

FROM MEMORIES TO COUNTERFACTUALS: A CONCEPTUAL JOURNEY IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S "SNOWS OF KILIMANJARO"

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Abstract: *The paper examines a number of unrealized and unauthentic narrative events in Ernest Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" which, despite not being part of the main story line, are still emotionally charged as well as thoroughly and instantly engaging. I argue that our involvement in such counterfactual scenarios might be explained by the fact that we don't feel it to be necessary to choose between the multiple developments of the story. In connection with this, I formulate the question whether this emergent narrative diversity has an implicit effect on the act of reading. It seems that the introduction of the counterfactual stories heightens the immersion effect of the story.*

Keywords: *short story, conceptual journey, counterfactuality, immersion effect*

This work was cofinanced from the *European Social Fund through Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013*, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, *Competitive Researchers in Europe in the Field of Humanities and Socio-Economic Sciences. A Multi-regional Research Network.*

1. Introduction

In *Snows of Kilimanjaro* Harry, a writer, has come to Africa in search of his lost artistic credo and with the belief that he will cleanse his soul and will wash away the "fat" (Hemingway 1995:411) out of his body and mind. He comes to Africa to escape his excessively wealthy American lifestyle and the privileged existence he has been sucked into by marrying an extremely affluent woman, Helen, and by the affiliation with her upscale family. But I would argue that Harry is not only a vulnerable artist but also a defeated traveller who is now caught between life and death, as he is dying in an African camp. What initially seemed to be a mere scratch to the surface of Harry's skin has led to gangrene, causing him horrific pains which steadily intensify due to the lack of life-saving medications. Physically present in the African camp but no longer able to actually enjoy physical mobility, Harry is granted a last chance to take a few imaginary journeys as he feels he must revisit the territory of his younger self. By substituting physical mobility with conceptual mobility, Hemingway empowers his protagonist with the ability to simultaneously inhabit different places where he can directly face his vulnerabilities in order to move beyond them through personal transformation. In his dying moments, Harry is granted the only chance to travel back and forth across imaginary worlds or across spaces he can return to and explore in his imagination. Paris, Constantinople, Italy, Wyoming, Michigan, Austria are the locations revisited by the male protagonist, clearly showing his mental mobility, despite the limited real setting of the story on the plains of East Africa. In effect, Harry now dwells among the untrodden paths of his memory while he surely feels that his imaginary powers must take the ultimate test.

Deprived of physical mobility, Harry can only travel freely through a virtual maze and weave his way through the massively intertwined corridors of his mind. It is in his imagination that Harry attempts to remap the territory of his personal history. Appropriately, haunting reminiscences present him as a traveller; this is the first one in a series of brief flashbacks: “Now in his mind he saw a railway station at Karagatch and he was standing with his pack and that was the headlight of the Simplon-Orient cutting the dark now and he was leaning” (Hemingway 1995:408). He had always meant to write about such experiences but surely, as his art had failed him, he never wrote a line of those. Deeply embittered by regrets and torn apart by excruciating pains in his infected leg, Harry recalls the snowed mountains of Bulgaria, but also the times of sickening loneliness in Paris or Constantinople. Later, he remembers riding in Anatolia through fields of poppies that soon gave him strange opium dreams. And then again Paris, in a café, he recalls Tristan Tzara with his monocle and regular headaches, and other figures and faces he would have liked to write about. He then remembers his blissful but short love affairs, often followed by disquieting quarrels. His memory harks back to other better times when he truly saw the world change, watching it so carefully that he can now remember with precision the details of how people were once different. Uneasily, he has the bitter recollection of a sobbing young boy who had been unjustly arrested and of a slaughtered officer who had been caught in a wire fence so badly that his bowels spilled out over it.

It is in his imagination that he meets up the other fellow-travellers. Williamson, a brother officer, is another traveller, dying like Harry, after being slaughtered by a stick bomb, and subsequently travelling rapidly to death. In order to alleviate his comrade’s pain, Harry gave him the morphine tablets he had actually saved to use himself and was thus able to provide the dying officer partial relief from pain. In the whole sorrowful story, Harry identifies with the defeated traveller, acting as a genuine fellow-traveller who gives assistance on the extremely rough road through human sufferance. There is another episode of travellers who die on the heavily snowed mountains in Bulgaria after they had been repeatedly reassured that it was too soon for snow:

No, that’s not snow. It’s too early for snow. And the Secretary repeating to the other girls, No, you see. It’s not snow and them all saying, It’s not snow we were mistaken. But it was the snow all right and he sent them on into it when he evolved exchange of populations. And it was snow they tramped along in until they died that winter. (Hemingway 1995:408)

Nearly every description of Harry portrays him as a traveller sympathising with other travellers on trail, who eventually become the pursued in the atrocious race with death. The Austrian officers in the leave train gunned down by an officer named Baker on a “bright Christmas day” (Hemingway 1995:409) could be the same Australians that “he skied with later” (Hemingway 1995:409). Had they not been killed by Baker, they might have been skiing together. The penalty for wilfully neglecting to write about his fellow-travellers comes in the form of recurring scenes and images that the dying writer must eventually confront. His unquenchable thirst for writing the stories he had witnessed is amplified by the tormenting guilt for somehow betraying the other travellers. The analysis of such incidents recalled by the dying writer may provide a key to interpreting the role of journeys in the protagonist’s personal history.

2. Pathways into the Conceptual Journey

If the controlling concept of “journey” globally informs the story, which is grounded in a series of spatial stories of travelling and physical movement, I will argue that *Snows* invites its readers to reinterpret the meanings of both physical mobility and conceptual

mobility. The cognitive dimensions of bodily spatial stories have been investigated at length by cognitive scientist Mark Turner (1996; see chapter 2 on “Human Meaning”), who argues that our abstract thought and reasoning are always grounded in the physical environment. As described in Turner’s ground-breaking study *The Literary Mind*, our human ability to interpret abstract stories is based on the identification of basic small stories of events in space, such as ordinary and simple stories in which we recognize the wind blowing clouds through the sky, a child throwing a rock, a mother pouring milk into a glass, or a whale swimming through the water (Turner 1996:13). Even though such stories seem to be outright boring or completely unproblematic, without the knowledge stored in them, we would be less confident in our interaction with the world.

Specifically, reading Hemingway’s short narrative requires a detailed analysis of the bodily spatial stories as the grounding basis for the overall metaphorical understanding of Harry’s journey. The required mental projection concerns a pattern of thought that maps a story of bodily motion onto a non-spatial story. In fact, the exploration of the conceptual schema for journey invites the readers of *Snows of Kilimanjaro* to map this schema onto the target conceptual schema for life. Typically, this metaphoric transfer comes almost automatically, as our conventional metaphoric understanding of “life as journey” contains prefabricated structures of imagination. As described by Mark Johnson (1987:114-120) in his book *The Body in the Mind*, speakers generally project the elements of the source schema (journey) onto components of the target schema (life): the traveller is the person leading a life, the route travelled is mapped onto the ways and means for reaching our aims, our purposes are destinations, difficulties we face in life are impediments on the physical route of the journey, and so forth. An important, perhaps primary, engine of the concept of “journey” is that it must have a beginning, proceed in a linear way, and make progress toward the destination. Crucially then, a *journey defines a path* (Lakoff and Johnson 2003:90). The schema of path has been defined as a recurring image-schematic pattern, which is deeply rooted in our experience with the physical world:

There is the path from your bed to the bathroom, from the stove to the kitchen table, from your house to the grocery store, from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and from the Earth to the Moon. Some of these paths involve an actual physical surface that you traverse, such as the path from your house to the store. Others involve a projected path, such as the path of a bullet shot into the air. And certain paths exist, at present, only in your imagination, such as the path from Earth to the nearest star outside our solar system. (Johnson 1987:114)

In adopting a cognitive approach to Ernest Hemingway’s short story, I place emphasis on our bodily experiences of space which can work their way up into abstract meanings and non-physical phenomena, inviting thus readers to interpret Harry’s physical journey and his conceptual mobility. The fact that we use our bodily experience of space may provide us with sufficient information to understand non-physical concepts imaginatively and creatively. In so doing, we elaborate on the image schematic structures of imagination in order to transform them into abstract patterns of thought. Such conventional metaphoric projections, which are commonplace unoriginal transformations mapping conceptually the source onto the target, inform *Snows*. Reading Hemingway’s story as fundamentally constituted through the conceptual metaphor of *life is a journey* may sound straightforward and simple, but the use of the concept of “journey” and its metaphoric transformations are anything but simple. This is the ground of the story. It is important to keep in mind, though, that our approach is to proceed from it, “for it is the most important, most complex, and by far the least well understood thing [...]. We must start with this ground, admit our great ignorance of what is involved in it, and seek to explain it.” (Turner 1991:242)

The scenes and images far removed from the African camp safari, represented in Harry's memories, reveal the importance of the journey in Hemingway's story, inviting readers to activate the journey schema to reach the relevant structure for understanding the underlying metaphorical story. Specifically, the journey schema in *Snows* has well-differentiated coordinates: the protagonists follow a path leading to a destination and a desired goal, Harry and Helen's safe homecoming from the safari; their journey should involve progress toward the purpose – unfortunately, the progress halts before the goal is reached as Harry's medical condition worsens; the journey involves the use of vehicles that serve to transport the travellers to the destination; in this case, the rescue plane that might arrive in time to take Harry to a hospital. But Harry is literally rotting from within, as his gangrene is killing him; the fact that he lacks physical mobility becomes the main impediment which prevents the couple from finally attaining their goal: journeying back home.

Despite the fact that we typically associate the journey schema with images of motion and movement, in *Snows* the protagonist lays confined to his cot, showing openly unwillingness to move: "I don't want to move," the man said. "There is no sense in moving now except to make it easier for you" (Hemingway 1995:405). Obviously, Harry can't move because of his impaired physical condition, but also the other characters are not as physically active as we might expect from a safari experience. Instead of hunting, hiking, or shooting big game, Harry's personal boy "was sitting by his bed" (Hemingway 1995:410), his wife "was sitting by him in a canvas chair" (Hemingway 1995:409) or "leaning back in the chair" (Hemingway 1995:422). The reversed action story suggests that slowly non-action will replace expected mobility and physical activity will be substituted by prolonged lethargy, which may lead us to think that "Impediments to Action are Impediments to Motion". This general conceptual expression is part of our general cognitive architecture and it should not be interpreted as a mere figure of speech. It is not simply a matter of speech, but it also guides the way we think.

In this complex story of a journey, it seems that the overall action story and physical mobility might be temporarily suspended, as Harry's gangrened leg gets worse, while wild animals begin to cross the open space, slipping lightly along the edge of the camp. In judging this image, readers plunge into Harry's internalized thoughts:

just then it occurred to him that he was going to die. It came with a rush; not as a rush of water not of wind; but of a sudden evil-smelling emptiness and the odd thing was that the hyena slipped lightly along the edge of it. (Hemingway 1995:414)

3. Counterfactuals or As the World Might Have Been

By opening up the male protagonist's mental world, the story opens itself up to a constellation of events that only exist for Harry, for his memories and for his internalized thoughts: these are his reveries that he has meant to write about "but he had never written a line of that" (Hemingway 1995:409). These are non-actual events in a non-existent story. They are non-events of "all the stories that he meant to write" (Hemingway 1995:420) in an unrealized and unauthentic narrative world. In connection with this, I formulate the question whether this emergent narrative diversity has an implicit effect on the act of reading. It seems that the introduction of the counterfactual stories heightens the immersion effect of the story. For readers to share Harry's grief and feeling of loss, they need to be fully immersed into his unwritten 'masterpieces'. Technically, readers are engaged in systematic counterfactual thought, as we truly have the potential for counterfactual thinking as a fundamental mode of human reasoning:

Counterfactual thinking is an essential feature of consciousness. Few indeed have never pondered a lost opportunity nor regretted a foolish utterance. (Roese and Olson 1995:46-47)

The distinctly printed vignettes move the story away from the African safari camp and give us access to the protagonist's thoughts and memories. As readers are immersed into Harry's mental work, by interpreting tags such as "he remembered" (Hemingway 1995:422), "he thought" (Hemingway 1995:408), "in his mind" (Hemingway 1995:408), they become part of his reveries while the African safari and the physical space disappear slowly. In other words, the italicized fragments that are integrated into the coherent narrative, dealing with Harry's past life as a soldier, a husband, an expatriate in Paris, and a grandson, can all be taken together to speak about Harry's distinct experiences that he could have used to create fiction. While Harry is the internal focalizer of these loosely connected stories, their intrinsic potential for fiction has never been exploited. They are lost stories and the type of writing Harry wishes he had created but never did. In these five jumbled short narratives, the protagonist confronts himself with the rich possibilities of a past that has never become real and that opens the door to bitter regret, now that death is nearly imminent.

Snows is concerned with the branching or multiplication of narrative pathways. If characters become involved in the fragmentation of space, their own life trajectories receive different configurations, and perhaps more importantly, their fictional mind is dramatically transformed by having to manage unexplored possibilities, diversification, and multiplicity. Ahead of them there is the unknown terrain of possible futures, as well as the yet undiscovered realm of missed opportunities. The male character ventures into these uncharted spaces and remaps his present life accordingly. Harry's ultimate ability of making experiments about what might have been or speculations about how things may turn out creates room for counterfactual thought. The concept of "journey" is cognitively inseparable from the issue of multiplication and diversification, which physically translates into the branching of narrative space, and non-physically, into imaginative counterfactuals.

As readers witness the remapping of narrative space in *Snows*, more pluralist narrative views occur and new possibilities arise within an unstable chain of unresolved narrative conflicts. In her study on *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, Hilary Danneberg (2008) speaks specifically of the counterfactual as a particular plot device in which narrative paths diverge, thus creating space for diversification and multiplicity. According to the scholar, plots of counterfactuality need to adopt a reader-oriented theoretical model that should examine the key cognitive operations stimulated by the plot. In the first instance, the narrative strategy or device of the counterfactual stimulates the reader's "*cognitive desire* to be in possession of the second aspect of plot" (Danneberg 2008:14). An examination of the apparently disjointed mini-narratives in *Snows* involves the reconstruction of "the sense of a double plot", as termed by Suzanne C. Ferguson (1994:223) in her analysis of modernist short fiction.

Snows does not, though, provide a clear key to the ontological status of the mini-narratives, and so the reader struggles to explore the different versions of Harry's life and determine the role of his counterfactual fantasies. In effect, they are no less relevant than the actual version of events in that they do not simply show the way in which the *reality* of the story could have turned out but they construct an ontologically unstable narrative space in which actual events and characters remain elusive.

4. Conclusions

With Hemingway's story, readers cannot find the ontological clarity of realist texts, and therefore they begin to take delight into the bewilderingly fascinating game of playing with alternate versions of narrative realities, of constructing pluralistic worlds, and of

permanently experimenting with unrealized possibilities. Accordingly, the text's ontological ambiguities and complexities map out an unstable plot development in which readers can play with virtual narrative products that do not occur in the actual text universe. By allowing one world to become possible or actual, readers do not follow a chronological sequence but become immersed in the sum of dynamic possibilities and take a "multiple-world approach to plot" (Dannenberg 2008:63). In this view, the chronological story gains multifaceted complexity and becomes more comprehensive, in the sense that it now incorporates events that actually occurred in the story and events that are narrated but prove to be counterfactual constructs.

Viewed in this fashion, reading Hemingway's short story is in itself an ontologically unstable act, through which readers constantly negotiate meaning and gradually assess and reassess events and relationships from a variety of possibilities that have all the force to say something new about the narrative world. If characters cross different physical world levels, they are also able to engage in exploring the imaginal worlds of alternate constructs and future possibilities. At all times they are drawn into a narrative space of alternate versions, a space of branching of narrative paths, which creates new patterns of diversification and multiplicity. Readers must engage in experiencing such fictional spaces equipped with cognitive mechanisms that allow them to accept altered outcomes and dramatically reconsidered life trajectories.

Harry's journey into his virtual past as a fulfilled writer and an accomplished traveller, and Helen's considerations of an alternate trip, together with the two projections of potential futures, are not part of the story at all but they speak of deviations that evoke the capacity of narrative to simulate our ability of generating versions of reality. Then, counterfactual generation becomes essential not only for plot development but also for stimulating our human propensity to juggle virtual constructs. Globally informing the whole story, the controlling concept of "journey" is cognitively inseparable from the issue of multiplication and diversification. The examination of the cognitive simulation of the bodily experience of space has shown that, physically, the idea of multiplication translates into the branching of narrative space, and non-physically, into imaginative counterfactuals.

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