

# Mourning and melancholia in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

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*Literature has played an important part in the mourning of catastrophic events..., in the negotiation between the historical givens and the underlying and unconscious consequences of trauma.*

(Linda Belau, xxv.)

Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) begins with a quotation from John Donne's "Meditation XVII." With the epigraph, Hemingway identifies the source of his title and defines the connections between human beings achieved through mourning: "No man is an island," Donne's argument begins, and he then provides an assertion of our connection to others: "never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for *thee*." Proper mourning expresses a recognition of the losses to our self in the death of another.

Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* depicts such connections to the dead and examines the emotional effects of incomplete mourning in terms that parallel Freud's own comments in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917; Hogarth Press, 1937).

Hemingway's novel of mourning concludes by depicting Robert Jordan, the American volunteer in Spain, as he prepares for his death. Jordan accepts the inevitability of this death and designs a ritual which expresses his commitment to his lover, Maria, and also contributes to the successful retreat of the members the guerrilla band (401-410). He provides a last effort of participation in their struggle against fascism and affirms his connection to the future of Spain. In Hemingway's parallel to Donne, Jordan's death while fighting as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War is a loss suffered by the people of all the republican nations of the world to the fascist armies of Spain, Italy, and Germany. Speaking in 1938 of the deaths of such volunteers of the International Brigades, Hemingway said, "They die fighting for you" (*Hem on War* 293).

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The depiction of Jordan's life and death parallels the expression of mourning in Hemingway's eulogy of 1939, "On the American Dead in Spain" (Nelson 36-39). In both works, Hemingway praises the volunteers who died fighting to protect republican values. In an introduction to the "Eulogy" that he wrote after World War II, Hemingway scolded America for its failure to support these "premature antifascists" (Nelson 26). At another point, he explains this failure:

The majority of the career diplomats of England, France, and the United States, are fascist, and it is they who supply the erroneous information on which their foreign offices and state departments act (*Hem on War* 293).

These failures in the diplomats led to the great bloodbath of the Second World War. Hemingway helps us to mourn the deaths of Jordan and the other volunteers because he affirms that they are, in fact, foreshadowings of our own losses.

Yet, many of the volunteers in the International Corps during the Spanish Civil War felt **betrayed** by Hemingway's depictions of literary and historical characters and events. Some of the veterans criticized the lack of political ideology in the central character, the literary self-indulgence of the love relationship between Jordan and Maria, and the negative depictions of several of the leaders of the Republican forces.

Pilar's narrative describing the massacre of civilian villagers provoked the sharpest criticism. According to Milton Wolff, many veterans felt that Hemingway had ignored fascist atrocities and betrayed loyalist soldiers who had been killed or wounded in Spain. Wolff also feared that Pilar's narrative would contribute to American anti-Communist sentiment against members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (Nelson 14).

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway is confronting the problem of a lost war. He had been a strong supporter of the Loyalists. He had helped to provide ambulances for the Republican forces and he had written a number of sympathetic journalistic reports (*Byline* 257-298). Martha Gellhorn, to whom Hemingway dedicated this novel, has written that during the Spanish Civil War "the Western Democracies had two commanding obligations: they must save their honor by assisting a young, attacked fellow democracy, and they must save their skin by fighting Hitler and Mussolini at once, in Spain, instead of waiting until later, when the cost in human suffering would be unimaginably greater" (17). Hemingway's novel was written after the democracies had failed to protect the Spanish Republic. Through examining mourning in this novel, Hemingway prepares for the continuing conflict with fascism and also engages his grief at the death of his own father.

Freud defines "Mourning" as "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, [or] an ideal..." ("Mourning" 125). These comments help to identify the range of Hemingway's concerns. In addition to mourning the deaths of friends and soldiers, and affirming emotional and political connections to the dead, Hemingway is "mourning" the loss of an environment of idealism in the Republic, the crushing of the efforts to resist Fascism, and even a kind of loss of Spain itself. One Loyalist in the novel observes, for example, "If the Republic lost it would be impossible for those who believed in it to live in Spain" (143). Freud's discussion of mourning devotes more space to issues in mourning the death of an individual object than to loss of an abstraction or ideal. Freud notes, however, that both kinds of loss impose a long process of emotional healing:

Withdrawal of libido is not a process that can be accomplished in a moment but must certainly be, like grief, one in which progress is slow and gradual" ("Mourning" 137).

Mark Cousins, who also discusses the process of mourning the loss of an object, identifies this slow process in more detail:

It [the mourned object] acts upon the subject as that which must be kept present, must be rescued again and again. If it went, what it threatens is not a loss that leads to mourning, but rather the loss of a loss that constructed a subject, which could lead to collapse. ("The Insistence of the Image", Belau 18)

The slow process of mourning protects the individual who has constructed the mourned object. The mourning subject is defending his own fragile self from collapse. This observation on the process/value of mourning clarifies the criticism which Hemingway directs at actions by some of the Spanish Loyalists and their leaders. He is repeatedly “rescuing” the core of value in the Republic – that which he mourns – from those who do not seem to have protected those values. In Freudian terms, we might see those who criticized Hemingway for his “betrayal” as similarly engaged in protecting their own “lost ideal” which also defines them as bearers of grief.

Hemingway’s “Eulogy for the American Dead in Spain” was first published in the *New Masses* in 1939, and then recorded for a tenth anniversary dinner on Lincoln’s birthday in 1947. The eulogy asserts that the American dead have become a part of the people and the land of Spain: “Our dead live in the hearts and minds of the Spanish peasants [and] the Spanish workers...” and “our dead are a part of the Spanish earth.” (Nelson 36-37) Nevertheless, the “Eulogy” includes a paragraph of rage at nazis “who may advance aided by traitors and cowards.”

Brett Levinson argues that “both forgetting – in which the traumatic past is ignored – and vengeance – through which the traumatic past becomes an obsession – block the flow of history and the possibility of transition” (Belau xxvi). It seems that both Hemingway’s novel and his “Eulogy” are attempts to mourn the losses in Spain in a form which will participate in the flow of history and strengthen the continuing fight against fascism. Although the “Causa” in Spain was lost by the time these works were published, the battles against the nazis in Europe were looming when Hemingway wrote about mourning the Loyalists and their ideals.

Herman Rappaport argues that “works of art must carry the burden of remembering and working through the trauma of the past” (Belau 233-250).

Hemingway’s novel centers on Robert Jordan and the band of guerrillas blowing up a bridge as their part in a failed major offensive by the Republican forces. Jeffrey Meyers says that in the novel “Hemingway’s judgment of all the Spanish and foreign politicians and commanders was influenced inevitably by his knowledge of their final fate” (Understanding 81). It is more important to the theme of the novel to see that Hemingway’s depictions of such figures are explorations of the issues in mourning the loss of the Republic.

The characterizations of Pablo, La Passionaria, and Andre Marti probe the issues of such mourning. Milton Wolff observes that Hemingway’s criticism of La Passionaria was offensive to many of the veterans who thought of her as “the heart of our fight against fascism” (Nelson 13). Wolff says that Hemingway shouldn’t have included gossip about her sending her children to safety in Russia because “all children were sent out of the country” (Nelson 13). Wolfe doesn’t discuss two references to La Passionaria by Sardo’s guerrillas when they are trapped on a mountain top, waiting for the air attack which will end their lives. In response to the crisis, a young guerrilla recites La Passionaria’s maxim: “It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees” (269). Wolff himself identifies this slogan as one of “the banners we carried into battle” (Nelson 13). But the slogan does not encourage or console the doomed guerillas. One of them scoffs, “Can she help you now?” Then he adds, “we are on our bellies, not our knees.” Later, when some journalists in Madrid are discussing La Passionaria’s report that the fascists are “fighting among themselves near Segovia” (312), Karkov, Robert Jordan’s friend, responds by saying merely, “That great face... That great voice” (313). Hemingway himself later said that he “decided not to write propaganda, but write just what I believe” (*Hem on War* 299). Jeffrey Meyers notes that La Passionaria became the President of the Spanish Communist Party in exile in Russia after the war (42). Perhaps this political role influenced both Hemingway and Wolff.

It is more important to the novel, however, that La Passionaria’s rhetoric and physical presence contribute little to understanding the issues of loss and the need for mourning that Hemingway is examining.

Pablo, who leads the guerrilla band before Robert Jordan’s arrival, is clearly struggling throughout the novel with emotional exhaustion and despair after two years of warfare. At their first meeting, for example, he drunkenly challenges Jordan, and some of the other guerrillas believe he should be shot (52-53). Most important, Pablo attempts to disrupt the plans for blowing up the bridge by stealing Jordan’s detonators. In the middle of the night, he cuts the bags containing the explosive detonators and escapes

with them, taking one of the horses. Robert Gaidusek observes that the imagery of cutting the bags suggests that Pablo is acting out a desire to castrate Jordan (150-151). When he returns to the guerrilla camp without the detonators, Pablo is discredited and exhibits a “distressing self-abasement” (129). Pablo’s conflicted motives and actions in the war have developed into a “morbid’ melancholia” (125). Freud says “[I]n the clinical picture of melancholia, dissatisfaction with the self on moral grounds is far the most outstanding feature” (129) Freud further observes that “in melancholia, countless single conflicts in which love and hate wrestle together... are fought for the object...” He adds that “[T]raumatic experiences with the object may have stirred to activity something else that has been repressed” (138). When Pilar speaks to Pablo about his weeping at night, she suggests that he has lost all reference points for his behavior: “Nobody understands thee. Neither God nor thy mother... Nor I either” (353).

One of the strongest complaints about Hemingway’s depiction of the war was the “notorious incident” which Pilar reports on the execution of Nationalists by the Spanish Loyalists. Milton Wolff says that Hemingway “wrote about no devils on the fascist side,”

But it is Republican terrorism that gets described in detail, for many of the Vets, who were concerned with the novel’s potential political impact, that decision was a betrayal (Nelson 25).

Wolff does not seem to recall the brutality that Hemingway reports in the rape of Maria and the murder of her Republican father by the fascists (61-62). Maria’s grief at these brutalities underlies her need for the love of Robert Jordan. In Freud’s terms, she is able to escape from “self-revilings” and achieve the capacity for a “new object of love” (125).

Pilar’s report of the executions of the nazi villagers in Ronda seems to identify events that contribute to Pablo’s melancholia. In Freud’s terms, Pablo’s leadership in the killing of the fascists suggests the denial of contradictory emotions which contributes to his melancholia. The killing is shared and sacramental when the peasants use their flails and scythes to execute fascists, but Pablo takes a role of leadership and “personally executes the *civiles* with shots to the head” (Gajdusek 146). These executions seem to be assertions of personal egotism and vengeance. Furthermore, by the end of the executions, Pablo is “deprived of his belief in the manliness and courage of the priest” (Gajdusek 149). In the character of Pablo, Hemingway explores the “conflicts of ambivalence” (Freud 138) which lead to a self-debasing melancholia. In that sense, Hemingway’s characterization of Pablo seems to identify a source of the cowardice and betrayal which contributed to the loss of the Republic.

Another figure in whom Hemingway probes problems of mourning is the historical figure, Andre Marti, the French Commander of the International Forces. Wolff says that it was unnecessary for Hemingway to include Marti in the novel, and he suggests that Hemingway’s “antagonism was personal” (Nelson 13). But, in fact, Marti’s harsh military discipline seems to be another aspect of the struggle with loss and the problem of proper mourning.

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* centers upon a plan for a major attack by the Republican army. The plan has been detected, however, or it has been betrayed. When Robert Jordan sends two messengers to warn General Golz that the fascists seem to be prepared for the attack, the messengers are arrested by General Marti.

Gomez, one of Jordan’s messengers, recognizes Marti from magazine articles about the celebrated leader. Hemingway’s description begins with Marti’s physical appearance but then shifts to issues of loss and manic melancholia:

[Gomez] recognized his bushy eyebrows, his watery grey eyes... and he knew him for one of France’s great modern revolutionary figures who had led the mutiny of the French Navy in the Black Sea. He knew this man would know where Golz’s headquarters were [but] ... [h]e did not know what this man had become with time, disappointment, bitterness both domestic and political, and thwarted ambition and that to question him was one of the most dangerous things that any man could do (363).

After Marti has him arrested, Gomez asks, “What passes with that man?” In answer, “*Esta loco*, the guard said, “he is crazy” (364). The guard continues, “That old one kills more than the bubonic plague....

But he doesn't kill fascists like we do.... He kills rare things, Trotzkyites, Divagationers. Any type of rare beast" (364). Freud says, "the self torments of melancholics, which are without doubt pleasurable, signify, just like the corresponding phenomena in the obsessional neurosis, a gratification of the sadistic tendencies of hate" (*General Selection* 132). This sadistic melancholy, expressed in executing the rare beasts of betrayal found in his own army, also seems to indicate that Marti has become a paranoid: "dominated by a system of thought [which] must be constantly shown to explain everything" (D. W. Winnicott, *Playing*, 164).

Robert Jordan's experiences in the Civil War include a moment of grief that seems to parallel the sources of Marti's melancholy sadism. After Anselmo has been killed in the explosion of the bridge, Jordan experiences an emotional "letdown," and Hemingway adds,

In him, too, was despair from the sorrow that soldiers turn to hatred in order that they may continue to be soldiers. Now it was over, he was lonely, detached and unrelayed and hated everyone he saw (389).

This is very far from the "deep and sound and selfless pride" which Jordan had experienced during the battle in the Sierras (206). Marti's suspicious despair is not simply an individual flaw, but a glimpse of an edgeless hatred which can emerge from loss in battle if there no recognition of a need for mourning.

References to the death by suicide of Robert Jordan's father extend throughout *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The first reference to his father begins with an odd, moment in the first conversation between Robert Jordan and Maria. She says, "I have been a republican for twenty years," and then adds, "My father was a Republican all his life.... It was for that they shot him.

Jordan replies that his father and grandfather were republicans all their lives. Then he delivers a joke that she does not see concerning the terminology of Spanish and American politics:

"My grandfather was on the Republican national committee."  
And your father, she asks, "Is he still active in the Republic?"  
"No," he replies, "he shot himself."  
"To avoid being tortured," she asks.  
"Yes." Robert Jordan replies. "To avoid being tortured" (57).

The torture was apparently his life. Robert Jordan's father is clearly an analogue to Hemingway's own father. In his hotel in Madrid, Jordan himself learns how to carry cyanide so that he can kill himself if he is captured (208). Suicide remains a recurring possibility for him until the last moments of the novel when he chooses to risk capture by defending the retreat of Maria and the guerillas. Perhaps in depicting a character who carries his father's suicide with him always – and is able to choose another death – Hemingway achieves a kind of success in mourning the suicide of his own father.

*For Whom The Bell Tolls* appears to be a psychoanalytically informed examination of both the personal and the historical dimensions in mourning and melancholia.

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