AN ANALYSIS OF "THE KILLERS" AND
THE WORK OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

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The purpose of this paper is twofold; it is a study of "The Killers" by Ernest Hemingway, which affords a general view of Hemingway's work and his unique contribution to literature. His work vividly exemplifies writing with a distinct, intrinsic theme and style, two of the most significant components in fiction. "The Killers" is one of his multiple short stories, not the best nor most representative, but one which lends itself to intensive dissection owing to its compactness.

Critics conclude that the short story is made up of certain basic parts which can be separately classified and adjudged in order to provide an objective view of the work, and permit a criticism of its weaknesses and merits. These categories are the setting, the point of view, symbols, style, characters, plot or conflict, and theme. Accordingly, these aspects will be investigated to obtain an understanding of "The Killers" and the author's purpose.

Ernest Hemingway, the man, is difficult to separate from his work. His life began in 1899 in Oak Park, Illinois, where he formed a part of a middle-class family. When only eighteen he was injured in Italy while serving as an ambulance driver during World War I. The rest of his life was a continual pursuit of adventure, danger, and challenges to his courage, physical and athletic skill—a constant test of his manhood. Fishing, hunting, fighting, boxing and war were his favorite sports. Hemingway stands alone among the major American writers who combined the active and writing lives. 1 In 1961, after he received the Nobel Prize, and had not published anything for almost ten years, he committed suicide by shooting himself. 2

The vividness of Hemingway's life, a hard-loving (married four times),
hard-fighting, and hard-playing man, did not fail to excite the interest of the public, and his escapades were faithfully published over a period of twenty-five years. From so much publicity, a public image appeared which was inevitably likened to the heroes of his novels, and, undoubtedly, a considerable amount of his stories was based upon personal experience. It is also obvious that his philosophy of life was basically the same as that with which he endowed his heroes.

Hemingway’s work includes short stories, novels and some negligible poetry. His principal collections of short stories are In Our Time (1924), Men Without Women (1927), The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories (1938), and Winner Take Nothing (1933). 6 This author’s first important novel was The Sun Also Rises (1926), and his most successful later novels were A Farewell to Arms (1929), For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940), and The Old Man and the Sea (1952). 7 His acknowledged masters were Stephen Crane and Mark Twain. 8

Hemingway was the literary spokesman for his generation, the “Lost Generation”, as it was called. This post-World War I generation was filled with disillusion with their fathers’ ideals, and searched for new meaning in a meaningless world. 9 Hemingway has been possibly the most influential writer of English prose in this century. Certainly he has been imitated or assimilated by innumerable authors wherever he has been read. 10

In this short story, “The Killers” we can observe some of Hemingway’s basic traits which have characterized his writing. The setting is in a small town, perhaps somewhere in the Mid-West, since there is a reference to Chicago. There is no indication that the characters or the action are in any way influenced by, or unique to the setting. The setting, then, could be anywhere. We know this story was written during the twenties, the period of Prohibition when gangsters and gang wars were rampant. The time has some significance, then, although the place does not.

The point of view is very fitting for such a dramatic story. The view is, of course, almost completely objective. We are not permitted to be titillated with the panic or fear within the minds of Nick, George, Sam or Ole, nor shocked by the callous, cold, indifferent reflections of the killers. Hemingway is showing us these emotions the hard way. The point of view as used here is a compliment to Hemingway’s whole style, characterized partly by understatement contrasted with violent action, producing a heavy dose of irony. 11

To extract the conflict it is necessary to examine the characters. The two killers reveal themselves through their talk, actions and dress. From the dialogue we see they are arrogant and insulting but do not become angry, nervous nor seem to enjoy their position of power. They display practically no emotion and we might deduce that they have been killing so long, that the job neither exhilarates nor depresses them. They do not kill for passion but for money.

Their mission is to kill Ole whom they do not know, and assuredly, their plan also included the murder of the three witnesses in the lunchroom. When Ole does not appear they are unmoved, and after momentary thought do not harm the three men. Their lives are spared by a twist of fate, a whim on the part of one of the killers.

The killers are dressed alike in tight, black overcoats, derby hats and gloves. There seems something rather comic about them, like a vaudeville team, but again this bit of absurdity takes on ironic overtones and we remember that regardless of their dress, they are definitely not to be laughed at.

These faceless men can be generalized to symbolize more than cheap hoodlums. If they are allowed to multiply they might well be symbolic of fascism with all its cold, ruthless, destructive connotations. With such an interpretation, we can see Ole as the victim, and George, Nick, and the cook as the various responses of the modern world to fascism. 12

The three men in the lunchroom, George, Sam the cook, and Nick, each react
differently to these killers. George does not demonstrate fear nor attempt any drastic moves while the killers are present. He calmly follows their instructions. He shows he is a different breed from the killers when he asks, “What are you going to kill Ole Andeson for? What did he ever do to you?” George advises Nick to warn Ole, but then adds, “Don’t go if you don’t want to.” George is a “good” man, but he has experienced exile and he can accept what is happening. He understands the gangland code and comments that Ole probably double-crossed somebody. “That’s what they kill them for.” His final words to Nick are, “You better not think about it.” (Ole’s impending death).

The Negro cook, Sam, immediately comprehends the seriousness of their situation, and he is absolutely determined to avoid any involvement with Ole. His experience with evil has been much greater, than George’s or Nick’s and he is a man with great fear and respect for evil forces, and no illusions whatsoever about the possibility of successful intervention on the victim’s behalf. The fact that he is a Negro and a cook should lead us to assume his life has been difficult and even violent, and his reaction is quite plausible.

Nick Adams is the young man who is inadvertently drawn into this drama. He says practically nothing until the killers leave and he is untied. “What the hell?” he says, and the author adds, in one of the few breaks from the objective point of view, “He was trying to swagger it off.” Nick volunteers to warn Ole and the cook’s comment is, “Little boys always know what they want to do.” When Nick finds Ole he offers to describe the killers, to call the police, suggests that Ole leave town or wonders if its all a bluff. Ole replies negatively to all of this. Nick displays his increduleness, his belief in resistance and remedy, in short, his innocence of evil. After Nick reports their conversation to George, Nick concludes that he will leave town because he cannot stand to think of Ole waiting for death.

This character, Nick Adams, is the central figure in a number of Hemingway’s short stories in which Nick’s development to manhood is intimately related. Some of the stories appear to be pointless unless they are in relation to the others. 13 While “The Killers” can be studied by itself, it is well to keep this point in mind.

Ole Andeson is not a well developed, living character at all. Like the other characters in the story, he stands for a philosophy, a way of life. He accepts his fate calmly, without struggle or flight. “I got in wrong,” is how he explains and concludes his situation and life. He had become a part of another world, another code different from the “normal” world, the world of Nick and Mrs. Bell. His cool acceptance of his fate is comparable to the attitude of the killers, and logically so, since they are all operating on some kind of code. The difference between the three men is that it has fallen Ole’s lot to be the victim. Perhaps in an earlier period he was the victor and had his victims.

Mrs. Bell, the owner of Ole’s rooming house, remains as the last character to discuss. Perhaps she seems insignificant but Hemingway included her for a purpose. Observe her comments about Ole. “I guess he don’t feel well.” “He’s an awfully nice man.” “He’s just as gentle.” And her advice to Ole is: “You ought to go out and take a walk on a nice fall day like this.” In this overwhelming bit of irony she advises him to go out and get killed, although she doesn’t realize it. Her role represents the normal world’s code— a world that is unaffected, ignorant, and even indifferent to man’s struggles, and particularly to the man who lives by a different code. 14

Now that the characters have come into clearer perspective, it is possible to concentrate upon the conflict. Critics of Hemingway’s work have concluded that there is usually an obvious external message or conflict and a subtler one below the surface. 15 As a consequence of this fact, they have worked out a system of analysis, first with the superficial interpretation, and then a more profound view based upon what was implied through irony, repetition, symbols, etc. Intrinsic in the more profound view is Hemingway’s moral code, a fundamental part of the “Hemingway hero.” 16

At first reading this story appears to be about killers, as the title indicates. That
Adam is going to be murdered by two unknown killers, perhaps could be the conflict. If this were the main point to the story, we wonder what is the sense of Nick's visit to Ole, and then with George. A good thriller, or terror story would have ended when the killers left the lunchroom. Hemingway included Ole, gave him a philosophy and a code for a purpose, and Nick's reaction to the killers and Ole also has a reason. The conflict is more than threatened murder. It is a conflict—for us—of divergent philosophies, of the code of the killers and Ole, and the code of the normal world, as represented by Nick. Now we see the conflict is a deeper, more subtle and meaningful one. Upon this conflict, the author has unfolded his theme.

A substantial part of the theme hinges upon Hemingway's code and his philosophy of life. He had a strong feeling of ultimate doom, of being poised upon the brink of nothingness. Therefore, it was essential to live life to its height. One had to live skillfully, properly, honorably, with great courage and endurance, and be able to die equally as well. His view of the world was a world at war, either physically, or emotionally, filled with violence and hostility. Hemingway's hero lived under pressure, with fear, grabbing pleasure quickly for the brief moment it lasted. To live well in such a violent world, the hero followed a code which offered some hope through human courage, dignity, and endurance in the losing battle of life. The man loses, of course, but "what counts is how you conduct yourself while you are being destroyed." 21

The Nick Adams stories and Hemingway's later novels trace the development of a young, innocent, sensitive, virile man through his initiation into the adult world. Pain, fear, love, danger, death, and evil are some of the realities he confronts. He is wounded by his experiences in that world, but not destroyed. He confronts the world with a code to live and die by, but he carries his wounds throughout his life. 22

The Nick Adams of his story is in the incipient stage. He is departing from his small home town to encounter the real world of violence, the Chicago world where men live by their special codes. His confrontation with life is framed by a violent, physical crisis. The conflict is one of decision, not accomplishment nor action, and he must choose to oppose the killers, or ignore them, as the cook does, or rationalize and accept them, as George does. Nick's opposition to the killers extends to warning Ole and offering assistance. While he does not succumb to evil, neither does he overpower it. Ultimately, in leaving town, he flees evil, and reveals his recognition of its power, and his unwillingness to co-exist with it.

In searching for the theme, we must try to generalize, to universalize this conflict and the participants in it. Nick represents innocence and the killers evil. The other characters, George and Sam, depict two attitudes of the world toward evil. The theme is Nick's initiation into, or discovery of evil. Ole stands out as Hemingway's personification of the code—living man, which will be the kind of person that Nick, and Hemingway's later heroes become. Ole defies death and evil with his code that he has followed in life and will hold until his death. 23 He knows he has violated the code—"I got in wrong"—and awaits death stoically. The theme, then, is the discovery of evil, and the corollary to evil is a protective code which gives a man some immunity from the evil word, and a certain degree of dignity.

The conclusion of "The Killers" is similar to that of five of Hemingway's novels. The scene shows a man cornered, gallantly suffering defeat, but surrounded by others who do not notice him, his ordeal, nor his heroic confrontation of his fate. Nick is the one man who recognizes and values the man's admirable stoicism, but the hero is beyond such help, suffering alone in an empty universe. Mrs. Bell represents Ole's indifferent, ignorant universe, and she is utterly unaware of what is going on. 24

We have now studied the point of view, characters, symbols, setting, conflict and theme. Our last point is the style, the "Hemingway style", which has been imitated so widely. This style has taught the values of objectivity and honesty, and has operated to
purify American literature of sentiment, baroque embellishments and superficiality. 25 It is a very "unintellectual" style in some respects: in the vocabulary, the sentence construction, the extreme economy of words and description, the strict chronological sequence of events, and the absence of commentary or explanation from the author. Certainly it would be inadequate for an intellectual analysis, but this style is perfect for the display of the concrete symbols, and the emotions ——love, despair, courage—— in which Hemingway deals. 26

There is a purpose to his style which is to so reflect the content as to become a part of it. The strict discipline over the hero's mind and nervous system compliment the tense, tightly disciplined sentences. The "mindless", unintellectual hero, like the prose, shows the need to stop thinking, to simplify things in order to encounter the basic, narrow focus in life which can be mastered. 27

The first thing that stands out in Hemingway's writing is the prevalence of dialogue and absence of description. The dialogue itself is striking in its economy and precision, stripped to the bare essence of thought and character. Although he employs commonly used, colloquial words, the dialogue is not simply average talk, but the stream—lined epitomy of every—day talk. 28 A consequence of this dialogue, and the objective point of view, is the creation of understatement. 29 That is, the characters verbalize only a small portion of their thoughts and emotions; their responses are muted, played down. As Hemingway once wrote in one of his stories. "The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one—eighth of it being above water." 30 When the understatement is contrasted with violent action, the result is irony. In "The Killers" the irony of understatement is heightened by the constant interplay between the world of normality and the "unreal" world of gangsters. 31

We can dissect the work even more minutely to examine the sentence structure which is also premeditatively constructed to enhance Hemingway's particular style and theme. His sentences are short and usually simple ——no subordinate clauses, nor complex sentences. If there are compound sentences they are linked by the simplest conjunction, like "and," "but," "so," or "then." The emphasis is upon nouns, as the closest approximation to things, and verbs that depict action. The verbs are limited mainly to the sixteen basic verbs related to body movement, with a heavy leaning upon "to be" and the gerund form of the verb. Adjectives are a decorative luxury with Hemingway seldom uses. 32

The initial effect which this structure produces is that of a rapid, choppy, staccato diction. Despite this aspect, or rather, because of it, a mood, an aura, or an emotion is established. The purity and simplicity of this style grow as we follow the story along a straight line, in one direction, avoiding side—tracks and structural complications. The story presents a series of images which hold our attention, and the frequent appearance of verbs create a feeling of overwhelming activity, fluidity and unity. 33

We thus conclude our study of "The Killers". Our objective has been to discuss the primary elements of a short story ——setting, point of view, symbols, conflict, characters, theme and style—— and to analyze a given story. From the analysis it should be apparent that such a division and a careful study of the parts can give us a deeper insight into the meaning of a story and the author's objective. Specifically, in relation to "The Killers", we can make some general observations.

One of the outstanding qualities of the story is its unity. The style compliments and contributes to the development of the theme. The characters are not well developed, but sufficiently so that they represent a certain way of thinking and acting which logically motivates the conflict and illuminates the theme. The action and dialogue are all essential for the conflict with nothing superfluous in evidence.

The theme itself is universal: the discovery of evil. It is universal inasmuch as it treats an experience which all adults have confronted, resolved, and reacted to in one way
or another. It is an indication of Hemingway’s skill that something with a universal application and interest can be developed within the confines of an eight page story.

The story also is valuable as a sampling of Hemingway’s style, conflict and theme. The dialogue, the monosyllabic words repetitiously used within short, blunt sentences, and the objective point of view are the dominant components of Hemingway’s style. His conflicts are almost always ones which include physical violence or the threat of it, and place the hero in a decisive conflict which will strongly influence his life, and possibly cause his death. The Hemingway heroes—usually a combination of Nick Adams and Ole Andreson—live their lives by their codes. These characters are intimately tied to the theme and conflict, which is usually the hero confronting success, or ambition, or danger, etc. The resolution of the conflict and the theme are often contingent upon the hero’s fidelity to or disavowal of his code.
FOOTNOTES


7. Ibid., p. 228.


9. Ibid. p. 9

10. Young, *Hemingway*, p. 3


20. Ibid., p. 39.


22. Ibid., p. 7, 37.


27. Young, Hemingway p. 34.
28. Ibid., p. 33.
31. West in Modern American Fiction, p. 248.
33. Levin in Hemingway by Weeks, p. 82.
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