

Dionysian Africa as an Antithesis of the Apollonian West

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Abstract

On his deathbed, the protagonist Harry in the story “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” examines his past life. He concludes that he lived an empty life and that none but he is to blame for it. The narrative is structured in a diegetic frame, telling the past events of the protagonist by separating them off from the present events. The narrative, consequently, swings back and forth from interjected flashbacks to flashforward scenes, suggesting a triumph of the Apollonian virtue over the Dionysian vice, as the yardstick to measure a man. In setting his locales and depiction of places, Hemingway employs Manichean dialectics, indicative of his internalizing an Orientalist perspective that places Africa as opposed to the West. The bipartite representation reflects the author’s subscription to the high Victorian values that he had absorbed while growing up. This paper contends that “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” embodies a dialectical struggle between the Apollonian virtue and the Dionysian vice in the human soul, presented as thesis and as antithesis. It attempts to decode the embedded binary symbols, illustrating that the usage of the imageries of the snow-capped mountains and the peaks, as opposed to the dusty plane of Africa infested with beasts, alludes to representation of life and death. Further, it asserts that the idea of Africa is feminized when Hemingway equates the continent with the image of Helen, making the latter a synecdoche of the former; and that this blending of hegemony and misogyny reinforces a politics of aesthetics that obliterates, distorts, and dehumanizes the image of Africa.

Keywords: Orientalism, Manicheanism, Dialectics, Eurocentrism, Synecdoche

Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” is a pastiche of Leo Tolstoy’s novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Anticipating an imminent death, like Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy’s story, Harry in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” examines his past life. He juxtaposes his current state of physical disability and moral delinquency with his past. Harry concludes that his life has been an unfulfilled dream because he squandered his talent on a hedonistic pursuit; that he lived an empty life, and that none but he is to blame for it. The interjected narrative subsumes Harry’s stream of consciousness and presents the protagonist’s past events to the reader in a diegetic manner by setting them off from the events of the presentiment. The pace of the narration consequently, swings back and forth between analeptic and proleptic modes, from interjected flashbacks to flashforward scenes. The narrative frame provides the readers a broader perspective by allowing them to transcend a specific point of time



in the narration, so as to ascertain the origins of Harry's anguish. Describing the death of Harry, the effaced narrator subtly suggests a triumph of the Apollonian virtue over the Dionysian vice as the yardstick to measure a man.

To achieve his aesthetics, Hemingway uses Manichean dialectics in choosing his locales and depiction of landscapes as well as the respective ambience. The choice indicates Hemingway's complete internalization of the Orientalist perception of Africa as the Dark Continent, a perception deeply rooted in his subscription to the high Victorian values and evinced in his equating "physical courage to moral strength" (Meyers 98), as a kernel of individual integrity. The story, thus, projects a bipartite vision that abstracts Africa into a diaphanous apparition. The treatment of the African continent as the "Other" originates in "Western psychology," writes Achebe, as there is a desire to "set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (3).

This psychological need that Achebe mentions is manifested in Hemingway's story, when he places pristine Africa in opposition to the industrialized West. This essay posits that "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" embodies a dialectical notion of the perpetual struggle between the Apollonian virtue and the Dionysian vice in an individual soul, presented as thesis and as antithesis, respectively. This being the case, this paper attempts to decode the embedded binary symbols, discernable in the story. It illustrates that the usage of the imageries of the snow-capped mountains and the peaks as opposed to the dusty plains of Africa overrun with beasts, alludes to the representation of life and death. It further contends that to portray its destructive power, the idea of Africa is feminized by Hemingway, when he equates the continent with the image of Helen, making the latter a synecdoche of the former. This blend of hegemony and misogyny reinforces a politics of aesthetics that obliterates, distorts, and dehumanizes the image of Africa.

"The Snows of Kilimanjaro" begins with a riddle of death. The description of a dried carcass on the mountain is followed by the declaration of the protagonist's resignation to his impending death as he notices that the "big birds squat ... obscenely," waiting for his death (Hemingway 3-4). From its inception, the story sets "death" as its theme, writes Stolzhus, from which there is no "recovery" (217). The imminence of death, however, catches Harry off-guard since he has come to Africa to recuperate from his ennui by purging himself of the "fat off his soul the way a fighter went into the mountains to work and train in order to burn it out of his body" (Hemingway 11). Harry evidently was attributing a therapeutic quality to Africa. His conviction in the pristine, bucolic, and pastoral Africa's ability to supply him with the required spiritual aliments, results in his associating Africa with the "creative phase of [his] life." He considers this phase as "natural existence," since before becoming the prey of lucre, Africa served him as his "spiritual home," where he was always the "happiest." To "start" it all over "again," therefore, he

considers Africa as his springboard (Hemingway 10). This intent to purify a corrupt soul, writes Oldsey, makes the story a symbolic attempt to attain the “heights” of a structured religion by “secular means” (188).

The world of Harry, however, becomes topsy-turvy; he forgets to apply the “iodine,” as a thorn had scratched his knee (Hemingway 13), resulting in the gradual atrophy of his right leg. Africa, or more precisely, the image of a therapeutic Africa, turns out to become Harry’s hospice: lying on his deathbed, he can introspect on the completion of his cycle of life, “out of which man comes and into which he returns at last” (Evans 602). In the remaining final moments, Harry concludes that he traded his talent for luxury, lived through an estranged marriage, and promoted a life of self-deception (Hemingway 11). The realization makes him angry; he quarrels with his phlegmatic wife Helen constantly and dies heartbroken. In the process of dying, Harry recalls the images of the snow-capped mountains of Schrunz and Black Forrest (Hemingway 7, 19). In the delirious penultimate moment before drawing his last breath, he “sees” the peak of the Kilimanjaro, believing that that is “where he was going” (Hemingway 27).

In light of Harry’s ambition as a writer, scaling Kilimanjaro becomes his symbolic attempt to gain immortality, because “the act of writing,” states Bluefarb, could be metaphorically compared to an “act of climbing” (6). The reference of the leopard that approaches the “House of God,” on the other hand, alludes to a man’s “attempt to transcend his animal nature,” so as to reach his “spiritual plane of existence” (Stephens 85). Metaphorically, Harry then is striving to attain a transcendent reality, in Aristotelian terms which is described as the “Pure Mind,” often equated with the “nature of God” (Bluefarb 6). The buzzards and the hyenas are the metaphors for the banal mendacity of human existence. At his death, in other words, Harry experiences a symbolic resurrection and spiritual ascension.

Until attaining this peak experience, as Harry remains tied to his temporality, he feels bitter. The resulting caustic resentment finds its outlet in vexation. Harry makes Helen a scapegoat, blaming her wealth for his hedonism (Baker 20), reasoning that though “this rich bitch” is a “kindly caretaker,” she also serves as the ultimate “destroyer of his talent” (Hemingway 11). His acrimony towards Helen is commensurate to his measuring her worth in terms of wealth and sexuality. Despite her having a pretty countenance, “pleasant body,” perky “breasts,” “useful thighs,” and the aptitudes that he values about her, she reminds him of the creeping up of death (Hemingway 12, 18). Helen becomes a symbol of a void, of that dark “*nada* that haunts him and that causes him to dwell obsessively with death” (Stoltzfus 221).

Sensuality is sharply contrasted to spirituality in Harry’s dualistic perception of Helen. Harry identifies her sensuality and the latent fecundity as the source of his fall. Because the lasting nubility of a woman like Helen and the pristine land of Africa share a common aspect of fecundity, Harry effectively turns Helen into a

synecdoche of Africa, both being a manifestation of Mother Nature, with the power to reproduce that binds a man to both. Unfolding this analogy explains why her “pleasant smiles” makes him feel the approach of death (Hemingway 18), since it reminds him of his Faustian enslavement. Contrary to his anticipation, Africa and by extension Helen, serves him as an agent of death. Ironically, he attached himself to both, anticipating rejuvenation. He expected the amenities of life from Helen and a resurgent creativity from Africa, but the former deprived him of his creativity and the latter of his biological life.

The epiphany that he has courted Thanatos believing it Eros, makes Helen’s “pleasant smiles” as despicable as the laughter of the hyena; not only does the hyena wait to devour his carrion, its shrill laughter appears to be mocking his intelligence, as does the soothing voice of Helen, reminding him of his castration. Helen, thus, is made a symbolic scavenger: descriptions of her prior amorous relations allude to her scavenging nature that is reinforced by the suggestion that she castrated Harry’s creativity by means of her sexuality. The suggestion, ironically, exonerates Harry of his volition; and the misogynistic attribution makes Helen a bestial villain as the hyena. For, following the Anglo-Saxon tradition, Hemingway thought of the hyenas as “hermaphrodites, scavengers, singers of sad songs, smelly, ugly, and ultimately, comical in their failure to comprehend the ‘realities’ of our perceptions” (Glickman 506-7). Both Helen and the hyenas are conflated as identical beasts in Harry’s symbolic perception; and his abomination towards both is intensified further because, for Harry, the two constitute the objective correlatives, linking him to death.

Africa as a Dark Continent too invokes a profound disgust in Harry. In this case, the culprit is its “mysterious nature” (Evans 602) and its state of disorderliness: failure to put iodine on time, breaking down of the truck, and the non-arrival of the rescue party (Stoltzfus 217). Rationality, the privy of civilization, disappears in this land of primitivism and mystery. Its ambience becomes unforgiving and its denizens behave contrarily. The “half baked” *kikuyu* driver fails to check the oil, burning down the truck (Hemingway 6). Its inhabitant, the personal boy, for instance, is of dubious origin, who uses an Indian appellation like “*memsahib*” than speaking a local patois, and Helen also sports an Indian outfit: “*jodhpurs*” (Hemingway 10, 12). This projection of Africa as confusing, inauthentic, and disorderly allows it to be placed as “the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (Achebe 3). The storyline, in following Achebe’s reasoning, exposes itself of having an engaged set of demerits, similar to African fictions of Joseph Conrad for which Edward Said made a scathing criticism. The gist of Said’s criticism is essentially valid and equally applicable to Hemingway. For, in representing Africa, like his predecessor, Hemingway also gives the impression that the “Westerners may have physically left ... Africa, but they retained [it] not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continue ... to rule morally and intellectually,”

and that for the benefit of Africa, there is no “alternative to imperialism” (*Culture and Imperialism* 27-8).

Hemingway’s subtle reiteration of these colonial vestiges is perplexing, since Orientalism could be defined, notes Said, as a form of “dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it ... ruling over it: in short, Orientalism [constitutes] ... a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” Concurrently, asserts Said, the divisive “us vs. them” binary is applied to distinguish the Europeans from “those” of the “Non-European” origins, assuming an inherent “*positional* superiority” of the European identity (*Orientalism* 3, 7). Given that Orientalism originated in the metropolises of colonial Europe, one wonders, why Hemingway subscribed to a similar attitude? The Americans of his time, after all, considered the Far East as Orient.

The Euro-centric perceptions toward Africa that Hemingway subsumes are a direct result of his English heritage and his early identification with the Victorian values, acquired via reading the imperial fictions (Spilka 6). Kipling left a permanent mark on Hemingway’s “technique, tone, theme, and code of honor,” writes Meyers (88); Hemingway took him as his “aesthetic model,” and from Kipling he learnt the techniques of short story writing. Because of their shared “biographical” and “literary affinities,” Hemingway retained a life-long admiration for Kipling, even when the latter fell out of favor. Though he distinguished between Kipling’s “aesthetic and politics aspects” (Meyers 91, 93), both shared a set of common “themes” in writing, both described their protagonists’ “emotions in extreme situation: action, violence, brutality as well as loneliness, insomnia, and breakdown,” notes Meyers (97).

The shared thematic content and the patterns of emotional portrayal that Meyers notes are abundant in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro.” Africa is projected as uncanny, effeminate, and disorderly with a latent violence and death, as it is being feminized in the image of Helen. Like Helen, Africa is effeminate, as much as, like her, it is fatal for a macho man like Harry. Its appeals lay in its primitivism, which radiates its charm as a siren to allure men, intending to entrap his masculine strength; and its fatality is exposed in eventual devouring of its prey; those lucky to escape the deathtrap, however, are kept as hostage by this impassive Circe. The flocks of buzzards and the pride of the hyenas keep the hostages in perpetual terror, reminding them of imminent death. The conflation of this encased allure and the inherent fatality that Africa embodies is presented symbolically in the dialectics of Helen and Hyena. The homonymic quality of their names and the intended personification in choosing the dictions as a pair are evident. Helen also alludes to her mythic namesake, the personification of the *femme fatale*, of the ultimate flame for the sins of the flesh, who ruined the lives of the masculine Trojans. The adverse legacy is hinted to have continued in this case as well. Helen ruins Harry by castrating his masculinity, curtailing his ability to use his pen, an extended metaphor for phallus, by means of exercising her sexuality. Moreover, she devours her prey silently, one at a time, as it

is her fashion: prior to Harry, she had had others, as spouse and lovers (Hemingway 12).

Once the hyena and Helen are conflated in Harry's perception, they are portrayed as two faces of the same coin, one as the alter ego of the other. Behind her exterior beauty, as the Janus-faced Helen is suggested to have hidden her cannibalistic and carnivorous features, so is Africa portrayed as a quagmire that covers its interior fatality behind her exterior charm. The only escape from this tragedy of being gradually atrophied is a quick death, metaphorical and/or real, to ascend the snowy peaks, the symbol of the Pure Mind, above the mundane and bestial plains of primitivism. Though tainted with hegemony and misogyny, Hemingway captures the dilemma of a conflicted soul, of an eternal cosmic struggle between good and evil, however, at the expense of Africa and the Africans. In the story, the mute Dark Continent is personified as Helen and is made an arch-villain, a symbol of the Dionysian other, legitimate to be exploited, bruised, and abused, though through Helen, it pleads: "I've been destroyed two or three times already. You wouldn't want to destroy me again, would you?" (Hemingway 14). But the pleading falls on deaf ears and Africa as much as Helen remains the plain for hunting big game and pursuing exorbitant hedonism. After all, though it can inflict its raiders with the curse of gangrene, it still is a "rich bitch," meant to be exploited, because its prospects are poetical: in its dreams, it promises a house in Long Island (Hemingway 5, 9, 27).

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