

Hemingway's Writing and Its Curative Effects

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ヘミングウェイのライティングとそれによる治癒効果

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I: Introduction

Ernest Hemingway refers to writing as curative in *A Moveable Feast* (1964), recollecting early 1920s Paris where he, as a budding writer, wrote stories day after day: “I would have to work hard tomorrow. Work could cure almost anything, I believed then, and I believe now” (21). In an interview in 1954, asked if he had ever had a psychoanalyst, he answered, “Sure I have. Portable Corona number three [typewriter]. That’s been my analyst” (Hotchner 139). However, the psychological healing he gained from writing must have been an unexpected byproduct and it is highly unlikely that he knew exactly why his writing was curative. This paper will demonstrate that the sense of release Hemingway felt from writing was not imaginary, but has a scientific basis, and will give us new clues to help us gain a different perspective on how Hemingway’s style was formed.

II: The Mental Health Role of Writing in Hemingway’s Literature

In “Fathers and Sons” (1933), the narrator implies that writing has had a special meaning to Nick Adams throughout his life: “If he wrote it he could get rid of it. He had gotten rid of many things by writing them” (*Short Stories* 491). Robert Jordan uses writing in the same way. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), Robert tells himself that “you will get rid of all that by writing about it” and that “[o]nce you write it down it is all gone” (165), expecting to sublimate the memories of the carnage he witnessed in the Spanish War. These Hemingway heroes see writing as a mental health tool, offering a sense of release.

Hemingway describes Nick as a shell-shocked soldier plagued by traumatic memories. In “Now I Lay Me” (1927), Nick concentrates on imaginary fishing so as not to remember his own near-death experience. In “A Way You’ll Never Be” (1933), he has to consciously choke his thinking, otherwise he is assailed by flashbacks and nightmarish memories. Nick’s case fits at least two of the traumatic symptoms listed by *Di-*

agnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-5): “Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s)” and “Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event (s)” (American Psychiatric Association 271). Medically speaking, these symptoms are diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In fact, Robert also could be diagnosed with PTSD based on one of the DSM-5 criteria: “Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others” (271).

Like Nick, Hemingway directly experienced a definitive traumatic event when he was severely wounded while serving as a Red Cross ambulance driver on the Italian front in World War I. According to the DSM-5 standards mentioned above, this experience alone is enough to diagnose him with PTSD, and some of his daily behaviors also indicate PTSD symptoms. Michael Reynolds, for instance, introduces an episode in 1925 in which Hemingway was suffering from sleep disturbances caused by “the old problem of night fears and bad dreams” (311). Insomnia meets the diagnostic criteria for PTSD when it coexists with one or more other symptoms, including “Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation) typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects” (American Psychiatric Association 272). In an episode in 1924, Hemingway had already exhibited this symptom: “Often his temper was beyond his control, an irrational response for which he just as often apologized the next day” (Reynolds 186).¹ Thus we see that Hemingway's mental burden was heavy when he was starting out as a literary writer, and writing seems to have been his way of saving himself during his sleepless nights: “Some nights he wrote himself to exhaustion; others he woke in darkness and picked up his pen” (Reynolds 312).

III: Scientific Mechanism of Expressive Writing

The psychotherapeutic use of writing is significant for Hemingway, but it is not a method exclusive to him. Since Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer introduced the talking cure in *Studies of Hysteria* in 1895, the positive benefits of emotional disclosure have been investigated through verbal communication. In chapter IV, “The Psychotherapy of Hysteria,” Freud reports that he linked disconnected words uttered by a female patient and finally detected the traumatic event which was the pathogenic factor of her obsessions and phobias (275-76). The task of giving context to unrelated individual words is considered important in this process.²

James W. Pennebaker and Sandra Klihr Beall in 1986 extended the research in this area to the effects of writing, using expressive writing for alleviating the mental burden of traumatized patients. Thus, putting upsetting experiences into words has been accepted as providing health benefits. In their experiment, Pennebaker and Beall divided subjects into four groups and experimented with the effects of expressive writing. The control condition group wrote about different trivial topics assigned to them. The trauma-emotion group wrote about their feelings associated with traumas in their life but no facts (the details of what actually happened). The trauma-fact group wrote about the facts surrounding traumatic events but no feelings. The trauma-combination group wrote about both their feelings and facts associated with their traumas. As

a result, the second and fourth groups, who tried to convey their emotions through writing, “evidenced higher blood pressure and more negative moods, relative to the other groups, each day after writing essay,” but crucially, both groups “showed some long-term benefits” (Pennebaker 280). This shows that expressive writing has the characteristics of exposure therapy.

Stephen J. Lepore explains in *The Writing Cure* that expressive writing interventions are counted as forced exposure therapies, in which traumatic patients can extinguish negative emotional associations through repeated exposure to stressful stimuli (104). In addition, these patients need to form a cohesive story rather than fragmentary descriptions in order to experience health benefits (110), because it is considered that, in therapeutic writing, constructing a coherent story works the same way the expression of negative emotions works in exposure therapy (168). However, it is rather difficult to express accumulated emotions into words.

Marian M. MacCurdy, from a neurophysiological perspective, explains in “From Trauma to Writing” that nonverbal feelings and memories need to be linked to language in order to translate emotional experiences into words. However, emotional experiences are difficult to verbalize because they are encoded non-verbally (165). According to Judith Lewis Herman, “[t]raumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (38). Trauma memories are stored as iconic images deep within the brain, in a part that is pre-verbal, and are not easily accessible (MacCurdy 162). These images must be accessed and given verbal narrative context if a story about the trauma is to be told. When we verbalize a nonverbal image, the inner first layer of the brain transmits a feeling of fear, or perhaps another strong emotion, to the second layer, which creates the image, and the outer third layer turns it into something that can be manipulated by language (Singer 495).³ “This process releases stress,” as Jessica Singer explains, “that otherwise may cause psychological and physical distress” (495). In other words, in expressive writing, the writer needs to connect with the image of his/her experience, from which his/her emotions arise, in order to reach his/her creative core.

Moreover, according to Wilma Bucci, verbalizing emotional experience is most successful when “a quality of immediacy” is found in the spoken expressions and “vivid and immediate experience” is evoked in the listener, and this also applies to written communications (109). Hemingway, as a literary artist, puts this in his own way: “the reader, if the writer is *writing truly* enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them” (*Death* 192; my emphasis). This is the writing that Hemingway strived to achieve during his training as a literary writer.

IV: Expressive Techniques as an Application of Expressive Writing

At the beginning of *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), Hemingway explains how he started his career as a literary artist: “I was trying to learn to write, commencing with the simplest things, and one of the simplest things of all and the most fundamental is violent death” (2). He states that death is “one of the subjects

that a man may write of" (2), and "[t]he only place where you could see life and death, *i.e.*, violent death now that the wars were over, was in the bull ring" (2). For this young artist, who had witnessed brutal scenes of war, first as a volunteer ambulance driver, and then as a correspondent, violent death was the prime object of study, and his priority was how to capture "the real thing" (2) of it in words.⁴

Young Hemingway used the art of bullfighting as a pattern for his own art of writing. *Death in the Afternoon* is not just an essay on bullfighting, but also an essay on art, in which he unfolds his own theory of literary art as paralleling the art of bullfighting.⁵ Hemingway, as one of the spectators, closely observes the process through which the matador, as an artist, forms a community in which the spectators can participate in his emotional uplift, feeling as if it were theirs:

Now the essence of the greatest emotional appeal of bullfighting is the feeling of immortality that the bullfighter feels in the middle of a great faena and that he gives to the spectators. He is performing a work of art and he is playing with death, bringing it closer, closer, closer, to himself, a death that you know is in the horns because you have the canvas-covered bodies of the horses on the sand to prove it. He gives the feeling of his immortality, and, as you watch it, it becomes yours. Then when it belongs to both of you, he proves it with the sword. (*Death* 213)

This is the archetype of Hemingway's realism, which makes it a principle "to make the story so real beyond any reality that it will become a part of the reader's experience and a part of his memory" (*Ernest Hemingway on Writing* 5). This principle is explained in more detail in his letter dated February 7, 1933: "I am trying, always, to convey to the reader a full and complete feeling of the thing I am dealing with; to make the person reading feel it has happened to them" (*Selected Letters* 380). Just as the feeling of immortality is communicated from the matador to the audience, the writer's emotion must be delivered as clearly as possible, undistorted, to the readers. This is, as it were, the direct transference of the writer's mental picture to the readers' minds—the attempt to show the readers how the writer experienced a decisive moment, and to make them feel as if the experience was their own.⁶ Hemingway artistically processes this experience into a coherent story as a matter of course, but the emotional core of this experience must be conveyed as it is felt by the writer.

Similar to the ideal conveyance of emotions in expressive writing confirmed above, Hemingway's literary techniques are based on the quality of immediacy, aimed at evoking in the reader a vivid and direct sense of experience. How to *write truly* was the question he had in mind when he tried to learn from bullfighters how to convey "the emotion" made by "the sequence of motion and fact" unfolding before his eyes (*Death* 2).⁷ When he succeeds in writing truly, his realism is accomplished as art, conveying this emotion straight to the reader, and bringing psychological benefits.⁸ However, writing truly brought him both positive and negative feelings. When Hemingway states, "After writing a story I was always empty

and both sad and happy, as though I had made love” (*Moveable* 6), this also shows the affinity between his writing and curative expressive writing. As confirmed in the Pennebaker and Beall report above, traumatic patients feel depressed immediately after expressive writing, though their mental conditions improve over the long run.

V: Conclusion

Hemingway confesses that writing truly was a difficult task for him in *Death in the Afternoon*. He reminisces that it was “beyond me” to represent “the real thing” (2). Scientifically speaking, he had difficulty in verbalizing, via the third layer of the brain, “the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion” (*Death* 2) stored as images in the second layer. Of course, Hemingway was exploring writing techniques in search of artistic expression, and probably did not intend to complete his writing as a form of writing therapy. However, the period when Hemingway was exploring expressive techniques as a means of writing truly was also a period when he was exhibiting symptoms of PTSD in his daily life. If a young man suffering from PTSD writes a story from an ardent desire to convey the intense emotions that arise in his heart, it is quite possible that his literary writing inevitably comes to share the same mechanism as curative therapeutic writing. It is certain that Hemingway’s writing style owes something to the fact that he was traumatized.

Notes

- 1 In 1924, Hadley Hemingway was beginning to recognize her husband’s “erratic cycle of elation and depression that could change Ernest before her eyes into someone she barely knew” (Reynolds 194). Thus, he had signs of bipolar disorder. According to American Psychiatric Association’s DSM-5 standards, individuals with PTSD are 80% more likely than those without PTSD to have symptoms of at least one other mental disorder, such as depressive, bipolar, anxiety, or substance use disorders (280).
- 2 This type of psychoanalysis founded by Freud may remind us of its influence on the stream-of-consciousness novel technique in literature. However, this technique itself was not intended as psychotherapy. It is just one of the literary techniques aimed at achieving realistic effects. Stream-of-consciousness writers added consciousness to artistic objects in the twentieth century, and desired to represent “the actual texture of consciousness” (Humphrey 63) in its irrationality and inconsistency without giving any context. The psychological principles of free association were additionally employed to augment this technique. Stream-of-consciousness writers’ uses of free association are detailed in Chapter 2 of Robert Humphrey’s *Stream of Consciousness in The Modern Novel*.
- 3 The first layer of the brain, or cerebellum, transmits strong emotions, such as fear, to the second layer. The second layer, or limbic system, creates the image and stores it as traumatic memories. The third layer, or cerebrum, makes the image linguistically recognizable.

- 4 Gertrude Stein introduced Hemingway to bullfighting and her influence on him seems rather significant when he was trying to figure out how to “study” (*Death* 2) violent death in the bullring. Stein’s artistic principles, “the way of seeing what the writer chooses to see, and the relation between that vision and the way it gets down” (Stein 200), are strongly reflected in his attitude toward observing the objects in the bullring.
- 5 Malcolm Cowley makes an intuitive remark that *Death in the Afternoon* is “a book about artistic appreciation and literary criticism” (76), not only about bullfighting. Michael Thurston observes that “Hemingway’s thesis about bullfighting...is also his thesis about writing” (54).
- 6 Regarding this type of realism, Ezra Pound’s influence cannot be underestimated. Pound thinks of the poet’s role as this: “It is our affair to render the image as we have perceived or conceived it” (86). In his art of the “one image poem,” the poet and the reader have a relationship similar to the one that Hemingway desired to establish: “In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective” (Pound 89). This is similar to the direct transference of the literary artist’s mental picture to the readers’ minds that Hemingway endeavored to realize in his realism.
- 7 Hemingway begins *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), his non-fiction experiment, with these words: “The writer has attempted to write an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month’s action can, if truly presented, compete with a work of the imagination” (Forward). This is his declaration that he would *write truly* even in genres other than fiction. In the novel written after this, Hemingway has Robert Jordan say, “I am going to write a true book” (*For Whom* 163). Many readers may think that he is planning to write a non-fiction book; however, whether his book is fiction or non-fiction, it is obvious that he views writing as a mental health tool when he tells himself that “you will get rid of all that by writing about it” (165). Therefore, it is not hard to imagine that he intends to write truly about the Spanish Civil War in accordance with Hemingway’s artistic principle, so that he could make his readers feel as if the events in the book were their own experiences.
- 8 In Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988), a Russian named Kirilenko says, “When I read Hemingway I get hungry” (160). Kirilenko says it is due to “the style” (160). DeLillo must have understood Hemingway’s ability to convey emotions. Hemingway’s ability as a writer to convey tangible experiences, such as the coldness of river water or the feeling of hunger, can be thought to have been cultivated through training that began with verbalizing the intense emotions evoked by violent death.

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Abstract

This paper will demonstrate that the sense of release Ernest Hemingway felt from writing was not imaginary, but has a scientific basis, and will give us new clues to help us gain a different perspective on how Hemingway's style was formed.