Self-Delusion in Ernest Hemingway's War Fiction

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Abstract

The study is an attempt to recover repressed impulses and silenced feelings which establish the hero as a self-deluding personality, not merely a social alien. The Hemingway war-hero develops delusions in the form of an image of the self to cover the egocentric motivations behind his actions. Then, a process of repression follows in order to protect the image with which the hero comes to identify, that of a caring lover to which Frederic Henry turns after his desertion from the Italian army, or of a brave soldier fighting in Spain which Robert Jordan tries desperately to perpetuate, or the mask of carelessness and of being in control which Jake Barnes puts on to hide his hatred for Cohn.

The thesis gives much more weight to the individual feelings than to the social scene in which the hero moves. The texts reveal a systematic effort on the part of the character to conceal his true feelings; that is why he is always trying to give his mind a vacation through the deliberate effort not to think as in the case of Robert Jordan, or to pretend to be "hard-boiled" about everything in day time as Barnes and Henry do. Each of them turns out to be living in his own island, eating, drinking, making love, and trying to forget. Sex, drinking, and fishing are their tools to run away from themselves.

Due to this deliberate process of thought-prevention, direct and indirect interior monologues become keys to our understanding of the character's true feelings. We come to know of what the character thinks of his actions through the daydreaming fantasies in which he indulges, and
during which his mind gets very active and moves to rethink the whole thing all over again. Repressed feelings also find expression in images and symbols through which the character projects his innermost feelings on external objects.

The war-hero tries to reconstruct reality in his own way. His attempt to impose order on a chaotic world leads only to more inner and outer chaos because of its egocentric motivations. He is estranged twice, once from a world in which any mediation between the self and the other is absolutely absent, and from himself because of the moral and material consequences of his actions. That is why he is always and forever worried, always and forever tormented by a guilt-ridden consciousness. It is not only because the world is dirty but also because he is self-centred.