

The flight of chivalry



In Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the recurring images of the horse and the airplane illustrate one of the major themes of the novel. The novel's predominant theme is the disintegration of the chivalric order of the Old Spanish World, as it is being replaced by the newer technology and ideology of the modern world. As a consummate artist, Hemingway, in a manner illustrating the gothic quality of his work, allows the bigger themes of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to be echoed in the smaller units. He employs the tropes of the horse and the airplane to convey these larger themes, while at the same time using them to comment upon the complex relationship that exists between the Spaniards – Fascists and Communists, alike – and religion. Through a close reading, and through detailed references to the work, it is the purpose of this paper to examine the tropes of horses and planes, as they exist in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, placing a special emphasis on religion. The frequent occurrence of the images of the horse and the airplane is not purely accidental, for Hemingway is using these tropes to support his bigger theme. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway uses the horse to represent the aristocratic hierarchy of the Old World dating back to the Middle Ages, while he uses the airplane to represent the invasion of Spain by modern technology and ideologies. The most powerful and moving illustration of the use of these images to symbolize this changing of orders occurs in Chapter 27, which proves the importance of the horse and plane images and what they represent. Hemingway uses the tropes of the horse and the airplane to symbolically portray the two contrasting views of the war held by the small bands of Spaniards and the Fascist powers. As the Spaniards, who stay medieval far longer than the rest of Europe, are closely tied to the ancient chivalric tradition, their first allegiance is to the town. They have abandoned

religion, as they have become disillusioned by it, and, therefore, have no mechanism for atonement. Stemming from their close attachment to the chivalric ideal of equality in battles, the Spanish have absolutely no conception of modern warfare, until the planes begin invading their land. They view war as a match of equals, wherein a lone soldier can look his enemy in the eye as they battle, but, instead, they are forced to come to grips with the horrors of modern warfare. The planes are representative of the modern mechanical accomplishments that have emerged, which can replace the chivalric, soldier of the Old World. With the emergence of such technologies, and the influx of new ideologies, not only has the religion, once integral to chivalry, become obsolete, but the people, too, have become dispensable. Gone forever is the almost sacred element of one-on-one battles; the planes have eradicated these chivalric ideals, by replacing them with a brand of never before seen mass destruction. In effect, the new ideologies have become the new religion; they have replaced the Church, just as the new mechanisms, such as planes, and mass warfare have replaced the chivalric ideals of the medieval world. The meaning of the horse and airplane images can be illuminated through an exploration of Chapter 27, which conveys, without a doubt, their significance. One of the very first images the reader is presented with at the beginning of the chapter is El Sordo's horse, which has been shot by the modern army. After shooting the horse to put it out of its misery, Sordo, at one point, hides behind the horse, using it for cover. Even in its death, the horse is still useful to the Spaniard. This image of an atheistic Communist soldier looking toward a dead horse for protection, is quite fascinating, especially in consideration of one of the turns of the novel this chapter marks: the reassertion of religion. Like the dead

horse, Christianity, too, has died in the hearts of the disillusioned Spaniards, and, in this chapter, resurfaces as a form of protection from the inevitable death of modernized warfare. With the interspersed images of the horse and the plane, Hemingway is conflating the religion of the old order of Spain with the religion of communism. As the planes get nearer, Joaquin, the young Communist atheist, comments that, “Pasionaria,” a Communist, “says it is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees” (309). This radical idealist, who has put all his hope into a real, living Communist woman, now shifts into a Catholic prayer, invoking the Mother of all mothers: the Virgin Mary. The very fact that Joaquin segues into prayer in a moment of fear arises from his being a Spaniard. This critical moment illustrates how the old religion takes hold in a moment of crisis. Earlier in the novel, Anselmo asserts to himself that “there must be a penance of some kind for the cleansing of us all” (196). Feeling this need for penance, young Joaquin calls on the Blessed Mother, and prays for forgiveness, something forbidden according to the Communist religion. Later on, in the same chapter, seeing the brain dead Joaquin, Lieutenant Berrendo made the sign of the cross and then shot him in the back of the head, as quickly and as gently, if such an abrupt movement can be gentle, as Sordo had shot the wounded horse. . . . Then he made the sign of the cross again and as he walked down the hill he said five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys for the repose of the soul of the soul of his dead comrade. (322) Thus, Hemingway allows Communism and Fascism to meet under the auspices of the old religion. The very fact that Berrendo blesses his enemy illustrates the two ideologies falling away in the face of death, as the sign of the cross and the Virgin Mother become more important to both sides. The Hail Marys heard from the mouths of the

Communist boy and the Fascist soldier owe entirely to the fact that they are both Spaniards. The horse and plane imagery existent in the pivotal Chapters of Eight and Nine not only foreshadow the death and destruction caused by the planes as well as the reassertion of the religion of the Old World, as seen by the prayer and the usefulness of the dead horse, but help support the significance of both the tropes in the novel. In Chapter Eight, the planes are described as “hammering the sky apart as they went over,” whereas later in Chapter 27, the planes not only hammer apart the sky, but the earth and people as well (75). In Chapter Eight, Pablo, who readily admits, “never have we seen planes like this” is eternally concerned about the safety of his horses (76). In Chapter Nine, Pablo is portrayed as making the same shift back to religion as Joaquin makes later on in Chapter 27, when he gets frightened. This shift back to the Old World represents Pablo’s loss of faith in politics, which can be seen symbolically in his close attachment to his horses, emblematic of the chivalric ideal. Thus, the atheism of the Communists and Socialists cannot help the Spaniards when they are facing death: the new ideologies cannot replace Christianity. As seen in Chapter Nine, the fear the Spaniards have for the planes is symbolic not only of the fear of their own death, but also of the death of the whole world. The Spaniards do not simply fear the death of the individual life, but the greater evil, that their cosmos will be obliterated. This different kind of fear propels Pilar to perceptively state, “The sight of those machines does things to one We are nothing against such machines” (89). Pilar is here voicing the destruction of the community that the planes represent; this kind of destruction is what moves Pablo closer to his horses, and even provokes him to kill his cohorts to get their horses. Religion and community are one

and the same, however, with the invasion of the modern world, religion does not hold because there has been a breakdown of community. The reaction to the coming of the planes is indicative of the Old World mindset of the Spaniards. In Chapter Eleven, when Sordo relays the troop movement and the planes he saw in Segovia to Robert Jordan, he confidently questions, “We prepare something?” (143). When they see all the planes flying, the Spanish peasants immediately assume that their side may be preparing. They err in thinking, however, because the Fascists are not there because they heard that their opponent was mounting an equal offensive, but rather, to obliterate the small bands. Questioning whether their side is “preparing” shows the mindset of the Old World Spanish peasant. Sordo cannot conceive of not being in a battle with an equal opponent. This is the old chivalric code. The Fascists are modern, however. As we see on the hill of Sordo, they are here to wipe them out. Essentially, the horses are no match for the airplanes. When the images of the horse are first presented to the reader in Chapter One, Robert Jordan, somewhat of a cultural invader, remarks, “That is much horse” (13). Later, in Chapter 27, Sordo says to his dead horse, “Eras mucho caballo,” meaning, “Thou wert plenty of horse” (313). Clearly, death of the horse by the mechanized warfare of the modern world bespeaks the death of the Old World. By the novel’s end, the same Robert Jordan will become injured by a horse which falls on him, as he is overwhelmed by the Old World, symbolized through the horse. At the end of the novel, Robert Jordan, whose precise knowledge of planes and all aspects of modern warfare, has become crippled under the weight of the Old World. However, the horses accompany the peasants as they flee from the terrors of mechanized warfare, and thus, the community lives on.