**The Influence of Ernest Hemingway**

The 1999 centennial of Hemingway's birth was celebrated in Florida, Idaho, Michigan, Arkansas, Massachusetts, and Illinois, as well as Cuba, Italy, France, Spain, China, and Japan. The event was commemorated with literary conferences devoted to his life and work, with public festivities, with the posthumous publication of an unfinished manuscript, True at First Light (1999), and with a great deal of media attention that focused as much on his iconic persona as on his contributions to American literature. Biographer Michael Reynolds has noted that although “Hemingway's short fiction is what changed American fiction,” particularly in the way subsequent authors wrote dialogue, “there are people who venerate Hemingway who have never read Hemingway.” Despite his reputation as a serious artist—he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954, and his novels The Sun Also Rises (1926) and A Farewell to Arms (1929) were included on a 1998 list of the top one hundred novels of the twentieth century—Hemingway has been commodified, or, in author Justin Kaplan's words, “Elvisized.” Hemingway's emblematic American masculinity is used to market everything from tourism to cookbooks to a line of furniture, and his minimalist writing style has been the subject of a yearly “International Imitation Hemingway Competition,” with the winners published in a book series entitled Best of Bad Hemingway.

Although Hemingway's larger-than-life presence—both in life and after his dramatic suicide in 1961—has often threatened to overshadow his work, it is generally agreed that Hemingway is, in James Nagel's words, “one of the finest prose stylists in English,” an author whose work “gave rise to the minimalist movement in American fiction, to the work of Raymond Carver and Susan Minot,” as well as many others, including Richard Ford. The presenter of the 1954 Nobel Prize in literature said: “With masterly skill [Hemingway] 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.” In his book, Genius, Harold Bloom pronounced Hemingway a “minor novelist with a major style”; in The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Short Story, Peter Mascuch called him “one of the great innovators of twentieth-century form.” At the Hemingway Centennial celebration at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, essayist Joan Didion declared, “This was a writer who had in his time made the English language new, changed the rhythms of the way both his own and the next few generations would speak and write and think.” At the same conference, poet Derek Walcott called the best of Hemingway's prose “an achievement superior to anything in poetry.” In a centennial article by Steve Paul, a journalist with the Kansas City Star (where Hemingway was a cub reporter from 1917-1918), author Russell Banks praised “the sheer beauty of [Hemingway's] sentences.” Charles Johnson told Paul, “I think it is impossible not to work in Hemingway's shadow, either as an imitator of his approach to prose writing or in strong reaction against it.” In a keynote address at the Seventh International Hemingway Conference, Terry Tempest Williams stated: “Hemingway has been a powerful mentor, in terms of what it means to create a landscape impressionistically on the page, to make it come alive, pulse, breathe, to ‘make the country so that you could walk into it.’”

Although recognized primarily as a stylist and innovator of form, Hemingway also embraced a distinctly modern, existentialist worldview that influenced twentieth-century literature. Novels such as The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms are populated by men who are, in Hemingway's words, “hurt very badly; in the body, mind, and spirit, and also morally.” In these works, World War I casts a shadow over characters who, no longer believing in the traditions and values of the nineteenth century or in the goodness of government, are disillusioned idealists who reject nationalist propaganda and easy sentimentality. Nevertheless, the Hemingway hero struggles to make his own meaning in a world filled with cynicism and war. According to Philip Young, the “Hemingway code”—exemplified by Jake Barnes in The Sun Also Rises, Frederic Henry in A Farewell to Arms, Robert Jordan in For Whom The Bell Tolls (1940), and the fisherman Santiago in The Old Man and the Sea (1952)—involves qualities of stoicism, courage, honor, endurance, and self-control. In his interview with the Kansas City Star, Banks described the Hemingway hero as a “sort of existential hero” who reflects the “romantic alienation that [Hemingway himself] seemed to be emblematic of and that he manifested in his style as well.” Critics have also remarked upon the psychological effects of violence depicted in Hemingway's novels and short fiction, which is ever-present in his descriptions of war, bullfighting, big-game hunting, and surviving in the wilderness. Hemingway's fiction is at its strongest in its portraits of male characters struggling to define their identities and find honor in a chaotic world. For half a century, critics have generally agreed with Leslie Fielder's 1955 contention that “Hemingway is always less embarrassing when he is not attempting to deal with women.”

At the centennial of Hemingway's birth, noted Linda Wagner-Martin, the editor Ernest Hemingway: Seven Decades of Criticism, the question was “why his writings last so well. … [What] else besides nostalgia does it provide the reader here at the very end of that twentieth century?” She noted that over the past seventy years, as views of heroism have changed, so too have critics' views of Hemingway. Rather than writing about “the code hero” much celebrated in the 1950s and 1960s, critics have become interested in the full variety of characters portrayed by Hemingway, including in his female characters. Contemporary critics are now exploring Hemingway's representation of nature, identity, and sense of place, as well as his handling of issues of race, gender, and sexual identity. With the posthumous release of The Garden of Eden (1987) and True at First Light, Hemingway's literary legacy promises to last as long as and run more deeply than his cult of personality.