



Interpreting Human Values in Hemingway's Novels

Dr. (Mrs.) Anuradha Gaur

Associate Professor

Department of English Studies and Research Agra College, Agra.

Hemingway is often spoken of as a nihilist, as a writer holding no values. In spite of his Nobel prize, it is not too difficult to dismiss him as a writer devoid of any moral concerns. The reason for this may be his preoccupation with sex, blood, violence, disillusionment and death. Infact, these things were common factors of American fiction of the post war generation. Hemingway and his contemporaries like Dos Passos, Scott Fitzgerald and Faulkner lived in the twentieth century America which experienced the tremors caused by two devastating wars; the ennui caused by growing mechanization of life due to technological progress and due to growing brutality and violence which made mankind a victim of alienation from the natural self. Fitzgerald wrote :

Here was a new generation.... Grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.¹

Hemingway, however, was different from his fellow writers because he never lost the zest for life and never gave up the quest for new values which would enable man to survive in the chaotic world and enable him to glean some real meaning in life. Hemingway's experience, despite the terrors of 20th century existence, promised some how a triumph over the horrors of life and seemed to assure that heroism was still possible.

Nihilism or the absence of positive human values is only the first hurried impression which Hemingway's writings make. If we have a deeper probe, the impact is totally different. Those who hold the view that Hemingway has no

moral values view him with a prejudiced eye. Infact, Hemingway has deep faith in human values and morality. In *Death in The Afternoon* he wrote clearly:

I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after²

Hemingway has a message for mankind. The silence of his heroes during the time of crisis is more eloquent than speech. Life is full of despair but what Hemingway seems to convey is that pessimism is not the right attitude to adopt in such a predicament. We can triumph over the sorrows and horrors of life only by cultivating courage, endurance and fortitude. Hemingway was no cheap moralizer. He may have no flaming idealism to preach, but, taken together, his novels provide his own answer to the problem — how to live in this world full of pain and cruelty. Herein lies the greatest value of his work. He is not insensitive to ethical and moral ideas. The highest human value that Hemingway upholds is that when fate traps you, all you have to do is to be brave and face its consequences with perfect control and calm.

This is what Catherine Barkeley does in *A Farewell to Arms*. At the end of this novel, she lies dying in the Lausanne Hospital, but she is not afraid of death and accepts it as a “dirty trick” played on her. She accepts the trep with brave stoicism. Frederic Henry realizes that the world breaks everybody but what one has to do in order to survive is to be “strong at the broken places”. After catherime’s death he in left all alone but he faces her death with enormous courage and reserve. Not a word escapes his lips. He strives hard to keep up his dignity which is the badge of his manhood.

Hemingway sees simultaneously ultimate doom together with man’s passionate fondness for being alive. Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* finds life very interesting” and expresses a remarkable capacity for life. “The world is a fine place and worth fighting for and I hate very much to leave it.”³. In the ecstatic experience of his perfect union with Maria, he learns the value of intensity and substitutes it for duration: “I suppose it is possible to live as full a life in seventy hours as in seventy years.”⁴ For him true love transcends the barriers of time and self. He talks of “eternal now” and comforts Maria thus, “thou art me too now, thou art all these will be of me we are not apart”⁵. We can not call it sex. This is love of two souls.

For Hemingway, dying well is equal to living well. Robert fights off an impulse to kill himself in order to end the pain of a broken leg. Jordon lives and dies for a cause. His own death seems to him completely unimportant before his mission. He believes that if democracy fails in any country, the cause of democracy suffers throughout, Therefore it is worth fighting for in any country. He is an American expatriate fighting for democracy against the Fascists. Having lived his life for a noble cause, Jordan faces his death heroically and

Maintains “grace under pressure”. He retains his mental equilibrium and shows an extraordinary strength of mind for he has a satisfaction of having lived a meaningful life. It is not pleasure or pain that counts, death is inevitable and it is only fulfillment of duty with excellence that makes life meaningful. He has contentment and peace at the end: “I hope I have done some good in it. I have tried to do best with what talent I had.”⁶ This is his spiritual victory over death that makes Jordan a real hero.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes suffers from an underserved misfortune. He has been unmanned by war, emasculated by a war-wound, but he bears his sickness well. He is a sensible man who carries himself well in the face of love’s impossibilities. He loves Brett but he knows that he can not lead a happy married life with her. He derives strength for his moral values from the bullfighter, Pedro Romero, He has the courage to face what life has given him, to live his life alone without Brett. When Brett says to him, “oh! Jake we could have had a damned good time together”, he simply replies: “Yes, isn’t it pretty to think so”⁷. Pedro Romero is the frontier of Hemingway’s values.

The world has given blow after blow to Brett also. The war had killed her first lover. She turns to seek this lost love in Jake, but unfortunately she can not live with him. It is no wonder that in such a situation she falls for anyone who comes her way, be it John or Romero. Throughout the novel, Brett is figured as one of the “lost generation” but she is not lost in this love seeking maze. At the end of the novel, she has turned off Romero and declares:

I am not going to be one of these bitches who ruins children. Here we get a glimpse of Hemingway’s faith in human values of loyalty and affection.

Jake Barnes, Pedro Romero and Bill Gorton are clear-eyed, level-headed men who are able to see clearly through the mist of life. They live and face life’s problems as men ought to do. Jake achieves at last the humanitarian ideal of his own and rejects the materialistic values of the post war generation. Through trial and error, he learns the crucial lesson that it is only through fulfillment of his commitments with full awareness that life can be lived purposefully in the midst of violence and confusion. The awareness of purpose involves a renunciation of self-indulgence. For Jake, the awareness of purpose brings full knowledge of the self which helps him to acquire self-discipline and strengthens him to impose an order on his existence. Whatever uncertainties he might have had due to the unprecedented crisis of his life, Jake finds new ethical and moral principles at last which would sustain him both in war and peace.

Besides the fact that we should admire bravery and heroism, Hemingway seems to emphasize another point in his work, which is that suffering and death even when heroically endured are a lonely and personal affair. Towards the end of *A Farewell To Arms*, we see that when Catherine lies waiting for death in the hospital, Henry, in order to kill time, visits a nearby café. The café is full of people who are laughing, singing and playing cards. All are making merry, unaware of the fact that among them is sitting a man whose world is going to be ruined. The solitary bearing of misfortune in this wide and happy world is what Hemingway appreciates. The endurance of pain with calm acceptance and reserve makes Hemingway heroes true heroes indeed. Life is a battle and it has to be fought irrespective of the consequences. At every moment there is a test of one's manhood.

The best example of this aspect of Hemingway's outlook is found in *The old Man and the Sea*. Santiago, the dynamic old fisherman, in spite of his old age and persevering bad luck for eighty four days, has the courage and confidence to go "far out" beyond anyone else to catch a "truly big fish". His will is indomitable. After a weary toil of three days, at last he manages to pull a huge marlin with great difficulty to the shore. But when he brings it out on the shore he finds that the body of his marlin has been attacked so badly by sharks that it has become worthless for him. There is the bare carcass- the skeleton of the fish. The writer seems to suggest the "winner gets nothing", Santiago continually utters: "-- man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated."⁹

To him it is not victory or defeat that matters but the dedication and devotion exemplified in the fulfillment of his commitment. Santiago faces the merciless misfortune with great calm serenity and evenness of mind because he is convinced that the essence of life lies in doing one's duty with true awareness and sincerity. He exhibits coolness and discipline in the worst situation. From this we derive the idea of "grace under pressure". The idea of sincere efforts and hard labour without the desire for fruitful result resembles very closely the teachings of Lord — Krishna as recorded in *The Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna advised Arjuna:

Treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, then get ready for battle. Thus thou shall not incur sin.¹⁰

This philosophy of duty with detachment is the gist of all wisdom. Santiago endures suffering and pain without complaint and says "pain does not matter to man". This endurance of pain emphasizes the moral and spiritual strength of his character and marks the nobility and dignity of man. His

knowledge that skill in action is all that man can achieve because the result of action is not in his power makes him a yogi.

In *Death In The Afternoon* Hemingway wrote: “Maturity brings strength, resistance but above all knowledge.”¹¹

Hemingway’s approach to life was not borrowed from any particular school of philosophy but was gleaned out of the harvest of his life’s experiences. He attempted to formulate a moral code of his own to replace the impractical idealism of religions theories. Once he said:

“If there in wrong, right it, if there is disease, cure it, if there is suffering, endure it; if there is death, meet it courageously.”¹²

His concept of morality differs from a traditional one. His experience taught him that traditional moral code was useless in a war-torn world. Therefore he invented a new moral code which would honour elemental human virtues like honesty, courage, honour, love, compassion, endurance and perseverance and patience.

Hemingway does not preach his morals from a high pulpit, like a preacher. But like an artist, his values lie embedded in his work only those who read his books on the surface find Hemingway a nihilist. A serious reader who has a probe into the hidden meanings of his artistic work view it in an altogether different way, Mark Schorer, the famous critic sees *The old Man And The Sea* as a moral Fable which enshrines the glory of action. Endurance, courage, selfreliance, perseverance, sense of duty, detachment and grace are the eternal human values that are presented in his novels. After rejecting traditional and conventional values, Hemingway formulated as rigid a set of rules for a meaningful living as can be found in any religion.

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