
BREVITY WITH DEPTH: UNPACKING ERNEST MILLER HEMINGWAY'S STORYTELLING TECHNIQUE

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway's narrative style, renowned for its simplicity and precision, was shaped by his early education, journalistic background, and personal experiences, particularly the trauma of World War I. Rooted in journalistic prose, Imagist poetry, and the spoken word, his writing evolved to reflect the disillusionment and skepticism of a war-torn society. Hemingway's style is marked by its economy of language, minimal use of adjectives, and preference for straightforward, declarative sentences. Influenced by his time as a war correspondent and his understanding of the emotional devastation of war, Hemingway crafted prose that conveyed truth and authenticity through clear, unadorned expression. His dialogue, succinct and emotionally charged, became one of the most striking features of his work, often conveying meaning through subtext rather than overt description. Hemingway's technique, refined through the influence of literary figures such as Mark Twain, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein, presents a style that combines simplicity with lyricism, moving between poetic and hard-boiled forms. His commitment to clarity, detachment, and realism contributed to the emergence of a style that mirrored the disillusionment of the post-war generation. Hemingway's narrative style remains one of the defining innovations of 20th-century literature.

Keywords

Impetus, war-ridden, agonizing, skeptical, heart-rending, syntactic, kaleidoscopic, sumptuous, resplendent, magnificent, terrifying, stupendous, charmingly, smilingly, angrily, violently, monosyllabic

Ernest Hemingway had exemplified his strong commitment to evolve a unique style for himself during his initial schooling at Oak Park. This inherent instinct to achieve an amazing mastery over his craft had been further enhanced during his apprentice years as a cub reporter for the **Kansas City Star**. But Hemingway got a new impetus to fashion his inimitable style during the First World War. The wounding experience of 1918 had of course played a decisive role in shaping both his personality and style.

Hemingway's style, grounded on the accent of speech, journalistic prose, and the striking accuracy of Imagist poetry, is the manifestation of his traumatized individuality. Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks are of the impression that: "The short simple rhythms, the succession of co-ordinated clauses, and the general lack of subordination- all suggest a dislocated, unified world"¹ precipitated by the ruthless war. J.B. Priestley comments that the style of Hemingway "for which he deserves the highest praise, not only made him as a writer, but probably saved him as a man from the results of some trauma, some open war wound in his inner life".² In fact, his stuff and style were profoundly influenced by the distressing experience of 1918.

Hemingway expresses his strong yearning to accomplish an incomparable style in his discussion with Kandisky in **Green Hills of Africa**:

The kind of writing that can be done. How far prose can be carried, if anyone is serious enough and has luck. There is a fourth and fifth dimension that can be gotten.....It is much more difficult than poetry. It is a prose that has never been written. But it can be written without tricks and without cheating. With nothing that will go bad afterwards.³ But the truth is that he had already become a renowned stylist when he made the above citation. Hemingway believed that there were specific dimensions yet to be accomplished in his prose. Ernest Hemingway had dissociated himself from the elegant and exuberant stylistic American convention during the First World War. It was during this period that the terms 'sacred', 'glorious', 'sacrifice', 'humanity' and the like

were extensively applied in language. Ernest Hemingway evolved and refined a unique prose style, a style grounded on crisp and explicit accounts, which fairly manifested the disappointed and skeptical state of the war-ridden society. Hemingway supposed that the agonizing situations of war could best be communicated through crisp and idiomatic expressions.

Hemingway's close association with the **Kansas City Star** marked the beginning of an illustrious vocation in his life as a journalist. Hemingway, with his new assignment as a war correspondent, had been forced to give up kaleidoscopic words, exaggerated language and imposing description. The heart-rending sights of war could best be expressed through lucid, undecorated statements. He penned, for the most part, in a simple and natural style without any pretense. He narrated according to the idiom of his period, in what may be called a simple style. Naturalness, accuracy and effectiveness are the other characteristics of his style. His prime concern was to exhibit the reality, sensations and intellectual processes in a prose that should be as perfect as paint. This obsession with truth had induced him to record the realities of life with much authenticity.

The term 'style' basically means dialect and rhetoric. And the style of a writer has a noticeably identical imprint in terms of the writer's distinctive lexical choices and syntactic arrangements. In truth, Hemingway's unique style has been under minute analysis during the past two decades. The distinguished critics of the period like Harry Levin, John Graham, Charles A Fenton, Frederic I. Carpenter, Carlos Baker, Earl Rovit and Tony Tanner have conducted thorough studies of his unique style recognizing the individuality and attractiveness of his craft. Critics like Richard Bridgman and Walker Gibson have also identified some of the commendable and significant attributes of American language in his craft. Hemingway, after making a proper introspection of his style, says, "I sometimes think my style is suggestive rather than direct. The reader must often use his imagination or lose the most subtle part of my thought".⁴The linguists, on account of the individuality of his style, are approaching to his craft as material for comparative study.

The primary characteristics of Hemingway's unparalleled style are apparently simple and adequately popular for every scholar to recognize. The principle of straightforwardness is not a new concept in English prose. The influence of the Authorized Version of the Bible on

Hemingway's personality and also on his lucid style cannot be undervalued. Hemingway clings to simpleness and concreteness more strictly than Swift or Bunyan does

Sheldon Norman Grebstein, in his book **Hemingway's Craft**, makes an excellent remark about Hemingway's diction:

.....Hemingway's diction is generally so accessible a child could understand it, he seasons it with a sprinkling of foreign words, an occasional exotic or off-beat usage and the strategic placement of unexpected adjectives or adverbs-techniques which forestall monotony and preserve the necessary element of surprise.⁵

Hemingway's reaction to Faulkner, when the latter observed that Hemingway did not use words that would send the reader to the dictionary shows his mastery over the simple diction. He comments: "Poor Faulkner. Does he really think big emotions come from big words? He thinks I don't know the ten-dollar words. I know them all right. But there are older and simpler and better words, and those are the ones I use".⁶

Hemingway had depicted the heart-rending sights of emotional and physical violence of the war-torn world without using violent and emotionally elevated language. He is mainly known for his application of colloquial diction. The succeeding descriptions would certainly shed light on his choice of colloquialism:

She watched him go out of the house, tall, wide-shouldered, flat-backed, his lips narrow, moving, still, she thought, like some kind of animal, easy and swift and not old yet, he moves so light and smooth-like, she thought⁷

Hemingway made a minimal employment of adjectives. He applied adjectives carefully and only when absolutely inevitable. Hemingway explained the feat of the fish, which awakened Santiago by pulling the line through his hand. To cite from *The Old Man and the Sea*:

He woke with the jerk of his right fist coming up against his face and the line burning out through his right hand. He had no feeling of his left hand but he braked all he could with his right and the line rushed out.....Just then the fish jumped making a great bursting of the ocean and then a heavy fall (pp.72-73).

Even though the action of the fish was violent in nature, Hemingway avoided the application of the adjective ‘violent’. Instead of applying the adjectives as ‘sumptuous’, ‘resplendent’, ‘magnificent’, ‘terrifying’, or even ‘stupendous’ he applied simple adjectives as ‘great’ and ‘heavy’. He refused to incorporate words like ‘charmingly’, ‘smilingly’, ‘angrily’, and ‘violently’ in his works. It is interesting to note the application of a simple preposition *with*-in the succeeding description of the dying guerrilla leader, El Sordo:

Come on, Comrade Voyager.....Keep on coming with your eyes forward look. With a red face and blond hair and blue eyes. With no cap on and his moustache is yellow. With blue eyes. With pale blue eyes. With pale blue eyes with something wrong with them. With pale blue eyes that don't focus. Close enough. Too close. Yes, Comrade Voyager. Take it, Comrade Voyager.⁸

The ability to create exciting conversations throughout his fictional world is another significant characteristic of Ernest Hemingway. For instance, the striking conversations, which Hemingway employed throughout *The Old Man and the Sea*, are often marked with emotional intensity: “‘Let us take the stuff home’, the boy said” (p.10). This technique is again applied when they are talking about the lottery: “Do you think we should buy a terminal of the lottery with an eighty-five? Tomorrow is the eighty-fifth day” (p.12). The deplorable plight of the innocent fishermen is brought out with the help of this casual dialogue. Nemi D’ Agostino, while complimenting Hemingway’s brilliant use of language in *The Old Man and the Sea*, comments:

The language is rich in suggestive and exotic words, in rich and sensuous imagery, in highly literary expressions, in bright and exquisite touches, and is consciously regulated by a love of verbal magic. It is, in short, the rhythm and language of a decadent....., incapable of full historical and moral significance. Within these limits *The Old Man* is certainly a refined work, with its admirable linear development and its brilliant “‘imagistic” style.⁹

The most piercing weapon in the armoury of Hemingway’s style is his dialogue. Innumerable writers as John ‘ Hara, J.D. Slinger and Bernard Malamud have been highly inspired by the unique style of Hemingway. Hemingway penned lucid, compact, aphoristic, and clipped dialogue. He avoided all that was inappropriate. According to W.F. Taylor, “His dialogue is pared

of the usual speech tags and explanations. It is spare, short-breathed, prone to understatement, and at times too consciously naïve”.¹⁰

Hemingway often created that kind of dialogue, which gets its effect from assumptions. In the subsequent dialogue between Jake Barnes and Lady Brett Ashley, the readers behold and experience only what Jake beholds and experiences. Hemingway strongly believed that emotion must come straightforwardly from experience. He was highly fascinated by the aesthetic principle of truth. On one occasion Hemingway explained to George Plimpton his aesthetic principle of truthful writing: “A writer, if he is any good, does not describe. He invents or *makes* out of knowledge personal and impersonal and sometimes he seems to have unexplained knowledge, which could come from forgotten racial or family experience”.¹¹ Hemingway wanted to convey the truth about his own perception of reality with utmost accuracy. The perception sank deep in his sub-conscious mind and he relived the perception as it was experienced when he first went through it.

Since childhood Hemingway was highly optimistic about his own potentials and he strongly believed that he could evolve a new kind of prose more authentic than the conventional prose. His intense quest for the ultimate truth had also enabled him to accomplish his long cherished dream of evolving a unique style. He thought of evolving “a fourth and fifth dimension”¹² prose. The fifth dimensional prose can be accomplished only when the writer has aptitude, self-control, perfect conscience, knowledge and impartiality. Hemingway achieved all these in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Hemingway has been widely applauded for his exquisite and unique narrative style. A unique narrative style is intended to report to the reader an authentic account of the object or action represented. Directness, detachment, economy of expression and concreteness are the cardinal features of a narrative style. Hemingway succeeded both in conveying the action straightforwardly and also in retaining the attention of the reader through a chain of ideas.

Another facet of Hemingway’s unique narrative style is his effective use of paragraph. It is observed that the straightforward and lucid sentences of Hemingway continue to compel good response from the readers. In fact, the command of the sentences is increased because of the

sequence of sentences in the paragraphs. Moreover, the size, fabric, and closeness of the paragraphs are elemental to the overall effect. Sketching an excellent comparison between the function of short and long paragraphs Grebstein comments: “Short paragraphs emphasize or highlight shifts in character or mood. Long paragraphs recreate the flow of thought or reproduce the continuity of a single action”¹³.

Another significant feature of his narrative style is his employment of lyricism. The formal lyricism, which Hemingway employs throughout his fictional world, is evolved through allusion. Hemingway also employs the accidental music of ordinary speech in his literary pieces.

Hemingway had flourished at least two kinds of styles—one suggestive, musical and gentle, and the other descriptive, hard boiled and masculine throughout his illustrious literary career. The style of *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* is mostly poetic and romantic in nature. But the stories published in *In Our Time* were composed in the bare, hard-boiled and realistic style. The technique of *In Our Time* and *The Sun Also Rises* reveals that the sentences are quite short in length, mostly declarative. The intonation is extensively lucid and monosyllabic. There is the minimum use of adjectives and adverbs. Dialogue is striking, ironic, repetitive, and is marked by understatement. When the complex sentence structure finds its place in *A Farewell to Arms*, the romantic style of the yesteryears once again becomes alive in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In *The Old Man and the Sea* Hemingway accomplishes a rhythmic union between the romantic and the realistic techniques of his earlier literary creations. His technique once again becomes lucid both in intonation and sentence structure, but the language is not simply traditional.

The Swedish Academy, while conferring the Nobel Prize for literature to Hemingway in 1954, cited his “powerful style-forming mastery of the art of modern narration, as most recently evinced in *The Old Man and the Sea*”.¹⁴ Maxwell Greismar argued that Hemingway received the Nobel Prize:

for the wrong book, and for the wrong period of his work....The great short stories of his “dark period” which are collected in *The Fifth Column* and the *First Forty-nine Stories* are the core of Hemingway’s lasting work, his bid for immortality, and the true basis of the Nobel Prize ward.¹⁵

But, taking strong exception about Maxwell's view, Philip Young wrote, "For the Hemingway is, next to Thoreau, the greatest prose stylist in our literature. That's at the most, most brilliant and most moving prose of our time".¹⁶ It is true that Hemingway developed an unusual, lucid, idiomatic, fair and unexcitable style for his generation.

The accuracy, crispness, lucidity, sharpness and sparseness go a long way in enhancing the significance of Hemingway's unique narrative technique. Hemingway's apprenticeship as a journalist qualified him to assimilate certain precepts for the art of narration. And these rules continued to haunt him forever even after he abandoned journalism for fiction.

Hemingway had also been highly influenced by the *Old Testament Narratives* during his school days. Hemingway, soon after the publication of *The Sun Also Rises*, told Samuel Putman in an interview that took place in Paris: "That's how I learned to write-by reading the Bible",¹⁷ mainly the *Old Testament*. He had imbibed the Christian allusions, biblical plainness, repetition, and the persistent application of 'ands' by reading the Bible. During his apprenticeship period Hemingway had also come under the influence of Ring Lardner, the prominent sports page-writer of the **Chicago Tribune**. Charles A Fenton observes that Hemingway's "careful adaptations of Lardner had been an invaluable opening experiment in various levels of humour, burlesque, and satire".¹⁸

Hemingway sought the help of other literary luminaries like Ezra Pound, Mark Twain, Gertrude Stein and Rudyard Kipling to evolve a unique narrative technique. He was also influenced by Pound's theories pertaining to the narration of effective prose. The bewitching style of Ernest Hemingway had emanated as a response to his war psychosis. As a means of adapting to the war trauma induced by a fatal wound in the First World War Hemingway had to repeat that experience again and again in his short stories and novels. Hemingway had handled the theme of violent death with more clarity and sincerity. In fact, his unique style was a manifestation of the generation itself. The president of the Swedish Academy opined, "He is one of the greatest writers of our time, one of those who, honesty and undauntedly, reproduces the genuine features of the hard countenance of the age".¹⁹

In conclusion, it remains a fact that the unique style of Ernest Hemingway is, of course universally acknowledged today as one of the significant innovations of twentieth century

literature and as itself as one of the greatest reactions of that literature to a generation of war homelessness and broken faith.

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