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Sudden Fiction

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The Fractured Unity and Cubist Depictions of Violence in *In Our Time*

While I have long been an admirer of Hemingway's condensed fictional style, my interest in his work has lately become more keen with the discovery of *In Our Time*, the author's first book and an excellent example of how one may use the vignette and shorter stories to effectively construct a larger narrative consisting almost entirely of intense moments. As I am an avid student of this particular literary form, I undertake here to consider Hemmingway's thirty-two small sections in light of how these seemingly disparate pieces (an introduction, 15 chapters, and an epilogue) come together to function as a whole.

Critic Jackson J. Benson writes, "There has always been the distinct possibility that *In Our Time* was a grab-bag of materials, hastily assembled and given the veneer of unity" (104). However, Jacqueline Vaught Brogan takes a different perspective of the structure, describing *In Our Time* as having a "cubist" or impressionistic quality; it "presents the same thing from different angles" (32). This term, "cubist," seems to be a particularly relevant way to examine *In Our Time* because it emphasizes the structure of separation that defines the work on a thematic level. Each of the 15 chapters of *In Our Time* is divided into two distinct narrative bodies, placed back-to-back: the very short, italicized, vignette-style moments, and the longer, more complex stories that follow each vignette. For the purpose of clarity in this paper, I will hereafter refer to "vignettes"

(cited by the Roman numeral that heads each of these) and "stories" (cited by story title) when I distinguish the difference between the two bodies within a complete chapter.

In Our Time begins with an introductory story, "On the Quay at Smyrna," in which an unidentified soldier is stationed in a Turkish harbor. He relates anecdotes about the goings-on of the people there, from minor conflicts between other military personnel to women having babies, to women holding onto dead babies long after they've passed. "What? That's a morbid detail," one might ask. "How is it taken so lightly?" But the narrator goes on to finish the passage with the statement, "It was a pleasant business. My word yes a most pleasant business" (Hemingway 11).

This introduction is important in the way it sets up the remainder of the work to examine not only the prevalence of violence, pain, and death his characters encounter, but also their reactions and attitudes toward these universal experiences as well. This particular perspective in this opening story is rather flippant, but, as the flow of narrative progresses through the juxtaposed vignettes and stories, Hemingway gives his readers a very good idea that violence is, indeed, a shifty kind of subject, experienced very differently by different people, though they may all live "in our time." The montage effect of the vignettes and interspersed stories present a rotating lens through which a reader can understand a variety of violent impulses and reactions: subtle and strong, near or far, deeply serious, baffling, or even wryly comical.

What does Hemingway specifically present in these short pieces? The first six stories present the life of Hemingway's first great alter ego, Nick Adams, and his family prior to Nick's experience in WWI: we see scenes of Nick as a boy, who goes with his father, a doctor, to help an Indian woman with a difficult birth, while her husband

commits suicide in the adjoining room ("Indian Camp"). We are shown the tension apparent in Nick's father's professional life, and in the marriage of Nick's parents, after Nick's father accuses a local Indian laborer, Boulton, of trying to cheat him:

> "Tell me Henry. Please don't try and keep anything from me. What was the trouble about?"
>
> "Well, Dick owes me a lot of money for pulling his squaw through pneumonia and I guess he wanted a row so he wouldn't have to take it out in work."
>
> His wife was silent. The doctor wiped his gun carefully with a rag. He pushed the shells back in against the spring of the magazine. He sat with the gun on his knees. He was very fond of it. Then he heard his wife's voice from the darkened room.
>
> "Dear, I don't think, I really don't think that anyone would really do a thing like that."
>
> "No?" The doctor said.
>
> "No. I can't believe that anyone would do a thing of that sort intentionally."
>
> The doctor stood up and put the shotgun in the corner behind a dresser.
>
> "Are you going out, dear?" his wife said.
>
> "I think I'll go for a walk," the doctor said.
>
> "If you see Nick, dear, will you tell him his mother wants to see him?" his wife said.

> The doctor went out on the porch. The screen door slammed behind him. He heard his wife catch her breath when the door slammed."
>
> ("The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" 26-27)

Here, the striking quietness of emotional pain and suffering enters into the work; R.M. Davis writes that Nick's father's cleaning of the gun in this episode "indicates that he is indulging in a fantasy of violence" (149). His frustration with his wife and with Boulton exhibits itself in the material element of the gun, creating a tense, slightly sinister scene wherein struggle and pain is muted and primarily emotive, depicted in brief and jarring (but not overtly violent) physical action. Hemingway will continue to use this technique, positioning episodes of emotional strife as foils alongside episodes of more blatant physical violence, demonstrating a full and complex range of ways in which people can experience grief and pain. In the following two stories, for instance, readers get a bird's eye view of Nick breaking up with his first serious girlfriend, the aftermath of that trauma, and how he deals with this via conversation, drinking, and fishing ("The End of Something," "The Three Day Blow"). However, the vignettes that cut between these stories center the reader in war-torn Europe, far from the calmer American setting of the stories. They create a dramatic foil for the smaller scale trauma and havoc apparent in the early stories. This juxtaposition implies the ways in which all manners of violence, whether on a large (war-like) or small scale are incredibly personal experiences for each character involved. This implication continues to build throughout the book, particularly as the vignettes seem to progress in intensity, proximity to violence, and grotesqueness. The separate and distinct nature of the stories and vignettes mirror what is becoming

thematically apparent: the often confused, disjointed experience people have when coming into contact with suffering.

The first seven vignettes, each no more than 500 words, are set near European WWI battlefields. In the first, a battery of soldiers is drunk, moving along a road, and an adjutant warns a cook not to light a fire for fear of being seen by the enemy (I). In the next vignette, women and children who have been displaced by nearby battles are toiling along the roads, and a woman gives birth by the side of the road, while a young girl holds up a cloth over her and cries (II). In the following vignettes, readers find Hemingway's unidentified narrator and his compatriots casually shooting enemy soldiers as they clamber over a distant wall: "We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him. He had so much equipment on and looked awfully surprised and fell down into the garden. Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that" (III, 29). Readers witness these same men killing enemy soldiers who have been made into sitting ducks by an indefensible barricade (IV), and the execution of political prisoners of war, one who is too sick even to stand up to be shot (V). Hemingway splices these increasingly intense vignette scenes with scenes from Nick's life that ebb and flow with varied levels of emotional or physical violence, creating what Jackson J. Benson refers to as a "catalogue of suffering" (118).

The way in which each vignette is paired with each successive story is curious; it seems as though the increasing proximity of the violence of the war-time vignettes provides the tension and foreshadowing that mirrors Nick's own involvement with the war. The connection David S. Leigh draws between story and vignette is this: "the interchapter [vignette] shows in contrasting or clarifying form what the story tells by way

of a more detailed but less obvious narrative" (133). This assertion makes sense. For example, although Nick's first encounter with suffering occurs early in the work, when he is a young boy ("Indian Camp"), we see him only experience more subtle emotional forms of violence until "The Battler," when he encounters a mentally unwell ex-boxer in a situation which escalates to imply the threat of physical harm. However, the story concludes before harm is done. Nick himself is not threatened. This story occurs in the work directly before the sixth vignette where we learn that Nick, whom we've been watching in each story since the beginning, but who has never before been named in a vignette, has been shot and badly injured in the war. One infers that he has been in the narrative "mosaic" of the vignettes all along as part of the battery of men marching through war-torn Europe, but Hemingway does not let us put the two lives together until this moment: the life of the warrior at war, and the life of the same warrior before he left his suburban Illinois home. Now, the reader understands, the two existences intersect one another. This collision seems to ask a new question of the reader: in what other ways will these seemingly separate pieces mirror, intersect, collide with, or in any way affect one another?

Via the widening scope of both the vignettes and stories, Hemingway answers this; from this point on, experiences of violence fan outward to include the perspectives of other people, sometimes unrelated to Nick Adams entirely. Hemingway can thus broaden his lens and show the reader moments of pain, discouragement, and violence that extend beyond Nick, the individual, and beyond the life of a soldier. Hemingway's depiction of the universality of violence, and its ability to shift into different forms, grows increasingly articulate, its presence ever more apparent. For instance, in the story "My

Old Man," the narrator presents us with a situation of subtle and confusing violence, unrelated to Nick and his particular perspective:

> So I went out of the Galleria and walked over to in front of the Scala and bought a paper, and came back and stood a little way away because I didn't want to butt in and my old man was sitting back in his chair looking down at his coffee and fooling with a spoon and Holbrook and the big wop were standing and the big wop was wiping his face and shaking his head. And I came up and my old man acted just as though the two of them weren't standing there and said, "Want an ice, Joe?" Holbrook looked down at my old man and said slow and careful, "You son of a bitch," and he and the fat wop went out through the tables.
>
> (118)

Here, Joe witnesses a confrontation between his father and two anonymous men that hints at possible trouble; his father has done something that causes one of the men to curse him. Later, at the end of that story, when his father has fallen from a horse and died, Joe overhears someone saying, "He had it coming to him on the stuff he's pulled" (129). Although Joe has given us a picture of his father as kind, cheerful and instructive, the reader infers from these comments, and the drinking and betting habits Joe describes, that his father is in some way a crook. He has seemingly committed injustices against other people on more than one occasion. To the reader, Joe's father is a complicated character who, while implicated in causing others to suffer through his misdealings, is also a loving man to his son. The idea of duality comes into play, as does the sense of circulatory violence (the notion that one reaps what one sows). Violence, hence, becomes less specific (to Nick) and more subtly complicated reality.

The vignettes that follow chapter 6 include, from a kaleidoscope of angles, the murder of two innocent Hungarians by a racist soldier (VIII), Spanish bullfights, where pain and death are dealt out mutually between men and beasts (IX-XIV) and, near the end, another execution, the hanging of a man in a public square (XV). In the stories that accompany each vignette, we experience, through Hemingway's lens, the decimation of another love relationship ("A Very Short Story"), a wrenchingly painful break in understanding between mother and son ("Soldier's Home"), the arrest of an almost innocent, naïve young revolutionary ("The Revolutionist"), sexual and emotional tension apparent in an otherwise very placid relationship ("Mr. and Mrs. Elliot"), class, interpersonal, and ethnicity tensions ("Cat in the Rain," "Out of Season"), the death of a man's father and humiliation by onlookers ("My Old Man"), and the naturalistic violence of a man catching and killing fish ("Big Two-Hearted River: Parts I and II").

Thus it is that the pattern of violence established at the beginning of the work escalates to a climax, where Nick is shot, then blossoms out into the everyday lives of all the people discussed after this midpoint. It is, however, important to reiterate that this violence, while universally present, is made distinct in each case, in every vignette or story. It varies by degrees, and it varies by distance; some of the chapters catch the protagonist in the thick of war, some find the protagonist fishing in a river, and some find the protagonist omnisciently observing couples interact in their hotel rooms. As critic Robert Slabey writes, "the various settings and nationalities utilized…universalize the theme" (77).

It is also notable, here, that the vignette seems to introduce the more intense form of violence in each complete chapter. Each vignette provides the more direct depiction of human relationship with suffering, while the stories depict apparently calmer periods in the characters' lives as they roam throughout Europe and America. The vignettes and stories inform and counterpoint one another. In this way, the vignettes are truly essential when one considers the thematic implications of the whole work. Without such a mosaic, or cubist, structure, Hemingway's depiction of violence as complex in form and experience might have been significantly weakened.

Slabey examines what he finds to be a kind of narrative flow throughout the work's entire patchwork contents, the structural arrangement being "not chronological, but ideological" (77). He contends that "up to [vignette] (VIII) there has been a growing awareness of the hostility and violence of the world. However no code of vitalizing experience has appeared…[T]he major function on the three remaining vignettes is to discover and articulate the code of manhood"(78). Slabey goes on to discuss how up to and around the centerpiece "wounding" episode of vignette VI, there have been presentations of violence that seem often misunderstood—they are seen from far away, or they are depicted as confusing or impulsively enacted, particularly in "The Battler," and the vignette VIII episode of the impulsive street-killing of the Hungarians. After vignette VIII, Slabey states, Hemingway gives us a vision of what it means to "shape violence into an art…the perfect bullfight…in which death is conquered artistically and valiantly" (78).

Slabley goes on to explain that the work as a whole seems to cluster in a "four part pattern:" the first five Adams stories represent Nick Adam's coming of age

encounters with tension and violence, and these culminate in the "war wound" episode of vignette VI, where Nick's psychic perceptions of violence at last take on a physical manifestation; he himself is hit with a bullet, and from that point forward, his dealing with the hostilities of the modern world will be changed. Thereafter, Slabey asserts, Hemingway is set upon continuing Nick's moral education about "how to be" when under pressure. At the end of the work, readers are left with two successive episodes, "Big-Hearted River I" and "Big-Hearted River II," in which we witness Nick as a mature man, who has approached, encountered, and drawn away from multiple embodiments of violence. He can enact a simple violence on the fish he catches, in a purposeful and honorable way, out of a need for food. It is the most simple and rational form of violence depicted, when contrasted with episodes of emotional misunderstanding and conflict (the relationship scenes), prejudice ("My Old Man," VIII), violence as the result of previous injury ("The Battler") or because it has become one's duty as a solider to enact it (III, IV). In this way, Nick Adams, as the primary viewpoint character, is able to successfully turn violence into nourishment, which may even be one step further into a moral realm than the bullfighters, who turn violence into art. As Linda Wagner puts it, "Nick is managing to save himself; other men--for various reasons--could not" (121).

This idea of the work's structure as demonstrating phases is also discussed by David S. Leigh, who divides the work generally into three sections: "The Education of Nick Adams to Violence, Evil, and Death [chapters](#1-7); Results of this Education: The Disillusioned Life of Expatriates [chapters](#8-13); Readjustment and Re-education by Return to Basic Sensations in Former Environment [chapters](#14-15)…"(Leigh 130). This concept of the shape of *In Our Time* is similar to that proposed by Slabey, the major

difference occurring with Leigh's emphasis on the expatriate as a distinct entity in the work. Whereas Slabey sees the episode of Nick's wounding as a distinct "phase" in his education, Leigh incorporates it into the preliminary phase, before Nick's time as an expatriate, and the most graphically violent of the episodes commence. Both critics agree, however, that the seemingly fractured episodes presented in each chapter represent a development in Nick's understanding of violence in the world. Likewise, Hemingway introduces the reader to new and more intricate ways of experiencing and dealing with suffering as the work progresses.

In the epilogue to *In Our Time*, readers encounter a Greek king, who, knowing nothing of violence other than his sheltered perspective from behind protective walls, is able to speak flippantly about it, much like the soldier in the introduction ("The Quay at Smyrna"). By taking the reader full-circle through a mosaic of episodes surrounding the theme of violence, Hemingway is able to reassert at the end of the work what is implied in the very multiplicity of perspectives throughout it: that people's experiences of suffering and pain will always differ, and there will be some who are more equipped to survive it, to "be moral" and graceful in the face of it than others. Hemingway's carefully-rendered juxtaposition of emotional and physical pain makes the structure of the work unique, implying an unusual but palpable cohesion. Indeed, the somewhat fractured, cubist quality of each separate episode combines into a larger developing thematic strand. Using this impressionistic technique, Hemingway creates an illuminating exploration of the how people experience and cope, some more successfully than others, with pain.

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