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<sup>20</sup> Crocq & Crocq 2000: 49.

<sup>21</sup> Crocq & Crocq 2000: 49-50.

<sup>22</sup> Crocq & Crocq 2000: 53.

<sup>23</sup> Shaw 1974: 18.

<sup>24</sup> Shaw 1974: 19-20.

the birth of their son. During their time in Canada, Hemingway managed to publish several short sketches he had written in Paris. The short sketches and the three stories from *Three Stories and Ten Poems* and several new ones were published together as a short story collection in 1925 under the name *In Our Time*. The vignettes, or the short sketches, introduce the short stories.<sup>25</sup> The edition of *In Our Time* used here is the Scribner paperback edition from 2003.<sup>26</sup>

Hemingway's war experience worked as an inspiration to the stories he wrote, but the stories are not biographical.<sup>27</sup> Due to this, he will only be mentioned when there is a correspondence between the story and his life. The focus will be on the short stories 'A Very Short Story' and 'Soldier's Home' along with the vignettes used to introduce them. 'Big Two-Hearted River Part 1&2' will also be used, but to a smaller degree. The short stories have been examined in the light of three themes; nature, emotions and trauma, and women.

## Nature

The theme of nature appears several times throughout the chosen stories from *In Our Time*. It is mostly referred to in the vignettes, but also in the longer short stories. The theme of nature might offer insight into a growing awareness of nature's indifference regarding humanity. Nature and time will continue to pass as it always does, without pausing for war.

This theme appears throughout the entire vignette introducing chapter VI 'A Very Short Story'.<sup>28</sup> The character Nick has been wounded quite badly in both legs during an attack during the war,<sup>29</sup> but the war continued on nonetheless. "The sun shone on his face. The day was very hot"<sup>30</sup> signifies an indifference from nature. Regardless of the war and that Nick is wounded, dirty and sweaty, the sun will still be there and shine mercilessly. Nature will continue. It will not hide or pause until the war is over, regardless of one or two soldiers who might live or die.

Another vignette where the theme of nature is present is the one at the start of chapter VII 'Soldier's Home'. At the beginning of the vignette, the character is found lying in a trench while it is bombarded, praying for his life and for Jesus to get him out of there. He states that if Jesus gets him out of there alive, he will believe and tell everyone he meets that Jesus is "the only one that matters".<sup>31</sup> The bombing moves away from his location and "in the morning the

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<sup>25</sup> Shaw 1974: 27.

<sup>26</sup> Hemingway 2003: 5.

<sup>27</sup> Gatzemeyer 2016: 114.

<sup>28</sup> Hemingway 2003: 63.

<sup>29</sup> Hemingway 2003: 63.

<sup>30</sup> Hemingway 2003: 63.

<sup>31</sup> Hemingway 2003: 67.

sun came up and the day was hot and muggy and cheerful and quiet”.<sup>32</sup> The morning is a contrast to the bombardment. The bombing is loud and ruining the trenches causing the soldiers to lay down and pray, while the morning brings the sun and stillness. The soldiers find the weather hot and extremely humid, making them uncomfortable, yet the sun shines and the world is quiet. The character who prayed and promised to tell everyone “never told anybody”.<sup>33</sup> This, along with the continuation of nature, gives the reader a feeling of lost belief. Life goes on, regardless of the praying soldier, and the bombing continues but in a different place. Neither Jesus nor nature and life are going to intervene, causing the belief to be abandoned and left to fade away.

The opening page of ‘Big Two-Hearted River: Part 1’ once more picks up the theme of nature, its indifference, and continuation. It presents the reader with the character Nick’s experience as he returns to a place he has been before. What he sees is a place burnt to the ground. “There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country”<sup>34</sup> echoes the battlefields of the First World War, where the towns around the Western Front were burnt to the ground and the fields left devastated as “trees [...] stood there as mere mutilated and blackened trunks”.<sup>35</sup> Amidst the ruins of human civilisation, a river still ran through the burnt down area.<sup>36</sup> Nature continues even when all of society has faded or burnt away. This is the same as with the sun which shone brightly over the battlefield in the vignette for chapter VI or the sun that came up with the morning after the bombardment of the trenches in the vignette for chapter VII. The river runs, the sun comes up and life goes on, no matter the devastation of humanity or soldiers’ experiences. Nature’s indifference might have left the soldiers feeling small and meaningless in the grand scheme of things.

### Emotions and trauma

Nature’s indifference might have broken more than one soldier’s belief in society and humanity, but the First World War also managed to do so with all its horrors. Life in the trenches consisted of being surrounded by corpses with bombings and gas attacks at regular intervals. The soldiers were sometimes forced to run through no-man’s land, the field separating their trench from their enemies, to attack the enemy soldiers. No-man’s land was covered with decaying bodies and desolation.<sup>37</sup> The soldiers became scarred for life and many suffered from stress syndromes and psychological trauma for years after the war. Hemingway’s short stories containing characters

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<sup>32</sup> Hemingway 2003: 67.

<sup>33</sup> Hemingway 2003: 67.

<sup>34</sup> Hemingway 2003: 133.

<sup>35</sup> Carpenter 2016: 118.

<sup>36</sup> Hemingway 2003: 133.

<sup>37</sup> Carpenter 2016: 117.

returning home from the war might offer the readers a slight insight into how the war experience affected the soldiers' emotions and caused trauma.

'Soldier's Home' tells the story of Krebs and his return home from the war. He expresses what could be read as feelings of being different and standing outside of society. Upon his return, he did not want to talk about the war, and when he did "no one wanted to hear about it".<sup>38</sup> The war had not taken place in the US and might have seemed distant and uninteresting for the civilians who took no part in it as time passed by. To be heard about his war experiences, Krebs had to lie about the events happening around him to make them interesting enough. The lies made him dislike the war and gave a "distaste for everything that had happened to him in the war".<sup>39</sup> Nobody seemed to care about what he had experienced as the reality was not thrilling enough for them,<sup>40</sup> and the war itself had made him fall out of society and marked him as different from the rest. It was only around other soldiers that he could speak the truth and say that during the war "he had been badly, sickeningly frightened all the time".<sup>41</sup> Only those who had been there themselves could understand the war and what it had done to him.

The feeling of being outside of one's own society is also present in two comments Krebs makes about the girls he sees in his hometown. He would like to talk to them but "here at home it was all too complicated"<sup>42</sup> and "the world they were in was not the world he was in".<sup>43</sup> He is still caught up in the war and finds homelife, where he has to make his own decisions and could not expect the girls to "come to him and not wanted to talk",<sup>44</sup> troubling and unfamiliar. It is too complicated compared to the soldier's life he experienced in the war where he just had to follow orders from his commanders, and pay for sex if he wanted a girl's company. The society he originated from no longer matched the society he had been a part of during the war. Upon returning, these different societies made their members feel like they belonged to different worlds.

What the soldiers experienced during the war left them with a feeling of standing outside of the society they came back to, and emotionally and psychologically traumatised. The American soldiers joined the war close to its end and did not participate for as long as the Europeans did, yet the trauma affected all the war's soldiers. They lived in a world where dead corpses, friends or enemies, lay around them all the time, and where they themselves could be

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<sup>38</sup> Hemingway 2003: 69.

<sup>39</sup> Hemingway 2003: 69

<sup>40</sup> Hemingway 2003: 69.

<sup>41</sup> Hemingway 2003: 70.

<sup>42</sup> Hemingway 2003: 72

<sup>43</sup> Hemingway 2003: 72

<sup>44</sup> Hemingway 2003: 72.

killed or wounded at any time. When they came back to society, they would be emotionally numbed without a taste for anything and avoid anything that reminded them of the war. Krebs tells his mother that he does not love anybody when she asks him if he loves her, which fits in with his emotional numbness regarding the society and the people around him.<sup>45</sup> The emotional numbness may also be related to the meeting with nature's indifference, with a lost belief in progress, humanity, and life. These symptoms fit the case of both shell shock and PTSD regarding the emotional numbness and avoidance of anything reminding the soldiers of the war.<sup>46</sup> By reading 'Soldier's Home', the reader might gain an insight into how horrible the war was for the soldiers, and how hard they felt the homecoming was.

In 'Big Two-Hearted River', Nick travels alone. During the travel along the river, he reflects back on things he had not enjoyed in a long time, but which he has the time for out in the wilderness all by himself.<sup>47</sup> While he might not feel different from the rest of the society around him, he has chosen to travel on his own and be alone. After setting up camp, he states that the place he chose "was good".<sup>48</sup> It is filled with solitude and nature,<sup>49</sup> everything the war did not have. It is the last story in *In Our Time* and it gives a feeling of conclusion where Nick has moved on from the past. For the reader, this might give an insight into the fact that it is possible to get on with life and heal to some degree from the trauma the war might have brought upon the soldiers.

## Women

The theme of women appears in many of the short stories in *In Our Time*. One of these is 'A Very Short Story' which tells the story of a wounded soldier who falls in love with his nurse and has a relationship with her until he leaves to go home.<sup>50</sup> Even though Hemingway has said that none of his stories are based on his life,<sup>51</sup> this story seems to be heavily inspired by his own wartime romance with his nurse after he was wounded in Fossalta.<sup>52</sup>

When reading Hemingway's *In Our Time*, it seems that some of the characters started to lose their belief in the idea of romance and courtship. This is found in 'A Very Short Story' where Luz ended her relationship with the nameless male character after falling in love with an

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<sup>45</sup> Hemingway 2003: 75-76.

<sup>46</sup> Crocq & Crocq 2000: 49, 53.

<sup>47</sup> Hemingway 2003: 140.

<sup>48</sup> Hemingway 2003: 140.

<sup>49</sup> Hemingway 2003: 145.

<sup>50</sup> Hemingway 2003: 65-66.

<sup>51</sup> Gatzemeyer 2016: 114.

<sup>52</sup> Shaw 1974: 19-20.

Italian major. She writes to the male character to tell him that their love “had been only a boy and girl affair”,<sup>53</sup> thus comparing their love with a summertime affair. A summertime affair is commonly known as something which is short lived for one summer. By comparing the romance these two had during wartime to the love affair of the summer, the romance is scaled down and regarded as something without any deeper meaning. The disbelief in the idea of romance is further supported by the soldier when he, after the break-up, “contracted gonorrhoea from a sales girl in a loop store while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park”.<sup>54</sup> There was no courting and no love, just the need for sex. To the reader, it might be understood as a lack of belief in romance after the first try did not work and was called a boy and girl affair.

The unwillingness and lack of motivation for courtship and romance may also be found in ‘Soldier’s Home’. While watching the girls in his hometown, Krebs thinks that “he would like to have a girl but he did not want to spend a long time getting her”.<sup>55</sup> This presents a lack of belief in courtship and the ideal romance. It was not worth getting involved in what he refers to as intrigues and politics and more telling of lies.<sup>56</sup> It would be simpler if he could keep to the way of the army; if he wanted a girl, he would get a girl,<sup>57</sup> most likely from a brothel. The belief in the idea of romance is broken as it becomes too complicated and demands too much of a soldier. If they wanted a girl, they went to a brothel and paid for one. Not out of love, but out of need. Romance took too long and was not worth the time.

## Conclusion

The short story collection *In Our Time* offers an insight into how the soldiers’ lives were during the war and in their return to society after it. One of these insights is the soldiers’ attitude towards nature. Nature was indifferent to humanity and showed no mercy nor sympathy throughout the war. The soldiers might die or survive, but life and nature continued anyway.

The attitude towards nature of feeling meaningless and helpless, combined with the trauma of wartime, gave a feeling of being different and standing outside of society. Upon returning from the war, they found themselves in a society where the war did not matter. The characters did, after all, return to an American civil society which had not felt the tremors of the First World War. The war experience caused soldiers psychological trauma. The emotional numbness made the soldiers lose their belief in romance. They stopped caring and loving those

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<sup>53</sup> Hemingway 2003: 66.

<sup>54</sup> Hemingway 2003: 66.

<sup>55</sup> Hemingway 2003: 71.

<sup>56</sup> Hemingway 2003: 71.

<sup>57</sup> Hemingway 2003: 72.

close to them, as seen by Krebs in 'Soldier's Home when he tells his mother he does not love her or anybody.

*In Our Time* may, with its themes of nature, emotions and trauma and women, offer an insight for the reader to gain a slight understanding of why the returning soldiers are behaving the way they do based on what they might have experienced. This would have been helpful for contemporary readers if they knew someone who had been involved in the war. It would also offer insight for later readers regarding the life of the soldiers during and after it. The war devoured the participants' belief in progress, nature, humanity, and love. Postbellum, an insight into why this might be the case would be helpful for those who did not participate to understand those who did, and this might be offered in Hemingway's *In Our Time*.

For further research on the topic of what literature might offer of insight into the First World War and the soldiers' experiences with the war, it would be useful to examine more stories and compare them to see what is similar and what is different in the presentations. Since *In Our Time* is written by an American and mostly using American characters, it excludes the European soldiers who fought longer and the civilians who experienced the war by being close to it. Therefore, it would be useful to look at other stories with the war as the setting and a European author and compare these to Hemingway's stories to see if there is a difference. An example of a novel to use is *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque. The use of other articles and books related to both Hemingway and the First World War may also be helpful to find new ways to look at the short stories and gain new insight in how to use them to expand on the work presented in this paper.

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