

NIGHTMARE AND RITUAL IN HEMINGWAY AND POE

A Thesis

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the Faculty of the Graduate School

University of San Carlos

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Literature

by

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NIGHTMARE AND RITUAL IN HEMINGWAY AND POE
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Modern man is at war with himself. He projects this tension within himself to the world outside, causing an atmosphere of anxiety, of despair, of constant fear of annihilation. From a microcosmic tension, it becomes a macrocosmic one. Bishop Fulton Sheen has this to say:

World wars are only the projections of the conflicts waged inside the soul of modern man, for nothing happens in the external world that has not first happened within a soul.¹

War and violence affect and upset not only the physical world but also man in his total personality. True economic values seem to disappear; much worse is the disappearance of the psychological and moral props which make man sure of himself. Having no higher values to cling to, no God (from whom he has alienated himself) to turn to, he turns upon himself for support and finds himself hollow and empty. But before the world, he shows a brave front, a false bravado, a courageous despair against the onslaught of nihilism and meaninglessness of his life. According to Mr. Edmund Fuller,

¹Fulton Sheen, Peace of Soul (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1949), p. 1.

Our time has been described variously as an age of anxiety, an age of schism in the soul, a time when man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine, and ruin, but from inner problems fully as terrible: despair, a conviction of isolation, randomness, meaninglessness in his very existence.²

Having the feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness, man eventually becomes absorbed in the idea of death. But since no man has yet experienced death and come back to describe fully the experience, its actual nature will depend upon the imaginative speculation. Man can have a realistic or idealistic image of death. Of the former, there is the "memento mori," the conqueror worm, the decaying substance and nothing more. In the latter case, the imagination tries its best to eliminate the evidences of physical dissolution and picture death as a doorway to eternal life. While the romanticists and idealists have concentrated on the more shadowy aspects of death, modern writers, who have experienced civil and world wars, tend to picture death realistically as they had witnessed it on the battlefields, in hospital wards, in ravaged countryside.

Literature is said to mirror life and novelists have held on to this idea. More often than not writers have touched on death in their writings, if not directly,

²Edmund Fuller, Man in Modern Fiction (New York: Random House, Inc., 1958), p. 3.

at least its corollary images - disintegration of man's mental capacities, alienation, breakdown of social structures and values. Writers of the 19th century like Galsworthy, Conrad, Hawthorne, Melville and Poe had written of violence and death in their novels and stories. In the early and later 20th century, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Faulkner, and Hemingway had their turn. But outstanding among these in the treatment of violence and death were Poe and Hemingway.

It is not within the scope of this study to delve into the personal life of Poe. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that he is the best representative of the 19th century of a man divided within himself. Being a literary genius in his own right, he projected this tension in his short stories and poems in a way unequalled by other writers of his time. As a romanticist he dwelt in the regions of dreams, hallucinations, and the supernatural terrors of the grave which the 19th century reader widely relished as an escape from the boredom of machines and Victorian rigidity.

Poe, perhaps better than any other writer of his time, defined the idea of death as that idea was held most sacredly by Americans in the 3rd and 4th decades of the 19th century. However strange and exotic his treatment may be to us, it offered no bafflement to his contemporaries; he was for his age a historian whose reports of death might well be

regarded as generally recognized and applicable to his time and as rather suggestive of his own artistic aims and limitations.³

Almost a century later another spokesman of violence and death appeared on the scene. Hemingway, with his gift for minute tactile and sensory images, began writing of the scenery and people around him, of the experiences of war-torn countries, of wounded animals dragging their entrails, of guerilla fighters decapitated.

In no other writer of our time can you find such a profusion of corpses: dead women in the rain; dead soldiers bloated in their uniforms and surrounded by torn papers; sunken liners full of bodies that float past the closed portholes. In no other writer can you find so many suffering animals: mules with their forelegs broken drowning in shallow water off the quay at Smyrna; gored horses in the bull ring; wounded hyenas first snapping at their own entrails and then eating them with relish.⁴

Both writers seem to have one thing in common - their obsession with nightmare in the form of violence and death. For the two of them, death seems to have taken the proportion of an idol which they had to return to, time and time again. The bulk of their stories support this.

Corollary to this is the attendant function of ceremonies and rituals. Violence or death does not come

³Edward Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: The Bolknop Press of Harvard University, 1957), p. 106.

⁴Malcolm Cowley, "Nightmare and Ritual in Hemingway," Hemingway: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Weeks (N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 40.