PRESENTATION OF NATURE IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY’S WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway turned to hunting, fishing, bullfighting and nature as a response to his war-psychosis. He had an excruciating experience of the First World War and made this experience his very substance. One of the effects of the First World War on the western society was that traditional values and morality lost hold on the youth. There is no philosophical security in Hemingway’s world which is characterized by violence, evil and death. Hemingway believed on primitivism because early civilizations are qualitatively superior to contemporary civilization. Hemingway had an amazing ability to write sensuous accounts of nature. Hemingway is keen observer of nature. Hemingway’s response to nature, animalism and primitivism was in accordance with his war-psychosis.

KEYWORDS: Contemplate, phenomena, imagination, malevolent, incongruous, disaster, sordidness, dissipations, unflinching, nihilism, spectators, matador, endurance.

INTRODUCTION

One of the effects of the First World War on the western society was that traditional values and morality lost hold on the youth, they pinned no faith in the pre-war values. Hemingway’s apparent loss of faith in traditional values is counterbalanced by war’s surrogates- shark fishing, big game hunting, duck-shooting, and bull-fighting. He reveled in depicting the compulsive instincts and appetites of man, his desire for food, drink and sexual satisfaction. This is the clearest expression of a natural man’s philosophy to be found in Hemingway’s work. A Hemingway hero is a great lover of wine, women and outdoor games. He enjoys eating, drinking, and sex. Both Nick Adams and Jake Barnes seem contented with the simple pleasure of
fishing, swimming or participating in the fiesta at Pamplona as a sort of escape from the violence and terror of the world through these activities. In Across the River and Into the Trees the aging Colonel enjoys duck-shooting, meets his almost nineteen year old beloved Renata, and drinks his favourite wines. It is a life of the senses. In the words of W.F. Taylor, “With Hemingway, the reader could often emerge from that dark realm of tension and violent evil into the calm of a world where one had only to accept naturally the primary pleasures-food, drink, sex, hunting, fishing, athletics-and to act with a certain masculine good humour, fortitude, and dignity”. It is a world of immediate sensations. It appears that Hemingway believed with Sir Andrew in Twelfth Night that human life consists of “cakes and ale” and also of making love. All the activities—bullfighting, hunting, fishing, drinking, sexual intercourse, and writing had a therapeutic effect on Hemingway because these activities were the means of releasing the inner tensions, fears and hatreds. This release made the wounded or shell-shocked Hemingway felt better. That is why Frederic Henry, Harry Morgan and Robert Jordan squeeze the sensual essence and enjoy it to their heart’s content in the midst of their dangerous callings.

There is no philosophical security in Hemingway’s world which is characterized by violence, evil and death. Nick Adams, Jake Barnes, Frederic Henry, and Colonel Cantwell are war scarred; Robert Jordan and Thomas Hudson die fighting. His world is inhabited by soldiers, bullfighters, boxers and all those who partake in masculine activities of life. In fact, Hemingway is the celebrant of the masculine life as well as the dilettante of violence. The epos of violence and death is life’s fundamental narrative in Hemingway’s fiction. This is evident even from his well-known collection of short stories In Our Time.

The theme of violence and death is the dominant motif in Hemingway’s other writings. He had experienced death so close in the First World War that in order to exorcise fear-fear that drove a man to wound himself, to kill himself, fear that made a man feel that he had come to the end of the road— he went to the bullring because there he entered into the dark maw of violence. Life for Hemingway had begun with violence and war, and would forever after be shadowed by violence and death.

Hemingway’s concern with primitivism and animalism is evident even to a superficial observer. Primitivism is the belief that primitive or chronologically early civilizations are qualitatively superior to contemporary civilization. Primitivism extols simple way of life close to nature at the expense of civilization. Michael Bell aptly remarks, “Primitivism is always by definition the paradoxical product of civilization itself. Primitivism, then is born of the interplay between the civilized self and the desire to reject or transform it.” Man is born good but civilization, as he grows, corrupts this goodness in him. Many a writer has escaped from the weariness, the fever and the fret’ of modern civilization into the elemental simplicities of a lost natural life. Rousseau, Melville, Walt Whitman, William Faulkner and D.H. Lawrence, to name only a few are among those writers who glorified primitivism. Hemingway also belonged to the cult of primitivism. Though Robert Evans objected to this view as he wrote, “The devoted craftsman whose work was blue-pencilled by Pound and Stein was not aesthetically a primitive at all”, we find it hard to agree to this opinion. It is one of the signal achievements of Hemingway that he created a simplified world peopled by matadors, pugilists, soldiers, jockeys, whores, waiters, bartenders who were interested in fishing, shooting, boxing, bullfighting, skiing, drinking and love-making.
In The Sun Also Rises Hemingway celebrated the values of primitive Spain, symbolized by the ritual of the bull-fight. The bulls stood for primeval strength kept intact in the decadent Spanish society:

The fighting bull is to the domestic bull as the wolf is to the dog…Bulls for the ring are wild animals. They are bred from a strain that comes down in direct descent from the wild bulls that ranged over the Peninsula and they are bred on ranches with the thousands of acres of range where they live as free ranging animals.4

Hemingway’s love for the primal time and the springs of vitality is evident from his infatuation for Africa. He wrote, “I knew a good country when I saw one. Here there was a game, plenty of birds, and I liked the natives. Here I could shoot and fish”5 looking at a Kudu bull’s track in the grass, he thought that it was the track of its re-historic predecessors: “I thought that we had the mammoths too, a long time ago, and when they travelled through the hills in southern Illinois they made these same tracks. It was just that we were an older country in America and the biggest game was gone”.6 He found the country like something born out of a primeval dream: “It was a country to wake from, happy to have had the dream…This was a virgin country, an unhunted pocket in the million miles of bloody Africa”.7

Hemingway had an amazing ability to write sensuous accounts of nature. He had a knack for depicting colourful descriptions of scenery. Hemingway told Philip Percival: “If I ever write about this it will just be landscape painting until I know something about it.”8 Hemingway had a poet’s fine awareness of the manifold impressions of sight, sound, smell and taste. He enjoyed sensuous pleasures in the world of nature. “No nature writer in all American Literature save Thoreau” remarks Alfred Kazin, “has had Hemingway’s sensitiveness to colour, to climate, to the knowledge of physical energy under hear or cold, that knowledge of the body thinking and moving through a landscape that Edmund Wilson, in another connection has called Hemingway’s ‘barometric accuracy’”.9

“The earth abideth for ever”, and it is to the earth that in Book II of The Sun Also Rises Jake Barnes returns because he finds woods and mountains clean in comparison with the sordidness of Paris. The tranquil beauty and the therapeutic influence of nature in Book II is in contrast to the sybaritical dissipations of Jake and his group in Paris in the earlier book of The Sun Also Rises. Before the fiesta begins, Jake and Bill go into the mountains above Buruete to do trout fishing in the Irate river. They stay at an inn; they go fishing and catch a good many trout. For a while in nature Jake feels refreshed and liberated from the difficulties and the tangled affair of Brett and Mike and Cohn. In the countryside Jake and Bill live and drink and eat and fish together, unworried and unbothered. They are delighted by the engaging beauty of nature:

The grain was just beginning to ripen and the fields were full of poppies. The pasture-land was green, there were fine trees and sometimes big rivers and chateaux off in the trees.

Hemingway is a keen observer of nature. He has a wonderful sense of colour which he exhibits in depicting picturesque sights and scenes of nature for its own sake. At Sea, the third part of Islands in the Stream contains some of the most colourful of Hemingway’s descriptions of nature: the waves breaking white and green on the reef off the coast of Cuba, the water that
curled and blew under the lash of the wind, the piled clouds over the lands, the beauty of the morning on the deep water, the unruffled as well as smooth and clean sea, ‘a long white beach with coconut palms’, and the yellow sand beach. Hemingway is also adept in the descriptions of fish, birds and insects. He describes beautifully the sand flies, the mosquitoes, the crabs the greyness that a school of mullet made, a very big barracuda stalking the mullet, and a heron flying with his white wings over the green water. How nice is the description of flamingoes:

Then he saw a flight of flamingoes coming from the left. They were flying low over the water, lovely to see in the sunlight. Their long necks were slanted down and their incongruous legs were straight out; immobile while their pink and black wings beat, carrying them toward the mud bank that was ahead and to the right. Thomas Hudson watched them and marveled at their down swept black and white bills and the rose colour they made in the sky, which made their strange individual structure unimportant and still each one was an excitement to him. Then as they came upon the green key he saw them all swing sharply to the right instead of crossing they key.11

In some of Hemingway’s works such as The Snows of Kilimanjaro, Three day Blow, and A Farewell to Arms nature assumes a malevolent character. The rain, ‘associated with an evil violence’ in In Our Time, is ‘a symbol of disaster’ and ‘an omen of death’ in A Farewell to Arms. Catherine is afraid of rain “because sometimes I see me dead in it”. She further says, “And sometimes I see you dead in it”. In this way, nature acts as a malevolent character in some of his works, but his attitude to nature changed “in immense pleasure-sporting and bull-fighting in Death in the Afternoon, skiing and fishing in The Sun Also Rises, and big-game hunting in Green Hills of Africa. Hemingway went to Nature, for he found ‘the grand elementary principle of pleasure’ in it. The African landscape gave much pleasure to Hemingway:

Now, being in Africa, I was hungry for more of it, the changes of the seasons, the rains with no need to travel, the discomforts that you paid to make it real, the names of the trees, of the small animals, and all the birds, to know the language and have time to be in it and to move slowly. I have loved country all my life; the country was always better than the people.12

Hemingway’s interest in Africa goes back to the twenties. His interest in Africa was roused by Rene Maran’s novel Batouala which he had reviewed in 1922. He praised the book for its faithful portrayal of life in an African village. “You smell the smells of the village”, he wrote, “you eat its food, you see the white man as the black man sees him, and after you have lived in the village you die there”.13 from then on Hemingway dreamt of going to Africa and he realized his dream when in November, 1933, he in the company of Pauline and Charles Thompson, sailed from Marseille harbor. They landed at Mombasa on 8th December. At Nairobi, Hemingway came to know about Philip Parcival, the famous white hunter, and engaged him as their hunter. By mid-December they reached the highlands of British East Africa. “In all the thirty-four years of his life”, says Carlos Baker, “he had never known such a place as Africa”.14

The hunting expedition began in the Serengeri Plain and for the first ten days everything went on smoothly. Hemingway got his lion, antelope, rhino and buffalo. After a few days hunting, Hemingway suffered from amoebic dysentery which jolted him completely. He had to go back to Nairobi for treatment. When he felt better he rejoined the group in the hilly country south of
Ngorongoro Crater in the last week of January, 1934. In contrast to the days on the Serengeti Plain, Hemingway was in a state of euphoria:

This was the kind of hunting I liked. No riding in cars, the country broken up instead of the plains…and it was a pleasure…simply to walk, and to be able to hunt, not knowing what we might see and free to shoot for the meat we needed.15

From the Rift Valley they went to the brown land of Masai. In this country one could hunt kudu bulls. Hemingway wanted to kill the beautiful kudu, but Charles Thompson was the first to get his kudu. Hemingway also went in search for kudu and got success in shooting two huge kudu bulls. The second was not as big and beautiful as the first kudu. Hemingway wrote about the first kudu bull:

It was a huge, beautiful kudu bull, stone-dead, one his side, his horns in great dark spirals, widespread and unbelievable as he lay dead five yards from where we stood when I had just that instant shot. I looked at him, big, long legged, a smooth grey with the white stripes and the great curling, sweeping horns, brown as walnut meats, and ivory pointed, at the big ears and the great, lovely heavy-maned neck, the white chevron between his eyes and the white of his muzzle and I stooped over and touched him to try to believe it.16

As the hunting expedition was drawing to a close because of the onset of rain, the safari ended on April 3, 1934 and then Hemingway sailed to New York.

The British East Africa safari could have been just only a hunting expedition, had Hemingway the hunter not been a writer. But Hemingway was a writer too, and he wrote down a true account of the safari in Green Hills of Africa. He began it in mid April 1934 soon after his return to Key West and completed it on February 7, 1935. It is truthful account of a safari, the peculiar temperaments of wild animals, of the natives and the way to hunt the beasts. He avoided faking because he concentrated on telling honestly what he had observed and felt in British East Africa. He made it clear in his foreword to Green Hills of Africa:

Unlike many novels, none of the characters or incidents in this book is imaginary…The writer has attempted to write an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month’s action can, if truly presented, complete with a work of the imagination.17

The book at once became popular because it reinforced not only the Hemingway legend but also his craftsmanship, the way he selected, shaped and winnowed the material for a book-length.

Hemingway’s response to nature, animalism and primitivism was in accordance with his war-psychosis. In the First World War he had witnessed violent death and when the war was over, he went to Spain and attended Corrida regularly. His love of hunting wild animals led him to the green hills of Africa. He reveled in the midst of nature, which ultimately gave him a sense of life and death as stages in a passage. In this connection Horald T. Mc Carthy says “a close involvement with nature, an involvement that intensified and deepened in meaning as his life progressed, gave him a clearly defined sense of his own individuality, his particular relation to the universe”.18 But nature in Hemingway’s works is simply nature-woods, rills, mountains,
pasture-land, unspoiled sunlight, white bright beach and nothing more. There is no pantheistic attitude towards nature. He is not a Wordsworth who penetrated beneath the outward manifestations of nature and gave her a separate life and a spirit of her own. Whereas Wordsworth sees the presence of “A spirit, that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought and rolls though all things”, Hemingway is not a pantheist. Hemingway is not a Rousseau who urged mankind to return to nature as a protest against the cramping effect of city life. He is not a Thoreau who went to the lap of nature ‘to sit on a tree stump and contemplate natural phenomena’. Hemingway’s is a simple love of nature, for he finds joy, serenity and peace in it. For Hemingway nature has a therapeutic function in soothing to war-strained nerves of his characters as in the case of Jake Barnes and Nick Adams. Jake Barnes and Wilson Harris enjoy trout fishing in Burguete. Free of the tensions induced by Paris, Jake exults in the masculine out-of-door pleasures he shares with Wilson Harris. In fact, in Hemingway’s fiction nature is a place of liberation and restoration. In this connection Leo Gurko says, “The movement away from society and its artifices is not motivated by the desire to escape but by the desire for liberation. Hemingway seeks to immerse himself totally in nature not too evade his responsibilities’ but to free his moral and emotional self”.19

REFERENCES


6. Ibid., p.209.


15. Ibid., p.384.

