

Hemingway and the American Dream by Jim Klee

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Although being an American, being physically large, and having a grizzled beard gives me a degree of similarity to Hemingway, I have no right to be here to speak of him other than that of a "witness." In my university days I read avidly all the novels and many short stories of Ernest Hemingway. He was very popular among the college bred intellectuals and did much to set styles of life which many of us aspired to some extent to follow.

Very few Americans coming of age in the decades between the two great wars could escape altogether Hemingway's influence. Some - the more staid - preferred the "superculture" attitude of Henry James. The rest of us, however, were deeply impressed by Hemingway's existential rawness which fitted what we imagined to be "the facts" of American life. In a curious way Hemingway offered a glimpse of freedom - the old dream of American immigrants and pioneers - but a dream no longer actually experienced in America. The growing complex of frustrations in contemporary American life were detailed by such writers as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis and Upton Sinclair who described the industrial North and Mid-West. The collapse of America's only major aristocratic tradition, that of our great plantation states of the deep South was vividly chronicled by William Faulkner. John Steinbeck and Erskine Caldwell wrote about the decadence of rural life and John O'Hara and F. Scott Fitzgerald recorded the spiritual poverty of the rich. But Hemingway called our attention to new sources of freedom - new horizons in the "old world" of France and Spain, in neglected portions of the Western Hemisphere such as the bypassed regions of the Caribbean and, most intriguing of all, the still relatively unknown interior of America. "Freedom," like the legendary Pot of Gold at the end of the rainbow seemed still just over the horizon.

Most American pioneers and immigrants had a curiously negative concept of freedom. They dreamed that it was possible to escape the repression of industrial slums, religious

persecution, wasted lands, and other evils consequent upon the industrial revolution but they had little positive picture of what they were escaping to, of what lay ahead. Some American experts on westward migration have likened their behavior to the invasions of locusts which lay waste all before them. The brave dream of the migrations west soon burst on the hard realities of a mostly arid, bitter land and the pioneers behaved accordingly. Several species of animals such as the passenger pigeon were exterminated for food. The American buffalo were reduced from herds estimated to have been around seventy million to a few sick hundreds in less than ten years. The American Indian was decimated by massacres and by disease often deliberately spread. When the Donner Party were trapped by snow in the Sierra Nevada mountains they ate their Indian guides first because they were not considered human. I am sure, being devout protestant Christians they asked the Lord's blessing as they sat down to their feast.

Few who migrated loved their new lands. For every *Old Jules* (Mari Sandoz) who lovingly nursed an almost impossible farm there were thousands who tore up the thin grass sod and moved on to let their homesteads return not to the previous buffalo range but to desert. Thus, the great American dust bowls were formed. The mountains were denuded of trees for timber. The earth was ripped by "strip mines" whose ugly scars still blemish large sections of the United States. The American dream of freedom had a negative quality: The hope of perfect freedom, "freedom from," persisted. For some it was to be found outside the United States. Our flights into space still nourish this idea for many. The dream contained in an irreconcilable paradox - to be free and to be fulfilled. But to fulfill oneself one must do something and this means, of course, commitment - and commitment requires a withdrawal from perfect "freedom from." While you do one thing you cannot do something else. If you have one woman, what about all the others? Some writers like Henry Miller face this as a logical conclusion which to them is justified. His heroes have all the women they meet even to the point of physical simultaneity. This solution has also been advocated in some of the erotic scenes depicted in Konarak and Khajuraho. Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald did not go that far. They limited their women to merely a sense of freedom that merged on what later became known as the "good sport" or "party girl" but who stopped short of the mass exhibitions of some of our recent scandals.

This negative sense of freedom is basic to colonial notions of independence and the adolescent notion of freedom from parental restrictions. But with growing sophistication

comes an awareness of the necessity of accepting responsibility of limiting freedom in the sense referred to by Erich Fromm in his "Escape from Freedom." For in the last analysis when perfect "freedom from" is attained one is left very often, as Sartre pointed out, in despair and boredom. One achieves not the "emptiness" sought by the Buddhist thinkers but essentially a negative vacuousness. If the struggle has been against real or fancied restrictions very often the sight of a positive goal is lost. What to do when freedom comes is frequently a most painful problem to fact especially if substitutes for the externally restricted activity are not developed. When there are no economic restraints, the solution becomes doing that which is most available - and since one's own physical being is often closest to hand, the appetites and the sex organs are most likely to have first call. So the problems of Hemingway's world are not the social problems which concerned writers of individuals, not truly involved with the affairs of the world who seek fulfillment through the spontaneity of their own sense physical beings. In only one of the three novels set in war time does one find a sense of war, social struggle, nations in clash. Each novel is centered around a lone individual - an ambulance driver who is wounded and falls in love with his nurse - an aging officer in Italy who indulges in a great deal of reflection which comes close to self pity. Only Robert in the novel of the Spanish Civil War seems also a social character but against such a small social canvas that he hardly represents the concern of the times. Hemingway's protagonist is the lone individual confronting or confronted by nature, by himself, or by other individuals - hunters, bullfighters, and one grand fisherman struggling directly with nature or occasionally a misplaced wife (Macomber Affair) or rival (Snows of Kilimanjaro). In a less romantic setting we are often given gangsters and prize fighters who belong to an underworld equally as primitive.

To Americans the memory of their recent confrontation with nature was still valid. A writer who could keep the dream that such a life was still authentic somewhere else, a writer who could capture primitive conflict between man and his immediate surroundings - such a writer was to be treasured. Many of us received him in that spirit. On my first trip to Mexico I turned to Hemingway and saw the bullring through his eyes as so beautifully depicted in *Death in the Afternoon*. As a demonstration of ultimate encounter the bullfight is conceivable. Although I never saw a really good bullfight I did see two Americans, "athletic" type young men obviously experienced with cattle, get into the ring with a man-wise bull. They were repeatedly tossed, completely helpless - no match for this bull

who had learned that the man and not the red cape is his chief target. A bull who stays in the ring without being killed for longer than twenty minutes will make this discovery. No man stands a chance in an encounter with such a bull.

Shortly after this I visited a slaughterhouse where the tourists were not permitted to see the actual killing of the animals. This was considered too ugly. But to eat is to kill and the sin of death is always upon us as long as we eat other creatures, plant or animal.

Hemingway is excellent at communicating this sense of elemental of the essential encounter between man and nature.

My experience with professional game fishing was also guided by Hemingway's novels and short stories. I spent several months in this occupation. Big game fishing is also such an encounter be it for pay as with Henry Morgan or for ultimate human dignity as with the old man. My attitudes about professional game fishing preceded my own direct experience and came first through Hemingway via Henry Morgan. I, too, saw the beautiful marlin strike, leap, run, and after a prolonged struggle be brought to the boat. And the fish is not always defeated. I have seen huge hooks straightened, nylon lines and steel wire snapped after hours of struggle. We once lost a huge tuna after seven hours of struggle. These were for me amongst the most intense experiences of life. And so I say I speak as a witness to Hemingway's major theme.

I am sure if I ever go to Africa I shall read his novels and stories first. As an individual I encountered the nature Hemingway addressed to us almost. I say almost because one of my most vivid recollections is a final sequence in a movie based on the last story in *To Have and Have Not*. John Garfield, then at his zenith as a star played Harry Morgan. The scene is the quay. Morgan has just returned wounded from a smuggling trip which ended in failure. The police await him and carry him off the ship. But his negro mate and helper has been killed. And as the crowd of police, doctors, and reporters leave the dock we see the mate's bewildered young boy, a lad about five or six years, standing there alone in uncomprehending patience waiting vainly for his father to come ashore too. There he stands, a single small lone figure left behind by the bustling crowd. The camera remains focused on him as it gradually pulls away and he becomes smaller and more alone until finally the whole scene fades out completely. This lack of concern with everyone else so vividly symbolized by this little boy was also part of the American Dream. That it was the *American Dream* Hemingway so eloquently manifested I think was evidenced not only by

the sales popularity of his books and their use in college literature courses but also especially by their frequent and detailed conversion to motion pictures. Most of the novels have been so used and many of the short stories formed the basis of very popular films. Generally these were major productions with top-ranking Hollywood stars in the leading roles. Gary Cooper, who was cast in a number of Hemingway type roles, exemplified for the American people the non-social individual in conflict with nature or with men exclusively bad, demonic at best. They were rarely "social" conflicts. One of Cooper's first major roles was with Helen Hayes, the "First Lady" of the American stage and screen at the time, in *Farewell to Arms*. He also played Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Humphrey Bogart made one of the sections of *To Have and to Have Not*. John Garfield made another. Both men were famous for their characterizations of underworld characters, the City's primitive man. Gregory Peck made *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. Burt Lancaster made *The Killers*, one of the great films of the time. Two films have made *The Sun Also Rises*, the most recent with Ava Gardner. When Hollywood gives this much attention and devotion to the works of an author one can be sure that these works have a wide range of appeal for the American public.

The tough, primitive hero of integrity, this was the typical Hemingway hero - a hero who has his counterpart in the "Western" story and in the detective story, especially the "tough" school represented by writers such as Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler. Hammet's Sam Spade expresses the typically American value system in a speech which he makes when an attempt is made to dissuade him from investigating the murder of his partner, an unsavory character who has been cheating Spade in business. Despite threats and cajolery Spade says he will continue his investigation not to serve justice, which has been well served already, but because it is a job to be done. He owes it to his client who has paid for his services. Sam Spade expresses in this speech a sense of responsibility to his job and to his conscience. This was an attitude generally admired by Americans at this time and which Veblen called "the instinct for workmanship." William James wrote that he had once asked a carpenter why he spent so much time and effort on the backs of drawers in a chest. "After all," said James, "No one ever sees the back of the drawer." "I do," replied the carpenter and went on with his work. The American Dream required complete integrity of the individual to his job - to his role as he conceived it. But the individual, authentic only in this role, was typically American.

As all modes of life became more and more socialized this kind of individualism was no longer sufficient. Perhaps it will come again. Perhaps it is most needed now in the recently independent ex-colonial nations where there is primarily an internal job to be done.

But in this atomic world, this world of reduced physical and temporal dimensions a more social conscience is needed. Let us hope that it will not be merely social but that it will contain as well the authentic individual of integrity that Hemingway so movingly created for us.