THE CONCEPT OF THANATOS IN HEMINGWAY'S NOVELS

Nematollah Moradi
Research Scholar, University of Mysore
Dr. Lingaraj Gandhi
Reader in English, University of Mysore

Some propitious vistas pertaining to Hemingway’s enchantment with war were provided by Jeffrey Meyers in his article “Hemingway’s Five Wars”. He traces early ignition of war-love in Hemingway’s glorification of his grandfathers who fought in the Civil War. He follows his war fascination by wars at the turn of the century like the Spanish-American War, the Boer War, and Russo-Japanese War and his indulgence as a boy to read the Old Testament since it was full of battles. He went to all major wars of his time including World War I as an ambulance driver with the Red Cross the account of which is reflected in A Farewell to Arms. He was eager to fight in that war but was rejected by the army because of defective vision. He also enjoyed different aspects of war, as Jeffrey Meyers adds, like masculine comradeship of war, the brave commitment to battle, the constant test of courage and distinct reality of war (Modern Fiction Studies: Vol.25, No.5-8,1985).

Ernest Hemingway, one of the writers of early twentieth century, was affected by the historical event of World War I due to his direct involvement in what is labeled as The Great War. This young writer of America went to war with a sense of what John Rohrkeemper terms “high adventure” (Modern Fiction Studies: Vol.30, No.1, 1984), otherwise he would have never jeopardized his life for the sake of those whose forfeited sense of patriotism had largely been aggravated by encountering havoc and heavy casualties of war. Hemingway like many of the people affected by war was detrued in the face of realities of war so strongly that his works were later dubbed the stories of “Lost
Generation”. However, it seems that he never wanted to spare one second, even when he was engaged in writing a story or novel, in diminishing his interest in this type of “high adventure” that nearly claimed his life. Is it sadism, masochism, Eros, Thanatos, adventure, playing game with death, wish-fulfillment, or thirst for reputation which accounts as driving force behind his actions?

Relevance of Hemingway’s war and war-aftermath novels to old and modern contexts can also be substantiated so far as war, love, and importantly human psyche are not the things that man has dispensed with up to now. History is replete with war stories being instigated by those who have benefited from it and likewise wars are still carried out and more fuels are added to its fire by one-track minded ideologists who assiduously seek their own profit in the names of certain dogma and democracy. Love as being both the sources of devotion and destruction is not something of the past which could be substituted or subverted. Love has a quintessential role in procreation and maintaining man’s life since human psyche is not going to be altered during the courses of any specific time. War and love are representative of two unconscious forces of life and death which are called Eros and Thanatos in Psychoanalytic terminology.

Hemingway along with his characters is more or less inundated with the concept of death and its defiance. The idea of death having its deep roots in man’s unconscious in the form of Thanatos is quintessential and driving force behind the demeanors of all of major characters of the wartime and postwar novels. Hemingway’s heroes are often placed in an encounter with death and they usually choose to confront death. Fredrick Henry and Robert Jordan give vent to their death drives by rushing to the scene of action. Bullfighters like Romero and Belmonte are in constant confrontation with death. War veterans like Jake, Yogi, and the Colonel have come to grips with death during the wars, although they endangered their health and well-being.

Reconciliation with the above-mentioned idea is impossible for an ordinary person so long as he believes that confrontation with death is stupidity. But Freud, as a great thinker, justifies the existence of this kind of
confrontation and death-dealing issue through an instinctual-biological hypothesis of innate aggression which he names death drive:

*Death Drive would serve as a biological justification for all the ugly and dangerous impulses against which we are struggling. It must be admitted that they stand nearer to Nature than does our resistance to them for which an explanation needs to be found... there is no use in trying to get rid of men's aggressive inclinations.*


In order to understand why Freud took this view and regarded the death drive as a necessary component of the human mind, one must examine his model of the psyche which is delineated in *The Ego and the Id* (1927). Freud saw the mind as composed of two oppositional forces of Eros and Thanatos. Whereas Eros or the life-drive aims to promote unity, procreation and creativity, Thanatos or the death-drive aims to destruct and destroy. The tension between the two is the source of ambivalence, duality and strife, which permeate human behavior.

Most of Hemingway’s novels concern man’s facing death or coming to terms with the concept of death and Thanatos. But neither the concept of death nor an experience with death has darkened Cohn and Scripps’ fields of vision in *The Torrents of Spring*. The death drive seems meaningless to them so far as they are diligently after Eros and the life drives. They yearn for life but they do not consider its antithesis. Since bullfighting deals with death, Cohn of *The Sun Also Rises* labels it as abnormal and likes to create or finance diversions to rid
himself of a vague anxiety about death. Both Scripps and Cohn have not been to war and death’s finality is foreign to them.

Freud believes that although death is the necessary outcome of life and it is something natural and undeniable, in reality, people are accustomed to behave otherwise. They display an unmistakable tendency to eliminate it from life and hush it up. Whenever people make the attempts to imagine their own death, they find it unimaginable. They perceive that they really can survive as spectators. The psychoanalytic school asserts that at bottom no one believes in his own death, and in the unconscious every one is convinced of his own immortality (Civilization, War and Death, 1968).

All through Across the River and Into the Trees wind heralds death for Colonel Cantwell. The wind is blowing hard from the mountains on the Friday afternoon of the Colonel’s drive by the way of Latisana to Venice. It sharpens all the outlines of the buildings on Torcello, Byrano, and Murano so that they look geometrically clear, as the consciousness of approaching death might clarify the vision of a dying man. When the Colonel asks the waiter to open all the windows of his hotel room, the waiter protests that the wind is too strong. But the Colonel will have them open and the wind enters the room as it were implacably defying the soldier’s implacable defiance (Carlos Baker, Hemingway: The Artist As Writer).

The Colonel finds death unimaginable and he does not believe in his own death. Therefore he spends the final moments of his life with favorite pastimes such as hunting, lovemaking, and the pursuit of precious sensations. The Colonel’s Eros and instinct of self-preservation becomes once more vigorous in the face of death. From beneath the golden and musical idyll that Hemingway has built up to lead his hero into a safe port, the old desperation breaks through. What the writer really felt was the anguish of Cantwell’s lonely march towards extinction. It is the despair that lurks behind the Colonel’s kisses and at the moment of lovemaking thoughts of funeral obsesses him. The Colonel has lived by sensations and death is the last sensation. He waits for the death and
seeks to the end the satisfaction of each appetite. Likewise Fredrick Henry, transformed later as Colonel Cantwell, has his own reflections about death and risk of losing his life at the time and setting of action. He thinks of joining the British Army in which there is a high probability of getting killed, but anyway he does not rule out of the hazardous nature of war even as an ambulance driver and does not believe in getting killed there: “Well, I knew I would not be killed. Not in this war. It did not have anything to do with me. It seemed no more dangerous to me myself than war in the movies” (38).

The death drive seems to be still operative in a veteran like Jake Barnes who is the real embodiment of Fredrick Henry after World War I. Jake goes to watch bullfights because he knows that in Spain death is an ever-present guest. Jake has survived a world war and he has seen death at firsthand. He can no longer ignore death and he is sympathetic to the role of the bullfight within its culture. The same comes true of Lady Brett Ashley who is the outlived version of Catherine Barkley also has experienced the World War I and acted as a nurse in Italian front. Brett watches her first bullfight and he is fascinated with its ritual of death. She is especially fascinated by its pageant’s handsome angel of death, Pedro Romero. Earlier she had feared that the killing would bother her but she finds herself spellbound.

According to Freud the death drive performs its task in two ways. It can be turned outwards or it can be internalized. The death drive must be externalized in order to protect the organism from its own destructiveness. Directing aggression outwards is essential to survival of the organism; otherwise the same aggression would be directed against the organism itself as self-destruction:

*The erotic instincts vouch for the struggle. The death instinct becomes an impulse to destruction when, with the aid of certain organs, it directs its action*
outwards, against external objects. The living being, that is to say, defends its own existence by destroying foreign bodies. But, in one of its activities, the death instinct is operative within the living being and we have sought to trace back a number of normal and pathological phenomena to his introversion of the destructive instinct. We have committed the heresy of explaining the origin of human conscience by some ‘turning inward’ of the aggressive impulse. Obviously when this internal tendency operates on too large a scale, it is no trivial matter, rather a positively morbid state of things; whereas the diversion of the destructive impulse towards the external world must have beneficial effect.

(Civilization, War and Death, P.92)

_Farewell to Arms_ epitomizes this instinct with regard to Fredrick Henry who does not know the reason why he serves in Italian Army as an American when he is questioned by his comrades. His prevaricating responses insinuate that the response is too close to his personality. Some critics like Charles Hatten have found the answer in masculinity: “Since Henry reveals no alternative reason for having entered the war, such scenes hint that Henry entered the army
simply to establish manhood through the quintessential masculine activity of war” (Journal of History and Sexuality: Vol.4, No.1, 1993). The superintendent of Milan hospital, Miss Van Campen, does not like him and seems to think it is somewhat disgraceful that he is with the Italians. It is Thanatos with its bearing in the unconscious mind that has led him to go far beyond the borders of his country and stage the aggression which is being externalized by the help of war. War is nothing but an outlet for giving vent to this instinct to externalize his innate aggression in the forms of violence, cruelty, and savagery.

Violence which is the immediate progeny and outcome of externalizing innate aggression of death drives is abound in almost all of Hemingway’s novels in one form or another, and it holds true in today’s context of wars. According to Surendra Singh Chandel who believes that violence is the cardinal characteristic of Hemingway’s novels (Violence in Hemingway, p.1), violence is cardinal attributes of involving people in contemporary wars. The fact that violence begets and violence is an established phenomenon since it entails human suffering, chaos, cruelty, casualty, devastation, and despair.

It is the death instinct that conducted Jake, Yogi, and the Colonel toward war so long as this instinct functions in every living being. They successfully directed this drive and aggression outwards by participating in war. They defended their own existence by killing the enemy who is foreign to them. They survived their organisms far better than Cohn and Scripps who internalized their death instinct. They refused to go to war and directed their death instincts against their own organism, which resulted in self-destruction.

Another character who externalized his aggression is epitomized by Colonel Cantwell. From his youth till the end of the World War II, the Colonel had been directing his death instinct towards external world and external objects. Therefore the Colonel succeeded in defending his own existence by killing the people he hated. When Renata asks him how many he had killed, he says that counting is impossible. Then Renata asks if he had any remorse or bad dreams about it, the Colonel answers: “Never”, “Nor bad dreams. But usually
strange ones, combat dreams, always, for a while after combat. But then strange
dreams about places mostly"(*Across the River and Into the Trees*, p. 97).

But after the war the Colonel began to internalize his death
instinct. According to Nothrop Frye Colonel feels his kinship with those who
have been maimed or victimized by war. The Colonel knows that no one has
profited from it except profiteers. His approaching death gives a better intensity to
the ordinary events of his life. Everything that remains for him in life he accepts
simply and without question (*Hemingway: The Critical Heritage*, p.394)
Colonel’s early prototype Fredrick Henry had reached to this conclusion long
before Colonel would go through excruciating experience of World War II that
there is a class of people, bourgeoisie, who reap the benefits of war and make
money and establishes themselves firmly on the throne of power.

On the whole mankind is torn between a drive for Eros and a
drive toward Thanatos and aggression. The eagerness to engage in war is an effect
of the drive toward aggression, which itself is always embedded in political,
social, and economic context. One can bring Eros into play against aggression and
whatever leads him to share important concerns produces a sense of community.
Aggression is a force whose objects can be changed and direction reversed. This
flexibility in direction and aim means that aggression is not necessarily harmful.
The death drive is an inherent tendency, which cannot be eliminated, but can be
diverted or sublimated. Civilization is an evolutionary process that develops
through the action of Eros, striving to unite people, families, and nations into one
human unity. Against this drive stands the opposite destructive force attempting to
disintegrate biological, psychological, and social unities. Human development
evolved out of this struggle between Eros and destruction. Freud has already
concluded that violence and aggression cannot be eliminated from human
existence. Although human aggression is innate but it is not uncontrollable.

It is in *A Farewell to Arms* that the hero’s development
through the struggle of Eros and Thanatos takes a new shape in favor of Eros
represented by his love. Fredrick Henry controls and subjugates his death drives
by deserting the army and taking a giant leap of it thanks to Catherine Barkley who succeeds in going through the same procedure as well. Wesley A. Kort overlaps this argument by proposing the notion of transformation which commences first by Henry’s excruciating war experience. Then he adds that they have underestimated and mistaken the nature of the war and Henry comes to the full recognition of nature which had been bestowed by his father. He also took utmost pleasure watching acts of violence and aggression. He draws a close affinity between war and bullfighting and whenever there is no war to be engaged, he took refuge in bullfighting to quench his sadistic thirst for aggression. In his deep-sea fishing, Hemingway killed many gargantuan marlines in the Gulf Stream. His big-game hunting in Africa resulted in shooting and slaughtering of a great number of wildlife animals including lions, kudu, rhino just to name a few. He witnessed killing the enemy soldiers in Spain, and he himself killed, as he claimed, a great many Germans in World War II.

It seems that under no condition Hemingway wants to learn from his war experience that was clouded by disillusion. It had never enabled him to abstain from the wars to come. He always rushed to the scene of violence be it hunting or war. The human unconscious breeds aggression and sadistic nature and history, which is replete with wars and aggressions of every kind has never served a punitive role in bringing about world peace.

Works Cited


ibid The Sun Also Rises. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954.

