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## **Representation of Death in Hemingway's Short Stories**

### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the different concepts of death in Ernest Hemingway's short stories. The dominance of this genre in his works coincides with the first decade of his writing career and the most significant short stories that are directly connected to well-known, thoroughly researched events of his life that are also fictionalized in most of his works, clearly show the distinct changes in his understanding and interpretation of the ultimate end of everything. His four short stories this paper focuses on, through his characteristic narration and dialogues built of an austere vocabulary, outline the process that marks these changes.

### **Keywords:**

Ernest Hemingway, death, suicide, fascination, curiosity, apathy, depression, narrative and dialogue techniques

Hemingway's approach to death, the obsession-like intensity with which he explores the unknown terrain, his vivid interest in the subject matter of passing away, the motivations and psychology of suicide - these are underlying characteristics of his prose fiction; his major novels and most important short stories are somehow connected to the issue.

This paper examines the changes in the concept and understanding of death in his short prose fiction, a dominant genre only in the first decade of his writing career, through those short stories that are directly centered around death and seem to build a path, draw a line spanning eleven years, which illustrates the different phases of the process, i.e. the different approaches, the different views, the different notions and perceptions. The short stories in focus include one of his earliest piece, *The Indian Camp*, first published in 1925, in his first short-story collection, in *In Our Time*, two short stories - *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* and *The Natural History of the Dead* - from his third collection *Winner Take Nothing*, eight years later, and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, published in *Esquire* magazine, in 1936. Since Hemingway is one of the most strongly autobiographical American authors (Baker 1990: 131), it seems quite evident that the changes in the attitude towards death that can clearly be observed in his works are closely related to different, very precisely documented and fictionalized events of his life; thus the short story from his first collection which basically marks the starting point of his career reflects on the experiences of a ten- or eleven-year-old boy, Nick Adams, Hemingway's first alter-ego, whereas the writer-main character, Harry in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* can easily be identified with the middle-aged author looking back on his life and career.

In the *Indian Camp*, in the first piece of the Nick Adams-saga, Nick accompanies his father, a doctor, to an Indian camp where a woman has been in labor for two days. The boy, for the first time in his life, is confronted with horrible suffering, and as he slowly and gradually adapts to the surroundings, absorbs the painfully and simply - nevertheless very accurately - described sights, sounds, smells, he is also taking the first tentative steps to the unknown domain of adulthood. His initiation into the world of the grown-ups is through witnessing suffering and ultimately death. The baby can only be born with a Caesarian, and seeing the frightening details of the operation and its aftermath, Nick first turns his head away, but when the tragic deed of the Indian, who during the birth of the baby slit his throat, is discovered, he quite openly examines the scene. In the typical Hemingway dialogue between father and son, in the short conversation built up of crisp, undecorated sentences, Nick receives an adult's laconic, slightly enigmatic explanation of what has happened:

*'Why did he kill himself, Daddy?'*

*'I don't know, Nick. He couldn't stand things, I guess.'* (Hemingway 2003: 69)

Looking at Hemingway's prose fiction from a larger perspective, it seems that the last sentence, one of the key sentences of *Indian Camp*, is in a way a capsule summary of the author's somewhat one-dimensional view on the world where men are split into two groups: the ones who can and the ones who cannot stand things. Disillusioned men who distinguish themselves with their moral fiber, and who - not always voluntarily - pay with their life for firmly sticking to the code - those are the ones who "can stand things". The Indian who is not able to bear the burdens of life, who is too weak to cope with the hardship that 'things' present would obviously fall into the latter group. The father's words offer a number of hardly different interpretations - e.g. the inability to endure the suffering of a loved one, to be confronted with the prospects of a native American at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the realization of the totally hopeless future for the child to be born -, but they do not significantly alter the author's standpoint.<sup>[1]</sup> Nick's final conclusion of the whole experience is summarized in the last uncharacteristically long sentence which is burdened with a detailed though still simple description of the surroundings, creating a different rhythm after the mainly one-tone sentences. In fact, the details that inevitably fragment the sentence prepare the reader for the surprising, improbable ending.

*'In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die.'* (Hemingway 2003: 70)

Death here is - quite naturally - something totally unknown, the source of a chaotic mixture of fascination, astonishment, incredulity, curiosity. The only way the young boy can define his attitude towards death is not accepting it, hardly acknowledging it. Nick who is now no longer sitting in his father's lap the way he did on

the way to the camp - which seems to indicate that he is one step closer to adulthood - concludes what he has experienced by distancing himself from the possibility of death.

*A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* offers a completely different concept in a story which seemingly does not directly touch the theme of death or dying. In a Spanish cafe two waiters are talking about the only guest, a lonely, deaf old man. Their conversation reveals that the old man tried to commit suicide a week earlier. This fact or the miserable loneliness of the old man does not arouse compassion in the younger waiter who is simply angry because he can't go home to his wife, has to wait till the last guest leaves. But his remarks about old age and his insulting behavior with the old man touches the older waiter whose initially slightly cynical attitude changes. He can understand the old man, can identify with him. The significance of the "clean" place and the light is more than obvious to him since he is harassed by the same fears, is motivated by the same desire to escape the frightening and chaotic darkness. He understands that it is the recognition of the nothingness, emptiness, *nada* that led the old man to try and take his own life. (Bollobás 2005: 392) His reactions to the younger waiter's rude remarks indicate his own longing for the cleanliness and light that counterpoint death and loneliness. Nick Adams's curiosity is replaced with fear and depression that is generated by the constant consciousness of death. In *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, where the only direct reference to death is the old man's attempt to kill himself, the depressing tone is mainly created by Hemingway's typical techniques of omission - what is not stated resonates much stronger than the written words. The interpretation of "nothing" in the conversation between the two men is given from two aspects: the younger waiter says that the miserable old man tried to commit suicide for no obvious reasons, for 'nothing', but his colleague understands that it is the emptiness of life, the meaningless life that motivated the attempt. (Egri 1967: 82) By the end of the story when he finds himself in a situation similar to the old man's, in a bar, and contemplates the meaning of *nada*, he finally concludes: *It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order.* (Hemingway 2003: 291) The author's understanding of death considerably changes and is significantly closer to the final apathy shown in later works.

*A Natural History of the Dead*, a highly unusual and uncharacteristic Hemingway short story in many ways, seems to offer a "*few rational and interesting facts about the dead*" (Hemingway 2003: 335). It is marked by the sharp contrast of narrative styles. The first part is characterized by a seeming scientific curiosity, the narrator precisely recounts the horrid, gruesome details of death, distancing himself with a disciplined scholar's objectivity (although he uses the first person singular and the descriptions are obviously based on his First World War experiences). He describes shocking scenes of dying and dead animals and human beings, sparing no ghastly details. He inserts almost light-toned remarks: "... *it being amazing that the human body should be blown into pieces which exploded along no anatomical lines, but rather divided as capriciously as the fragmentation in the burst of a high explosive shell.*" (Hemingway 2003: 337) The intention that the account should be devoid of emotions is intensified by several references to animals, by

comparing the death of human beings to that of animals. People "... *died like animals... died from little wounds as rabbits...most men die like animals, not men.*" Hemingway 2003: 338) But the narrative is loaded with strong irony and sarcasm (something not exactly frequent in Hemingway's writings) that masks dread, dismay and the inability to comprehend the horrible and meaningless destruction. The author's own First World War experiences, which dominated his works, either directly or indirectly, for roughly twenty years and created a background for all his writings in this period, serve as indigestible raw material for the macabre account. Not even in his outright war novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, is the theme of death so directly and bluntly addressed. The deeply ironical tone does not change throughout the detailed recount, but the narrative suddenly alters within a paragraph, it shifts into the third person, and the reader is led into a much more familiar and usual Hemingway scene. It is a description, mainly through dialogues, of a confrontation between an artillery officer and a doctor over a seriously wounded soldier "*whose head was broken as a flower-pot may be broken, although it was held together by membranes and a skillfully applied bandage now soaked and hardened with the structure of his brain disturbed by a piece of broken steel in it...*" (Hemingway 2003: 339). The officer who is himself a patient passionately attacks the doctor for not caring adequately for the dying soldier, meaning that he should not let him suffer. Besides presenting the familiar male rivalry theme, Hemingway also shows different reactions to death and suffering. The lightly wounded officer's compassion and anger is contrasted with the doctor's tired apathy. Hemingway is no longer a direct narrator, nevertheless the dialogue between the two men subtly but no less clearly shows his dismay over pain and death. The theme is presented here in an extreme situation - a horrible war -, but the reactions are not significantly different compared to what other characters show in narratives that present the theme in everyday situations.

The short prologue of *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* - which along with the only other longer short story, *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*, grew out of Hemingway's African hunting experiences - sets the tone. The reference to the "*dried and frozen carcass of a leopard*" (Hemingway 2003: 39) clearly defines the significant role of death in the short story. Harry, the writer, on an African safari with his rich wife, is injured: a thorn scratches his leg and that causes serious gangrene which threatens his life. They are waiting for a truck or a plane that can take him to a hospital. In fact Harry is waiting for his own death which will come by the end of the story. In a way, what we receive is an accurate and detailed description of the different mental phases of dying. The first sentence of the dialogue at the beginning directly addresses the wound, the cause of the looming death. Harry remarks that it is painless, and then refers to the unpleasant odor. But it is not only the physical injury he is referring to: by saying that because there is no pain this is "... *how you know when it starts*" (Hemingway 2003: 39), it becomes obvious from the first few words that he is aware of what is coming, he is consciously waiting for death. And his conclusion not very much later shows utter resignation and complete indifference:

*So now it was all over, he thought. So now he would never have a chance to finish it. So this was the way*

*it ended, in a bickering over a drink. Since the gangrene started in his right leg he had no pain and with the pain the horror had gone and all he felt now was a great tiredness and anger that this was the end of it. For this that was coming, he had very little curiosity. For years it had obsessed him; but now it meant nothing in itself. It was strange how easy being tired enough made it.* (Hemingway 2003: 40-41)

Instead of fascinated obsession and curiosity - tiredness and anger. Whereas the eleven-year-old boy thinks of never dying, the middle-aged Harry almost listlessly accepts the inevitable. The short story written around a time when serious suicidal thoughts haunted Hemingway (Baker 1990: 144; Young 1966:121) does not only resonate with bitterness and apathy about the inevitable but is also an account of a writing career. Harry, no matter how weak he is physically, vigorously attacks his wife, accusing her of being responsible for all the chances he lost as an artist. Helen's sin is that she is rich, so Harry had a cushioned life that made him unable to work. But partly through the inner monologues that recount his previous experiences - some of which are shadowed by death and human suffering -, partly through reflections on the past while he is waiting for his death, he reaches some important conclusions. (Beegel 2000: 63) He realizes that he "*had destroyed his talent himself... He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in.*" (Hemingway 2003: 45) Despite his obvious fate he is also dreaming of a condition and state where creative work is possible. Also, his last delirious dream slightly alters the impression that he is resigned and is indifferently waiting for his passing away. In his dream the plane arrives, and when he is carried on board and they take off, after a time "*... all he could see, as wide as all the world, great high, and unbelievably white in the sun, was the square top of Kilimanjaro. And then he knew that here was where he was going.*" (Hemingway 2003: 56)

Reading this and about the carcass of the leopard in the prologue of the short story it is difficult not to think of a "clean, well-lighted place" - the metaphorical place and condition for the ideal death.

The four short stories illustrate the changes in the concept of death, the different attitudes towards it. Hemingway, whose interest in death is obviously not limited to his short prose fiction since the theme is very much present in most of his works, using his techniques of omission and implication in descriptions and dialogues as well, employing a puritan vocabulary, wording in undecorated, plain sentences, offers a number of contrasting interpretations of the end of human life.

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[1] It is interesting to note that in the last of the three Hungarian translations of *Indian Camp* (Imre Szász, 1960) the translator's interpretation changes „things" to the singular („a dolgot") which seems to limit the potential meaning.