

Week 6 Lecture: Americans Abroad, War, and the Novel

Introduction

This week, you are having your first experience with the novel in our course. My goal in this lecture is to contextualize Hemingway a bit (where he is coming from, other things going on) to help this novel make sense. After that, I plan to discuss reading the novel a bit, just to give you a few guidelines. Somewhere in the middle, I might discuss War a bit, just to connect last week's readings to this week. Two thoughts before we begin: first, it might be beneficial to read the biography of Hemingway in the textbook, just to contextualize his life. Otherwise, check [this one](#) out. Second, because we are reading Hemingway, I thought it might be appropriate to recommend some music this week while listening to your lecture. This song might help make Hemingway make more sense. If you choose to, please enjoy: [It's a Man's World](#).

Hemingway and Americans Abroad

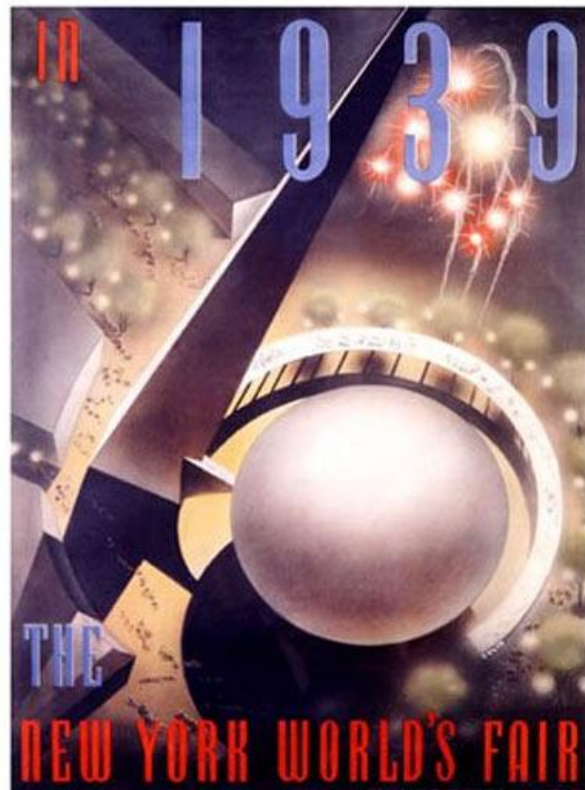
There are three major issues that need discussion to help contextualize Hemingway: Modernism/Industrialization, WWI/The Lost Generation, and literary style in the 20th Century. I'll try to present you a bit of background on each as a way to see where this novel comes from (by an American in a foreign land at this time) and how it connects to the larger American identity.

The first category is Modernism/Industrialization. From a historical perspective, the modernization of industry and advances in technology at the end of the 19th century led to rapid changes in thinking. The world goes through several fundamental shifts at this time, from the empowerment of women (to vote, for equal rights) to how industry functions (labor laws against children working in factories to more specialized labor needs) to education (public education begins in earnest around the turn of the century). The literary response to these shifts and trends

is called Modernism, which takes an intellectual and historical approach to writing. Some famous Modernists include James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams (the last two will be featured in coming weeks).

The major features of Modernism are a visionary view of the world based on the knowledge available and a focus on the complex psychology of the individual. In this age after Freud, the basis of the self gets questioned with more frequency. Characters in novels are treated in more psychological depth, but in the context of social forces and uncertainty. Instead of a clear timeline of events, novels start to mix various sets of characters and settings together into a collage of meaning. While Hemingway's novel sticks to a more realistic depiction of events and people, he is immersed in this movement and its ideas.

Another major feature of Modernism is a visionary approach to society. The 1939 World's Fair in New York set out a variety of possible solutions to the problems of modern living, with the hopes of projecting a Utopian society. One easily recognizable aspect of Modernism is the sleek design of its images. Note the stark contrast between these two monuments, the Trylon and Perisphere. Both, however, stress a basic form in an elegant way, a hallmark of Modernist design. As the 20th Century moves forward, however, Modernism declines from a visionary presentation to mere entertainment. But that is more a discussion for *The Book of Daniel* later this semester.



The other social forces at work here are a product of World War I. While less important in American history, WWI fundamentally changed the face of Europe and, more importantly, the

thinking of Europeans. A new kind of war, channeling Melville's poem from last week about mechanization in war and a lack of passion, WWI wiped out a generation of European men.

Previous to this war, 'generational movement' was a steady process forward, with slight changes from parent to child. WWI changes this trend, creating a break with old traditions and the rise of new ways of thinking. The 1920s, though already showing signs of future peril, are a time of positive spirit and rebuilding, with a mix of enthusiasm for the future and pessimism about the possibilities for Europe.



This [photo](#) shows an aerial view of a chemical warfare attack on the allies from the German side during WWI. This war not only brought in a revolution in mechanical warfare, but also set the stage for the chemical warfare that would reach its peak in the atomic bomb droppings of WWII.

Remember, though the trend starts to change during the American Revolution, war used to be classy business: guys in uniform, marching in lines. In WWI, the dignity of war disappears into the trenches that collect bodies and lay waste to a generation. War stopped being an adventure and became, simply, a [nightmare](#).



Following WWI, a number of American writers and artists found themselves drawn to the new Europe, particularly in the 1920s. This group of people was termed the [Lost Generation](#). As a group, they fundamentally questioned and changed the artistic merit of literature. Bizarre and complex texts emerge from the collaboration of these writers and thinkers, but for our purposes, what's important is that a view of the world and of writing emerged. Concerned about the role of America after World War I and seeking meaning in a war-torn Europe, the Americans in this group helped forge a new American literature from abroad.

Finally, in terms of style, Hemingway is credited for singlehandedly changing the style of American writing. Because he was a journalist before he started writing stories and novels professionally, his style sounds more like newsprint than it does fiction. His descriptions are dry and stay on the surface, and his characters (somewhat irritatingly) speak in short, straightforward sentences that are sometimes hard to make sense of. As your reading questions last week mentioned, Hemingway wrote on the "iceberg principle," where only 1/9 of the story is there on the page; the rest of it happens beneath or behind the scenes. As a result, we as the audience need to connect the dots and make sense of his rather terse narrative. His new style would go on to influence American writers for the rest of the 20th Century up to the present.

Literature and War

While I only want to broach this subject briefly before moving on to the novel, it is worth considering *The Sun Also Rises* as a war novel, since our main character suffers from injuries taken in war. Just like his story "In Another Country" from last week, Hemingway ponders the aftereffects of war in this novel. One way to approach thinking about literature and war is to consider how, even in our present movies of war, we usually follow a character through the carnage. If you think of the new [Robin Hood](#) movie, for instance, you can see one man's struggle

against tyranny and injustice, a struggle in which people die, just not Robin or his friends. In the past, the soldier was a kind of warrior engaged in semi-logical combat. In the 20th Century, war starts to make less sense (as I discussed above) and the authors we read last week notice this trend. We also generally see war through the eyes of an individual participant and observer, our hero, who somehow survives (conveniently) to tell the tale.

War used to be (and to be fair, is still) pictured as a beautiful and glorious event, but that glory became harder to sell citizens after WWI combat, for instance. The literary view of war evolves into the sentimental side (Robin Hood) and those seeking more complicated ways of representing war. You probably noticed last week that most of our authors were fairly negative about modern warfare techniques (including Crane, even if he tells people not to weep – think about how nasty and sad the images he presents are). Most literary works about war, just like literary works about almost any subject, critique war, from the battle itself to the bureaucracy of war to what comes after war. Hemingway, for us, fills this gap. Thus, think about how much this novel is a product of a world that is trying to find itself or settle itself (though with hindsight, we can see that this world will eventually propel itself into WWII before anything gets resolved).



The photo above depicts the running of the bulls from a movie version of [TSAR](#).

Approaching the Novel

I'll make this final section on the novel brief. Novels, for the most part, work like more complex and involved short stories, so for our purposes we can use most of the same terminology to approach our three novels (like setting, plot, character, etc.). The major difference in novels is how events develop over the course of the novel. Instead of a quick story or several quick events, novels unfold slowly and include more details and situation to make the impression that they do.

The two main approaches I want to pitch to you are to approach through **motifs** and through **themes**, both of which build over time. Motifs are repeated images or patterns that we see over and over in the novel. In *TSAR*, we hear about Jake's impotence (or at least hints about it) throughout the novel. As a result, his impotence, like the Lady Brett's style of dress or the talk of bullfighting, becomes a motif in the novel, accruing meaning as we progress. Unlike stories, where the meanings are usually apparent, the motifs gain significance from their role in the novel itself and generally pay off at the end, when everything comes together. From a thematic direction, things like travel, drinking and talking, love, anger, and even impotence (yet again) following a similar pattern. Through the course of the novel, these themes evolve and take on more and more meaning, until the ultimate explanations and meanings come in the end.

In other words, the novel is a sort of detective experience, where you, as the reader, slowly build a case for what you think is happening or what things mean. As you read, you make judgments and categorize people and things. Only in the end, however, can you find out if you were right. In a novel like *TSAR*, where lots of subtext stays under the surface, your best bet is to read with an open mind and try to keep track of what all these things add up to. Where is the climax of this novel? What answers are given?

Conclusion/A Few Hemingway Questions

This week, you are working on a new genre, the novel, which is an evolved version of the short story. I was tempted to give you an historical background on the novel genre, explaining how it evolved, but that seemed like too much. For our purposes, we need to look at this old form of entertainment and try to decide both how to read it and what meaning we will take from it. As for Hemingway and war, I gave you a brief overview; bring all your questions, concerns, and answer to the table while completing the discussion board this week.

Here are a few Hemingway questions:

- 1) How central to this novel is Jake's impotence? What role does Lady Brett Ashley play in the drama of the novel?
- 2) The novel opens with a description of Robert Cohn. Why? What central role does he play in this novel? More importantly, how does the 'type' of person he represents fare in this novel? Is Hemingway calling out his contemporaries?
- 3) Why does this novel take a major fishing trip in the middle? What I mean, more fully, is what importance do the man-ventures of fishing followed by bullfighting have for our understanding of this novel? Do these masculine activities in some way cement Jake's manhood? Or, alternatively, do they point out some weakness in him?
- 4) Finally, think about setting. It is important that most of the main characters are out of their natural context, traveling abroad? What actions does this freedom allow them that they might not have at home? Is it important to go away from home to learn about the self? Or to report back home with what you found "out there"?

You don't need to be able to answer all of these questions. They are purposely vague and merely here to help guide your reading/give you things to think about. Good luck with Hemingway!