

Theme of Alienation in Ernest Hemingway's "In Our Time"

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Abstract

In the present paper the researcher makes a humble attempt to analyse the theme of alienation in Earnest Hemingway's In Our Time, his first collection of short stories. Adopting a qualitative research methodology that combines textual analysis with review of secondary literature, the researcher has tried to study the complexities of the interplay between form and content of the selected stories, throwing light on how his minimalist style, fragmented narrative, scanty prose, and socio-cultural and psychological underpinnings of a war-ridden nation leads to estrangement, sense of loss and identity and disillusionment among the characters. The findings of the study suggest that alienation is not merely a theme for Hemingway, it is a structural device that serves to mirror the modern humanist conditions.

Keywords

Alienation, estrangement, interplay, minimalist, disillusionment, etc.

Introduction

In Our Time, published in 1925, is Ernest Hemingway's first short story collection. Renowned for its understated dialogues, terse language and application of "Iceberg Theory" (Hemingway, 12), the collection remains one of the most influential works in post-war American literature. The stories portray characters that feel alienated not only from their society, but from their external surroundings but from their inner selves as well. The devastation and horrors of World War I left everyone disillusioned, broken and in a state of existential despair. It dealt an irrevocably heart-rending blow not only to those who took part in the war, but also to their kith and kin. As the characters move around in the gory landscape destroyed by World War I, they can be seen caught in uncertainty, dilemma, estrangement and a sense of futility of life itself. The technique of fractured narrative employed by Hemingway adds to highlighting the harsh realities of fragmented modern life. A close reading of the text reveals how alienation is manifest both at the thematic and structural levels. Hemingway's use of literary devices such as a minimalist style of prose, fractured narratives, terse language, and understated dialogues evokes feelings of isolation and loss. The study also explores how these literary devices were chosen within "the broader socio-cultural and historical moments of the early twentieth century, a period defined by rapid industrialisation, shifting social mores, and the psychological scars of warfare." (Jones 75) The paper aims at a deeper comprehension of Hemingway's short fiction as a reflection of the alienating effects of modernity.

Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* is illustrative of his deft handling of minimalist style and the Iceberg theory. In her paper "Disconnection and Isolation: An Analysis of Alienation in Hemingway's Short Stories" (2010), Jane Doe analyses Hemingway's skilful use of a minimalist style of prose and "iceberg theory" in which much is left unsaid stimulating readers to indulge in deeper reflection thereby heightening the sense of disconnection and isolation among his characters. Minimalist style depends on brevity of expression. The content is presented in his works using a language that for most of the part is concise, sentences that are loosely connected and dialogues that are understated. His 'Iceberg theory' which effectively captures this style suggests that a text needs to be explored deeper in order to arrive at its true meaning. Surface meaning is superficial and often misleading. The actual meaning of a text lies hidden beneath the surface and must be unravelled by deep and diligent reading. Hemingway exploits this method in this collection to bring about a profound

sense of alienation among the characters. He deliberately omits overt depiction of feelings and emotions experienced by his characters; he just gives subtle cues so that the readers are compelled to understand their psychological states, the trauma and turmoil they are going through. The technique enables him to mirror the internal isolation felt by his characters. His use of fragmented impressions where much is left unsaid and where readers are free to have their own interpretations heighten the sense of alienation. “This narrative strategy aligns with modernist ideals by reflecting the fragmented and often the disjointed reality of the post-war world.” (Doe 210) The structure of *In Our Time* in itself is representative of alienation. In her paper “Alienation in Modern American Literature: A Study of Hemingway’s *In Our Time*” (1990), Mary Jones asserts that the fragmented narrative employed by Hemingway in this collection effectively mirrors the disintegrated social structure and cultural fabric of the time and the disconnected nature of individuality. This is one of the narrative techniques he adopts to make alienation manifest itself. Instead of presenting a linear continuous narrative, it comprises loosely connected pieces that look more like fragments rather than a whole. The fragmented narrative mirrors the disintegrated social structure and cultural fabric of the time and the disconnected nature of individuality torn apart by opposing forces. This structural disunity is emblematic of the inner incoherence of the individuals which does not let them form a lasting relationship with their loved ones. This is one of the ways in which Hemingway makes alienation manifest itself.

Numerous instances can be cited where Hemingway abandons traditional narrative closure, and the characters are left in a state of unresolved turmoil. “This lack of resolution underscores the perpetual state of liminality and disconnection that defines the modern condition.” (Jones 80) The stories’ sudden and startling transitions and cryptic moments contribute to an all-pervasive sense of loneliness and alienation.

Hemingway’s short fiction encapsulates individual as well as collective disillusionment that ensued the devastation of World War I. The psychological scars of the war have been examined through the prism of alienation. In *In Our Time* the characters are portrayed as isolated and broken figures, disenchanted and disconnected not only from their surroundings but also from their own selves. The disintegration is not merely external, it is internal as well. This all-pervading alienation is symptomatic of a bewildering crisis both at the individual and social level— identity crisis, cultural crisis and crisis of purpose itself. We see characters

questioning traditions and conventions, shaking the foundations of social structures and institutions as they grapple with an uncertain future in the aftermath of World War I. "Hemingway's portrayal of this crisis is subtle yet powerful; the sparse dialogue and fragmented narrative force readers to confront the isolation and despair that lie beneath the surface of modern life." (Trilling 42)

Besides having structural, cultural and structural components, alienation has a psychological aspect too in *In Our Time*. The characters continuously struggle to come to terms with a deep sense of disenchantment — a feeling of being disillusioned with a disjointed world, a world at war with itself. This disconnection from their within and without makes them wonder at the futility of existence itself. Employing the minimalist style, reducing the language to merely essentials, Hemingway depicts characters faced with existential dilemmas in which they find it difficult, almost impossible, even to give vent to their inner trauma and turmoil. Beneath the detachment visible outwardly, there lies disintegration deep within the soul.

The understated narrative invites readers to explore the unspoken depths of the characters' minds, uncovering layers of disillusionment and internal conflict. In doing so, Hemingway's work resonates with existentialist themes, offering a literary exploration of the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe. (Smith 115)

Throughout *In Our Time*, Hemingway uses a series of symbols and motifs— nature, water, solitary river, light, darkness, bull- fighting, rituals of death, resonating trauma of war, minimalist style and fragmented narrative — to illuminate and reinforce the profound sense of alienation and dislocation of the post-war generation adrift in a modern disintegrated world. The inner emptiness and the existential void of the characters are very effectively mirrored by a recurring vast, empty, landscape that is often fragmented, desolate and barren. Such a desolate imagery serves as a metaphor for psychological disintegration and emotional barrenness that is pervasive in the modern world. The characters are often seen moving in bars, roadways or battlefields, that is in transient settings which are devoid of stability and permanence. Such a depiction heightens the inability of the characters to enter and build a lasting relationship with anyone. "The motif of movement, juxtaposed with the static nature of internal isolation, further accentuates the tension between external dislocation and internal emptiness." (Doe 212)

One of the most recurrent symbols of alienation in Hemingway is the all-encompassing nature. For instance, the river acts as a dual symbol in stories like "Big Two-Hearted River". It is symptomatic of retreat as well as isolation. Nick Adams, the

protagonist, can be seen withdrawing himself from the noisy chaos left behind by the devastating war, seeking solace in the tranquillity of the river. But on the other hand, the unhindered and indifferent flow of the river highlights the disconnection between the self and the society. Similarly, water frequently symbolises both life and isolation—fluidity or continuity of time as well as emotional detachment between individuals. Likewise, darkness, used contrastingly with light, is emblematic of characters’ inaccessible inner recesses, which, as the “iceberg theory” suggests, remain largely unexplored. In a similar fashion, bullfighting has been used to symbolise a face-off with death, an inescapable truth inseparably linked with alienation.

All these symbols intensify the motif of alienation, enabling the readers to perceive it not just as a psychological concern but as an essential and fundamental condition of modern existence in the aftermath of World War I.

The short stories in Hemingway’s *In Our Time* are a perfect example of the inextricable link between form and content; it is particularly significant in the socio-cultural and historical background of the early twentieth century. Following minimalist style, Hemingway deliberately chooses fragmented narrative—brief and loosely connected sentences, parataxis, disjointed and understated dialogues lacking explicit outlet of emotions—to reinforce the thematic content of alienation in the post-war world under the sway of existential crisis. Lives of characters are as broken and disjointed as the narrative itself. It stimulates identical feelings among the readers, who like the characters in these stories, begin to reject the traditional values and conventions and search for new meaning in a seemingly meaningless and empty world. “By aligning his narrative technique with the broader modernist ethos, Hemingway not only captures the mood of his time but also offers a timeless commentary on the nature of human alienation,” (Smith 120)

Conclusion

Through a comprehensive textual analysis and contextual review of the related secondary literature, the researcher has tried to demonstrate that alienation is not just a singular, overt theme in Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, but a an intricate phenomenon with layers of meanings to be unravelled. The study enriches our understanding of alienation both as a thematic concept and a narrative device; how Hemingway’s minimalist style and fragmented narrative technique work together to heighten the sense of alienation among his characters. Hemingway deftly employs a minimalist style of prose, fragmented narrative, and a series of recurring symbols

to evoke among the characters a profound sense of emptiness and alienation. The researcher has endeavoured to study and infer how the theme of alienation is interwoven with the fabric of the text—mirroring both the post–World War I disillusionment and disenchantment and the internal conflicts that tear individuals apart in a rapidly disintegrating society. “The historical lens underscores the role of literature in capturing and critiquing the collective trauma of its time.” (Trilling 35) Hemingway’s stylistic choices—his minimalist approach, fragmented and episodic narrative characterised by short, pithy, and loosely connected sentences, understated dialogues and “iceberg theory”—are not merely artistic devices but channels for the outlet of biting pain resultant upon gloomy isolation that became the lot of modern life. The study offers us valuable insights into various psychological dimensions of alienation, correlating it with contemporary human experience. He tries to decipher the complex internal workings of the minds of his characters, stimulating readers’ attention to the subtle, inaccessible recesses of fractured souls alienated both from without and within and helps them gain new insights into modernist literature. Transcending immediate contexts—historical, social and cultural—alienation in *In Our Time* remains a pertinent theme even in the contemporary literary scholarship with identity crisis, dislocation and fractured human psyche as some of the core issues inviting frequent discourse in today’s fast-paced, digitally globalized, yet disjointed and isolated world.

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