

Trauma Theory: No “Separate Peace” for Ernest Hemingway’s “Hard-Boiled” Characters

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies trauma theory to Hemingway’s post World War I writing. His work, for example, *A Farewell to Arms*, shows how soldiers are traumatized by their war experiences, and how they suffer from such aftereffects as flashbacks, nightmares, inability to sleep and social maladjustment. Although examining Hemingway’s work in terms of shell-shock has been established, this paper suggests that traumatized characters in Hemingway’s work carry what the trauma theorist Cathy Caruth calls an “impossible history.” It suggests that survivors of trauma experience a sudden or catastrophic event that is beyond the normal realm of human experience. Since traumatized individuals often do not process catastrophic events as other normal events, they have access to it through disturbing flashbacks and nightmares. These psychological manifestations provide snippets of the individuals’ impossible history which they never fully possess or normally store. By tracing these psychological manifestations, e.g. flashbacks and nightmares, this paper shows that traumatized survivors struggle with a traumatic history, haunting them in day and night.

Key words: Trauma Theory, Traumatic Narrative, Impossible History, Flashbacks, Nightmares

INTRODUCTION

Philip Young examines the repeated patterns of violence, wounding and death in Hemingway’s work and concludes that Hemingway suffered from “war neurosis” (165). His psycho-analytic reading led many critics, for example, Ellen Knodt, Charles Coleman, Paul Quick and Ronald Smith, to analyze Hemingway’s work in terms of shell-shock and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. While characters, such as Nick Adams in “A Way You’ll Never Be” and “Now I Lay Me” and Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, are troubled with sleep difficulty and intrusive recollections, their problem is not pathology of a traumatic event, but a pathology of history, I argue, in which these characters do not fully witness their traumatic experiences. They involuntarily relive their trauma in the belated and recurrent return of these memories as flashbacks and nightmares¹. Cathy Caruth explains, “The traumatized, we might say, carry an ‘impossible history’ within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (1995, 1). Since trauma survivors never fully possess their “impossible history,” they often try, or perhaps are forced, to make sense of it. Thus, for trauma survivors, what does it mean to be haunted by flashbacks and nightmares? And how do these psychological manifestations reflect “an impossible history” that they have to act out over and over?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hemingway’s early work, written in the 1920s and early 1930s, depicts soldiers suffering from shell-shock. This

term was common among British and American soldiers during World War I and described soldiers’ incapacity to fight and follow orders when they were exposed to heavy shelling. The British psychiatrist Charles Myers was the first one to mention shell-shock in his article “A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock,” which he published in *Lancet* in 1915. Although he explained that soldiers’ presence in the front line and their exposure to shell bursts were the main reasons for shell-shock, he later called shell-shock “a singularly ill-chosen term,” for many soldiers showed symptoms of shell-shock in their billets and before they reached the front line (1940, 26).

In the 1990s, the term shell-shock (“battle fatigue” in World War II and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Vietnam War), associated with medical and military fields, piqued such critics’ interest as Cathy Caruth, Bessel van der Kolk, Onno van der Hart, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. Caruth regards trauma “an impossible history” which, in its belated return as flashbacks and nightmares, disturbed survivors. Since traumatized subjects are haunted by “an impossible history,” they reexperience it through disconnected images that disrupt the linearity of history. In “Bearing Witness or Vicissitudes of Listening,” Laub contends that the traumatized who survive a terrible event often have “no prior knowledge, no comprehension and no memory of what happened” (58). Thus, far from linear history that provides meaningful descriptions of historical events, traumatic history challenges the traditional modes of narration and telling. The traumatized, Laub argues, avoid any encounter with

their terrible history: "That he or she profoundly fears such knowledge, shrinks away from it and is apt to close off at any moment, when facing it" (58).

Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart distinguish between narrative (ordinary) memories and traumatic memories. They maintain that survivors of trauma are inflicted with memories that are distressing and indelible. Unlike narrative memories which can be easily remembered and restored, traumatic memories are intrusive and unexpected. They are fragmented and full of "holes" and silences, the gaps that reflect the survivors' inability to articulate their traumas. The traumatized, van der Kolk and van der Hart maintain, may remember parts of their overwhelming experiences or have access to them through nightmares or flashbacks, yet they often cannot retell their experiences fully as they remember narrative memories.

Hemingway's work, for example, *A Farewell to Arms*, shows how combat experience may often inflict soldiers with traumatic memories². Trevor Dodman maintains that in *FTA*, Frederic Henry "suffers from the compulsion to remember and retell his traumatic past from the standpoint of a survivor both unable and perhaps unwilling to put that very past into words" (83). Frederic's narrative, Dodman claims, exhibits shell-shock symptoms from "the very first page of the novel" (85). He contradicts himself, though, when he writes that Frederic recollects "pain that registers at the 'outer' level of the body, breaking apart the perceived unity of the physical self in the presence of terrific bodily suffering" (83). But Frederic experiences his violent wounding and shows the aftereffects of his trauma, for example, drinking heavily and enduring nightmares and flashbacks in chapter 9. Michael Reynolds contends, "Despite Frederic's reticence, his behavior should let the reader see that he has been changed by his violent wounding" (119). Frederic's relation with Catherine, Reynolds maintains, shifts from being a game to being "a psychic dependence" and love (Reynolds 120).

Many soldiers found it difficult to retell their traumatic stories due to military restrictions during and after World War I. Soldiers were encouraged to show bravery and patriotism while normal feelings such as fear and crying were considered "unmasculine" (Herman 21). Those who exhibited "unmasculine" behaviors were accused of being malingerers and court-martialed (21). Alexs Vernon argues that characters, such as Frederic in *A Farewell to Arms*, "are unmanned by the war" and try not to narrate their stories of "cowardice" to other people (44). Sarah Anderson, too, explains that Hemingway's male war heroes are governed by their gender, preventing them from expressing their fears during and after the war. But if gender prevented soldiers from showing their fears, their trauma, then, was somehow cultural. Hemingway's war heroes, I argue, often are unable to remember or narrate what happen to them, not because they are afraid to be labeled "feminine," or they want to show their machismo, although some may, but because they carry an "impossible history" that they cannot simply narrate. When soldiers are wounded or exposed to heavy shelling, they become helpless and cannot comprehend their terrible experiences such as Frederic in *FTA*. After soldiers leave the war, for example,

Nick in "A Way You'll Never Be" and Frederic in *AFT*, they often develop PTSD.

Although Carl Eby argues that Hemingway's bouts of depression came from Agnes von Kurowsky's rejection letter and had nothing to do with PTSD, many critics, for example, Roland Smith, Charles Coleman and Peter Hays, have explored Hemingway's oeuvre as a post-traumatic narrative. Roland Smith points out that Nick Adams in "A Way You'll Never Be" shows symptoms of PTSD, for example, drinking too much, difficulty in sleeping and suffering intrusive flashbacks. Smith states that "In area A of the Diagnostic Criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: two of the first criteria in establishing whether or not an individual suffers from PTSD are that the individual must have been exposed to a traumatic event which threatened death and which elicited a response of 'intense fear, helplessness, or horror'" (41). Although Nick experiences a violent event that inflicts him with serious wounds, he is traumatized by the intrusive flashbacks and disturbing nightmares that haunt him and intensify his fear. Charles Coleman maintains that Nick in "WYNB" suffers from PTSD and traumatic brain injury (1). He states that "people suffering from PTSD create various types of cerebral timelines, sometimes as simple as short vignettes of loosely connected mental pictures, some with action, speech, soundtracks, words, and associated odors" (2). Frederic's dissociative description of his wounding in *FTA* can be read as cerebral timelines describing soldiers' traumatic memories.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In *A Farewell to Arms*, the narrator Frederic is violently wounded, a terrible experience that makes him unable to possess its memory entirely. After a mortar shell suddenly falls, turning him helpless and numb, he provides sensory depictions of sounds, colors and images without a coherent narrative. He remembers the sound of the trench mortar: "I heard a cough, then came the chuh-chuh-chuh-chuh" (47). He also hears the blast of the trench door, sees a flash caused by the extremity of the shell and loses his breath. His traumatic experience happens in a moment and is disrupted by his feeling that his soul disintegrates from his body: "I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind" (47). This description indicates that Frederic does not fully register this violent experience; and as a result, he will suffer from such aftereffects as flashbacks and nightmares.

Traumatic memories do not appear at will and intrusively haunt survivors. Since they are not narrative memories and cannot be retrieved as other stored memories, they make the traumatized live through their terrible past anew. Nightmares are manifestations of an "impossible history" that haunts survivors and disturbs their sleep. In *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic has no control over his traumatic memories, which bother him at night:

I know that the night is not the same as the day: that all things are different, that the things of the night cannot be explained in the day, because they do not then exist, and the

night can be a dreadful time for lonely people once their loneliness has started. But with Catherine there was almost no difference in the night except that it was an even better time. (318)

Although Catherine makes his night "an even better time," Frederic cannot avoid his fear of the night (318). In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes is impotent due to a war wound. In his flat, he sees his old scars: "Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny" (25). It may sound funny for Jake to be wounded in his testicles (and for people too), but his war memories are distressing and cause him to stay awake: "I lay awake thinking and my mind jumping around. Then I couldn't keep away from it" (26). In "Now I Lay Me," Nick cannot sleep at night because he is afraid his "soul would go out of my body. I had been that way for a long time, ever since I had been blown up at night and felt it go out of me and go off and then come back" (276). In "A Way You'll Never Be," Nick cannot sleep "without a light of some sort" when Paravicini asks him to sleep (309).

While the traumatized struggle with their nightmares at night, they also relive their traumatic flashbacks when they are awake. In "A Way You'll Never Be," after Nick finishes his conversation with Paravicini, he lies on a bunk and suddenly encounters a flashback that reminds him of his terrible past. Like many soldiers, Nick recollects how he is afraid of death and wounding, and to hide his fear, he wears a chin strap on his mouth. Nick's flashback is dissociative and fragmented, in which the past and the present are overlapped, and history is effaced: "Knowing it was all a bloody balls—if he can't stop crying, break his nose to give him something else to think about. I'd shoot one but it's too late now. They'd all be worse. Break his nose" (310). This flashback moves from the past "was" to the present "can't" and ends with the immediate imperative "break his nose." This back-and-forth shift between the present and the past disrupts history and suggests that Nick cannot control his traumatic past.

The memory of a traumatic event is more frightful than the event itself because its belated, literal return causes the individuals to reenact their violent traumas. In the same flashback, Nick involuntarily encounters the images of the yellow house, stable and canal. He does not know what happens to him, and the only remnants of his wounding experience are these incomprehensible images. For Nick, the yellow house "meant more than anything and every night he had it. That was what he needed but it frightened him especially when the boat lay there quietly in the willows on the canal, but the banks weren't like this river" (311-312). He feels that he is there "a thousand times and never seen it." This feeling suggests that he carries an "impossible history," which he does not fully possess:

Now he was back here at the river, he had gone through that same town, and there was no house. Nor was the river that way. Then where did he go each night and what was the peril, and why would he wake, soaking wet, more frightened than he had ever been in a bombardment, because of a house and a long stable and a canal? (311)

The absence of the yellow house and the presence of the river, although the river is different from the one he experi-

ences in his flashback, create an uncertainty concerning his traumatic past. He cannot identify the yellow house and the lower river and can know his traumatic past through intrusive, disturbing flashbacks.

In the last flashback, a new traumatic image of a man with beard pointing his gun towards Nick appears: "He shut his eyes, and in place of the man with the beard who looked at him over the sights of the rifle, quite calmly before squeezing off, the white flash and clublike impact, on his knees, hot-sweet choking, coughing it onto the rock while they went past him, he saw a long, yellow house with a low stable and the river much wider than it was and stiller" (314). This traumatic image does not override the main traumatic flashback of the yellow house and the lower river. It may fill in some gaps in Nick's traumatic history (and may lead to a future recovery), yet the ending does not suggest that. After he encounters the flashback of the man with beard, Nick suddenly says, "Christ ... I might as well go" (314).

Survivors of trauma prefer not to talk or think about their terrible past. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud argues that "perhaps they [survivors of trauma] are more concerned with not thinking of it" (7). In "A Way You'll Never Be," Paravicini offers Nick grappa, causing him to remember "completely and suddenly" when he used to get "stinking in every attack" (309). These memories are frightening and make Nick change the topic. Also, when the adjutant asks Nick about his "scars," he changes the topic and talks about grasshoppers. Nick says, "These insects at one time played a very important part in my life" (312). In "Now I Lay Me," the memories of trout-fishing and grasshoppers help Nick stay awake because he is afraid to sleep at night. In "Big Two-Hearted River," although there is no mention of the war, the short story shows how Nick is psychologically disturbed³. He feels that he leaves "everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him" (164). This trip, then, suggests that Nick wants to forget his past, probably his war memories.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, when Frederic is taken to the hospital in Milan, Rinaldi does not recognize Frederic's psychological disturbance and insists that Frederic recount his "heroic act." Frederic reservedly responds: "I was blown up while we were eating cheese" (55). In chapter 34, Frederic does not want to read the papers because he wants to forget the war: "The war was a long way away. Maybe there wasn't any war. There was no war here. Then I realized it was over for me" (213). In *The Sun Also Rises*, Brett Ashley reminds Jake of his impotence in her secret affairs with Robert Cohen, Mike Campbell and Pedro Romero: "This was Brett, that I had felt like crying about. Then I thought of her walking up the street and stepping into the car, as I had last seen her, and of course in a little while I felt like hell again" (28).

However, some trauma survivors try to understand their "impossible history" by reading about the war. In "Soldier's Home," Harold Krebs' lies about his war experience create a "feeling of nausea" and lead him to retreat to his own private world: "sleeping late in bed, getting up to walk downtown to the library to get a book, eating lunch at home, reading on the front porch until he became bored and then walking

down through the town to spend the hottest hours of the day in the cool dark of the pool room" (147). He does not tell his townspeople about his fears, except in the dressing room when he tells a soldier that he "had been badly, sickeningly frightened all the time. In this way he lost everything" (146). Krebs is interested in reading history books, which, although Milton Cohen uses to disregard PTSD, may provide some answers to Krebs' war experience. He wants to make sense of what happened to him in the war—Fighting in such major battles as Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Mihiel and the Argonne is traumatic enough to inflict him with indelible memories.

If Harold Krebs goes to war books to make sense of "all the engagements he had been in," in "A Way You'll Never Be," Nick goes to the front itself to understand his unassimilated history and its intrusive return. He knows that he is wounded in the front line; nevertheless, he still does not know or possess that overwhelming experience entirely. He tries to track it down yet fails, making him anxious and deteriorating his mental state: "If it didn't get so damned mixed up he could follow it all right. That was why he noticed everything in such detail to keep it all straight so he would know just where he was, but suddenly it confused without reason as now" (311). As an archeologist, he notices scattered objects, such as postcards, letters, helmets, gas masks, which belong to a recent offensive. He also observes swollen, dead bodies with coats that are open, and pockets that are out. This close observation suggests that Nick is eager to know the missing pieces of his traumatic past.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how soldiers find often difficult to recollect their "impossible history" as other ordinary memories. Considering traumatic memories as "an impossible history" helps us see why Hemingway's combat characters are troubled by their inability to sleep and their social maladjustment. These characters also try not to remember their "impossible history," yet they are compelled to relive it as intrusive flashbacks and nightmares. Most importantly, his paper has shown that trauma lies not in the event itself, but in its immediate and belated return as distressing recollections and nightmares.

END NOTES

1. Cathy Caruth, one of the leading figures in trauma theory, published two foundational books, *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). In *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, she edited articles that cover a wide range of disciplines such as history, film, literature and psychiatry. In the preface, she maintains that traumatized individuals are not abnormal, nor suffer from pathological illness that can be psychoanalyzed. The traumatized, she argues, go through an overwhelming experience that they find hard to remember entirely. A traumatic experience, she argues, is "an impossible history" to which the traumatized subject has no access except through flashbacks and nightmares. Her recent book *Literature in the Ashes of History* compares the traumatized individual's "impossible history" with Jacques Derrida's "archive fever," a term which suggests that traumatic memory is an indelible history which paradoxically erases itself. This erasure assures the incomprehensibility of traumatic experience which persistently and intrusively revisits trauma survivors. It is worth mentioning that many critics and historians, e.g. Ruth Leys' *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000), reject Caruth's assumptions that traumatic experiences are incomprehensible and cannot be known or represented.
2. Although not a war trauma, Marc Seals regards Hemingway's loss of his early Paris manuscripts as traumatic. He bases his analysis on Caruth's definition of trauma, which she sees as a "response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena." Seals also suggests that Hemingway fictionalized his traumatic loss of the manuscripts, which might serve as recovery and "a therapeutic outlet for trauma" (62). But Seals' reading is problematic. First, Hemingway's loss of his early manuscript cannot be equated with being exposed to shell bursts or being wounded. Second, Caruth considers trauma as unhealable wound, which argues against Seals' suggestion that Hemingway's writing about his lost early manuscripts served as a recovery.
3. In *The Moveable Feast*, Hemingway states that "Two Big-Hearted River" "was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it" (76). The absence of war reference suggests Nick (perhaps Hemingway) as a trauma survivor does not want to remember the war, for it may psychologically deteriorate his mentality.
4. Milton Cohen disregards "Soldier's Home" as a post-traumatic narrative and argues that Krebs does not suffer from PTSD. When Krebs meets a soldier in the dressing room, he "fell into the easy pose of the old soldier among other soldiers" (146). He, then, reveals his fears of the war. Cohen explains, "The problematic word here is 'pose.' If it means 'stance' or 'attitude,' it suggests that Krebs, relaxing, can now tell the truth to the fellow soldier. But if 'pose' means a false appearance, then Krebs is simply falsifying his experience once again by pretending he was badly frightened in combat" (162). While Cohen sees the first evidence as a falsification, he is still ambivalent and admits that the "pose" can be interpreted both ways. Another evidence Cohen uses to discredit PTSD in this short story is when Krebs expresses his interest in reading history books about the war. Cohen contends, "No one suffering from PTSD would look forward 'eagerly' to reading about the battles he was in" (163).

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