

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1954**



**Ernest Miller Hemingway**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1954 was awarded to Ernest Hemingway "for his mastery of the art of narrative, most recently demonstrated in *The Old Man and the Sea*, and for the influence that he has exerted on contemporary style".**

In our modern age, American authors have set their stamp more and more strongly on the general physiognomy of literature. Our generation in particular has, during the last few decades, seen a reorientation of literary interest which implies not only a temporary change in the market but, indeed, a shifting of the mental horizon, with far-reaching consequences. All these swiftly rising new authors from the United States, whose names we now recognize as stimulating signals, had one thing in common: they took full advantage of the Americanism to which they were born. And the European public greeted them with enthusiasm; it was the general wish that Americans should write as Americans, thereby making their own contribution to the contest in the international arena.

One of these pioneers is the author who is now the focus of attention. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Ernest Hemingway, more than any of his American colleagues, makes us feel we are confronted by a still young nation which seeks and finds its exact form

of expression. A dramatic tempo and sharp curves have also characterized Hemingway's own existence, in many ways so unlike that of the average literary man. With him, this vital energy goes its own way, independent of the pessimism and the disillusionment so typical of the age. Hemingway evolved his style in the herd school of journalistic reporting. In the editorial office of the Kansas City newspaper where he served his apprenticeship, there was a kind of pressman's catechism, the first dictum of which was: «Use short sentences. Use short paragraphs.» Hemingway's purely technical training clearly led to an artistic self-discipline of uncommon strength. Rhetoric, he has said, is merely the blue sparks from the dynamo. His master in older American literature was Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*, with its rhythmical stream of direct and unconventional narrative prose.

The young journalist from Illinois was flung headlong into the First World War when he volunteered to serve as an ambulance driver in Italy, where he received his baptism of fire at the Piave front and was severely wounded by shell splinters. The nineteen-year-old's first violent experience of war is an essential factor in Hemingway's biography. Not that he was daunted by it; on the contrary, he found that it was a priceless asset for a writer to see war at first hand - like Tolstoy at Sevastopol - and to be able to depict it truthfully. Several years were to elapse, however, before he could bring himself to give an artistically complete account of his painfully confused impressions from the Piave front in 1918: the result was the novel *A Farewell to Arms* in 1929, with which he really made his name, even if two very talented books with a European post-war setting, *In Our Time* (1942) and *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), had already given proof of his individuality as a storyteller. In the following years, his instinctive predilection for harrowing scenes of action and grim spectacle drew him to Africa with its big-game hunting and to Spain with its bullfighting. When the latter country was transformed into a theatre of war, he found inspiration there for his second significant novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), in which an American champion of liberty fights for «man's dignity» - a book in which the writer's personal feelings seem more deeply involved than anywhere else.

When mentioning these principal elements in his production, one should not forget that his narrative skill often attains its highest point when cast in a smaller mould, in the laconic, drastically pruned short story, which, with a unique combination of simplicity and precision, nails its theme into our consciousness so that every blow tells. Such a masterpiece, more than any other, is *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), the unforgettable story of an old Cuban fisherman's duel with a huge swordfish in the Atlantic. Within the frame of a sporting tale, a moving perspective of man's destiny is opened up; the story is a tribute to the fighting spirit, which does not give in even if the material gain is nil, a tribute to the moral victory in the midst of defeat. The drama is enacted before our eyes, hour by hour, allowing the robust details to accumulate and take on momentous significance. «But man is not made for defeat», the book says. «A man can be destroyed but not defeated.»

It may be true that Hemingway's earlier writings display brutal, cynical, and callous sides which may be considered at variance with the Nobel Prize's requirement for a work of an ideal tendency. But on the other hand, he also possesses a heroic pathos which forms the basic element in his awareness of life, a manly love of danger and adventure with a natural admiration for every individual who fights the good fight in a world of reality overshadowed by violence and death. In any event, this is the positive side of his cult of manliness, which otherwise is apt to become demonstrative, thereby defeating its own ends. It should be remembered, however, that courage is Hemingway's central theme - the bearing of one who is put to the test and who steels himself to meet the cold cruelty of existence, without, by so doing, repudiating the great and generous moments.

On the other hand, Hemingway is not one of those authors who write to illustrate theses and principles of one kind or another. A descriptive writer must be objective and not try to play God the Father - this he learned while still in the editorial office in Kansas City. That is why he can conceive of war as a tragic fate having a decisive effect on the whole of his generation; but he views it with a calm realism, void of illusion, which disdains all emotional comment, a disciplined objectivity, stronger because it is hard-won.

Hemingway's significance as one of this epoch's great moulders of style is apparent in both American and European narrative art over the past twenty-five years, chiefly in the vivid dialogue and the verbal thrust and parry, in which he has set a standard as easy to imitate as it is difficult to attain. With masterly skill he reproduces all the nuances of the spoken word, as well as those pauses in which thought stands still and the nervous mechanism is thrown out of gear. It may sometimes sound like small talk, but it is not trivial when one gets to know his method. He prefers to leave the work of psychological reflection to his readers, and this freedom is of great benefit to him in spontaneous observation.

When one surveys Hemingway's production, definite scenes flare up in the memory - Lieutenant Henry's flight in the rain and mud after the panic at Caporetto, the desperate blowing up of the bridge in the Spanish mountains when Jordan sacrifices his life, or the old fisherman's solitary fight with the sharks in the nocturnal glow of lights from Havana.

Moreover, one may trace a distinctive linking thread - let us say a symbolic warp reaching back a hundred years in the loom of time - between Hemingway's latest work, *The Old Man and The Sea*, and one of the classic creations of American literature, Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, the white whale who is pursued in blind rage by his enemy, the monomaniac sea captain. Neither Melville nor Hemingway wanted to create an allegory; the salt ocean depths with all their monsters are sufficiently rewarding as a poetic element. But with different means, those of romanticism and of realism, they both attain the same theme - a man's capacity of endurance and, if need be, of at least daring the impossible. «A man can be destroyed but not defeated.»

This year's Nobel Prize in Literature has therefore been awarded to one of the great authors of our time, one of those who, honestly and undauntedly, reproduces genuine features in the hard countenance of the age. Hemingway, now fifty-six years old, is the fifth American author so far to be honoured in this way. As the Prize winner himself is unfortunately unable to be present for reasons of health, the Prize will now be handed to the United States Ambassador.



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