

# Robert Jordan in for whom the bell tolls



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Throughout Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan struggles to assign some value to human life – specifically, to his own life. This struggle reveals a weakness in Jordan's cold, calculated nature, a weakness that Hemingway poignantly depicts through Jordan's conflicted attitudes towards his father and grandfather. While Jordan clearly admires and aspires to be like his grandfather, a brave soldier in the Civil War and the Indian wars, he endeavors to rid himself of the image of his father's cowardly suicide, for which he shows great disdain. This conflict is intensified by Jordan's almost imminent death. The conclusion, at which point his conflict is resolved as he realizes the value of all life, provides insight into the changes that he endures to reach this stage. Through Jordan's noble death, a clear repudiation of his father's suicide, Hemingway is making a statement on the immense difference between willingness to die and desire to die. Jordan's conflicted feelings towards his father and grandfather expose a discontinuity in his usually steadfast emotions, and eventually aid him in resolving his inner struggle concerning death and the value of life. Often throughout the novel, Hemingway returns to the motif of the significance of human life, which he mainly depicts through Robert Jordan's self-conflicts. Amidst all the killing of the war, Jordan searches for meaning in the dead men's lives. At times, his uncompassionate nature is strongest in this conflict, as in the passage in which Jordan relates the difference between him and Kashkin to Agustín: “‘ I am alive and he is dead’, Robert Jordan said. Then: Is that all it means to you, now? It never meant much, he told himself truly. You tried to make it mean something, but it never did” (289). However, it is clear that Jordan has been emotionally affected by the killing he has done: “ How many is it that you have killed? He asked himself. I don't know.

Do you think you have a right to kill anyone? No. But I have to” (303). His commiseration with the men he has killed is a sign of the break in his usually strict control over his emotions, a break that results in internal conflict: “ Listen, he told himself. You better cut this out. This is very bad for you and for your work. Then himself said back to him, You listen, see? Because you are doing something very serious and I have to see you understand it all the time” (304). Although Jordan has not realized the value of life yet, this conflict is the first step in bringing about some change in his nature that will make him do just this. Robert Jordan’s feelings towards his father contrast sharply with those towards his grandfather, another conflict that causes him to lose strict control of his emotions. For his grandfather, from whom Jordan derives great pride, he has admiration similar to the feeling one would have towards a role model. While worrying about the mission, Jordan wishes he could “ talk to [grandfather] now and get his advice,” illustrating his desire to be more like this man who he believes, as a model soldier, would know the significance of life and death (338). Jordan realizes, however, that “ both he and his grandfather would be acutely embarrassed by the presence of his father” (338). His scorn for his father borders on the edge of derision and arrogance, as he thinks, “ maybe the good juice only came through straight after passing through that one” (338). Jordan hardly even acknowledges their real relationship. Instead, he makes his father inferior to himself - “ he had felt suddenly so much older than his father and sorry for him that he could hardly bear it” (406). Clearly, Jordan has trouble keeping his emotions under check when thinking about his father. When Jordan is injured and his death all but certain, he is forced to decide what importance his life still has, forced to choose the path of his father or his grandfather. In this last

passage, Jordan's inner conflict reaches its climax, and his true grit is being tested. Blinded by the intense pain from his broken leg, he nearly capitulates and decides to "do that business my father did" (469). Arguing with himself as to whether or not to commit suicide, Jordan finally comes to the realization that, although his life may not have any value to himself, it is very valuable to others, especially if he is able to slow the cavalry in pursuit of his guerrilla group. "I think it would be all right to do it now? Don't you? No, it isn't. Because there is something you can do yet. If you wait and hold them up even a little while or just get the officer that may make all the difference" (470). Jordan has figured out what his father never knew: that everybody's life is worth something, that every man is a piece of the continent, and that the bell tolls for all. With Jordan enlightened with this newfound knowledge, Hemingway concludes the novel with a very sensual passage, emphasizing the pureness and simplicity of life by focusing on the heart, the simplest sign of animal life: "he could feel his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest" (471). On this note, glorifying every individual's life and utterly rejecting his father's suicide, the passage and the whole novel are concluded. Hemingway uses Robert Jordan's conflict concerning his father and grandfather to make him realize the importance of life on a larger scale than suicide and the killing involved in a war. Through his reverence of his grandfather's bravery and disgust at his father's cowardice, Jordan discovers how his life and the lives of others are inter-related. His struggle to assign value to his life, aided by emotions brought out in him by the killing he has done, comes to an end with Jordan changed man, full of new resolution. Jordan's decision not to kill himself is a hopeful message from Hemingway –

one that exhorts emotion and the sacredness of life, a rejection of Jordan's father's suicide.