



## Doing It Right: Ernest Hemingway's Fetishization of Daily Tasks as a Means of Dealing with Inner Mental Anguish

Jonathan Elisha Lemelman, MSc, BA

Doctoral Candidate at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic  
Department of English and American Studies

---

### ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway's writing fetishized hunting, fishing, war, and many other activities. He explained meticulously step by step how to do almost everything in life the "right" way. This technique draws the reader in as an acolyte whom Hemingway has taken under his wing and given the inside "dope" on all the important things in life. It works effectively as a literary device in his writing, but it was even more important as a method for Hemingway to maintain his own sanity. He used this method of fetishistic writing as a means of maintaining a mental even keel through all the turmoil and traumatic incidents he experienced in his lifetime. When at the end of his life he was not able to write anymore, he chose the final rite of his lifetime and committed suicide.

**KEYWORDS:** Ernest Hemingway, Malcolm Cowley, Mental Illness, The Sun Also Rises, Nick Adams, Big Two Hearted River, In Our Time

---

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout his work, Ernest Hemingway continuously writes about the "right" way of doing things. He does this whether writing about cooking a fish, setting up a camp, watching a bullfight, cooling bottles of wine in the outdoors, or even explaining how to make the perfect martini. (Hemingway's Martini recipe called the Montgomery is 15 parts gin to 1 part vermouth, just like General Montgomery used to like his odds when he went into battle). In fact it is hard to read a page of his writing, both his fiction and non-fiction, that does not include this "how to" expertise. He is always aware and has the "inside dope" on the right way of doing things. When contemplating just how much of his work is dedicated to telling the correct way of doing things, I have come to realize that certainly an obsessive and abnormal percentage of his work is dedicated to this mania. As his life went on, he became more and more obsessed with the rituals and methods of doing practically everything. This corresponded to the increasing pressure he felt from the fallout of his traumatic life as well as his increasing inability to write. He carried on fetishizing the right way of doing things up until his death, when he must have felt that doing things right simply could not save him anymore.

I will discuss just a few of the thousands of examples of Hemingway's obsession with doing things the perfect way. In his famous and excellent Nick Adams story, *The Big Two Hearted River*, Hemingway describes a soldier home from World War I, who goes through the rituals of establishing a perfect camp, fishing the river the right way, and preparing his meals and even coffee in the best way possible. When we reflect on this story we can feel that Hemingway's details regarding all of these seemingly normal and trivial activities is Nick's way of helping to cope with the shell shock of the war, and the difficulties he has fitting into life once back home in small town America. Taking infinite time and care on these small routine actions and activities gives him a control over his life and circumstances that he is lacking out in the real world. Not once in the story does Hemingway ever mention the war, but we can feel the emotional pain he has been through by his long descriptions of details on how he sets up his tent, how he fishes the streams, and the way he prepares every aspect of his meals down to what order to eat everything and the correct disposal of the coffee grounds. The following passage demonstrates Nick's highly detailed fetishistic setting up of his camp:

Between two jack-pines, the ground was quite level. He took the axe out of the pack and chopped out two projecting roots. That levelled a piece of ground large enough to sleep on. He smoothed out the sandy soil with his hand and pulled all the sweet fern bushes by their roots. His hands smelled good from

---

\*Corresponding Author: Jonathan Elisha Lemelman, MSc, BA, Doctoral Candidate at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, Department of English and American Studies.  
Email: prahaenglish@yahoo.com

the sweet fern. He smoothed the uprooted earth. He did not want anything making lumps under the blankets. When he had the ground smooth, he spread his three blankets. One he folded double, next to the ground. The other two he spread on top.

With the axe he slit off a bright slab of pine from one of the stumps and split it into pegs for the tent. He wanted them long and solid to hold in the ground. With the tent unpacked and spread on the ground, the pack, leaning against a jackpine, looked much smaller. Nick tied the rope that served the tent for a ridge-pole to the trunk of one of the pine trees and pulled the tent up off the ground with the other end of the rope and tied it to the other pine. The tent hung on the rope like a canvas blanket on a clothes line. Nick poked a pole he had cut up under the back peak of the canvas and then made it a tent by pegging out the sides. He pegged the sides out taut and drove the pegs deep, hitting them down into the ground with the flat of the axe until the rope loops were buried and the canvas was drum tight.

Across the open mouth of the tent Nick fixed cheesecloth to keep out mosquitoes. He crawled inside under the mosquito bar with various things from the pack to put at the head of the bed under the slant of the canvas. Inside the tent the light came through the brown canvas. It smelled pleasantly of canvas.

Already there was something mysterious and home-like. Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. (Hemingway, 1925)

The amount of detail that Hemingway uses in this passage clearly shows the precise steps Nick takes to set up his camp in the perfect way. It is as if he is hanging on to something, as if he did not do everything perfectly and set it all up just right, he would lose all control and fall off into a mental abyss. So much is riding on doing every single action and activity just right. I think we can safely identify Nick in this story as a stand in for Hemingway, how Hemingway felt and perhaps what he did when he came home from being a wounded and celebrated Red Cross ambulance driver in World War I Italy. Outwardly he was the conquering war hero, giving many talks, highly embellished, about his war experiences. However, we know that he was having trouble settling back into suburban life in Oak Park with its conformity and the demands and expectations of his puritanical and exacting parents. He even had trouble sleeping with the light off when he came back home, often staying up all night and self-medicating with alcohol. He came back a different man from the war, and he needed these rituals as a coping mechanism to help deal with his pain as he outwardly played the triumphant and heroic war hero.

As Malcolm Cowley deftly points out in his famous essay, *Nightmare and Ritual in Hemingway*, one of Hemingway's great strengths that separated him from his imitators was his unique and insightful portrayal of life as it is felt deep below the surface where humanity hides its "buried hopes and fears" and Hemingway confronts "...his nightmares, (and) his rituals for escaping them..." (Cowley, 1945) Everyone has secret fears that are buried deep within them which they try to suppress and not let up to the surface, and Hemingway's gripping writing that captures this hidden part of humanity on a much deeper and primal level is as Cowley states is what is so affecting and authentic about his work.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes is on a fishing trip on the Irati River with his friend Bill Gorton. Jake Barnes, back from being wounded in World War I, is another character Hemingway largely based upon himself. It is a splendid day for fishing, and Jake not only successfully catches a good number of superb trout, but he dresses and packages them in a careful and exacting way.

He was a good trout, and I banged his head against the timber so that he quivered out straight, and then slipped him into my bag.

While I had him on, several trout had jumped at the falls. As soon as I baited up and dropped in again I hooked another and brought him in the same way. In a little while I had six. They were all about the same size. I laid them out, side by side, all their heads pointing the same way, and looked at them. They were beautifully colored and firm and hard from the cold water. It was a hot day, so I slit them all and shucked out the insides, gills and all, and tossed them over across the river. I took the trout ashore, washed them in the cold, smoothly heavy water above the dam, and then picked some ferns and packed them all in the bag, three trout on a layer of ferns, then another layer of ferns, then three more trout, and then covered them with ferns. They looked nice in the ferns, and now the bag was bulky, and I put it in the shade of the tree. (Hemingway, 1926)

This is similar to Nick's careful and thorough preparation for preparing his camp in *The Big Two-Hearted River*. Jake's exacting attention to detail in the right way of preparing and packing the freshly caught trout is highly fetishistic and helps him to gain control over his life. By performing these ritualized actions Jake can at least momentarily forget his personal and romantic troubles, leaving them behind him in the harsh reality of his Paris life.

I have to admit that Hemingway's ability to tell you the best way to do just about everything, is one the great reasons that I love reading his work, and I am certain I am not alone in this. His narrative voice often speaks to you like a close friend who is sharing the particular activity with him and is also "in the know" of the right way to do things. One thinks when reading his prose, "Of course. I would certainly wade the river in this way, or stalk kudu at first light on this path, or prepare lion steaks with this precise way." It is this method of drawing the reader in as a co-conspirator in the expertise of performing any task that makes his writing so successful, accessible, and enjoyable. So the way he writes makes us believe that whatever he writes must be the best, most enjoyable, and most correct way of doing any particular activity. It does not matter that it may not be an activity that we like or are even remotely interested in. It is still enjoyable to read his writing about how to do it right because he writes with such detailed assuredness and confidence and we want to agree with him. I would venture to say that the majority of his readers are not interested in personally going hunting, fishing, following the bullfight season, or indeed fighting in a war, but when Hemingway writes about these subjects with such assuredness and detail, readers eat it up as if we too regularly enjoyed these pursuits. In short, it doesn't matter what Hemingway's subject was; whatever he wrote about he wrote with such detail, vitality, and description of the right way of doing things that it is stimulating and enjoyable to read. Hemingway's coping method of paying attention to performing the smallest parts of each action is surely effective and enhances his writing as highly aesthetic works of literature.

Taking as an extreme example, Hemingway wrote some tantalizing copy for a Ballantine Beer advertisement in 1952. Hemingway writes in the tone of his *Esquire* articles on deep sea fishing from the 1930's:

You have to work hard to deserve to drink it. However, I would rather have a bottle of Ballantine Ale than any other drink after fighting a really big fish.

We keep it iced in the bait box with chunks of ice packed around it. In addition, you ought to taste it on a hot day when you have worked a big marlin fast because there were sharks after him.

You are tired all the way through. The fish is landed untouched by sharks and you have a bottle of Ballantine cold in your hand and drink it cool, light, and full-bodied, so it tastes good long after you have swallowed it. (Hemingway, 1952)

Apparently Hemingway didn't even drink this particular brand or beer, but his authority and assuredness of Ballantine Beer being the proper and most thirst quenching beer to drink after a long hot day of marlin fishing in the Caribbean especially when "iced in the bait box with chunks of ice packed around it." This is the "right" beer and Hemingway even tells you the optimum way to store, drink, and enjoy these bottles. You can almost feel that he is bursting to continue with his advice. He will go on to tell you how you can make a great night of it by correctly cutting up and preparing the fish, grilling it at a beach barbecue on white sand accompanied by plenty of properly iced bottles of Ballantine. Next you will be heading into Havana to have the best post beer and marlin barbecue drink of a daiquiri properly made to his exact specifications, made by the best bartender, sitting at the best seats down at the end of the bar at the La Floridita, the best bar for drinking a daiquiri in Havana. That is what makes this advertisement such great and convincing copy, and I'm sure it helped sell a great amount of this highly mediocre beer.

Of course there are multiple ways to do everything in life and that is what makes it so varied and infinite. But Hemingway's obsession to nail down the "right" way to do everything precludes other ways and means of doing things. Moreover, he could become downright nasty when his convictions were contradicted. If someone did not share his enjoyment of certain aggressive sports or pastimes, he considered them weak and cowardly. For example, at the bullfights in Pamplona in 1925 Hemingway asked his then friend, Harold Loeb how he liked his first bullfight. Loeb voiced his opinion that he felt sorry for how the bulls were treated, and that it involved too much death for him to enjoy it very much (Blume, 2016). The fact that Loeb did not fully appreciate the bullfight for the superior art form Hemingway believed it to be angered Hemingway greatly. Through the rest of the fiesta in Pamplona, Hemingway ignored and scoffed at Loeb, eventually insulting him for hiding behind a woman when Loeb refused to leave town. Loeb was a friend of Hemingway's from Paris who he played tennis with regularly, discussed writing, and who even helped Hemingway get his first book contract with his publisher Boni & Liveright for his first real book, *In Our Time*. Nonetheless, Loeb became an instant enemy when he did not appreciate the bullfight. Hemingway got his ultimate revenge on Harold Loeb by vilifying him in his first highly successful novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, thinly disguising him as the unmanly, cowardly, and privileged Robert Cohn. Hemingway could not forgive Loeb for his wimpy, unmanly, and unappreciative attitude towards the bullfight and he immortalized his ridicule for him in perhaps his most famous book.

So the question becomes why was Hemingway so obsessed with the rituals of knowing the perfect way to do and enjoy practically everything. One can imagine him even expounding on the proper way to brush your teeth to get the best effect and enjoyment out of it. I believe Hemingway uses this fetishization over the correct way of doing things to cover over the emotional pain caused by a large number of significant emotionally harmful events in his life. These very traumatic events included but were not limited to his being blown up and wounded as an ambulance driver in World War I, his fiancé Agnes von Kurowsky's cancellation of their planned marriage by letter when he arrived back in America after being wounded, Hadley's loss of almost all of his early manuscripts at the Gare de Lyon in 1922, his mother's lesbian affair and emasculation of her husband which partly contributed to his father's very traumatic suicide in 1928, and later on his son Gregory's crossdressing and transvestism, as well as his own increasing inability to write in the last decade of his life which eventually led to his suicide in the summer of 1961.

These are all very difficult and traumatic emotional events to say the least that would be difficult for anyone to handle. Hemingway did not really attempt to directly deal with these issues and try to mentally heal; he simply continued working and getting on with his life which was the "right" and manly thing to do especially for a man who grew to adulthood at the time and place where his ideas and concepts about manhood were formed. But it was impossible for these significant traumatic events not have taken an emotional toll on his psyche. Therefore he developed these obsessive fetishistic behaviors of doing everything just right, just as they exactly should be done as a way of coping with the emotionally volatile issues looming just beneath the surface of his life.

Up until the very end of Ernest Hemingway's life when it was too late in the Mayo Clinic, he never received any psychological help. Hemingway just got on with it, with great success at the beginning and progressively less and less as time went on. Dealing with his emotional pain was not the manly thing to do, not something the ultramacho Hemingway felt he could do as the scion of manly behavior in the western world. He could not admit to himself, let alone the public that he suffered from extreme mental anguish. In compensation, as a survival technique he became obsessed with doing the correct thing in every situation in order to keep his head above water. As Hemingway got older these behaviors became more apparent and less effective, and in the end he took the same way out as his father before him. This must have occurred to him as the right thing to do in the situation when he felt there was nothing that could compensate for his inability to write. If only he had been able to deal with his emotional pain head on instead of developing these effective but inadequate fetishistic coping behaviors he may not have ended his life in the way he did. Perhaps it would have opened him up, and enabled him to continue writing and enjoy a happier and more stable life. He clearly had deep seated pain and trauma, and he needed professional psychological help. But as time went by these coping behaviors had become so ingrained in his life and his work, and were in fact so lauded and celebrated by his readers and the public that he must have felt he had no choice but to continue on and "take it" for as long as he could; until the time came when the fetishization of this right way of doing things could no longer save him, and he resorted to the one last action he felt was the right and proper thing to do in his rapidly deteriorating life.

## REFERENCES

- Blume, Lesley. *Everybody Behaves Badly: The True Story Behind Hemingway's Masterpiece The Sun Also Rises*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.
- Cowley, Malcolm. Nightmare and Ritual in Hemingway. *The Portable Hemingway*, by Ernest Hemingway, The Viking Press, 1945.
- Hemingway, Ernest. Ballantine Ale [Advertisement], 1952.
- . *In Our Time*. Boni & Liveright, 1925.
- . *The Sun Also Rises*. Scribner's, 1926.