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An exploration of Ernest Hemingway's portrayal of war and its unpropitious effects
through the characters in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* have been praised by critics, such as Edmund Wilson and Ralph Thompson, because of its near-accurate portrayals of nature and unique character structures. In my essay, I explore the roles that each of these characters undertook in order to reflect a different effect of war on people. I specifically analyze the main characters Robert Jordan, Maria, Pilar and Pablo and some of the minor characters, such as Anselmo or Joaquín. Robert's relationship with nature and Maria, Pablo and Pilar's interchange of bravery and courage, and Anselmo and Joaquín's sudden turn to religion are all key parts in understanding the effect of war on humanity. I, further examine their differentiating trajectory of personalities in a war-torn environment, in which I also search the reasons behind such changes, and the connection of these characters to real people in a society. I believe that all of the characters in the book had been originated from Hemingway's memories about the war, and all of them has a connection with actuality, and Hemingway himself. I focus on that in several parts, and associate the characters with their possible real-life matches.

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1. INTRODUCTION

War had always been ingrained on people as the battle of pure good and pure evil. Bias of the authors who wrote about war did nothing but fueling that belief. However, with the beginning of the 20th century, the wars underwent a complete change, with innocent soldiers fighting with each other because of the battle between their leaders. Beginning from the World War 1, it got harder to define a side, which is morally superior to the other one, in wars. Each sides, and each soldier within these sides, had his own life story, which generally was composed of love, hatred, regret and fear.

During the Spanish Civil War between 1936 and 1939, Ernest Hemingway went to Spain, wrote his experiences and created *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the story of an American volunteer's trial of blowing a bridge to help the Republicans. What makes this novel "a tremendous piece of work" in the eye of critics, is its portrayal characters, and the mood it creates. Every action in the novel takes place during only four days and three nights. What forms the biggest part of the novel, are the portraits of emotional states of characters, and flashbacks for supporting them.

Sentiments of the characters are the main elements through which Hemingway can channel his ideas, that there is no pure good and pure evil anymore, and what happens is nothing but pure suffering in war. Effects of being in a war, and fighting with a past full of sufferings and an unclear future on people is explored through major characters, Robert Jordan, Maria, Pilar and Pablo, and some of the minor ones, such as Anselmo, Liteunant Berrendo and Joaquín. Throughout the progression of events, each of them has changes in their personality and attitude with the continuously increasing tension of war.

2. ROBERT JORDAN

Robert Jordan is the main, and probably the most significant character in the novel. Coming from America as a Spanish Teacher, he volunteers to join the Spanish Civil War along with Republicans. He then was assigned to blow up a mountain bridge, in which he receives help from an old man, Anselmo, and a guerilla band who had been hiding in the mountains. There, he meets new people to aid him in his case, and he begins to develop different relationships with each of these members. These relationships reveal different aspects of his mental and emotional state: His love and affection for Maria, his clashing philosophies of life with Pilar, and his hate beyond comradeship for Pablo are the key elements to understand his personality.

Being in a war changes Robert drastically. In the beginning, he joins Republican Forces, and is committed to them in the heart, such that he has faith in them, which is as strong as a 'religious' one. He describes this feeling in his internal monologue, *"You felt that you were taking part in a crusade. . . .It would be as difficult and embarrassing to speak about as a religious experience and yet it was authentic. . . . It gave you a part in something that you could believe in wholly and completely and in which you felt an absolute brotherhood with the others who were engaged in it."* (p.243), which hints the initial reason for Robert to join the Republicans. However, as events proceed, he starts to question his beliefs and actions, and discover what he truly wants. The primary reason in this, is that he felt like he found a family while up there in the mountains. *"I know him better than I know Charles, than I know Chub, than I know Guy, than I know Mike, and I know them well. Agustín, with his vile mouth, is my brother, and I never had a brother. Maria is my true love and my wife. I*

never had a true love. I never had a wife. She is also my sister, and I never had a sister, and my daughter, and I never will have a daughter. I hate to leave a thing that is so good.” (p.397) He also questions whether he is a Republican, or just anti-Fascist, as he loses his belief in Republic.

This shift also occurs spiritually. In the beginning, when Pilar reads his hand, he does not care about it and sees it as nonsense. Then, when Pilar describes the smell of death, and how Kashkin, the previous bomber smelt like it, he makes fun of the situation, by saying *“If that is true, it’s a good thing that I shot him” (p.266)*. However, as he gets more blended into love, hate and the very nature itself, he finally understands that there might be some powers in nature that he can’t explain.

Throughout the time he resides in the cave, he believes that Fascists will bring forth nothing but destruction, and the victory of Republicans must happen in order to save the country. However, after hearing Pilar’s story of the reclaim of Pablo’s village, and questioning himself whether the people he killed were really Fascists or not, he finds himself in an internal conflict, and tries to decide which side is morally superior to other.

Robert Jordan stands out as the character whom Hemingway link himself with the most. Even though Hemingway did not participate in the war by himself, he reflected his ideals to Robert, and turned him into the hero that Hemingway desires. A hero who is both devoted to his duties and comrades, a hero who has love in his heart and who can maintain his imperturbability even at the most critical conditions, such as the time when Pablo ran away with some of the explosives, thus making the mission almost impossible to complete, is the description of a Hemingway-ian hero. His shift

in personality eventually aids him to resolve his conflicts, and finally makes him “integrated” with nature.

Robert falls in love with Maria, a girl who is saved from Fascists’ hand by Pablo and rest of the guerillas, in 3 days, which is an extremely short time period. This is the indication of an acceleration of life on the people who are at war. This love story progresses much faster than it was supposed to be, because of the uncertainty of the future of the characters. Since Robert and Maria have endured danger many times, and unaware whether they will survive after the blowing of the bridge, or not; they try to live and feel every moment, while they can. This causes their perception of time to get stretched, so they can experience a love that is extremely fierce and heartwarming in such a short period of time. Robert thinks it as “living seventy hours *as in seventy days*”, and believes that it is possible if “*your life has been full up to the time that the seventy hours start*” (p.173) At the climaxes of their intercourses, they both “*feel the earth moving*” and the time, slowing, which implies that they live in these moments as long as they are able to do it.

3. MARIA

Maria is the one who is emotionally affected the most during the war. After Fascists shoot her parents right before her eyes, they rape and imprison her. She survives with hair that is cut almost bald, and emotional wounds because of the rape, thanks to Pablo’s guerilla team and Kashkin. She then becomes a part of their “family”, especially getting committed to Pilar, to whom she sees as a mother figure. She does not show any dark emotions, like anger or hatred towards anyone. On the contrary, she accepts people as who they are. This is shown when Pilar swears to her in a

moment of frustration. Since she had been accepted Pilar as who she is, an old woman with a dirty mouth, she does not get angry towards her.

Not much is known about Maria's past. This shows that she probably did not have something special before the war. It was the war conditions, and the pain she endured during the war that formed her character. Just like Robert, she also knew that she might die at any moment, so she also cares about time, and tries to live full, while she can.

In the story, Maria is represented as the Spanish lands. Hemingway makes a connection of their past filled with grief, and his hope for their better future. Just like Maria having been raped, the lands in Spain had been constantly bombed by two opposing forces. However, despite what had been done to them, they still both are embracing.

4. PILAR

Throughout the novel, Maria has a mother-daughter relationship with Pilar. It's Pilar who advises Maria to have sex with somebody she loves to relieve the trauma of being raped, and who teaches her how to do it with Robert. There are a few times when they get angry at each other, but those moments are always short-lived, and they always fix their relationship back. This is caused by the need to stick together and evade loneliness at the wartime. If they had not been such forgiving, they would have to separate, and get lonely and defenseless against the weariness of war conditions. Same goes for relationship between Robert and Pablo: Despite they hate each other, they do not attempt to resolve this problem by murder, since they know that one might be useful for the other in the future.

When seen from the perspective of an outsider, Pilar has a furious and raunchy personality. However, upon learning her story, Robert and Maria understands that it's the war and deaths of people who she once loved, that made Pilar like this. She goes through two important relationships, and the men whom she loved dies, physically or emotionally, each time. The pain and grief caused her to become furious, and somewhat withdrawn. Her willingness to tell her stories to Robert and Maria shows her desire to connect with them in an emotional level, which is brought by the artificial comradeship that wartime conditions bring.

Pilar often recalls the past. While doing that she compares her two lovers, and questions herself about what she had become. She mentions how her ideas and lifestyle had changed after Finito's, her previous lover's death and her new relationship with Pablo, whom she likens *"the bulls that Finito had spent his life killing"* (p.198). However, she also implies that Pablo is dead too, not his physical body, but his courage that made him Pablo. *"But neither bull force nor bull courage lasted, she knew now"* (p.198) She frequently repines from his weakness *"What class of people is my life passed now?"*(p.192), which also makes her question what is she doing there. *"...and what did last? I last, she thought. Yes, I have lasted. But for what?"*(p.198) her grief and the sensation of everyone she loved slipping away from her forced her to hold on to Republic and never let it go, since she thinks that it would never abandon her.

With these characteristics, Pilar draws a perfect Spanish woman portrait. Her affinity for nature and ability of reading it, as seen in her fortunes, her still-standing posture against everything she went through, and her immense care for the ones she like shows both her innate feminine side, and her masculine side that came with the war. Her strange ingredients in her description of the "smell of death", in which she

portrays as *“For part of it is the smell that comes when, on a ship, there is a storm and the portholes are closed up. Put your nose against the brass handle of a screwed-tight porthole on a rolling ship that is swaying under you so that you are faint and hollow in the stomach and you have a part of that smell...”, “After that of the ship you must go down the hill in Madrid to the Puente de Toldedo early in the morning to the matadero and stand there on the wet paving when there is a fog from the Manzanares and wait for the old women who go before daylight to drink the blood of the beasts that are slaughtered. When such an old woman comes out of the matadero, holding her shawl around her, with her face gray and her eyes hollow, and the whiskers of age on her chin, and on her cheeks, set in the waxen white of her face as the sprouts grow from the seed of a bean, not bristles, but pale sprouts in the death of her face; put your arms tight around her Ingles, and hold her to you and kiss her on the mouth and you will know the second part that odor is made of...” “It is important that the day be in the autumn with rain, or at least some fog, or early winter even and now thou shouldst continue to walk through the city and down the Calle de Salud smelling what thou wilt smell where they are sweeping out the casas de putas and emptying the slop jars into the drains and, with this odor of love’s labor lost mixed sweetly with soapy water and cigarette butts only faintly reaching thy nostrils, thou shouldst go on to the Jardin Botanico where at night those girls who can no longer work in the houses do their work against the iron gates of the park and the iron picketed fences and upon the sidewalks. It is there in the shadow of the trees against the iron railing that they will perform all that a man wishes; from the simplest requests at a remuneration of ten centimos up to a peseta for that great act that we are born to and there, on a dead flower bed that has not yet been plucked out and replanted, and so serves to soften the earth that is so much softer than the sidewalk,*

thou wilt find an abandoned gunny sack with the odor of the wet earth, the dead flowers, and the doings of that night. In this sack will be contained the essence of it all, both the dead earth and the dead stalks of the flowers and their rotted blooms and the smell that is both the death and birth of man. Thou wilt wrap this sack around thy head and try to breathe through it.”(p.265), are actually symbols, representing the elements a man experiences in his life, such as the “blood” for courage, “kiss” for love, and “dead flowers” as a reminder for the nature’s course. Her deep knowledge of life and death comes from her strong observation of nature. And her state of being nested with the nature is what forms her strong and resistant character.

5. PABLO

Among all of these characters, Pablo has a special place, since it is him which war destructed the most.

Before the war, he was working for a horse contractor, and was *“furnishing horses for bull rings and as remounts for the army” (p.190),* which probably is the cause of his strong relationship with horses. However, it is his mid-war actions that truly defines himself. In the beginning of the war, he was a powerful commander, and representative of masculinity and bravery. He was the leader of the Republican attack on Avila, which is done to get the town back. He planned the infiltration and the execution of Fascist leader by the villagers. As Pilar said, Pablo once would have sacrificed anything for the Republican cause, but has “gone bad” as the war has dragged on and now wavers in his loyalties. During his aging process, a fear of death beleaguered him, and turned him into a “coward”. Like Robert’s comparison to Kashkin, Pablo also had always been compared to his foil, Finito, throughout the

novel. While Finito's character is portrayed as a funky, timid man who tries to overcome his fear of bulls by performing bullfights in arenas constantly, Pablo is portrayed as a strong and fearless man, who turned into a complete coward with age. The countless number of men whom he killed accelerated this transformation. After all, it was the potential danger to his safety in the mountains that made him disagree with Robert's plan. And it became inevitable for numerous conflicts to happen between Pablo and the rest of the team. Robert snakingly hated him, but did not want to clash with him because he understood that nothing will come out of these quarrels, and they will just be repeated endlessly. Robert likens this situation to that of a "merry-go-round" which "goes around and comes back to where it starts" (p.233). He had a brief argument with Agustin, and he quarreled Pilar numerous times. During all those arguments, all of them wanted to kill Pablo, but neither of them could, probably because of his innate leadership or their respect to his glorious actions in the past.

Pablo is portrayed as an old and unpredictable man, a man who frequently follows his instincts and gives rash decisions. This is seen when he runs away from the camp with some of the dynamite, and comes back, confessing that his action was a "moment of weakness". Hemingway frequently associates Pablo with wild animals, such as bears and bulls, to emphasize his strength and danger and to show the animalization of people during war. The way he acts, his mistrust towards everybody, his alcoholism, and his brief moments of regret and weariness (he once wished that he could turn all the Fascists he killed back to life), associates an old general who had been in war through most of his life, and grows tired of it now. Just like the description of a retired soldier who experienced trauma and suffered, Pablo wants to live in peace and no longer take part in any action, as seen in the first parts of the novel. However, his instincts overpower him in the end, and he decides to help the

rest to blow up the bridge. This shows the “dark” side of the soldiers, stating that war had always been a part of them and they can never abandon it.

6. MINOR CHARACTERS

Apart from Robert, Maria, Pilar, and Pablo, some minor characters get severely affected from the war either. The changes in those people also reflect the possible changes that could happen in everybody during the war, partly because of fear and the need to trust somebody. Anselmo and Joaquín are the perfect examples for that shift. As a devoted supporter of Republic, both Anselmo and Joaquín aid to the guerilla groups as much as they are able to, and believe the Republican philosophy wholeheartedly. However, this philosophy is strict and cold, which foregrounds sayings of the leaders of Communist Party, rather than any religion. Throughout the novel, Republicans show hints of their rejection of religion for their political belief, such as Pilar’s perplexity and anger towards Pablo’s prayer. However, Hemingway emphasizes the need of spiritual energy and faith in people’s hearts, regardless of their secular actions like fighting in a war. Both Anselmo, and Joaquín starts to pray to God, after feeling that they have been let down, and hopeless. While on under attack of Fascists, Joaquín’s abrupt shift from reading aphorisms from Pasionaria (a Republican leader), to a dolorous prayer to Mary, Jesus and God, show how much the war blinded his eyes, even prevented himself to feel the emptiness in his heart, and how much he actually needed it in his desperate moments. Same goes for Anselmo: After finally noticing the things underneath the poncho that Lieutenant Berrendo carries, which are the heads of men from El Sordo, and losing his hope and belief to the Republic, who was unable to protect its comrades, he holds on to

religion, and starts to pray, after a long time. His sudden shift also show his newly nurturing lack of faith in Republic, which occurs during the course of the war. With showing the spiritual shifts in many other characters, like these two, Hemingway touches on the importance of faith in one's heart in critical moments, and criticizes Communism for being unable to destroy and not replace it.

7. CONCLUSION

War changes people in a fierce and drastic way. During war, people learn to adapt new conditions, stay in the moments and get as much as they can from life, become fearful, or fearless, hold on to good relationships no matter how quick they fade away, look to life from a different perspective, see what they could not see about life before, and realize the force of faith and God. Hemingway shows each of these aspects to the reader of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* through the experiences of different characters. Robert learns how to communicate with nature and resolve the conflicts in himself, and becomes 'integrated' with nature in the end of his war. Maria learns how to live "seventy years" in a period of "seventy hours", therefore living a legendary love story in a short time period; Pilar transformed into a strong and aggressive woman after witnessing the loss of one her lovers, and the deteriorative moral change of the other one. Pablo became a selfish, coward and unpredictable man while drawing a cruel and strong portrait, because of the growing fear of death inside him. Anselmo and Joaquín questioned their faith in Republic, and realized the existence of emptiness in their hearts, caused by lack of faith to a superior being. Even Lieutenant Berrendo, a Fascist soldier, suffered, from the tragedy of his friend's death.

Combined with Hemingway's detailed pen-portrait, and the language used which is created for the text to look like a translation of an Spanish-originated one, these portrayals and the characters almost come alive in the mind of reader, especially in the ones who first-handedly experienced warfare, which was quite a lot in 1941, the novel's publication date.

WORD COUNT: 3634

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