Hemingway’s legacy in literature goes beyond his grave

Despite recent questions concerning Hemingway's future relevancy in mainstream Modernist studies, there can be little doubt that the man with the shotgun carries a hefty literary load well past beyond his grave. While it is true that he never managed to reach beyond his perceptions of a world that served merely as the solar system to his sun, he still managed to capture an important slice of Americana with his portrayals of an era of decay and hopelessness. To complain that he is not a Whitman or a Faulkner is to miss out on some fascinating details.

In order to grasp the truths behind In Our Time, one must first observe the historical context from which it sprang. Hemingway's generation witnessed the very apex of nihilism during the Great War. None of the ancient institutions such as romanticism or duty could repel the merciless batterings of that all-consuming spiritual void. As a result, soldiers and hospital drivers alike returned home with shattered expectations and a need to find something, anything else to believe in – thus the previously unheralded obsession with a chronologically-based lifestyle. Others, such as Hemingway and Eliot, sought refuge in mythology and the ritualistic qualities therein. This, and a desire to defy any and all " outdated" conventions such as narrative flow and coherence, gave rise to what we know as Modernism. Whether this is in reality a case of the " poor me's" (as America played Johnny-come-lately in the war) or not depends on one's perspective.

Hemingway exemplified this ideal with his barren vignettes of a generation stranded in a desert and forced into introspection. In " Soldier's Home," Krebs mopes about because he has lost, as his mother puts it, " your ambition . . . you haven't got a definite aim in life" (75). When she asks him if he still loves her, he says simply, No. When she recoils and starts to cry, he tries to comfort her by explaining that “ I didn’t mean it. I was just angry at something.” This “ something” is the cause of Krebs’s angst, but it is never expressly stated. This is because, like so many others of his generation, he didn’t know what to be angry at. This unexpressible emotion, this free-floating guilt complex, has left him destitute and unwilling to return to the life he was once comfortable with.

Krebs, however, appears only in one chapter, as do the majority of characters. The only recurring person is Nick, who undergoes an interesting transformation throughout the pages and ultimately serves to bind the otherwise unrelated vignettes into something that isn’t so much a story as it is a series of scattered photographs from a by-gone era. At the outset, we are given a glimpse of Nick as he loses a sense of innocence about the world when he finds a man who has committed suicide. Rather tellingly, when he asks his father if dying is hard, he answers, “ No, I think it’s pretty easy, Nick. It all depends” (19).

From there we follow Nick go through various stages in life and through the repercussions from his stint in the war. Like Krebs, he loses his romantic notions of the importance of women in a man’s life, as demonstrated in “ The End of Something.” This chapter paints a poignant contrast between the pre- and post-war periods. Marjorie represents the age of unspoiled innocence and all that Nick believed valuable before being exposed to the terrors of the war (and is also proof enough that Hemingway was indeed capable of creating romantic characters, especially with the line, “ She loved to fish. She loved to fish with Nick.”), while Bill can be seen as the reality at present.

Nick, meanwhile, is caught in the middle as he initially divorces himself from his relationship with Marjorie – without having any tangible cause, much as Kreb had no tangible reason to not love anybody – only to feel pangs of sadness as he realizes what he just gave up. The chapter closes with him contemplating whether to march ahead with an uncertain life as Bill suggests, or to return to the comfortable bosom of a past in which he no longer believes. We soon realize that Bill’s will prevailed, but it is debatable as to which path would have better served Nick or, for that matter, which path Hemingway himself would have seen as the most beneficial.

Once Nick has forsaken a romantic life, his options are decidedly limited, and Hemingway plays with this. In “ Cross-Country Snow,” he gives us a glimpse at the tenuous faith in the future that people had, while simultaneously showing the necessity of just such a faith. When George suggests that “ Maybe we’ll never go skiing again, Nick,” Nick argues that “ We’ve got to. It isn’t worthwhile if you can’t” (112). Even now, Nick is still searching for something to put faith into, even it is something as simple and inconsequential as the promise of a skiing trip.

Finally, Hemingway details the generation’s last resort, according to him: a return to ritual and nature. In “ Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick returns to a river whose surrounding areas have been torched and demolished during the war. The nearby town was destroyed, but the river was still there, and is the lone thing in which Nick can place any faith. Women have disappointed him, his friends have disappeared, and he has no real future but, just as a New Yorker could set his watch and know when he is if not who he is, Nick can at least know what he can come back to. The fishing, then, symbolizes the importance of maintaining ritual amidst vacuous chaos. This is how Nick manages to pull himself from the war’s ashes and feel at peace once more, and when you get right down to it, that’s all that anybody in the Modernists’ time could hope for: peace of mind and peace of soul.

And maybe a bottle of Sion.