

Less Is More

Modernist style is characterized by disillusionment and psychological depth, generally flavored with a dash of symbolism. Ernest Hemingway's work is no exception. His experimental short story collection *In Our Time*, along with his two "war" novels *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* provide an incisive look into twentieth-century post-WWI culture; all largely due to his unique writing style. Hemingway's short, clipped sentences and simple diction present succinct, un-editorialized stories that leave readers to draw their own moral conclusions. They, like the lost generation, are left without any behavioral or moral prescriptions. Ultimately, Hemingway's concise stylistic choices provide the perfect framework for his honest, undecorated subject matter.

Hemingway's sentences can be almost comically short. A carryover from his days working at the Kansas City Star, this mode of writing is concerned with facts and neutrality. As such, things like adjectives and extensive background information are often rare, implied, or excluded outright. For example, in "Indian Camp," Hemingway introduces his story with short, simple sentences: "At the lake shore there was another rowboat drawn up. The two Indians stood waiting." Despite this brevity, however, readers are still given plenty of information: the word *another* tells us there is more than one rowboat, the presence of a lake and multiple rowboats suggests a natural or wooded setting, and the two Indians *waiting* suggests that they are expecting a third party to follow. What Hemingway's sentences lack in length, they make up for in depth.

Such minimalism also manifests itself in Hemingway's dialogue cues. Rather than include multiple "he said" and "she said" tag lines, he opts to leave many of them out. This can sometimes result in confusion for readers who lose track of who is speaking in a verbal tête à tête. In *A Farewell to Arms*, for example, Catherine and Frederick have the following exchange:

"Now do you want to play chess?"

"I'd rather play with you."

"No. Let's play chess." (300)

This is just one abbreviated example of the lack of distinction between speaking parties that commonly appears in Hemingway's writing. While the exclusion of explicit tag lines does blur the difference between speakers, it is possible that this is Hemingway's intent. Often, especially in the case of couples like Frederick and Catherine who want to be "all mixed up," the distinction between individuals is irrelevant (300). It does not matter who says what; it matters that the conversation itself takes place. In other words, general impressions in Hemingway's writing are often more important than particular characters' triumphs, failures, or opinions. In such cases, he uses bare dialogue as a tool to present overall images of social encounters without quibbling over personal details. Strategic omissions like these are hallmarks of Hemingway's writing style and typify his famous Iceberg principle.

Hemingway believed in the ability of prose to convey inferred messages to an audience. His Iceberg principle holds that "the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of...things as strongly as though the writer had stated them." Thus, Hemingway privileges intuition over direct statement. For example, in *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes refers occasionally to an unnamed injury that has presumably left him impotent. Readers, however, are only offered subtle clues to suggest this, such as Jake's statement that "what happened to [him] is

supposed to be funny” (34). The motif of male impotence, however, is a major contributor to the overall plot and message of the novel. By suggesting such a graphic and unpleasant thing yet avoiding stating it outright, Hemingway magnifies the severity of the situation. The trauma’s unmentionable status builds up a feeling of disquiet toward the subject that would not be present if the topic was plainly stated. In this way, Hemingway’s Iceberg principle works well to create tension between the literal text and intuitive audience reaction.

The uselessness of words to convey meaning was a commonly held belief following World War I. In *A Farewell To Arms*, Hemingway writes, “...I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity” (185). Given the impotence of conventional descriptive language (e.g. using abstractions like “sacred,” “glorious,” or even “horrible”), modernist writers were faced with the challenge of conveying true meaning on the page. For someone like Hemingway, who had witnessed battle and disillusionment, simply saying “Frederick was disillusioned” would not have been enough; there was no real meaning behind the word. This crisis of meaning affected much of post-WWI society, including popular ideas about religion, ethics, and science. Therefore, when Hemingway leaves readers without authorial commentary on his characters’ actions, it directly reflects contemporary feelings about morality; there is no such thing as “right” or “wrong,” and no guidance to be found. Once again, Hemingway’s minimalist, neutral form lends itself to effective representation of the general post-war cultural state.

Much of Hemingway’s works being *in medias res*, particularly the short stories and vignettes included in *In Our Time*. This particular work is an ideal example of how writing can

function as a snapshot of a specific cultural moment. Rather than tell a single story, Hemingway presents a wide collection of images with common themes like the loss of innocence, detachment from society, and pregnancy (both literal and metaphorical). While most of Hemingway's stories progress chronologically, this experimental work moves forward apparently without a linear plot. One moment readers are witnessing a drunken march to the Champagne, and the next they are transported to a lake, following Indians with Nick and his father. This collage-like style was inspired by Cézanne's then-recent exploration of cubism, an art form that attempted to show all angles of a thing at once. Effectively, this meant representing four dimensions (including time) on a two-dimensional plane. By playing with continuity and taking pains to simply and accurately represent reality, Hemingway attempted – and achieved – this same effect in the composition of *In Our Time*. For example, if isolated and read as a stand-alone piece, any part of this collection would lose its meaning with regard to the whole. While the war vignettes would still be powerful, for instance, the reader would miss the larger cultural perspective; the 1920s were not comprised only of soldiers.

Although less experimental, *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Sun Also Rises* also exhibit similar, cultural snapshot-like qualities: both begin *in medias res* and use the same neutral tone characteristic of Hemingway, leaving audiences to draw personal conclusions in the end. The emotional detachment of the writing itself often reflects that of the characters, implying that there is something inherently damaged inside them. In many cases, such as Jake Barnes's impotence or Krebs's situation in "Soldier's Home," characters suffer lasting traumatic effects from the war. Known as shell shock at the time, the inability to adjust to life after a trauma appears often in Hemingway's writing. This phenomenon was very common in post-WWI society and is once again represented realistically through Hemingway's objective, terse style of

writing. His unpretentious language contributes to the overall feeling of authenticity in his representations of war and its aftermath, both physical and psychological.

Ultimately, though it appears incredibly simple at first glance, Hemingway's choice of clipped sentences and concise words lend his writing weight. His undecorated style is appropriate to the inglorious subject matter of his stories. Because he uses words so purposefully, anything he omits from his writing is often just as important as that which he includes. Hemingway's neutral tone coincides with popular moral ambiguity of his day, as well as the emotional detachment felt by many touched by the war. His works, taken as a whole, represent a multi-faceted picture of life after World War I.