

IN THE NAME OF GOD

**RITUALIZATION OF DEATH  
IN HEMINGWAY'S MAJOR WORKS**

BY

**SHAHRIAR SHAHIDI**

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EVALUATED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE AS:  
EXCELLENT

*P. Ghasemi* ..... P. GHASEMI, Ph.D., ASSISTANT  
PROF. OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.  
(CHAIRMAN)

*E. Pourgiv* ..... E. POURGIV, Ph.D., ASSISTANT  
PROF. OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

*A. Anushil* ..... A. ANUSHIRAVANI, Ph.D.,  
ASSISTANT PROF. OF ENGLISH  
LITERATURE.

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# **Ritualization of Death**

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**By: Shahriar Shahidi**

**Thesis Advisor: Dr. Ghasemi**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Ritualization of Death in Hemingway's Major Works**

**By:**

**Shahriar Shahidi**

This study focuses on the ritualization of death in Hemingway's major works, including long and short fiction respectively. Hemingway studies, which suffered a decline in Eighties and surged up again in Nineties, traced Hemingway's obsession with death and ritual to a puerile traumatic experience, and was largely historical-biographical. This thesis, through delineation of puissant arguments, upsets the traditional patterns of thought regarding Hemingway, "this Titan who still had it in him to become a god" (Burgess), and introduces two alternatives which may prove beneficial to any Hemingway study. The first perspective of this study reinforces the tacit assumption running through all his works that the consciousness of death shatters the banality of everyday existence, and liberates us from the petty mentality of the ordinary man. Death, which had become a shopworn

word in previous literature, acquires delicate nuances in his works, and evidentially becomes the prime expression of human finitude.

The second perspective adopted here is that by interiorizing and humanizing death, man can apparently deprive it of its character as a restriction upon our freedom. These two doctrines are fairly supported by eliciting sufficient evidence out of the primary sources. Having thus philosophized about death, the thesis draws to a close on a high note of passion and promise of man's partial salvation.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Introduction

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1898-1961) was indubitably one of the arch-pioneers of modernism in America whose peripatetic life provided him with ample experience and profound vision. Being one of the writers of the depth, he took after Conrad's "destructive element". He was, in his later works, experimenting with postmodern narrative or got as near to this end as any of his contemporaries dared to. His recently discovered work *True at First Light* (1998) can be found in Scribner's publications, which houses the bulk of his manuscripts and correspondence. Scholars see this work as a daring expedition into postmodern narratology, when realism and naturalism as the precursors of the modernist movement were falling into desuetude. His early works as well as the late ones, without a doubt, offer impressive critiques of fin de siecle humanism, pessimism, under the impact of Schopenhauer, and the investigation of our notions of subjectivity. Some papaficionados go as far as stating that Hemingway expressed a lasting revolution in human sensibility and artistic sensitivity.

Being among the few artists, in whose fiction myth and reality join hands at many places, Hemingway has become part of our

modern reading consciousness, and thus it makes the experience of his fiction timeless and worth having. Embarking on a Hemingway study, we are invited to peer into an abyss, out of which there begin to lurk awkwardly -formed monsters with unaccountable demands on our attention. His works, rising above the ruins of reason and the murkiness of human soul, strike a very sensitive chord in modern man's consciousness, galled by "the fang-marks of experience" (Sanderson 34).

Of all the fiction that came from the war and from postwar experiences, that of Ernest Hemingway has been judged most representative. Hemingway fixed himself in the attention of the returning soldier, who, like his Krebs, felt that, "there was something wrong" in the world to which he had returned. It was not only the war itself that Hemingway had definitively characterized, but also the postwar world--- the world of the Paris expatriates. The war, literal or figurative, physical or mental, served as a presiding background of all Hemingway's fiction in the 1920's. When, in 1929 *A Farewell To Arms* was published, he had already given the war definitive and sharply effective treatment. In the brief interchapters, which serve as thematic commentary upon the stories of *In Our Time*, and in the portrait of Jake Barnes, readers had already found an eloquent portrayal of the war both as fact and effect. By then, many of the



conventions of war literature had been firmly established, among which there was a frequent reaction against the "holy abstractions" of Western civilization, which, in the midst of trench warfare and melancholy retreats, seemed a culminating and fulminating profanity against the dignity of man, whose effect was reductive and intellectually disenchanting.

Hemingway's works move inevitably toward a formularization of attitude and reaction. This takes the form of a carefully developed symbolic ritual, borrowed from the sports in which Hemingway was most interested. These sports have rules which must be scrupulously followed: they, like a work of art, on a figurative level, demand a setting, an atmosphere, which cannot be violated or they lose their usefulness. At times the usual sport of fishing lends its place to bullfighting, in his more ambitious works, since it involves the risk of death; both the danger and the evidence of death are continuously and often conspicuously present throughout. It is a carefully formulated work of art or as Hemingway put it, "a three-act drama". Finally, it so challenges the skill, courage and art of the bullfighter that it is easy for the aficionado to mark the difference between the real thing and faking. From being a humble worker in the art of fiction Hemingway, of *The Green Hills of Africa*, had now, in the fifties, become a rather too authoritative critic of modern literature.

Among the commonplaces of Hemingway criticism is to write profusely on his style, since Hemingway maintains his “delicate balance” through the economy of style, yet this needs all the comments it can get. The followers of modernity, whose hallmark is masterly style, postulate that the style of writing creates emotion, and emotion shapes the destiny of the characters, thus it engages morality and formalistic profundity, which is the reputed task of modern fiction, on the deepest levels imaginable (Hassan 237). His “stripped-down” style (according to Pritchard) is characterized by impressionism, brevity, and versatility of form and not of subject matter; though critics like Young, Sanderson and Fiedler find his limited scope of subject matters restrictive to his development, a host of other critics, Baker, Gurko and Hassan, to mention only a few, contend that this does not pare down the quality and greatness of his fiction. On the other hand, he works fine within self-inflicted limitations and does not let the fabric of his fiction get too crowded, or let a minor theme predominate over his major concerns.

Hemingway’s contribution to modern prose engineering and the art of narration places him among the towering figures of the age. Those two were certainly among the imposing factors that prompted his Nobel Prize. He wrote his most ambitious works in the booming Twenties and Thirties, the most controversial

decades in American life and letters, when novel as “a new immigrant to pristine America”(Bradbury vi)was establishing itself, though it had already reached its peak of perfection in Europe in the hands of Balzac, Thackery, Stendhal, Dickens, etc. The distinctive feature of his fiction in this period is the relative absence of social novel, importance of solitude and nature and the tendency to see history less as a process than myth which in eighties gave rise to New Historicism in the hands of Focault. The purpose of Hemingway’s art, which was partially political in its gestation, is to bestow on humanity independent individuality which totalitarian powers seek to deteriorate.

His canon as a whole has been a sort of literary catalyst, which has affected the entire course of American fiction, and like a catalyst it has remained untouched by and superior to all the imitations of it. With his insistence on “presenting things truly”(R.P.Weeks 23), he was a denizen of the naturalistic tradition, and belongs with the leading craftsmen of American fiction, with Poe, Hawthorne and Melville “the haunted nocturnal writers”(R.P.Weeks 40), who initiated the dark tradition in American Literature. The thing they all had in common was the obsession with the journey back to the place they lived in before. Poe was irresistibly drawn to the tomb of his decaying beloved,

Hawthorne reluctant to leave Salem, and Salinger's Zooey refusing to leave New York.

Being an expatriate in Paris, Hemingway, in his major works, always shot back his heroes to a strongly American setting if not by name then by very powerful associations of the mental replica of the setting. Young says: "Hawthorne is the classic American statement of the principle and marking its centennial, Hemingway is its apotheosis" (Young 122).

Aside from his so-called limited cast of characters, there is another common charge directed at the characters themselves deprecatingly called "dull-witted, bovine, monosyllabic simpleton[s]" (Weeks 2). It is true that his characters never go to the ballot box, and are lone wolves. It is also true that Hemingway has been many times hailed as the "champion of mindlessness in literature". But a Hemingway hero is not a "dumb-ox" as Wyndham Lewis said. Bestriding the chasm between the highbrow and the lowbrow, Hemingway was always respected by both camps. The split between "the two audiences", which began in the nineteenth century with the universal spread of literacy has been taken as the inescapable burden of all modern culture since, and no other writer managed to so speak to both cultures. Maxwell Geismar in his famous book, *Writers in Crisis* quotes a piece of advice Henri Bergson gave his students. He

taught them "to think like men of action and act like men of thought"(63).With Hemingway the axiom has been somewhat simplified. His people act as if thought were unthinkable. Hemingway's unifying device of unthinking (if I may coin the word) is the trap of nada, where the (code) hero is caught in a frenzied struggle against the blind(ing) forces of life. This corresponds nicely with existentialism. These characters stop thinking to stop or delay death for the moment. This is the best place to quote Camus "beginning to think is beginning to be undermined"(*The Myth of Sisyphus*12) and get reduced to a "nihilating nothingness".

This is going to get fully expounded later in this thesis is the light of existentialist philosophy. Though Hemingway had a flagrant distaste of any label that tended to set him in a certain school, critics still seek to place him within the known and the knowable schools. A philosopher-critic, John Killinger, has veritably called him an existentialist in a vigorous academic essay published in Kentucky University (1960).

R.P.Weeks has directed the charge of sterility against his style, claiming "too much has been stripped away, leaving the diction pale, the syntax weak, the verbs without energy, the adjectives colorless"(4). Leon Edel (Weeks 170) calls this "the artful illusion of a style", maintaining that Hemingway "conjures

up the effects of a style by a process of evasion” and “by walking directly away from emotion”; little knowing that the word “conjure” itself implies magic, and the sterility and illusion go hand in hand with Hemingway’s late modernism and his all-pervasive apprehension of death which finds support in the death of punctuation, though he did not belong with those American expatriates who thought “the salvation of literature lay in the lack of punctuation.”(Geismar 40)

A fundamental characteristic of his colloquial style is *polysyndeton*, or the linking of simple sentences with *and*, of which Hemingway made extensive use in “My Old Man”, “Now I Lay Me”, *A Farewell To Arms*, and as early as *The Sun Also Rises*. Polysyndeton becomes less prominent in his later prose, although *The Green Hills of Africa* provides a few good examples. He was also beginning to forsake the coordinated sentences for more involved ones. “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”, in which the fondness for polysyndeton is less discernible, continues the movement towards the emergence of a new style. In this long short story even the compound sentences manifest an increasing amount of subordination. Another most important stylistic feature of Hemingway, growing out of his vernacular heritage, but which ultimately transcends it, is perhaps the colloquial habit of *understatement*, the deliberate use of simple

modifiers like *nice*, *fine* and *good* in place of more descriptive ones in order to convey the maximum amount of emotion with the least possible fuss. The quest for one true sentence leads to wordlessness, which is the irony of Hemingway's aesthetics. And if to get a novel written wordlessness must be filled with words, they will verge on the parodic. Parataxis, employed in "Indian Camp", conveys the sense that event follows event by only the slimmest logic. "And" reflects Hemingway's honest ignorance of how one thing leads to another, though it is not an ignorance he cherishes.

In comparison with some of the great novelists, undoubtedly, Hemingway falls short in richness and characterization, in the depth of psychological insight and the relative abundance of uninventive plots. This does not matter in the least, because language will carry the day and make do for all of these. Style for Hemingway alone was a moral act, a desperate struggle for moral probity amid the confusions of the world and the slippery complexities of one's own nature. To set things down simple and right is to hold a standard of rightness against a deceiving world. This style is so far from being a merely literary phenomenon or a matter of belles-lettres that Hemingway in fact set a style of life for a whole generation. "It (style) is what we have in place of religion", says Lady Brett Ashly in *The Sun Also Rises*. The right