



## **Hemingway and America : A study of To Have and Have Not**

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The Wall Street Crash in 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression of the thirties set in grim suffering in America as well as Europe. In the 20s, America had become a nation of consumers paying for the new technology in installments. Debt became a way of life in the rush to buy now and live now. The people were wrapped in a cocoon of security and exhilaration. And then the bubble burst. Following the Wall Street Crash, there occurred a deep rift in the American life which Irving Howes says was basically “a rift in that benign continuity Americans had supposed to be their particular blessing.” The assumption they carried that they lived safely under the canopy of providential destiny was shattered. As it happened, the first tremors in the Stock Exchange were felt in late September, 1929 when there was a large withdrawal of funds to London due to a scandal on the London Exchange. Big speculators started selling their holdings, followed by others. Panic prevailed. There were efforts by a group of bankers to buy stock but this also did not help. On October, the Crash finally took place. More than 16,000,000 shares were liquidated. By an account, by the end of October stocks that had been worth \$87,000,000,000 at the peak of the boom were now worth only \$ 55,000,000,000 and by 1933 they would be worth only \$ 18,000,000,000.<sup>2</sup> Decidedly, the nightmare had begun.

The impact of the stock market debacle was depressing. An atmosphere of gloom and despair hung over the lives of the Americans. Investment and consumer spending came to a virtual halt. The rosy hued world had now become a bleak and harsh reality. As Donald McQuade has put it “A great leveller, the Depression put millions ... in the same leaky boat.”

There was wide spread unemployment. Poverty and squalor raged every where. This meant for the average citizen of the United States the forfeiting of all luxuries; it meant intense concern whether he and his family would actually have something to live on. The industrial towns could be paralysed by the failure of two or three local companies. As Thomas C. Cochran has noted “By early 1932 the entire country of Williamson in Southern Illinois had almost no employment. Some Appalachian mining cities had two or three hundred employed out of many thousands.” Mass unemployment was rampant. The economic depression had plunged the country, into the darkness of hunger, poverty and chaos. The first impact of this depression had its most obvious effect in a wave of exposure. “There were the congressional investigating committees between 1930-1935, in the wake of which the press, drama and novel united to analyse the obvious abuses of the time.”<sup>5</sup> The national mood was direct and grim and targets were clearly defined. The erring bankers and brokers, the promoters of the stock market speculation came under heavy attack.

Many writers during this period were attracted by the Marxist analysis of the socio-economic ills of that time. Even those opposed to Marxism could not ignore the economic depression of the decade. All writers dealt directly or indirectly with the impact of the Great Depression on life in America. Novelist after novelist emerged to take up fictional revelations of social injustice in the coal fields, the mines, the ghettos, the factories, the farms and the slums. Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* dealt competently with exposures of Southern illiteracy and poverty. The scope of the migratory labour problem and the attitude of the economic royalists in the face of the appalling misery was laid bare in John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Based on the epic trek of Oklahoma and Texas families, driven off their land by drought and starvation and moving towards the promised land of California, the novel brought out much of the exploitation, experiences and theme of the thirties. It confronted the plight of the dispossessed tenant farmer with a ruthless honesty. Now there was a mutually shared belief that a novelist must not only be a responsible artist but also a responsible critic of society.

Hemingway, during this time, was living in the Key West, and to the indignation and chagrin of many seemed resolutely pursuing his own interests. The social and economic upheavals of the depression did not, ostensibly, seem to be effecting him. The period between the publications of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *To Have and Have Not* (1937) was a complete

contrast to the wild twenties. No longer was it acceptable to live with the purpose of pursuing one's own happiness. The stark agony of the depression was the sole interest of most writers. Many felt that Hemingway's preoccupation with big game hunting, deep-sea fishing and bull fighting during such a time of crisis seemed callous, deliberate and irresponsible. Hemingway's subject-matter further convinced the critics and writers during the 1930s that he was only interested in his own pleasures and amusements. They felt that he was totally self-centred and had adopted an escapist attitude to the prevalent agony around him. While millions were without work in America, Hemingway was going out on a safari to Africa. The hunger and frustration of the people was maddening them and as Stephen Cooper points out, Hemingway was "condemning the decadence of the Spanish bull fight."<sup>6</sup> Understandably, other writers were antagonised by his public persona and attitudes. He was condemned by most.

It cannot be said that Hemingway was unaffected by the events in America in the 1930s. In fact, he did write on political issues in the early and the middle 1930s in many of the articles he wrote for *Esquire* between 1933 and 1936. The political apathy he was accused of was not fully justified. The difference in Hemingway and the other writers was that he viewed the Depression from a different angle. His perception of it was not that of the others. The major reason behind this, as Stephen Cooper has rightly pointed out, was that "Hemingway's experience in the period between the two World Wars was opposite that of most Americans."<sup>6</sup> In the 1920s most Americans were enjoying the boom period of post-war prosperity, while Hemingway was struggling to establish as a writer and was living a relatively frugal life. As he wrote in the last sentence of *A Moveable Feast*, "But this is how Paris was in the early days when we were poor and very happy." And then by the end of the 1920s success came / to him with the good response to *The Sun Also Rises*. The financial situation took a turn for the better. His marriage to Pauline Pfeiffer in 1927 further helped his financial matters. Finally, with the publication of *A Farewell to Arms* in 1929, Hemingway had a best seller in hand and in 1930 he sold the movie rights to the book for \$ 24,000. America's economy was in shambles, millions of Americans were being knocked out of their jobs and securities while Hemingway was finding himself comfortably ensconced in the cocoon of financial security, never experienced before. The 1920s for him was a period of struggle and financial insecurity, while the 1930s was a time of newly acquired wealth. This was obviously in direct contrast to the experience of most Americans. Consequently, Hemingway looked upon the Depression of 1930s from a different

perspective to that of his contemporaries. Furthermore, Hemingway had seen the chaos of the post-war Europe and as a consequence found the suffering of the Depression not as oppressive as that of during the war. He believed that he had seen worst suffering and that the other writers were naive and had no sense of proportion of misery and social upheavals. Thus, it would be wrong to say that Hemingway was unaware of the events in America in the 1930s, he only was not ready to conform to any ready-made ideology placed before him.

The publication of *To Have and Have Not* in 1937, - Hemingway's only novel to be set in America — was a relief for the set of critics who had despaired of Hemingway ever writing anything social. It seemed to mark a turn towards the awareness of the socio-economic problems during the years of the general economic depression. Maxwell Geismar echoed the views of many when he said that with *To Have and Have Not* Hemingway had shaken himself out of the preoccupation with his art and it marked a turn from individualism to a concern for the world.<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Cowley felt that in his social novel Hemingway had moved beyond his old defeatism but he pointed out that the two themes of the 'Have' and the 'Have Not' never quite come together. Generally, the novel was not accepted as one of the better works of the writer. Even Alfred Kazin, while accepting the positive social aspect of the fictional work, found it uneven and not wholly successful. Edmund Wilson criticized Malcolm Cowley's praise of the book, calling it "mostly hazy and actually represented Hemingway in pieces." Bernard De Veto, Clifton Fadiman and Cyril Connolly altogether dismissed the possibility of social significance and felt it was on the whole "negligible." Delmore Schwartz and Lionel Trilling went a step ahead and stated that Hemingway's earlier and supposedly non-political works had more effective social criticism than *To Have and Have Not*. The later critics also chose to ignore the very obvious social context of the novel and laid focus on the stock themes like the Hemingway hero, the Hemingway style, etc. Critics like Philip Young, John Killinger, Sheridan Baker, Farl Rovit and Delbert Wylder have been primarily concerned with the debate whether Harry Morgan is the code hero or the real hemingway hero. Though Carlos Baker has touched upon the social aspect of the novel, it comes out in rather general terms.

Evidently, *To Have and Have, Not* is not one of Hemingway's best novels, yet it is still an interesting work and it cannot be denied that it provides perception of Hemingway's social and political views concerning America in the 1930s. Besides, the short parody *The Torrents of*

*Spring, To Have and Have Not* was the only other novel to be set in America, though limited to one small corner of his country, Key West. It was the place he knew best during the 1930s and he wanted to show that it could be representative of the general world provided the writer wrote honestly. The setting of the novel is the Florida resort place of the Depression years. Harry Morgan, his wife Marie and their three daughters live from his earnings as a guide fisherman in the waters off Cuba. Harry and his friends are at the centre of the novel and are generally presented sympathetically as Depression oppressed. Harry's concern for the well being of his family is an overriding one. He embodies the stable middle class virtues. He loves his wife and children, works hard and does his best until he is deprived of all opportunities of making an honest living. Harry is ruined by Johnson, his customer, who loses his (Harry's) expensive fishing gear over board, and then goes on to cheat him of the cost of the boat and guide for the eighteen day trip. After the fishing trip with the defaulting Johnson, Harry 'went up town and ate at a chink place where you get a good meal for forty cents and then bought some thing to take home to my wife and our three girls. You know, perfume, a couple of fans and three of those high combs.' When he learns that he has been cheated by Johnson, he says, "All right, what was I going to do now? i could not bring in a load because we have to have the money to buy the booze and besides there's no money in it any more .... But I was damned if I was going home broke and starve a summer in that town. Besides I've got a family." (pp.26-27).

Harry Morgan is, undoubtedly, a man in need, but he has a stubborn streak in him, distinguishing him from Albert and most other working men in the novel, which makes him unwilling to rely on anyone or anything other than himself to support his family. He decides that he has no choice but to take over the job of transporting the bank robbers. He ponders "that even if he does sell his house there would still be now work for him after that. And if he goes over to the rank and passes on information about the robbery, all that he would get is 'thanks.' The hell with it, he thought. 'I got no choice in it'"(p.111). Over and over again, Harry says that he has no choice but to indulge in illegal activities so as to keep his family fed. He blames the current social and economic situation that makes him turn towards the criminal scene. In spite of his repeated justification one does get a feeling that economic necessity does not provide a satisfactory excuse to his indulgence in crime.

Hemingway, like Harry Morgan, prided himself on his ability to be self-sufficient and self-reliant under any circumstances. He claimed that he was not totally dependent on writing to make a living. He never specified what his methods of making a living would be but he again and again pounded on the fact that he could live alone and survive in the bleakest of times. This is evident from his letters. On August 9, 1932 he wrote to Paul Romaine, “I could make my living, without capital in these times, in at least three other ways than by selling what I write.”<sup>40</sup> Later, after three and a half years he wrote, “I’ve made my living since I was fifteen and there are several things I can do well enough beside writing to make a living at so I do not get into despair personally.” In yet another letter to Ivan Kashkeen, Hemingway declares that being alone is no deterrent for him in life: “Everyone tries to frighten you now by saying or writing that if one does not become a communist or have a Marxian view point one will have no friends and will be alone. They seem to think to be alone is something dreadful; or that to not have friends is to be feared. I would rather have one honest enemy than most of the friends that I have known.”<sup>42</sup> His views on making a living are made clear in another letter to Ivan Kashkeen. He wrote: “I’ve made my living since I was fifteen and there are several things I can do well enough beside writing to make a living at so I do not get that despair personally.”<sup>43</sup> Evidently, Hemingway took pride in his self-reliance, although as Stephen Cooper has pointed out that it shows a lack of self-knowledge. Hemingway took “great joy in the company of others and was continually inviting friends and acquaintances to visit him in Europe or Key West or Cuba. At various times, people as different as Dos Passos, Archibald Macleish, Maxwell Perkins, Gary Cooper, and his brother Leic ester, to name just a few, joined him on his various expeditions and at his various homes.” So, reality for Hemingway was far different from his heroes who are generally men having the courage and pride to go ahead in life all alone. Harry Morgan is an extreme example of an individual who will rely on one but himself, amidst the deprivation, chaos and suffering of the Depression.

*To Have and Have Not* is not an artistic success because of its lack of unity and cohesion. The change in the narrative point of view in the novel also distracts the novels unity. In all probability, the problem arises from the fact that it was composed by writing two different stories written at different times. The first story about Harry Morgan was written as “One Trip Across,” published in April, 1934 in *Cosmopolitan* and later the *Trademan’s Return*, the second Hemingway story was published in *Esquire* (February, 1936). And then, Carlos Baker points out,

in summer 1936, on Arnold Gingrich's, the editor of Esquire, advice Hemingway combined the two stories and *To Have and Have Not* took shape.<sup>68</sup> The task was onerous as two different complete stories were to be fused into one unit. This was evident on the publication of the novel in October, 1937 when it met with critical disapproval. Yet, in spite of the lack of polish in the novel, it is still an interesting work providing insight into Hemingway's social and political views of the depression oppressed America in the 1930s. It stands out as a rather persuasive social document bringing out Hemingway's views on the individual's self-reliance in the economically depressed world of corruption and violence. The novel certainly stands apart from the great deal of proletarian literature which appeared in its times but vanished with the change in circumstances. Hemingway obviously felt deeply about the problems he presents in the novel, and dramatized them equally powerfully in the novel.

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