

Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (1923–1938)

Study Guide Suggested Stories For Further Reading Discussion Questions

Study Guide (1992) for *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*

Written by Scott Samuelson, Chair, English Department, Ricks College, Rexburg, Idaho

In Hemingway, personality competes with prose. Few American authors have cultivated their media image, their private mystique, like Ernest Hemingway. The Hemingway presence and celebrity depend, of course, on his roles as war hero, big game hunter, deep sea fisherman, aficionado of bull fighting, husband of four wives, and cavorter with the famous and rich. Ironically these guises tend to shadow Hemingway's work as a writer but serve to qualify him as an American character. And after the image hype, it is refreshing to return to the fiction, to see the hero—victims that permeate his writing and ring, in some ways, more true than the life of their creator.

But even in returning to the fiction we may be victims of our preconceptions of the man. For example, in our time of growing gender consciousness we may find Hemingway's cultivated machismo insensitive and offensive. But again, that machismo seems more present in the man than in the stories. Stories like "Hills Like White Elephants" and "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" present gender issues in complex terms. While it is true that, like their creator, the heroes of much of Hemingway's fiction tend to be deep sea fishermen, big game hunters, and men at war, their roles are not more important than their humanity.

Notwithstanding our reservations about Hemingway, he remains one of the clearest fictional voices of our century. His characters' existential integrity strikes us as honest; at its best, his spare prose is finely crafted, wonderfully understated, chiseled and pure.

Hemingway did not come easily to his famous terse style. Though he read widely and composed stories in high school, his prose apprenticeship took him a long time. He turned down a chance to go to college to become a cub reporter for the Kansas City Star. He left that job to serve in Italy in the first World War as

an ambulance driver. Wounded, he returned home in 1919 and continued writing. As a reporter for the *Kansas City Star* he began to learn a thrifty, blunt style. In Europe in the 1920s he worked as a correspondent for the *Toronto Star*, writing human-interest accounts that helped him sharpen his skills of observation and set them in succinct prose. While he was learning from journalism the principles of short, impact-strong sentences, he experimented with various fictional approaches. In Paris in the twenties Hemingway became a member of Gertrude Stein's "lost generation." Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound tutored Hemingway; F. Scott Fitzgerald was a friend. Between 1923 and 1938 he published forty-nine short stories which are among the best any American has produced.

Of course, he was also writing novels, the best of which are *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), for which he earned the Pulitzer Prize. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954. After living in Cuba for many years and making numerous trips to Africa and Europe, he settled in Ketchum, Idaho, where he took his own life in 1961. *Islands in the Stream* (1970) and *The Garden of Eden* (1986) have been published posthumously.

Like many writers, Hemingway linked his personal experiences and transformed them through the genius of his imagination to universal fiction. The so-called Nick Adams stories chronicle the life of an adolescent who faces the complexities and contradictions of an adult world and is animated by the hurts and shocks he encounters. Hemingway eventually published sixteen stories with Nick Adams as the protagonist. (Eight others have been published posthumously, and half a dozen other stories published in Hemingway's lifetime had nameless or differently named protagonists that could be placed in the Nick Adams chronology.)

Suggested Stories: The following are suggested stories for discussion.

"Indian Camp"

"The Killers"

"The Snows of Kilimanjaro"

"The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"

"Hills Like White Elephants"

"A Clean, Well-Lighted Place."

“INDIAN CAMP” and “THE KILLERS”: These two stories illustrate Nick's initiation, his developing sense of evil in the world. In "Indian Camp," Hemingway's fourth story, written in Paris in 1924, Nick accompanies his medical doctor–father to perform a Caesarean delivery in an Indian camp. After the baby is delivered under difficult circumstances, the mother's husband kills himself.

Like many Hemingway stories, "Indian Camp" is fraught with contrasts and apparent contradictions. For example, the doctor–father is easy to fault because he arrives without proper medical tools, ignores his patient's pain, considers the husband's suffering too late, and subjects his son to trauma. On the other hand, he does save two lives and initiates his son into the mysteries of birth and life. The climax of the story is the return of the doctor–father with his son in a boat; Nick's simple questions of his father are profound. His father's answers are honest and show abiding love.

The contrasts in the story reach even further: the Indian camp may represent the dark, primitive, irrational side of life and the doctor may represent the civilized, scientific, secure, rational side. Uncle George may represent the treacherous white man, the father of the baby, or perhaps he is only a bystander, irritable because he has been bitten by the Indian woman. Is the husband the opposite of an ideal Indian brave because he takes his own life, or is he courageous, dying by his own hand in order to lay guilt on Uncle George? The husband's suicide may be seen either as an act of cowardly weakness or of courage.

The final assertion—"he felt quite sure he would never die"—many have taken to be ironic. Others say it shows that Nick realizes his father's love. Still others look at the entire sentence as qualifiers—that only under these circumstances could Nick feel that he would never die. Given the circumstances of Hemingway's death thirty–four years after the story was written, the assertion teems with irony.

In "The Killers," another Nick Adams story usually considered a tale of initiation; Nick is without a father to answer his questions. In it, two killers come to Henry's lunchroom to kill Ole Anderson, an ex–boxer. When Anderson does not come, the killers leave and Nick goes to tell Anderson, who does nothing.

A strong sense of theatricality pervades the story, ranging from the extensive use of dialogue, the vaudevillian tenor of the killers' dialogue, and what one critic has called the comic-tragic edge along which Nick is painfully stretched.

The story illustrates the notion of discrepancy. One discrepancy is that people no longer act as individuals but have become agents of other people; the murderers act for a "friend" in their mechanized, efficient way of killing. Even Ole refuses to defend himself, having sacrificed his individuality to become a victim. Much else in the story does not follow: Nick mistakes Mrs. Bell for Mrs. Hirsh because the boarding house is called Mrs. Hirsh's, but Mrs. Bell runs it. Henry's lunchroom was once a saloon, and now it is run by George. The clock is twenty minutes fast. The killers' coats do not fit. They take each other's orders. No one calls the police. The story seems small-town though it is set in a suburb of Chicago.

"THE SNOWS OF KILIMANJARO" and "THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF FRANCIS MACOMBER": Two other well-known and much discussed stories are often seen as initiation stories, but of a more tragic shade. "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," both set in Africa, chronicle the deaths of their protagonists at important points of personal realization.

In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" Harry suffers from gangrene and cannot be treated because he and his wife and their hunting party are stuck in the wild. Harry remembers and assesses his past as a writer and wishes for time to write more stories, to be true to his talent. As with almost all Hemingway stories, discussion can center on the extent to which the story is autobiographical. Are Harry's indictments of his selling his writing talent for his wife's money, and the kind of life it will secure, a projection of Hemingway's guilt?

The story's structure can be studied in terms of the relationship of the italicized past—the stories Harry has saved to write—with the present when Harry tries to come to terms with his impending death. This process can be seen as a ritual of avoidance or as a means of self-knowledge, depending on how readers choose to see Harry's struggle.

In "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" the protagonist moves from cowardice to courage, but at the moment of exhilarated bravery, as he is charged by a wounded buffalo, his wife shoots and kills him.

Discussion of this story can profitably center on Mrs. Macomber's complexity and motivation. According to Hemingway's own assessment of the story, Margot Macomber is a "bitch for the full course," a woman who kills her husband because he becomes his own man in realizing his courage. Others have suggested that she is more complex than Hemingway himself realized. She may have aimed at the buffalo trying to save her husband. Or possibly she was neither trying to kill him nor save him but merely trying to save herself by shooting well and rejoining the society of her hunter-lovers.

Discussions of Mrs. Macomber's complexity and motivation must take into consideration Wilson's character and role. One view sees him as the great white hunter, wise and courageous; another reading doubts his credibility.

The question this story raises is one fundamental to Hemingway criticism: can or should supposed authorial intention outweigh contrary evidence in a story? The stereotypes of infallible white hunter and irredeemable bitch-wife exist in other Hemingway stories. Does their presence there mean they exist in this story? Or may this story run counter to the stereotype and portray Wilson as other than infallible and Mrs. Macomber as other than a villain?

"HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS" and "A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE": Two stories set in Spain illustrate through dialogue and narrative omission the lonely existential decisions and longing for meaning that Hemingway's protagonists inevitably face.

In "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" two waiters discuss an old, deaf customer and offer their divided opinions about his life, his attempted suicide, and the meaning of life. This quiet story demands intense concentration, especially regarding dialogue: who is speaking when, and what does he mean? On a less technical, more thematic note, the story's essential theme seems to invoke the yearning for faith. Does the story, in portraying a man who longs to find but cannot find anything to believe in ("nada" means "nothing" in Spanish), finally say that there are no grounds for faith, or does it suggest that, however modestly, there is something to believe in--relationships, the individual, consciousness, art?

In "Hills Like White Elephants" a couple debates whether the woman should have an abortion. The essential question of the story portrays the open-ended but volatile demand for action--will she give in and have the abortion or will she choose to have the baby? The setting and symbols of the story and their relationship to the conflict of the story is a rich area for exploration. The cafe sits at a railroad junction with views alternately barren and fecund. The curtain into the bar may symbolize barriers or a rosary.

Another profitable way to approach the story is to discuss the couple's characters and language. Do the man and woman really speak the same language? Do they understand each other? The woman's comment about the hills shows her creativity. One critic suggests that the term "white elephants" metaphorically represents the inner conflict, for it not only means an annoyingly useless gift; it may also be a possession of great value, a rarity in nature to be considered sacred and precious, revered and protected.

Hemingway's stories often portray a desperate, tenacious love of life, though many seem preoccupied, as Hemingway was himself, with death.

For Further Reading

By Ernest Hemingway (Dates are original publication date.)

The Sun Also Rises (1926)

A Farewell to Arms (1929)

For Whom the Bell Tolls (1939)

The Old Man and the Sea (1952)

A Moveable Feast (1964)

Selected Letters, 1917-1961. Edited by Carlos Baker. New York: Scribners, 1981.

About Ernest Hemingway

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Flora, Joseph M. *Ernest Hemingway: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989.

Smith, Paul. *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (Hall, 1989)

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Discussion Questions for *Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*

1. What "American characters"—in both the individual and the cultural senses—do you find in Hemingway's short stories?
2. Appraise your preconceptions of Hemingway. To what degree do you think your notions of the man colored your views of the fiction? As you turned (or returned) to the short stories and tried to divorce past judgements or prejudices from present reading, what did you discover?
3. In "The Art of the Short Story" Hemingway said, "A few things I have found to be true. If you leave out important things or events that you know about, the story is strengthened. If you leave out or skip something because you do not know it, the story will be worthless. The test of any story is how very good the stuff is that you, not your editors, omit." As you read Hemingway's short stories, what has he left out? Why has he included what he has included? Do you always agree with his choices?
4. One critic has suggested that "every Hemingway story is tragic." Do you find a sense of inevitable doom in all of the stories? Is there any qualifying or mitigating force in the presence of unkind fate?
5. Hemingway has been described as a rustic moralist, a non-intellectual reporter known for his practicality and resilience. What morals does he argue for, stand for? Is his a morality of mere survival, or is there something more?
6. One critic has pointed out that Hemingway's virile writing masks an aesthetic sensibility of great delicacy. Explore instances in Hemingway's short fiction where potent, brawny themes and style are juxtaposed with exquisite, sensitive themes and style.
7. Hemingway's stories are often seen as tales of initiation. The symbolic journey includes trials and helpers, flights and returns. Do you see Hemingway's characters completing the symbolic journey with a knowledge or power they lacked at the outset?

8. Discuss the role of physical action in Hemingway's short fiction. One critic has asserted that "physical action is unimportant insofar as the actions reveal the psychological underpinnings of the story." Do you agree that psychology is more important than action in the stories?

9. One critic points out that Hemingway was extremely dependent on women throughout his life and that dependence stems directly from his "androgynous" parents who gave him a "conflicting definition of manhood" to live with. From the short fiction, try to reconstruct the complexity of Hemingway's view of manhood and the relationship of the sexes.

10. One critic suggests that "none of Hemingway's characters is definite" because Hemingway himself is anxious about being misidentified and projects that anxiety onto every character. Thus, a character like Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is both an altruistic political martyr and a suicidal coward. What protagonists in Hemingway's short fiction illustrate this complexity?

11. Is "The Killers" Nick Adams' story or is it Ole Anderson's?

12. "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" contains two prominent symbols—the mountain and the leopard frozen on it. How do they function in the story? Does Harry come to an understanding of himself at the end of the story? How do these symbols help answer the previous question?