



Earnest Hemingway: Truth & Fiction

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Abstract

The difference between fiction, reality and truth has been a subject of a long debate since Plato excluded literature from his Utopia. Plato insists that literature is a thrice-removed reality or at least an inferior imitation of it. Aristotle, on the other hand, believes that literature might be an improved version of reality. This article explores the possibilities of bridging the gap between fiction and reality and if literature has the power to express truth. I focus the discussion on Earnest Hemingway's *An Old Man at the Bridge, For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and a collection of his nonfiction writing- his Spanish Civil War Dispatches. Hemingway indeed managed to portray what he refers to as "absolute truth" in his fiction more than he does in his journalism.

Key words: Earnest Hemingway; Fiction; Truth; *An Old Man at the Bridge, For Whom the Bell Tolls*

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INTRODUCTION

"What is truth? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer" (qtd. in Woolman, p.6). This is perhaps the best-known line in Francis Bacon's *Essays*. People have been always fascinated by the concept of truth, which can be traced back to Greek times. Plato tries to distinguish truth through three main characteristics; it needs to be

public, independent of anyone's belief and eternal (p.7). The famous, late politician, Daniel Patrick Moynihan said: "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts." From early childhood, we are taught the difference between facts and opinions. This difference has become fundamental in our understanding of the world, and the way we perceive reality. While we are encouraged to develop our own opinions of many issues, still, we might not be able to question facts. But, we find ourselves in a position where we might not be able to reveal truth or some facts due to some serious socio-political conditions. Ernest Hemingway might have believed that fiction is the only means to reveal truth in many contexts in my estimation.

Hemingway experienced many wars and had the opportunity to understand the real struggles and motives of the horrible wars he covered as a journalist. Wars have been called useless, inhuman, and barbaric among other things. The deaths of innocent people, which take place in wars, are horrific events, which, in turn, might develop a sense of the uselessness of war. Hemingway obviously expresses these ideas in his literary works.

Perhaps more than any other American author, Hemingway was fascinated by wars. He took an active role in quite a few of them – starting from WWI through Greco-Turkish conflict of 1922, Spanish Civil War (1936) and World War II (1939-1945). As an ambulance driver in Italy during the World War II, Hemingway was wounded and later on awarded an Italian medal of honor. In other wars he was right there on the spot, reporting on the mayhem and the American public. Due to some socio-political consideration, Hemingway preferred to express the horrible truth he experienced in the aforementioned wars through fiction rather than journalistic articles. In his introduction to "Men at War" – a collection of war stories edited by Hemingway, he fully expresses this notion:

A writer's [a fiction writer's] job is to tell the truth. His standard of fidelity to the truth should be so high that his invention, out

of his experience, should produce a truer account than anything factual can be. For facts can be observed badly; but when a good writer is creating something, he has time and scope to make it of absolute truth. (Qtd. in Nakjavani, p. 138)

In what follows, I will explain that Hemingway manages to tell the absolute truth in his fiction more than he does in his journalism. I focus on his *An Old Man at the Bridge*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and a collection of his nonfiction writing- his Spanish Civil War Dispatches.

EARNEST HEMINGWAY BETWEEN TRUTH AND FICTION

Hemingway wrote thirty-one dispatches for the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA) covering Spanish Civil War (1937 – 1938). Even though mostly journalistic in nature, written in third person and with many facts, many of these dispatches try to tell a story or convey a message. Most of which are general in content, some others are more or less little snapshots of people, and some of which are touching accounts of what it is like to be in war. The dispatches make a good use of dialogue – a feature more typical of a short story or a work of fiction, and almost contain some literary elements such as similes, metaphors or imagery. Although he uses similar techniques in two different types of writing, Hemingway never considers his journalistic writings to be part of his fiction and he expresses this attitude quite often. In the introduction to his compilation of Hemingway's nonfiction writing titled "By-line," William White quotes Hemingway saying:

Newspaper stuff I have written...has nothing to do with the other writing, which is entirely apart.... If you have made your living as a newspaperman, learning your trade, writing against deadlines, writing to make stuff timely rather than permanent, no one has any right to dig this stuff up and use it against the stuff you have written to write the best you can. (White p.xi)

Indeed, many of the dispatches are written hurriedly as Hemingway tries to meet the deadline for the journals to which he reports. Quite a few of which are cabled over to the States. Thus, punctuation is practically lost. Sarah Shaber thinks that Hemingway is more focused on pursuing his love affair with Martha Gellhorn of *Colliers*, than writing. She calls his dispatches: "meager, rambling and self-centered" (p.421). She also quotes Phillip Knightley describing Hemingway's performance as a war correspondent "abysmally bad" (p.422). A nod should be made to a few dispatches containing Hemingway's literary brilliance. For example, in the dispatch dated on March 18, 1937, there is a passage describing Hemingway's arrival to Valencia:

Coming into Valencia in the dark through miles of orange groves in bloom, the smell of orange blossoms, heavy and strong even through the dust of the road, made it seem to this half-asleep correspondent like a wedding. But even half asleep, watching the lights go out through the dust, you knew it wasn't an Italian wedding they were celebrating. (Watson, p.34)

The parallel structures in this passage help us see the contrast between dreamy, carefree orange groves in bloom, an Italian wedding and the harsh reality of war. There are certainly some more examples of literary genius in Hemingway's dispatches, but as a whole, they are not considered to be extraordinary. The same does not apply to the two works of fiction Hemingway wrote on the same topic; *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *An Old Man at the Bridge*. Both are, actually, considered to be among the best fiction Hemingway ever wrote.

An Old Man at the Bridge (hereinafter "Old Man") is a very brief short story. On the surface it is deceptively simple. Despite its brevity, the story has a fully developed, even complex character, a conflict and a resolution. The story is built around "An old man with steel rimmed spectacles" (p.57) who was the last one to leave his hometown San Carlos fleeing fascists. After walking for some twelve kilometers the old man set down just before a pontoon bridge, unwilling to move any further. He appears to be resigned and not worried about his own fate; instead, he is very concerned about the animals he had to leave behind and wonders what is going to happen to them. Hemingway in this and many other short stories gives the reader a direct insight into the character's mind. The reader might clearly see the old man's situation, and then the reader might 'think' the old man's thoughts and 'feel' his feelings. This creates a certain bond between the reader and the old man.

Despite the narrator's advice to keep walking and cross the bridge, the old man keeps sitting on the road. Almost as an afterthought, the narrator informs the reader at the very end of the story that the encounter happens on Easter Sunday. We also know that his beloved cat is independent.¹ The narrator calls the only good luck the old man would ever have. Thus, we feel the tragedy of a war, especially for a good, old man who cares more about his animals than he does for himself. The story with such a symbolic end provokes a stronger depth of emotions than Hemingway's dispatches dealing with a similar topic of refugees' flight.

One particular dispatch that deals with the same subject is a NANA dispatch dated April 3. In it, Hemingway deals with the same subject matter as in "Old Man" i.e. fleeing of refugees and the chaos and fear caused by the enemy advancements and bombardments. Here is a very descriptive paragraph from this dispatch:

That was how the day started but no one yet alive can say how it will end. For soon we began passing carts loaded with refugees. An old woman was driving one, crying and sobbing while she swung a whip. She was the only woman I saw crying the whole day. There were eight children following another cart and one little boy pushed on the wheel as they came up a difficult grade. Bedding, sewing machines, blankets, cooking utensils,

¹ A cat was one of the animals the old man had to leave behind but because cats are known to be independent animals the old man did not worry about the cat as much as the other animals.

mattresses wrapped in mats, and sacks of grain for the horses and mules were piled in the carts and goats and sheep were tethered to the tail-boards. There was no panic. They were just plodding along. (Watson, p.69)

While Hemingway provides detailed images here, the reader has no way of knowing what the author or the people involved think. There is too much going on in every dispatch, even in every single paragraph for the reader to be able to focus on one in particular. The story, on the other hand, is completely centered on one event – the old man’s immobility. In it the reader gets a glimpse into both the narrator and the old man’s thoughts and feelings. There is a clear sense of progression and the feeling of loss and confusion representative of the old man and all the refugees is palpable. The following paragraph from the story showcases some of the aforementioned points:

“What politics have you?” I asked. “I am without politics,” he said. “I am seventy-six years old. I have come twelve kilometers now and I think I can go no further.” “This is not a good place to stop,” I said. “If you can make it, there are trucks up the road where it forks for Tortosa.” “I will wait a while,” he said, “and then I will go. Where do the trucks go?” “Towards Barcelona,” I told him. “I know no one in that direction,” he said, “but thank you very much. Thank you again very much.” He looked at me very blankly and tiredly, then said having to share his worry with someone, “The cat will be all right, I am sure. There is no need to be unquiet about the cat. But the others. Now what do you think about the others?”

One can almost feel the old man’s resignation and worries after reading this paragraph. The old man’s concern for his animals and carelessness about his own fate is poignant. It arouses hard feelings of empathy. Unlike the images of refugees’ movement in the dispatch painted mostly for the purpose of informing the reader, the similar opening image in the story serves more to create a contrast between the chaos and movement of the others and the old man’s quiet immobility.

It is important for the purpose of this analysis to note that it is widely accepted that “Old Man” is written based on a true account. Hemingway’s field notes provide details to support this assumption. For instance, the date of the account – April 17 (Easter Sunday), meeting an old man concerned about his animals, pontoon bridge, cloudy sky, etc. (Watson, p.154). Most critics also believe that while taking notes Hemingway meant to form them into a dispatch for NANA. Even the manner in which the story is sent to the publisher, *Ken* magazine, is through a cable - the same manner in which most of his dispatches are sent. Besides the fact that Hemingway has to meet a deadline for *Ken*, it is probable that he also recognizes a bigger potential of the old man’s story. Arnold Gingrich, the editor of *Ken*, cables the following to Hemingway after reading the story: “Marvelous piece. Feel that these short punches have done more good for Loyalist cause than volumes of ordinary reporting, judging by terrific response received” (Watson, p.157). Hemingway

obviously recognizes the story had a potential to represent and portray the general feeling of the refugees’ plight in the Spanish Civil War. In other words, it has a potential to tell a higher truth, and for this he chooses to use it in his fiction. Hemingway does a similar thing in his novel dealing with the same subject matter.

For Whom the Bell Tolls is considered by many to be one of Hemingway’s best novels. The plot is built around Robert Jordan, an American who sympathizes with the Republicans and enlists with the Government forces as a dynamiter. Jordan is sent to blow up a bridge in the territory behind the enemy lines and his death is very probable, if not certain. Despite this fact, the general tone of the novel is positive. This attitude is surprising especially because the other two novels of Hemingway – *The Sun Also Rises* and *Farewell to Arms* are both negative in their tone. After reading *For Whom the Bell Tolls* one is not left with bitter or nihilistic feeling about war as the end-all of humanity, rather, more than anything else; while certainly not a great thing, war is something people can deal with. D.S Savage, an author of several articles on Hemingway, in his article for *Hudson Review* explains that in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* insists “futility is replaced by meaningfulness,” and “nihilistic despair with lyrical acceptance.” He adds that the feeling operating at the center of the novel is a positive feeling of being at terms with one’s own fate, rather than a feeling of being controlled by nature or being a victim (p.394). From this central positive attitude springs the empathy a reader feels for the protagonist and other characters in the novel.

In addition to developing empathy for the characters in the novel, the reader also gains a greater understanding of war and its consequences. In her article titled “Reading For Whom the Bell Tolls with Barthes, Bakhtin, and Shapiro,” Jennifer Laster looks at the novel through the prism of the theoretical work of the aforementioned scholars. She explains the way in which Hemingway frames the war for the reader using contrasting images of nature versus war machines, weapons, sounds and similar juxtapositions (1). Lester calls these nature images the: “artistic backdrop against which war is contrasted” (1). Just like Erich Maria Remarque used images of nature in his novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* to suggest that despite war life goes on, Hemingway suggests so in his contrasting images that nature, and perhaps humans, might adapt to any condition. Furthermore, this technique allows Hemingway to subtly invite the reader to question the necessity of war.

Robert Jordan engages in a similar activity through his internal dialogue. Hemingway uses Jordan’s thoughts to introduce the reader to the thinking and feelings of a person in war. In chapter twenty-six Jordan questions himself about his right to kill other human beings. He reads a letter from a young cavalryman he killed and he starts feeling guilty for taking another person’s life. This is a small part of his internal dialogue:

How many is that you have killed? He asked himself. I don't know. Do you think you have a right to kill any one? No. But I have to. How many of those you have killed have been real fascists? Very few. But they are all the enemy to whose force we are opposing force. But you like these people of Navarra better than those of any other part of Spain. Yes. And you kill them. Yes. If you don't believe it go down there to the camp. Don't you know it is wrong to kill? Yes. But you do it? Yes. And you still believe absolutely that your cause is right? Yes. (Hemingway, p.303-304)

Hemingway effectively portrays the turmoil going on inside a thinking soldier's head. He gets Jordan to come to the following conclusion and answer to his questions: "You have put many things in abeyance to win a war. If this war is lost all of those things [life, liberty and pursuit of happiness] are lost" (p.305). Through Jordan's reasoning, the reader gains greater understanding of war; the reader learns the greater truth – in a war people often have to sacrifice some of their moral values so that they achieve the victory for which they strive. Hemingway mentions a similar event in his article titled "Dying, Well or Badly" he wrote for *Ken* magazine in April 1938. In it, he speaks of coming across a body of a young dead soldier and reading a letter from the soldier's sister (Kobler, p.38). Hemingway does not dwell too much on this in the article and the reader does not necessarily make the connections between this event and the larger issues of war and morality as he does in the similar scene of the novel.

Hemingway also brings the reader's attention to repressed rights of people during war such as speech, emotions and thoughts. This helps the reader gain a better understanding of war as a social phenomenon and perhaps creates some sense of empathy for the people under war. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, speech becomes essential, not only as a means of exchanging information, but also as a means of asserting one's humanness despite the circumstances (Lester, p.4). Hemingway helps the reader realize this in chapter twenty-three as Jordan thinks to himself the following: "He felt the need to talk that, with him, was the sign that there had just been much danger. He could always tell how bad it had been by the strength of the desire to talk that came after" (Hemingway, 2003, p.283). Here, in addition to helping Jordan re-assert his humanness, speech also helps him recover from the shock and reflect on the situation that has just occurred. However, despite the great need for language, in a war, this language is often suppressed and limited to short, terse phrases. This discrepancy between a heightened need for language and its limited use creates an internal conflict within a person participating in war. It is almost like there is no time to talk and everything has to be done in action. The speech becomes laconic and discussion is often postponed for some other time. This is mirrored in the exchange between Jordan and Primitivo in chapter twenty-eight where Primitivo expresses concerns over leaving some of his comrades in a bad situation. Jordan tells him: "There was no choice, and now it is better not

to speak of it" (p.325). Similarly, at the end of chapter twenty-five, Pillar declares: "In war one cannot say what one feels" (p.301). She reinforces this notion later on in chapter thirty-eight, after mentioning the issue of Pablo killing the entire crew of Otero post, when she says to Augustin: "Leave it. It does no good to talk" (p.384). While acknowledging the fact that language is very much needed during war, Hemingway also makes a point of showing how language becomes suppressed and hurried at those times. This contradiction helps the reader understand how complex and even opposite human feelings and actions might be during war. Lester proposes that classic texts such as *For Whom the Bell Tolls* carry the meaning over time because they expose some features of social or political experiences and ask provoking questions. She contends: "When approached as sociopolitical text on war, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* reasserts itself as classic literature. Hemingway's novel continues to reveal and question the implications of war; its significance has not wavered over time" (p.7). This long-term validity is one of hallmarks of good literature.

This fascination of Hemingway's with the human consequences of war is certainly not limited to his fiction since it is the most frequent subject in his dispatches in which Hemingway deals with human suffering caused by war, political consequences of a war, and military strategy. Some of his dispatches are very similar to his short stories in that he uses dialogues and paints many images using figurative language. However, many of these dispatches are so abundant with information that at times it is difficult to appreciate their literary value. This is another important point of difference between Hemingway's fiction and nonfiction, and perhaps an understandable one having in mind the genres' different standards. While in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *An Old Man at the Bridge* Hemingway focuses primarily on one event and takes time to develop it, in his dispatches he is trying to write about many different events, people and situations all the once.

This sometimes causes the same event to be covered in more detail in Hemingway's dispatches than in his novels or short stories. A good example of this is Hemingway's handling of the battle of Guadalajara that happened on 19 March 1937. Hemingway's Dispatch 4 – *Loyalist Victory at Guadalajara* dated 22 March 1937 goes into the details of the battle and in it Hemingway makes the appraisal of the situation, even some predictions about it (Watson, p.17). Hemingway wrote this dispatch reacting to a NANA cable he had received few days before demanding that he do less "daily running narrative" (p.18) and more of surveying and appraisal of situations. This is just an excerpt from the aforementioned dispatch:

Franco, having exhausted his Moorish troops in the repeated assaults on Madrid, now finds he cannot depend on the Italians. Not because Italians are cowardly, but because Italians defending the line of the Piave and Mount Grappa against

invasion are one thing and Italians sent to fight in Spain when they expected garrison duty in Ethiopia are another. I talked with an officer of the Eleventh Government brigade who was all through the Trijueque fighting. "The Italians advanced in columns of fours along the road toward our defenses. It seemed they did not expect any resistance. When we opened fire they seemed completely confused. (p.19)

Hemingway mentions the same event in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in the part of the novel where Jordan thinks back about his life in Madrid in chapter eighteen:

He wished that he had seen the fighting on the plateau beyond Guadalajara when they beat the Italians. But he had been down in Estremadura then. Hans had told him about it one night in Gaylord's two weeks ago and made him see it all. There was one moment when it was really lost when the Italians had broken the line near Trijueque and the Twelfth Brigade would have been cut off if the Torija-Brihuega road had been cut. "But knowing they were Italians," Hans had said, "We attempted a maneuver which would have been unjustifiable against other troops. And it was successful. (Hemingway, 2003, p.233-234)

Besides the obvious difference in the length of description— in the dispatch Hemingway uses about 1000 words, and in the novel about 150— the important difference lies in the way Hemingway deals with the same event in his fiction and nonfiction and the effect it has on the reader. The passage taken from the dispatch is very informative, detailed, with some personal commentary. It does not pull the reader in – it simply presents facts in a colorful manner. The passage from the novel does not have as much information, but it is much more memorable. The reader might identify and empathize with people who are desperate as the prospect of losing a battle neared and then they try a crazy maneuver as it is their only way out and they succeed. It is as if the reader is there himself going through the soldiers' disappointment, fear, and finally euphoria of victory. This one paragraph has a conflict, climax and denouement, much like a short story, and is thus much more effective in engaging the reader. The basic pieces of information presented are similar, however the effects on the reader are radically different.

CONCLUSION

It seems to me that Hemingway indeed manages to portray what he refers to as "absolute truth" in his fiction more so than he does in his nonfiction. We might disagree on the universality and validity of Hemingway's truth and mediums. The Spanish critic Arturo Barea criticizes Hemingway's use of Spanish language in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. He also points out that "Hemingway has understood the emotions which our 'people as a whole' felt in the bull ring, but not those which it felt in collective action of war and revolution" (qtd. in Nakjavani, p.137). Barea also argues that the novel is simply Hemingway's version of truth. This is reflected even in the title of Barea's article-*Not Spain but Hemingway*. Nakjavani, in

his article titled "Knowledge as Power: Robert Jordan as an Intellectual Hero," argues that it is exactly the fact that it is not Spain, but Hemingway, that renders the power to Hemingway's novel. Barea supports this notion when he calls Hemingway's account of Spanish Civil War "honest in so far as it renders Hemingway's real vision" (p.138). This brings up the issue of what is Hemingway's real vision? What is it that he considers an absolute truth?

Unlike Barea, Shelley Fishkin in her book *From Fact to Fiction: Imaginative Journalism & Writing in America* contends that even in his fiction Hemingway relies mostly on facts and concrete images. She says: "From his earliest 'Nick Adams' stories to his last novels, Hemingway would pay careful attention to concrete sensation, accurate technique and precisely observed fact" (p.147). This is especially relevant for *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as the novel, along with other fiction and nonfiction Hemingway wrote about Spanish Civil War, is his attempt to, as Fishkin puts it: "...set the record straight by telling the truth" (p.157). What Fishkin refers to here is the fact the Loyalist are actually a victim of propaganda and that many American newspapers published half-truths or even plain lies to support General Franco and his cause (p.156). Thus, in my estimation Hemingway needed to address this issue and he did so through his writing, especially through his fiction. Fishkin goes on analyzing the importance of concrete facts to every character in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. She concludes by saying that no work of literature might tell it all.

Ultimately, every work of literature is only one version of the truth. Any work of literature that does not acknowledge this fact ends up being a lie (p.163). Hemingway acknowledges this limitation in his fiction and by doing so manages to portray the higher, or absolute truth. These are the lines Jordan thinks as he is dying at the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: "There is no one thing that's true. It's all true. The way the planes are beautiful whether they are ours or theirs" (Hemingway, 2003, p.467). And that is the truth – Hemingway's absolute truth.

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