

The Dramatic Foundation of Hemingway's "The Killers"

In his Letters, Hemingway repeatedly refers to Shakespeare as being the greatest writer who has ever lived. He looks upon Shakespeare, and Shakespeare alone, as the one inimitable writer. Other "great" writers Hemingway views with much less admiration, and he is not afraid to boast of his relative importance among writers of unquestionable stature, as in a letter of 6 and 7 September 1949 to Charles Scribner:

I started out trying to beat dead writers that I knew how good they were. (Excuse vernacular) I tried for Mr. Turgenieff first and it wasn't too hard. Tried for Mr. Maupassant (won't concede him the de) and it took four of the best stories to beat him. He's beaten and if he was around he would know it. Then I tried for another guy...and I think I fought a draw with him. This other dead character.

Mr. Henry James I would just thumb him once the first time he grabbed and then hit him once where he had no balls and ask the referee to stop it.¹

After having "whipped" Henry James, Hemingway moves immediately to Shakespeare, saying "There are some guys nobody could ever beat like Mr. Shakespeare (The Champion)..." (L, p. 715). And when in another letter Hemingway is again placing himself in the ranks of the Great Ones, Shakespeare tops the list once more: "There have been about twelve or more good writers and they are all behind Dr. Shakespeare...they are all good and I am one of the good ones" (L, p. 713). Although quick in verbally "knocking out"

writers of the stature of Turgenev and Maupassant, Hemingway hesitates twice in his Letters when he suspects that a book blurb and a review may compare him to Shakespeare: "the only thing I don't like is that people might think I was trying to compare myself with Shakespeare..." (L, p. 317); "He started off saying I was the best writer since Shakespeare which will make me plenty of friends,...What a statement...There have been at least a dozen since Dr. Shakespeare that were all very good" (L, p. 715).

Hemingway, throughout his Letters, exhibits cockiness when comparing himself to almost any other author except Shakespeare: also in the "boxing great authors" letter he says, "In the big book I hope to take Mr. Melville and Mr. Doestoevsky,...and throw lots of mud in their faces" (L, p. 673). So the following question naturally arises: why, given Hemingway's total abandon in spattering the names of other major authors, is he utterly diffident and respectful ("Dr. Shakespeare") when mentioning Shakespeare? Certainly others--as the reviewer who compared Hemingway with Shakespeare--did not or do not regard Shakespeare as unapproachable. Yet Hemingway did.

Since Hemingway never specifically mentions what, to him, made Shakespeare "The Champion," the reasons why he held Shakespeare in such esteem will probably always be left to conjecture. What we do know is that, at least in high school if not all through school, Hemingway received a good

dose of Shakespeare, reading, at least, Twelfth Night, Macbeth, Much Ado About Nothing, and King Lear.² We also know that Hemingway memorized passages from Hamlet in high school and, in his high school newspaper, mimicked Shakespeare's style in lampooning a teacher.³ And we can be fairly certain, judging from the books contained in Hemingway's collection at Key West before he died and the few Shakespeare plays he read at his Oak Park high school, that Hemingway knew at least twelve of Shakespeare's plays. All told, Hemingway's library contained 56 works of drama, including Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw. And, of course, Hemingway, in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," has Wilson quote from 2 Henry IV; Hemingway alludes to the relationship of Othello and Desdemona in Across the River and into the Trees; and the title of his story "The Sea Change" comes from The Tempest.

Aside from pointing out Hemingway's obvious reverence for Shakespeare, this information is not meant to introduce a thematic source study. What Hemingway borrowed from Shakespeare in developing his own themes has already been documented.⁴ I would, however, like to underscore a fairly evident yet ignored point which can be inferred from this information: that Hemingway was and had long been a reader of plays by the time he began to write short stories. I would also like to suggest that the form of the play probably had more to do with influencing what critics refer to

as Hemingway's "style" in certain short stories--obviously "Today is Friday" but also "The Killers," and perhaps "Hills Like White Elephants"--than did his writing credo drawn from his days as a journalist. I wish, further, to suggest that, while writing such stories, Hemingway thought not of the newspaper style sheet which instructed him, early on, to "Avoid the use of adjectives...", to use "short sentences," "short first paragraphs," and "vigorous English."⁵ Rather, he thought as a playwright would think when writing a play: in terms of characterization solely through action, or stage direction. Examinations of these stories and the circumstances surrounding their composition will, I believe, bear these inferences out.

It is of course obvious that Hemingway was thinking as a playwright when he composed "Today Is Friday," the four-page "mini play" which stands out obtrusively, because of its form, in The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway. The question automatically becomes "why?" Why does Hemingway, established novelist and short story writer at the time he composed "Today Is Friday" (16 May 1926), choose to write a "story" in the form of a play? The answer is, unfortunately, extremely elusive. Most of Hemingway's critics simply lump "Today is Friday" in with the other short stories,⁶ as Hemingway himself did. (Referring to the time he wrote the story, Hemingway tells Maxwell Perkins on 5 June 1926, "In Madrid I wrote three stories ranging from 1400 to 3,000

words" (L, p. 209; my emphasis).) And when critics do point out that "Today Is Friday" is in fact not a short story, it is usually to say that it is simply "constructed as a miniature play."⁷

But critics cannot be faulted entirely for a lack of commitment to the question of why Hemingway wrote "Today Is Friday" as a play. It is practically impossible to arrive at a satisfactory explanation. About all we do know is that "Today Is Friday" was composed, along with two other stories, "The Killers" and "Ten Indians," on the same day (16 May 1926; L, p. 200) in Madrid. Hemingway thought of his writing three stories in one day, incidentally, as quite an accomplishment, as he refers to the fact twice in his Letters (pp. 470 & 799), even though he apparently had a start on the stories before that productive day. Of course the only other thing we know of Hemingway the playwright is that, years after the composition of "Today Is Friday," Hemingway spent much time composing The Fifth Column (probably written around 1933, in Madrid [L, p. 463] though not published until 1938), the only full-length play he wrote, a play disliked equally by publishers and critics. Aside from discussing the critical bludgeoning The Fifth Column took, Hemingway rarely mentions plays or playwriting in his Letters and non-fiction.

So one is by lack of reference turned away from a satisfactory answer to why Hemingway chose the form of a play

for two--and only two--of his works. One can only assume that, as any writer is on occasion moved by what he is reading or experiencing to imitate other authors in his own writing, Hemingway was on at least two occasions influenced enough to want to experiment with the play form. The first of these occasions is of particular interest, though, for, as we know, "Today Is Friday" Hemingway composed, or completed, on that productive day in Madrid, along with two "short stories" in the true sense of the term. If one cannot answer the question of why Hemingway chose to employ the play form on two occasions, one may, however, ask the following question, which has not been asked but which does yield an interesting and, I believe, plausible inference: did Hemingway's turning from one form to another--from "play" to "short story" or vice versa--during an intense period of one day influence the "style" or compositional technique employed in one or the other form?

The answer appears to be "yes." Although no one is certain of the sequence in which Hemingway composed "Today Is Friday," "The Killers," and "Ten Indians," one would have to conclude from examining the compositional characteristics of the stories that "The Killers" was written still with the "mind-set" of a playwright and therefore probably directly after "Today Is Friday." "Ten Indians" is compositionally very different from either and therefore was probably the first or last "story" composed on that day. It seems indeed

telling that Hemingway, as his Letters reveal, consistently thought of "Today Is Friday" and "The Killers" as somehow related: in a letter to Maxwell Perkins on 14 February 1927 he proposes that the two stories be printed side-by-side in Men Without Women, leaving out "Ten Indians" altogether (L, p. 245). And in other places he mentions the two stories in the same breath, again leaving out "Ten Indians," as, for example, in a later letter to Maxwell Perkins of 12 July 1938: "I wrote To-day Is Friday and The Killers on the same day in Madrid..." (L, p. 470). Of course my assumption here is that a writer must "fine tune" his thinking, his approach to his art, when working in a particular genre or style and that, when writing much in one short span of time, as Hemingway did here,⁸ the "style" of writing (or form, as the case may be here) is bound to somehow link the works produced, even if seemingly separated thematically.

This seems to have been what happened with "The Killers": the story, more than any other Hemingway wrote, is so devoid of authorial presence or embellishment that, aside from its physical "short-story" appearance, it reads like a play. The narrative sections of "The Killers" do little more than "set the stage" for the reader so that the action, the suspense, and the conflict can be carried out through the characters' words within this setting. For example, the two sentences which open "The Killers" simply act as scenic directions, giving the reader bare-bones information about the

story's setting: the kind of place the characters will be in and who the characters are:

The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter.⁹

The "story" never begins or continues in "The Killers" with authorial narrative but only with the characters' dialogue, just as in a play. Thus the narrative, which, after the first two sentences of the story (above), conveys only movement or action of the characters which cannot be conveyed in the dialogue, serves rather the same function in "The Killers" that scenic directions serve in a play. Look, for instance, at the second narrative sequence of the story:

Outside it was getting dark. The street-light came on outside the window. The two men at the counter read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watched them. He had been talking to George when they came in. (SS, p. 279)

There is only one piece of narration in the story more extended than this one, and it occurs a full six pages later, after solid dialogue, interrupted only by one-line "directions" such as "George looked at the clock on the wall behind the counter" (SS, p. 278). In excerpting these narratives, the more important point is, however, that the only elements separating "The Killers" from being a play are 1) its actual short-story appearance on the page and 2) the fact that the narration is written in the past tense. To "dramatically" illustrate the degree to which the narration in "The Killers" resembles, in fact, stage direction in a play, one need only change the verbs in the narrative to present tense:

[The door of Henry's lunch room opens and two men come in. They sit down at the counter.]

[Outside it is getting dark. The street light comes on outside the window. The two men at the counter read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watches them. He had been talking to George when they came in.] (SS, p. 279)

One may, of course, object to such an analysis on the grounds that "The Killers" is simply not a play, that it doesn't look like one. But to raise such an objection is to judge a work solely on appearance without regarding its compositional characteristics. Many would argue, for example, that simply breaking up a story into lines so that it resembles a poem still does not make it one. They would argue that, though it may look like a poem, it has none of the elements of, say, "compressed" language or heightened awareness of language that are indigenous to poetry.

To object to seeing "The Killers" as having been influenced by the play form ("Today Is Friday?"), however, is also to miss that its main compositional difference from most other Hemingway stories is its almost complete reliance on dialogue. Sheldon Grebstein has noted this "dramatic" difference,¹⁰ but neither he nor anyone else has been able to suggest why Hemingway wrote so "dramatically" in "The Killers." Other Hemingway stories, though indeed comparatively "objective" in their point of view, are never so "stage-directional" in narrative sparseness. A random sampling of the narration from any of a number of stories will illustrate that Hemingway is conveying more than "stage di-

rection": "Liking him she opened the door and looked out" ("Cat in the Rain" [SS, p. 168]); "He was very embarrassed, having brought out this thing he had lived by" ("The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" [SS, p. 321]); "I thought he must be figuring on taking an awful beating if he doesn't want to go home afterward" ("Fifty Grand" [SS, p. 316]). Such passages illustrate a degree of authorial omniscience wholly absent from "The Killers," even regarding stories, like those above, usually noted for their objectivity.

Only "Hills Like White Elephants" contains narrative sections which resemble those of "The Killers" in their lack of authorial omniscience. Yet the introductory narrative passage of the story provides the reader with more tactile and sensory description and more explanation of scenery than "The Killers." Hemingway, in the beginning of "Hills Like White Elephants," talks of "the warm shadow of a building," a sensory image (SS, p. 273), and a curtain "to keep out flies" (SS, p. 273), an explanation of the purpose of scenery absent in "The Killers." Such stylistic distinctions between "Hills Like White Elephants" and "The Killers" are, indeed, fine, but nevertheless relevant. And, in any case, it is no doubt possible that "Hills Like White Elephants" was also written from the same kind of creative frame of mind--that of a playwright--as "The Killers." "Hills" was published in the little magazine transition, in August 1927, just a little more than a year after Hemingway wrote "The

Killers."¹¹ And it is probably quite intentional, since the two stories are stylistically the most "dramatic" of all that Hemingway wrote, that they appear side-by-side in The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway.

I have not wished to suggest here that Hemingway was by any means a frustrated playwright whose internal urge to write plays grasped him unawares during the writing of "The Killers" and made him write "dramatically." I do believe, however, that, since Hemingway read and had read plays more than is generally acknowledged and since he was in fact writing a "play" on the same day he wrote "The Killers," he was, consciously or not, thinking "play" during the writing of "The Killers." It is not surprising, given the information presented here, that "The Killers," of all of Hemingway's stories, was made into a movie. Its "dramatic style," after all, appears to be much more than coincidental.

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¹ "To Charles Scribner," 6 and 7 September 1949, Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), p. 673. Subsequent references to this text are cited parenthetically within the text, using the abbreviation L followed by the page number.

² See Michael S. Reynolds, Hemingway's Reading 1910-1940: An Inventory (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 11 and 40-41.

³ See Reynolds, p. 181 and Jeffrey Meyers, Hemingway: A Biography (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 17.

⁴ See, for example, Meyers, pp. 110, 469, and 200.

⁵ Quoted by Charles Fenton, The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway: The Early Years (New York: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1954), pp. 31-34.

⁶ See, for example, Meyers, p. 33.

⁷ See Sheldon Norman Grebstein, Hemingway's Craft (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 54.

⁸ See Meyers, p. 133.

⁹ Ernest Hemingway, "The Killers" in The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), p. 279. All subsequent references to this volume appear parenthetically within the text using the abbreviation "SS" followed by the page number.

¹⁰ Grebstein, p. 99.

¹¹ See Nicholas Joost, Ernest Hemingway and the Little Magazines: The Paris Years (Barre, MA: Barre Publishers, 1968), 155.