

# Essay on the art of understatement omission and the conveyance of meaning in the ...

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In 1941, the influential critic and academic Oscar Cargill wrote what may be one of the most misleading analyses of *The Sun Also Rises*. While praising what he considered a remarkably symbiotic achievement in style and content, Cargill concluded that Hemingway's initial entry into the literary milieu was limited in meaning and philosophical depth (Hays, 19). *The Sun Also Rises* was conceived as a modernistic contemplation of the post-war generation, yet many have criticized it as nihilistic; a self-indulgent, anti-intellectual response to the post-war generation and to the more elaborate style of writing that characterized the Gilded Age and the post-war era. In fact, Hemingway's style no more obscures the book's deeper meaning than Mark Twain's unique stylistic approach compromises *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. *The Sun Also Rises* heralded something new: a sparse, minimalist, anti-sentimental prose style that employs imagery, dialogue and a quasi-journalistic recounting of events. Style and content work together in a quite revolutionary way, powerfully conveying the unfamiliarity of a world bereft of meaning.

Hemingway's writing style, which he developed with the encouragement and advice of luminaries such as Ezra Pound and Scott Fitzgerald, was more than a self-conscious and calculated attempt to establish a new literary form. It fit Hemingway's personality and his belief in the poignancy of the thought-left-unstated. For Hemingway, "stoicism in prose equaled stoicism in life" (Hays, 20).

Masculinity and a more extensive pondering of gender assignation

is a central theme in *The Sun Also Rises*, as it would be in many of his later works. Much of the

story's power arises from a consideration of the ambiguity of gender and the place of masculinity in a world that had been blown apart by a conflict that called into question the validity of masculinity. In this, Hemingway's style tautly balances a "dual loss of sentiment and potency," by allowing his characters "neither to lay claims to a hard masculinity nor really to renounce it" (Banach, 2012). Thus, Hemingway's use of language evinces a balancing act in which the hard, athletic prose contains an "emotional suggestiveness" that evinces a feminine sensitivity (2012).

Those that have criticized Hemingway as a stylist overlook the delicacy of this achievement in *The Sun Also Rises*, and in his later works.

Understatement, the omission of thoughts and feelings, not only lends the story a sedate and dignified power, it is an attempt to mimic life itself, the chaos of which often unfolds in remarkable ways that pass on without comment, or with little to mark what has occurred. Hemingway's experiences in World War I endowed him with a cynical sensibility. The Great War was an unnatural melding of new world-technology and a remnant of old-world heroism, the renowned and lamented "stiff upper lip," an ethos that charged the sufferer to bear tragedy with perfect equanimity.

Hemingway's writing seeks to resolve this notion of courage with the unprecedented horror that informed so much of his fiction.

subjective voice, would have somehow facilitated a deeper metaphysical contemplation of the story's main themes, the perceived want of which has been both a target of criticism and a source of praise as Hemingway has come in and out of favor over the years. Indeed, it was sentiment that the

likes of Pound, Dos Passos and others urged Hemingway to eschew in *The Sun Also Rises*. The great literary breakthrough which the novel represents lies in the fact that pathos could be so spectacularly achieved by avoiding sentimental language. In other words, it is the intended function of Hemingway's style to express the deeper interests of the story.

The New York Times' review, published shortly after *The Sun Also Rises* was released, set the tone for subsequent analyses. Its description of Hemingway's literary style as "lean, hard, athletic" is often repeated while the more profound accomplishment of this style is often overlooked and lost in feckless criticism (NYT, 1926). The Times noted that Hemingway "knows how not only to make words be specific but how to arrange a collection of words which shall betray a great deal more than is to be found in the individual parts" (1926). It is the latter part of that statement, the idea that Hemingway paints a picture that conveys far more than can be achieved through the employment of a more elaborate prose style, which indicates an understanding of the singular voice that Hemingway labored to attain.

Hemingway's marriage of style and content in *The Sun Also Rises* reflected the new aesthetic then emerging among the coterie of artists and writers in Paris in the 1920s. It was there that the famous population of expatriate Americans, such as Pound, Hemingway, Ford Madox Ford and E. E. Cummings, found a new inspiration and a new sensibility among the French intellectuals and artists from other countries. Hemingway's artistic perspective was early

influenced by Gertrude Stein and, more directly, by Pound, who was a driving force in

the early imagistic movement among the Paris literati, provided a substantial amount of technical input and general, philosophical guidance in the writing of Hemingway's first novel. The poet John Peale Bishop recalled that the exchanges between Hemingway and Pound were often quite detailed. The early manuscripts, Peale noted, "came back to (Hemingway) blue penciled, most of the adjectives gone. The comments were unsparing" (Wagner, 88). It was this unadorned prose, non-adjectival and borne along by the dialogue of multiple characters, that *The Sun Also Rises* made famous.

It is as though the reader is privy to the writer's inner-monologue, the built-in voice that everyone has which simultaneously describes vision and translates the action into perspective. In this way, Hemingway achieves a linear, reportorial narrative, the concision and clarity of which opens a window on some deeper meaning. The bullfight scene in *The Sun Also Rises* is a quintessentially Hemingway-esque passage: "Each time he let the bull pass so close that the man and the bull and the cape that filled and pivoted ahead of the bull were all one sharply etched mass. It was all so slow and so controlled. It was as though he were rocking the bull to sleep" (Hemingway, 2006, 221). Much of the dialogue of *The Sun Also Rises* is terse and staccato but indicates by what is left unsaid that there is much more going on, both internally and externally, than is expressed conversationally, such as in the following exchange between Mike, Cohn and Brett:

**“ He was a very distinguished soldier,” Brett said. “ Tell them about the time your horse bolted down Piccadilly.”**

“I’ll not. I’ve told that four times.”

“You never told me,” Robert Cohn said.

“I’ll not tell that story. It reflects discredit on me.”

“Tell them about your medals.”

“I’ll not. That story reflects great discredit on me.”

“What story’s that?” (Hemingway, 2006, 139).

In Hemingway and *The Sun Also Rises: The Crafting of a Style*, Frederic Svoboda argues that in finding his voice, Hemingway was able to “ distance” himself from his narrator (84). It is this that gives the novel so much more depth than a simple journalistic recounting of events (9). It was upon this literary scaffolding that Hemingway constructed what he would come to call the “ iceberg theory,” or “ theory of omission” (Svoboda, year, 44). Through omission, Hemingway is able to powerfully convey through conversations between characters, “ ruthlessly pared down to an irreducible minimum,” suggesting “ terrible restraints” that limit and determine the course of the relationships between friends and lovers (44-45). Thus, Hemingway created a style that draws the reader into the deeper interests and underlying meaning of the story through allusion, through the artifice of the thought unexpressed. The writing of *The Sun Also Rises* was an intense and constant process of editing and condensing.

However, it is important to note that Hemingway does not sacrifice other literary elements to the exigencies of a singular prose style. Those critics who have considered *The Sun Also Rises* bleak and nihilistic have either missed or overlooked Hemingway's rich use of metaphor. There is a plentiful representation of sexual and gender-based themes. Hay writes

that " Jake's impotence is a metaphor for a feeling of social helplessness, as well as a reaction against Victorian and oppressive optimism" (263). Jake finds himself confronted by " Women's freedoms (which) demanded a reconfiguring of traditional roles" (263). There is the hovering presence of eroticism throughout the novel, the apex of which is the bullfight and the phallic symbolism of the matador's thrusting and dominance of his vulnerable prey.

Hemingway created a retinue of memorably metaphorical characters that inhabit a sterile, post-war landscape, unable to communicate openly and honestly. Hemingway's craftsmanship marries metaphor and dialogue, the two creating a remarkably delicate tension.

Rather than structuring a more traditional plot line, much of the story is carried by its dialogue, which, taken together, exhibits a palpable ambiguity. This accounts for the sheer volume of dialogue, and the abundant, almost repetitious comments and responses that bounce back and forth so rapidly between Hemingway's characters. There is a curious blurring of individuality in the book's dialogue, as if there is little meaning in who is saying what. The reader has the feeling that the lines are interchangeable, that it really doesn't matter what Jake or Brett is saying because the " normal" roles

expressed in fiction mean little. In this, Hemingway is creating a new literary aesthetic with a prose style that underscores a key theme: the modern world has brought about profound change in human relationships and the way men and women interact.

Despite the ambiguity of the dialogue, Hemingway's characters remain distinctive and unforgettable. *The Sun Also Rises* is a story that people who had suffered through World War I and its aftermath could understand, with characters suffering after-effects that resonated with the reading public. That Hemingway created such vivid characters is all the more

remarkable given that the book does not rely on the interpretive explication that often is used in novels to interpret the action or the motives of its characters. Hemingway places the story's actors in situations that reflect the fragmentary nature of day-to-day life, conveying the "gray" over the neat "black-and-white" resolutions of the traditional novel. The resulting dialogue is often incongruous, obtuse and open-ended:

**"We've had a grand time, Harris."**

"Harris was a little tight."

"I say. Really you don't know how much it means. I've not had much fun since the war."

"We'll fish together again, some time. Don't you forget it Harris."

(Hemingway, 134).

Thus, Hemingway's prose style approximates realistic conversation. Rather



than confusing or diluting the novel's thematic elements, Hemingway's writing emphasizes the open-ended nature of life and the multiple destinies that are possible for his characters. He is not concerned with tying up loose ends, resolving story lines or with happy endings. *The Sun Also Rises* is a metaphorical, existential contemplation of a world that has been profoundly altered by war, a cataclysm which called into question the meaning of life itself and the nature of human relationships. The characters are at once familiar and unfamiliar to each other, both ambivalent and meaningful. *The Sun Also Rises* is an exquisitely balanced story, complicated yet concentrated in its structure and in its language; language which manages the remarkable feat of expressing deeper meaning by saying less.

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