

Ernest Hemingway: *in our time: The 1924 Text*

Notes &c.

Objectives

1. To recognize textual compression in prose.
2. Identify examples of Hemingway's "iceberg" method of writing.
3. Recognize Hemingway's blurring of explicit and implicit meaning.
4. To show developing 'close reading' (or [New Critical](#)) skills that are essential for poetry but can be equally important to reading prose.
5. To discuss the importance of gender and masculinity to Modernism and the American expatriate group.

Reading Assignment

Dimock, Wai Chee. "Lecture 2. Hemingway's *In Our Time*." Yale University, New Haven. 2012. Web. <https://youtu.be/FOF8vYkg0MI>

Hemingway, Ernest. *in our time: The 1924 Text*. Ed. James Gifford. Victoria: Modernist Versions Project, 2015. Web. <http://tinyurl.com/yc9p3csm>

Commentary

[Ernest Hemingway](#) has become *the* major voice of American modernist prose and is popularly understood as embodying the epitome of rugged American masculinity. At the same time, he is among the most difficult authors for separating his public profile from his actual texts. After Hemingway's death, several of his works were published posthumously, and these profoundly changed the way scholars approach his works. His "manly men" and "rugged style" of his early works suddenly "made it new" again as they were replaced by gender

bending and amorphous characters in his posthumous fiction. This made scholars rethink his earlier novels and recognize his subtle critiques of patriarchal masculinity and capitalist exchange. For example, in his most famous work, the novel *The Sun Also Rises*, his protagonist Jake (notice the continuity of names with *in our time*) has been castrated or made impotent due to an injury during [World War I](#), so he replaces his sexuality with his money clip and performs an ironical image of masculine domination that the novel symbolizes in the bull fights. In retrospect, scholars began to recognize in Hemingway's work a deeply critical approach to masculine authority and systems of domination ranging from the war and gender norms to economic power and racism.

One of the most useful elements of *in our time* is its enormous compression of materials into vignettes that express the wartime and post-war moment in which it was written. Because the text has a very complex history, we have many opportunities to see Hemingway's excisions and craft at work. First we must recognize that we are reading only one version of this text. It was preceded by another version in 1923 and followed by many subsequent expansions from 1925 through the late 1930s. Hemingway continued to alter the materials to emphasize different political themes or to polish technical or stylistic innovations. The "Introduction" to your text emphasizes much of this process and should guide your readings.

Hemingway is a far more difficult author than the simplicity of his prose suggests. This is, in many respects, the greatest challenge and the greatest reward for reading Hemingway – he is both extremely easy and extremely difficult. The contrast lies between his clear and simple prose versus his unstated or implicit interests. This leads many readers to assume they've "understood" Hemingway by simply reading him. Before we consider Hemingway in his social context, we must first recognize how he trains us to be more careful and more critical readers.

Social Context

During the First World War, Hemingway (1899–1961) served in the Red Cross as an ambulance driver in Italy. He was badly wounded in the Italian front lines and had shrapnel wounds in both legs, which left him in hospital for six months, although he was not permanently injured from these wounds. After the war, in 1921, he began serving *The Toronto Star* (newspaper) as the foreign correspondent for Paris. There he met

[Sylvia Beach](#), [Ezra Pound](#), [Gertrude Stein](#), [Pablo Picasso](#), and many other modernists. Many of these biographical experiences are echoed in *in our time*, including his love affair with Agnes von Kurowsky, the nurse who helped him to recover but subsequently broke off their engagement.

This time period after the First World War was also marked by unstable exchange rates, which often gave the American dollar a great advantage in Europe – a casually working American who had a modest but reliable salary in American dollars could live quite well in France. Many American writers took advantage of this, and the “Americans in Paris” moment arrived. Many writers from Canada and the USA moved to Paris or London to take advantage of exchange rates, and Hemingway was among them.

The Iceberg

Hemingway used what he called the “iceberg” technique or his “theory of omission.” This is a stylistic device in which the emotional center or crux of the narrative is missing, yet “the omitted parts of the tale may generate the core feeling of the text” (Stoneback 4). Like an iceberg, this means that only a tiny tip of the “iceberg” (the emotional substance of the story) is visible to readers who nonetheless realize that the large body of the iceberg is invisible below the water level. Said another way, the emotional weight of the story is below the surface or is implicit rather than explicit. Readers may think of this in particularly difficult emotional conversations in real life, outside of the text – how often do we avoid speaking directly of something that is emotionally important, even while discussing it with other people who understand the topic? By introducing his readers to characters who are discussing such emotionally intense materials, Hemingway guides us to read more attentively and carefully, even while he is careful to craft his prose in a manner that is extremely precise and clear.

This technique is very common in Hemingway’s works. His story “Hills Like White Elephants” consists of a discussion between two lovers who are contemplating an abortion, yet the topic is never explicitly broached – instead, their indirect conversation and the landscape described in the story tell the reader about their emotional challenges and decisions. Jake’s war wound is another such “iceberg.” There are many other such moments in his novels and short stories, and it is the defining technique of *in our time*.

Notes &c.

Omissions in the Vignettes

Many scenes from *in our time: The 1924 Text* demonstrate Hemingway's "theory of omission" while at the same time linking and juxtaposing concepts we might otherwise not connect. The most prominent "iceberg" in the collection of vignettes is in "chapter 10" – this may also be seen as the central chapter to the collection. The story is much like Hemingway's own love affair with Agnes von Kurowsky, and the woman named "Ag" in this story is renamed when she appears in the subsequent version of *In Our Time* in 1925 and after. We see her "Dear John" letter breaking off her engagement to marry him (we assume this male character is Nick who was injured in "chapter 7" since he is given the name in later versions of *In Our Time*), but we do not see Nick's reaction. We may assume that he is emotionally distraught, but we only see an external manifestation: "A short time after he contracted gonorrhea from a sales girl from The Fair riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park" (15). What does this tell us about Nick? Did he have sex with the "sales girl" as a way of proving his masculinity after being injured by Ag breaking off their engagement to be married? Is this somehow typical of masculinity (matadors, soldiers, mobsters, police) as it appears in the collection of stories? Is this a healthy response by Nick, or is it a symptom of his experiences, just as other soldiers experience symptoms after the war (what we today might call "post-traumatic stress disorder" or psychologists at the time described as "shell shock")? We are not actually told any of these things, but the symptoms of all of them are prominent, so we know as readers that such emotional processes and inner thoughts are going on in *in our time*, even if we do not have access to explicit descriptions or reports of them. This is like knowing there is a tree between you and the horizon because you can see its shadow, even if you cannot see the tree itself. We have only the outward manifestations of inner lives, and this marks an "outward turn" in Modernism.

Other examples will take us in some new directions, but a reader could easily expand on the central "chapter 10" in the same way. For example, in "chapter 17" when Sam Cardinella is hanged, we see his actions and those of the people around him, but we do not actually have any access to his thoughts, feelings, or fears – this is a striking contrast against [Woolf](#) and [Joyce](#) whose novels thrived on stream of consciousness. The only direct reference to feelings or emotions comes when the text tells the reader "Three of the men to be hanged were

negroes. They were very frightened" (Hemingway 23), yet we do not have the same description of the two other men being hanged, whom we assume are white, one of whom is Sam Cardinella, who appears to be very afraid. You may remember the fear in "chapter 1" as well when the soldiers are "fifty kilometers from the front" but are still so worried about being seen that they put out their kitchen fire, and also the soldier praying to Jesus for safety in "chapter 8," who is obviously terrified but at the same time unable to admit this to himself or anyone else (and who deals with his fears in much the same way as Nick deals with his sadness, by going to a brothel).

Another "iceberg" in the collection comes in "chapter 2" when the "kid" matador kills five bulls and then "sat down in the sand and puked and they held a cape over him" (6). We do not have access to his emotional state, but we must assume that some combination of exhaustion and disgust overcomes him – at the least, we are made aware by his being sick that he is in distress. This omitted description of his emotional state is, just like the linked fear in "chapter 1" and "chapter 17" (among several others), then linked by the cape hiding the view of his "unmanly" puking to the blanket in the very next "chapter 3." In it, "There was a woman having a kid with a young girl holding a blanket over her and crying. Scared sick looking at it" (7). We don't get to see what is happening behind the blanket, just like the audience in the bullfight doesn't see the sickness under the beautiful cape. The omission, however, draws our attention. Both scenes are "sick" either with the "kid" matador vomiting or the woman giving birth to a "kid" with the young girl is "scared sick" – remember as well that Nick in the central "chapter 10" has the same experience, and he "felt sick about saying good-bye like that" (15) to Ag. They are all sick, and they are all hidden from us, which means they have something in common that we are being prompted toward.

These omissions may also, because they can draw attention, be called an "aporia," which means a noticeable gap. When many of these aporias string together or create links, we have new questions posed to us as readers. For example, with those above, is there a link between the manliness of the blood sport in bull fighting (we see the bull fighter dying in later chapters), the evacuees from the scene of warfare in Smyrna, and the deaths of soldiers in "chapter 4" and "chapter 5"? These are all caught up in combat and fear, even if they differ in location and cause. Likewise, we have in the hanging of Sam Cardinella (based on the real-life Chicago mobster Sam Cardinelli) a racialized description

of the men being executed – do these “negroes” and Cardinella link to the other racist descriptions in “chapter 9” of “wops” (a slur for Italians)? Do the police in these two chapters link out further when we recall that the men the police shoot in “chapter 9” are actually Hungarians, and they are followed by the Hungarian in “chapter 11” who is “in jail near Sion”? Do we infer that he is being treated in the same way, almost certainly being tortured for his political activities or executed? Do we link this further by comparing the two execution scenes in the collection, with the Greek ministers after the war being shot (one of whom is “sick” with typhoid) and the hangings? Are those legal executions, sanctioned by law and the state, meant to be compared to the shootings of soldiers in “chapter 4” and “chapter 5” during combat? If they call out for comparison, what is Hemingway’s purpose in comparing (or even equating) murders, executions, and warfare with a blood sport? If they appear to be in some way similar to each other, we must be quite disturbed by this. More still, are we the readers meant to be compared to the audience of the bullfight or the civilians observing the war from a safe distance or the witnesses to the executions? None of us have to look directly at that which would upset us...

The only certainty we have from Hemingway’s theory of omission is that we the readers must be very active, especially when the text appears to be the simplest and when we have the least access to the inner lives of the characters. We must also ask how the shift to the external world and material actions marks a difference from the inner turn and mental lives in Modernism. Hemingway may be dismissing those interior views of his peers, or he may be simply offering a different way of observing them. It is up to us to connect the white horse of “chapter 12” on its knees to the dead matador Maera (22) and the sick Greek minister kneeling at his execution (10) or even the exhausted bull kneeling before being slaughtered (19) and Sam Cardinella who cannot stand (23). And if we can find a similarity by comparing them, we must be ready to confront social change.

Questions for Self-Review

1. How do form and content relate to each other in *in our time*?
2. Do gaps or aporias in the novel matter in the same way as they did in Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* or has something changed?
3. How do race and gender function in *in our time*? Is Hemingway sincere or ironic when he discusses gender and race?

4. Is Hemingway portraying a “good” image of the American Dream?
5. How does the absence of something communicate information in *in our time*?

Works Cited & Supplemental Reading

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Author: James Gifford
Editor: Lucie Kotesovska