

# Autobiographical motives in the snows of kilimanjaro

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It is often said that great artistic inspiration can only be born out of experience. Some of the saddest stories ever written were created by authors who had experienced some great trauma in their own life. Similarly, the most realistic and engrossing depictions of foreign lands are often penned by those who have actually been there. Authors often draw on their own personal experiences and musings in order to create moving and realistic works of fiction. Thus, even through fictional literary works, one can learn a great deal about the author themselves. One of the best examples of an author who poured their own experiences and emotions into their writing is Ernest Hemingway. His short story, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” reflects a great deal about the life of the author himself. (Burgess, 1978) With this in mind, the following essay will examine the life of Ernest Hemingway, explaining how *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* was greatly impacted by the author’s own experiences and circumstances.

Perhaps the most obvious influence of Hemingway’s life on his short story comes through in the setting of the story. The characters are in Africa, living in a somewhat primitive, yet comfortable camp after the primary character, Harry, begins to succumb to gangrene. (Hemingway, 1970) Hemingway himself travelled to Africa for safari on multiple occasions, and his experience shows through in his detailed writing about the scenery and African wildlife. (Moddelmog & Gizzo, 2013) Harry’s recollections of his past life also seem to draw from locations and experiences from Hemingway’s own life.

The time setting of the story is also very significant in this discussion, as the main character Harry is part of the so-called “lost generation,” or the generation of people who came of age during World War I. (Moddelmog & Gizzo, 2013) Hemingway himself was of this generation. Both he and Harry served in World War I, upon which Harry reflects. (Hemingway, 1970) Both Harry’s and Hemingway’s respective experiences in the war came to shape who they are as people, and give both individuals a sense of being somewhat lost.

Hemingway’s use of symbolism in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” can also be explained by his own experiences and beliefs. Across many of Hemingway’s literary works, such as *Farewell to Arms*, mountains symbolize purity, goodness, and peaceful tranquility, where lowlands and plains symbolize corruptions, rot, and imperfection. (Moddelmog & Gizzo, 2013) This is true of “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” as well. This common symbolic representation across Hemingway’s works is due to his own contemplations on mountains and nature in the various locations he visited. The mountains were mostly viewed from far off, and few people ever climbed them. Furthermore, the tops of these mountains were subject to freezing temperatures, which largely preserved anything atop them. The lowlands, by contrast, were easily traversed by many people, and subject to rot and decay. Thus, Hemingway likely associated many of the evils of human nature, as well as death and decay itself, with the plains. (Burgess, 1978) On the other hand, he symbolically viewed the mountaintop as a place where timelessness and purity could manifest for those who could achieve the feat of climbing them.

In the short story, Harry wants to die as the clean, preserved Snow Leopard atop Kilimanjaro, rather than rotting away slowly on the lowly plains.

(Hemingway, 1970) Harry wanted to become preserved atop the mountain as a symbolic representation of his desire to complete all of his planned writing and be preserved in history. This is something that Hemingway also wanted to do, as he struggled to find meaning and morality in the midst of a confusing, often directionless existence. (Burgess, 1978) Going down in history as a great writer is something that few people can do, just as only a few people can ever conquer these mountains. Harry, and Hemingway, both saw the mountains as a representation of their life goal, to become timeless and pure in history through their artistic literary expression.

Probably the most significant parallel to be drawn from Hemingway's life and this short story is the characterization of Harry. Both Hemingway and Harry, as mentioned before, are part of the "lost generation." (Moddelmog & Gizzo, 2013) This influences them in profound, existential ways. Both feel somewhat lost, and as though they are often simply going through the motions of life in searching for meaning. Hemingway's four marriages hint at the fact that he had trouble finding lasting love and may have been simply pretending to be in a state of marital bliss, much as Harry is in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." (Moddelmog & Gizzo, 2013) Harry, at the beginning of the story, being overcome by a state of depressed apathy as is largely representative of the "lost generation," tells his wife that he doesn't love her and that he never loved her at all. (Hemingway, 1970) This is despite the fact that his wife, Helen, is very loyal, kind, and intelligent. Although

Hemingway had many long relationships with women who were good and kind, he was unable to find a happy romantic life. (Burgess, 1978)

Hemingway's depiction of Harry mirrors Hemingway's own life in many notable ways as well. For instance, Hemingway lived in Paris and believed it to be a hub of interesting people and experience, for which he could find inspiration for his writing. (Burgess, 1978) Harry also reminisces about his time in Paris and all of experiences he had which he promised he would write about, but never managed to. (Hemingway, 1970)

Beyond their membership in the "lost generation," war experiences, and times in various locations around the world, both Hemingway and Harry are also writers. (Hemingway, 1970) Just as Harry discusses the grand influence of his life experiences being the catalyst for his writing, so too did Hemingway believe that his life experiences should be included heavily in his writing, even if the plotlines were entirely fictional. (Burgess, 1978) Harry's musings allow Hemingway to express many of his own beliefs and fears through the character of Harry. For instance, one of Harry's biggest lamentations is that his wife's wealth has impacted his creativity and ability to write. He blames both Helen and her money on his own procrastination and declining literary output. (Hemingway, 1970) This mirrors Hemingway's own belief that his increasing fraternization with the wealthy and powerful due to his rise as a writer was causing his writing to suffer. (Moddelmog & Gizzo, 2013) Harry comments about how boring and superfluous the lives of the wealthy are, and believes that it is starting to wear off on him. His reason for coming to Africa in the first place, in fact, seems to be to regain his sense

of literary integrity and motivation. (Hemingway, 1970) This parallels the strongly held belief of Hemingway that location and setting directly impact one's ability to write and create. (Burgess, 1978)

It is through such a detailed examination as this that one can make the assumption that Hemingway was in fact, writing a great deal about himself and his own thoughts and worries when he created the character of Harry. (Moddelmog & Gizzo, 2013) Under this assumption, more conclusions about who Hemingway himself was and what he thought about can be drawn by further exploring the character of Harry.

Harry is introduced as an individual in failing health, on the doorsteps of death itself. Being confronted with death, he feels great sorrow (expressed to his wife as apathy) that he was unable to ever do all the writing he had wanted to get done. (Hemingway, 1970) While Hemingway himself was not necessarily in any grave danger at the time of this writing, he did have his fair share of life-threatening injuries as well as a good deal of firsthand experience in both World Wars. (Moddelmog & Gizzo, 2013) Combine this with an individual already predisposed to existentialism and it is safe to say that Hemingway himself often felt like his death was impending and worried that he would not be able to ever become the writer that he wanted to. Just as Harry turns bitter and somewhat nasty towards his wife and the lifestyle she has brought him, so too did Hemingway likely feel resentment towards his rich friends and romantic relationships for sacrificing his artistic integrity. (Moddelmog & Gizzo, 2013) Finally, Harry's death on the plains of Africa is very significant. As mentioned before, the plains to Hemingway represented

immorality and decay. (Burgess, 1978) Harry's death on these plains encapsulates the fear that Hemingway has about his own death being surrounded by evil and rot, and his worries over the possibility that he might never write a great story, and be preserved, as the leopard on top of Mount Kilimanjaro.

This story is a fantastically written and engrossing piece of literary fiction that causes the reader to contemplate their own mortality and the meaning of existence. Hemingway was able to create such a work of art by drawing upon his own life experiences and beliefs, and more importantly by mirroring the character of Harry after himself. Though Hemingway met a tragic end through suicide, his writing lives on. Through his works of fiction, the reader can learn a great deal about who Hemingway was and how he contemplated the most perplexing topics in life. Despite his troubled state at the time of his death, one can only hope that Hemingway found some semblance of lasting peace, and he will forever be remembered as the pristine leopard on the snowy mountaintop.