#3.1
2012
ISSN 2161-0010

Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature

Stigall, Natalie. "Force of Habit: Excessive Physicality and Mobility as a Coping Mechanism in Hemingway's Veterans." *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature* 3.1 (Fall 2013): 98-106. PDF.

Natalie Stigall

Force of Habit: Excessive Physicality and Mobility as a Coping Mechanism in Hemingway's Veterans

As veterans of WWI, Hemingway's fictional characters no doubt endured severe physical torture; the stories of Jake Barnes of *The Sun Also Rises*, Frederic Henry of *A Farewell to Arms*, and Nick Adams of various short stories all make explicit reference to physical wounds these heroes have suffered in war. And the intangible psychological wounds Hemingway's veterans endure – most notably shell shock – have been widely discussed in academic discourse. However, the physical manifestations of these characters' psychological traumas have yet to be fully explored. This can be achieved by utilizing a combination of trauma and literary theory, as well as contemporary studies of neurosis in WWI veterans, which locates the scars of these veterans' repressed psychological trauma in their preoccupation with the physical realm.

I. Trauma Repression in Victims and Veterans

In her seminal work on the physical and psychological experience of torture *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry discusses the process of disintegrating perception brought on by intense physical pain partially through an analysis of Sartre's short story "The Wall." Scarry highlights in Sartre's work his character's experience of losing his perception of the conscious world to his own imminent physical pain:

> The objects of consciousness from the most expansive to the most intimate, from those that exist in the space at the very limits of vision to those that exist in the space immediately outside the boundaries of the body, from the Big Dipper down to Spain and in through the realm of personal memories to the most abiding objects of love and belief and arriving finally at the bench beneath him and the coal pile at his feet – all in one patient rush are swept through and annihilated. It is in part the horrible momentum of this world contraction that is mirrored in the sudden agonized grimace of a person overcome by great pain or by the recognition of imminent death. (32)

Scarry goes on to explain that, as the body breaks down – be it from physical torture, old age, or illness – it becomes increasingly the sole object of concern, so that "the world may exist only in a circle two feet out from [the victim]; the exclusive content of perception and speech may become what was eaten, the problems of excreting, the progress of pains, the comfort or discomfort of a particular chair or bed" (33).

While Scarry's theory focuses on the psychological experience of physical pain, veterans of WWI often dealt with purely psychological trauma. Eric J. Leed explores the social and political realities of neurosis in WWI, calling it a "psycho-sociological phenomenon" (163); at the time, however, independent medical professionals as well as military personnel were reluctant to acknowledge the gravity of the psychological effects of war on American soldiers. Leed notes the political entanglements of classifying neurosis – loosely termed "shell shock" – as a legitimate disease: some worried this classification would turn "cowardice" and "indiscipline" into an accepted medical condition (166). However, as public support and sympathy for victims of shell shock grew, more traditional military officers were forced to accept the severity of the condition (166-7).

Given what Pamela Boker calls Hemingway's "commitment to the taboo against grief" and his "need to disguise his emotional vulnerability behind a façade of strength and control," though, Hemingway had a more difficult time accepting the psychological trauma of his shell-shocked veterans. This extends to the author's portrayal of his fictional war heroes: any real and explicit reference to these characters' fragile conditions as trauma survivors is non-existent (Boker 166). Instead, Boker says, Hemingway's veterans are made to use mindless physical action to stand in for the pain and grief they feel:

> …in his early stories, action and behavior uninformed by self-analysis, psychological insight, and understanding – behavior that reflects a displacement, disavowal, projection, or rationalization of repressed painful feelings – are used by Hemingway as a replacement for the emotions that motivate and infuse the behavior of his fictional heroes. (191)

This behavior is in line with the findings of WWI contemporary researcher W.H.R. Rivers in his study on neurosis and repression in the air corps (Leed 182). Rivers argued that a logical response to feelings of anxiety is the participation of a manipulative activity through which "he acquires a sense of himself as an autonomous actor in a world of instrumentalities" (182). Conversely, Rivers notes, a lack of mobility prevents a man from repressing this anxiety and fear. Leeds summarizes, "Immobility created the conditions in which men were forced to process and deal with their fears. The repression of fear was, as most analysts recognized, the root of the neurotic symptom" (182). Therefore, veterans of WWI – both real and fictional – suppressed feelings of fear and anxiety brought on by the neurosis of trauma through constant mobility.

Combining these three theories on trauma victims' psychological repression of anxiety presents a new lens through which to view the actions and seemingly mundane, almost obsessive habits of Hemingway's veterans: that of a combination of a lingering psychological environment of pain and death and an authorial repression of the emotions brought on by this state. Hemingway's veterans – namely, Nick Adams, Jake Barnes, and Frederic Henry – have been traumatized by the environment of physical torture and the threat of eminent death in WWI, and so function within Scarry's concept

of the perception of the body as the primary object of concern; coupled with Hemingway's need to displace any emotional grief or trauma into a controllable outlet, the result is a lifestyle of excessive attention to the care of the body – most notably through physical comfort and the preparation and consumption of food – as well as their constant mobility reveals the true depth of their physical and emotional trauma.

II. Nick Adams As Archetype

As Hemingway's archetypal WWI veteran, Nick most embodies this perspective, specifically in the short story "Big, Two-Hearted River." Nick's tale of a solitary fishing trip contains numerous references to the hero's physical well being, narrates in depth the character's need for and interactions with food. These details betray both the character's own emphasis on the condition of his body and the author's attempt to conceal the depth of Nick's emotional trauma as a veteran. In an unexpected subversion of Scarry's and Hemingway's principles, however, Nick channels his emotions through his excessive physicality, but his wrecked state soon become too much to bear, and he returns to his haven of corporeal reality.

Even in a story written in Hemingway's signature succinct style, the simplistic, declarative sentences found in "Big Two-Hearted River" stand out. Throughout the narrative, simple statements such as "He was sleepy" and "He was hungrier" abound – sentences that constantly refer to Nick's physical state: hungry, sleepy, stiff, comfortable ("Big Two-Hearted River" 184, 187). In fact, not even a full page into the start of the story, we are treated to an extended narrative concerning Nick's physical comfort:

> He adjusted the pack harness around the bundle, pulling straps tight, slung the pack on his back, got his arms through the shoulder straps and took some of the pull off his shoulders by leaning his forehead against the wide band of the tumpline. Still, it was too heavy. It was much too heavy. (178)

Though not a first person narrative, the narrator interprets Nick's thoughts several times throughout the story, indicating a private consciousness of Nick's thoughts, and this could easily be reflected in the narration. This emphasis on Nick's physical well being displays the extent to which the veteran has succumbed to Scarry's skewed perception of objects of consciousness. Nick cares for little unless it is directly contributing to or detracting from his physical comfort: thus, he notices the "uneven, shadeless pine plain" only because it contributes to his weariness and heat; and his hands smell like the sweet ferns he pulls from the ground because "He did not want anything making lumps under the blankets" (181, 183).

Even when Nick expresses the rare emotion, this revelation is coupled with, or directly related to, some physical sensation: "He walked along the road feeling the ache from the pull of the heavy pack. The road climbed steadily. It was hard work walking uphill. His muscles ached and the day was hot, but Nick felt happy" (179). Nick's emotions even frequently manifest themselves as physical sensations, as when he describes the "thrill that made his shoulders ache" (194). And Nick expresses his desire through the narrator using the language of physicality: "He *felt* like reading. He did not *feel* like going on into the swamp" (198, emphasis added).

This connection between Nick's emotions and his physical state support constitute Hemingway's authorial intent to displace his traumatized veteran's "unmanly" emotional distress. By equating Nick's psychological state to his physical comfort, Hemingway attributes any deeper emotions Nick might feel to his physical state. Take, for example, the several instances in which Nick professes through narration to being happy. The narration of the story not only links this emotion to the physical sensations Nick is experiencing, but attributes this emotion to the lack of any conscious or unconscious objects in his perspective: "He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him" (179). This passage emphasizes more than the physical objects Nick has left behind, such as the pencil he might need for writing; it focuses on those intangible, subconscious entities that might trigger emotional reflection or release, such as writing and thinking. Here we see Hemingway's taboo of grief narratively imposing its restrictive guidelines on the author's shell-shocked hero; the further Nick retreats into his own physicality, the less he feels the need to express his emotions in any other way. A passage that follows the description of Nick's process of setting up his camp implicitly belies the anxiety Nick begins to feel when his physical tasks are completed and his needs met:

> He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it. (184)

This passage's tone seems increasingly anxious as Nick realizes his physical tasks and experiences for the day are complete, and he has no current outlet; he attempts to sooth himself with the knowledge of what he has done to ensure his future comfort, but the thought that truly comforts him is the acknowledgment of another physical need to be sated: "Now he was hungry" (184).

Nick's relationship to food and his physical need to consume it also reflects the veteran's trauma-induced, body-oriented perspective, and Hemingway's authorial displacement of his character's emotional vulnerability. In a twenty-two-page short story, some version of the word "hungry" is used no fewer than five times. What's more, the narrator emphasizes Nick's unease and concern over the contents of his stomach through the use of compound superlatives that exaggerate Nick's condition and reflect his growing anxiety to sate his body. In the span of a single page, the description of Nick's hunger escalates as follows: "Nick was hungry. He did not believe he had ever been hungrier" (184); "He was hungrier" (184); "He was very hungry" (185); and "He had not eaten since a cup of coffee and a ham sandwich in the station restaurant at St. Ignace" (185). It is significant here to note that the distance between St. Ignace and Seney, the towns near where "Big Two-Hearted River" is set, is five miles. Nick's anxiety is not (at least, not wholly) a result of his hunger; almost immediately after Nick sooths his anxiety with the completion of physical work he becomes anxious again with the knowledge that he has not yet tended to his body. This emphasis on Nick's sudden and fierce hunger can be read as a transference of that emotional turmoil and vulnerability Hemingway forces his characters to repress. Nick's displacement and repression manifests itself through his trauma-induced obsession with the state of his own body as a site of both control and anxiety.

In his obsessive concern with the preparation and consumption of food to mend his broken body, however, Nick inadvertently finds an outlet through which to access and channel his grief and

trauma in a way that is satisfying to both Hemingway's code masculinity and Scarry's tunnel perspective on the body in pain. As he is preparing his meal, Nick's mind wanders from the physical task at hand of preparing food for his body's consumption to an old friend we might assume to have been a war buddy, Hopkins. While preparing coffee, Nick recalls that he and Hopkins used to argue about the proper way to make coffee, and subconsciously he prepares his pot in the manner Hopkins preferred. The gravity with which Nick approaches this task and the value he assigns to it speaks volumes:

> The coffee boiled as he watched. The lid came up and coffee and grounds ran down the side of the pot. Nick took it off the grill. It was a triumph for Hopkins. He put sugar in the empty apricot cup and poured some of the coffee out to cool. It was too hot to pour and he used his hat to hold the handle of the coffeepot. He would not let it steep in the pot at all. Not the first cup. It should be straight Hopkins all the way. Hop deserved that. He was a very serious coffee maker. He was the most serious man Nick had ever known. (186)

Following this passage, Nick proceeds to catalog with the same detail he previously and later will apply to physical tasks like fishing and preparing food what he remembers of Hopkins: he played polo; he had a girl the boys called the Blonde Venus, who was not Hop's real girl; he gave his .22 caliber Colt automatic pistol to Nick; they had all planned to go fishing the next summer, when Hop would rent a yacht and they would cruise Lake Superior; they had never seen Hopkins again, and that had been a long time ago (186). Nick then drinks his "coffee according to Hopkins," and the narration of this moment is significant (187): "The coffee was bitter. Nick laughed. It made a good ending to the story. His mind was starting to work. He knew he could choke it because he was tired enough" (187).

Nick laughs; he shows the only physical sign of his emotional state in this passage that illustrates the significance of Nick's memories over coffee. Through the preparation of food, Nick inadvertently accesses his grief over the loss of his friend, honoring him by consciously altering his meticulous preparation. More significantly, Nick's actions leave him vulnerable to his unstable emotional state; hence, the anxious laughter over the bitter coffee that served as Nick's end to the story of his friend. But, as both Boker and Scarry note, this experience and expression of emotion is not suitable to a veteran suffering from the trauma of war; and so Nick quickly shuts off his brain, which "was starting to work," and returns to the mundane physicality of his existence, a feat he can accomplish because "he was tired enough" ("Big Two-Hearted River" 187).

III. Marking Time and Weather Concerns in *The Sun Also Rises*

Amidst his chaotic life of work, drink, and bull fights, war-wounded Jake retreats to Roncesvalles with fellow veteran and friend Bill on a fishing trip. Very similar to Nick's fishing expedition, Jake's and Bill's includes excessive concern with physical comfort and days that are marked by the consumption of meals. When the pair first reaches Roncesvalles, for example, Bill is immediately concerned with the temperature. Within the span of two pages, Bill complains four times about the cold, and immediately mobilizes to warm himself up. After his initial "It's awful cold," Bill laments that he will have to wade a stream in the cold, should it not break before the next day (*The Sun Also Rises* 114); he then takes rather absurd action to comfort his chilled body:

> There was an upright piano in the far corner of the room beyond the wooden tables and Bill went over and started to play.
>
> "I got to keep warm," he said. (115)

Bill continues to play as Jake haggles with the innkeeper over the price of a room, and when he returns to his friend, Bill immediately suggests the pair have a hot rum punch, as "This isn't going to keep me warm permanently" (116). Bill's obsession with the cold and his ridiculous solution to keep warm by playing the piano speaks to the veteran's psychological neurosis as illustrated by Scarry and Rivers: Bill focuses on his physical comfort is a tool of psychological repression used to avoid the trauma and grief experienced in WWI; his playing of the piano illustrates his need for mobility as an effort to repress his lingering anxiety and fear. In fact, Bill and Jake's entire lifestyles throughout the novel – their constant movements from town to town, country to country, fiesta to fishing trip to bull fight – exemplifies the veterans' constant mobility that enables them to psychologically repress their war-induced neurosis and retain, according to Hemingway, their masculinity.

Jake mirrors his friend's concern for physical comfort in his narration. Describing the success of the trip, Jake states, "We stayed five days at Burguete and had good fishing. The nights were cold and the days were hot, and there was always a breeze even in the heat of the day" (129-130). Jake begins his summary with the statement that the fishing was good; the logical focus of a recount of a fishing trip. However, he goes into no further detail; appropriate specifics such as the number of fish caught or the size of them are absent. Instead, Jake details the pleasant weather they experienced. In fact, the structure of the paragraph – a sentence stating the success of the trip directly followed by several more describing the pleasant weather – directly links the weather and the physical comfort experienced as a result of it to the success of the trip. Again a Hemingway veteran is over-emphasizing physical comfort in an attempt to mask his own unresolved, "unmanly" psychological trauma.

Though *The Sun Also Rises* is a novel filled with the consumption of food and drink, Bill and Jake's relationship to meals significantly changes on their fishing trip. Rather than used as frivolous time-killers, Bill and Jake's meals punctuate their routines, offering clear breaks between one task and another. One the first day of the trip, Jake awakes, digs for the worms he will use as bait, and returns to the room to urge Bill out of bed for breakfast before they fish. Bill is reluctant to rise, until Jake mentions his intentions to eat his morning meal: "'Eat? Why didn't you say eat? I thought you just wanted me to get up for fun. Eat? Fine. Now you're being reasonable…'" (118). Bill will only get out of bed for a specific, logical purpose – the nourishment of his body and the beginning of his structured, mobile day. Bill and Jake will fish separately, break and come together for a mid-day meal, nap, and return to the inn for dinner. During breakfast, Jake and Bill are conversing on a topic on which Jake states he would like to hear more. Bill's reply: "I don't know anymore. Tell you some more at lunch" exhibits this mentality of mobile compartmentalization (121). Meals are times for the pair to talk and eat, fishing is time for the pair to fish, etc. In blocking time in this manner, the veterans are able to ensure that, like Nick, they always are about some mobile task, never left without an action to take or a physical need to fulfill; such gaps in their mobility could, as Rivers notes and Nick briefly displays, lead to a return of the anxieties and fears the veterans' constant mobility and concern for the physical represses.

IV. Frederic Henry's Meal Breaks in *A Farewell to Arms*

Hemingway's third repressed veteran utilizes Scarry's and Rivers's tools of repression not only to suppress past anxiety and pain, but also to cope with new feelings his situation evokes in him. Frederic, a soldier who is wounded, sent back to war, and deserts to be with his pregnant lover Catherine, most strongly exhibits Rivers's repressive mobility during a time of great psychological trauma in his life – the painful and ultimately fatal delivery of his son. During the short time Catherine is in the hospital, Frederic consumes three meals – a breakfast, a lunch, and a supper. Though his lover – and, in the case of the supper, a nurse – does urge him to take these meal breaks, it is significant that he complies so specifically. The purpose of Catherine's and the nurse's requests is to get Frederic out of the room: in making her first supplication, Catherine says, "'You go away, darling…Go out and get something to eat. I may do this for a long time the nurse says '" (*A Farewell to Arms* 314). Catherine's suggestion is clearly meant only as an offhand remark aimed at encouraging Frederic to leave the site of her own pain and trauma. And yet Frederic does, in fact, head to a nearby café and orders a brioche and white wine; he even has the focus to remark that "The brioche was yesterday's" (315). He finishes his meal and a second glass of wine and returns to the hospital, but leaves again, the narration tells us, at two o'clock.

It is significant to note that Catherine first awakes with pains around three o'clock the morning before; Frederic sleeps for "a little while" before waking up again, at which point Catherine requests that he call the doctor. After the doctor instructs them to visit the hospital, Frederic calls for a taxi, though "No one answer[s] the phone for a long time" (313-4). Furthermore, once at the hospital, Frederic does stay awhile before he cedes to Catherine's request that he leave. As he walks to the café, "it [is] just getting light" (315); Frederic's narration previously establishes the couple is in Lausanne sometime in April 1918, meaning the sun would rise around half past six in the morning. If Frederic did eat breakfast around this time, it seems telling that he would, in true Nick Adams fashion, state: "I was very hungry" not long after his previous meal. Similarly, Frederic leaves a third time for supper not long after the sun has gone down, or around half past eight in the evening. Again, Frederic states simply, "I was hungry," and at a café he consumes ham and eggs and several glasses of beer.

A rather symbolic element of Frederic's meal breaks is that others around him are quick to note that he is eating at inappropriate times: at breakfast, an old man sitting at the zinc bar asks Frederic, "'What do you do at this hour?'" (315); at lunch, Frederic is told by the waiter, "'It is past time for lunch'" and so he must make do with the café's food "for all hours" (318); and at supper time Frederic has come too late to enjoy the café's *plat du jour* (328). On a literal level, Frederic is simply dining during the café's normal off hours; metaphorically, however, Frederic is concentrating on the physical health of his own body at a time when his partner's trauma and pain should be his main focus. The veteran's concern for his own physicality as a tool of repression is emphasized by his narration of the supper scene, in which he notes his physical environment's effect on his concentration: "…but I could not concentrate. It was hot in the café and the air was bad…I tried not to think and to be perfectly calm" (329).

Like Nick, and Bill and Jake before him, Frederic is easily influenced and distracted by physical stimuli; the heat of an overcrowded café, the rumble of an empty stomach are enough to distract him

from the trauma of his lover's painful delivery. Between lunch and dinner, in fact, he learns that his son was delivered stillborn; and yet it is his physical environment and health that distresses him. It is, in fact, this focus on his own physical comfort that anesthetizes Frederic to the trauma of his lover's physical suffering and his son's death. In the fashion of repressed WWI veterans, Frederic suppresses the pain and trauma of his predicament by focusing on the physical health and mobility of his own body: he fuels it regularly with meals, and becomes hyper-aware of its interaction with its physical environment. In this way, he pushes away the psychological trauma – the grief and pain – of Catherine's and his son's hospitalization.

As wounded WWI veteran, Nick, Jake, and Frederic suffer from an unstable, trauma-induced states of emotional turmoil. Following Scarry's theory of the psychological reaction to a body in pain or sickness, these characters limit their perspectives to the well being of their own bodies in order to cope with the pain of the physical torture they endured. And, in step with contemporary research by Rivers on neurosis in WWI, the men also rely on the steady flow of constant physical tasks to distract from their own pain and anxiety. For Hemingway, however, the emotional vulnerability these veterans might feel clashes with the rigid code of masculinity he assigned to himself and his fictional characters. So, the author displaces his characters' turmoil into physicality, confusing for the characters and reader the health and comfort of their souls with that of their bodies through obsessive and anxious fixation on physical comfort, the preparation and consumption of food, and constant and routine mobility. And though Nick's shell-shocked mind is able to subvert its own and Hemingway's trappings to emotionally connect with the memory of a fallen friend through the preparation of a pot of coffee, his trauma-induced psychosis and his author's insistence on emotional repression quickly stifle this incident with a return to the world of safe, restrictive physicality where all Hemingway's WWI veterans uneasily reside.

Works Cited

Boker, Pamela A. *The Grief Taboo in American Literature*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. Print.

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1929. Print.

---. "Big Two-Hearted River." *The Nick Adams Stories*. New York: Schribner, 1972. Print.

---. *The Sun Also Rises.* New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1926. Print.

Leeds, Eric J. *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979. Print.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press , 1985. Print.