



## Tragic Pattern in Earnest Hemmingway's *For Whom The Bell Tolls*

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### Abstract

*If For Whom The Bell Tolls is a kind of epic, it is above all a tragic epic. Like the Iliad, it may be seen as a study of doom. Madrid, like Troy, was fated to fall. Seventeen months of hindsight on the Spanish affairs helped to mature in Hemingway a feeling that the Republican defeat had been virtually inevitable. "The Spanish Civil War was really lost, of course," wrote Hemingway in 1940. The paper delves to study the tragic pattern designed in the novel and killings in war.*

**Keywords:** Hemmingway, Spanish Civil war, Tragic Pattern, Massacre

Hemingway's choice of the early summer of 1937 as the time of Jordan's action thus takes a special importance. He wanted a period deep enough into the war so that the possibility of the Republican defeat could be meaningful psychological force. However, the time must also be far enough removed from the end of the war so that some of his people could still believe in the Republican victory. The struggle could not seem to be hopeless. Yet as a study in doom, the novel must early isolate and dramatize those adverse powers and power-failure which would ultimately combine to defeat the Spanish Republic.

Robert Jordan's first sight of Pablo gives him an insight into the nature of one power-failure. No Republican, at the beginning of the movement, was more in command of himself or the situation than Pablo. Now the guerilla leader is so far gone in defeatist "sadness" and moral cowardice as almost to doom in advance any undertaking in which he is to play a part.

Pablo is a specific Judas, as his stealing of the detonator will later show but he is also a recognizable symbol for the general canker of defeatism, gnawing the tissues of republican moral from within, and leading to the larger betrayal. A second internal danger is the inefficiency of the Republican bureaucracy. A third is an aspect of Spanish temperament. One gets the impression that a radical inefficiency stretches all the way from the higher echelons in Madrid down to the gypsy Rafael, who is so irresponsible that he runs off to shoot rabbits when he should be standing guard near Pablo's cave. These situations ultimately create the tragic pattern. The Russian General Golz, only half-believing that his attack will not be doomed to failure before it even starts, points up the larger difficulties, "They are



never my attacks,” observes the General . “I make them. But they are not mine I must put in for it. I have never been given what I ask for even when they have it to give. That is the least of it. There are other things. You know how those people are. It is not necessary to go into all of it. Always there is something. Always someone will interfere” (FWTBT). Tangled in red tape, Golz is not free enough to prosecute a war successfully. The Rafaels of the Republican side are too free, and too irresponsible. Bureaucracy and temperament, two more internal foes of the Republic, help to fix the doom.

The most awful symbol of the doom is the air power of the foreign enemy. All the Spaniards hate it; as they hate the foreigners for interfering in their Civil War. When the Fascist planes roar over the mountain hideout, it is always in threes, or in those multiples of three with which practitioners of black magic used to conjure.

The novel touches the edge of the supernatural also by a considered use of premonition. The primary human agent is the gypsy Pilar who is both a woman and a kind of witch very naturalistically portrayed and very womanly in her witch hood. Her function in part is to sharpen the reader’s foreboding and thus to deepen his sense of impending tragedy. Having watched Pablo’s degeneration through fear, she is both wise and fond of Jordan to reveal that she has seen his coming death in the lines of his hand. But the reader’s knowledge of Jordan’s coming death gives special point to the passage in which Pilar describes with naturalistic precision, the three blended odors of the smell of death to come.

The woman-witch dialectic is marked often in the novel. In this instance, the woman withholds what the witch has gloomily discovered. Her certainty that Jordan will die has motivated her in brining the lovers together. This is done both for the therapeutic effect of a healthy love affair on Maria, and in order to give Jordan, through Maria, as much of life as three days will hold. This, one might guess, is the tender side of Pilar. However, in the passage on the smell of death to come, she adopts the very tone, which will arouse Jordan’s curiosity as to the truth she is saying. He doubts and he argues, and the doubting arguments divert his thoughts at least from the probability, if not from the possibility, of death. The rough railing humor of her presentation is meant to save him from a fear, which might undo his resolution, or, at any rate, spoil the closing hours of his short, happy life.

There are other premonitions in *For Whom The Bell Tolls* than those we owe to Pilar’s super-sensory gifts. Jordan, as a partisan soldier, must often consider that he may die



at the affair of the bridge. He is compelled to recognize the possibility of death. His life among the Guadarramas may well total three-score and ten hours as a substitute for seventy years. In the meteorological bad luck which brings as unseasonal snowfall, in Pablo's defection, and in the bombing of EI Sardo there is a discernible "Pattern of tragedy" which he is too sensible to ignore. Jordan's predicament is something as if that he may be killed but despises death and enters the ring in spite of the possibility. The knowledge, derived through Pilar, that Jordan not only may but will die gives every incident in Jordan's seventy-hour span of life the special poignancy that would be felt by a spectator who knew in advance that he was watching the last fight of a torero.

The idea that a same consciousness of death will give added depth and meaning to the events of life, is one of the familiar Hemingway themes in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. Sparing but effective use is also made of the men without women, the father and son, and the home versus war themes. Jordan, for example, shows spiritual relationship to Pilar in that he can be, by turns, both tender and tough-minded. In one of his aspects, he can love human beings and allow himself to become involved with them; as in his good companionship with Anselmo or his love for Maria. At the other extreme, he must be the cold-minded and detached commander, reserving part of him in all human relationship so that the necessary job can be done. It is the detachment that he coldly judges his companions, estimating their dependability and perfecting his battle-plan in accordance with these estimates. He cannot often expand warmly; as a soldier, he must contract coldly within himself. "You are a very cold boy," says Pilar. Jordan disagrees. "No," says Pilar, "In the head you are very cold". Jordan replies that he is preoccupied with his work. "But you do not like the things of life?" asks Pilar. It is not now a liking for hardy masculine comradeship in hunting or fishing to skilling which motivates the Hemingway hero, but preoccupation with the work a man must do; where women have no place and may even be in the way. The morning Jordan kills the Fascist cavalryman; Maria is still beside him in the sleeping bag. As he quickly and coldly issues orders to Anselmo and Premitivoe, he is aware of Maria behind him, dressing herself under the robe. "She had no place in his life now". At the end of the novel, both elements are visible. He is the Republican soldier coolly drawing ahead on the Fascist Lieutenant Berrendo, and the husband covering his wife's escape.



The closing scene also rounds off the father and son theme, which has been introduced in Jordan's soliloquies at various earlier times. Jordan's grandfather fought bravely and successfully in the American Civil War. His father died by his own hand. Jordan has long since forgiven his father for the act, but he is still as ashamed of it as he is proud of his grandfather's soldierly bravery. Now, at the end of the line, as Jordan lies nearly fainting under the ballooning pain from his fractured leg, the father-grandfather opposition once more commands his mind. Suicide would be permissible under the circumstances. But memory of his grand-father, his true spiritual ancestor, helps him to hold on to his courage and to die in combat.

The significance of Maria is finally symbolic. In the lonely alien region of the Guadarramas, she comes to stand as the image of 'home'. Maria stands for the normal in the midst of a terrible abnormality. Her Fascist captors have subjected her to all sorts of outrages. The rape is an act of supreme brutality; only the true tenderness of Jordan, as Pilar well knows, can erase the psychological scars the Fascist have left. The cutting of Maria's hair is a symbol of her loss of womanhood or girlhood, just as its growing-out indicates her gradual return to balance and health.

Another well-trying theme handsomely adapted to the use of the Spanish tragedy is that of nada, or nothingness. By placing his action among the high slopes of the Sierra de Guadarramas, a clean, well-lighted place where the weather is cold and the air clear, Hemingway has achieved a kind of idyll in the midst of war, an island surrounded by the sinister. It is there that Maria, raped and venerationally affected by Fascist soldiery is restored to health and sanity. One sees again the lowland-versus-highland image; on the plain before Madrid the Fascist are deployed, but here are high slopes, concealment, and something like the good life, a veritable island in the midst of nada. Still, in the words of Donne's devotion, "no man is an island". In this savage war, no mountain can serve as a permanent sanctuary. El Sardo, on his high hilltop position, finds no good life. Fascist cavalry surround it, and three Fascist planes destroy it. Pablo's mountain cave becomes untenable as a refuge. The partisan's plan to retreat across the war swept lowlands to another mountain fastens in the Sierra de Credos.

Hemingway's sense of Fascism's betrayal of the Spanish people has the nightmare quality. The mountain sanctuary is now shown to be open to invasion and destruction by



Fascist bombers, which are symbols of the power of evil. The destruction of EL Sardo's band on the hilltop suggests the horror of brutality and darkness unleashed against a betrayed people.

Among those whom Fascism will betray are the artists. Robert Jordan is not only a teacher of Spanish and a lover of Spain; he is also a writer. As an artist, he is fully aware of the threat of Fascist domination. If Fascism were the kind of force, which fed upon itself, remaining relatively limited in its dimensions, Jordan's manifest duty, would belong to the development of his art a task so huge that it takes a life-time to accomplish. During the years of peace, Jordan wrote one book on Spain and the Spanish people. Presumably, he would not be averse to doing another but this is not the time.

In the deeper meaning, *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, the invasion of the high sanctuary from above, marks a transition in the affairs of the artist. Unless the force is stopped, it can mean the death of art as it can mean the death of everything else the artist values and needs. Fascism has become militant, imperialistic, and international.

*For Whom The Bell Tolls* is principally a novel about the problem of killing people in war and man's response to war. It is completely a tragedy. Hemingway has often been criticized for glorifying violence and brutality; this charge is unjust. He was interested in such themes; certainly, but he did not advocate such behaviour. *For Whom The Bell Tolls* is about war, but he does not glorify war; if anything, it takes a very unfavourable attitude to war. Let us consider just two themes that reflect this attitude.

Three major characters Jordan, Anselmo, Pablo reflect on the problem of tragic pattern of killing in war. The problem of killing is the book's pivot. Jordan turns the question of killing cold Russian, hot Spanish around and around:

Hemingway himself did not get further until he sensed the deepening irony behind his contrasting episodes and took Donne's idea for his epigraph and title: war is most sadly and viciously futile because each man kills part of himself a position with which Hemingway would not have agreed, had he entirely understood it. Using the variety of views he discovered in *To Have and Have Not*, Hemingway gets at the real problem of the Spanish war and of any war not the problem of enjoying killing, or of killing people one likes, or of how bravely one can face death without committing suicide, but the problem of "any man's death". The question runs through the book, to be sure clearly asked but never clearly



answered. It begins with Jordan's first discussion with Anselmo and continues until Lieutenant Berrendo walks into Jordan's sights an instant before both will be erased.

Anselmo is a Christian, thinks Robert Jordan "Something very rare in Catholic". Steadfast old Anselmo hates to kill. Since "The movement" has banished religion, he hopes that the new state will organize some civic penance to cleanse its killing; he finally prays for the souls of El Sardo's band and prays that he will be firm during the attack. "But with or without God (he has said earlier), I think it is a sin to kill. To take the life of another is to me very grave. I will do it whenever necessary but I am not of the race of Pablo" (FWTBT).

Something of Hemingway the African naturalist shows in Jordan, who does not like animals, but who has found to his disturbance that he does not mind killing men. In a starting Christian image, which old Anselmo the Christian does not notice, we get intimation of the unspoken message of Donne and Robert Jordan, who is named after the river that baptized Christ: any man's death diminishes me. Anselmo, who hates to kill men, is proud of the bear he shot: "And every time I saw that paw, like the hand of a man, but with those long claws, dried and nailed through the palm to the door of the church, I received a pleasure" (FWTBT). Anselmo remembers with pride the shooting of the bear, peacefully turning over a log with his human paw, on the hillside in the early spring, exactly the setting that will see both him and Jordan dead in three days time but Robert Jordan knows that a bear is very like a man; and clearly man has crucified him.

The description proceeds through the brutalities and animal cunning of Pablo, through the simple dedication of Anselmo, through the irresponsibility of the gypsy, and through the constancy of Pilar, to state the ultimate irony of war. Hemingway illustrates this point toward the end in three parallel instances. The first is when Jordan, shirt off, sunning his back in a cloudless spring afternoon, reads the letters of the young cavalryman he has killed and listens to the shots from where El Sardo is surrounded.

The demonstration of irony in the mutual voyage comes as Lieutenant Berrendo, calling his own decapitations barbarous, though necessary for identification and effect, prays for the soul of his dead friend.

The novel is about war and about man's response to war and the tragic pattern surrounds him. The response of Robert Jordan to the situation that confronts him is one of the central concerns of the novel, though the response of others to similar situations is also



relevant. Consider first Pilar's recollection of Finito in the passage that starts in the middle of p.165 and ends on the top of p.167. Here we are shown a matador going in for the kill, facing 'the moment of truth' Finito does it properly, with grace, disdainful of the danger. The essence of heroic conduct is to maintain an undefeated spirit to confront whatever fate decrees; to act contrary to the code that binds behaviour detracts from the man and constitutes true defeat. Sardo preserves this undefeated spirit. He knows he will die on the hilltop, but he does not lapse into self-pity or prayer like Joaquin does, he continues to struggle against hopeless odds, regretting only that his trick entices only one fascist. We have seen that Jordan as his life span takes the time span of the novel; he knows that he will die at the bridge, but he continues to do what he has been told to do. Jordan comes in for his fair share of bad luck, from the initial orders Golz gives him, through unseasonal snow, Pablo's theft of his material and finally one packhorse running loose. Pilar's reading of his palm is clear indication of his fate; he could protest against the orders, or cancel the operation after the snow or the loss of his equipment. He refused even to consider these courses of action, he refuses to run in the face of inevitable doom. He may rail against his bad luck at times, but he does not consider withdrawing, and that is the quality of his heroism. The good fight must be fought, whatever the consequences but it is a tragedy pattern by motives.

Jordan clearly conceives of his actions as a participation in the good fight. It was something that you had never known before but that you had experienced now and you gave such importance to it and the reasons for it that your own death seemed of complete unimportance. Only a thing to be avoided because it would interfere with the performance of your duty but the best thing was that there was something you could do about this feeling and this necessity too. You could fight.

Thus, the concept of tragic pattern becomes central in the novel. Just as the seventy hours he spends with the guerrilla band become the tragic pattern of Jordan's life who realizes the pattern existing in everybody's life.

### Referances

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