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Feature Article: **JAF6386**

HUMANITY CRUCIFIED: HEMINGWAY AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

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This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume **38**, number **06** (**2015**). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/.

"An old man is a nasty thing," says the young waiter in Ernest Hemingway's short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." He wants to go home to his wife, but an old man who drinks in his cafe until the early morning hours is preventing him. Another waiter, much older, is thankful for the cafe and respectful of the old man drinking. He knows that a clean, well-lighted place holds off the darkness of the night and the mess of the city streets, keeping both the elder waiter and the old man who drinks there from facing the emptiness of their aged lives. The young waiter understands nothing of what the other two dread. Confident that a night of passion awaits him, he cannot yet feel his existential solitude. At one time, romance protected the older waiter, too, for which reason he tells the young waiter that the old man "might be better with a wife."[1]

Romantic love, Hemingway understood, exerts a powerful anchoring force in a universe that seems otherwise to care little for humans. But romance does not last forever. When it goes, one turns to such places as this café: "'I am one of those who like to stay late at the cafe,' the older waiter said….'With all those who need a light for the night.'…What did he fear?…It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too."[2] This *nothing* is the great dread that threads Hemingway's literary work. Against it his characters push back with work, romance, and politics, sensing, through all of their pursuits, that nothing lasts. Thus does the older waiter begin his parody of the Lord's Prayer: "Our *nada* [nothing] who art in *nada*, *nada* be thy name, thy kingdom *nada*, thy will be *nada*, in *nada* as it is in *nada*."[3] Nearing the twilight

of life, he has nothing to hold off the nada but his work in a clean, well-lighted cafe. It alone provides order and dignity and meaning for his life.

Most of Hemingway's characters believe this present life is their only life—that *nothing* awaits them at death. The *machismo* for which they are famous is an existential stance that simultaneously accepts and defies the collapse of life into nothing. Ironically, Hemingway uses the crucified Christ as a recurring metaphor for a strong man facing this human situation—not Christ resurrected, but Jesus crucified, a man enduring the collapse of his dreams before the violence of the world, facing with clear-eyed consciousness the revelation that he is forsaken.[4] In the short drama "Today Is Friday," three Roman soldiers discuss Jesus' crucifixion. One says repeatedly of Him, "He was pretty good in there today."[5] This soldier, a veteran of many crucifixions, is impressed by Jesus' fortitude. For Hemingway, life is a long crucifixion the strong endure without recanting all that they have lived for.

Santiago of *The Old Man and the Sea* possesses this same dignity. He suffers the vagaries of age, his body both worn and strengthened by his life of labor on the sea. Though he is old and poor, the simple clarity of his understanding highlights his strength: he is a man willing "to know what I have against me."[6] A subsistence fisherman living in Havana, Cuba, and needing little to sustain his life, he says he fishes because it is "that which I was born for."[7] This novella narrates the greatest catch of his life, a 1,500-pound blue marlin that takes him three days to land. The slow, monotonous battle is a contest of endurance in which the old man outwaits the fish's strength, holding the line in pitch-perfect tension for seventy-two hours while the fish pulls Santiago's skiff through the sea.

His victory is short lived because the marlin is too big to bring inside the skiff. Lashing the fish alongside the boat, he turns back toward Havana when sharks attack. The narrator records and comments on Santiago's reaction: "'Ay,' he said aloud. There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood."[8] Although the allusion to Christ is clear, Santiago is a futile Christ, one who kills several sharks but cannot beat them all. They strip the great marlin of its meat, leaving Santiago to row into port with only the head and skeleton of the fish. As evidence, simultaneously, of victory and defeat, the skeleton demonstrates both "what a man can do and what a man endures."[9] For Hemingway, in futile struggle alone do humans transcend the world.

The futility of human life may, however, visit a person long before old age, especially if he or she experiences the violence of war. As an ambulance driver during World War I and as a reporter during the Spanish Civil War and World War II, Hemingway witnessed war firsthand. Several of his most important novels explore the physical, relational, and spiritual damage that war inflicts on humans. In *The Sun Also*

Rises, Jake Barnes returns from WWI with a physical wound that leaves him sexually impotent and a spiritual wound that leaves him alternately stoic and cynical. Of his acquaintance Robert Cohn, he says, "I mistrust all frank and simple people, especially when their stories hold together."[10] Yet despite his sexual impotence, Jake is, in many ways, the most virile member of his group, all of whom—himself excepted—are sexually adventurous. Their sexual indulgence, their vast consumption of alcohol, and their lives as expatriate wanderers (voyeurs really) who visit the bullfights of Spain for the pseudoreligious anchor this ancient art provides, belie their existential impotence. They look on, but they do not participate. Jake resists, fitfully, such impotence.

Reflecting on how frustrating his, necessarily platonic, relationship with Brett is, Jake says of this world, "I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about."[11] Bullfighting interests Jake because the matadors face death. With courage, strength, and grace of movement, they make something beautiful out of the aggressive and deadly power of the bull. Although bullfighters are always afraid, they best use their fear to shape the beautiful dance with death, which makes for life.

Lady Brett Ashley, the woman whom Jake loves and who loves Jake, sleeps with nearly every man in this coterie of expatriates, not because she particularly enjoys being promiscuous but because Jake lacks the potency to anchor her. Brett's problem is also existential. She is spiritually adrift, and Jake—having neither firm faith nor the ability to be sexually intimate—can do little for her except provide occasional comfort when her affairs come to an end. Though technically a Catholic, Jake admits he is "a rotten Catholic, but realized there was nothing I could do about it."[12] Life in the church has some residual appeal, but he lacks the faith to make it work. Fraught with images of humanity crucified but not resurrected, Hemingway's work depicts death delimiting our power to establish a meaningful existence.

At the end of the novel, thinking of the life she wants with Jake, Brett complains, "Oh, Jake…we could have had such a damned good time together."[13] The old pairings have come apart. She can have sexual passion, and she can feel love, but she cannot have both with the same man. As the old order passes away, the sun rises on a new and confusing disorder from which each person must eke out whatever personal order he can. In the general dissolution of meaning that follows WWI, both romantic love and religion lose their power to unite and ground two such souls. Thus, "Isn't it pretty to think so?" remains the only reply Jake can make to Brett's complaint.[14]

The characters in *A Farewell to Arms* fare little better. This poignant novel chronicles the love of Frederic Henry—an idealistic young American who joins the Italian ambulance corps during WWI—and Catherine Barkley, a young British nurse who cares for him when he is wounded. After the Italian army suffers a major defeat,

Fred turns his attention to Catherine with whom he flees to Switzerland, seeking a respite from the futility of war.

Fred and Catherine are deeply in love, each seeking in the other an existential anchor: "I have been alone while I was with many girls and that is the way that you can be most lonely. But we were never lonely and never afraid when we were together."[15] Although the private, separate peace these two achieve in Switzerland is alluring, it too fails.[16] Catherine dies in childbirth along with their son, leaving Fred alone to meditate on her last words about life: "It's just a dirty trick."[17]

If human romance cannot hold back the nihilistic forces of this world, then perhaps a return to the political realm will. For Whom the Bell Tolls describes the efforts of American Robert Jordan to support the Spanish Republic and oppose the fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War. Of his own political convictions he says, "All people should be left alone and you should interfere with no one [but]….He fought now in this war because it had started in a country that he loved and he believed in the Republic and that if it were destroyed life would be unbearable for all those people who believed in it."[18]

As one for whom the bell has tolled, Jordan views the conflict in Spain as part of a larger fight for human freedom. To fight for the freedom of this one nation is the best way he knows to fight for the freedom of all people. Thus does Hemingway use the line from John Donne's "Meditation 17" for his title: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.…any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."[19] Jordan's conviction that he is justifiably concerned with the political struggles of the Spanish people is a profound—and problematic—stance. It presumes an essential unity among human beings but motivates, simultaneously, both his self-sacrifice and his violence against the Spanish fascists. Furthermore, because Jordan and the peasant fighters are all consciously post-Christian, there is little foundation for their unity beyond the Republic itself. For the Christian faith they have substituted the Republic, in which they now have both an existential and a political interest.[20]

Thus does Hemingway's title become ironic. Donne's claim that the bell tolls for all men is grounded—explicitly—in his belief that all humans are bound together, first as creations of God, next as members of the redeemed body of Christ. His meditation asserts a unity more profound than political unity, based on his understanding that even his enemy is his brother precisely because he is a son of God. Now, however, Jordan and his fellow fighters seek unity in a secular political endeavor. Not religious faith but the struggle for a secular polity anchors these human actors. Unfortunately, as the defeat of the Republic shows, this anchor does not hold.

Hemingway's work demonstrates that this world leaves each human, ultimately, alone. Fraught with images of humanity crucified but not resurrected, it depicts death delimiting our power to establish a meaningful existence. Thick with the futile efforts of humans to transcend their condition, it conveys his sorrowful suspicion that neither romance, nor politics, nor manly machismo can anchor the soul either in or beyond this life. Had Hemingway been able or willing to take one additional existential step, he would have discovered, as his contemporary Auden did, that the Christian faith meets us just where death leaves us; for "Nothing can save us that is possible/ We who must die demand a miracle."[21] The resurrection is that miracle, the only hope of a crucified humanity.

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NOTES

1 Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, The Finca Vigia Edition* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), 289.
2 Ibid., 290–91.
3 Ibid., 291.
4 Kathleen Verduin, "The Lord of Heroes: Hemingway and the Crucified Christ," *Religion and Literature* 19, 1 (Spring 1987): 23.
5 Ernest Hemingway, "Today Is Friday," *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, 272.
6 Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1980), 46.
7 Ibid., 40.
8 Ibid., 106.
9 Ibid., 66.
10 Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 4.
11 Ibid., 148.
12 Ibid., 97.
13 Ibid., 247.
14 Ibid.
15 Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms: The Hemingway Library Edition*, ed. Sean Hemingway (New York: Scribner, 2012), 216.
16 Ibid., 211, 251.
17 Ibid., 283.
18 Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 178.
19 John Donne, "Meditation 17," http://www.online-literature.com/donne/409/Web, August 3, 2015.
20 Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 100.
21 W. H. Auden, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, ed. Alan Jacobs (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 8.