

The Light of Hemingway's World (1)

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Crowded cafes full of smoke which dims the light and dulls the brain; brightly-lighted cafes which shelter the old, the rootless, the lonely; streets lined with street lights shining through the night-black leaves of trees and colored traffic lights which warn and direct more than the traffic; bullfights staged in the heat of a courageous sun; fresh mornings full of light which has not yet dried the dew; hot baking afternoons occupied with the dusty, choking rage of war; late evenings passed with a reading light or a bright campfire—all are familiar scenes to the reader of Hemingway, and they point dramatically to the abundance of light in Hemingway's world. "The sun also riseth, and the sun goeth down..." and the importance of this revolution to Hemingway is of such magnitude that his entire cast of characters must be viewed, at least to some extent, in relation to the light around them.

The function of light in Hemingway's settings serves to illuminate the internal personalities of the characters as well as the nature of their relationships. Hemingway comments through this element of light by establishing a basic distinction between natural sunlight and artificial electric light. The sunlight is an enduring source of strength, mental and physical health, courage, and happiness, even though some characters choose to shut it out of their lives or to pervert its qualities to suit their own ends.¹ Artificial electric light, on the other hand, usually functions as man's feeble, generally useless attempt to duplicate the sunlight, to diminish the fear and loneliness brought close by the darkness of night. The artificial nature of the electric light is reflected in sterility or hopelessness of relationships and the inefficacy of its intended quality of restoration.

¹Although the light which occurs on cloudy days and the moonlight which illuminates the earth on clear nights may also be considered natural light, these forms function almost independently of the direct sunlight. The light of cloudy days must be understood primarily in its relationship to Hemingway's use of clouds and rain; moonlight may generally be associated with Hemingway's rich use of darkness.

When Hemingway includes sunshine in a particular setting, the character in the sunlight may be viewed in terms of the potential strength-giving qualities of the light. The strength may come in the form of additional health or courage, but however it is packaged and whether or not it is consumed consciously, it may serve as a revitalizing force in an otherwise brutal world.

The early morning sun seems to possess the most vitality; its power to heal and restore seems more potent during the morning hours. One of the most succinct expressions of the sun's restoring effects comes at the conclusion of "Indian Camp." Young Nick has just experienced a traumatic initiation into the mysteries of birth and death, and the night has shattered his emotional state of mind. The night's horrors are in the past now, and Hemingway writes, "The sun was coming up over the hills.... In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he [Nick] felt quite sure that he would never die." (*SS of EH*, p.95)² The force of the natural light has made Nick feel strong enough to live forever. In such a setting, death seems inconceivable.

Sunshine has a similar effect on the Nick Adams character throughout his youth, his war experiences and his post-war struggle to retain an emotional equilibrium. In *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederick Henry frequently looks upward to the clear sky and the sun-drenched white mountain-tops, but the sun usually seems remote during the conflict of war. When he is wounded, the doctor advises, "You must first have the wounds exposed to the sun." (*F to A*, p.97)³ Although the doctor speaks of the wound in his knee, there is, perhaps, a more significant dimension to the doctor's advice. The healing of the physical and emotional war wounds is taking place when Hemingway writes, "Outside the sun was up over the roofs and I could see the points of the cathedral with the sunlight on them. I was clean inside and outside and waiting for the doctor." (*F to A*, p.105) And the healing is nearly accomplished in the days of sunshine in Switzerland. The sun's power is gradually overcome by the clouds which hover over the relationship, however, and as Catherine goes to the hospital to deliver the baby, Hemingway uses the sunlight once again to comment on the action. He writes, "The day was cloudy but the sun was trying to come through." (*F to A*, p.318) As Catherine

²*The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Scribner's, 1953)--hereafter cited as *SS of EH*.

³*A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner's, 1957)--hereafter cited as *F to A*.

dies, the rain blots out all the healing, revitalizing effects of the sunshine.

Perhaps the most clearly stated use of sunshine and its effect occurs in the post-war experience related in "Big Two-Hearted River." In an agonizing attempt to give his chaotic emotions some semblance of stability, Nick carefully executes each minute detail of a solitary fishing trip. As he approaches the river, Hemingway comments that "Nick kept his direction by the sun." (*SS of EH*, p.212) The direction here is not only the course toward a good fishing spot; it is also the direction toward the healing of Nick's inner world. Nature's psychological therapy is evident in one passage which occurs immediately after Nick has lost a big fish. The predominance of the sun declares its importance:

He [Nick] sat on the logs, smoking, drying in the sun, the sun warm on his back, the river shallow ahead entering the woods, curving into the woods, shallows, light glittering, big water-smooth rocks, cedars along the bank and white birches, the logs warm in the sun, smooth to sit on, without bark, gray to the touch; slowly the feeling of disappointment left him. It went away slowly, the feeling of disappointment that made his shoulders ache. It was all right now.

(*SS of EH*, p.227)

The sunlight, coupled with other natural forces, is at work to ease the small disappointment of losing a big fish as well as the lingering pain of Nick's war experiences.

Hemingway's use of sunlight in settings remains consistent in *The Sun Also Rises*. There are very few references to sunshine except in the idyllic interlude of the fishing trip to the mountains. The bright, cool mornings when the dew is still wet, the warm sunlight in the streets of the town, the hot sun which dried the fishermen as they came out of the cool stream--the references are frequent and are sharply contrasted to the predominance of artificial light throughout most of the novel. The fishing trip is the one experience in which Jake can most fully forget his incomplete manhood and the painful emotional wounds of the war; here he can find a satisfying wholeness, and the sunshine plays an important role in corresponding to his feelings.

In *Death in the Afternoon*, the sun seems to embody the specific attribute of courage. Hemingway asserts the significance of the sun when he states:

The sun is very important. The theory, practice and spectacle of bullfighting have all been built on the assumption of the presence of the sun and when it does not shine over a third of the bullfight is missing. The Spanish say, "El sol es el mejor torero." The sun is the best bullfighter, and without the sun the best bullfighter is not there. He is like a man without a shadow.

(*D in the A*, p.15)⁴

The sun is extremely important not only to a bullfighter but to many of Hemingway's characters. When the sun is absent, they have difficulty in finding the courage to face life's painful realities; when the sun shining they are encouraged to struggle with what life has dealt them, attempting to create a situation where they, like the bullfighter, can control the action and assert the dominance on their own terms.

Since Hemingway employs the facet of sunshine as a healing, invigorating, encouraging force of nature, his characters may be partially understood in terms of the amount of sunlight around them and how they incorporate the sunlight into their lives. In "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," for instance, Hemingway mentions three times that the doctor's wife is lying in a darkened room with the blinds drawn. (*SS of EH*, pp.101-103) The room has been darkened voluntarily by shutting out the natural light of the sun. Although the Bible, the copy of *Science and Health* and the *Quarterly* are also possible sources of spiritual and intellectual light, the woman has shut out the sunlight and chooses to remain in physical and mental darkness. The sunshine remains an avenue of insight, and the doctor's wife must be understood according to her rejection of the light. Similarly, the American lady in "A Canary for One" shuts out the natural light by pulling a window-shade down, preferring to remain a little blind as well as a little deaf.

There are many facets to Hemingway's use of sunlight, and they do not lend themselves to a simple explanation of their functions in setting. The sun occasionally seems to operate in a negative capacity. When this occurs, however, the emphasis is usually on the heat of the sun and it is mixed with the dirt, decay and failure for which man is primarily responsible. The heat, dust, smoke and

⁴*Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner's, 1960)--hereafter cited as *D in the A*.

decay of the aftermath of war in "A Way You'll Never Be" and the description of the summer offensive in *A Farewell to Arms* do not actually contradict Hemingway's general use of sunlight; instead, Hemingway apparently intends to comment on the human actions which pollute the sunlight and prevent its positive capacity for good from being effective.

The use of electric light in Hemingway's settings is perhaps even more significant than sunlight in its revelation of man and his position in the modern world. The sunlight is an enduring element of the universe and will shine for generations of men; the electric light, however, seems to be directly connected to a modern society, and its use in setting paradoxically illuminates the darkness of the human situation. Man fails miserably in his frail efforts to duplicate the natural forces of the sun. His attempts to diminish the darkness of the night by an electric light rarely bring satisfactory results. Although the lights of cafes, streets or hotels do chase the gloom away from one particular spot, the very inadequacy of the light seems only to intensify the darkness which surrounds the speck of brightness.

The darkness of the night seems to correspond to the loneliness, fear, pain or hopelessness of the characters. The darkness provides the setting for the rampage of inner darkness which plagues modern men. Hemingway's employment of electric light in the setting of his work reveals his view of the inescapable loneliness of emotional isolation and old age, the impotency of many relationships in a modern society, the hopelessness of a permanent emotional attachment, and the frustration of unavoidable memories.

One of the most inclusive uses of the electric light is found in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." "The old man sits"... in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light." (*SS of EH*, p.379) The cafe itself is well lighted and the older waiter understands the importance of its light: "I am of those who like to stay late at the cafe," the older waiter said. "With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night." And with this statement, the waiter establishes a communion with a number of Hemingway characters. Behind all the motives for using electric lights is the awful knowledge of the world, which the waiter defines:

What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order.

Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada....

(*SS of EH*, p.383)

The nothingness could never be filled, but it could be made bearable by remaining in the light. Hemingway concludes the story with more of the waiter's thoughts: "He would lie in bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep. After all, he said to himself, it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it."(*SS of EH*, p.383)

The old man who sips brandy from his saucer with dignity and the older waiter who identifies with the old man have both discovered the reality of life as Hemingway viewed it. Life itself is a kind of empty nothingness which ends in nothingness, and only occasionally does man experience the joy of love, the ecstasy of strength and courage, the restoration of the sunshine. Man can never completely escape from the tragic cruelty, conflict and loneliness of the earth until he becomes part of the even more tragic nothingness of death.

Many characters, indeed, have the same "insomnia" which the waiter experienced. Although the reasons for the insomnia may vary, the electric light functions in a relatively consistent manner--as man's antidote for the unbearable darkness of his world. Man turns on an electric light, hoping somehow that it will drive away the demons of his thoughts. The electric light is not capable of performing this task, however, and the character in such a position usually tries to retain some semblance of stability until the sunlight of a new day allows him to sleep.

For the Nick Adams character, in particular, the artificial light becomes a desperate effort to erase the physical and mental wounds which have left permanent scars on his psyche. In "Now I Lay Me," he explains, "... I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body." (*SS of EH*, p.363) The experiences of the war plague him, but he acknowledges the comfort of an electric light when he says, "If I could have a light I was not afraid to sleep, because I knew my soul would only go out of me if it were dark." (*SS of EH*, p.367) In "A way You'll Never Be," Nick echoes these words by stating, "I'm all right, I can't sleep without a light of some sort. That's all I have now." (*SS of EH*, p.407) Hem-

ingway's ironic understatement here underlines the real magnitude of Nick's problem and the inadequacy of the electric light to deal with the problem.

William Campbell has a similar ailment in "A Pursuit Race." When Mr. Turner enters the hotel room, he turns off the electric light which had been burning all night. (SS of *EH*, p.351) William is not drunk, as Mr. Turner believes; he failed to turn off the light because his haunting experiences are pursuing him so closely that he feels the need to keep them away through the use of drugs and a weak lightbulb.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake finds himself in a corresponding position. His past war wound shapes the pattern of his present and future existence, and he, too, finds himself with insomnia. He comments on his discovery:

I turned off the light and tried to go to sleep.... But I could not sleep. There is no reason why because it is dark you should look at things differently from when it is light. The hell there isn't!

I figured that all out once, and for six months I never slept with the electric light off. That was another bright idea.

(SAR, p.205)⁵

No amount of electric light in Jake's bedroom or in the crowded cafes of the city can make fruitful the impotency of his body and the sterility of the relationships with his acquaintances.

Hemingway provides a different slant on the electric light in *A Farewell to Arms*, but its primary meaning remains the same. Before Henry's reunion with Catherine, he experiences many sleepless nights. Once they are united, they turn the light out at night and remain secure in their physical and emotional contact. When Catherine is taken to the hospital, however, a battle occurs between light and dark in the setting. As the time drags on, Frederick comments, "It was beginning to be dark outside and I turned the light on to read. After a while I stopped reading and turned off the light and watched it get dark outside." (*F to A*, p.321) The light-dark contrast continues, and when Frederick goes to see Catherine he says, "I could not see at first because there was a bright light in the hall and it was dark in the room." (*F to A*, p.328) Later, he walks down "...the dark

⁵*The Sun Also Rises* in *The Hemingway Reader* (New York: Scribner's, 1963)-- hereafter cited as SAR.

street in the rain to the cafe. It was brightly lighted inside...." (*F to A*, p. 328) Hemingway's conflict between the darkness and man's attempt to conquer it through electricity finally ends in a revealing verdict: Catherine dies, and Frederick turns off the light, resigning himself to a lonely existence with memories. Although the relationship had been meaningful, it ends in the same nothingness that prevented other relationships from being fulfilling.

Various dimensions of the meaning of electric light are explored in different stories. In "The Undefeated," for instance, Manuel suffers the painful loneliness of an unacknowledged victory. He has fought beneath the bright arc-lights of the night arena, and the verdict from the darkness is one of misunderstanding and lack of appreciation. The artificial light serves once again to emphasize the darkness which surrounds man and his frantic efforts to accomplish something of which he can be justly proud.

The traffic lights of "Fathers and Sons" and *The Sun Also Rises* warn man about his current position in the world; the searchlights of war reveal the darkness of the night but fail to illuminate man's position in that darkness; the myriad of streetlights cause the characters to walk near them but fail to provide lasting comfort. Lights shine in buildings created by a rootless, homeless society--in the bars, all-night cafes, hotels--but how futile they are. They serve not to strengthen and comfort in a real sense but to illuminate the bleakness of a modern world.

The sunlight of Hemingway's world offers man hope in the form of regeneration, but few of his characters appear able to incorporate its power into the wasteland of their lives. The universal warfare of a twentieth-century world has so permanently maimed its inhabitants that they can never be completely free of the effects of their deep wounds. Man continues to exist in his world of nada, polluting the sunshine with the dusty rage of war, trying frantically to create a substitute healer -- which turns out to be an opium rather than a restorative.

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