

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S NOVELS

### EKZISTENCIALIZMI SIPAS FILOZOFISË DHE LETËRSISË FRËNGE

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#### Abstract

As one of the greatest modernists, Ernest Hemingway is known for his iceberg theory and his minimalistic style of narration, and his novels are still being studied by scholars. In this paper we give an insight of how much of Hemingway's life is present in his greatest novels. We have covered some of his greatest novels like *Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Moveable Feast*, *Old Man and the Sea*, etc. In these novels, the author wrote about a lot of events he experienced or participated, like the World War I, the World War II, the Spanish Civil War, etc.; he wrote about the places he had visited or been to, like Italy, Paris, Spain, Cuba, Africa, etc.; many of the characters in the novels are based on people Hemingway knew, met or encountered in his life, and he transmitted his own emotional state through these characters; We read about bullfighting, hunting, fishing, safaris, skiing, all sports that were familiar to Hemingway. All these novels are written in a very realistic and simple style, so that fact and fiction are masterfully combined in them. However, this paper would be just a little contribution for the work of this great novelist.

**Keywords:** Hemingway, novels, factography, fiction, biography

Authors and their works have a certain synergic relationship, and this is how they are unified and complement each other, so we can say that their fiction is often based on their personal experience, "which gives the reader a feeling of personal authenticity which is often considered autobiographical." (Plimpton, 2002, p. 173), and it is the case with Hemingway as well. Wellek considers that between the autobiography and the work of an author, there is a relation, parallelism, similarities... Studying biography is very important as far as the interpreting aspect is concerned - it might help us understand their works.

So, the point of this work is to find out how much of Hemingway's biography is present in some of his greatest novels. When we read '*Farewell to Arms*', '*For Whom the Bell Tolls*', '*Old Man and the Sea*', '*Moveable Feast*' etc, we notice that they express a great part of his life, like for example a lot of events and experiences the author witnessed; a lot of the characters are based on real people; settings of the novels are taken from Hemingway's life, etc, thus they reflect the author's experience and a great reality.

No matter if he wrote journalistic works, non-fiction or fiction, Hemingway is in first place a storyteller. The claim that some of Hemingway's journalism and fiction contain elements of reality indicates that the difference between reality and imagination was not important for him as was the communication of other truths. During his career he combined

journalism and fiction, as well as some fictive and experienced realities, and he did it in order to “raise the question of our perception of the nature of fictional reality.” (Dewberry, 1996, p. 34)

The sense of place and fact is very convincing in Hemingway’s works. He writes about real battles, attacks, actions, events. For example – the First World War in Italy, the Spanish Civil War, the Cuban revolution, the African safaris, the Swiss Alps, etc. Hemingway describes real places – the Italian and Spanish cities, Paris, the Caribbean, Africa, etc, so realistically, that it seems we are reading a real map. According to Baker, “places are less than geography, facts lie inert and uncoordinated, unless the imagination runs through them like a vitalizing current and the total picture moves and quickens.” (Baker, 1956, p. 52).

So, based on this, the real art comes from the function of the sense of scene. Hemingway brings facts and scene together harmoniously, “registering whatever he sees and feels in the best and simplest way.” (Baker, 1956, p. 54) It is the realistic way of presenting facts that distinguishes Hemingway’s style. He used a great part of his life, his experiences, acquaintances, friends and relatives to create his stories and characters, so this is how he discloses his secret of the realistic effect.

For instance, in “*A Farewell to Arms*”, a novel about the Austrian- Italian conflict during World War I, Frederic Henry is an ambulance driver as was Hemingway himself, although Hemingway was a teenager during the war, whereas Frederic was 30 years old. We can say that “*A Farewell to Arms*” is close enough to an autobiographical novel because it is based on Hemingway’s experiences during World War I, particularly his wounding and his unlucky love affair with a nurse in Milan, Agnes Von Kurovski. Although, the chronology and the events are changed in the novel, Frederic Henry's relationship with Catherine mirrors that of Hemingway with Agnes.

Despite the similarities, the character of Catherine differs from Agnes’, and her romance with Frederic Henry is different from Agnes's with Hemingway. The novel focuses on Catherine only and her love for Frederic, so many important people from Hemingway’s life are missing. The episode when Frederic and Catherine travel to Stresa in Hemingway’s life corresponds to the period he spent with his friends. Moreover, the Hemingway’s unheroic return to the battlefield and desertion, his stay in the hospital because of dysentery, are changed in the novel into the dangerous retreat to security, whereas the calm, kind walks along the lake coast with his friend Bill Horn were the long night rides throughout Switzerland.

There is almost no information about the British nurse in the novel, about her family, friends, her past (except that she is mourning her fiancé’s death), but we suppose that she is not of a noble descent. Frederic leaves his beloved to return to the battle, whereas in Hemingway’s case it is Agnes who leaves the wounded Hemingway in hospital and returns home. These two women are different – Catherine is sweet, gentle, and vulnerable, believes in love, and is completely dedicated to Frederic, whereas Agnes, as Hemingway’s friends recall, was tough, and had a lot of experience with men.

Hemingway’s war experience is only superficially similar to Frederic’s. Frederic travels a lot and is sexually more experienced; he is fluent in Italian; Keeps Company with both diplomats and simple people from the bars and understands war differently from Hemingway in Italy. When he says “In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains,” (Hemingway, 1997 , p. 9) he talks about places and times Hemingway didn’t experience.

He narrates the Croatian army’s breakthrough in the highlands of Bainsizza; he describes the Friulian field, the Milan streets, the journey through the lake, etc. So, we can say that Italy itself is the greatest fact and reality, since many places, cities, villages, their geographical position, distance, are presented realistically, and it seems as a real geographic presentation. The battles in the novel are real reported events, including the report on the Italian debacle in

Caporetto, which made the Italian fascist government ban the publication of the novel in Italian until World War II. So when Hemingway was writing “*A Farewell to Arms*”, he turned to someone else’s battlefield and added his own experience, knowledge, information, etc. As he would put it in a 1935 article:

Good writing is true writing. If a man is making a story up it will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life he has and how *conscientious* he is; so that when he makes something up it is as it truly would be. . . . Imagination is the one thing beside honesty that a good writer must have, the more he learns from experience the more truly he can imagine. *If he gets so he can imagine truly enough people will think that the things he relates all really happened and that he is just reporting.* (Reynold, 2009, p. 71).

Or later in a 1958 interview,

“A writer, if he is any good, does not describe. He invents or *makes* out of knowledge personal and impersonal and sometimes he seems to have unexplained knowledge which could come from forgotten racial or family experience.” (Plimpton, 2002, p. 30)

In “*For whom the Bell Tolls*”, Hemingway writes about the Spanish Civil War, a real event in the 30s of the XX century. The factual elements that Hemingway incorporates in this novel are present but not in a great number. Firstly, he wrote about Spain, a country he had visited many times, where he reported from, and what’s more important, loved it. He knew Madrid, the mountains, people, etc, so he described them realistically. Many of the characters of the novel are based on real people – the hero, Robert Jordan, refers to Robert Merriman, an American volunteer in the Lincoln Brigade, and the character of young Mary is also based on a Spanish nurse with the same name, who was imprisoned and constantly raped by the fascists, and whose father was killed.

Another character, whose name is taken from Hemingway’s life, is Pilar, whom he had named after his boat. The character of general Goltz was also based on the well known general Walter, a republican general who led the attack in Segovia. Hemingway also reflects some of his personal psychological and emotional states, and one of the best examples is his relationship with his father, who committed suicide. This is reflected in the relationship between Robert and his father in “*For Whom the Bell Tolls*.” It is known that Hemingway survived two airplane crashes, and in the second one he injured his head, what caused him a lot of psychological troubles, like depression, paranoia, etc. This state of his got constantly worse, so just like his father, he committed suicide in 1961.

Another factual example in “*For Whom the Bell Tolls*” is the main mission itself, the destruction of the bridge. This event was inspired by a real mission, but unsuccessful one, on a bridge in Segovia, on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1937. Hemingway’s last novel, “*Island in the Stream*”, is set in Cuba. The hero, Thomas Hudson, is a painter who lives in Bimini, where he welcomes a friend of his, a writer. This corresponds to the period when Hemingway lived in Cuba and welcomed a friend, a painter. Moreover, we can notice some common features between Hudson and Hemingway: both are artists, both have troublesome marriages and divorce, both drink in pubs and bars, the sadness Hudson feels for the loss of his sons is reflection of Hemingway’s sadness for the loss of the son of one of his friends; the accident Hudson’s sons died is inspired by the accident Hemingway’s sons had, but who fortunately survived, whereas the death of Hudson’s third son in war is a parallel of the wounding of Hemingway’s third son while serving in the army.

The two very important episodes of the novel are as well taken from Hemingway’s life. The first one is the episode when a big fish attack the children but is killed and totally destroyed by Hudson’s friend, which is similar to the event when Hemingway let the sharks eat and destroy the whole catch of his friend, a big barracuda. The other episode is when Hudson had a brawl in a pub, which corresponds to Hemingway’s fight with Joseph Napp, a publisher. Another important parallelism between Hemingway’s life and the novel is the search for

German submarines in the third part. Hudson's mission is to find the German submarines, which is the same thing Hemingway did with his boat Pilar during the World War II.

"*Moveable Feast*", on the other hand, is a typical autobiographical work. It is about Hemingway's life in Paris from 1921 to 1925, where he lived with his first wife Hadley and their son. There he met important people, like Fitzgerald, Pound, Stein, etc, who become his friends. In the novel Hemingway describes and mentions many streets of Paris that really exist, like Cardinal Lemoine, etc, but also caf  s and places where he spent his time and got inspired to write, like Caf   D  me, St. Michel, Pruniers, than Gare de Lyon, V  lodrome d'Hiver or the Stade Buffalo, where he rode his bike and enjoyed the horse races.

Moreover, Hemingway didn't only describe Paris, he also gave importance to the personalities of his friends and his relationship to them, and so he described their personalities by pointing out their weaknesses and vices. For example, he wrote about his first wife Hadley and their marriage; he wrote about Scott Fitzgerald's weakness to oppose Zelda's obsessive behaviour, and accused her for the downfall of his friend; he described his disgust when he understood that his dear friend Gertrude Stein was a lesbian, etc. Although this novel has a lot of biographical elements, and can be considered a biographical one, it also contains a great artistic mastery that makes it a great fiction too.

In many of Hemingway's novels we read and learn about hunting, fishing, skiing, bullfighting, etc. All these outdoor sports were part of his life since he practiced them during his life. As much as he loved Spain, he was also attracted to the national Spanish sport of bullfighting, so he dedicated one of his best novels "*The Sun Also Rises*", to this sport. He travelled to Africa and enjoyed his African safaris and hunting, what he disclosed in his great works "*Green Hills of Africa*" and "*The Snows of Kilimanjaro*". "*Green Hills of Africa*" is an account of a month on safari he and his wife took in East Africa during December 1933. Much of the narrative describes Hemingway's hunting adventures in East Africa, generally in the region of Lake Manayara in Tanzania, interspersed with ruminations about literature and authors.

Hemingway's masterpiece and Nobel Prize winning novel "*Old Man and the Sea*" is also set in Cuba, the country where he lived for a certain period, what clearly refers to his life and his relation to Cuba and the Caribbean islands. The novel is about author's attraction to fishing. Santiago is an old fisherman, who wants to show others that he is still able to go fishing, and after a great scary fishing experience, which in fact is a great fight between a human and nature, we see that his pride stands above his strength and ability.

Discussion about Hemingway and his works can be endless. His art is unique and magnificent, and this greatness is best seen in the realism and his dealing with facts, in the way he presents them as fiction and art. At the end, we can conclude that factual and autobiographical elements are present in Hemingway's novels, and they give them a great value and importance, because as he says, any man's life told truly is a novel.

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